



Saigon on the screen
Comedian Robin Williams
took the words that
Armed Forces Radio DJ
Adrian Cronauer used to
open his Vietnam show
and made them famous
worldwide in a hit movie.

GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM

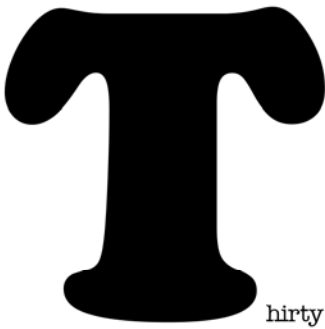
Was there anything funny about the Vietnam War?
Robin Williams thought so.

By Rick Fredericksen



The moviemakers
Top left, *Good Morning, Vietnam* director Barry Levinson; top right, Robin Williams poses with cast members; center, Adrian Cronauer, who wrote the first version of the script and later became a lawyer; bottom, Williams with co-star J.T. Walsh; inset, Williams portraying Cronauer at the microphone.

TOP, LEFT: COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL ALAMY; RIGHT: BUENA VISTA/PHOTOFEST; CENTER: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; INSET: ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES/ALAMY; BOTTOM: BUENA VISTA/PHOTOFEST



Thirty years ago, America's irritable mood over the costly military venture in Vietnam began to lighten just a little. As the search for missing servicemen was escalating and veterans were lining up for treatment of mental trauma and exposure to Agent Orange, a Hollywood company took a major gamble: Touchstone Pictures, a distribution label of The Walt Disney Co., made a bet that the time was right for the first major motion picture combining humor and the Vietnam War.

Good Morning, Vietnam, released on Dec. 23, 1987, is not a war movie in the traditional sense. Most of the movie, filmed in Thailand, takes place in the urban setting of 1965 Saigon, and there is very limited on-screen violence.

It's the story of Air Force disc jockey and Staff Sgt. Adrian Cronauer during his time as a broadcaster with Armed Forces Radio Service when he used the phrase, "good morning, Vietnam," to begin his early-morning show "Dawnbuster."

Producer Mark Johnson described the movie, with Robin Williams in the starring role, as "a comedy with a very serious underbelly" when he participated in a panel discussion of the film at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on May 6, 1987, four weeks into production.

"We're not irresponsible to do something lighthearted and frolicsome about the war in Vietnam," Johnson said.

"It's almost like Bronx meets Buddhism," Williams said at the panel discussion. "I think right now the [war] numbness is wearing off a little bit. If it works, there's a certain catharsis in laughter."

In the film's official production notes, Johnson said the DJ role was perfect for Williams. "When he sat down in the control booth to do the scenes involving Cronauer's broadcasts, we just let the cameras roll," the producer recalled. "He managed to create something new for every single take."

Williams' performance made him a star and made the movie a box office success. The film earned \$124 million, making it the fourth top-grossing movie released in 1987. Williams won a Golden Globe Award and an Oscar nomination, both for best actor.

Before the accolades there had always been a possibility that laughing at the Vietnam War could be an audience turnoff, and Williams realized it when I interviewed him for a public radio piece during the filming. He said: "It's like, how long before they made *Mister Roberts*? How long before they made *Hogan's Heroes*? The Germans are going [in thick German accent] 'That's really not that funny, mister smart man.' We can laugh at that now."

Mister Roberts premiered 10 years after World War II; *Hogan's Heroes*, 20 years. Although *Good Morning, Vietnam* appeared 12 years after the war ended, Cronauer had begun pitching the concept less than five years after the 1975 fall of Saigon.

Cronauer wrote a television screenplay with former Army broadcaster Spec. 4 Ben Moses, who had become a close friend when the two men worked together at Armed Forces Radio in Saigon. In 1979 Cronauer tried to peddle the script to TV networks as a situation comedy. "M*A*S*H was No. 1 in the ratings. *WKRP Cincinnati* was very popular," he told an interviewer years later on KMOX radio in St. Louis. "So I figured if you put them together you'd have Armed Forces Radio." The networks were not interested. The timing was too risky they figured.

In 1982 Cronauer and Moses repackaged the story as a TV movie. By this time, Moses had become a successful television producer, and his agent, Larry Brezner, happened to be Robin Williams' manager. "Robin and his agent bought an option on the script, and after a drastic rewrite tailored to the talents of Robin Williams, the hit movie *Good Morning, Vietnam* was filmed," states Cronauer's biography on the website macoi.net, dedicated to veterans who were in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of Information. Mitch Markowitz, a writer for the *M*A*S*H* series, worked up the final screenplay.

Embassy Pictures expressed an interest in the script but backed out. So did Paramount Pictures. "They decided less than a year ago not to make it," Johnson said during the May 1987 discussion at the Foreign Correspondents Club. "Then Disney Studios picked it up and almost immediately slated it for production."

Doubts about the project, however, surfaced during the early stages of production. "The overwhelming mood as we shot the movie was that it was a mess . . . it was going to be an inglorious failure," recalled one of the film's advisers, Alan Dawson, who served in the war as an Army specialist 4 in the information office of the 1st Signal Brigade and returned to Vietnam as a war correspondent with United Press International and Metromedia Radio News. "I can't remember one person who disagreed, except [director] Barry Levinson. Levinson took little pieces of disaster and made a coherent and enjoyable movie."

Even Williams had reservations, according to Johnson's recollections in *The Hollywood Reporter* after Williams' death in August 2014. "He did his best stuff in front of British crewmembers and Thai and Australian extras," the producer said. "He would do some specific, iconic American humor . . . and the crew would just be sitting there. He thought his material wasn't working."

Williams' fears were unfounded. Reviews were dazzling, including "two thumbs up" from the critics on the TV show *Siskel & Ebert*. Gene Siskel, who had written Army press releases at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, said the film "is the answer to a lot of moviegoers' prayers at long last . . . that Robin Williams in *Good Morning, Vietnam* has finally found a film worthy of his talents as an improvisational comic genius."

The cast of characters included a young Forest Whitaker and another comedian, Robert Wuhl. Thai starlet Chintara Sukapantana played William's girlfriend Trinh. Two Vietnamese debuted in key parts. Tung Thanh Tran, who played Trinh's brother, Tuan, had escaped from Vietnam at the end of the war and was a high school student in Chicago when he auditioned for the role. His character would turn out to be Viet Cong. Cu Ba Nguyen was the gregarious saloonkeeper Jimmy Wah. Nguyen was a former military prisoner who once staged a daring escape from Cambodia, according to the movie's production notes.

No American veterans of the war were among the actors given top billing, although a couple found their way into the movie as extras. Available non-Asian faces were in short supply in 1987 Thailand, in part because production also had begun on another Vietnam War film, *Off Limits*, a crime thriller set in Saigon, starring Willem Dafoe and Gregory Hines. Casting directors who needed blacks and whites for certain scenes faced a

limited pool of prospects among expatriates, backpackers and international tourists. They posted "Wanted" signs in hotels and guest houses. Visitors from Europe, Australia and Nigeria were among those dressed up in U.S. Army fatigues.

"We explored shooting in Vietnam, but the Disney studio would not go for it at all," producer Johnson said during the discussion at the Foreign Correspondents Club. "I think they're worried about being perceived or doing business right now with a country that was quite recently an enemy of the United States." Constructing sets and city streets in the United States, however, would have cost millions of dollars, so *Good Morning, Vietnam* was made entirely on location in Thailand, which had a reputation for welcoming moviemakers.

Director Levinson strongly believed in giving the troupe a sense of place. "The first and most important thing is to have the actors spend time together so they can develop a rapport," he said in the production notes. "Inevitably the bonds they establish will translate to the screen." It's precisely the same kind of camaraderie that veterans themselves experienced in Vietnam.

Working in temperatures soaring above 100 degrees and frequent monsoon rains, the movie's cast battled the same discomfort as a logistics unit during the war. Fittingly, Bangkok's meteorological offices were converted into the Armed Forces Radio Service studios in Saigon. The Malaysia Hotel served as the radio operation's exteriors. In 1965, the actual radio station was in the Brink Hotel (known as the Brinks), now the Park Hyatt Saigon Hotel.

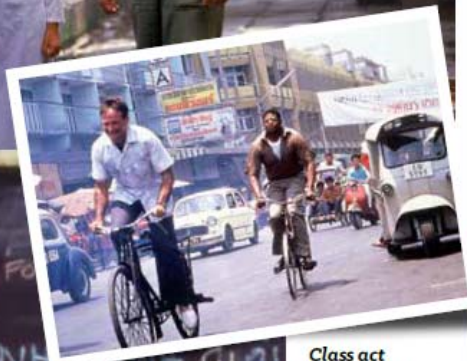
When the crew needed to build a Vietnamese village, designer Roy Walker chose the resort island of Phuket to re-create a perfect rural landscape, complete with rice paddies. Walker was familiar with Thailand. He had worked there on *The Killing Fields* four years earlier. The land's fertility was underestimated, according to the production notes. "The rice grew so quickly . . . the *Good Morning, Vietnam* team had to harvest the crop and replant before shooting could begin."

British set decorator Tessa Davies and Dawson, her assistant, strove for authenticity in the look of the movie, from the uniforms and patches to the teletype machines and the 2½-ton cargo trucks. Fiberglass replicas of wartime Saigon's two-tone Renault taxis—familiar to long-legged GIs who remember cramming into the yellow and blue cabs—were stamped out of the original molds.

TOP: RICK FREEDHOLSEN; CENTER: SUBANASTAS/PHOTOFEST; INSET: SUBANASTAS/PHOTOFEST; BOTTOM: COLLECTION CHRISTOPHER ALVAREZ



On the set
Top, Robin Williams drills with an M16 between takes of a scene filmed outside Bangkok; at right, Williams with actress Chintara Sukapatana in the role of girlfriend Trinh; inset, Williams and co-star Forest Whitaker on bikes.



Class act
Williams as Cronauer teaches Vietnamese students how to curse in English.



Thailand's Star Attraction

In *Good Morning, Vietnam*, soon after the Air Force DJ played by Robin Williams arrives in Saigon in 1965, he is swept away by a virtuous young lady who would make him cry. Thai actress Chintara Sukapatana, ironically, was born in 1965 and had turned 22 when she landed the lead female role as Trinh in the movie. Twenty-six minutes into the film the DJ is captivated by her modest beauty the instant she walks by wearing a traditional Vietnamese *au dai* dress, with its snug high-collar top, silk trousers and flowing fabric panels in front and back.

According to the film's production notes, hundreds of women were interviewed for the part. The first choice was Sukapatana, whose career was peaking after she won Thailand's best actress award. "She's done 15 films in two years, which is more than I hope to do in my lifetime," Williams said at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand during an evening off while filming in Bangkok. "She's teaching me some Thai. I've taught her some Californian."

Alan Dawson, a Bangkok adviser for the production, said, "We came very close to losing the Thai star. She really didn't give two hoots about Hollywood or the money, and she tried to break her contract to do another soap opera filming at the same time." It took negotiations and threats to get her back on board, he said.

The behind-the-scenes drama, complicated by Sukapatana's lack of English, was not apparent on camera, especially during the co-stars' tender goodbye when their doomed relationship ends with a tearful handshake. "She cranked it out in the farewell scene," Williams said. "All of a sudden she was full out and very good. She's very innocent."

Soon after Williams died in 2014, Sukapatana recalled that moment in the online media publication *Coconuts.co*: "He said I did well and warned me that he was sensitive. When I cried on camera, he cried too."

For her international admirers, Sukapatana will always be remembered as Trinh, the shy Vietnamese girl in *Good Morning, Vietnam*. But for her fans at home in Thailand, the 52-year-old actress is an established versatile performer in popular soap operas on Thai television.

—Rick Fredericksen



Playing the part
Robin Williams jumps
into the role of airman
Adrian Cronauer
with gusto.

A small fleet of the reproductions was used for *Off Limits*, as well as for *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

The historical evolution of the conflict was also respected, said co-producer Brezner in the production notes. "In early 1965, no one was taking the Vietnam situation very seriously, but by the end of the year, the number of troops had increased by the thousands," he said, adding, "1965 was the year that Jekyll became Hyde."

Even the basic storyline was based on reality: Military broadcasters provided a vital morale boost throughout the Vietnam War. There was censorship of the news and occasional controversy over the selection of music.

But the movie version of Cronauer strayed far from the real Cronauer, whose film alter ego didn't emerge until the script went through several rewrites. "In one version, I was captured by the Viet Cong," Cronauer revealed in the KMOX radio interview. "I was glad that never happened. In another version, I married a Vietnamese girl. My wife says she's glad that never happened."

But Williams' madcap banter also was an exaggeration of the real Cronauer. In a 2014 interview with me after William's death, Cronauer shared one of his favorite observations about the star's portrayal of him: "If I did even half the things that Robin did in the movie, I'd still be in Leavenworth [federal penitentiary]." The film was never intended to be a biography. "Williams was trying to make it as entertaining as possible," Cronauer told me and, echoing movie critic Siskel's observation, added, "He was a comic genius."

Williams' mastery of his craft was on display when he joined producer Johnson and cast members at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, an organization of

journalists, expatriates and Thais. The panel discussion, followed by questions from a standing-room-only audience, might as well have been headlined "Robin Williams, Live in Bangkok!"

For more than an hour Williams dominated the program with his off-the-wall, spontaneous antics and impressionist ad-libs, impersonating President Richard Nixon and other public figures. No one was safe from the comedian's playful taunts. When someone walked in late, Williams became a style-show announcer: "Wearing a lovely suit from the Sears men's collection, it's almost springtime here in Bangkok. Let's show some of the other fashions for foreign correspondents."

Another guest asked if the moviemakers were bothered by the notorious mosquitoes in Thailand. Williams instantly swerved into a Southern drawl: "I've been to Texas. We have bugs out there that pick up the dog. You know, the ones that fly into the screen and go, 'Open the door!'"

When an Asian woman questioned him about a scene in *Good Morning, Vietnam* where he tutors a "cursing class" for Vietnamese, Williams confessed in the best way he could, with humor. "There is one scene where I teach some American colloquialisms, some basic street language that will help you get a cab in New York." The audience roared with laughter.

Film history is rich with stories connected to the Vietnam War. Wikipedia has assembled an inventory that includes, even if incomplete, nearly 100 titles, starting with the 1964 American film *A Yank in Viet-Nam*. Directors from a dozen countries have contributed to the genre, which includes two movies that were South

Duos
Williams and Whitaker share a scene that shows them stranded in the countryside. Williams poses with author Rick Fredericksen, who interviewed the star during filming.



Vietnamese productions made during the war. Bravery, prisoners of war and disturbed veterans are common themes. The most recent picture is a monster movie, *Kong: Skull Island*, released this year and partially filmed in Vietnam.

Good Morning, Vietnam remains the standout comedy and is still available through online streaming services and channels that show classic movies.

Although Williams was never in the military, let alone on armed forces radio, he became the most famous of the DJs associated with the "Dawnbuster" show. His agonizing death in 2014, related to Lewy body dementia, was detailed in a haunting account by his wife, Susan Schneider Williams, in *Neurology* (September 2016): "Robin was losing his mind and he was aware of it . . . from where I stood, I saw the bravest man in the world playing the hardest role of his life."

When Cronauer welcomed his "Dawnbuster" morning radio audience, he initially stretched out the word "good"—"Gooooood Morning, Vietnam"—to give himself a few extra seconds to cue up his first song on the turntable. The cadence of that wake-up salutation became a time-honored tradition and was copied by Cronauer's successors, including Pat Sajak, who became the host of TV game show *Wheel of Fortune*.

In the studio scenes where Williams utters that phrase, he seems to hurry his delivery. "The one thing that rattles me to this day is that Robin's personal 'Gooooood Morning Vietnam' is nothing at all like the actual, real

ones," complained movie adviser Dawson, who listened to the program on American Forces Vietnam Network (formerly Armed Forces Radio Service) while working as a war correspondent and still lives in Bangkok.

It's true that Williams rushed through the word "good" in about three seconds, whereas Cronauer took twice as long. A later "Dawnbuster" host could barely do it in one breath, taking nearly 20 seconds. Few Vietnam veterans would ever notice the discrepancy—in fact, by the end of the war, the expression had faded. Army Spc. 4 Joe Huser was the final "Dawnbuster" host in 1973 and said, "I don't ever remember saying 'Gooooood Morning, Vietnam.'"

But those three words have had a lasting impression in reunified Vietnam. Some years after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, one of the first Western-style bars to open in Ho Chi Minh City was named Good Morning Vietnam. The phrase is now part of Vietnam folklore. On the streets of the bustling metropolis in 2017 you can buy a designer T-shirt with a distinctive twist: the words "Good Morning Vietnam" are centered around a war-torn Communist Vietnam flag. ♡

Rick Fredericksen was a Marine newsman at American Forces Vietnam Network in 1969-70. His new e-book is Broadcasters: Untold Chaos. He reported from the Thailand set of Good Morning, Vietnam for CBS News, Asia Magazine and American Public Radio (now Public Radio International).

View From the Back Row

During much of 1967, Army Spc. 5 Don Fox greeted radio listeners with "Gooooood Morning, Vietnam" as one of about 30 announcers who took turns hosting the "Dawnbuster" show throughout the war. When the movie pre-

miered outside Rochester, New York, the theater held a special preview for Vietnam veterans, and Fox was there, sitting quietly in the back row.

He describes what happened:

"Every time Robin would shout out those infamous words the audience would shout

back obscenities, hoot and holler, cheer, throw popcorn at the screen, and then laugh uproariously, often slapping each other on the back. They had no idea who was slumping deeper and deeper in my seat each time. As the movie ended, I slunk out of the theater, crawled into my car and sat quietly

watching the crowd of once-hardened men, now gregarious and effusive, spill into the parking lot, gathering in groups large and small, as if to hold on to something precious, a camaraderie that had slipped from their lives so many years ago in that foreign land. And for the first time I real-

ized that my time on-the-air at AFVN [American Forces Vietnam Network] had made a difference. It had given them—and me—a common bond, regardless of when, where, and how they served in country. It was a humbling experience."
—Rick Fredericksen

LEFT: ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY; RIGHT: RICK FREDERICKSEN