

## **Return to Viet Nam**

**September 2-11, 1999.**

After some thirty-odd years, I finally made my return journey to Viet Nam, something that I have wanted to do since leaving Da Nang on a hot steamy day back in July, 1967. After a seven day visit, I discovered that everything has changed in Viet Nam, as we knew it in our past, yet nothing has really changed at all. My tour of Viet Nam was to be focused mainly in the area where the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment operated during it's deployment - from Quang Ngai City in the south of I Corps to Hue in the north. Following are my personal feelings and observations, which, for the most part, gave me a positive feeling about my trip.

Departing Los Angeles at 23:45 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, via Hong Kong, around 09:00 on the morning of September the 4<sup>th</sup>. I stepped into a wall of heat and humidity as I exited the aircraft. Tan Son Nhut airport is still being used by the military. Old revetments were clearly visible as were several types of aircraft built in the old Soviet Union. Photographing the airfield is strictly forbidden, but this rule was circumvented after our stay in Viet Nam. Once we were airborne and on our way to Hong Kong and home, several Marines took photographs as our "Freedom Bird" winged its way west. I had never been to Ho Chi Minh City, renamed to honor Viet Nam's modern day Hero. It is still referred to as Saigon by everyone including the world's airlines. Hearing several horror stories about bureaucratic bumbling clearing Customs, I was quite pleased that we breezed through quite quickly. From the airport, we went on to the Omni Saigon Hotel for freshening up before leaving for Da Nang later in the afternoon. I decided to make a brief tour of the city. I was curious about this place referred to as the "Paris of the Orient" that everyone talked about during the war. The U.S. Embassy from the Viet Nam War era no longer exists. In it's place stands a brand new U.S. Consulate. The Embassy has been moved to Hanoi, which is the Capital of Viet Nam. During my short stay, I discovered Saigon is a cesspool of humanity, a city full of thieves, pickpockets, and prostitutes chasing the almighty dollar. The streets teamed with cycles, motor bikes and other vehicles. Rot and stench permeated the air and hung like a cloud in the sky. It was quite common to see locals urinating in the street. I wondered aloud, "What the hell am I doing here, and why did we ever come here in the first place so many years ago"? I felt vindicated for never having been there and spending all of my days up north in the "boondocks" of southern I Corps. The departure to Da Nang, my destination, was eagerly anticipated and I was itching to rediscover my Viet Nam.

The short flight north via Air Vietnam was pleasant. Once again, on arrival, familiar smells permeated our nostrils. This time it was the smoke of central Viet Nam that was fused in my mind. We were picked up and our baggage efficiently transferred to the Bamboo Green Hotel on Phan Chau Trinh Street, which is situated near the Han River. The hotel, nine stories tall and with access to the roof, afforded a spectacular view of the surrounding area. Accommodations were spacious. The air conditioning in our rooms was pleasant compared to the heat outside. At last I was close to the area where I had spent my time "in country" as a young Marine during the Viet Nam War so many years ago.

Da Nang had grown from a city in the 60's with a population of approximately 20,000 souls to one of around 80,000 today. Hordes of people were everywhere with the constant noise of bells and horns sounding the alarm as we negotiated the crowded streets. Our days of touring were full. After breakfast, commencing at 06:00, we hit the road

at 07:00 and were usually back at the hotel by 18:00, tired but pleased with the experience of rediscovering the past.

The first two days were spent traveling to get to our destination, Da Nang. On the third day, our second "in country", we began by visiting the southern portion of the area near Da Nang. This included the area from the vicinity of Hill 327, south to Hill 37, west to Thuong Duc, then east to Highway 1 and north to Da Nang. Leaving the hotel, we crossed Highway 1 and headed southwest, passing Hill 327, which was the 1st Marine Division HQ and is now a NVA Base where access and pictures are prohibited. The road to Dai Loc was paved, no longer one of dusty red clay although it remained the same width. Hootches dotted both sides until we reached the Song Tuy Loan and crossed Cobb Bridge, where the countryside opened up to the familiar sight of rice paddies that, for the most part, were now harvested. As we proceeded south, Hill's 22, 10, and 44 could no longer be distinguished from the rest of the terrain as they were no longer bare but covered with trees and natural foliage. At the intersection with Highway 4 in Dai Loc we turned west toward Thuong Duc. The first stop was Hill 65, where a staircase leads to its summit and a monument to the local VC and NVA infiltrators who were killed during the Viet Nam war in the Dai Loc District. Nothing remains of our presence except for a few slight depressions which indicated defensive positions. The view of the Song Vu Gia, Charlie Ridge, and the "Arizona" was breathtaking; boats were clearly visible traversing the river at their leisure. We continued to our next stop, which was Hill 52, the most western point of the 7th Marines TAOR. For those of us who had traveled this road before, it was amazing to see - lined with hootches on both sides of the road, and black top pavement until we reached the hill. We disembarked and climbed to the summit, still pock marked with depressions indicating defensive positions from a by gone era. What was striking were the electrical power lines, which I later found out extended electricity all the way to, and past, Thuong Duc. Another oddity were TV antennas attached to bamboo poles and the locals watching color TV in their hootches. Viet Nam had surely changed. This did not exist in the past. Leaving Hill 52, the road was gravel and the sides opened up to rice paddies all the way until we reached our most western point of travel, the SF Camp at Thuong Duc. I climbed to the top of the hill where the camp was located. Evidence of the LZ remained - several defensive positions and remnants of concrete bunkers. Leaving Thuong Duc we travelled east on Highway 4 until we reached Highway One, with several stops along the way.

On the way east our first stop was Hill 25 [Dineen Hill], which was located with the help of our guide and translator. It was not visible from the road, but a path led to it and we took it to the summit of this low mound of dirt and rock surrounded by a sea of rice paddies. Hill 25 is where a Platoon of "Mike" Company 3/7 was overrun by the enemy on 2 November 1967. Casualties were high but the Marines persevered and held their position. A Canadian, Patrick Dearborn, lost his life that night fighting along side his fellow Marines. There are no monuments on this hill but it is now a burial area. A number of Vietnamese tombs litter the area and rice paddies still surround it. It is very still and silent. To the east, Hill 37, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marines CP was awaiting and so were our lunches. My first disappointment - unfortunately, for some reason, we were unable to take photographs of Hill 37. It is now a large open pit quarry. The center is a huge hole and it is still being excavated for the fabrication of brick and mortar. I did, however, find the lone concrete bunker that still stands guarding the rear approach. Perhaps soon it too will disappear. After having lunch we proceeded east until we reached the rear entrance to Hill 55. Our first destination, the ambush site of "Kilo" 3/7 on 27 July 1968, required a walk over the rice paddy dikes south to the vicinity of Giao An Hamlet. We then retraced our path and continued on foot up to the summit of Hill 55. At the highest point, the Vietnamese

have erected a monument dedicated to their victory against the French troops and the end of their war in 1954. The hill is planted with trees and overgrown with natural foliage but still affords a decent view in all directions from its summit. We unfurled the Marine Corps Colors for a photo opportunity. How appropriate to do this at the site of the former CP of the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment. Having concluded our picture taking and well rested, we proceed down the hill and back to our vehicle. We then headed east down the road on the way back to Da Nang, stopping only at an old Charm Temple.

Day four began with the usual breakfast - a choice of Vietnamese food, bacon and eggs and assorted fruit. We then boarded our transportation and headed south on Highway 1, crossing the Song Tra Bong and turning west onto Go Noi Island and the Allen Brooke area of operations during May 1968. This road is also now lined along both sides by hootches, making it a continuous long strip of dwellings. We disembarked from our transportation and walked down to the river in the vicinity of Liberty Bridge. Liberty Bridge had been destroyed several times and now all that remains are several wooden pilings that still protrude from the sand - lone testaments to our presence. From Liberty Bridge we walked east along the river and then inland to the Line of Departure of the second phase of Operation Allen Brook. This operation began on 15 May and launched in the early hours of 16 May 1968. We had walked quite a way, sometimes traversing people's gardens but being careful not to ruin the vegetables growing there. Everyone was friendly but curious to see "foreigners" wading through the fields. Some talked and were helpful with directions. I came across an old Papa San who wished us an enjoyable day in French. Completing our tour of the area we boarded our vehicle and headed west to An Hoa airstrip and Combat Base. Arriving at An Hoa I discovered all that remains of this once sprawling facility is the asphalt runway. Nothing else is visible except for some depressions which indicate fighting positions and a few concrete foundations where once buildings stood. We had lunch on the runway and talked about the changes that we had been exposed to. We then hit the road south over the mountains and then east into the Que Son Valley. The road was hardly passable and it seemed like it took forever to reach Que Son and Hill 51, also known as LZ and FSB Ross, both of which are in close proximity to each other. It appeared that several times we would have to disembark and push our vehicle either out of a ditch or out of the deep ruts in the road. To his credit, the driver kept us on course and to our destination. Views were spectacular, especially from the high mountain passes looking down into lush green valleys - finally a chance to view the area with a different outlook than during a time of war. Again, a monument graces the top of the hill and the boulders are still pock marked with bullet holes. There are remnants of buildings at the foot of the hill. These were holding areas for the reeducation of the South Vietnamese officials and soldiers after the war ended in 1975. After a brief tour of the area we continued east along Highway 535 until we reached Hill 63 and LZ Baldy. The Hill is clearly visible from the road and there is now an NVA Base in this vicinity. After a brief stop we continued to Highway 1 and then north back to Da Nang.

Day five would prove to be our longest yet. We would travel south, then east to Son My Village and My Lai before returning to Da Nang. We departed at our usual early morning hour, heading south along Highway 1 past Tam Ky, which has grown enormously. It is no longer the District HQ but the Provincial HQ of Quang Nam Province, replacing Da Nang. Travel on Highway 1 can be quite exciting as it is loaded with all kinds of vehicles. Being narrow, it gives the traveler the impression a mishap can occur at any time. We finally arrived at the first stop of the day - one that I had been awaiting for sometime - and a photo opportunity at the An Tan Bridge in Chu Lai. We continued south. Access to the Chu Lai airstrip is forbidden, as is picture taking, since part of the old facility is still being used by the NVA as a base. We had access to

part of the beach area and were able to get to the heli-pad in close proximity to the splash point where port facilities are still located. The sands of Chu Lai are as white as ever and the China Sea is as clear and clean as it was when young Marines swam in it. We rode to the top of Hill 41 and found another Vietnamese monument [Should this hill be any different than the others? Of course not!]. It seems every prominent hilltop in the country has a monument. The Quarry is still there and it appears that the Vietnamese are still digging out gravel for use on roads or other projects. With a clear view of the surrounding area, this was a good vantage point for picture opportunities. I located Hill 69, which was the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiments CP in 1966 and part of 1967.

Having finished our brief tour of the Chu Lai enclave, we headed south, with a stop in Binh Son and the Song Tra Bong. Then west towards the Van Tuong Peninsula and the Operation Starlite AO. Arriving at the battleground area we had lunch before listening to a briefing on the battle which took place here some thirty-four years ago. We toured the area where remnants of a tank and Amtrak are still preserved, as well as some enemy defensive positions, which have been encased in concrete. A plaque marks the spot where the Vietnamese version of the battle is inscribed. Boarding our transportation, we headed south and then west for a brief stop in Son My Village and, preserved as a memorial, My Lai Hamlet. I had no interest to visit, but being there I decided to enter and view the area. This is a very sad place. I don't agree to what happened in this village so long ago but at the same time I felt offended with the propaganda display in the small museum. My Lai did not and does not represent the American warrior then or now. It does, however, make one reflect at the total waste of life when politics enter the lives of ordinary people and war is the result. Leaving this place of great sadness and sorrow, it was a long return trip back to Da Nang for food, drinks and a well-deserved rest.

The sixth day was spent again touring in the vicinity of Da Nang. After breakfast we headed north, making stops at the old facilities that existed but were no longer there, such as FLC. And, a visit to Red Beach, where the Marines landed, and Dog Patch, just outside the main gate to the old 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division HQ. Dog Patch looks like a typical suburban street and I'm sure most of you who have visited it in the past would see the improvement to its legacy. A visit to China Beach was next and a swim in the South China Sea, which hasn't changed at all in the years it has existed. The legendary white sand is still there. So is the crystal clear water. Facilities are sparse and it could use a world class hotel at that location. A couple of beers and lunch at our leisure, then it was off to Marble Mountain. Although not in use, the Marble Mountain Air Facility still had some revetments in place and clearly showed the signs of our former occupation. At Marble Mountain we disembarked and climbed to the top of "Metal" Mountain where a Buddhist Temple exists. We also descended into a natural cavern which was rumored, falsely, to have been a VC Hospital. One of our group, a Marine with Amtracs, remembers it well as he and his fellow Marines explored this location during the war. Once again, spectacular views of the Da Nang area enabled us to take photographs to bring home and share with our family and friends. Leaving Marble Mountain we traveled south and then east to Hoi An for some shopping and sight seeing. Hoi An is a great place to visit. With it's many shops, you can purchase local art, whether it is a painting or a carving, prices are hard to beat. The river has a number of interesting boats, both large and small, with several small restaurants lining one bank. After brief stay we headed north, the day ending with our return to the Bamboo Green Hotel.

Our seventh, and last day of touring I Corps, we departed Da Nang, heading north on Highway 1 towards Hue. We stopped at several spots along the way, including Nam O Bridge and the top of Hai Van Pass, where we were accosted by an annoying rabble of vendors. This was one of the

few places where they descended on us like locust. Passing through Phu Bai, where we made a brief stop, we finally arrived at Hue and our Hotel on the banks of the Perfume River. The afternoon was spent walking the areas where the Battle for Hue took place during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Hue has also grown and many things have changed. Hue University where some of the most bitter fighting took place, is now a hotel. I visited the key strong points and the Citadel, which is undergoing a major renovation and rebuilding process. In several areas there are still traces of the battle that took place many years ago. A visit to the Hue market was interesting. You can buy just about anything from a fake Rolex watch to your evening meal. Returning to the hotel we prepared ourselves for supper and a guest. He was from America and now living in VietNam in Dong Ha. He had been invited to speak to us and the theme was a surprise which most of us were not prepared for. After over a week in VietNam and no political views expressed by the Vietnamese, we managed to endure a speech from a liberal American who was in VietNam on a "Mine" removal project. I chuckled when one Marine remarked, "I thought we exploded all of our ordinance before we left"? Most of us could have done without the rhetoric but were polite enough to sit and listen. I couldn't wait to finish and rush off to my room for a quick drink of several Manhattans to soothe the soul.

After an early morning breakfast, we hit the road for our return trip to Da Nang and our departure to Saigon on our way home. We spent the afternoon in our hotel or doing some last minute shopping. Following a brief flight, we found ourselves back in Saigon. On the bus to our hotel, another surprise - this time a brief speech, for the first time by a Vietnamese. "We must forget the war, it was a very long time ago, it is time to move on a path of friendship". Thank God it was a brief ride and a short speech! After an overnight stay at the Omni Saigon, we bid farewell to VietNam and, at 10:20, left for Los Angeles via Hong Kong. After a brief stop in Hong Kong, we boarded our flight and arrived thirteen hours later, at 14:00, at our final destination.

Final thoughts and observations: The trip was excellent and lived up to my expectations. The Tour staffs, both American and Vietnamese, were professional and helped to the best of their ability. I found it odd not to see the rice paddies full of black pajama clad villagers. Instead, most were wearing colorful shirts and trousers, with white being the predominant color. Vietnam is also a country full of young people. Most seem to be in their thirties or younger. The war did leave it's mark on this Nation. For those of you who want to make a return trip, forget the past, you won't find your fighting hole because very little remains of our presence and it is being eroded each and every day. The smells and the scenery remain the same, as does the poverty. The Vietnamese are as friendly as they were back when we were at war, at times much more so, and at least this time you can feel safe that what you see is an honest smile and not one that may get you killed. But remember that you are in a Communist country where the Government may change the rules and law at their convenience. Their lifestyle and regulations are a far cry from the freedom that we take for granted. It was a hectic schedule, so if you decide to go on an organized tour, be prepared to have some disappointments because you will probably not be able to see everything that you wished to. Prices are very reasonable and you can load up on souvenirs to bring back home. The food was excellent. If you like Asian cuisine you will enjoy VietNam, especially the seafood. Share your experience with those of the other tour members and you will certainly learn more about the war than you can remember. In order to really see specific places, one must probably make a special trip a second time because the most difficult part is time, or lack of it, due to long periods of travel required to get from one location to another. Vietnam is not America. Although the roads are, in many cases now paved, travel still remains the same as we once knew it.

Since returning I've also experienced the same dream several times. Perhaps it was a reaction to my being in VietNam again. All of us have experienced some sort of event or events during our stay there during the war, which we may have forgotten. Your return may or may not bring back some memories. I would like to share my dream and hope to leave it behind me forever.

### Dealing With Demons

Recently I returned to VietNam, something that I have wanted to do ever since I left some thirty odd years ago. Perhaps it was in search of my youthful past, or to find answers to questions that have been locked away in my mind. I was not disappointed for several reasons, one of which may have been hidden for a very long time and reoccurred several times in a dream since I have returned. I am sure it was triggered by the odors and smells of the past, which struck me as a frontal assault on my defensive position. My return to this mysterious faraway land paved the way to dealing with demons that had been locked away and were the forgotten part of my life.

Since my return, I have experienced a dream, several times with such intensity that I awake and am unable to sleep for several hours. I assure myself it is only a dream but then this young girls face with smooth lightly colored skin and eyes as dark as pools remains in front of my eyes, I can't forget her.

The dream, "I am standing in the hot blazing sun in the midst of several prisoners and suspects. Women are wailing and children are crying and the smell of smoke is heavy in the air. I enter hooch or some kind of building, there on the floor covered in warm ruby red blood is a Vietnamese who has been brutally shot and has a bone protruding from his thigh. Through his semi- open eye, he watches me enter and immediately locks his arms around my leg in a death like grip and begins to wail. I just about lose it and begin to yell for him to release me. I can't stand to touch this man bleeding all over my jungle utilities. I only own one pair and they have to last the duration of my stay in country. Now what in the hell am I going to do with all this pigs blood on me?"

"A blur of rifle butts begin to pound him, but he refuses his grip until finally I kick him loose and he is dragged wailing outside. I hear several sharp reports, and a smell of cordite, then all is silent and still. Opening the door I exit into the sun, shielding my eyes I suddenly see smiles and laughter. On the ground is the bullet riddled corpse of the man who pleaded for his life and on his chest stands a proud smiling ARVN with his smoking gun." I bolt upright and awake with a cold sweat.

The dream never happened, it is all in my mind, but the young black pajama clad girl with the dark eyes did. I think I understand, I should have saved her although she may have lived but I have doubted it all those long years. I was a newly arrived Corporal in Chu Lai, and one day before nightfall I was sent south somewhere near the Song Tra Bong to a Marine unit. My assignment was to pick up a VC suspect; little did I know that I would be picking up a young girl who was about sixteen and she was a beauty. My initial reaction was of anger; she was bundled up and tossed in the rear of a Mighty Mite for the trip back to Regiment and then Division Headquarters. She cowered and whimpered all the way, with those dark eyes that still burn a hole in my mind. I didn't know her final destination was the ARVN interrogation unit attached to the Marines at Chu Lai, I could only guess that she did. I never saw her again, but I do hope I am wrong about her early demise, of all that I have witnessed she is the only one that remains in my mind.

*I have seen, I have been, I am thankful to be alive.....  
Victor Vilionis, September 15, 1999.*