

SPECIAL ISSUE

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**A Memorial to the American Experience
In Vietnam**

REVETMENTS

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BACK TO VIETNAM

By Bob Anisko

A SECOND RETURN TRIP BACK TO VIETNAM

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It's been 8 years since I last visited Vietnam. This year then came along and a fellow worker who was a Marine Vietnam Vet invited me to go back to Vietnam in September 2006 with his former unit, "Hotel" Company, 2nd Battalion, 26th Regiment. The unit's AO was from Chu Lai to the DMZ and included Da Nang, Hue, Dong Ha, Con Thien, and Khe Sanh. I wondered how a former USAF AP would interact with this band of warriors.

The departure date of September 8th arrived and the group of 31, including some wives, sons and daughters, met at the San Francisco Airport for the return trip. When I met the group of aging, graying, and some chubby former vets, it was hard to imagine that they were the same warriors that handled everything that Charlie threw at them. But, as the tour progressed, that old spirit came out.

After a long 13 hour flight to Taipei, Taiwan, and an additional 3 hours to Viet-

nam, we landed at, of all places, the Eye of the Tiger, Hanoi, Vietnam. You might think that the group would feel a little strange in this city, but they adjusted very quickly and warmly to the Vietnamese people who themselves were very gracious and friendly. Staying in a 5 Star hotel, the Melia, helped.

Interestingly, in Hanoi, our guide was "Quan" who was a former MIG-21 fighter pilot. He served in the Vietnamese Air Force after the war ended.

We visited the History Museum, the Military Museum, the Hoa Lao Prison (Hanoi Hilton), and had an exhilarating "cyclo" ride through the streets of the city.

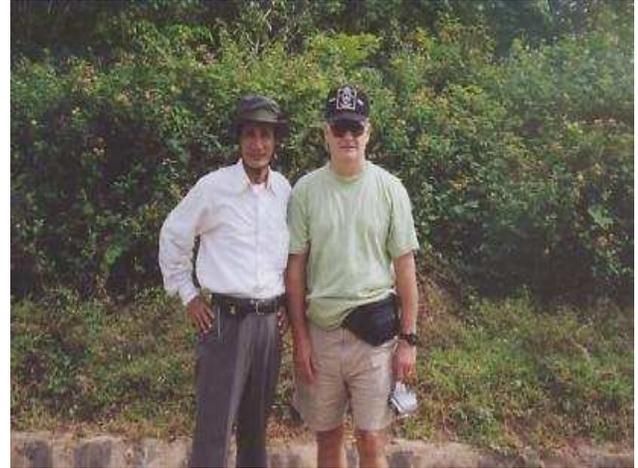
After 2 nights in Hanoi, we flew via Vietnam Airlines to the City of Hue landing at the Phu Bai Airport. In the Hue area, we visited the Citadel on the Perfume River (the scene of a major battle in 1968), the Forbidden City, and had a cruise on the Perfume River where we visited an old pagoda and tomb of one of their former kings. At Hue, we stayed at the La Residence Hotel, another top notch hotel.

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On the 2nd day in Hue, we visited the City of Quang Tri, the Doc Meu Fire Base, the former DMZ at the Ben Hai River, and the Vin Moc Tunnels, which are similar to the Cu Chi tunnels located northwest of Saigon (oops Ho Chi Minh city). It was during this time that we were introduced to a former VC named “Toan” who operated in the Marines AO. I jokingly had our interpreter tell Toan that at his next VC reunion to thank his former VC comrades for having missed me when they mortared Bien Hoa in 1964 and Qui Nhon in 1965. That night we stayed at an “OK” hotel in Dong Ha, which isn’t exactly a tourist area at this time.

On the next day, we drove past Camp Evans which doesn’t exist any more and Camp Carroll which had signs posted “Restricted Area-Do Not Enter”. We didn’t test the validity of the sign. Then we headed into the heart of Marine Country. We visited the former Con Thien Fire Base, the Rock Pile, the Dak Rong Bridge, and finally Khe Sanh where the big 77 day battle took place in 1968. There was nothing left at Con Thien. Khe Sahn is now a historical site with a small museum, but the runway where our planes dropped supplies was completely covered by dense growth.



We then headed south by bus on Highway 1 going through the City of Phu Loc where we visited the Bac Ma National Park and then went through the Hai Van Pass enroute to Da Nang. After arriving in Da Nang, we passed Red Beach where the first Marines landed in 1965 and passed the Da Nang International Airport (formerly Da Nang Air Base). The revetments are still there. In Da Nang, we stayed at the Furuma Resort, another 5 Star facility. The following day we visited the old seaport town of Hoi An and then visited the former Marine Air Base at Chu Lai. Nothing is located at Chu Lai anymore. On the final day at Da Nang, we drove around the city observing Marble and Monkey Mountains and then spent some time on China Beach. The mountains were barely visible because of the haze.



On our last day in Vietnam, we flew from Da Nang to Tan Son Nhut (now Tan Son Nhat) via Vietnam Airlines. Upon arrival at Tan Son Nhut, the revetments, old hangars, and old USAF aircraft are still there. Tan Son Nhut now has a large, modern terminal at the airport. It was reported that Vietnam is going to build a new international airport for Saigon beginning in 2007. The new airport will be located at Long Thanh, a former Special Forces Camp east of Saigon and south of Bien Hoa, on the way to Vung Tau.

In Saigon, we spent several hours touring the city. We visited the Reunification Palace, the War Remnants Museum, and did some shopping on the old Tu Do Street. It's now called Dong Khoi (Liberty) Street. Saigon is still as vibrant as ever.



I think it was very telling that the Marines wore hats and shirts with the Marine logo and their unit designation. Not to be outdone by the Marines, I wore my VSPA hat from the time we landed in Hanoi until we left Saigon. My VSPA golf shirt also looked pretty good in Da Nang and Saigon on the last day.

Although many years have gone by since the old warriors were

young Marines, their esprit de corps was still there. An example is that while traveling by bus through Hanoi and Hue, someone start playing CDs with the Marine Corps Hymn, other Marine songs, and songs from the Vietnam years. The only thing missing was to fly the U.S. and Marine Corps flag on the outside of the bus, and play the songs on an external speaker. That would not have been a good idea. We did "fly" the flag on the inside of the bus.



A very touching moment occurred in Hoi An when one Marine who lost a leg in Vietnam posed with a former ARVN soldier that also lost his leg.



All in all it was a very good trip. The Marines treated me well and we encountered no problems at all, and everyone enjoyed the trip. The hotels, food, and all logistical arrangements were superb.

I am ready for return trip Number 3. How about you? Tiger Beer awaits your return!

