

VIETNAM

Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base

377th Security Police Squadron

Photos and Return

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[Page-1](#) (Return to NAM) * [Page-2](#) (Ten Days Diary) * [Page-3](#) (Vietnam TET Monument photos)

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377th S.P.S Tân Sơn Nhứt
10-1967 to 8-1970

Diary of Vietnam Trip

Day 1 - Saturday, August 8, 2009

I finally connected to Air Vietnam, Tokyo to Saigon (HCMC) non-stop. I was the only non-Asian on this first-class flight full of successful-looking Vietnamese.

The only recognizable items I saw upon landing were the old Delta Sector revetments, now decaying, brown with years of weathering and Tango Alpha, the old water tower near CSC.

The Airport was modern but fairly empty of travelers. I was shocked when my bags arrived from the Northwest connecting flight that I had missed.

I cleared customs and the Visa process was simple and efficient, but the inspector was dour and unsmiling to me. Everyone on the plane had been friendly and I met an expatriate family visiting Vietnam from Pittsburgh. Their 20-year old college age kids, who were American-born, were not happy to be returning for another Vietnam vacation.

My buddy, Ric and our guide picked me up and we went directly to the Military Museum where the 3rd Field hospital once was located.

We met Mr. Truc and the 84-year-old WWII, French and American Wars hero of the VC, Mr. Hoia. He was a jungle munitions manufacturer and home made weapons expert engineer. He was brilliant, bubbly, and very eager to tell his stories and he looked like Hồ Chí Minh with a beard, for that purpose. He is the founder, curator, guide, maintenance crew and housekeeper of the munitions manufacturing exhibit. I could write a chapter about our two-hour visit.

We gave him a 100,000 Dong note, which is 17,800 to the US dollar today, and he was pleased with this large donation of about 5 or 6 dollars. We shook hands with this vigorous, former enemy who now loves his former enemies, the US, Japan and France, but not the Chinese.

Mr. Hoia would have gladly kept us for hours with his stories and magnificent explanation of how they made weapons from junk and discarded enemy waste.

We headed back to Saigon to walk the riverfront area, old Tu Do Street, now Dong Khoi. The city is very clean as the communists have trash pick up down to a science.

We went for a beer at the old Majestic Hotel, top floor bar, overlooking the waterfront and the exceptional Saigon nighttime panorama, breathtaking.

We stopped at a local French-style, upstairs bistro for more chicken and hot spicy shrimp dishes with various rice and vegetables. We had some North Vietnamese cookies for dessert, small and sweeter than animal crackers. We took a long downtown stroll by the Caravelle, Rex and other newer hotels, the National Theater, which I think was the old post office, the former Presidential Palace, the former John F. Kennedy Square, which is now centered with a Hồ Chí Minh Statue.

Day 2 - Sunday, August 9, 2009

Visited 051 gate, now a tennis and golf center for the military. The mass grave on TSN was moved across the street, Highway #1, where the Dai Tuongniem – Tan Phu Memorial stands. Most bodies, all except 82, who were VC in this area, were moved closer to their homes in South and North Vietnam.

I had breakfast with Gil, the USAF expatriate, at the Sheraton hotel and then toured West and North perimeter of Tân Sơn Nhứt.

I saw remnants of a bunker west of Gate 051. All bunkers and perimeter towers are gone.

A wall 6 to 12 feet high has been erected from the Echo Sector all the way around Alpha Sector and the east end. I located where Tango 10 should be and saw an Isuzu truck factory and further east a large Mercedes Benz parts assembly facility. The old open areas of the West-Northwest, North and Northeast perimeters are now completely built up as residential areas, part of the greater Saigon City.

The old North Church Steeple where we took fire from during Tet was saved and a new church sits to the left. A brand-new larger church is planned for construction.

We did a complete ride around the entire circumference of Tân Sơn Nhứt (NHAT) and noted that the base has shrunk because many large portions of Alpha Sector, Echo Sector and Foxtrot Sector are now off-base, residential areas.

Tango 1, the large white and red checkered water tower, formerly located in the VN Ranger Compound, and my home for 1 ½ years is no longer there.

Traffic in Saigon consists of over 4 – 5 million motor bikes and scooters. Red lights are only indicators of caution, nobody stops, the cars, trucks and motor bikes move about randomly in and out of proper lanes and everybody has the right-of-way. However, the bikes move in unison, like a school of fish, with thousands moving like a mass Tour de France with very few collisions, and more road courtesy than anywhere I've ever seen on the planet. Drivers and riders seem on constant alert, with great peripheral vision, allowing constant shifting of movement in a seemingly effortless manner. One must see it to believe it, as it is very spectacular to watch. I closed my eyes on many occasions as our driver negotiated through thousands of motor bikes, all moving haphazardly, but with incredible smooth flow.

After a full day of touring Saigon and dining in a French/Vietnamese restaurant, it was back to the luxury of the Saigon Sheraton.

I ended the day with a panic attack and went to the international S.O.S. clinic to see a great Dr. who prescribed a mild sedative. He told me many vets come back and experience this as part of an overwhelming experience of return, long flights, delays, lack of sleep and thinking they are still 20 years old. The sedative allowed me a great night of sleep and calmness.

Seeing TSN, my home of 3 years during the war, brought back the recurrent dream that I have had for years, of not being able to go home and being left in Vietnam. I had the same feeling of loss of control, being away from family, in a sea of strange people, worsened by poor connections for my cell phone and email to contact home. Having had major medical issues a year ago, and being on medication caused more thoughts of the danger of the distance and loss of control. This was not pleasant; however, the people are all friendly and love Americans. We then met with a fine group of 10 young 25-30 year-old student alumni of Southern NH University who will start a Saigon Alumni Chapter this year. All were gregarious, intelligent, and motivated future entrepreneurs who strongly believe in capitalism. My interpretation of their careful comments was that the south of the country, Saigon, would drag the north, Hanoi, into the 21st century.

One student banker asked me to find wealthy investors in the US who would help to capitalize a new Saigon community bank and start the trend away from state-controlled, partially-owned banks. All agreed to keep in touch with Ric and me, both of us former SNHU Trustees, to keep the ball rolling. All were invited to attend SNHU's second graduating class at the Hanoi branch in September.

Day 3 - Monday, August 10, 2009

Today it was a Tour to Cu Chi Tunnels in the "Rubber Plantation" region of Tay Ninh. It turned out to be a tourist trap with communist propaganda films about the war of American aggression.

I reminded the guide that we saved them from Japanese takeover in 1945 and it appears that the communist system is a failure. He smiled and told me his job was more important than his politics. We shook hands as friends.

We marveled again at the incredible patience and ingenuity the Viet Cong sustained for over 25 years in building and maintaining the 1700 kilometer system of tunnels, some of which were under a giant American Army base.

From Cu Chi we drove to the world-renowned Cao Dai Temple in Tay Ninh. This ancient religion is a mix of Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and other less popular religions that have earthly beliefs and ancestral worship and 4-hour per day prayer chants.

The people are devout, polite and very gentle in their totally religious lifestyle. It is amazing that the Temple in its great beauty and splendor was not touched, though situated in a very heavily fought area.

After much picture taking, a donation was expected and made. Donations alone keep this gorgeous temple maintained for future generations. We departed with a feeling that these people were close to Heaven on Earth.

Day 4 - Tuesday, August 11, 2009

We got up for an early, large breakfast and then to Tân Sơn Nhứt for our flight to Đà Nẵng. We arrived at Đà Nẵng after a typical AVN delay and were picked up by a driver who took us to the Hoi An resort spa. The place was full of European tourists with children. All of France is typically on holiday in August and many were here. The resort lies on the local river leading to the ocean and beaches that stretch to Đà Nẵng. The afternoon was relaxing but our lunch of local fare gave us both instant Montezuma's revenge, probably from the Nuoc Mom which is fermented fish sauce.

We relaxed at the pool where I caught up with the daily documentation and labeling pictures. I called my wife at home. Found out my email Blackberry was faulty. I spent 2 hours with Verizon on the phone troubleshooting but to no avail.

Today in Hoi An, I went to a beautiful resort where I stayed with many others, mostly European and Australian guests, almost all Caucasian. Next to the resort was the abject dirt and poverty I witnessed in Saigon 40 years ago. Garbage and sewage was strewn about, squalid living conditions, dirty children, poor sanitary conditions. There were beggars and pimps plying the girl trade to foreigners. I saw no black people in Saigon and one African couple in Hoi An. They were friendly with the other Caucasian guests but I sensed the same Vietnamese prejudice toward the black race today as I saw in 1967-1970. I hope I am wrong.

I had dinner with Ric but I have lost my appetite. I am apprehensive about the remoteness and poor access to medical facilities and the loss of my cell phone and email ability. I am no longer the fearful 19-year-old of my prior days in Vietnam.

Day 5 - Wednesday, August 12, 2009

I had an early breakfast, western-style. My diet here has been terrible. Breakfast foods are good, but all eggs, meat, pastries and only the fruits are healthy. I have not seen any cereal.

Today, we drove by car, a Toyota Corolla, to My Son and to the ancient Champa ruins, dating back to 700 AD. Influence in this incredible construction came from China, India, Rome, Greece and other places. It is very exotic and overtaken by vegetation, but much is intact due to the clever engineering of that time. They used cactus paste as a seamless brick adhesive that has lasted over 1300 years.

Very little is known of the origin or the people who built the large complex.

This area was a Viet Cong stronghold during the war and subject to massive artillery and air bombardment by the US, which did much damage to the ruins. It is now a place of interest and a grand tourist destination from all over the world.

Our guide, Uy, spoke great French and English. His Dad was our ally in the southern army and forced to years of hard labor near the North Vietnamese/China border after 1975. His family was able to keep one of their many properties, which now houses a beautiful restaurant, "The Secret Garden," an upscale clothing boutique and tailor shop and other entrepreneurial enterprises. His wealthy grandmother emigrated to the US years ago.

Our return-drive to Hoi An passed rice, corn, tapioca, and melon farms. The rural areas consist of thousands of micro businesses, food stops, produce shops, motor bike repair shops, and many others. The people are all friendly.

Hoi An's market area is comprised of hundreds of stalls competing for customers of food, clothing, knick knacks, necessities and of course the massage and prostitute trades. Prices are very inexpensive. I bought a nice bathing suit for \$6.00 and a can of coke for 60 cents.

Lunch at the Secret Garden was interesting but the spices and sauces completely masked the meat, fish, poultry and vegetables so much that we could not tell what we ate.

I miss my wife and son and once again know why I live in a great country full of hope and opportunity. Vietnam remains the haves and the have-nots. Bribes and political connections in the Communist State are customary. But, the southerners run a strong capitalist society in a socialistic state run by communists. Two more generations, or

less, and they will change for the better forever.

Three to six pm is pool, journal writing, and picture labeling before our evening walking tour with Uy in Hoi An. I met Uy's Dad who was bitter about being left behind when the US pulled out. He hates Henry Kissinger! He suffered greatly in prison for years when the communists took over in 1975. He shook our hands and tears welled up and he said he likes Americans. It was a sad parting but his son is prospering and we could see the fatherly pride.

Day 6 - Thursday, August 13, 2009

We left Hoi An to drive to Huế via the world-renowned Hai Van Pass in the mountains North and West of Đà Nẵng. We had a new guide, Phuong, who was somewhat close to the vest and had many questions about the war. We bumped into our British biker friends whom we met in Hoi An as they biked up the mountains. Jamie and Elle are on their way to Hue.

We decided to by-pass Huế and after driving through the fishing bay village of Lang Co at the base of the mountain pass, we had to wait for a freight train to pass from the Hai Van Tunnel. We had a severe thunderstorm for 5 hours while on the way.

After Lang Co, we detoured off Highway One to a "short cut" our driver knew to by-pass traffic and go directly to Đông Hà. It was a two-hour, rough drive through remote villages and farms and cows blocking roads. We arrived at the former (1968) small village and outpost of Đông Hà. Now it has been officially named a city, with a population of mostly northern VN settlers moving south for opportunities from the high Northern unemployment.

Our driver took us to our destination office of RENEW. This is a multinational, small start-up non-profit CO dedicated to locating and clearing land of unexploded ordnance. It is financed by donations and the Director, Mr. Hien, told us that the Vietnam Veterans memorial Fund headed by our friend, Jan Scruggs, is the main benefactor. They work on a \$300,000 per year meager budget. They also help the victims of explosive ordnance injuries; have a prosthetic center and a school and village program to promote safety and teach the poor to avoid digging up unexploded ordnance for scrap metal sales. 95% of Quang Tri Province (Northern-most in SVN) has unexploded ordnance. The project clears land by square hectares and once cleared the land can be reclaimed for farming or other uses. The government gives little funding for this project since other major infrastructure projects seem to have priority (my impression).

Mr. Hien gave us a one-hour canned presentation and asked us to get the word out. I asked if they had received any money from Rotary International and he said he thought so. Rotary has no presence yet in Communist Viet Nam. I asked him to seek them out.

We departed Đông Hà, south to Huế on Highway One in a thunderstorm. Darkness came and we fell in line at a long, long line of south-bound trucks and busses jammed on a major bridge with one lane open due to construction. There were no police or any officials to direct the flow of traffic and typical of traffic in VN, it was chaos. After what seemed like hours, and thanks to very light North-bound traffic, our driver took a chance and drove by a line of stopped vehicles until he could enter between two trucks near the bridge and a few moments later we got through. Anyone with any kind of emergency would have been in absolute danger. A few miles further, we passed a truck recently demolished as he tried to use a train track as a short cut.

We arrived at our hotel in midtown Hue. La Residence was built in 2005 and opened in 2007 and is a very modern, French-influenced design, with all new and beautiful fixtures. I went to bed, very, very tired.

Day 7 - Friday, August 14, 2009

I met the driver at 8:30 for the Perfume River Boat Tour west of Hue. It is a beautiful river and a beautiful view but there is much poverty in squatter's boat houses on the North Bank. Government will try to clean up as it causes tourism issues.

We visited the Citadel where the Huế Battle raged in January and February 1968 for 3 ½ weeks. The Citadel has a \$400,000,000 restoration project over the next 10years. Many old relics are in tact and many were lost forever. Most of the people are too young to remember the war 40 years ago. I took many pictures.

We bumped into our Brit friends, Jamie and Elle, again. They are going north to Hanoi; we fly out of Phu Bai (Huế airport) tomorrow and head south to Saigon.

We took a brief evening walk down the street from the hotel but came back early as night walking can be dangerous with the crazy traffic and driving habits with no rules. As usual, we were approached by the vendors and pimps, even at the main entrance of our plush hotel. Went to the hotel restaurant for a late dessert, my first one, and had a caramel dipped banana split with vanilla, chocolate and strawberry ice cream.

I went to my room at 10:00pm, watched the international news and crashed early.

Day 8 - Saturday, August 15, 2009

I was up at 6:00 am, took a long, hot bath, and a long breakfast from 7 – 9:00 am. I then caught up on this diary and labeling pictures. I have not had my internet and email service on my Verizon Blackberry since last Saturday. It worked only one day, however, I have been able to call my wife at 7:00 am and 7:00 pm daily.

At this point, we are waiting for our guide-driver to pick us up at 1:00 pm for our flight that was delayed (what's new!) to 3:30 pm. I could not confirm my Monday flight from Huế and will have to do it in Saigon. I am ready to leave Vietnam for the second and last time.

Phu Bai Airport was the old Phu Bai Advanced Northern Army Airstrip in the late 1960's. There are still remnants of old revetments and cement bunkers. It is a very noisy terminal with all the people seemingly screaming at one another and no line discipline.

My overall reaction of this trip is that I expected something different, but I don't know what. The experience was OK but not as exciting or thrilling as I expected. The Far East was more interesting when I was 19. Now I prefer to be in my own country with the comfort of familiar faces, places, language and culture. It has been odd being the only Caucasian around among thousands of staring faces, still viewing us as the rich Americans.

Not being able to visit where I was in battle and under rocket attack was a disappointment. Seeing a country still separated informally as Northern and Southern was not surprising considering that Communism is failing here too. To me, the people are the same, better educated, wanting to be more western but clinging to custom and traditions which interfere with full communication. I see no jealousy, only frustration as only those with money, power or government ties seem to move up the chain.

I am so happy for those Vietnamese friends and acquaintances in the US who have prospered due to hard work, school, assimilation and language skills in our system.

I am sad as I feel that change will be slow in Vietnam but the signs are there for long-term change. Even the poorest farmer has access to TV and the internet, which will create more desire, frustration and hopefully future prosperity.

As of today, what I have realized is the same thing I realized when I went home from Vietnam in 1970. I live in the best city, in the best state, in the best country, on the planet. I share it with a great wife, son, friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers.

I will leave Vietnam behind, soon forever.

Day 9 - Sunday August 16, 2009

I spent the day in Saigon. I walked around downtown, lunched, visited the War Museum, Said good bye to Ric and went to bed at 8:00 pm.

Day 10 - Monday, August 17, 2009

I was up at 2:55 am before 3:00 am wake up call. I went to bed last night at 8:00 pm. I left the hotel at 3:35 am, the same time Saigon and Tân Sơn Nhứt were attacked on Tet 1968.

The streets were fairly empty except for newspaper deliveries and some women doing laundry on the street. The cab driver took a short cut that was unnecessary and disconcerting to me. He charged me \$9.00 rather than \$6.00 for the trip due to the early time.

Security at the airport was tougher going out than it was coming in. Most people on the flight are Vietnamese who live in the States. There were also a few Aussies and a handful of Americans.

I expect to not ever return to Vietnam. I hope to leave my demons behind. All week I have had the same haunting thought that something would go wrong and I would be stuck and unable to return. Maybe my recurring dreams and nightmares about the war will stop. It was a part of my life that influenced my future more than anything prior or since but it also took its toll on my psyche.

So, off I go to Tokyo, Los Angeles, Boston and Nashua, NH without looking back. I am contemplating destroying most of my mementos and photos from the war since nobody else but me is connected to those memories of long ago.

I am now an old soldier, like my grandfather was when I was very young and my father when I was going off to war.

Good bye Vietnam. Forever.

VSPA has permission to use the article but add a disclaimer that it does not represent historical facts and the opinions expressed are my own based on personal recollection and notes and my diaries from 1968 and 1969.

[Page-1](#) (Return to NAM) * [Page-2 \(Ten Days Diary\)](#) * [Page-3](#) (Vietnam TET Monument photos)

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