

*George Solli's story is a combination memoir of his service in the Vietnam, a partial history of the war, and a travelogue of 12<sup>th</sup> TFW Association members' and friends' tour of Vietnam and Cambodia in April-May 2017. The details about the trip's sites were related by the tour guides.*

## **Vietnam Redux 2017**

The other end of the earth beckons. It will take more than a day, over 22 hours flying time, to reach Vietnam from Miami. It's not the distance that captures my imagination as much as the recognition that this is the fourth time I've made this trip! My perspective on Vietnam and Cambodia will be different this time, however. I'll be on the ground able to closely view places I've previously only seen from the air.

For me, my time in-country, stretching from 1970-1973 with two breaks, was the best of times. For some, regrettably, it was the worst. If I had a bell curve of contemporary reflections of the more than two million servicemen and women who fought the Vietnam War, the median opinion would probably fall at "What am I doing here?" The whole conflict was fraught with confusion of purpose and worth. I want, on this my final trip to Southeast Asia (SEA), to see if I can tie a knot on what my service in Vietnam meant.

Being single at the time, the biggest drawback of not being in the States was that I missed watching women in mini-skirts. Before long, however, the pleasures of the Orient would erase that unhappiness. At the other end of the spectrum, some of my colleagues would find themselves shot down in one of four countries in SEA, burrowing in the woods and weeds calling for rescue. One of my squadron buddies flew his last flight. One pair of comrades waited for the war to end imprisoned in the Hanoi Hilton.

### **Pre-arrival Anticipation**

For one Navy and three Air Force veterans set to gather in Vietnam for a tour, I conjecture memories of the war, land and skies will flood back as soon as we step off our flights. We are returning, on average, 50 years later to a unified, communist Vietnam.

"I think just smelling Vietnam again will awaken my subconscious." (George Solli)

"I'm looking forward to meeting some wonderful people who will forever change my feelings about who they are. I have no expectations or anxiety about stepping back in-country after 47 years. Time changes all." (Georg Hambach)

"I want to see the sights and how the country compares to the image I have of it." (Steve Casey)

This is an especially sentimental trip for Cliff Heathcote. Cliff never got to meet his father, a fighter pilot at Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, who went down on a mission when Cliff was not yet born. He wants to see what it was like for his dad in Vietnam.

Skip Blanchard served at Cam Ranh AB; and Steve Casey, a Navy man, served at the Cam Ranh Naval Support Facility. Both Georg(e)s were at Phu Cat. Diane is Skip's wife and made the arrangements for the trip. Chris is George Solli's son and wishes to explore a new corner of the world.

Vietnam holds a particular sadness for veterans—for the first time in history, the United States lost a major war. The enemy had greater resolve and proceeded slowly but steadily, sometimes stopped but always returning, to strip freedom from the South Vietnamese. The U.S. militarily and diplomatically maneuvered to end the war in a stalemate in 1973. But history would record North Vietnam the victor on April 30, 1975, when Saigon fell to an unstoppable North Vietnamese Army (NVA) march southward that pushed ARVN (Army of South Vietnam) forces lacking U.S. support backward until the whole country was overrun. The unabashed violation of the Paris Peace Accord showed it was never the intent of North Vietnam's leaders to make a peace short of their objective to create one Vietnam under communist rule.

The veterans on our tour served at distinctly different areas in the Republic of Vietnam. The Cam Ranh air and naval bases were on the coast of the South China Sea. The air base was memorable for tents pitched in the sand and aluminum planking runway, taxiways and parking areas. Phu Cat AB was constructed later in

the war; from the start it featured concrete surfaces, permanent buildings and, for aircrews, air-conditioned quarters.

Both locations were vulnerable to rocket and sapper attacks. Any time, but usually at daybreak, the Big Voice loudspeaker could sound a siren and blare out, "The base is under attack, take cover!" This was just an affirmation of what you already knew from the clamorous sound of 122mm rockets exploding in your vicinity. Phu Cat was protected by Republic of Korea (ROK) soldiers who made gory displays of Viet Cong corpses along the base fence to warn off the enemy who mixed with the local populace.

### **Making Merry in the War Zone**

One of the funniest things I remember from waging war in the sky was the Forward Air Controller (FAC) Brevity Code. Air crews unofficially carried a list of three-digit numbers starting with 101 that had short explanations. We could communicate with great amusement and sarcasm about targets called out by FACs on scene or about general situations. The user would commonly say, "Sandy 06, that's a 101!" A short collection of my favorite codes follows.

101 You must be confusing me with someone who gives a damn.

1 \_\_ You've got to be shitting me.

1 \_\_ Screw you and your little dog too.

1 \_\_ I'm so happy I could shit!

Phu Cat in the Central Highlands did not offer an outlet to the world off base. The area remained an insurgent stronghold. To counter the ennui of confinement, there was a great deal of frivolity at the service clubs.

The Phu Cat Officers' Club rarely saw professional entertainment, but each event was met with boisterous approval. The base had but two women, both nurses; and they were rare sightings. So when a Philippine band came to play with female dancers, it was a big deal not to be missed!

Showing up at the O'Club early to get a seat meant you also had ample time to down multiple beers. The crowds were hyped up at show time, stomping the floor and banging the tables. I remember one inebriated pilot with his squadron scarf wrapped around his forehead like an Indian headdress yelling, "Bring on those heavy titted women!"

We could be gentlemen too. There was a wonderful evening spent hosting a group of intrepid Red Cross Donut Dollies at a squadron party. The ladies were flown to Phu Cat on the base Gooney Bird (C-47) from a less remote place to meet us decked out in our flame red, made-to-order party suits. We shared wine, food and dancing. Stepping outside to sit on the steps and simply talk about Nam and home with a girl felt very good.

Swinging back to low-brow occasions, there was the infamous night of the Naked Mothers March.

The 389<sup>th</sup>'s hootches were a short distance downhill from the O'Club. After flying was done for the day, a gathering usually materialized between quarters in an area called "the beach." Beer and liquor mixed with stories one day until an ignoble idea surfaced for a march in formation to the club. The uniform was announced to be "combat boots and helmets, that is all!" With accentuated stomping the formation moved on the Club. The doors were violently pushed open, the marchers coursed in. The lone nurse in attendance fell off her bar stool pointing at something about the men and laughing uncontrollably. The manager wanted to shoo the group out as quickly as it came in, but that was not going to happen. The bare warriors demanded to be served—and were.

We were not confined to base at my two stops in Thailand. On occasions of a MiG downing the O'Clubs there were the epicenters of terrific eruptions. Victorious flyers would run and leap onto long table assemblies foamed with beer. The carrier-landing challenge was to slide the farthest down the "runway." Should you make it to the end, you would be spared a tumble to the floor by jocks on each side providing a

landing hook of grabbing your ankles. Another show of bravado at these celebrations was trying to keep standing on a round table wildly lifted up and let down by your squadron buddies. I'm amazed that bruised elbows and cracked skulls did not shut that activity down!

### The Tour

Our group's military tour of Vietnam anticipated bringing us in contact with former opponents. We share the common bond of being military men. What will our perspectives be on the war? I don't think any animosity still lingers. I'm genuinely interested in having a full discussion of what the two sides were fighting for.

### Hanoi

Members of our group met for dinner in our hotel the day before our tour began to relate our travel experiences. We had approached Hanoi from all directions--Tokyo, Seoul, Taiwan, and Bangkok. Skip and his



L>R: Steve Casey, Christopher Solli, Skip Blanchard, George Solli, Cliff Heathcote, Diane Blanchard and Georg Hambach

wife, Diane, had been to Vietnam in 2009 and were the trip organizers. We soon recognized we were in good hands with the detailed arrangements Diane had made for in-country travel, sightseeing and amenities.

Day 1 was touring Hanoi, a city of 9 million people, approximately one-tenth of the country's population of 94 million. The first of our tour guides was a handsome young man who spoke excellent English and could answer all our questions in precise detail. He would care for us for four days until we left the city.

The first stop was a large park holding government buildings and Ho Chi Minh historical sites. We walked by two of Ho's homes; one had a bunker to protect him from Yankee bombing. Of course, we proceeded in line through the mausoleum where the adored leader lay in state surrounded by four army

honor guards. I thought the corpse had a natural appearance not at all waxy. Our guide steeped us in history about the man. We witnessed a changing of the guard.

A morning haze burned off making for brilliant sunshine and oppressive heat. I stayed in shade as much as possible. We walked several narrow alleys of market stalls selling food and various goods until we came to a small lake with aircraft wreckage. It was the notorious B-52 Lake. I'd say the fragments of the plane that jutted out of the water were a landing gear, bit of wing and part of an engine. For Americans, it is a grim reminder of the hazards of war.

Lunch in a small restaurant was refreshing. The men started a tradition of sampling a new beer at each meal. Hoa Lo Prison, more famously known as the Hanoi Hilton, was the next stop. Most of it has been torn down and used for other purposes; just one corner remains. Half of this is dedicated to the imprisonment woes of Vietnamese while under French colonial rule; the other half is about U.S. prisoners in what the Vietnamese call the American War. There are good displays, both statues and pictures, throughout the museum. Many captions on the wall hangings, however, are untruthful propaganda. I was struck by the central city location of the prison making it unlikely someone could secret away if he could manage an escape. The torture and killings the Vietnamese suffered by their captors was made clear, but the Americans were always treated humanely according to the descriptions. Not!

We made stops at Hanoi's air force and army museums. I enjoyed reviewing the many displays at both. The former was a place I could be next to the antiaircraft guns that fired on nearly all my missions: 23mm, 37mm, and one day over Hanoi a radar guided 100mm. There were SAM-2s and the four varieties of contemporary MiGs. I noticed in several museums we visited displays of the sophisticated sensors we dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It appeared the NVA was particularly fascinated by these and in devising ways to defeat them. We saw much captured South Vietnamese and American equipment ranging from artillery pieces to aerial munitions to aircraft. The Army Museum traced battles back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. There were excellent mockups of jungle encampments displaying how the North's army made its way south.

On the bus, we passed by the lake John McCain parachuted into and was promptly retrieved from; it bears his name now. We also passed the Paul Doumer Bridge, the bane of F-105 drivers who repeatedly had to dismember it. Later in the day our group walked partway over the bridge and back.

The tour bus passed the Hanoi Railway Station and my thoughts drifted to the last time this place made an imprint on my mind.

*It was Day 3 of the Christmas Raids, and the target for the daytime fighter task force was the Hanoi railway yards. At the intelligence briefing I was shown an aerial picture of a dense network of train tracks. We were not given any particular target there, "just cause mayhem," I supposed. Dropping twelve 500-pound bombs in the yard was guaranteed to create a great deal of work for the North Vietnamese to fill in craters and repair track. But I wondered if I would have enough time to draw a bead on a locomotive while weaving through a fusillade of antiaircraft artillery (AAA). That would be a prize!*

*We delayed takeoff from Ubon RTAB one hour because of weather in the target area. When it was determined the target could not be struck visually, an alternative plan of bombing off LORAN was put in place. Each four-ship of F-4s would be led by a bird equipped with LORAN navigational devices. When lead's bombs came off their racks, all other planes in tight formation would pickle too.*

*We had a long run-in at 18,000 feet with a solid undercast below. All planes' jammers were on. I was sure the enemy knew we were inbound to drop, but I still got a shock. "Whew!" My eyes popped as I saw some clips of Satan's fiery darts stream by lead's nose. Actually, it was jaw dropping to think that a gun could move 400 knots with us so accurately. Obviously, it was linked to a radar. I maintained radio silence but could not wait to talk about it after the flight. I had been No. 2 on lead's left wing; the No. 3 pilot similarly had his eyes*

*fixed on lead on the right side. In the debrief he said, "Did you see that 100mm?" "Yes!" I got no satisfaction on what my bombs did that day. Results from a post-strike recce were not passed on. Still, no aircraft were lost. It was a win for the Yankee Air Pirates; that's what the North's propagandists called us.*

We returned to the hotel for dinner and a quick turn to attend that evening Hanoi's touted water puppet show. The theater was full. There was a section to the left of the stage where several musicians and singers performed. The stage was a pool. We were treated to a dozen skits of people, dragon, fish and bird puppets skimming and jumping through the water to music from oriental instruments accentuated with drum beats and cymbals. It's all very cleverly performed with long poles operated by about 10 puppeteers behind the stage curtain. The audience left clapping and smiling.



Our rides through Hanoi captivated all of us as we watched thousands of motor scooters mix with far fewer cars to make their way to work, home or to shop. We were told there are four million of the two-



wheeled vehicles in the country. The streets are generally broad, but traffic darts in all directions in a furious game of chicken. Motor bikes with three or even four riders and some with cargo stacked high gave us many chuckles. A little rain, no worry; ponchos were donned quickly. Women were seen in

high heels driving the streets. Some wore total coveralls to keep their complexions from tanning. Most all women scooter riders wore masks over their noses and mouths not so much to filter out air pollutants as to, again, block the sun. Helmets are mandatory, but sometimes you'd see a lawbreaker. And sometimes you would see one caught by police who stood in the street in bright yellow uniforms signaling with white wands to pull over.

## Halong Bay

*Halong Bay is another place where I hold a war memory. Daily throughout Linebacker I in Spring 1972, the war command in Saigon sent massive tactical air task forces to North Vietnam. Each mission required up front a weather reconnaissance of the target area; this was the era before awesome weather satellites. An RF-4C (camera-equipped recce bird) was the way we got pre- and post-strike reconnaissance. Their motto was "Alone and unafraid." The strike F-4 drivers dubbed their brother's mission, "Kill 'em with film."*

*Weather recon was a mission every crew liked; we were supposed to have the element of surprise. For me whose sorties were 99% bombing, I was exuberant going up loaded with wall-to-wall missiles, four Sparrows and four Sidewinders. I got a quick taste of the difference in flying with RFs when I discovered that these guys, who were used to flying solo, had no concept of wingman consideration. After a short while of flying on the wing, I said to my backseater "the hell with this jerking all around" and went wide into a tactical formation.*

*The recce F-4 with its two MiG-protection escorts on each side flew up the South China Sea; just past Haiphong we descended to the deck and turned sharply west. We needed to assess the skies over an airbase north of the capital which would be the task force's target. The unanticipated beauty of Halong Bay caused me to temporarily lose focus on the mission as I absorbed the emerald water with numerous huge black karst outcrops rising from the sea. It was so stunning that I failed to look for the anticipated AAA site on a cliff just south of our ingress path. (It was firing I was told later by the pilot of the other F-4.) Throttles pushed full forward, we crossed the coastline. In five minutes we reached the area we needed to reconnoiter; it was clear—the strike force would rumble today!*

*The most difficult part of the flight was now to unfold. I would be on the outside of the 180-degree turn back to feet wet and needed to tightly arc in a 90-degree bank in afterburner to stay abreast of the other two ships. No sweat; my backseater and I rode the burble through the turn and wound up right where we were supposed to.*

*Over water again, the three-ship climbed to altitude where the recce could use its long-range VF radio to inform Saigon of the favorable weather conditions.*

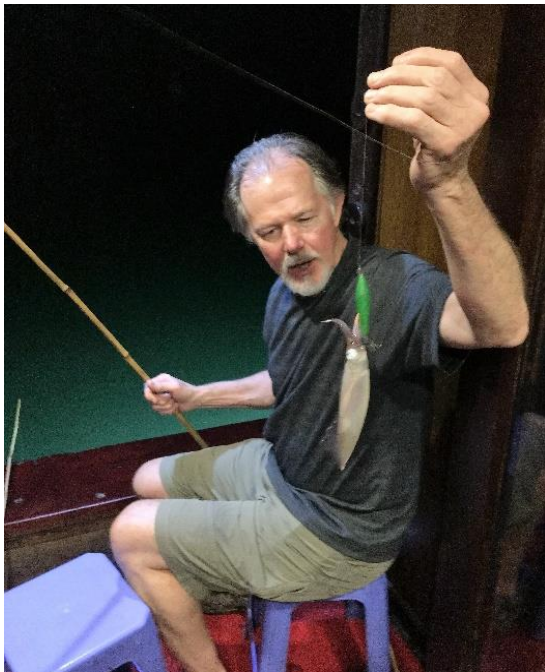
The next day we were off by bus to world famous Halong Bay to board a boat for a two-day cruise through a gorgeous landscape of cream green water and 2,000 small islands of jagged karst shooting up from



the sea. The drive to Halong Bay took three and a half hours. We took one rest stop at a large statuary and crafts factory.

On arrival at the port we saw our boat; it bore a semblance to a Chinese junk, especially when the sails are put up. We set off in a circuit with other cruise boats snapping pictures of the awesome towering, limestone rocks half grown over with trees. We made a stop to crawl through a cave and ascend a steep slope to get a vista of the bay.

Before dinner, we met the other passengers on our boat. They hailed from Australia, the Netherlands, Germany; and there was a young, athletic Kiwi (New Zealander). Christopher engaged the Germans from the Bodensee for an hour and then circulated among the other foreigners. Chris is fluent in three foreign languages and has been endeavoring from the start of our trip to



add Vietnamese phrases to his repertoire.

Dining was wonderful. Seafood came to the table in great variety. There was a cooking lesson that showed us how to make wraps of the ingredients on the table.

We retired to cabins early in the evening but not before two of our members accepted a challenge to jig for squid. Georg Hambach was first to pull one in.

We were tired and knew the next day would challenge us to climb to the top of a tall karst mountain under clear skies and brutal heat.

Coming back down after the climb, some of our party cooled off with a dip in the bay. Skip had another idea. He pulled a harmonica from his pocket; and perched beneath a shady tree aside the beach, he began playing songs. The ditties were all American, but the international beach folk love him. He was an instant rock star as women, especially Chinese, came up to get in a picture with Skip!

The long drive back to the city turned out to be one of the most memorable events of the trip. Our guide asked if we wanted to stop to see a country village. Great idea we all agreed. Villages have archways on dirt roads leading from the highway bearing their names. Our first encounter was with a water buffalo tied to a stake at the edge of a rice paddy. We were warned not to wander off the road into the lining weeds for fear of stepping on a cobra. Not me GI!

A rooster and several hens scurried about. We saw and waved to small children and villagers in their yards as we walked down the road. We were told this village is 80% Catholic. That came as no surprise seeing nearby a magnificent church that was built with money sent from relatives in the United States.

Many houses throughout the country have shops in front. We stopped in one. Purchases of soda led to meeting an old but sturdy woman with blackened teeth from years of chewing betel nuts. This actually was a beauty treatment in her era. We learned in conversation with her and her daughter, translated by our guide, that she lost her husband in the American War and had to raise 10 children by herself. She labored on her farm plot and neighbors' to make a living for the family. She's 90 and still works. The more time we spent in the shop and home's courtyard, the closer natives and strangers became. A point was reached where Cliff stooped down and reached for the older woman's hands, and they were joined for a couple minutes teary eyed feeling a common bond of lost loved ones. There are times when humanity just consumes us—I cherished it.



Another night's sleep in Hanoi concluded our stay in the former North Vietnam. George S. and Chris got a special treat as the hotel was full and they were quartered in the Presidential Suite. Two bedrooms, two baths, a living room with an oriental grandfather clock, and gold trim everywhere necessitated leading the others through for a looksee while we gloated!

Leaving Hanoi, now the seat of power for the whole nation, I tried to assess where the country stands.

- Peace, after a long history of fighting the French, the South, Americans, Cambodians, and Chinese is most welcome.
- It's said that 80% of the population is happy with the government system. There are several tiers to it: federal, provincial, district and local. However, one law must be followed uniformly throughout.



- Life is pretty mercantile from what we saw. The main government interventions noted were taxation, mandatory military or civil service for men, and obedience to the Communist Party.
- Many freedoms were instituted in 1986 that transformed society.
- Citizens can choose private education for their children and private healthcare, if they can afford them.
- The average income in Vietnam is \$2,000 a year. Individuals are taxed a flat 10%, companies 25%.
- Religion is allowed, but certain ones can make you suspect of being dissident. The vetting process to become a communist party member excluded (until later) Catholics, for example, since the Vatican has been critical of the government.
- Travel internally and externally is allowed.
- Expatriates are welcome to come back home.
- Facebook is allowed and TV/radio is not blocked.
- In cities houses are narrow (five meters wide) and long. But you can build second and third stories as you gain more wealth. In rural areas the government offers 50-year land leases to residents for farming.
- The view up north appears happy. The country is prospering in many ways. New highways are being built, and investment is flooding in. Honda, for one, has a huge manufacturing plant. The law allows foreigners to own up to 49% of a property.
- Vietnam's biggest industry now is tourism. But it can stake claim to being the world's #1 exporter of black pepper, #2 in rice and #4 for rubber.

The one problem that stands out starkly for Vietnam presently is a growingly militaristic China. Their behemoth communist neighbor has usurped two Vietnamese archipelagos and claimed control of part of the South China Sea that lies within Vietnam's territorial waters; that is backed by building manmade islands and basing warplanes there. The hatred has grown so strong that the Vietnamese changed the name of their eastern boundary to the East Sea. Getting support from the U.S. to contain China has warmed relations considerably between our two nations.

## Hue

We flew from Hanoi to Hue, the home of the emperor prior to 1945. His palatial residence is a huge gated compound called the Citadel, which we spend a couple hours touring. To get there we boarded a dragon boat and cruised up the Perfume River. A project is underway to restore the Citadel to part of what it used to be. Its six-foot thick exterior walls, miles in length, still stand strong.

Hue is located in the former Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).



It was particularly hard struck by the 1968 Tet Offensive having been overrun and occupied by the Viet Cong and NVA. More than 2,500 residents were massacred at the aggressor's hands. There were 5,000 estimated civilian deaths overall. U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese forces battled for 30 days to retake Hue.

After reunification in 1975 the Vietnamese people were allowed to choose where they wished to live. One million migrated to the south; 200,000 went north. A large portion of those who moved south were Catholics.

Hue is a vibrant city. Our group ate dinner at an outdoor café and split up to roam past entertainment spots; a lively youthful band was playing outside in one walking area and was very engaging.

We travelled the second day in a new Toyota minibus north from Hue to Quang Tri Province, the former DMZ and Khe Sanh. The road we traveled north was aptly named the Highway of Terror for the period in early 1972 when the North invaded across the DMZ. It was the largest battle of the war. Several cemeteries lie along the route. NVA dead lie in manicured gravesites adorned with flowers. ARVN dead are in mass graves covered by weeds. We were told the number of communist soldier deaths was 1.1 million; South Vietnam's killed were 200,000 and U.S., 58,000. [The National Archives count of U.S. military fatalities is 58,220.]

Life was harsh for overrun southerners. They struggled to survive and many were brought to re-education camps to perform hard labor and be educated in communist values. Our tour guide expresses latent bitterness of the harsh conditions for the South's people from 1975-1990. His family moved from the city to countryside. It had to supplement its food supply with tapioca roots which, though nutritional, caused muscle pain. A very intelligent man, he had to forego his teaching profession to take other jobs that paid more money than the communist provision for educators.

We traveled through Dong Ha which has a modern look post reconstruction. A little farther north, Quang Tri City suffered the most damage in the war; it was obliterated. Part of the destruction came from B-52 strikes to push the NVA back north. The NVA retreated but not completely out of the DMZ. Their part of the buffer zone became permanently occupied above a river. The city wasn't reconstructed until 1985.

Quang Tri has a bridge where both sides' POWs were exchanged from the Lam Song and Hue battles. There is a museum showing the Geneva signing that created the demarcation of North and south Vietnam and monuments to the communists on both sides of the river. The border between the former two countries ran 60 miles east-west from the sea to Laos. In the war years, loud speakers perpetrated psychological warfare of both nations bilaterally north-south.

Our group noticed inaccuracies in displays in nearly all of the museums we visit. Our guides had a saying for it: "History is filtered by the victor." All of our tours were steeped in detailed history; only a fraction is being recalled in this story.

A question was asked, "How can one become a member of the Communist Party?" Vetting is not easy as the application must give a family history dating back three generations. Applications won't be approved if there is an instance that someone in the family had been aligned with an anticommunist organization.

### **Khe Sanh**

Khe Sanh was a U.S. Marine Base perched on a plateau in the mountains in I Corps. It had the unenviable geographical position of being near the DMZ, which no longer could be called such, and the NVA sanctuary of Laos on the western border of South Vietnam. When Khe Sanh began to feel hostile pressure in 1968, it was very much in the eye of President Johnson who feared a lost battle there would look all too much like the French defeat in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. The press and TV reporters also had their interests piqued on the plight of Khe Sanh.

An intense artillery barrage on the base raged for days. The commanders of both armies, Generals Vo Nguyen Giap and William Westmoreland, directed the battle. The Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division moved troops north to support the marines; it brought the number of defenders to 6,000. B-52 strikes pounded the

enemy's artillery and infantry who were moving forward in trenches and tunnels. Tactical fighters did the same. In exceptional acts of bravery C-130s and other cargo craft resupplied the base on its pockmarked dirt landing strip.

Strangely, to the Americans, the NVA held back from making an all-out assault on Khe Sanh. As it turned out, the attention General Giap was calling to Khe Sanh was a feint to open up a dramatic campaign throughout all of South Vietnam—the Tet Offensive.

Although the Tet Offensive caught American forces and the ARVN by surprise, they rallied to defeat the Viet Cong's and NVA's voluminous attacks on bases and civilians. The North suffered a striking defeat; the Viet Cong were decimated. Nevertheless, the broad, fierce battles convinced both sides that a negotiated settlement was desirable. Peace talks began under newly elected President Richard Nixon. U.S. troop strength apexed in 1968 as the same year marked the commencement of America's withdrawal from Vietnam.

We turned west to travel Highway 9 which extends to a border post with Laos. The hilly route showed off vegetation that we received lessons on: black pepper vines, rubber trees, tapioca plants and more. We arrived at the Khe Sanh camp and airfield situated on a hilltop. It is now a museum site with an exhibit hall and outside displays that include a C-130, Chinook helicopter, Huey, two American tanks and an armored personnel carrier (APC). We walked on the former runway which has long since been denuded of its perforated steel planking (PFC).

While in the area we drove out to a couple artillery sites Army and U.S. special forces advisors held until being forced out. At Lang Vay Special Forces Camp the friendlies were attacked by tanks; it was impossible to get marine help in from Khe Sanh. The Khe Sanh area gave me a vivid idea of what life was like in the field. Skip drew out his harmonica to sound *Taps* as we paid honor to the fallen.



## Danang

Our tour departed Hue to drive south to Danang. The route was a scenic one in part displaying a large lagoon to our east and wooded mountains to the west. The lagoon holds a bounty of oysters. To attract them poles are cemented to motorbike tires and submerged. Fishermen pick up their catch every few months. We see occasional churches both Catholic and Protestant. The road climbs and descends mountains; it was widened by the U.S. so our convoys could resupply Hue. We made a stop at a high vantage point called Big South Rock. There we took in a beautiful view of a small town with a beach stretched out in a wide arc.

Arriving in Danang, Vietnam's third largest city, we drove up Freedom Hill to a bunker site built by the French and later used by the U.S. for a commanding view of the city. The location now, however, is a monument to Viet Cong and NVA forces who died in the district. The memorial is attractive and has at its center a large obelisk bearing four symbols that translate: "The Fatherland Remembers Your Merits." Large marble plaques are inscribed with the names of the deceased soldiers. Then names are numbered and grouped by villages or other places they were from. The last name bears the number 7,468.

*In one way or another every military member in Vietnam knew Danang Air Base. It was the airport for going on R&R. For Thailand-based fighters it was also a stop-and-reload point*

*on the ubiquitous Danang Turn. After performing one in-country bombing mission, you would get a new load of ordnance to deliver on the journey home.*

*Danang earned further fame, or infamy, since it bore the moniker "Rocket City" for being attacked more often than other bases. And for aircrews it was the site of the "No Hab Kitchen." To get an understanding of this peculiar name, picture the following conversation taking place at the flight line snack bar.*

*Aircrew member to attendant and cook, "I'd like a hot dog and coke please."*

*Attendant, "Solly, no hab hot dog today."*

*Aircrew, "Okay, can you give me a hamburger?"*

*Attendant, "Solly, no hab meat for burger."*

*Aircrew, "This is frustrating. I'll settle for a ham sandwich."*

*Attendant, "No hab."*

*Aircrew in a loud voice, "Well, what pray tell do you have?"*

*Attendant: "Can make peanut butter sandwich."*

*Aircrew, "Aah crap, Give me that."*

We stopped in Danang at China Beach. It was famous during the war as an in-country R&R site and was the name of a fine TV series in the 1970s bearing similarities to M.A.S.H. China Beach is far from what it used to be. For one thing the Vietnamese, because of antipathy with China, have renamed it East Beach. There is also considerable modern commercial development around it. Many hotels line the beach now, and we saw a dozen or more condominiums and time shares built or are under construction along the shoreline as we drove south. One reminder of the old days was spotting a former large heliport. It used to be filled with all manner of army helicopters; some revetments for the choppers still remain.

It's easy to see that Danang City is an up and coming location. It has a fresh and bright presence with its modern buildings. New construction is going on at a rapid pace, particularly now as the city gets ready to host in November the next APEC Conference. Two architectural oddities especially make us rush to get our cameras--the dragon bridge and flying saucer building. A huge Ferris wheel is another landmark. The airport is nice, and a new international terminal is being rushed to completion to meet the APEC conferees.

## **Hoi An**

Before arriving at our hotel in Hoi An, we stopped to see and shop at silk and marble factories. Our lodgings this time was in a resort with lush vegetation and a beautiful pool. The restaurant was open air looking out on a bay. We were allowed half-day respites the two days we stayed to enjoy the surroundings and relax.

Hoi An is a picturesque small town with attractive waterways. Our first stop was at the Japanese Covered Bridge. Its practical purpose is for crossing a canal, but it also was designed to defeat a monster prone to cause upheaval. The monster has an enormous span with an Indian head, Vietnamese body and Japanese tail. A sword is thrust into it at the bridge.

A quaint street has old houses that are shops in the front end. The buildings are narrow and long. Behind the shop is a living room, followed by an open air courtyard to let light in and then one comes to the kitchen and toilet. We did not go upstairs where I would expect to find the bedrooms. Trees are used as poles to hold up the roofs that are thick to insulate the house from the heat. The wood is so hard that termites cannot eat it.

There are five Chinese temples in town. The main one was founded by persecuted opponents of the Ming Dynasty who took flight from their homeland by boat. A story is told that the immigrants were saved from a storm at sea by the goddess of the sea. They stopped at Hoi An and developed it into a prosperous seaport. The temple we visited had three statues to which homage was paid; they stood for prosperity, longevity and happiness. You could pray for fertility at the altar for 12 midwives upon making offerings of betel nuts, money and fruit.

### **Cam Ranh Bay and Na Trang**

Our flight from Danang landed on the runway of the former Cam Ranh Bay Airbase. Resemblances to the 1960s' infrastructure were few. The airfield is actually named Na Trang because that nearby city's former runway could not be extended since it would have taken up too much valuable city property.

The day was hot—35 degrees Celsius. The climate's been noticed to warm the farther south we move. It remained that hot the rest of the trip.

Before we made our way to Highway 1 and Na Trang, our van searched the CRB area to find spots our members who served there remember. We gravitate to the sea. A training area is recognized that was formerly used by Army Rangers and Republic of Korea soldiers. We learn we will not be allowed very far down the peninsula where Steve Casey was based with the navy because it is a closed military area. We walked onto the wide white sand beach that was frequented in off hours by Cam Ranh AB servicepersons. It was on the beach that another sad reflection occurred for Cliff Heathcote. He was told that the mountains to the south were where his father's F-4 went down.

Our 45-minute drive to the city passes by Cam Ranh Bay where we saw floating platforms for fish and lobster farming. A house on stilts in the bay is used to harvest oysters. One of our crew remembered and pointed out an old monastery by the former base. It is uninhabited now and scheduled to be torn down. We passed a village that principally exists as subsidized housing for naval officers and army families.

The drive was attractive as it moved along the foot of a mountain and offered views in the opposite direction of the water. We saw some time shares being built. Entering Na Trang we encountered a nicely laid out street along the ocean. Between the road and the water there is a wide strip of parkland—a sidewalk, grass and palms. No hotels or other buildings disrupt the view of the sea. We viewed a nice harbor scene full of boats from a bridge. Our tour of Na Trang would mostly teach us about two religions, one old, Cham, and the most widely followed, Buddhism.

At Long Son Pagoda we saw Buddhist nuns for the first time. The monks wear brown robes which is different from the customary orange robes you'd see in Thailand and other countries. We learn several key points about the faith. There is a daily mass from 10:00-11:00 a.m. for dead ancestors. Vietnamese do not come to temples regularly. Their attendance is usually to pray for blessings when they have trouble; simple offerings are presented. A follower does not have to belong to a temple. Monks can be requested to come to families' homes to pray that their problems go away. Unlike in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, Vietnamese monks do not have two years of compulsory service in pagodas; they are free to leave and return anytime. Homes often have a shrine to Buddha on their top floor. Speaking of tops, we climbed 176 steps to get to see the Buddha statue at the top of a hill in the city. Our final lesson was to learn there was a different burial approach in the north of the country from the south. People in the former territory pick up the deceased's bones after three years, whereas bodies buried in the south can remain there forever. Only 25% of departed Vietnamese are cremated.

The Cham tower, built in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, is of Hindu origin. This faith is rarely practiced in Vietnam now, and the country has modified the religion from its origin. Shiva and Uma, his wife, are worshiped versus the three principal Hindu gods of which Vishnu is one. Worshipers bring offerings of chicken, sticky rice and rice wine. After prayers, rather than wasting the offerings, they are eaten. As we walked down a tall hill, we were shown that some of the old trees trunks and roots are really concrete but so artfully done that we had not noticed the difference.

There are 54 minorities in all of Vietnam. Since 1995, government jobs have become more open to Catholics and former ARVN members. The influx of foreign companies has greatly helped employment rise. The re-education camps for the ARVN soldiers have shut down. Enlisted members could serve only months' imprisonment while officers were in for years.

### **Qui Nhon and Phu Cat**

We traveled from Na Trang to our next stop, Qui Nhon, by minivan. It was a great opportunity to see more of coastal Vietnam as our winding route scaled small mountains that looked out over the South China Sea onto beaches and fishing villages that we would soon pass close up after completing the downslope. The boats were almost uniformly painted with black bottoms and grey tops. We were told this was to honor whales in an ancient folk story. The boats also bore the eyes of sharks on their bows. Our road trip also afforded views of water buffalo grazing near stacks of straw there to feed them. The coastal plains had numerous farming villages, winding rivers and rice fields some of which were being harvested. Farm workers wore clothing over their faces to protect them from being cut by sharp elephant grass.

Since ours was a custom tour, we did not miss the opportunity to get off the main road on our 250 kilometer route to drive by Tuy Hoa AB. Whereas the U.S. flew F-100s there, the Vietnamese Air Force bases MiG-21s there for training. We did not get a good view of the base other than to notice the aging revetments. Military installations everywhere, we noticed, were heavily restricted.

Pulling in to Quy Nhon looked much like our entry to Na Trang. There was a beautiful beach on the east side with a grass median and a sidewalk bordering the wide boulevard. This city converted its airport runway to a wide street with modern stores on both sides. The new municipal airport is at Phu Cat AB and is shared with the air force.

Our group was only in Quy Nhon overnight, but our short stay was memorable for the hilarious dinner experience we had at an authentic locals' restaurant. Chris found the establishment in *TravelAdvisor.com*. We walked a short way from our hotel to land at the restaurant which was open in the front on both levels. We opted for "air conditioning" which was upstairs and consisted of a large fan. But the fun was only about to begin. A couple of our meals on the tour had suspiciously long waits before entries were served. If we wondered before how fresh the meat was, there was no doubt this time that the chicken was pulled alive into the kitchen for the chef to go to work. An hour later the bird came to the table head, feet, everything! Georg Hambach, ever the comedian, stuck the chicken's head on the tip of a chopstick and spoke for it making "caw" sounds. He then took a foot and gave us a one-finger/claw salute. We outlasted the large party to our left to just about close the place down. When that group up, we viewed on the floor a hurricane's aftermath of beer cans and other dinner debris. Local custom we supposed. We laughed ourselves to sleep that night.

The next day had been long anticipated by Georg H. and myself because we would be returning to Phu Cat Air Base where we served in 1970-71. One sight along the way that we hadn't seen yet was a funeral. The deceased's coffin was laid out in a dragon-decorated bus parked outside a city restaurant where a crowd was gathered. People and casket would later be transported to the cemetery. The road from city to airport was being widened, so we had to navigate around construction. The drive was longer than I imagined it would be. I got a second-sense feeling of belonging here upon seeing a temple ruins on a hill and exposed red clay soil.

We arrived at a military gate where we were passed through with only a short stop. By the checkpoint there was a billboard for air force recruitment. The road from that point led straight to the location of the old base ops building which has been replaced by a larger terminal building. I did not see any of the old Phu Cat AB infrastructure except for the runway, taxiways and rows of F-4 revetments. It was hard to see much, however, with billboards at ground level displaying coming construction to the area. Nor was there viewing the area from the terminal second floor because the windows were white coated to prevent seeing out.

It was not until we were walked to our plane for boarding that I could see anything around the base. Close by I noticed four Sukhoi fighters parked under carport-like roofs. Our taxi to Runway 33 brought us past

the old revetments where stood behind the last row a new squadron ops building. Another addition was two runway-facing alert hangars with Su-27s at the ready. The last connection I could make with my former residence and workplace was on our takeoff for Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. The climb out brought back a familiar feeling as I gazed at the verdant hills lying off to our left and straight ahead.

### **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)**

We were met at the airport, as on prior occasions on the tour, by a new guide and driver. Our middle-aged guide had a lamentable personal history which unfolded as we drove into the city. He was imprisoned as a youth for six months when Danang fell in 1975. It was related that typically an ARVN colonel would get 13 years and generals 15.

Our guide's high school education was brought to an end when he was conscripted to fight Pol Pot in Cambodia. This warfare occurred from 1987-89. Vietnam, aligned with the Soviet Union, supported the resistance in Cambodia against Pol Pot who killed two million of its citizens. Cambodia had the support of China which complicated the picture by starting a border war in northern Vietnam. The United Nations brought about cease fires to these conflicts finally.

We started seeing Saigon, as our guide prefers to call it, on foot. It appeared a lovely city with trees, parks and attractive buildings, much nicer than Hanoi. We walked to the front of the former CIA Headquarters; it was from its roof that the last helicopter pickup occurred during the American evacuation in 1975. We were told the story of residents that day turning on radios and hearing Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" song being played over and over. It was a signal to U.S. government personnel left in the city to come to the CIA to leave the country. The next stops on the walking tour were to note the architecture of a large Catholic church and across the street the Old French Post Office.

In the afternoon we moved on to the former Presidential Palace. We were steeped in the history of this last vestige of South Vietnamese government when it was entered by the North Vietnamese crashing through the gate with a tank on April 30, 1975, at 11:30 a.m. An NVA colonel took the South's surrender. A new president, General Duong Van Minh, had been installed just two days before replacing Vice President Tran Van Huong, who only recently had stepped in for President Nguyen Van Thieu, who resigned and retreated to London. The last message sent from the palace was, "Communists arrived already. We surrender. Goodbye." A deal had been made to lay down weapons. The president said to the officiating NVA colonel, "I've been waiting for you to hand over power." The colonel responded roughly. The war was over. An interesting side note is that the colonel defected to Paris 13 years later.

The former president's home and South Vietnamese government building has been renamed the Reunification Palace. The building and grounds are beautiful with manicured lawn, gardens and large trees. We toured the expansive interior to see such sites as that were the cabinet meeting room, banquet hall and more. Some period military pieces are scattered on the grounds, in particular a VNAF F-5 and the two tanks that played in the final scenes of North Vietnam's conquest of the South. The tank that rammed the gate was not the one that arrived on the scene first. The preceding tank did not have a North Vietnamese flag and was ordered to wait for another that did. The last assault on the Palace, interestingly, was not the first. On April 25<sup>th</sup> a defecting VNAF pilot dropped two bombs on the palace grounds then landed his F-5 at a field prepared by the "Liberation Forces."

In 1976 the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) renamed Saigon in honor of its hero, Ho Chi Minh. The war with Pol Pot, 1975-79, was waged, in part, with weaponry the Americans gave to the VNAF; namely, A-37s and F-5s. C-130s are still used today.

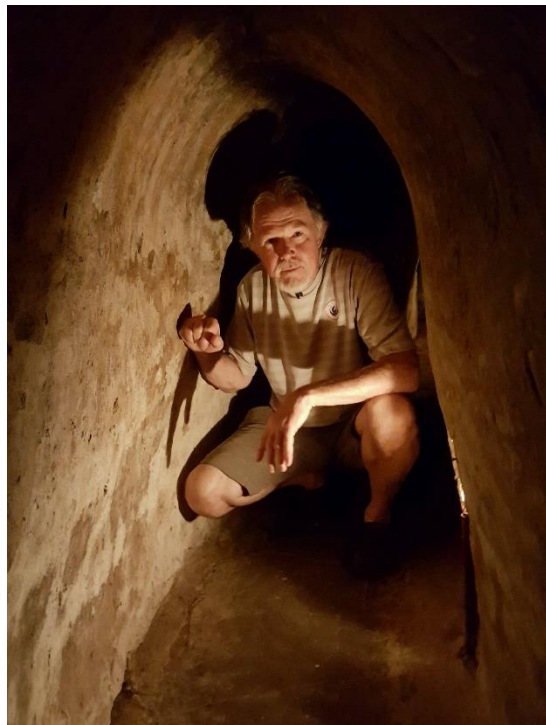
We left after breakfast the next day to drive through the city then suburbs to see the infamous tunnels at Cu Chi. The ride took us past the gate to the old US 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters. Life for the villagers in Cu Chi was particularly threatening since they were forced to pay taxes to both government and the Viet Cong. Life was so unsafe that people settled at night on the main roads. They had to check for VC mines on the roads back to their homes in the morning. But, where were the VC? We would soon see as we made our way

deeper into the Iron Triangle region that was close to Cambodia where many branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail entered South Vietnam. It was area of frequent fighting between the Viet Cong and American forces.

We traveled deep in to a jungle. Cicadas chirped loudly and incessantly. The area had rubber plantations that were nationalized from Michelin after 1975. Huge organic greenhouses now operate in place of rubber trees to grow and export high-end vegetables. The latter bring in more money largely since tires are no longer manufactured from raw rubber. We're told rubber is principally used now for condoms and gum.

The Cu Chi Tunnels are an elaborate network of hand-dug tunnels that total 150 miles in length. Visitors get the impression seeing the small and disguised entryways and crawling through short passages of the tunnels that this was an enemy that was ready to endure a lot for its cause. The tunnels could be constructed because the ground was clay and had little rock. The ground could be dug by hand and hoe. The excavated earth was carried away by women in small baskets where it was inconspicuously distributed around the edge of fresh bomb craters. Air holes to ventilate the tunnels were often found by termite mounds.

Only small or thin Americans could fit into the tunnels to look for enemy presence—Hispanic GIs often got the call. Tracking dogs could be thrown off by VC tricks to strategically place articles with Americans' scents. Our guide demonstrated how to enter a tunnel and suggested we try it. Cliff successfully followed suit lowering himself through a small vertical chute. Others in the group entered a different section of tunnel more conventionally through a crawl-in portal.



The jungle was booby trapped with wicked primitive but deadly devices. Hidden pits along trails contained sharp-tipped and poisoned punji sticks that would disable infantrymen. Many different handcrafted spiked objects perched to kill awaited inadvertent triggering. The enemy also exploited unexploded allied ordnance to make mines. This fighting area is a nightmare; it makes a lasting impression. I give credit to the makers of this well planned tourist exhibit for the real life displays that vividly reveal the extraordinary determination and skill of the enemy to conceal its fighters when waging attacks in the Saigon area. The war had one other large tunnel complex; that was through the DMZ.

Leaving the steamy forest behind we settled not far away at a restaurant on a beautiful island between two rivers. We had a private pavilion by the water where we conversed and ate a delicious meal. Our ride back to the city provided a lesson on the Vietnamese language. Spoken Vietnamese is similar to Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese dialects. The ruler in 1900 ordered that the language



formally adopt roman letters. Later, Malaysia and Turkey followed this example. Vietnamese incorporates five tones, 12 vowels and 9 accents. We have fun repeating the same sentence but with each of the accents. It's hilarious how the different accents on the same word change the meaning.

Back in the inner city we drove by the grounds of the former U.S. Embassy. President Bill Clinton lifted the U.S. embargo on Vietnam in 1995 and a consulate general post, opened by Madelyn Albright, now occupies part of the space. It nowhere near approximates the size of the old embassy building. Our embassy now is located in Hanoi.

More notable sights we saw were the Caravelle and Rex Hotels which have hosted famous personages, the very attractive Opera House and wide and ornate City Hall. There is a huge indoor market in this area; it occupies a full city block. The perimeter stalls are government owned stores; the tip from our guide was to shop there for the best prices. Many more independent sellers are in the interior with all manner of goods to sell.

We awoke the next day on the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the communist conquest of South Vietnam. It is a holiday. We had breakfast then left by minibus heading south and west for the Mekong Delta. The two and one-half hour drive gave us plenty of time to learn more about the country's history, physical and human geography and economy. We were told that only a tiny stretch of the city along the river remains a slum and will be cleared soon. Half a million Chinese live in Vietnam.

We learned some ways Saigon residents in 1975-89 passively resisted the communists who were newly ruling their city. There were booming loudspeakers sounding military marches and propaganda. Russian songs were played; foreign radio was forbidden. One singer continued to croon American songs by substituting names of Russian, Cuban and East German places. An example would be: "I left my heart in Moscow City." Much of the ordeal could not be made light of, however. People received food stamps, but families never received enough meat. The pigs they raised were supposed to be sold to the government, but the black market was more profitable. Families shared clothing.

Things have always been better for Communist Party members. That population is 4.7 million people or five percent of the citizenry. To be promoted to officer rank in the army, you have to be a Party member. To become CEO of a company, you likewise require membership. Even marriage is scrutinized. Fiancés are investigated, and the Party can say no.

Approaching the 1990s, the country began to open up. The first foreigners to arrive were Asian businessmen.

Our guide told us on our ride that the Delta offered a relaxed way of life; the people are hospitable and easy going. He and his wife were thinking about retiring there. The area is flat. In contrast, 80% of central and northern Vietnam is mountainous. A freeway took us to the river. We saw rice paddies and duck farms. Ducks create a fine ecocycle. They eat fallen rice, insects and snails to help the farmers; the latter collect the ducks' eggs. There is more, duck waste is fertilizer; and duck meat is a prized protein source for poor people. Rice has after uses also. People use the husks for fuel to cook with and then collect the ashes to give back to the soil as fertilizer.

Three crops of rice are produced annually in the Mekong Delta supplying 90% of the country's requirement. It was said that the best rice harvested is used to make rice wine. The delta also produces large quantities of fish, with Mekong catfish a specialty. Fruit is the third-ranked crop. Farmers plant corn and vegetables on dry land and rice on wet land. Water hyacinths were spotted as were some private cemeteries in farmers' gardens and rice fields.

We arrived at a port on the Mekong and boarded a private boat that had wooden benches and a straw roof. We rode out to see the floating market and floating fish farms whose cages were lashed to poles by the banks of the river. Red tilapia are raised to two pounds and then harvested. We disembarked twice. The first stop was a candy factory where we sat for tea and sampled delectable rice and coconut confections. Furthermore, we witnessed the interesting ways it was produced. On our second stop we transferred to two sampans where women in conical straw hats rowed single long oar from a platform on the stern. We travelled for half an hour down a peaceful residential canal with thick with vegetation along the banks. We passed an occasional house party.



Once offloaded back at the dock, we walked by dozens of stalls in a massive outdoor market. A sample of the offerings were 10 or more varieties of rice, live fish, ducks, chickens, water snakes, crabs, squid, frogs, vegetables, chillies, fruits, flowers, pre-processed and raw spices. The long ride back to the city traversed a different route. We crossed the river on a huge bridge built by the Aussies and appropriately nicknamed the Australian Bridge. The journey lasted until twilight and was our last vestige of sightseeing in Vietnam.



That evening, the Reunification Day holiday, our group enjoyed an alfresco farewell-to-Vietnam dinner on the rooftop of our hotel. It offered a sweeping view of Ho Chi Minh City; our position was near the center. It was surprising that for the couple hours we spent dining, only one small display of fireworks was set off! I wondered, even bet, there was much greater celebratory activity in Hanoi. It signified to me that while there is peace in the conquered south, there is not the level of

general satisfaction the communist government would like to see.

## **Cambodia**

Our morning flight leaving Ho Chi Minh City took us across the full width of Cambodia to near its western border. The descent for landing traversed the Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake. Tonle is shrunken this month but will swell to greater depth and area when the monsoon rains fill it starting in a month or two.

Our destination, Siem Reap, is another tourist mecca, the equivalent of what we witnessed in Vietnam. It has gained worldwide fame for the ancient temples that the French discovered a century ago and that are being restored in many cases with international aid.

Our tour guide and driver in Siem Reap, and driver took us to seven temples that dated from the 6<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries. We walked and climbed through Angkor Thom, Bayon, Ba Phuon, Ta Prohm, Banteay Samre, Pre Rup, and to conclude, the grandest of all, Angkor Wat. These sites shared several things in common.

- Kings built the temples in the belief the sites brought them power.
- The temples were built by slaves conquered mostly in the Angkor Period, 802-1431.
- Khmer artisans carved the statutes and intricately inscribed wall murals that often depicted large battles.
- The massive quantities of sandstone used in construction originated at distant quarries. Stone in huge blocks was transported on barges down rivers to the building sites.
- The earliest temples were created by Hindus; the latest by Buddhists. Some temples were converted from Hindu to Buddhist.
- Our three days of visiting temples was done with the temperature at 95-degrees. The scorching sun and heat-laden air were draining; only rarely did we get a wisp of breeze.
- A French botanist discovered the temple region around Siem Reap. Most had been long hidden in dense overgrowth.
- Several benefactor countries have and are aiding the Cambodians in restoring temples at Siem Reap; namely, France, Japan, India and Germany.
- No one lived in the temples. They were solely for praying and meditation.
- The sandstone could be easily split to size at the quarries by soaking wood wedges and soaking them to expand.
- Anchor Thom was built in 1280. It has a remarkable entryway lined with 54 demon statues on one side balanced by 54 gods on the other.
- Bayon was built when the country was the enlarged size of Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam today. Some pillars in this temple had faces on all four sides.
- The Ba Phuon temple outdated Anchor Thom by 150 years but did not open to the public until 2011. Ba Phuon is a temple all our travelers will remember for the image of Cliff and our guide waiving triumphantly from the top tier after making a very steep climb 55 meters high that the rest of us begged off.
- Ta Prohm Temple had a nice complement of trees.
- Banteay Srei was late to be discovered (1914). It was notably different for having a ruddy color since it was constructed with pink sandstone. It has a theme as a Citadel of Women and is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. Banteay Samre is a temple built as a miniature copy of Angkor Wat.
- Pre Rup was the last temple we visited. It was built in 962 and was notable for having five levels and lots of stone lion figures.

## Angkor Wat

*I first saw Angkor Wat in May 1970 circling at 2,000 feet. The aircraft commander I flew with for our first incursion into Cambodia had a vector off a TACAN station that enabled us to find it. My gasping impression was of a blackened, ornately carved rock fortress stretched across an enormous plot of land with a wide surrounding moat. Although I did not come prepared with foreknowledge of the significance of this ancient temple, I remembered a newsreel showing Jacqueline Kennedy visiting the site fewer than 10 years before. It was a good thing we took the first opportunity to sightsee because it was quickly put off limits.*

Angkor Wat is symbolized on the Cambodian flag. It has at its outer edge a huge rectangular moat that was dug by hand. The long side is nearly a mile long, 1.5 kilometers; the short edge, 1.3 kilometers. The moat was not made as a defensive measure; it is strictly for ceremonial effect. The City of Siem Reap observes height restrictions not allowing building construction higher than Angkor Wat.

- Angkor Wat is the biggest religious monument in the world and is regarded the most beautiful Hindu temple. It covers 195 hectares or about 390 soccer fields.
- We walked in from the west which displays the front side of the temple. There is a stone bank walkway across the moat.
- Five entrances front the temple itself. The middle ones are reserved for the king, queen and high officials. The outer ones for regular people and animals.
- There are three levels all adorned with wall carving in dedication to gods, such as Vishnu, and Buddha.
- Angkor Wat was converted from the original Hindu to Buddhist theme in 1556.
- There are stupas (tombs) for ashes of the dead.
- Sacrilegiously, the temple bears some bullet marks from Khmer Rouge firing on enemies who retreated there.
- Our group climbed to the third level negotiating a long, steep ladder to the last tier. There was tight surveillance of access to the top. Only 10 people at a time were permitted to climb/descend the ladder and 100 people were allowed to be on top.

## Cambodia Yesterday and Today

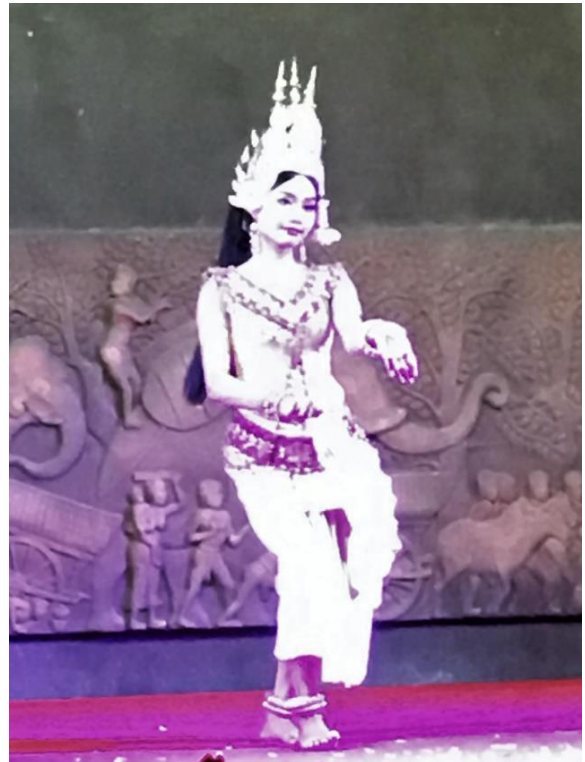
- Cambodia was a French colony from 1863-1953. The French get mixed reviews from the people; they were colonial masters but also did good things for the county. They left peacefully.
- The Khmer Rouge in the mid to late 1970s left an indelible scar not only on Cambodian history but on the world conscience.
- From 1975-79, 3 years, 8 months and 20 days, many city people who were sent to farms died. During this period people were forced to work farms 12 hours a day and were poorly fed while the rice they produced was exported.
- Phnom Penh was emptied in just two days. There were brutal killings. Intellectuals were the first to be executed. Killing fields have been found throughout the country. Some Khmer Rouge are still alive. Those identified are standing trial.
- Military service is voluntary.
- The current government is viewed as corrupt and having rampant nepotism. Citizens want a change
- Tuk Tuks are a common conveyance. These are motorbikes pulling carriages fitting two people.
- Gasoline is sold on the black market roadside in bottles.
- Post-2006 Honda motorbikes have been bought from Vietnamese factories.

- The country is 95% Buddhist followed by Christian, Cham, Muslim and Hindu elements. We occasionally saw small shrines in the countryside representing animism.
- The country's history is commonly broken into three periods: Pre-Angkor from the 6<sup>th</sup> to late 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries; Angkor, 802-1431; and Post-Angkor, 15<sup>th</sup> Century to present.
- Schools are run in AM and PM shifts to serve the most students with the limited infrastructure. Classes are held six days a week. There is a two-week holiday at New Years and a 2 1/2 –month holiday in the rainy season.
- Country teachers will usually work one of the shifts and have a second job.
- Computers are not always available to public school students living out of the cities, but private schools have them.
- Boys can move to cities for education and find jobs more easily than girls. The boys can eat and live at Buddhist Temples.
- Battambang Province in the northwest corner of the Tonle Sap produces three crops of rice a year which is sufficient to feed all of Cambodia. Rice is widely exported.
- Cambodia has the largest water snake harvest in the world. These are nonpoisonous and are eaten.
- The civil war chased many tigers out of Cambodia to neighboring Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

### Tour Finale

Our last evening on the trip was a special occasion as we went to a dinner-show restaurant where we were entertained by Khmer folk dancers. We witnessed five dances which were especially remarkable for the way the female dancers bent back their fingers and toes. The women wore tall gold headdresses. The Coconut Shells Dance was something different for the joyful way the men and women coordinated tapping coconut shells together in varying patterns and in a rapid tempo.

The last day of Cambodia touring took us on a motorized canoe ride out to the Tonle Sap. The canoe's propeller was at the end of a log movable shaft. It enabled the boat to navigate through shallow water and reeds. It was a noisy ride out to the lake. We traveled the muddy brown tributary at a relaxed pace, but canoes carrying locals sped by kicking up rooster tails. We passed some houses on stilts, essential when the lake begins to rise in the June –October rainy season. The farms and trees will be flooded. The scene is called the "Inundated Forest." We occasionally passed spirit houses that resembled birdhouses on a pole.



Once on the Tonle Sap, the 19<sup>th</sup> largest lake in the world, we steered to a pod of houses and stores assembled on barges. There are actually three substrates to the construction: a boat under which are bamboo logs and under that metal oil drums. Families have lived and worked in them for generations. Children growing up on the lake may only get schooled through sixth grade. They marry and keep the fishing life going.

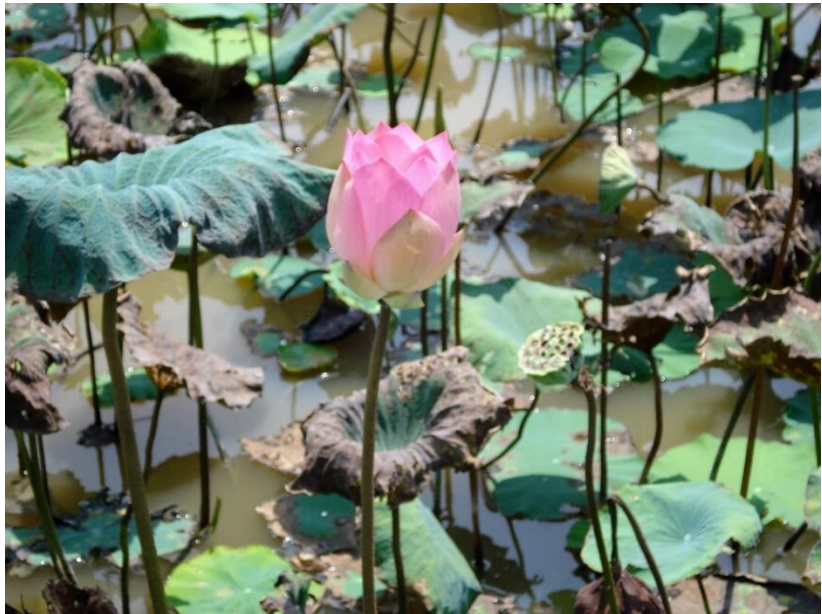
Fishermen pay the government to own part of the lake and can fish anywhere in it. Some illegal fishing occurs from dynamiting and electrocution. Fishing is so plentiful that part of the catch is exported to Thailand and Vietnam. Climate change and dams in Laos and China have been responsible for reducing the fish population in the lake to 100 varieties. The white fish migrate from the lake as it shrinks because they need

more oxygen than the black fish. The Mekong, which runs 500 kilometers through Cambodia, gives up 10% of its flow to the lake. Other tributaries combined account for 40% of the lake's filling. Poles and nets for catching freshwater shrimp dot regions of the lake. In the dry season the depth of the lake is only 1 ½ meters, but it becomes 6-8 meters deep at monsoon time.

We disembarked on a shopping barge that had floating fish and crocodile cages lashed to it. The crocodile species has no tongue. A large party boat was in the area and cruise boats also pay visits. In all, more than 170 floating villages make the lake home. There are 1,100 families on or around the lake. Twenty percent of residents live in stilt houses on the banks.

On the return trip to town we walked through a marsh-like farm growing lotus flowers. We learned we could peel the lotus flower to the seed and eat it. We sampled seeds from carefully selected flowers because taste varies with a flower's stage of development. Our seeds tasted good!

There was a short space of time left to shop, and our guide and driver took us to excellent venues for art crafts and crocodile leather. George S. was pleased to find attractive lacquerware pieces he had wanted to buy since leaving SEA, and Skip found a great knife blade at a blacksmith stand. The smithy worked it to a high polish on the spot!



By late afternoon we well-trodden travelers were transported to the Siem Reap Airport where we spread out to various airline counters to begin the long roads home. Hugs and sincere farewell wishes were shared in parting. Our experiences in Vietnam and Cambodia—sightseeing, learning, dining and reminiscing—we agreed, will vibrantly dwell in our memories.

### **Georg Hambach's Extension in Saigon**

"I left in a cab for my friend's apartment the same day everyone left for Cambodia. The cab ride was 10 minutes from the hotel. I could have walked. When I arrived, James's neighbor had the key for me. Once in the apartment, I found a note and the keys to his motorbike. We all had been watching the daring antics of the cyclists for two weeks, so I was a little familiar with the rules of the road. There are none! You are responsible for everything in front of you, period. Those behind you are watching you. Stay up with the traffic. I've been riding since I was 16 years old so that helped. The motorbike got me around places in Saigon that I probably would not have seen otherwise. Parking was NOT a problem.

I visited the Saigon Zoo. Depressing. Minimal natural habitat. I did find four local microbreweries, two German restaurants, and a Blues club. The sidewalk vendors were great for early breakfast during my morning walks. Fried eggs on a baguette just 15,000 Dong (60cents). I managed to find a different cuisine almost every stop for food. Saigon is a culinary delight. French wine abounds.

The good news is that we saw Vietnam as it is growing in culture and technology. The bad news is that I fear it is out of control. The entire coastline is up for grabs by corporations that will put profits before environment and a government that sees a lot of money coming in. The infrastructure is not keeping up with growth."

### **My Years in the War: 1970-1973**

I racked up 252 combat missions on the first tour. The flying was exhilarating with the most satisfying sorties being those that supported our soldiers and marines in contact with the enemy. Our firepower consistently helped beat back attacks on friendlies' hilltop camps, landing zones and patrols. Missions at Phu Cat could come from the daily frag passed down from Headquarters 7th Air Force or be scramble launched from the alert shack. Crews pulled alert duty on 12-hour shifts 24x7.

Standing alert was actually great fun. I was riding back seat my year at Phu Cat and needed to be first up the ladder when scrambled to start the inertial navigation system gyros spinning. They were the long pole in the tent for getting the plane rolling out of the chocks. Not a problem; I could outrace anyone else the 50 yards to the planes in their shelters. Crews could get up to three alert missions in a day. Alert duty ran my year's sortie count up appreciably.

By 1970 the U.S. was accelerating the withdrawal of ground forces with the hope that the ARVN could hold the country independently. A bold and valiant campaign pushed that strategy to the max as I was leaving in early 1971—Operation Lam Song 719. With American and Vietnamese air cover ARVN soldiers crossed the Laotian border to attack the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Casualties were catastrophic, however, as the NVA rushed new troops to the scene forcing an Allied withdrawal.

Cambodia was helpless in the years the Viet Cong and NVA used its eastern border as a sanctuary from ARVN and American attacks. Cambodian President Lon Nol, newly deposing King Norodom Sihanouk, in April 1970 gave a nod to the U.S. to strike the communists. President Nixon pounced on the opportunity. A promising campaign to inflict heavy damage on 7,000 NVA soldiers did not materialize, however, because it was handcuffed by politics, as so often happened. But tons of weapons were destroyed. This was particularly useful to Allied airmen because it greatly reduced the showering of rockets on our bases. Whereas the enemy was striking Phu Cat once a month from the surrounding hills, the frequency was reduced to once every two months thanks to the large number of munitions confiscated and destroyed in Cambodia.

Our relief was not respected back in the States, however; antiwar protests broke out with a furor over the incursion. Widening the war was seen by the vocal minority, and undoubtedly many other citizens, as another step deeper into the Vietnam quagmire. It didn't help that Ohio National Guard soldiers fired on student protesters at Kent State University killing four. I remember at the time thinking selfishly about my own improving circumstances and not feeling compassion for this tragic event. But my heart breaks now.

In the Spring of 1972 several fighter squadrons were hurriedly deployed from stateside bases to Vietnam to repulse the NVA which arrogantly was crossing the DMZ. It was Operation Linebacker I; the air war over North Vietnam was reignited. With tanker support our 308<sup>th</sup> TFS F-4Es deployed from Homestead AFB in South Florida flying long legs in succession to Hickam AFB, Hawaii; Guam AB, Pacific Ocean; Clark AB, the Philippines; then across Vietnam to Thailand.

When I returned to the conflict as "summer help" for the air wing at Udorn Ratchathani, it was a different war. Interdiction missions filled the flight schedule. All four countries of SEA were open to strikes: South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Linebacker I was a much improved air campaign against North Vietnam. All targets of military value were on the table to attack. New weapons, laser guided bombs in particular, took out bridges with great efficiency. B-52s struck deep inside North Vietnam. The Navy mined the country's main harbor and resupply point, Haiphong--Russian and Chinese vessels be damned! Tactical aircraft could find substantial targets more easily in the South because the invaders were out in the open.

The numerous aircraft squadrons deployed from the states to wage Linebacker I paired with the ARVN to beat back the North's assault across the DMZ and from the west. Tens of thousands of northern soldiers were killed. Four months into the campaign, the U.S. effort to Vietnamize the war appeared fruitful. But it needed our firepower.

After retreating, the North reverted to its widespread strike-and-retreat attacks. There was hope that a resumption of the peace talks in Paris would succeed. U.S. patience, however, wore thin after additional

months of frustration in Paris and the suspicion the North was playing a delaying game. President Nixon opted to make a preemptive strike in December 1972 on the North's heartland, the capital Hanoi and port, Haiphong.

Operation Linebacker II brought in waves of B-52s attacking the Hanoi-Haiphong corridor by night. Fighters attacked by day; they also flew MiG cap nights for the BUFFs (an affectionate nickname for B-52s) and laid down chaff to confuse enemy radars. Fighter crews from the States once again were rushed over the Pacific to supplement permanent party in Thailand. My station changed to Ubon Royal Thai Air Base.

The operation gained a popular name—The Christmas 1972 Raids. For 11 days the deep North was pounded around the clock. POWs retuning after the war told of their elation and their guards' fear of the bombardment. This time the operation succeeded in driving home a peace accord. Over the first months in 1973 the Vietnam War, the longest in U.S. history at the time, was closed down in phases.

A few of my missions during Linebackers I and II, where I accumulated 55 sorties over North Vietnam, were my most memorable. On my first tour, February 1970-71, my unit only went North once. That occasion was the fruitless attempt in November to rescue POWs at Son Tay.

The squadrons I flew in, 389<sup>th</sup> TFS (Phu Cat) and 308<sup>th</sup> TFS (Homestead deployed), had remarkable safety records. In my time only four planes were shot down. Two were picked off by AAA, one by a SAM and the other by a MiG. One flyer was KIA; five were rescued by Jolly Greens; and two were taken prisoner. Operation Homecoming repatriated the POW pair in Spring 1973.

In this memoir I've credited the cargo drivers for their bravery in taking relentless fire and continuing to resupply embattled ground units. FACs going low and slow also get a deep nod in the courage department. I further greatly respect the daring contributions of Strategic Air Command crews who waged the Christmas Raids. Fifteen B-52s were lost. I just grit my teeth at the missions those men performed flying straight and level to deliver their loads in history's most protected airspace. Give me a fighter any day!

Our POWs returned with honor. Most of the captured men endured long imprisonments (up to eight years) and terrifying torture. Yet almost all showed the fortitude to adhere to the Soldier's Honor Code while held in camps and prisons. Some of the latter places gained infamous names such as "Heartbreak Hotel" and the "Hanoi Hilton" for their harshness and cruelty. When joined with other American POWs, the men adhered to military custom and discipline respecting the authority of the senior officer. Ingenious means of communicating and resisting were devised. A few escaped their captors; some were executed. The joyful, tear-rendering repatriation of 591 POWs in Operation Homecoming in 1973 was a tonic to all America.

### **Communist Version of the War and the Aftermath**

Although we tried to find NVA veterans in Hanoi, we did not meet with communist soldiers or airmen of our era, as hoped. Our guides were well versed in their countries' history; a couple could relate the war period 1965-1975 well. Their perspectives were interesting and parted from propaganda we sometimes viewed in museum displays. Ho Chi Minh was honored in the North while the Communist Party was given mixed reviews. In the South the pain following the communist takeover will never be forgotten by those who lived through it. The younger generations, however, will likely take life on without this bias.

It's evident that the North holds sway over the South in what is portrayed about the war. Memorials to communist service members are very attractive and frequently presented gloriously; the graves of ARVN combatants were ignored and in some cases were cordoned off for years. There are no widow benefits for the defeated soldiers' wives contrasted to their communist counterparts.

Communist Party buildings and grounds are meticulously maintained. Some official places post guards, but otherwise there is not a visible military presence around the country.

### **Making Sense of It All**

I came to the Republic of Vietnam early in 1970 an optimist that the U.S. would stop a communist takeover. Naturally, I was motivated to fight to defend the honor of the United States of America. But I was



propelled further by loathsome tactics the North Vietnamese employed. I particularly drew ire that South Vietnamese youth were forcibly conscripted from their homes to fight for the North and their village leaders executed. That greatly offended my sense of democracy. My combativeness aroused, I adopted the mantra, "The only good Cong is a dead Cong." I felt that way every day of my three tours of duty.

It would take years beyond the fall of Saigon in 1975 to make me start reconciling my feelings to the new reality. Emotional leveling did not occur quickly. I followed the plight of the Vietnamese Boat People escaping the retribution being levied on people in the South by the communists. I wanted refugees to find peace, at last, in America. I wanted them to see how freedom in the U.S. could enable their making fulfilling lives. As years went on, I was lifted by heartwarming stories of Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian emigrants who made that vision a reality.

The day Saigon fell I was swept with remorse for the carnage and destruction I wrought in SEA. It was all in vain. I could not sleep that night. To this day, I bear guilt for the unexploded cluster bomb units (CBU) that go off injuring people who find them.

The division in our nation over the Vietnam War contributed much to the turbulence of 1960s America. It was rare to hear support for the war from beginning to end. But it was all too common to see antiwar protesters on TV and biting graffiti on walls. The most disheartening facet to me of the social unrest was the coolness with which citizens received returning veterans. Coming home from my first tour, no one wanted to hear about my war experiences. Being in uniform often incurred suspicious gazes and even overt disrespect. "Baby killers, war mongers..." were notions embedded in civilian minds about the fighters for South Vietnam's sovereignty. Once in California I was nearly denied boarding a flight because the gate agents thought I was unstable. True, I was disheveled, unshaven and my uniform (1505s) was wrinkled after spending hours flying back from the war zone; but this would have been a badge of honor in other wars.

I was delighted when some belated parades in the 1980s were held to herald the gallantry of Vietnam veterans. I was stationed in Europe in 1985; otherwise, I would have proudly marched with thousands of vets down the Big Apple's famous ticker-tape route for heroes and soldiers of other wars.

In retrospect an historic cycle has been repeated: "Enemies will be friends and friends will be enemies." Today a communist Vietnam looks to the United States for support in fending off Chinese incursions in the South China Sea. The U.S. is a major purchaser of goods manufactured in Vietnam, and Yankee investment is encouraged. The former enemies are delicately forging mutually beneficial relations.

Our bitter defeat in Vietnam at least presaged some important changes in military strategy and national resolve. Subsequent wars have benefited from our presidents' determination to fight to win with all the power and support we can muster. The Air Force instituted rigorous and realistic training programs that followed the Navy's successful air warfare model. Though it's murky whether Mideast governments can sustain the help we've given them to fight radical Islamists, there's no doubt that in hostile engagements the U.S. will display its superior might.

### **What Did You Do in the War Daddy?**

I came three times from 1970-73 to Vietnam to fight. When I was there, I thought we could win; not everybody did. I ambitiously accumulated a total of 410 combat sorties, a high number for a fighter pilot. They covered the whole theater--I to IV Corps in South Vietnam; Route Packs I, II and VI in North Vietnam; Laos and Cambodia.



The Phantom II fighter I flew was the most versatile fighter up to its time and maybe for all time. Our mechanics and weapons maintainers broke their backs keeping us flying. I lived in relative safety thanks to our and allies' military police and security forces. I enjoyed full-service bases providing excellent medical care, food, recreation and administrative functions.

War was not hell for me. My tour of Vietnam in 2017, however, showed me places where it was Hades: for Army soldiers in the Iron Triangle, Marines at Khe Sanh, and Navy boatmen in the Mekong Delta. These places and many others in-country put our servicemen at high-risk all the time. I hold high respect for these Americans' service.

### **What to Make of Vietnam Today?**

The Communist Party has firm control of the political system even though only 5% of the population belongs to it. Dissent is not allowed, but capitalism is prevalent and communication is open with the rest of the world. Social media thrives. The country is rich in natural resources which seem to be well managed. The people can buy what they want depending on their earnings. Citizens can choose government-provided free education and medical care or pay for private alternatives which are superior. There is relief in the country that there is peace and life can be normal. The wars to end French colonialism and American protection of the South became 42 years old when Reunification Day (April 30<sup>th</sup>) transpired during our visit. There has been no hot war for almost 30 years, but China and Cambodia still menace Vietnam.



The country is booming with tourism, new construction and foreign investment. It is a prosperous time. Vietnam was candidly depicted by one native we met as "an egg where the shell outside is communism, but inside the yolk and egg white are capitalism." The country seems to have many friends, and Americans are well received.

### **Conclusion**

The number of military deaths in the Vietnam War from both sides totals a somber two million. It has been reported that of all the troops North Vietnam sent south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, only 15-20% survived. The NVA suffered heavily from bombings, malaria and fighting. The U.S. was joined in the war by seven allied countries. Our friends also bore casualties; they were: Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand. Canada contributed war supplies. Civilian deaths in the two

Vietnams were heavy too. We did not stop communism from spreading over the whole country. The communist movements in Laos and Cambodia succeeded in gaining control but independently of the war in Vietnam. Thailand never saw the rise of a “people’s” ideology. Thus, one piece of the Domino Theory that was used to justify American involvement in SEA did not materialize.

Joining in the North vs. South Vietnam civil war ultimately did no good, and it caused appreciable disruption to politics and the social fabric of the United States. Had America and South Vietnam prevailed, a model like the Korean Peninsula might exist today. The U.S. won every battle of the Vietnam War except to deflect vocal minority opinions at home. The country’s executive branch up to Richard Nixon did not take sustained strategic measures against North Vietnam that may have made the communists abandon their effort. America’s longest war at the time appeared to be a war without end. When we finally got an armistice in 1973, the legislative branch, by denying funding, ensured we would not go back to stop the North’s final invasion in 1975.

The Vietnam War was a futile effort that damaged the U.S. psyche for decades and was exorbitantly expensive. We should, I believe, in the future carefully vet idealistic ambitions we may have about war. Consequences near-term and far down the road need thorough examination from all sides. Negotiation should be pursued to the greatest extent possible as an alternative to war. But, despite attempts to make peaceful resolutions, wars will continue to pock mark history especially when people and nations are put into untenable defensive positions.

Were we right to help the South Vietnamese fight their defensive war? If we succeeded in halting the North’s aggression, the results would have looked heroic like our interventions in World Wars I and II. Sadly, it didn’t turn out that way. I discovered on my trip that the people of Vietnam and Cambodia are able to flourish today in their non-democratic societies. They are no longer living under the duress of war; and fortunately, their communist leaders do not make too many onerous demands and are open to the infusion of capitalism.

I joined the United States Air Force to be part of the country’s military arm. It was a call to duty in wartime, as I saw it. I trained and fought fervently to achieve the nation’s objectives in Vietnam. As I close the book on that chapter of my life, I’m proud I joined over two million loyal Americans to dutifully serve the U.S. in Vietnam. Not all of the country was grateful. But veterans know and respect the travails of fellow veterans. It is their fellowship I value most.

Dr. George Solli (Lt. Col., USAF retired)



*Tour Group at the Hanoi Air Force Museum 4-19-2017*