

Return to Vietnam

Some of my family and friends have indicated interest in the story of my recent trip to Vietnam with my wife, Sharon. Our story follows:

I served in the United States Army as a pilot in the 189th Assault Helicopter Company, radio call sign Ghost Rider 32, at Camp Holloway in Pleiku, South Vietnam from April 1970 until the end of November of that year. The 189th ceased operations at that time, as the war was gradually being turned over to the South Vietnamese military. The remainder of my tour of duty was served across town at Pleiku, AFB. There, until my return to the United States in April 1971, I trained Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) pilots in the newly formed VNAF 229th Assault Helicopter Squadron. The other remaining Ghost Rider pilots and I were the first aircraft commanders in the 229th. Following our departure the 229th crews were 100% Vietnamese.



A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Actually I'm at Dak Seang in June 1970 and I'm a newbie wobbly one (New guy Warrant Officer WO-1 fresh out of flight school).

After my tour of duty I resumed my pursuit of the good life and opportunities available to those of us fortunate enough to live in this wonderful country. Over the years since then I have responded to inquiries about my Vietnam experience with a candid description of what I considered to have been “a good tour.” My year was filled with adventure, it was exciting, sometimes a little too exciting and occasionally, briefly terrifying. I was young, 21 when I arrived in country, and I often felt as though I were in a “John Wayne” movie although live ammunition was in use. I considered myself to be very fortunate to have returned sound of body and mind. There were no ghosts or demons to be dealt with as far as I was concerned.

Last December I received a letter from a former Ghost Rider crewmember who was organizing a trip to Vietnam for those who had served in the 189th. Several had made the trip back to Pleiku in 2006 and they enjoyed the experience so much that they wanted to do it again and, this time, take their spouses. I was immediately interested and when I handed the letter to Sharon and suggested that we postpone our planned Alaska cruise until 2013 in favor of this opportunity she responded with “Have you lost your mind?” I countered with “but this is the opportunity of a lifetime.” Since my return in 1971 I have thought that I would like to visit Vietnam again after the war was over and the healing was

complete. A group tour with people with whom I shared experience and perspective was the only way I was interested in having such an adventure and this could be the last chance. Sharon would have none of this. Disappointed, I dropped the invitation in the trash and then brooded in another room. An hour later I discovered Sharon in the breakfast nook reviewing correspondence she had recovered from the trash. She looked up and said, "We probably should do this, it is a once in a lifetime opportunity." YES! On with the planning phase!

Our adventure began at 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, March 7th with a two and a half hour flight to Newark that was, after a two-hour layover, to be followed by departure for Hong Kong. The flight to Hong Kong was to be over the North Pole, literally, we would fly north until we were flying south and after fifteen and a half hours we would arrive in Hong Kong where we had two hours to make our connection for Ho Chi Minh City. HCMC will always be Saigon to most locals and me in the same way that most Russians never really considered Saint Petersburg to be Leningrad. As Sharon and I approached our departure gate in Newark we observed that there was a commotion. An angry crowd of about thirty travelers surrounded the agent at the podium. Soon we heard the gate agent announce that, due to solar activity, our flight would have to circumnavigate the North Pole as a precaution against radiation hazard. He went on to explain that this would increase our flight time by two hours. The additional two hours flying required additional fuel and, to accommodate the weight of the extra fuel, 25-30 passengers would be bumped. Our hearts sank as we were certain that we, steerage class passengers in the cheapest seats, would be spending the night in New York. Miraculously, we were boarded and soon were tucked in our seats and anxious to depart as our two-hour layover in Hong Kong would be consumed circumnavigating the pole. As if this was not enough we sat ready to go through our scheduled departure time and, without explanation, did not push back from the gate until nearly an hour later. The Captain later explained that he would try to make up some of the lost time however I assumed that we would likely spend a night in Hong Kong.

A little time was made up and we arrived less than two hours late but only minutes before our scheduled departure for Saigon. Fortunately that flight was already behind schedule and we made the connection with time to spare. Our Saigon arrival was a little less than an hour late but it was 1:30 a.m. on Friday, March 9th and we were exhausted (Saigon's time zone is Eastern Standard Time + 12 hours). A bit after 3:00 a.m. we collapsed into bed in our Saigon hotel that was new, beautiful and modern.

Later that morning, after sleeping in, we awoke and began our discovery/rediscovery of Saigon. The day was free for us as this was arrival day for many of our travel companions and the first tour was scheduled for the next (Saturday) morning. My previous experience in the city was miniscule. In March 1971 my commanding officer allowed a few of my peers and myself a 3-day in country R&R in Saigon that was spent mostly in museums. Actually they were bars, not museums. Hey! I was 22, what else would you expect? The most obvious difference to Saigon's appearance was the skyline; there were numerous skyscrapers some rising sixty stories or more. Sharon and I stayed close to our hotel and enjoyed a late lunch at a nearby German restaurant. It was just as good as it was unexpected. Later that evening we met all of our companions in the hotel lobby bar and then went to a nearby restaurant for a welcome and get acquainted dinner. I was surprised to discover that only six of our companions were former Ghost Rider pilots; five of us had our wives with us. The rest in our party were Vietnam veterans who were neither former Ghost Riders nor pilots and some of them had their wives with them. This actually made the group more interesting as their experiences were varied and different from that of we aviators. I especially enjoyed conversation with some of the others who during the war were truck drivers, infantrymen and specialists in other lines of business.

The following morning (Saturday, March 10th) we boarded a comfortable, air conditioned coach and toured Saigon. It was no surprise that we visited Buddhist and Hindu temples. What did surprise us was the tsunami of motorbikes on the streets and boulevards. Saigon's population has swollen to 6.5 million and everyone apparently has two or three motorbikes or scooters. The two wheelers came in wave after wave after wave. To us it appeared as absolute chaos and, in the end, the biggest surprise was that we did not witness or otherwise see evidence of a single accident. We also visited the huge Ben Thanh Market where I felt like a bee swarming in a hive.

Next we visited the War Remembrance Museum formerly known as the American War Crimes Museum. Many in our group, especially the wives and particularly Sharon were very upset by what

they viewed as one-sided propaganda. It was certainly that as both exaggeration and bias were apparent. It bothered me not one bit and some of the other vets said they shared my perception. The side that prevailed in the war constructed the display. The United States was not defeated on the battlefield although the museum suggested that it had been. The communists and their supporters did wait us out until our political will was broken. It was no surprise that within two years of the departure of the last American troops the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) waltzed into Saigon in the face of near zero resistance. I would not expect to see displays sympathetic to their former enemies any more than I would expect to see WWII museums here that were sympathetic to the Germans or Japanese. Simply said, in the eyes of those who ultimately prevailed, we were an unwelcome, invading enemy and those we were fighting were their liberators. As for our good intentions, they don't mean a thing.

Sunday morning we boarded our coach for a two-hour ride south to the Mekong River Delta town, Ben Tre, where we boarded a motorized tour boat. Sharon said that this was the most interesting experience and I must agree. I had never been south of Saigon and it was unlike anyplace I had seen in Vietnam or anyplace else for that matter. The delta has coconut palm trees the way north Florida and south Georgia have pine trees. On the river we passed numerous facilities for the processing of coconuts and every part of the trees on which they grow. We toured a 150 year old brick factory that turned mud scraped from the bottom of the Mekong River into the bricks used in nearly all construction. We observed that nearly all of the labor was manual. Coconuts were moved in large, heavy baskets balanced on the workers shoulders. Bricks were loaded by hand, one by one, onto light trucks and all sorts of vehicles including motorbikes. Later we transferred to a sampan, which is like a large canoe powered and steered by a single oar/rudder attached to the rear of the boat. When I first saw the sampan I thought, Sharon isn't going to like this at all. She does not like little boats that rock, feel as though they are going to roll over and often lead her to motion sickness. We sat single file like in a canoe with the oarsman standing on the stern. I sat directly behind Sharon and observed her death grip as she imagined that the brown water concealed crocodiles. I knew that she was beyond uncomfortable but was also proud of her both for being a good sport and for facing down her fear. The sampan experience was over in less than 20 minutes but its effects would be with us through the end of the tour.



View from the dock at the onset of Sharon's anxiety attack.

As we navigated the narrow streams and estuaries I could not refrain from imagining what it must have been like for our water borne troops forty plus years ago. The mangroves and coconut palms that lined the streams created perfect cover for ambushes. Our enemy could fire on the river patrols and disappear into the darkness created by the jungle environment. After our sampan landed at a small dock we followed a path that took us to a very small settlement where we were served a typical Vietnamese lunch on a pavilion under a thatched roof made from, what else, palm fronds. Young girls, their mothers and aunts served lunch. I enjoyed the meal, for me it's an important part of the adventure of travel. On the other hand this was the beginning of Sharon's travel diet. It isn't easy for a traveler who prefers food that is familiar and is a self-proclaimed germophobe to boot. Following lunch we boarded the larger, motorized boat for the return to Ben Tre where our coach was waiting to transport us to the Saigon Airport for our flight to Pleiku.

We arrived in Pleiku at 8:30 p.m. after a comfortable 90-minute flight on a Vietnam Airlines ATR-72 turboprop. The airport was what had been Pleiku AFB when I had last been there. Sharon seemed surprisingly calm during our flight considering she doesn't care much for travel on, comparatively, small aircraft or foreign airline companies in the third world. Later we checked in at a hotel that, although not as nice as the hotel in Saigon, was comfortable and more than adequate. Afterwards we hurried to the hotel's restaurant for a late dinner. Sharon was relieved to find spare ribs on the menu. Her relief was short lived as the spare ribs turned out to be pig knuckles. I tasted and found them to not be objectionable. Still, there was an image for Sharon to reckon with; good thing she had the foresight to fill a suitcase with an assortment that included cheese & crackers, peanut butter & crackers, trail mix and, of course, Cadbury Easter Eggs.

Monday morning after breakfast we boarded our coach to begin sightseeing in and around the town, near which, I spent a year of my life so long ago. Incidentally, every hotel in which we stayed included breakfast. Some of the offered fare looked exotic; I didn't have sushi for breakfast, but I could have. I did have a made to order omelet every single morning in Vietnam; didn't see that one coming. As we motored away from our hotel and through the center of town I had the first of two completely unexpected emotional experiences. This first one was relatively mild. My nose was firmly pressed against the window as I got my first look at Pleiku since my departure nearly forty-one years ago.

When I last saw Pleiku it was a war torn rat hole that more resembled a landfill than a town of 20,000 inhabitants. Back then the locals presented a war weary and wary appearance. Everyone knew that American involvement would end in the next couple of years and that when we were gone there would soon be a new sheriff in town. I was acquainted with a few Vietnamese; the maid who washed my flight suits and polished my boots, the young women who staffed the PX and Officer's Club and the VNAF pilots we were training. They well knew that when the dust eventually settled those who worked for, with or in any way cooperated with the government of South Vietnam and their American allies would learn the hard lessons of revenge and retribution.

Through my window I now see a bustling and booming town of 300,000 people who seem to be both busy and happy. It was quite apparent that they too had survived and then thrived although, there had been a fifteen-year period of stifled economic activity under communist rule and for many, years spent in re-education camps. I was overcome with a sense of relief and told Sharon that, much to my surprise, I felt a bit emotional. For the first time I acknowledged that I must have been harboring some survivor's guilt during the decades following my escape from what was a hellhole from which the locals had little chance of escape. We continued through town and then ten miles southeast to what was once the headquarters of the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division at what we then called Camp Enari. Our coach parked on the hard packed red clay soil that is so common in the central highlands of Vietnam. The imprint of the perforated steel planking (PSP) was still clearly visible though the steel surface had long since been removed. We were on what had once been the runway from which the aircraft we flew operated. Although there is a small presence of Vietnam's military most of the land is now used for the cultivation of coffee, peppercorn bushes and cassava plants from which tapioca is derived.



Sharon and I on what once was the runway at Camp Enari just southeast of Pleiku on Monday, March 12, 2012. Dragon Mountain is in the background.

Our next stop was a Jarai village located ten miles west of the road that runs from Pleiku north to Kontum. The Jarai and Bahnar are indigenous tribes that occupied this land long before the Viet people migrated from China and populated what eventually would become Vietnam. They are to the Vietnamese as Native Americans are to those of us who are of European heritage. When I served here we erroneously referred to all indigenous tribes as “Mountainyards” or “Yards” much the way Native Americans are referred to as Indians here. These peoples live simple lifestyles that include an abundance of hard work and live in small villages in traditional structures that are rather primitive in appearance. The Jarai are very poor and eek out a living in agriculture mostly by the cultivation of rice, coffee and peppercorn. It was my impression some forty years ago as it is today that many Vietnamese scorn the indigenous people.

Along the way we passed what once was Camp Holloway and is now a Vietnamese military installation. Our admission certainly would not be allowed and I’m also certain that nothing remains of the infrastructure in which I once lived. Google Maps shows a slash on the map labeled Pleiku Area Airfield. Switching to the satellite view there is a red clay strip where we had a PSP runway years ago. The area on either side of the clay strip is covered with trees and other vegetation where in my time there it was the ramp and aircraft parking revetments. The revetments provided our aircraft protection from shrapnel that was produced by incoming mortar and rocket attacks that were all too common.

The next morning (Tuesday, March 13th) we visited a Bahnar village east of Pleiku near the infamous Mang Yang Pass. The Bahnar people were friendly and gracious. They entertained us with music played on brass gongs and drums of various sizes. The girls and young unmarried women of the village performed dance routines that are a part of their traditional celebrations. Afterward I sampled some of their rice wine from an earthen jar. It was good and, not surprisingly, potent. Also not surprisingly, Sharon politely declined their offer for a taste.

On Wednesday we bussed forty miles north to Kontum where first we visited an orphanage. Next we visited a large and beautiful wooden Catholic church that was constructed by the French colonists in 1913 and is on property adjoining the orphanage. Next we boarded the coach and continued northward for another fifty miles. This was the territory in my unit’s area of operation (AO) that was most dangerous. The war and our enemies were everywhere, even in the cities and towns. Movement anywhere in Vietnam could be hazardous but in this area where the borders of Vietnam,

Laos and Cambodia intersect and north another fifty miles through the Dak Seang Valley danger permeated the atmosphere and I cannot recall ever having a comfortable moment when there. When my mission required me to fly to this part of our AO I felt as though I were tiptoeing past the gates of hell. We knew that NVA occupied the triple canopy jungle below; after all, it was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The NVA decided when and where to make a stand. It didn't always happen but you just never knew. Anytime I flew in this area I had to imagine that I might become an irresistible target of opportunity.

Before we returned to Kontum for the night we experienced Sharon's least favorite event of the entire trip. Our Vietnamese tour guide recommended that we have lunch in a restaurant familiar to him. He wanted to provide a little local favor, so to speak. By local, I mean the border crossing into Laos is ten miles west of the village where the restaurant is located. There was nothing remarkable about the food, it was typical Vietnamese fare. Sharon insisted that the place was filthy and I must admit, in this instance, she wasn't exaggerating. I'm certain that the fact that the "Ladies Room" was equipped with a squat toilet didn't help. By the way, she deferred, preferring to wait until we reached our Kontum hotel.

After checking into our hotel in Kontum we decided to take a walk in the Hotel's neighborhood. I had over flown this town dozens of times during my tour of duty and stopped for fuel at the U.S. controlled airfield but had never entered the town itself. This was an opportunity not to be resisted. Kontum could best be described as gritty but, as was the case everywhere we visited, the people were friendly and gracious. The children were pure delight. English is required in their schools and the children could not resist trying to communicate with obvious westerners. We could not have been more charmed. Later we had a group dinner with our companions in the hotel restaurant and then retired to our room.

Sharon was exhausted and soon asleep. I was restless and decided to write an email letter to our son, Marcus, to share with him the events of the day.

The text of that letter follows:

*March 14, 2012
Marcus,*

We are in our hotel in Kontum after a full day. Departed our hotel in Pleiku this morning and arrived in Kontum an hour later, our first stop was the Kontum Orphanage. One of the pilots from the 189th (not one of those on this trip) is a supporter of the orphanage. He raises money and is a frequent visitor. The orphanage is run by nuns and receives no government support. Currently 220 children reside there ranging in age from newborn to 19 years. The majority of these children were born to children and that is the reason they are here. Per the suggestion of our group's organizer we arrived with gifts. Most brought children's books, we gifted wipeable coloring books and crayons. We also presented 3 soccer balls and a hand pump. All were purchased at our local Target the day before embarkation. I deflated the soccer balls so that I could also pack my clothes. We presented the gifts to the nuns as we had been advised that to give the gifts directly to children would result in envy. We interacted with many of the children before we departed and our hearts were full.

Next we boarded the bus for Dak To (pronounced Doc Toe) and points west. If you lookup Dak To, Vietnam on Google maps you will notice that it is less than 20 miles from the point where the borders of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia merge. Dak To and north of Dak To to Dak Pek (pronounced Doc Peck) were the places in the 189th's area of operation (AO) that, when on a mission in that area, resulted in my greatest anxiety. It seemed that nothing good ever happened up there and the 189th lost a lot of good men in that area. One of the guys in our tour group was shot down just west of Dak To in May 1969. He was to have returned home at the end of his tour within 2 weeks (I was reporting to Ft. Wolters, TX for pilot training at that time). He suffered a near fatal head injury and one of his door gunners also appeared to be near death. That saved their lives; the other 2 crewmembers were ambulatory and were executed by the NVA within minutes of the crash. I cannot imagine what he and his wife must have been thinking as our tour bus motored past the site of that event this morning. Myself, I felt somewhat emotional as I recalled the anxiety I experienced when my mission assignment directed me to this section of our AO some 41 years ago. I still have vivid memories of flying to or, northbound, past this area and wondering if I would make it back to Camp Holloway and Pleiku later that day. Our bus continued west to the former site of firebase Ben Het, which was less than 10 miles

from the "tri-border area." We were not permitted to get off the bus so near the border with Laos; don't understand the logic but, their country, their rules. We all shot photos of the logging operations on that site from the bus before heading back east to the little town at the intersection of national highways 14 & 17 for lunch (see Google maps.) We enjoyed some Vietnamese beer and interesting food before continuing on back to Kontum and our hotel. What a day!

I had intended to attach a photo of your mom and I taken at lunch earlier today but now realize that the pic was taken with my cell phone and I'm writing on Mom's iPad. I will try to send the pic attached to a separate message. I should not have to do it that way but I'm not really a geek, just a geek pretender. This evening we gathered at the hotel's restaurant for dinner and reflection on the day's events. Tomorrow we bus to Tuy Hoa, which is a beach resort between Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. Next up are 5 days & nights at coastal beach resorts before one final night in Saigon and then the long, long flight home.

Love,

Dad and Mom

p.s. One of our group encountered a young girl while strolling through town late this afternoon. She is a high school student who, recognizing a westerner, wanted to exercise her English skills. He invited her to share our dinner and, lucky for us, she accepted and was seated at our table. She was delightful, we exchanged email addresses, and I will be happy but not astonished if we meet her again in the future.

Thursday morning, after enjoying my omelet, we finished preparations for the day's long journey. I told Sharon that I had been up past midnight writing Marc and asked if she would like to read my letter. She was in the final stages with makeup and suggested I read it to her. About halfway through the letter I suddenly became overwhelmed with emotion and began sobbing. Survivor's guilt again I supposed. So many terrible things happened in the area we had visited the previous day and in the valley that extended to the north from there. In late April 1970, within a week of my arrival in Vietnam, I reported to Camp Holloway where I was assigned to the 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion. The Battalion ordered me to report to the 189th, which was also located on Camp Holloway. After signing in at the 189th I was instructed to go to supply and draw flight suits, a helmet, firearm and other necessary equipment. Next I was directed to a room where I would spend the next couple of nights until a permanent room assignment would be available. I was in my room trying to get organized when flight crews began returning from the day's missions. I was introduced to the pilots in the 1st Airlift Platoon, to which I had been assigned. Soon the other pilots told me to come with them to the base chapel. "Sure, what's going on?" I responded. They answered that one of our aircraft had been shot down that morning in the Dak Seang Valley just northwest of Dak To; the four crewmembers had all been killed. We were going to their memorial service. This was a sad and sobering beginning to my tenure as a combat aviator.

I suppose that I must have been wrong, there were ghosts or demons to be dealt with and up until that morning in Kontum I was unaware. I survived intact but, unbeknownst to me, carried survivor guilt with me ever since. I am relieved that I returned and finally shed those long overdue tears.

After wiping my eyes and pulling myself together we boarded the coach once again for a long drive that would take us through Pleiku one last time and then east to the coast. Pleiku is 75 miles west of the coast on a plateau 2,500 feet above sea level bounded, on the east, by mountains that rise to nearly 5,000 feet above sea level. East of that high terrain is the An Khe (pronounced On Kay) Valley, which is 1,500 feet above sea level and is about 25-30 miles wide. The An Khe Valley is bounded, on its east, by high terrain that rises 2,500 feet above sea level. East of that high terrain it is 20-25 miles to the South China Sea and most of that terrain is rice paddy and just barely above sea level. Qui Nhon is on the coast and it has a deep-water port. Nearly everything we consumed arrived in Qui Nhon's port or other ports and was moved inland via truck convoy. The convoys had to negotiate the two passes that made penetration of the two mountain ranges between Pleiku and Qui Nhon possible.

Our coach followed that route to the coast; it was the first time I ever passed, on the surface, through the Mang Yang Pass, which penetrates the mountains that separate the Pleiku Plateau and the An Khe Valley. Also a first was passage, on the surface, through the An Khe Pass, which separates the An Khe Valley from the coastal plain. As our bus negotiated the steep terrain and switchbacks in

the passes I could not help imagining the men operating those truck convoys as they labored up and through the passes with loads of jet fuel, ammunition or even beer. I always climbed to an altitude that, I believed, kept me comfortably above the effective range of small arms fire when flying to and from the An Khe area and/or the coast. The soldiers in the truck convoys, when ambushed, could only return fire and press on. I never thought for a minute that I'd like to swap places with any of them.

After reaching the coast we continued south to Tuy Hoa where we enjoyed a night in the nicest of all our hotels. Several of the wives wanted to spend the rest of the trip right there. The next day we rode to Nha Trang for a two night stay a short walk from a beautiful beachfront. Then it was on to Phan Thiet for two final days at a beach resort. For these five days and nights, except for the language and menu, we could have just as well been in southern Mexico or at any other tropical beach on the planet. It was nice and relaxing but when it comes to tropical beach resorts, the truth is, when you've seen one, you've pretty much seen them all. These beach resorts are very popular with Russians and we haven't heard so much Russian spoken since our last visit in Moscow. In the coastal area all menus and most signs are in Vietnamese, English and Russian.

We enjoyed our first western food at a beachfront restaurant the first night in Nha Trang. Sharon was especially pleased and we decided to return there for lunch the next day. We walked the mile and a half south from our hotel and did a little shopping along the way. On the walk back to our hotel after lunch Sharon seemed to be limping a bit. She told me that her knee had been bothering her since the sampan ride in the delta and it was getting worse. She further explained that when she took her seat in the sampan her leg was in an uncomfortable position but she was afraid that if she tried to find a more comfortable position she might cause the boat to capsize. We decided that it would best for her to do minimal walking for the rest of the trip. She hardly left our hotel room in Phan Thiet as by then she needed to keep her leg elevated for comfort. I took a couple of walks on the beach alone and stopped by the bar on the way back so I could deliver to her tropical drinks that, although didn't ease her pain she did seem to care less about it. I told Sharon that the up side of this misfortune was that, from this time forward, if someone should notice her limping and comment she could look them straight in the eye and say, "I hurt my knee down in the Mekong Delta during my tour in Vietnam."

Back in Saigon we enjoyed a farewell dinner with our travel companions. The following morning we had an early wakeup and began the long, long journey home. Looks like flying over the North Pole will have to remain on my bucket list as the threat of solar activity resulted in our return flight taking the longer route that stayed clear of the polar area. After more than thirty hours, including eight layover hours, we arrived and it never felt so good to be home. Actually there was one time that it felt even better.

p.s. Our son, Marcus, and grandsons, Colin & Tyson, spent Easter with Sharon and I. After hearing our story and viewing the photos Marcus said he would love to have been with us. I advised him that a similar tour is already in the works for next year. He said to count him in; I think that it is the ultimate father-son travel adventure. Our tentative departure date is February 20, 2013. Sharon said that she would be happy to stay here and take care of the grandsons and dogs.