

SPECIAL ISSUE

APR 2007



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

REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

Dayton Reunion May 3 - 6 2007

Guest Speaker

Dr. James Reckner Ph.D.

We Are Pleased To Announce The Guest Speaker For The 2007 Reunion



James R. (Jim) Reckner was born in Philadelphia in August 1940. He entered the US Navy directly from high school in 1958, and gradually rose through the enlisted ranks to Signalman, First Class, [E-6] in 1962. He served in the Mediterranean in 1959, and took part in the Extended International Geophysical Year in Antarctica in 1959-60. During 1960 and

1961 he participated in hydrographic operations on the east coast of Greenland and islands north of Iceland. From the end of 1961 until August 1964 he

served on ships operating in the Western Pacific, home ported in Subic Bay, the Philippines. Reckner first encountered Vietnam in 1963, when he was part of the Navy's reaction to the military coup that resulted in the assassination of South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem in November of that year.

In August 1964 he was ordered to Officer Candidate School and in December he was commissioned an ensign. On board USS Leary (DD-879), Reckner participated in the OAS intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. A second Mediterranean tour followed. As a lieutenant he returned to Vietnam in 1968 to serve as senior advisor for a Vietnamese Navy river assault group operating in the southwestern Mekong Delta, along the Cambodian border. With only ten months at home after that tour, he was again ordered to Vietnam, where he served as senior advisor to a Vietnamese Navy river patrol group [fiber-glass jet boats] in the "Iron Triangle" area north of Saigon.

From 1972 to 1978 Reckner served as a military and political intelligence analyst for the NATO commander-in-chief of Southern Europe, stationed at Naples, Italy.

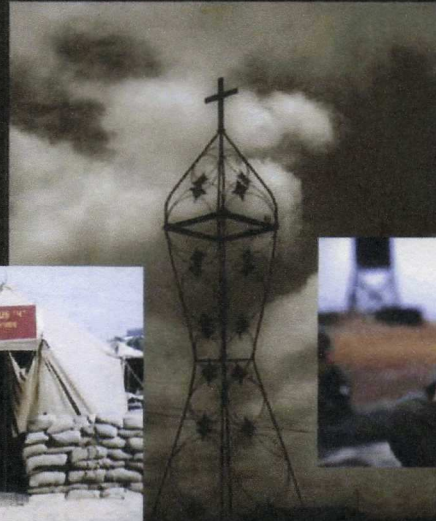
Reckner retired from the Navy in 1978, emigrated to New Zealand, and became a freshman at the University of Auckland, where he eventually earned his BA, MA and Ph.D. He returned to the United States in 1987 after nearly twenty years overseas and began teaching military history at Texas Tech University in 1988. He founded The Vietnam Center in 1989, and continues to direct it.

VISTAS

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**SAVING
VIETNAM**
OF 'NAM:
30 Years After the Fall of Saigon



SAVED BY THE BELL



The black granite slabs of the Vietnam Wall stand seemingly below ground, like a long grave, and form a dark scar on the land. A remembrance of the American servicemen and women who perished during the 10-year Vietnam War, the Wall reveals the outcome for many young American troops. However, those more than 58,000 names cannot explain the complex war that continues to divide Americans over our nation's military involvement in Southeast Asia. »



affected by Vietnam. The wounds of America's longest war may heal, but the Vietnam generation will carry the scars forever. On the eve of the 30-year anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the end of America's involvement in the war, Vietnam lingers and reminds us of the injury, trauma, pain and grief of a historical period that will remain in our memories and national fabric forever.

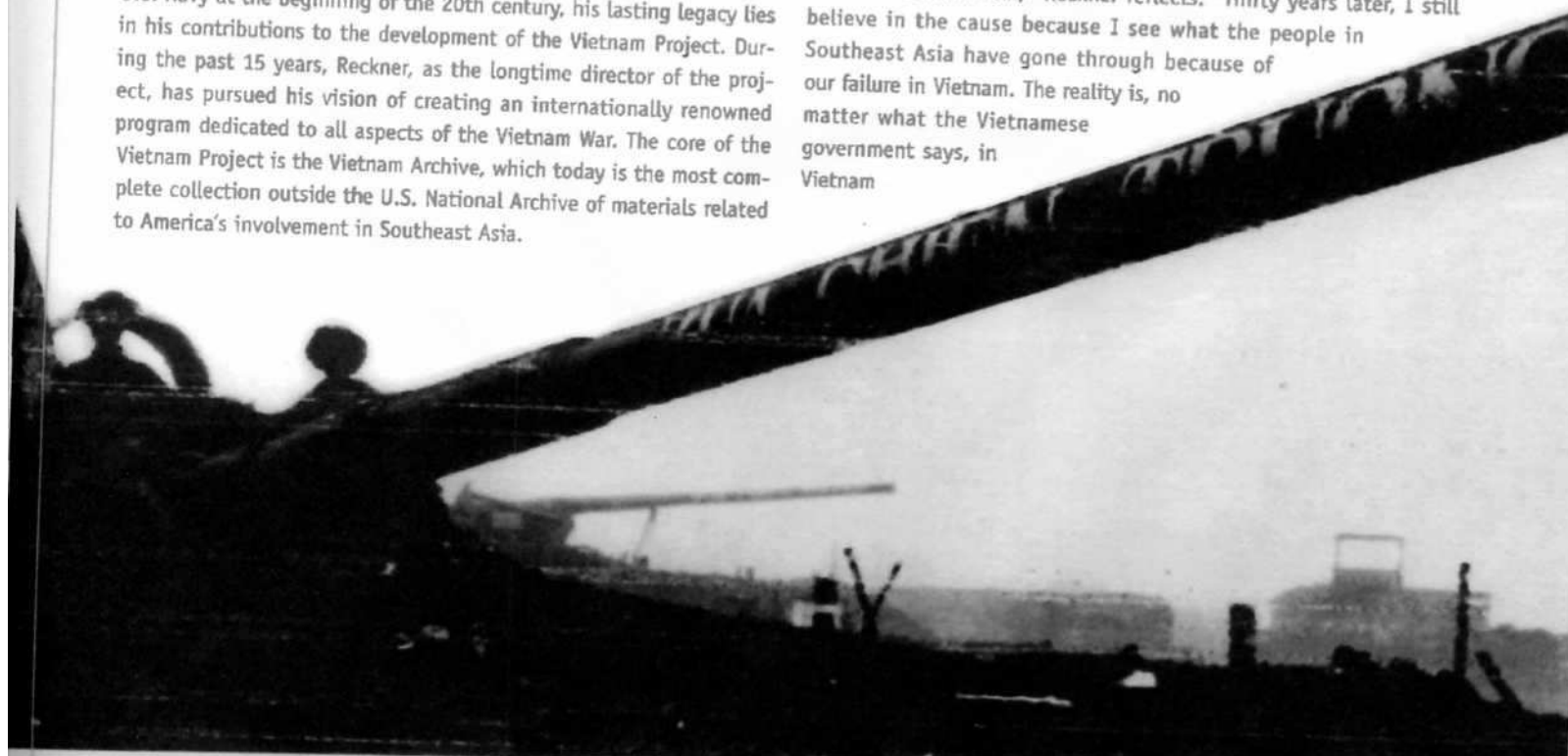
The window of opportunity to gather stories from the American troops who fought on the Vietnam battlefields is narrowing. While America's active combat involvement in Vietnam generally encompasses the years between 1965 and 1973, direct American involvement in Vietnam dates to 1945 and the presidency of Harry S. Truman. Before the passing of the generations that shaped events in those decades, scholars with Texas Tech University's Vietnam Project are fighting against time to gather as many stories and archival materials as possible about American involvement in Southeast Asia.

A combat veteran who served two tours, James Reckner, Ph.D., never imagined that his life's work would turn toward the Vietnam War when he accepted a position in 1988 in the Texas Tech University History Department. A historian of Theodore Roosevelt's Navy, Reckner had imagined disappearing into the halls of ivy, spending quiet summers researching and writing, living the life of an academic. While Reckner has just completed his second naval history book, this one about the U.S. Navy at the beginning of the 20th century, his lasting legacy lies in his contributions to the development of the Vietnam Project. During the past 15 years, Reckner, as the longtime director of the project, has pursued his vision of creating an internationally renowned program dedicated to all aspects of the Vietnam War. The core of the Vietnam Project is the Vietnam Archive, which today is the most complete collection outside the U.S. National Archive of materials related to America's involvement in Southeast Asia.

emotions stirred by the war remain very real for older Americans; however, they are baffling to the generation that has come of age since the war."

Reckner, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1958, had his first encounter with Vietnam in November 1963 when he was a first-class petty officer in the amphibious forces assigned to the Western Pacific. Those forces arrived off the coast of Vietnam days before the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. The sailors were prepared to evacuate Americans from Saigon should the capital become chaotic. "When the situation stabilized after the coup d'etat, we simply sailed away, without people in the country knowing we had been there. That's the strength in having naval power close off-shore," he notes. Called "the Old Man" by troops under his command, Reckner, then a 28-year-old Navy lieutenant, returned to duty in Vietnam in 1968 and spent a year as senior adviser for a Vietnamese Navy River Assault Group in the southwest portion of South Vietnam. He then came home to spend the next 10 months doing his principal work in that day involving Soviet naval missile systems and electronic countermeasures. Again, as a lieutenant and senior adviser for a River Patrol Group, Reckner began his second tour in Vietnam in 1971, patrolling north of Saigon on the Saigon River in an area called the Iron Triangle. He left Vietnam, he thought for the last time, in April 1972.

"At the time, I believed in the cause, which was keeping a nation free from communism," Reckner reflects. "Thirty years later, I still believe in the cause because I see what the people in Southeast Asia have gone through because of our failure in Vietnam. The reality is, no matter what the Vietnamese government says, in Vietnam



NA 338, Hanoi, April 7--One of the "Battle Kings"--long-range 175mm guns--captured by the PLAF at Tan Lam Base, Quang Tri Province (South Vietnam)./. AF

today, certain basic freedoms do not exist. Our failure in Vietnam and Cambodia resulted in immense suffering for the ordinary people in these countries. I still think we were right to try to prevent that. The failure was one of leadership, of faulty decisions concerning the conduct of the war, and Lyndon B. Johnson's conflicting priorities. Attempting to conduct the war in Vietnam and the War on Poverty at the same time, President Johnson ended up losing both."

Even with the archive of nearly 20 million pages of holdings, Reckner contends that a definitive explanation or understanding of the Vietnam War remains elusive. "There will never be a book that encapsulates the complete truth about the Vietnam War. It is very difficult for our generation not to be ideological, perhaps even more so for those who opposed the war, given its aftermath. Vietnam remains close to the surface in our country. It has been easy in the past to understand America's wartime involvements because the goals were clearly defined and we always have been the victors. We are gracious victors. But we never have been the losers before," he comments.

"Through the Vietnam Project, American veterans are able to deal with their past through us. In preserving all aspects of American involvement in Southeast Asia, the archive presents all sides of the war with equal vigor and care, including the anti-war movement. Our American veterans see that we preserve the records of their efforts, which have been overlooked or denigrated for many years. We finally are bringing honor and a degree of dignity to those veterans and their experiences."

The Vietnam Archive has the mission of collecting, preserving and disseminating materials related to America's involvement in Southeast Asia. The Archivist and Associate Director for the Vietnam Project, Stephen Maxner, explains that the primary focus of the archive is preserving the American veteran perspective. "We realize we have a narrow window of opportunity during which to work with those veterans. That generation is in their mid- to late-50s, 60s, 70s and some are in their 80s, so we want to work with them very specifically to collect their materials, conduct oral history interviews and basically preserve their aspect of their history of the Vietnam War," Maxner says.

Additionally, the archive has a broader mission of collecting and preserving materials that focus on the theater of Southeast Asia. "We see America's involvement in Vietnam within the context of the history of Southeast Asia as well as within the American context," Maxner explains. "We have materials dating to the 19th century, and we have newspaper collections from Indochina that date to the 1860s during the French colonial period. We consider America's involvement in Vietnam as a continuation of Western



Douglas Pike Collection, 1968: Corporal salutes as Marine raises the U.S. flag.



"WE FINALLY ARE BRINGING HONOR AND A DEGREE OF DIGNITY TO THOSE VETERANS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES"

involvement in Southeast Asia. We see the Vietnam War as an event that occurred within the context of the Cold War and as part of the general U.S. military history of the 20th century, so we collect Cold War materials as well as materials that focus on World War II and the Korean War. We want to preserve all aspects and all perspectives of the war. We do not have a political agenda; our only agenda is to preserve all of the historical materials relating to the Vietnam War. We want to give everyone a fair voice to present his or her experiences of the war. With our holdings, the Vietnam Archive is very encompassing."

Working very closely with the veterans and their families, Reckner, Maxner and the archival staff are being entrusted with precious items from the individuals whose lives were most touched by the war. Donations totaling 1,500

artifacts include personal letters, diaries, autobiographies, audio letters, personal films, photographs, slides and negatives, as well as uniforms, military equipment, and some weapons. The donations eventually will be displayed at a future museum planned at Texas Tech dedicated to the Vietnam experience. "We're collecting that unique material that typically would be given to a family member and probably ultimately just would be lost or thrown away," Maxner says.

"It's rewarding to know that people have taken notice of the archive. They trust us with their materials. They know that we will treat them with the honor and dignity they deserve. More importantly, we make those materials available to others." Through the Virtual Vietnam Archive, anyone who has access to the Internet can find nearly 2 million pages of materials, including 73,000 photographs and more than 250,000 individual documents related to the war. "We are one of the largest, if not the largest, online archive in the United States," Maxner says. (www.vietnam.ttu.edu)

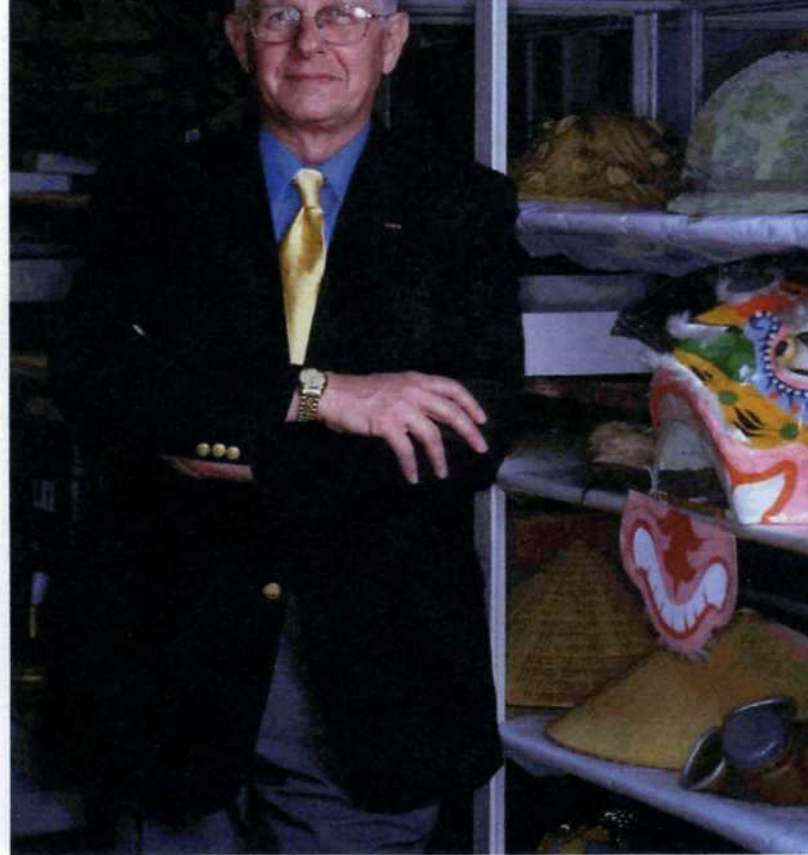
With what Maxner calls the most complete microfilm collection in the nation regarding America's involvement in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam Archive collection includes presidential library materials dating back to President Truman, State Department files, national security files, captured Vietnamese military and government documents, and U.S. military records.

Helping put a face on the war, the Oral History Project of the Vietnam Archive captures the recollections of veterans' service in Southeast Asia. "When you listen to someone talk about their experiences and what it was like to be a combat foot soldier in rice paddies, jungles and the delta, it really helps to bring the war to life. That exchange has emotion and sometimes a tragic note for what the men and women who served had experienced," Maxner comments. With more than 1,600 participants from around the globe, archivists record and transcribe the oral histories, making them available online through the Virtual Vietnam Archive. "A person's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to listen to their veteran tell his or her own story in his or her own words. In this respect, we also are preserving family history that will be available for generations to come."

For some of the veterans, the oral history interviews are the first time they have talked about their experiences in Vietnam. "The veterans tell us up



**JAMES RECKNER
HAS WORKED
DILIGENTLY TO PRESERVE
DOCUMENTS AND
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INVOLVEMENT IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA.**



front that the interviews are cathartic and therapeutic for them. After American withdrawal from Vietnam, most veterans came home, got on with their lives and became productive citizens. They put their experiences behind them because they were not welcome to discuss them in most circles. Many did not reveal themselves as being Vietnam veterans until recent years. When they came back, they had to push their emotions back, to keep it to themselves. Now that they can openly express their feelings and thoughts, they do so willingly," Maxner says.

Maxner repeats Reckner's assertion about Vietnam. "For people who think they can speak in absolute terms about the Vietnam War, we provide a tremendous amount of materials, tens of thousands of pages, that reveal that we never will be able to talk about that experience in definitive terms."

Reckner's efforts to create such an impressive collection came about serendipitously in 1989 with a single question he asked freshman students in his introductory history courses. Needing to round out a nine-question survey that asked students about their general knowledge of events since 1945, Reckner composed a 10th fill-in-the-blank question asking students to name the general they most closely associated with the American involvement in Vietnam. The results stunned Reckner. He



James Reckner Collection:

TOP: Combat Action Ribbon, Navy Unit Commendation; Navy Meritorious Unit Citation with Star in lieu of 2nd Award
BOTTOM: Meritorious Unit Commendation; Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation; Vietnam Civil Actions Unit Citation

of the U.S. military in Vietnam. "If you didn't know the name General Westmoreland, then you didn't know anything about Vietnam. The kids knew nothing about this event that had torn America apart only 14 years earlier," says Reckner.

Disturbed by this lack of knowledge among his students, he was compelled to teach an upper-level, undergraduate research course about the Vietnam War. Finding few resources about the Vietnam War in the Texas Tech Library, Reckner convened a meeting of Lubbock-area Vietnam veterans to talk about what they might do, in a positive way, about their Vietnam experiences. From that first meeting in May 1989, the veterans launched what has become the Vietnam Project at Texas Tech. To help Reckner in his teaching efforts, the veterans immediately began collecting their own wartime materials and spreading the word for other contributions.

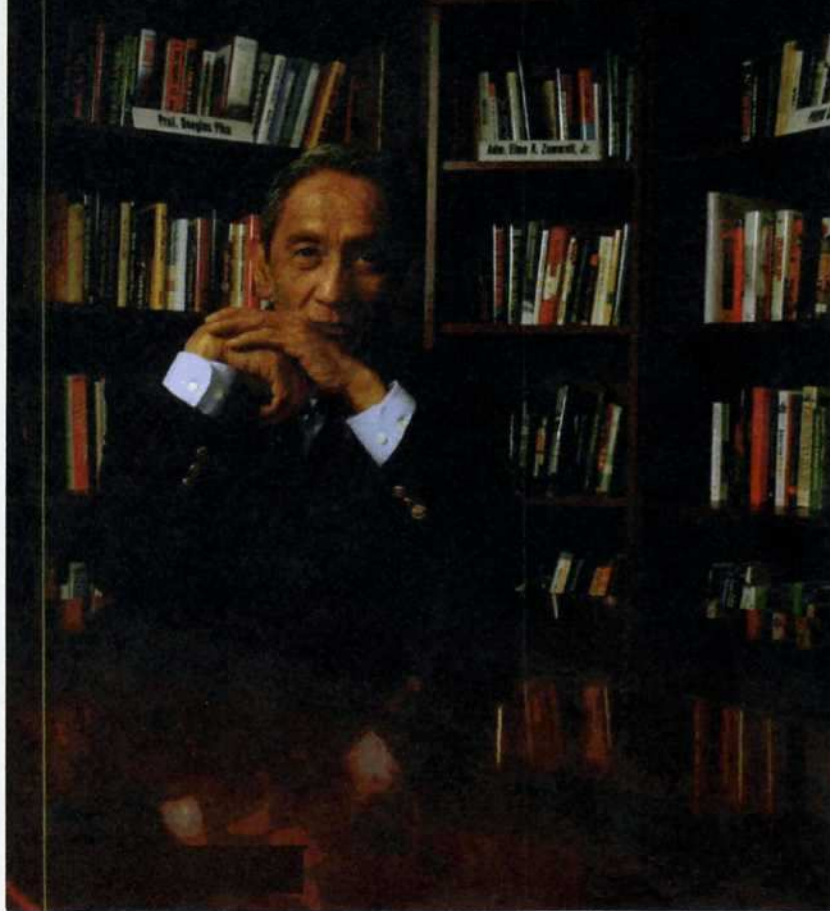
The first donation came from Lubbock business owner Phil Price, who gave a box of books to the archive – his collection of the Time/Life Series on the Vietnam War. "Those books now are among tens of thousands of books in the Vietnam Archive," Reckner says. Another Vietnam veteran and, at the time a Texas Tech graduate student, Dan Siewert followed with the first archival material, the letters he had written home to his mother during his time in Vietnam. A Slaton, Texas, native, Siewert was a Navy hospital corpsman with the Marines in the northern part of South Vietnam. During a battle, Siewert was badly wounded and sent home, where he subsequently became involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "Those letters are still there in the archive, preserved. Some of the letters' envelopes are covered in mud, so those letters became both artifact and archival material," Reckner says.

As director of the Vietnam Project, Reckner first returned to Vietnam after the war in 1998 to attend an international conference in Hanoi. With the 700 conference attendees, Reckner unintentionally ended up sitting immediately behind General Vo Nguyen Giap, the founder of the North Vietnamese army. "We met and got over it. That was the first morning of my first day back in Vietnam since the war. Such a situation would have been strange to any veteran of the Vietnam War," he recalls.

"When I later walked in downtown Saigon during that first visit back, I thought, I've become like the old Frenchman I remember sitting in front of a French restaurant near Tu Do Street in 1969. I have been OBE, overtaken by events (a military phrase). In other words, I am history," he comments. "I looked for all the



TOP: Combat Operations of the 1st Inf. Div. Members of Co "B", 2nd Bn, 18th Inf, wait beside a deserted farm house to be air-lifted from the area. MIDDLE: Ho Chi Minh Campaign Badge. Vietnamese inscription is "Chien Dich Ho Chi Minh." BOTTOM: James Padgett Collection, Taking Five



AMBASSADOR

STATES AFTER HIS FIVE-YEAR IMPRISONMENT BY NORTH VIETNAM AFTER THE FALL OF SAIGON.

world. For many veterans, this is difficult to come to grips with because they never really understood the war in the first place, or at least the whole context of the war. For many veterans, it is almost impossible to explain their role in a war they did not understand. Going back, I suspect, for any reflective veteran, becomes a trip of self-discovery."

One of the many tragic outcomes of the fall of Saigon in 1975 was that hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fled the country, many in unseaworthy boats. Many died on this dangerous passage to freedom and others endured remarkable hardships to gain the precious benefit of freedom. "The legacy for us is the presence of more than 1 million Vietnamese Americans who have greatly enriched our society. However, those who fled Vietnam paid a high price: the loss of their country, their culture and all their personal possessions in Vietnam. But they have moved forward and have achieved considerable success in their adopted land," Reckner reflects.

One of those South Vietnamese who now makes his home in the United States is Nguyen Xuan Phong, a senior research associate with the Vietnam Center. Phong was a cabinet minister in the Saigon government without interruption from 1965 to 1975, working with U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. Phong also participated in the Paris Peace Talks in his capacity of deputy and acting head of the Saigon government delegation. Phong returned to Saigon five days before the South Vietnamese capital fell on April 30, 1975.

He was at that time assuming the official duties of Minister of State in charge of negotiations and Head of the South Vietnamese Delegation at the La Celle Saint Cloud Conference. After the North Vietnamese troops took over South Vietnam, Phong was imprisoned for five years in North Vietnam because of his high-ranking positions in the Saigon government.

Released in 1980, Phong remained in Vietnam under communist rule during the next 20 years before accepting an invitation to visit the United States in 2000. "Something quite amazing is that even through the prison term, the war never hurt me as much as I had thought it would, not really, because I never felt any kind of hatred for my brother enemies, especially among the numerous close relatives of my family who were on both sides of the fighting," he says.

THE VIETNAM PROJECT FOCUSES ON EDUCATION AND OUTREACH, NOT ONLY IN THE UNITED STATES, BUT ALSO IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

bases where I had served. I saw everything, came to grips with it and wrote an essay that examined my feelings about that experience. I was searching for something. After a while, I concluded that what I really was looking for was not the Vietnam I remembered – you cannot go back there, it is gone forever – but rather that I was searching for my youth. That time in my life was dangerous but also exciting as hell, with the adrenaline pumping at the most bizarre times and with people actually trying to kill you. Then I realized what it was all about, this thing of aging and nostalgia. In the

and the United States apart. "We don't seem to realize the magnitude of the calamity we went through. The Vietnam War is not only the longest war, but also the most confusing conflict in America's history. One of the bloodiest episodes in Vietnamese history, we fought communist rule for 30 years from 1945 to 1975, with the death estimates between 3 to 5 million in a country of about 25 million people at that time, and at least 2 million of those deaths were civilians. Roughly half the size of Texas in land area, Vietnam was the target of twice the tonnage of munitions, bombs, explosives and rockets that were used in total during World War II. It is not that the Americans did not try very hard, but it was a very confusing war for the American people during five successive American presidents. The Vietnam War was not a civil war between north and south; it was a conflict between two global opposing forces, the communist block and the free world. The conflict was internationalized as early as Harry Truman, who believed in American democracy and wanted to see a free Vietnam, free of French colonial rule and free of communist rule. With President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, South Vietnam was viewed as an 'Outpost of the Free World' and the conflict became a bigger war within the context of the Cold War. Vietnam was not a war for the Americans to win, nor was it a war to lose in the strict sense of conventional warfare. The Americans fought in Vietnam for the ideals of freedom and democracy – concepts that were then too abstract for the Vietnamese people to comprehend. Most of them were simply motivated by a tremendous upsurge of 'nationalism' after the end of WWII and they longed to be free from foreign rule and presence after more than 100 years of French colonial occupation. Eventually, the Americans lost the battle for freedom and democracy in Vietnam, not on the battlefields but on Capitol Hill. However, in the end, America won the big war, the Cold War."

January 31, 1968: Residents dig out and rebuild after Viet Cong attack on Saigon. Their homes destroyed by the Viet Cong attack on Saigon, Vietnamese citizens search through the rubble for salvageable material with to rebuild. The rebuilding began as soon as the area was cleared of the Viet Cong attackers.



1940s, Ho Chi Minh resorted to terrorism in a widespread and systematic manner to physically eliminate tens of thousands of individuals, groups or parties that did not accept his Marxist-Leninist leadership. Ho Chi Minh's concept of warfare was mistakenly viewed as 'guerrilla warfare' or 'subversive warfare,' but it was, in fact, a form of 'total warfare,' which also commonly is labeled 'people's warfare' with terrorism as its main form of armed struggle. Total warfare completely refuted any conventional demarcation between civilian and military populations. "For 30 years, I said nothing about the war or its aftermath. Giving an oral history to the Vietnam Archive was my second time to speak of it," he says. "This is my third."

Within the Vietnam Project, Phong is involved with the Lessons of Vietnam project with high school students in various states, who send him questions about the war that he and American veterans answer. "The young students are very concerned, and it's a very good thing. It would be very sad if we could not help them to not go through what we had to go through, which was a very painful, chaotic episode in history."

With this same concern for teaching future generations, Reckner takes great personal pleasure in the aspects of the Vietnam Project that focus on education and outreach, not only in the United States, but also in Southeast Asia. He personally presents college scholarship monies raised through the Vietnam Project to many of the poorest students with the most promise in Vietnam and Cambodia, making the difference as to whether those individuals are able to attend college. "The innocent people of Vietnam, the children, do not understand America's fixation on what happened many years ago. They do not understand why we are so tortured when they have moved on. The young people in Vietnam and Cambodia today find

turn to incorporate what they had learned to their teaching. "These trips to Vietnam show that we have a good relationship with the people of those countries," Oliver says. The burden that sits heaviest on Reckner's shoulders is the fact that so many veterans have entrusted the Vietnam Project with documents and artifacts that are near and dear to their hearts. "I feel a great responsibility to ensure that the archive continues going on and is handled in the most professional way so that these precious documents will be here 50 years and more from now. The bottom line is that many veterans have donated their papers and artifacts simply because there is a veteran here in charge. No matter the collection, whether it concerns the My Lai massacre, CIA Director William Colby's papers, or the anti-war movement, those documents are in the hands of friends because we carefully preserve everything," Reckner says. "As historians we have another responsibility: to present to future generations of Americans the most balanced record possible."

During the 2004 summer, Reckner made two trips to Vietnam with several project staff members and graduate students. On the graduate student trip, Reckner and his entourage visited battlefields, religious sites, archeological digs and the Mekong Delta. Perhaps the most memorable experience for Reckner was taking his students down a canal where he spent nine months in 1969 and had not seen since. When the students visited the 1954 battle site at Dien Bien Phu, the pivotal battle of the French Indochina War, they were accompanied by a People's Army lieutenant general who had been an artillery commander at the decisive battle that sealed the fate of the French colonialists in Vietnam. The general walked the battlefield and explained the battle in detail to the students. "How do you match that kind of educational experience? I do not think in their lifetimes the students will be able to repeat such experiences," Reckner says.



Douglas Pike Collection, January 31, 1968: Viet Cong attack on Saigon troops of the 8th Vietnamese Airborne Battalion fire M79 grenade launchers and small arms during heavy fighting with the Viet Cong in a cemetery one-half mile northeast of Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airfield.

» **"THE SEARING MEMORIES OF VIETNAM WILL ENSURE THAT IT REMAINS A VIVID MEMORY IN AMERICA'S COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE."**

The local veterans' agenda from the beginning of the Vietnam Project was to gather archival materials and hand them over to the younger generation. "Every generation seems to have a war, unfortunately. 'Your war' is the one about which you are most emotional. Doubtless, Iraq will be this generation's war," Reckner reflects. "The searing memories of Vietnam will ensure that it remains a vivid memory in America's collective conscience. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University will assist future generations in interpreting the Vietnam experience."

Telling their stories, Vietnam veterans are keys to understanding the confused and chaotic war that was fought on distant battlefields halfway across the globe. Helping the public to understand the war and continuing the dialogue about Vietnam, Reckner and the staff of the Vietnam Project are focusing on the long years of battle and wounds in Southeast Asia. Education may be the best prevention of the future tragedy of war, perhaps sparing subsequent generations from similar grief. ◀



IMAGE COURTESY OF CONDRAY DESIGN GROUP INC.

The remembrance of the Vietnam War has expanded at a fast pace at Texas Tech, and the Vietnam Project is rapidly outgrowing its current spaces and in need of a greatly enlarged new facility. The Texas Tech System Board of Regents has allocated 12 acres of land on the existing Texas Tech campus for this new building, which will enable the gathering of all aspects of the Vietnam Project under one roof. As well, the creation of a world-class, 75,000-square-foot museum of the Vietnam War will portray the young men and women who served in Vietnam in an honorable and objective way. At the same time, the museum will critically examine all aspects of American policy in Vietnam.

The facility must provide adequate storage and office space for a rapidly expanding archive, oral history project, Virtual Vietnam Archive and Vietnam Center staff. Also important, the building will provide meeting facilities for Vietnam veteran groups to hold reunion meetings, facilitating Vietnam project staff in displaying veteran group-specific artifacts that might not at that time be on display for the general public. Vietnam veterans will have an opportunity to critique the Texas Tech Vietnam War Museum, and provide memories and other insights that will help the project staff to gather correct versions of individual stories. The new facility will attract even greater donations of artifacts and documents, making the planning of future space essential.

The new Vietnam building will house an enlarged program of military and diplomatic history that will enable future Texas Tech students to study the causes, conduct and consequences of American wars in a systematic way.

The facility, overall, will have about 191,000 square feet of floor space and adequate outdoor spaces for static display of major military artifacts, such as aircraft and military equipment. Those interested in participating by providing contributions toward the \$50 million funding costs of the new facility are encouraged to contact Vietnam Center Director Dr. James Reckner at (806) 742-3742.



