

## TRIP REPORT

VIETNAM, 4-14 MARCH 2001

Melanie and eldest son Spencer gave me a precious gift this past Christmas – a trip to Vietnam. And Spence came along. The impressions the war made on his young life were tremendous with Dad's first combat tour coming at age 1 and second tour and MIA/presumed dead coming at age 4. It meant a lot for us to make this trip back to the land of that war together.

The trip began on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Spencer flew from Denver, Colorado via Hong Kong, and I flew from Seattle, Washington via Tokyo. Our flights landed in Singapore within five minutes of each other and we met by our adjacent gates just inside the terminal. Immigration and customs in Singapore is a breeze, and within moments we were on our way to the Le Meridian Hotel in downtown Singapore for a night in an upscale hotel before launching onto Vietnam the next day. After a morning foot tour of downtown Singapore, we got to the airport and caught our Singapore Airlines flight into Saigon.

It was eerie as we came over the Vietnamese countryside and made our approach into Saigon. I had never landed there before without staying alert for enemy anti-aircraft fire. We landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport which was the same airport that serviced the civilian passenger terminal and a large Vietnamese and U.S. air base during the war. Our

plan for our trip was to try to generally retrace my first introduction to Vietnam by coming through Saigon and then working our way up country. My first tour had been at Hue/Phu Bai in the northern portion of what was then South Vietnam. My second tour at Pleiku in the Central Highlands – right about in the middle of South Vietnam.

As we taxied in to the terminal, I was surprised at how much things had not changed. The runway, taxiways, even the old concrete revetments and shelter for the American fighter aircraft, were all just exactly as I remembered them. Even many of the hangers were the same, and the passenger terminal seemed to be about where the old one was, but was a new building. What I wasn't prepared for was the uniformed Communist soldier positioned just inside the jetway when we got off the aircraft. My reaction was sudden and uncontrolled. I think it was a shudder and a too loud utterance of "Goddamned Communist Bastards." Spence elbowed me and said "Shush!"

We continued through immigration and then customs. I was very uneasy having my comings and goings being processed by the same people who had held me locked up against my will for so long and found myself quivering all over with a rapid (but I'm sure barely discernable) shaking. It was like a high speed vibration in the rudder pedals of a helicopter that has some sort of tail rotor problem. At any rate, we got through the bureaucratic formalities and caught a cab into downtown Saigon.

We'd stayed in an upscale hotel in Singapore largely because we thought we'd pretty much be in hovels throughout our travels in Vietnam. We didn't book an organized tour (or unorganized for that matter). We just got off the plane, the two of us with our *Lonely Planet* guidebook and ten open days ahead of us, and pulled together an itinerary as we went. I did have an idea of the places I wanted to go: start in Saigon, get

to the Central Highlands, try to get all the way to my crash site near the Laotian border, travel to Phu Bai, and then get to Hanoi.

We took a hotel in Saigon based on two recommendations we'd received, and were quite surprised at the high quality of the place. We stayed at the Caravelle, that during the war was an adequate place that housed a lot of press. Now its been upgraded substantially and is a real first rate establishment with even a large outdoor pool and sauna. A bit expensive though (\$100 a night for the two of us), so we decided that we'd stay somewhere else on our way out.

We wanted to go next to the Central Highlands where I'd flown Cobra attack helicopters with the 361<sup>st</sup> Pink Panthers my second tour. We soon found all flights to the Highlands had been cancelled, however, because of a Montagnard (indigenous native population relegated to living in mountain villages) uprising and some 60,000 Vietnamese troops had been deployed to the region to quell the unrest.

As luck would have it, we ran into members of America's Joint Recover Team staying in our same hotel. They are the people who are carrying out the extraordinary effort of our country in trying to determine the fate of our MIAs from not only the Vietnam War, but all our conflicts when information surfaces about the fate of the missing in action. They told us that we might have difficulty getting into the Highlands, but that we might try working our way up from the coast by ground transportation.

So we took a Vietnamese Airlines turboprop to Qui Nhon (actually a very nice fairly new airplane with a very professional crew who took us on a flawless flight with a perfect landing). From Qui Nhon we took a minibus to Pleiku and then on to Kontum – all in one day. Working our way into the Highlands along Route 19 brought back many



memories of previous battles fought by that road, and it was interesting to drive through An Khe and Mang Yang passes after having flown through them so often in the past on miserable cloudy days. We kept our heads low as we went through several different army checkpoints, and succeeded in getting ourselves into the Highlands.

In Pleiku we looked for my old base at Camp Holloway. We spotted what looked like the old entrance road, but at its front was a large Vietnamese military headquarters building complex and it would obviously be impossible to gain access. So we pressed on to Kontum, some 45 KM farther north. Kontum was the site of many of my launches on combat missions, and where we rendezvoused with the Special Forces S.O.G. teams we supported during the war. Much of Kontum was unchanged and I could spot many familiar landmarks.

We stayed in an simple but adequate hotel in Kontum. The next morning we contracted a guide off the street and set out on the back of two motorbikes in search for my crash site at Ben Het, just inside the Vietnamese border from the juncture of its border with those of Laos and Cambodia. Spence had his GPS and we were confident of getting there. And we did get within a mile and a half before we came upon signs on the road in English and Vietnamese that said "Restricted Area. Frontier. No Trespassing." So we stopped. I was inclined for a moment to damn the signs and press on. We were only a mile and a half away. But then the thought of getting thrown back into a Vietnamese jail for the second time came into my mind, and I decided I could come another time and experience whatever emotion waited for me at the spot I fell from the sky and where my front seat, Tim Conry's life ended. And I will go back for that. I must.

We even presented ourselves before the highest army authority in the closest town and sought permission to press on. But permission was denied. There had been some trouble, you see. Things were still not safe. Perhaps the next year, on another trip, I could get there. Lord knows what means of suppression were being employed at the Montagnard village just over the hill from where we'd been stopped. I had dozens of sticks of gum in my pack I'd planned on handing out to the kids there. That will have to wait. I'll buy fresh gum when I return.

We were able to get to two significant locations along our route toward Ben Het, Dak To and Tanh Canh. Dak To had been a military base and airfield where we'd often rearmed and refueled and stood by on occasion (hanging out waiting for the shit to hit the fan so you can scramble out and save guys on the ground who are suddenly in big trouble). I could see the old Dak To airstrip from the road. I excitedly asked our guide to pull the motorbikes off the road. We dismounted and walked out onto the airfield. Really eerie. One of the last times I recalled seeing that strip it had Communist tanks running up and down it as they conquered Dak To and Tanh Canh in a matter of hours on April 24, 1972 during the huge North Vietnamese attack that became known as the 1972 Easter Offensive. It was about two weeks later in that same tumultuous campaign that I would be shot out of the sky and captured just a few miles west of Dak To.

We also stopped at the sight of Tanh Canh. Nothing there now but a big field covered with trees and shrubs with some agricultural fields here and there. Tanh Canh had been the sight of a huge battle that same day in April 1972, and it was there the South Vietnamese 22<sup>nd</sup> Division (Forward) was defeated and overrun. It was there that several the senior staff of that division were captured. We'd later meet and endure the hardship

of the Ho Chi Minh Trail together as we agonized our way north to Hanoi amid pain and always death. It was the Engineer Officer of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Nghiem Ke, who would become my closest friend in captivity and who would save my life, again, and again. It was a special moment to stand there on that field of battle at Tanh Canh.

I recalled there too, that when that battle took place, when the Communists “liberated” their brethren in the South, that I’d seen thousands of civilians clogging the single road leading south, trying desperately to get to South Vietnamese or American lines. I saw not one single individual moving towards the Communist lines, and I saw no civilians among the North Vietnamese soldiers in the “liberated” zones. With all the bad mouth that has been put on the South Vietnamese, with all their problems, and corruption, and political instability – most of those people hated Communists and wanted to be free, free to hopefully mold their troubled world into a prosperous democracy. Now they are a people who suffer under an occupying force. It is obvious throughout the countryside of the old South Vietnam.

There is also ecological damage of horrendous proportions throughout the Highlands. The area has been nearly denuded of trees. The rich thick forests that existed during my combat tour are gone. The hills are bare. The weather is hot. It is a very sad thing to see.

The people are wonderful though, and I enjoyed being with them in the Central Highlands very much. They looked over their shoulders frequently, and closely guarded what they said unless we were well out into the countryside. But they were warm and friendly as ever and recalled old friendships from bygone days of the U.S. presence in the area.



We left Kontum on motorbikes to cross the mountains on a mostly unimproved road to the coast. It was an adventure. Saw lots of indigenous peoples and spectacular mountain and jungle scenery. Spence, who I'd banned from ever getting on a motor cycle throughout his youth, piloted his own bike not only through the treacherous mountains, but also along the much more treacherous national highway, Highway 1, as we made our way to Da Nang.

Enroute we stopped at My Son, ruins of one of the centers of the old pre-Vietnamese, Empire of Champa. Fascinating ruins of an obviously high culture with significant influence from India. From there we pressed on and stayed in a nice clean hotel in Da Nang where we also visited relatives of our motorbike guide. We were the first Americans to walk the lane to their house, and they were honored to have us in their home, and we were honored by their hospitality.

We left the next day by bus for Hue, the old imperial capitol. En route, we got off the bus at Phu Bai to spend some time with memories from my first tour of duty with the SPUDs of the 131<sup>st</sup> Aviation Company. The airfield had once been a thriving American military base with hundreds of buildings and airplanes and helicopters parked all around the runway. Today there is the airstrip and the old terminal building, but nothing else. We stayed for a time, walking and looking and remembering. Everything is gone. All the old buildings. Even the roads. Nothing. Nothing but the old terminal building which is still in use for the couple of flights that come in each day. All that was is now lost under the soil of a pine forest. There is a terminal and a runway surrounded by a pine forest. I looked through the woods to where my old unit had been, drank a Vietnamese "333" beer in the memory of my comrades (used to be "33" – name now changed for

some reason), and rendered a snappy hand salute. We hired a cab and went the remaining 13 KM into Hue.

The old walled citadel and surviving buildings of the old imperial palace were still magnificent. Spent all afternoon wandering through. Passed an internet café (unbelievable) along one street and sent an e-mail to Melanie using Hotmail. It is an amazing world. Communism can't last too much longer there. Communists count on control. Control of everything, and most especially information. Now the people can surf the internet and get satellite TV. The government can't keep the lid on much longer. Capitalism is already everywhere. Just a matter of time before the people insist on free elections and demand their basic human rights.

Train from Hue to Hanoi. First part all at night, but in daylight from Vinh all the rest of the way into Hanoi. Pass close to the camp where my American comrade, Wayne Finch, died on the journey north. Would also like to return and spend some time there. There are spirits in that land that I need to sit down with at more length than the constraints of this trip allowed. Helped a crippled Frenchman on the train trip. Gutsy guy. Probably around 30 years old. Paralyzed. No use of his legs at all. Wheel chair bound. Traveling alone with much difficulty, but brave in spirit and game for all the challenges and dangers involved. He was going on to Laos after Vietnam. Quite an inspiration.

Arrived in Hanoi at 0900. Spence insisted we walk the ten blocks to the hotel we'd selected out of our *Lonely Planet* guide. We came to a corner and I looked up and saw staring at me the Hanoi Hilton. I was rocked back for an instant, but then I snarled at the thing, and it snarled back, and we walked on and everything was fine. Continued on



to find our hotel had no vacancies, so we then hoofed it on a bit farther and found a charming place, very nice, very reasonably priced (\$30 a night for two), and right by the lake in the historic district of Hanoi.

At dinner that first night in an upscale expat establishment that really set the contrasts firmly in my mind. I was sitting in a great restaurant in the center of Hanoi eating venison covered with a delicious wine gravy and enjoying a glass of marvelous Bordeaux wine. Only a few blocks away sat the Hanoi Hilton where I had sat all those cold and miserable nights so long ago eating a rusted bowl of cabbage soup and struggling through malaria attacks. I was sitting on top of a world that had once had me squished under its thumb. I smiled and rather enjoyed it. Also had the best mocha I've ever had in my life in a little coffee spot along the lake the next morning. Very rich. Very chocolaty. Never had anything like it. Quite wonderful. Clearly my favorite city in Vietnam (though Kontum remains my favorite community).

We had two nights and the better part of three days in Hanoi. Many adventures. I returned to the Hilton as I knew I must. There was some trepidation, but we arrived late in the day and had limited time to get through, so there really wasn't time to do much pondering. We were established in a rush mode, so basically just bolted through the entrance, paid our fee, and got on with seeing the thing. That was probably best. I didn't need a long hesitation at the door.

The old prison has been mostly torn down. Only the front part remains. The back where most of the cells were has been leveled and a huge high rise office building now juts skyward. A real shame in a way. But the old ogre is certainly cowered in the shadow of this symbol of capitalist intrusion. Seemed to take some of the sting out of

whatever threat remained to my psyche from the seemingly much smaller beast now whining at its feet.

Well once inside the Hilton, I found that one of the few cells that still exist was mine. Wow! Not only does it still exist, but it is one of just a couple that have been completely restored as an exhibit of what the old cells were like, complete with mannequin prisoners, same massive community sleeping board, peeling walls, and the whole bit. That was an experience. To stand there and peer in at a mannequin sitting there where I sat. He now the prisoner for an eternity, and I the curious freeman peering in at such a different alien world from that which I know. – and then I grabbed my soul as it tried to dash to that place and look back at me looking in, for I couldn't let myself go back in there, even just in imagination, with the cell doors still locked, and no way of getting out.

The scenes in the prison are presented as a museum to the plight of the Vietnamese prisoners of the French while they were a colonial power in Vietnam. The descriptive signs in English, French, and Vietnamese, describe the unspeakable horror of the conditions the Vietnamese suffered under their French captors. It was interesting to note, though, that everything looked exactly as it did also while the American POWs were in there under their North Vietnamese captors. We finished our self guided tour and stepped back out through the same doorway I'd marched through upon my release in 1973, and I took a big deep breath of air, and relished for one exhilarating moment, the tremendous feeling of freedom that overcame me.

We also searched out my earlier prison camp of Plantation Gardens not too many blocks distant. It is now part of a huge military compound and photography is strictly

forbidden with prominent signs to that effect posted. We clandestinely snapped some shots anyway (I might have made a good spy) and walked briskly on our way.

We left Hanoi on the 13<sup>th</sup> so as to be in Saigon in time for our departure flight on the 14<sup>th</sup>. We flew on Vietnam Airlines again, and again had a very pleasant experience, this time on a jet. We spent the night in a different, but very nice hotel in Saigon for half the price of our first hotel there, and departed the next day for Singapore. There we splurged with dinner at the Raffles Hotel where I even got a bit schmaltzy and indulged in a Singapore Sling in memory of a very sick joke I told to Wayne Finch as we made our way up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He didn't like the cornball joke at all and died a few weeks later. But somehow, it felt appropriate to sit there at the oldest most historic hotel in Singapore and drink a Singapore Sling in a toast to Wayne and all we endured together.

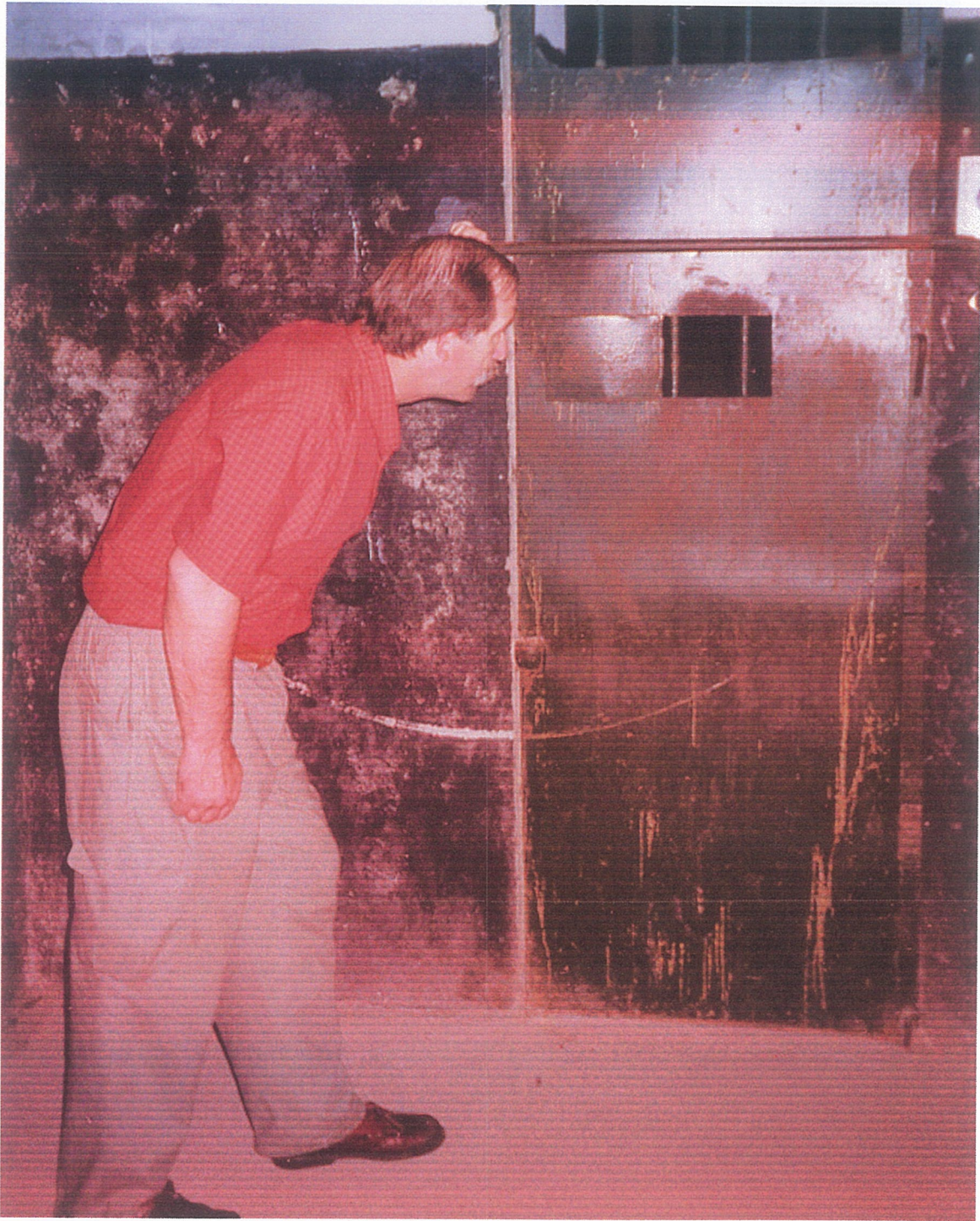
Got on United Airlines very early the next morning for the agonizingly long flight back to the States. Very good to be home. Very glad I made the trip. And very happy to have made it with Spencer. It meant a lot to both of us. I do need to go back though. I need to get to my crash site. I'd like to get to the place where Wayne died. And someday I want to get back out on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But that is in Laos and presents a much more difficult challenge. Challenges though do make life interesting, so I think I'll stack that challenge prominently among those that are arranged before me so I'll be certain to tackle it just as soon as the time is right.

If you're looking to go home, a trip to Vietnam is not the route. If you want to go back and see what Phu Bai was like, or Camp Holloway, or An Khe, or any of them – save your breath, and air fare. They don't exist anymore. None of it exists anymore.



That world is gone. If you want to spend time with memories though; if you were intrigued by certain aspects of a culture you caught just a glimpse of and want to see and learn more; if you want to discover some further bit of yourself; then go – go and spend as long as you can. It is a beautiful and magical place.

Written and submitted by William Reeder Jr., COL (ret)



Revisiting My Cell in the Hoa Lo Prison (Hanoi Hilton) – 11 March 2001