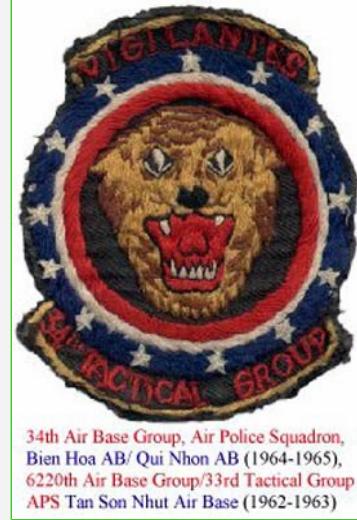


TOUR VIETNAM!

Deja Vu... all over again

*Long Bien, Biên Hòa,
Tan Son Nhut, Saigon, Cholon*

Photos by Robert Anisko
1984



I used the Nine Dragon Tours Agency out of Muncie, Indiana to set up my Vietnam tour. It's run by an ex-Viet Vet, Jerry Sandman. I thought the price was fair and all went as planned. The total airfare from Pittsburgh was about \$1000 each. Additionally, my wife and I together spent about \$500 each on the ground in Vietnam for four days. However, this included visas, pickup at and return to Tan Son Nhut, excellent hotel accommodations at the Majestic on the Saigon Riverfront, all meals, a driver, an air conditioned vehicle, and a tour guide for four days, we went everywhere that we wanted to go (Tay Ninh, Cu Chi, Vung Tau, Long Thanh, Biên Hòa and Saigon), and we almost got to see everything we wanted. The only disappointment was that we couldn't get onto Biên Hòa AB because the Vietnamese Air Force was located there. Overall, my wife and I had no problems at all. I would recommend the trip.

Deja Vu (All over again)

In 1998, I decided to make a return visit to Vietnam. This was 36 years after I first arrived at Tan Son Nhut in 1962, when I was 19 years old, 34 years after I arrived the second time, at Biên Hòa and Qui Nhon in 1964, and 33 years since I departed in 1965. This time it would be different. I would be taking my wife, and I would be traveling as a civilian (although I'm still in the US Army Reserves).

The return journey began in November 1998. After a few days stay in Tokyo, where I had also been stationed for 2 years, the Northwest 747 was on its way to Bangkok (where I'd spent 3 great R&R's). Although I had been thinking of what Vietnam would be like now, the memories really came alive when the pilot stated that we were now flying over Đà Nẵng, and shortly would be over Laos. We then arrived in Bangkok and spent a few days sightseeing and relaxing.

The final countdown then began. We took off from Bangkok on a Thai Airways Airbus. Don Muang's military side looked the same as it did in the 1960's, although I didn't see any U.S. military aircraft. We crossed Cambodia and flew into Tan Son Nhut (now Tan Son "Nhat", thanks to the visitors from the north). As we approached Saigon (they still do call it that in spite of officially being named Ho Chi Minh City), my cameras were ready, but the flight crew cautioned that photos were prohibited at Tan Son Nhut. I decided not to test my luck upon arrival, but I successfully got some photos upon departure.

After deplaning, the 90 degree heat really hit home. We were picked up by our travel agent and taken to the Majestic Hotel on the Saigon Riverfront. The hotel was excellent. En route we traveled on Dong Khoi (Revolution) Street which formerly was Tu Do (Liberty) Street. Oh, how some things change. After we checked in, the first evening we had a dinner cruise on the Saigon River. I had my first Vietnamese meal in 35 years. The tastes and smells were different from stateside to say the least, but it was pretty good.

The second day we went into the former Iron Triangle near the Cambodian border. We visited the Cao Dai Temple

and observed the Black Virgin Mountain at Tay Ninh, and finally visited the Cu Chi tunnels. The Viet Cong booby trap display and the tunnels really had a profound affect upon my wife. Then we were off to Vung Tau to spend a relaxing evening on the South China Sea.

The third day we drove to Biên Hòa passing through Long Thanh where a former Special Camp and airstrip had been located. We had to go there sometimes in 1964-1965 because a pilot had crash landed his A1E. I didn't have the time to try and find the actual site.



We also went by Long Binh, which didn't exist when I was at Biên Hòa. Half of Long Binh has been turned into an industrial park while the other half is occupied by the Vietnamese military.

Finally we arrived at Biên Hòa's main gate. You could still see the water towers on the base, but unfortunately, we couldn't get onto the base because the Vietnamese Air Force was now occupying it. I wanted to get to the pad where the Viet Cong blew up the first B-57's jet bombers that were flown in, but it wasn't in the cards. The town of Biên Hòa, which has really grown since I was there, was totally unfamiliar. After driving around for a while, we left for Saigon on Highway 1.



That evening we had a very good meal at the "Tu Do" Restaurant. You know what street it was located on, Dong Khoi, of course. We also had a very special treat that evening: A monsoon blew in. Within a couple of hours, there was at least six inches of water on most of Saigon's streets.



To get to the restaurant, our driver had to drive up on the curb to the front door, and I had to carry my wife from the van to the entrance to keep her feet from getting soaked.



Then the day came to leave Vietnam. En route to Tan Son Nhut, we drove through Cholon, where the streets were still flooded, and stopped at the *Saigon Hard Rock Café* for a T-shirt. This Hard Rock wasn't much.

Finally, we arrived at Tan Son Nhut for the flight back to Bangkok. At this point, I did sneak in some photos of Tan Son Nhut.
TSN AB Flight line

The old hangars from 1963 were still there, and the aircraft bunkers which were constructed after my time at Tan Son Nhut were still there. I was able to get a peek at the one end of the runway where we used to guard the RF-101 Voodoos. Then the Thai aircraft nosed into the sky bound for Bangkok.

My thoughts at that time went back to 1963 and 1965. In 1963, I knew I would return to Vietnam, which I did in 1964. When I left in 1965, I didn't know if I would ever return. When I left this time, I knew that I would like to return again, especially if it would be with a group of

persons who had been there. I still want to visit Qui Nhon and Duc Co, and many of the other places that I had visited for various reasons. Although my wife joined me for this trip, she stated that she would not want to return. Here's some observations of the trip:

- Uncle Ho Chi Minh is spinning in his grave! The Vietnam that I just visited is still heavily influenced by the West. Numerous western businessmen were present, western advertisements were all over the place, and Saigon's skyline is growing rapidly. It would probably collapse without the western investment.
- The bars are still there, operational and thriving.
- The population is increasing. This has led to tremendous pollution. The exhaust from thousands of scooters, motorcycles, cars, vans and trucks is atrocious. You can see it and smell it from Vung Tau, Biên Hòa, Tay Ninh and to Saigon.
- When I asked for a "ba mi ba" (33) beer, they looked at me kind of funny. Ba mi ba is now "ba ba ba" (333).

Civilization has set in. Its demise can only be near.

- The smells of the street are still the same. The street food got my stomach a little queasy (as it always did).
- Each US dollar was worth approximately 14,000 dong. In 1965, officially it was around 100, whereas on the market it was around 200.
- The cyclos and rickshaws are still there. The old blue cabs are gone. I hear tell they still have them up North.
- US jeeps are still being used extensively.
- The US embassy has been torn down. A new US consulate will be erected on the same site.
- The old Palace is now a museum open to the public (for a fee of course).
- Although the people seemed as wild and as loose as ever, it was quite evident of whose country it was now. Ho Chi Minh's picture was everywhere along with the red flag with a gold star.
- The street-people are still a pain and the begging is sad. You really have to watch your wallet, fanny-packs, watches and jewelry.
- In comparison to Tokyo, and to an extent Bangkok, the prices were quite reasonable.

All in all, other than the possibility of getting pick-pocketed, which also occurs in the US, all of the people that we met were very gracious and friendly. There was no outward animosity towards us as Americans. I'm glad that I went on the trip and, as I stated previously, I would like to go again.

Note: What's your thoughts on generating some information from members of the organization about a return trip to Vietnam? I'd be glad to be the point-of-contact for any interest that may be exhibited. I'd need to know:

- How many are interested;
- Where would they like to visit or not visit;
- How long would they like to go for; and
- How much they'd be willing to spend.

The total cost for a group would be dependent on the total number of persons interested, and would also be affected by where we would centrally meet for the trip over the pond. I'm ready to go back.

Robert Anisko

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