

Vietnam Notes

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5/28/11 – 6/5/11

Several people mentioned to me before I left on this trip to Vietnam that I should blog and share my thoughts. I must confess that I do not have a good record regarding blogs. Maybe it is because I type so poorly or maybe it is because I tend to overanalyze every word I write but I have never been successful at maintaining a blog or journal over any period of time.

5/28/11

Landed at Tan Son Nhat at 1005 this morning. I am not sure why I felt obliged to look at my watch at the moment of touchdown but I did nonetheless. I wondered how similar the field looked to the war days when it was a major US base. The only vestiges I could find was a series of concrete enclosures we passed as we taxied to the gate. Malaysian Airlines joins the company of BA, Iberia, and TWA by failing to get my luggage to me and I am waiting for them to deliver it to my hotel room. I've never been in Saigon before so I have no reference but I was surprised that I did have some expectations of what I would find here. For example, I expected to see a lot of people wearing the conical paddy hats and the women wearing the Ao Dai that was common when I was in Vietnam before. I only saw one or two paddy hats on the trip from the airport to the hotel and no one was wearing an ao dai. Maybe it will be different when I get further from the city or up north in Thua Thien province.

Saigon turns out to be another large Asian city. It is less squalid than Manila and relatively clean but not as pristine as Singapore. All in all I am finding it to be very cosmopolitan. There seems to be an even mixture of vehicles and motorbikes and it reminds me of Shanghai in that regard. The city has its share of skyscrapers and avant garde architecture. The population is relatively young, people are dressed as they would be in any of the other cities I visit, and everyone has their cell phone and/or iPod. The center of Saigon appears to be very pretty. I am looking forward to tomorrow when I intend to go out and do some exploring. Right now I'm waiting for my luggage to arrive because today I planned to "regroup" after a week of living out of the suitcase.

I wonder why I enjoy Italian TV so much? I don't speak Italian but I am always fascinated by Rai Italia. I think I'm just going to settle in tonight and watch a little Italian TV.

5/29/11

Well, I'm back in Vietnam all right. It was 90 degrees today with 100% humidity. It just wrings the life out of you. I ventured out from the hotel today and did a little sight-seeing. The street my hotel is on was well known to American GI's during the war I understand. Back then it was known as "Tu Do" street and it was lined with bars and brothels. After the fall of South Vietnam it fell into decline but now it has emerged as one of the trendier areas of the city under the name of Dong Khoi. It certainly is trendy. Gucci, Versace, and all the rest have shops there. I walked to the Notre Dame Cathedral and stopped in. There is a big history of Christianity in Vietnam and Saigon in particular. It was introduced by the French. From there I walked to the Reunification Palace, which was the center of the South's government before the fall of Saigon. I vividly remember seeing the news footage of the North Vietnamese tank crashing the gate of the palace signifying the fall of Saigon. The tank is on display on the grounds.



The people seem very friendly and a 300 pound American is enough of an oddity that everyone wants to say “hello” or have their picture taken with him. As I was entering the Reunification Palace I was surrounded by a group of kids who appeared to be on a school outing and wanted a picture. This is their “Bunker Hill” or “Lexington Green” so there are a lot of school kids there. I had one taken with my camera as well. I have to confess though that my first reaction was to grab my wallet after reading all the warnings about pickpockets in my guidebook but these were just young school kids (as opposed to street kids) and they just wanted a picture. It is unsettling because you are accosted the moment you step out on the street by beggars, cyclo drivers, and people trying to sell anything they can. I began to regret my decision to wear the Rolex rather than leaving it home and wearing a cheapie. I don’t feel like that often. I have to attribute that to reading the guidebooks before I came here, which is something I rarely do.



Next, I headed to Diamond Plaza, which is a very glitzy shopping center similar to the malls I remember in Hong Kong. I have to say that I really needed to get in to an air-conditioned space and have a cold drink (Pepsi). As I was sitting there I realized that the sky was beginning to look very threatening and I decided to head back to the hotel before the deluge. I made it back before the rain but I am beginning to wonder if my recollection of the weather in the Danang/Hue area is accurate. As I recall it this time of the year was hot but dry (no rain) both of the Junes I spent there. Hopefully Saigon is a different micro-climate from Danang because it has rained torrents both days I have been here. I plan to spend some time out in the countryside while I am there and I really don't want to be waterlogged.

That's it for today. My only plans are to find a good place to get a bowl of Pho (noodle soup) and a cold beer (Tiger beer) and to figure out how I am going to get into the office tomorrow.

5/30/11

Not much to say today since I spent the day teaching a course that I have taught since 1998 to an entire generation of Intel employees. One person thought it was ironic that I was in Vietnam for the first time since I served over here on Memorial Day.

It struck me on the cab ride into work this morning that Asians make driving more difficult than it needs to be. There are very few traffic laws that are enforced or even considered. They do (mostly) obey traffic signals but there is always one of two cowboys that don't consider things like traffic lights to apply to them. Traffic lanes are considered to be a suggestion more than a rule and it almost seems like there is a law against driving in any single lane for more than a hundred meters or so. Motorbikes and scooters buzz around everything like angry

wasps. Yet, no one seems to get hurt. One of my friends in Dalian in northern China explained to me that there are not so many accidents but the ones that occur are usually gruesome. But, back to original point, driving would be much less stressful if people just followed the rules but that appears to be an unrealistic expectation.

On a related topic, I have learned how to cross the street in Saigon. Actually it is related to the traffic discussion. People here drive bicycles, cyclo's, scooters, cars, busses, and enormous trucks inches from each other with no apparent problem. It is very similar to walking on the ASU campus with kids whizzing by on skateboards and bicycles. The idea is to never make a sudden move or turn. To navigate this it appears that all you have to do is to screw up your courage, pick a spot on the opposite side of the street, wait for a relative lull in the traffic, and then walk at a steady pace in a very determined manner across the street. People will whiz by you in front and in back but you will make it across with no problem. Actually I learned this yesterday. If I hadn't I would still be standing in front of the Cathedral waiting to cross – necessity is the mother of invention (or determination).

On a final note – Dear Diary – I had a very surrealistic experience today in class when I shared my photographs of the city of Hue taken 45 years ago with a bunch of students, none of which were alive back then. They found the pictures fascinating and I found their reaction just as fascinating. I guess I shouldn't be too surprised though. This whole visit has been surreal to me. Who would have ever guessed that I would be working in Saigon teaching a class of bright young students in English. Go figure!

5/31/11

One of my colleagues in Chandler posed this question to me today in response to one of my blogs.

As you participate in this society following a 45 year absence, do you think these folks see new technology and the return of westerners as progress? I am wondering if they tolerate this enormous change their country is undergoing as a means forward (by forward I mean surviving or experiencing life with more ease), or do they genuinely embrace it.

I replied, *“That's a good question and exactly the type of thing I am most curious about.*

It appears that after the war with America the government suppressed the population with a pretty heavy hand but they also stifled the economy. By the mid-80's the population began to rebel. In 1986 the government began a series of economic and social reforms referred to as 'doi moi'. The government moved away from hard-line communism and began to introduce capitalism and generally freed up their rule. As a result the economy is booming and life is better for many of these people than it had been for many generations.

This population is young. These kids are lined up to take their place in the world economy and they are embracing technology and the renewed western presence. Last night in one of the local Pho restaurants my waiter was fascinated with my phone. I thought it was because it was a smart phone. It turns out he was fascinated because he recognized that my phone is a new model that is not yet available here and he gave it quite a 'test drive'. I was fascinated watching how facile he was with the phone and the Android operating system. Every restaurant and bar has Wi-Fi and everyone is on line.”

The only caveat I have about what I wrote is that so far my experience in Vietnam has been limited to the yuppie section of Saigon. Judging all Vietnam after a few days here would be like judging America after a few days in Manhattan. I'm looking forward to my visit to Da Nang and Hue to get a better sense of what is happening in the smaller cities.

As I was answering the question above I began to think about some of the people I have seen since I got here. I have to preface this by saying that I don't bear any animosity towards the Vietnamese. Frankly, I never did. In my experience these people were very poor and, because I spent my time in the boonies of Thua Thien

province, they were very rural. When I was here last they were in their 30th year of fighting. First, they started fighting the French for liberation from the French colonial regime in the mid-30's. Then it was the Japanese during the second world war. After that the British came in to disarm the remnants of the Japanese garrisons and promptly turned control back over to the French! They finally convinced the French to leave by defeating and capturing them at Dien Bien Phu only to have the Americans under Kennedy and McNamara arrive to 'save' them from themselves. It is nice to realize that since the mid-80's these people have known peace after 50 years of war and unrest. I'm happy for them.

Today is my last day of work for a while. I am flying this afternoon from Saigon to Danang. Frankly, after teaching 5 workshops in a week I can use some time off. Returning to Danang should be very interesting because, having been there before, I will have a chance to see what has changed in 45 years.

6/1/2011

What's that they say about "the best laid plans of mice and men"? I was not sure how long I would work today and so I made my flight reservations for the trip to Danang at 7:40 pm. It turns out I was able to teach the workshop planned for today yesterday afternoon and so I had very little to do today. I went in to the office for a meeting with the Training Manager for the site and I did some administrative stuff but by noon I was done. So, I headed off to the airport. Air Vietnam has flights to Danang from here just about every hour. I was certain that if I just showed up they would put me on an earlier flight.

WRONG!

Turns out I have to sit around here for 6 hours until my flight. I decided to take a walk around once I checked my bag. Several people who had been stationed here during the war asked me to take some pictures of the airport. I've taken the pictures but I don't think I have done it justice. This is a big airport! The domestic terminal is kind of seedy but the international terminal is just as glitzy as the rest of them on this side of the world.





One thing I have learned on this trip is that Vietnamese coffee is great! It is very similar to the Starbucks coffee we get in the states. I know that some people don't like it but I do and this stuff is as good or better. I may pick some up to bring home with me.

6/2/2011

Danang

I just spent a very restful night in Danang. Danang used to be a sleepy little colonial town. The French influence was very obvious in those days. Well, all I can say is that the "neon genie" has visited Danang. The city is vibrant, hectic, busy, and noisy. I'll tell you that one good antidote to drowsiness is a 15 minute ride in a cab in Danang. Whew!

When I got into the hotel I did three things. First I stepped outside and checked my GPS to see how far I actually was from the spot my Battery was positioned when we were here. I am 6.8 miles from that spot and I will be stopping there in a few minutes. Second, I sat and had a cool (not cold) San Miguel (in a non-frosted glass). And, Third, I took a long hot shower and got in to bed. I remember one time, after I had been in VN for about 6 months that I had to go to Danang and I found myself fascinated by the flush toilet I encountered. I had been in the boonies for so long that white porcelain was amazing to me!

So what am I doing here? Is it closure? Am I revisiting the scenes of my youth? I don't really consider this to be any sort of closure. I closed the Vietnam chapter of my life many years ago. I think it is more intellectual curiosity that brings me here and the fact that I have the technology and wherewithal to do it. I spent 19 months and 22 days in Vietnam (but who's counting) but I moved on quickly after I returned to civilian life. I suppose the biggest factor in my story is the fact that I never got hurt over here. Vietnam was a big adventure for me. Philip Caputo in his excellent book "A Rumor of War" talks about how young men are attracted to war despite all the warnings they get. I enlisted in the USMC less than 10 days after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which was the excuse Johnson and McNamara used to escalate our involvement here. I had never heard of Vietnam. I spent 6 months in Cuba prior to coming over here and we began to hear more and more about this place while I was there. I have to say that the prospect of going to war scared the hell out of me but it also intrigued me. And so, on March 9, 1966 I landed at Danang. We flew in from Okinawa on a big C-124 cargo plane. The training I

received before I got here consisted of spending 6 weeks marching up and down the hills of Camp Pendleton and living in the field during the coldest time of the year in Southern California. It was supposed to prepare me to come here where most of the country is about 10 meters above sea level and it is tropical. The other part of the training consisted of hours of lectures about all the different ways we would die. Not *might* die, but *would* die. So we all landed, convinced we had been given a death sentence.

Danang was the center of the USMC presence when I got here. The 3rd Marine Amphibious Force and, later, the 3rd Marine Division was based here. Most of my time was spent to the west and south of the airstrip (away from the city). West of the airstrip is dominated by a hill (hill 327) and I spent a lot of time driving up and down that hill because in my job as a surveyor (all artillery fire control operators in those days were also surveyors) I had to access the Bench Marker (survey control point) that the French had put up there. To get there you had to drive from the airstrip past Highway 1 through a small village we called “Dog Patch” and past the Marine enclave.

Our first position in Vietnam was located south of the airstrip near the Cau Do river. We were co-located with the 3rd Battalion of the 9th Marines. We left Danang just about this time in 1966 and moved up north to the Phu Bai area. In fact, tomorrow it will be 45 years to the day since we made that trip by convoy.

So, I’m off. I have a driver who is going to be with me for the day. I will visit some of the sites I want to see in Danang and then he is going to drive me up the coast to Hue. When I explained to him what I want to do he seemed as interested as I am. We’ll see how it goes. Oh, the car (a Camry) and the driver will cost me about \$55. I consider that to be very reasonable.

One last story before I close. Yesterday as I was getting off the plane a young kid – probably 6 or 7 – stopped to let me step in front of him. I know I must look like a towering monster to these kids, even more so than to American kids because I’m bigger than any Vietnamese I have ever seen. Anyway I leaned over and thanked the kid in Vietnamese. He broke into a smile from ear to ear and said something very excitedly to his Mother. She told me he had said “He speaks Vietnamese!” It was cute.

6/2/11

Hue

The main thing I accomplished today was to make myself feel ancient. How long does it take for a forest to grow?

The genesis of this trip was the combination of several things. I have always been amazed at my ability to remember numbers as opposed to names or faces. I used to prove this by rattling off the map coordinates of our battery center in Phu Bai (YD8932712786). One day I found a copy of the grid sheet (map) of the Phu Bai area online and I was amazed to see that the coordinates were right on! Next I checked the location on Google Earth. Our position, which was on the south side of the Phu Bai enclave was isolated. In front of us was a marshy area (actually a river in the rainy season) and behind us, between us and the 3rd Marine Division, there was an area of ancient oriental graves. I think they put us where we were so the graves would be behind us because Vietnamese graves are very elaborate things and they would have served as excellent “pill boxes” for anyone who wanted to attack our position. There were no trees or foliage of any sort on our site. In fact the ground was mainly white sand that almost looked like snow. But on the recent satellite picture it looked like the center of a small village. I thought it would be great to locate this exact location using a GPS to see what it would look like today.



Here's what it looked like in 1966. I knew it wouldn't look the same as it did but I never in a thousand years expected to find what I found. Here's what the same place looks like today.



The lower picture was taken from a position about 50 meters from the top one! I have double-checked the information and I am convinced that I have the position correct. I guess I should have suspected something like this because, as you can see from the Google Earth view (below) the site was now green and populated. Actually I put a dot and an arrow on the satellite view to show the location and direction of the picture above. Just to make sure I wasn't crazy I went off to look for the graves and they were there, exactly where I assumed they would be (but there are many more of them). How long does it take for trees like this to grow! Why was the place so barren in 1967 and so wooded today? Was it Agent Orange? Did the locals denude the place for firewood?



A rice harvest has just come in and everyone is drying their harvest to prepare it for storage or sale. Most of the houses have a cement 'patio' in front. They use this space to dry the crop by spreading the rice on the pavement to dry in the sun. Some of them use the sides of the local streets to do this. At the end of the day they sweep it up and bag it. They also use the 'straw' but I'm not sure what for. I have not seen much livestock and NO water buffalo! This is really a surprise because in the old days a water buffalo was a farmer's most prized possession and everyone seemed to have one. It does add up though because the lack of water buffalo and the presence of trees explain why the place smells so different. In the old days everyone cooked using buffalo dung and/or charcoal. Now every house has a propane tank outside.

6/3/11

Hue

Why can't the French design a decent shower? Here is the country that designed the Eiffel tower, runs high-speed trains, dug the Chunnel, and even invented the bidet – but they can't design a shower. I got my first taste of this in 1982. Janet and I were staying in one of the grandest hotels in Paris, the Meridien at the Porte Maillot, and we found it impossible to use the shower without flooding the entire bathroom. I'm staying in a French hotel here in Hue and this shower is less functional than the one in Paris! They do bake great bread though.

I'm actually sitting here in the middle of the morning screwing up the courage to go across the river into the old city of Hue and have a look around. The heat and the humidity are oppressive and I'm reluctant to leave the air conditioning in the hotel. All I can think of is how in hell did I live in this when I was here? I guess the answer is a combination of being 45 years younger, not having any experience with air conditioning at that time, and having no choice. I don't think I could have gotten away with "Sorry Gunny but I don't think I'll go out on patrol today. It is just too humid!"

6/3/11

Hue

Now I remember why I was drinking a case of beer a day (when I could get it) when I was here before – I was sweating a case of beer a day! The joke in Arizona is "What do you call someone walking in downtown Scottsdale in August? – A tourist" What do you call someone walking around Danang or Hue at this time of the year? An Arizona tourist in Asia. Boy was it hot out there today! It hit 95° but the humidity hit about 125%

Anyway, I finally got myself out of the hotel and into a cab to the city center. I walked a good distance through the old Imperial Palace and the Forbidden City but I didn't have much luck finding the places depicted in the old pictures I brought with me. I don't know – I'm batting about .100 right now. The first site I visited has been obliterated by a cement factory, the second one has turned into an unrecognizable jungle, and today I couldn't find any of the venues I was looking for in the old city. It is pretty though. Here's an example:



I spent \$6 (120,000 dong) for a ride in a cyclo. I really felt bad for the guy pedaling me around for an hour in that heat and humidity but it was a good way to see the city. It seems that Ho Chi Minh and George Washington had something in common. They slept in a lot of places. This monument is outside a house in the old city. Essentially it says “Uncle Ho slept here.”



I walked across the Trang Tien bridge back to the new city and crawled into one of the hotels on the south bank of the Perfume River for some air conditioning and a cold (yes cold and in a frosted glass) beer. In 1968 the Trang Tien bridge was the only traffic bridge across the river and the VC blew it up to keep the Americans from taking back the city during the Tet offensive. The Marines had to make an amphibious assault to get back into the old city.

All I can think of in this city is the bitter battle it took to reclaim the place after it was over run by the Viet Cong during Tet in 1968. I had been home for a few months when that happened. I remember being happy that I did not have to experience it. My old Battery fired many missions in support of the battle because the city was within range of our position in Phu Bai. But at the same time I felt guilty for not being here as if I was shirking my duty. It is strange to describe to someone who has not experienced it. Actually Phil Caputo talks about similar emotions in his book, which is probably one of the reasons why I found it so compelling.

Everywhere I go people tell me how much they like America and how their parents told them that the Americans were good to work with. I said the other day that I bear no animosity toward the Vietnamese and I find that the Vietnamese, at least the ones I have met, bear no animosity towards America. To me that is incredible because the Vietnam war was not one of America's finest hours. There was no set battles fought in that war. It was not fought for territory. From the very beginning the goal was to kill as many VC and North Vietnamese Regulars (NVA) as possible. By the end of our involvement the obsession with "body count" meant that any Vietnamese who was killed was, by definition, a VC. Dead men tell no stories. But what is even more interesting to me is that the Vietnamese I have met do not appear to have any animosity towards fellow Vietnamese. There are a lot of people from the north who are now living and working in the south. We were so

caught up in our own involvement in Vietnam that we forget that the war was actually a bitter civil war that we stuck our nose into. Just as in our Civil War in the 1860's there were brothers fighting against brothers and, just as in the case of our Civil War, they were brutal with each other. It is estimated that when the North Vietnamese (not just the VC) captured Hue they assassinated over 3000 people who had been fingered as collaborators. They were just as brutal in the countryside.

I'm sitting on the veranda behind the hotel near the pool. The sun is down, a balmy breeze is blowing, and it is actually tolerable out here. Last night I had a French dinner. Besides the fact that it took longer than I wanted it to (the definition of "a French dinner") it was food I am accustomed to. Tonight I am going to eat Vietnamese. I have actually found some dishes I really have liked and the price is about a third of the continental stuff. I'm on my own dime on this part of the trip so I don't want to break the bank.

Tomorrow I head back into the boonies looking for the location of a fire base we were at in August of 1967. With my luck I'll probably end up in Laos, which isn't far from this site.

Hue

6/4/11

It strikes me that if I were playing horseshoes I would be doing pretty well because I continue to get very close to my goals. Today I rented a car and driver and headed off to find a firebase we were located at in June of 1967 in support of Operation Cumberland. When I went to the lobby to request the car I had a bit of a problem explaining to the people at the desk what I wanted to do.

Did I want to go to see the tomb of Minh Mang? No, but I want to go to a place closeby. Did I want to visit a village nearby? No.

Eventually a manager came down. His English was pretty good and I was able to explain to him what I was doing. I showed him the pictures I had from 1967 and, after everyone had a good chuckle over how thin I was, we talked about the location. He was skeptical but he was very impressed with the GPS unit and the sheaf of pictures I had.



We made arrangements for the car and driver and I went off and had my breakfast. At the agreed time I returned to the lobby and met the manager and the driver. He explained what I was doing. We all had another chuckle about how thin I was and I proceeded to show him where I wanted to go. His first response was “Oh, you want to go to Birmingham!”. I was impressed because as it turns out he was close. While we were there in 1967 for a few weeks and had abandoned the place, the Army, when they moved into I Corps, created a major firebase a few hundred meters from where we had been. We pulled in, scraped a few gun positions on the side of the hill and spent a month or so out there firing missions in support of Operation Cumberland that was going on to the North and West of the location. In 1971 the Army (101st Airborne) moved a Brigade out there, built an airstrip, and began launching airborne operations from the place. You can Google “Firebase Birmingham” to see what they had to say about the place. So, we headed off for “Birmingham”. On the way we stopped at the side of the river where there had once been a ferry, which was the only way to get across. Now there is a pretty impressive bridge. I took a picture but I am sure I was close to the location of my old picture but not in the exact spot.



You think it would be easy but it isn't. The good news is that we found Firebase Birmingham with little trouble. It looks nothing like it did and the old airstrip is overgrown and now has several houses on it (not beside it but on it). My driver tried to drive as far as he could along the old road but we couldn't get very far. I took off on foot and came within 50 meters or so of the location I had scouted out on Google Earth. The official USMC records only locate the spot to within 1000 meters but from my recollection of the lay of the land and with the help of my pictures I had a pretty good idea of where it was. Well, once again the place is totally overgrown with thick brush and trees and I could not get to the spot I wanted to reach. Unfortunately I was hoping to get to a clearing where I could get a shot of the valley with a glimpse of the river as in the shot above (with the skinny me in it) but no such luck.

My driver, who by then was convinced that I was completely off my rocker, decided to take me to the place depicted in the picture of the river and boats above. He took me to a place that was almost back in the city of Hue, a good 8 or 9 Km from the spot I know the picture was taken. He took me to a spot where he said the Americans had a base. I have no idea if he was right about the base but the place was studded with old French bunkers. I was amazed when I was first in Vietnam at how many French bunkers existed all over the place. Everywhere you went you would find these bunkers. It seemed the French were trying to recreate the Maginot Line here. The Maginot line did not protect them from the Germans and they didn't do them much good in Vietnam. The Americans never used them and, in fact, we blew a lot of them up because they posed a threat to our positions. Anyway, I have found that a lot of Vietnamese assume the bunkers were from the Americans and I'm not sure they believe me when I tell them that they were French. Anyway my driver insisted we take a picture. So here is the more 'substantive' me standing on a spot overlooking the Perfume River west of Hue.



When I explained that I had never been to this place before and showed him how my old picture was taken from a few meters above the river and how this picture was taken from a spot about 40 or 50 meters above the river he just mumbled and shook his head.

We had some time left on the meter so I asked him to take me back to Phu Bai. I don't know what it is about Phu Bai but every time I get within a few km of the place all my batteries fail. This time the batteries in both my camera and my GPS bit the dust. It didn't matter. I had him take me back to the spot where we were located in Phu Bai and all the trees were still there as they had been two days ago. I really looked around and tested my assumptions and I am certain that I was where I said I was the other day and that the place has simply become wooded in the 45 intervening years.

My last goal, before heading back to the hotel was to find the spot in Hue where I had taken one of my favorite pictures in Vietnam. I was in the city one afternoon in 1967 and it was just the time that one of the local schools was letting out. Suddenly a group of young girls, all in their school uniforms of Ao Dai's and riding their bicycles, rode past us. The good news is that I found the place (I even located the school) but it does not look the same.



Tonight is my last night in Hue. Tomorrow I will take the ride down the coast back to Danang. I didn't find everything I had hoped for or expected while I was here but I don't regret having done it.

6/5/11

Danang

This is my 8th and last entry from Vietnam. Thanks to all of you for your encouraging words. This blog actually worked out better than I had expected.

On October 29, 1967 I got up early, checked in my rifle and hopped a ride to the airstrip at Phu Bai. From there I caught a flight to Danang and began my trip home. October 29th is significant for a few reasons. Beside the fact that it was my Mother's birthday and it was the day I began my trip home and out of the Marine Corps, it is also the last time I ever touched a firearm. Well, almost. When I was here I had a .32 Caliber Berretta pistol that I always carried in my hip pocket. I only used it on a few occasions and it was practically useless but it gave me a sense of security. I had mailed it home a few days before I left Nam and never touched it until a day in 1971 or 1972 when I took a sledge hammer to it and destroyed it. October 29th is also significant because it is the first

and only time I ever missed a flight. When I got to the transit facility in Danang I was informed that I was scheduled on the 3rd flight back to “the world” as we called it. The military was chartering commercial flights out of Danang. I don’t know where the Army or Air Force people went but the Marines went to the Air Force base at Kadena in Okinawa. From there we actually had to get our sea bags out of storage at Camp Smedley Butler, get our “A” uniform up-to-date, and stand a dress inspection before we were allowed to return to the States! The 3rd flight was scheduled for the next morning. They told us to stay close by because the scheduling was erratic and so I headed off to the enlisted men’s club, which was located on the east side of the airstrip. I think it was the only time I was ever on that side of the base. It was also so close to the strip that you could see the planes landing and taking off. I commenced to drink. After a few beers we watched a commercial jet take off. It was a 707 and it was beautiful. I loudly announced to everyone that I would be on the second one of these planes to head back to civilization. Everyone cheered! A short while, and several beers later, the next jet took off. This time I got up on the bar and announced to everyone present that I would be on the next jetliner to take off after 19 months in Vietnam. Everyone cheered. People bought me beer. I was an actual Marine who had been in the jungle (as opposed to someone who had spent their time in the relative safety of Danang) and everyone wanted to celebrate with me. Then the third commercial jet took off. I had missed my flight out of Vietnam and the only flight I have ever missed in my life. No one cheered – but we did drink more beer. The next morning I stood on the side of the strip and watched a Braniff Airlines 707 land to take me back to the world. I had spent 19 months and 22 days in Vietnam when I left.

The trip down here from Hue this morning was tedious. There is just no sense the way people drive here. It almost seemed that my driver would slow down when he had open road in front of him and speed up when he was tailgating other cars or trucks. When I say tailgate I mean that he was literally driving less than 6 inches from these other vehicles while going 35 or 40 MPH! The motorbikes and bicycles are all over the road and have no regard for anyone or anything. I have to admit that I have yet to see an accident here but it is not for the lack of opportunity. I actually crave getting back on the 101 and watching the way the idiots drive on that road. It is tame compared to what I experienced here.

I did see my first Water Buffalo today. In fact I saw many of them. Maybe they were on holiday up until today. The farmers have started to flood their fields to start a new crop and the Buffalo were out there plowing the fields. Actually there was a 50/50 mix of buffalo and tractors. I also had a chance to look at the beauty of this place. The sky was much clearer today than it had been on my trip up to Hue and so I think I got some good scenic shots.

So here I am, sitting in a Japanese hotel on China Beach, drinking Pilipino beer and listening to “Begin the Beguine” sung in Spanish. As I was saying to my daughter today (God Bless Skype!) this place has grown up. It was a very poor third world country when I was last here (and that is understandable after the 30 years of war they had endured) but they are now just on the cusp. The population has more than doubled in the time I was gone from 39 million to over 85 million. I can just imagine what this place will look like in another 5 or 6 years. I said at the beginning of this odyssey that I wasn’t really sure what this was all about, why I had been drawn back here after 45 years. As I said then, it wasn’t closure. The best I could figure was that it was intellectual curiosity about a place where I had spent a year and a half of my life. I proved to myself that the mind does play tricks because some things just weren’t where my memories had placed them. Other things were recognizable but barely. I guess the saying “You can’t go home again” is true in some ways. I don’t regret having served here although I came to learn after I had gotten out of here that “I had been had”. In some ways I grew up here. Perhaps I was here to try to make some sense of why the US had gotten involved here in the first place. Were we here to protect the assets of the French plantation owners? Were we trying to show the French that we could succeed where they had failed? Was it to satisfy the American hubris that we could fix anything we touched? The bottom line is that we had insinuated ourselves in a civil war in a third rate country, threw all the weaponry and technology we could at a guerilla war, an insurgency, made a mess of it, and eventually snuck out the back door after failing miserably. Vietnam turned Communist and a lot of people who had collaborated with us

suffered during the period of “re-education”. There is no denying that. But the Vietnam I visited this week is a vibrant, growing country that is on the verge of joining the ranks of industrialized nations.

So where do I go from here? Physically I leave tomorrow to go back to work in our plant in Chengdu in China. I have to teach 2 workshops in one day there because of a scheduling glitch. I like Chengdu. Actually I should say that I like the hotel in Chengdu. I stay at the Kempinski hotel and I love the Paulaner beer and the Schweinshaxen they serve there. From there I go to Dalian in Northeast China for two days. My contact there has scheduled me for 15 hours of classes and meetings in those two days so I will be a busy boy. I’m not complaining. I just want my boss to know that she is getting her money’s worth out of this trip. By the time I leave there I will be more than ready for the 27 hour trip back to the States. I’ve often said that there are only two things I truly fear – height and snakes. My family takes great delight in watching me squirm when I am more than a few feet off the ground. Well, I have to add a third thing. I am scared to death of riding in Chinese taxi’s. I have three such trips in store for me next week. One from the hotel to the airport in Chengdu and one to and from the hotel and the airport in Dalian. Wish me luck. It is the most traumatic part of this whole trip for me.

As for my Vietnam visit, I am going to put together a memoir comparing the pictures I have from 1966/67 and the ones I have taken on this trip. I will probably post it on my website and put a short version on YouTube. I’ll let you know when I do it. For those of you who have not seen it and are interested in my Vietnam pages on my website, you can visit www.mytrngdept.com/Guns.htm There you will find some of my pictures from that time, Links to the monthly Operations reports of my outfit “1st 155mm Guns(SP)” in the USMC Archives and maps from that era of this portion of Vietnam. Thanks for enduring my ramblings.