

JUNE 2010



A Memorial to the American Experience  
In Vietnam

"All included, none excluded"

# REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

## REGARDING THE DIABETES ARTICLE

By: Carol Bessette  
TSNA Treasurer

I found the April article by Charles Penley, with the follow-up letters from other members, to be of particular interest. Since 1994, I have been a tour guide in Washington, DC, which means that in the spring and fall, I may be at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) 2-3 times a week, or more. And some years back, I started giving a five-minute "Public Service Announcement" (PSA) to all my adult groups.

This started because I had a man on a bus from Richmond, Virginia who, when we were approaching the VVM, started to tell me how "the #\*&% Army had drafted him and how they sent him to #\*&% Vietnam. And now the #\*&% VA kept sending him mail, and he was now having his revenge. . .it felt so *good* to take that mail from the VA, rip it into little pieces, and throw it out."

I almost had apoplexy on the spot. As I told him, he did not have to like the Army. He did not have to like Vietnam. He did not have to like the VA. But he had earned those VA benefits and he was entitled to them. (And maybe he could take a feeling of "revenge" by using the VA benefits.)

So I started my five-minute PSA. And I just say that if these visitors, or anyone they knew, had boots that

touched the ground in Vietnam (and now, if their ship ever docked in a Vietnamese port), if the veterans developed any one of a large number of chronic diseases, get to the VA, fast. And that perhaps the most frequent diseases associated with Agent Orange were Diabetes 2 and prostate cancer (which was diagnosed in my husband, an AC-47 crew member at Bien Hoa, thirteen years ago.)

I mentioned this a few years back to a friend who had gone to law school after retiring from the Air Force. He is now retired, but he spends his time in pro bono counseling veterans who find obstacles and delays in getting their VA claims approved. He said I should add one more note to my PSA: "Document your combat time." He has experience with veterans whose claims are rejected because their AFSC/MOS was not "combat-related." His approach in fighting that is that "a truck driver may not be in a combat-related skill, but if the guy next to him is blown away, he has been in combat. Period."

I personally feel very fortunate. I know a woman who served two years in Vietnam. By the time she was ~50, she had had breast cancer, uterine cancer, and a serious digestive disease that she could only control through total avoidance of any kind of meat. I feel very fortunate--so far.

As you may know, a plaque was added near the plaza at the Three Servicemen's Statue at the VVM in 2004, to honor those who continue to

die today from their Vietnam service. It reads:

IN MEMORY OF THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR AND LATER DIED AS A RESULT OF THEIR SERVICE

WE HONOR AND REMEMBER THEIR SERVICE

You can learn more about the project to get this plaque approved at <http://www.vietnamproject.ttu.edu/inmemory/vietwarmem/plaque2.htm>

Thank you, Charles, for surfacing this issue, and good luck to you and the others who wrote.



## EMAIL "CONVERSATIONS"

(Editor's Note: Sometimes it's just easier to publish emails that tell the story instead of trying to turn them into a story. That is the case with the following. Enjoy!)

----- Original Message -----

**From:** [meltompsonbrm](mailto:meltompsonbrm)

**To:** [crazybill1945@embarqmail.com](mailto:crazybill1945@embarqmail.com)

**Sent:** Sunday, July 19, 2009 1:08 AM

**Subject:** Playing "Hot Potato" with a phosphorous grenade gives a whole new meaning to "Heartburn"!

Hi Bill, I just heard (e-mail) from Larry passing your address on to me. Glad for this opportunity to write a fellow TSN'er who was there when I was there and experienced some of the same events that took place while we

were there. As you, I too posted an article in July's "Revetment" news letter about the Dec. 4/5th '66 attack on TSN in which we both mentioned "barber" (yours)/"barbers" (mine) in our articles. And, I find that to be quite a coincidence since I've not found it mentioned in any other postings that I've read. Although, I've read many postings, I haven't read them all and it could very well be that it is mentioned somewhere in this 10 year old web site, I just haven't seen it. Another subject that you touched on, that I remember vividly was the "phosphorous grenade" incident and the shake down that followed. Since my outfit was the 377th Munitions Maintenance Sqdn., I think we were singled out for special scrutiny, especially since they (authorities) were trying to figure how these clowns got hold of this kind of grenade. I think the incident took place on a Thursday night and I think the shake down took place the following Saturday night. I say this because I had just came back to the barracks from a day in downtown Saigon. I'd taken a rickshaw back to base and got in just under the curfew, about 10:00 PM. My barracks compound was to the right of the main gate, just a hundred yards or so down the road, past the hospital/mortuary compound, I'd turn right and my barracks was the first building in the compound and just across the road was a stone wall and on the other side was a cemetery, seems like they were all over the base! Well, as I entered the front door there was an AF Lt. greeting me as I walked in and ordered me to stand next to my locker (first one to the right as you entered the hutch), and at the other end of the barracks was a Sgt. assisting a "full bird" Col. as he went thru my barracks mates lockers, looking under bunks, and any place else that might be a hiding/stash place to put contraband. Since I hadn't, up to that point, heard about the "incident" and was at a loss as to what the "#@\*&" was going on, I asked the Lt. (as he is standing next to me guarding the front door and as people would come in he would direct them to stand

by their lockers), he informed me that they were looking for contraband, mainly munitions, and he went on to inform me about the grenade episode. Well Bill, my life flashed before me in a second, I thought I was going to the brig for sure and immediately broke out in a cold sweat! For in my locker, on the top shelf, in plain view were 2 grenades (one pineapple and one smooth case steel) and 2 - 20 mm in casing shells. My barracks was a 12-14 man building the smallest in the compound, much of the time half the guys would be TDY at other munitions dumps in country or at some Thai base. This night there were maybe 6 or 7 of us going thru this inspection, so it wasn't long before said Sgt. and Col. were at my locker, with the words "open it up airman!". Well, after fumbling around with my combination lock for a few seconds, I finally got the lock off and the Col. tells me to "step back" as he opens my locker door. Now, I'm the last locker he is going thru and up to this point they haven't found squat! Well, when that Col. looked up and saw my "stash" his jaw dropped and his eyes got real big, and he just stood there a minute (seconds anyway, it seemed like hours, and I was getting ready to put my hands behind my back so they could put the cuffs on). Finally he says "What's this airman?" as he reached up and took one of the grenades down to examine it more closely, "Sir, those are some souvenirs I was going to take back to the States, thought I might use them as paper weights or something", was my reply. As he continued examining the other 3 pieces he asks me if they are "live rounds"? I said "No Sir! These are "dummy"/"practice" pieces that were shipped to our (TSN) depot by mistake, as we have no use for this type of ordinance and it cannot be shipped out into the field, it's pretty much useless and this is about all it's good for. Besides Sir, since chroming is a 'hot process', live ordinance cannot be chromed, it would explode". "So, who chromes these things?", he asks me. "Well Sir, there is a small metal foundry about 5 minutes out the front gate that will chrome

them for a couple dollars or a carton of cigarettes each" (Remember cigarettes were a dollar a carton!) Again he turns the munitions over in his hands for a few seconds then asks me if there are any more at the dump? And I replied that we had several cases of them that we'd tried to ship to other "in country" dumps, but nobody would take them off our hands. Now, realize at this point, I'm still of the mind that I'm going to be arrested, chromed dummy ordinance or not, it was still considered munitions. Then out of the blue this Col. asks me if I can get him some and get them chromed? "Yes Sir, it'll probably take about a week" was my quick response to him. He then proceeded to put all my chromed ordnance back on the shelf and closed my locker door. He then gave me his duty phone number at the "Provost Office"! I remember looking over at the Lt., who was still standing near me and observing all this, and he just sort of smiled and rolled his eyes. "Then I'll expect to hear from you next week Airman Thompson!", was his last remark as he walked out the door with his entourage in close pursuit, "Yes Sir!" ,was my "relieved" reply. And a week later the Col. had an exact replica of what was in my locker, gratis the 377th Mun. Maint. Sqdn./TSN Bomb Dump.

Well Bill, I hope I didn't bore you too much with this story, but remember, you got the memory wheels going with your mention of this incident in your "Revetment" article. Thanks for triggering an "old war memory", it was fun reliving it! The other thing I wanted to pass on to you was your mentioning in the article about "pursuing a claim with the VA for Agent Orange and PTSD". I too am in this process with the VA; been about 2 months since I started. Just the other day I filled out more questionnaires and related paperwork to prove my claim, I was told it would take about a year to process, "hurry up and wait!", been there, done that, right!

Sgt/E4 Mel Thompson

----- Original Message -----

**From:** [Bill Donnelly](#)

**To:** [melthompsonbrm](#)

**Sent:** Tuesday, July 21, 2009 9:29 PM

**Subject:** Re: Playing "Hot Potato" with a phosphorous grenade gives a whole new meaning to "Heartburn"!

Greetings Mel ,

Thanks for the terrific e-mail re: some of your TSN stories. We had a lot of great people in the AF, the Col. being one of them. You came out smelling like a rose when you had the ordnance chromed for him. I wonder if your buddies in the foundry were smelting iron for those homemade grenades or mortar fin assemblies. I recall hitching a ride on an Army 5 ton truck. The trooper driving asked if I could get him some beer so we pulled up in front of that little club near where C123s were parked. I bought 1/2 a case as I recall and gave it to him. He wanted to pay for the beer I said no way so he offered me two grenades from the trucks' glove box, one was white phosphorous and the other was a small smooth looking job about the size of a baseball. So I said no thanks and told him he would need them more than I would. So you can see the stuff was around and not too hard to get.

By any chance do you recall any of the following incidents?

Bomb Dump explosion around 10/66.

C47 crash with about 27 guys on-board, the bird was shot up and wanted to land downwind on the grass between the main runways. The tower made them go around; they crashed, all on board killed.

The firefight in the graveyard right behind the 700 area.

Did you ever go waterskiing at the Army R+R center on the Saigon River? That was usually pretty interesting. You could watch the F100s plaster the jungle on the riverbank as you water skied. More on this later.

I'm also working on a claim with the VA here in Jersey A/O PTSD etc.

If necessary we can compare notes and validate any experiences that the VA may challenge on our claims.

That's all for now .  
Bill Donnelly

**(Editor's Note: I don't know the date of the following email, but it was obviously after the previous two:)**

Hi Larry, wanted to let you know that since you put us in touch, Bill Donnelly and I have been communicating via e-mail, and swapping war stories. Thought you might get a kick out of these, and in fact if you want to use mine in Revetments please feel free and whatever editing it might need feel free to do so. Bill brought this story to mind in his July Revetments article, if you need to compare notes to see where we're coming from with this, that's what got it started. Bill would probably sign off on this too, with his add on! Hope all is well, also I enjoyed the August Revetments. Larry, thanks for what you do by keeping us all informed and making us feel that we still belong to something that was slowly slipping away. The war is for the history books, but the events of that war are ours alone. Thanks buddy.....All the best.

Mel Thompson, 377th Munitions Maint. Sqdn. '66-'67 in the Nam



### MY TIME AT TSN

By: [Peter D. Umbras](#)  
[377th Combat Support Group](#)  
[Jun 68-Mar 70](#)

When I arrived at Tan Son Nhut, I'd already been away from the world for eighteen months on a tour of duty in the Personnel office at Naha AB, Okinawa. In June/July 1968, I was reassigned to the 377<sup>th</sup> CSGp Consoli-

dated Base Personnel Office (CBPO), to work in the "machine room" (data processing) as a leave accountant.

That warehouse of a building was located on the other side of the flight line, near the back gate (Cong Li), and it was also in this area where some of the enlisted airmen and NCOs assigned to the CBPO lived. The hooches were set up on the side of a quadrangle near the CBPO at one end and the mess hall at the other, if memory serves. I remember also that this was where some foreign personnel in transit were billeted, Koreans and Australians.

The hooch where I was lucky enough to bunk held men who also worked in Personnel, and many, if not all, had gone through the Tet offensive, and, like many, these guys, these "office workers," were caught off guard and relatively defenseless. No weapons. No bunkers. At least not at the beginning.

Most were a few years younger than me (I was 24), and going through the experience of that previous February definitely left its mark.

I don't know when it happened, before or after Tet, but the interior of our hooch was set up like no other. The bunks and lockers were pushed close at each end of the structure, and a fully enclosed "day room" (I suppose you'd call it) had been build in the middle of the hooch. Completely walled in it was, and after duty hours that room, in effect, shut out the rest of the world. Air-conditioned, paneled, adorned with posters of day-glo rock stars and body-painted women, it had a TV, a sofa, some folding chairs, something of a counter, which served as a bar, a table or two for cards, a Teac reel-to-reel tape deck with two very large speakers ... *(I soon learned that Personnel could just about arrange to get anything).*

Nights, after some volley ball or a movie, in that space, the strobe lights flashed, the music played loud, the

bottle was passed, and shirtless guys, decked out in granny shades and love beads, danced to Hendrix riffing "Hey Joe" (Where You Goin' With That Gun in Your Hand?).

So went my first couple of nights in-country. It had been less than six months after Tet, and these guys were ... well, simply expressing the vitality of their survival, in a tribal sense, if you will. It was like a reaffirmation and that they needed to let everyone know that they were alive and FIGMO. So they jumped and danced and sang for a couple of hours.

This kind of blowing off steam didn't occur every night, though at first to me it seemed it would, as I'd never seen or been part of anything like it. But in the following mornings, the men were ready and prepared for duty, still responsible, and performed as ordered to the best of their abilities, reflecting – (what's the wording on the citations?) – great credit to themselves and the United States Air Force.

Yet, suffice it to say, they also kept their short time calendars up to date and always close at hand.

In a million years, I could never imagine what these guys went through just a few short months back. Cut off from the main base by the flight line, these guys were, effectually if not formally, somewhat isolated and vulnerable. I heard mention of baseball bats and souvenir swords picked up in Bangkok as only weapons. Possibly.

I distinctly remember one fellow telling me how he had to ride shotgun one night on a fuel truck traveling up to Long Binh and watching tracer bullets cross the road ahead. This man's regular duty was that of a file clerk.

Don't know how much of this was real; retold events have a way of gaining a certain dramatic momentum in their emotional retelling. But I do know that some of these men experienced extraordinary, if not horrifically frightening, things, and the experience of it all

left them a little warped and in need of some long R'n'R.

I'm not saying they didn't give a damn any more. I'm saying that after a couple of days of my arrival, well, they made me Hooch Chief.

As the weeks went by, things settled, and guys rotated back to the CONUS and were replaced by new men. TV and "Laugh In" and "Star Trek" replaced the many nights of partying.

I spent eleven months in-country at Tan Son Nhut before taking a 30-day free leave to Europe (my first leave ever, because of all the post-Tet catch-up work that had to be taken care of). I extended my tour to remain in-country another six months and was reassigned to the leave accounting desk at the CBPO of the 633 CSGp up at Pleiku, becoming friends with a whole new bunch of brothers, until March of 1970 when I hopped Freedom Bird to McChord for an early out-processing back to the world.

I relocated from the Lower East Side of Asia (Viet Nam) to the Lower East Side of New York (Manhattan) and thus began a new life as a civilian. Some adjustments had to be made. Like having to figure out what clothes to wear everyday. Counting Okinawa, three years had passed since I'd been back, and a lot had changed in American society between February 1967 and March 1970. But I felt fine, really.

Decades went by. I now live in Wyoming County, New York with my wife, Annie, and our teenage daughter, Sophie.

A couple of years ago, a friend I'd served with in Pleiku reconnected with me and invited me to join the Pleiku Air Base Association, of which I continue to consider myself to be a proud member. But something was missing. Namely Tan Son Nhut.

Pleiku held a lot of memories for me in my last six months in Nam. However, it's always been my year of experi-

ences at Tan Son Nhut and those, my first in-country friends, that I hold closest to my heart.



## WHY I JOINED TSNA

I found the TSN Association web site while trying to look up some of the guys that I was stationed with at the 1962nd Comm. Group at Kadena AFB, Okinawa. I was not having much joy in that search so I decided to look up a buddy that I was stationed with at TSN in 1963 with the 1964th Comm. Group, which led me to the TSNA site. I had entered Tan Son Nhut in the Google search engine and along with some other personal sites found the Association site.

I had conversed with Charles and Larry, receiving pictures of the base as it existed in 62-63, and in one picture I could point to one of two tents in the old tent area where I and the other Crypto Technicians were housed. There were no numbers visible in the pictures, but where the road grader was parked was the walkway to the open air latrine/shower facilities for the area. Our tent when I was there was #69, directly across from the latrine/shower facilities.

The pictures brought back old memories and with further review of the site and the past Reunions the TSNA has had, I thought it would be a good group to meet up with other vets of the Vietnam era who had seen duty at TSN.

-- Dick Dubendorf  
1964th Communication Group

## FAVORITE SAYINGS

God whispers in your soul  
And speaks to your mind.  
Sometimes you don't have time to listen.  
That's when He throws a brick at you.  
It's your choice: Listen to the whisper OR  
Wait for the brick!

## APR/OER TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

TERM	DEFINITION
Exceptionally well-qualified	Has committed no major blunders to date
Active socially	Drinks heavily
Wife is active socially	She drinks too
Character and integrity above reproach	Still one step ahead of the law
Zealous attitude	Opinionated
Unlimited potential	Will retire as SSgt/Major
Quick thinking	Offers plausible excuses for errors
Exceptional flying ability	Has an equal number of take-offs and landings
Takes pride in his work	Conceited
Takes advantage of every opportunity to progress	Buys drinks for superiors
Outstanding	Frequently in the rain
Indifferent to instruction	Knows more than his superiors
Tactful in dealings with superiors	Knows when to keep mouth shut
Approaches difficult problems with enthusiasm	Finds someone else to do the job
A keen analyst	Thoroughly confused
Expresses himself well	Speaks English fluently
Often spends extra hours on the job	Miserable home life
A true Southern gentleman	A hillbilly
Conscientious and careful	Scared
Meticulous attention to detail	A nit-picker
Demonstrates qualities of leadership	Has a loud voice
Judgment is usually sound	Lucky
Maintains professional attitude	A snob
Keen sense of humor	Has vast repertoire of jokes
Strong adherence to principles	Stubborn
A very fine NCO/officer of great value to the service	Gets to work on time

Submitted by: Carol Bessette, TSNA Treasurer



### NOTATIONS FROM APPLICATIONS

**D**ue to overcrowding on base when I arrived at TSN, I was assigned to an off-base BEQ. I was stuck off-base, unarmed, at a Vietnamese friend's house for 3 days during the '68 Tet offensive. One year later, after much paperwork, I managed to get discharged in Vietnam where I remained for another 3 years as a civilian contractor. I married my Vietnamese "friend", and we lived together for 36 wonderful years until she passed away. I've revisited Vietnam many times, the last in 2005 when I taught Business English at An Giang University in the Mekong Delta for one year, and re-married.

Paul A. Allard  
460 AEMS  
Sep 67—May 69

**W**orked on "Charlie Row" maintaining C-123B aircraft. Lived in the barracks at the end of Charlie Row. They had the unique name of 'Tilton Hilton.'

I was working on my aircraft, which was in the #1 spot on Charlie Row, on 13 April '66 when we came under attack. It was a very "long night".

Met a lot of great people while stationed at TSN. Lots of memories both good and bad.

John A. Matlock  
377th FMS/19th AC  
Dec 65—Dec 66  
*(Editor's Note: "It's a small world")*  
*One of the two times I flew while in Vietnam for 69 days was on a C-123, which I discovered recently was severely damaged just down the line from where John was working in the 13 April '66 attack.*

**I** was there during Tet. I worked on the flight line repairing photo recon systems on RF-4C, RF-101, and RB-57 Aircraft. Thanks, and keep up the good work.

Chobby A. Betts  
460th Tac Recon Wing  
Oct 67—Oct 68

**L**ived in the 800 area. There during Tet. Caught out in the open Feb 18 '68, got a good look at the fireworks. Most of the time I rode shotgun from TSN to Long binh and Bien Hoa, but also went to some interesting places I can't remember the names. Went back to Viet Nam in 2006—very different!

Michael G. Barty  
377th CES/Augmentee 377th SPS  
Sep 67—Sep 68

(Editor's Note: In the December, 2009 Revetments there was an article about this, and the fact that TSNA had donated monies to help defray the cost)

### THREE SERVICEMEN STATUE TO UNDERGO SIX-WEEK RESTORATION

**Washington, D.C.** – The Three Servicemen statue, an integral part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial site, will receive restoration treatment beginning May 25 in a project expected to last approximately six weeks, said Jan C. Scruggs, founder and president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF).

The restoration will remove damage and restore the original patina of the statue. VVMF and the National Park Service (NPS) are partners in the project.

The work will be performed by New Arts Foundry out of Baltimore, Md. The statue will remain in place while the work is done, but an enclosure will be built around it to provide a more controlled environment for the restoration process. The enclosure, which will be erected beginning May 25, will include windows so the public may view the work as it progresses.

The Three Servicemen statue was created by artist Frederick Hart in 1984 with a patina that includes combinations and gradations of many different colors. Elliot Gantz, the original patina artist, has recreated the colors and prepared color match samples on the same bronze material that was used for the statue. Eight different colors of chemically applied patina will be used in the restoration.

Currently, oxidation has caused parts of the statue—areas on the figures' faces, noses, arms, hands and weapons—to turn a greenish-blue color. New Arts Foundry will remove the worn finish, reduce the areas of damaged patina and reapply the patina to the artist's original intent.

Once the restoration is complete, the

National Park Service and VVMF will establish a conscientious program of regularly scheduled maintenance, including waxing, which will preserve the new patina and prevent future damage of this type.

Work on the Three Servicemen statue is part of a maintenance and restoration program begun last fall by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to assist the National Park Service in upkeep of the site. VVMF raised funds last year to refinish the flagpole and flagpole base, as well as five directory stands located throughout the site. It also paid to replace paper directories of the names on The Wall with laminated directories better able to withstand being out in the weather.



### CHAPLAIN'S CORNER

June is a very good time to talk to the BOSS. Oh, come on, you know what I mean: Your prayers are heard and answered: Try them!!!  
'Nuff said"----Chaplain Bob Chaffee

### TSNA 2010 REUNION

Fellow Reunion Attendees:

This year we are offering our attendees the opportunity to pick and choose what reunion events they want to attend. We expect many members and guests living in the greater San Antonio area to do so. A system of stickers of various colors and shapes that are applied to name tags will maintain positive control over those who decide to attend less than all events.

To accomplish this and ensure that all those who attend pay their fair share, we will need to man the reception desk whenever the hospitality suite is open. I envision 2 hour shifts at the desk.

To volunteer - please email me your name.

Thanks,

George Plunkett  
[Viet62@aol.com](mailto:Viet62@aol.com)

**The Rescue of BAT 21** is the most famous SAR effort in the history of the Air Force, and was characterized in the 1988 Hollywood movie **BAT 21**, starring Gene Hackman and Danny Glover, along with two books on the subject.

Over eight hundred sorties were flown in direct support of the BAT 21 SAR effort (including close-in B-52 Arc Light bomber strikes). At least eight rescue aircraft were shot down, two US rescuers became POWs, and eleven American heroes paid the ultimate price attempting to rescue three fellow Americans down behind enemy lines during the Eastertide Offensive of 1972.

However, in making this ultimate sacrifice, the TSNA pauses to remember the motto of these heroic search and rescue efforts:

**“That others may live”**

**John 15:13**

*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”*

A total of 234 medals were awarded to individuals for the BAT 21B & Mail 38B rescue missions.

Our Reunion Banquet Speaker, Lt. Thom Norris, received our nation's highest recognition—the Medal of Honor.

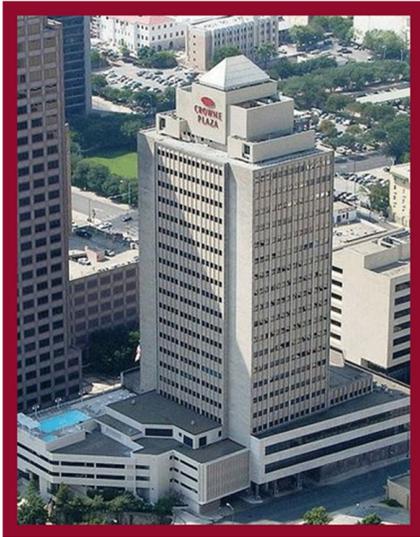
**OCTOBER 7—10, 2010:  
COME TO SAN ANTONIO; MEET,  
GREET, AND SAY WELCOME  
HOME TO ALL OF OUR MEMBERS,  
GUESTS, SPEAKERS, AND  
FRIENDS!**

**2010 TSNA REUNION  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS  
OCTOBER 7—10**

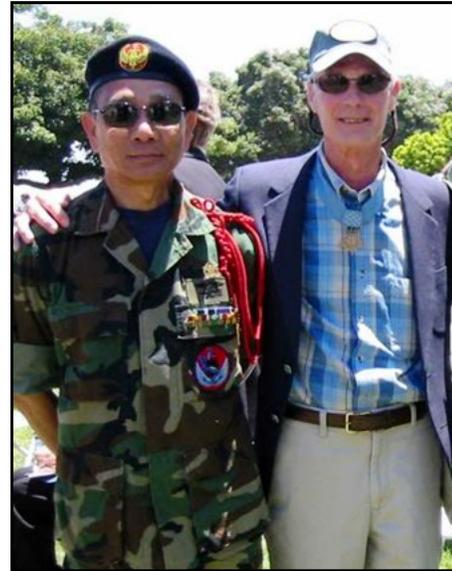
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**MAKE YOUR TSNA AND HOTEL  
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TSNA.ORG  
FOR MORE INFORMATION**



So come on down to greet old friends, make new friends, see San Antonio and Lackland AFB, and have a wonderful time reviewing your memories of Tan Son Nhut along with the memories of your fellow TSN veterans.



**Nguyen Van Kiet, and Thomas R. Norris, LT, USNR (Ret.)**



**The Alamo**



**Darrel D. Whitcomb, Colonel, USAFR (Ret.)**



**Lackland AFB**



**San Antonio Riverwalk**



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