

Return to Vietnam '14

When my wife, Sharon, and I returned from the 2012 edition of this wonderful adventure our story and photos fascinated, our son, Marcus. He has always exhibited keen interest in my military career in general and in my Vietnam experience in particular. As Marc was growing up he planned on a career as a military pilot. That fantasy passed and he settled for a career as a medical doctor in the practice of emergency medicine. I was not disappointed in the least. He would have joined his mom and I in 2012 had it been possible but, for a variety of reasons, it was not. He asked me if I would do it again, with him, if the opportunity ever presented. We signed up for the 2013 edition but, alas, that tour never got off the ground because the minimum number of participants (16) was not reached. When the 2014 tour was announced we immediately signed on and held our breath. Twenty-two adventurers signed up and we rendezvoused at the Royal Lotus Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) on the last day of February.

Our flight itinerary to Saigon was the same as the 2012 trip; Jacksonville-Newark-Hong Kong-Saigon. Navigation information on the seatback TV screen during taxi for departure at Newark revealed the details of this, the longest leg; distance to Hong Kong, 8,519 miles with fifteen and a half hours until arrival. Fortunately some serious sleep medication was in my carry on bag. Aside from my having a different traveling companion the first difference from the '12 tour was that, this time, I got to scratch flying over the North Pole off my "Bucket List." In 2012 solar flare activity forced our aircraft to remain south of 70°N latitude; I was disappointed. This time we passed over the polar ice pack and crossed 0° longitude at 85°N latitude. We entered Russian airspace in north-central Siberia and continued south through Mongolia and China before our stopover in Hong Kong. Our return flight was eastbound via Tokyo and by the time we returned to Florida we had crossed every latitude on the globe. I suppose I can strike "trip around the world" from my bucket list as well.

The flights were not unpleasant, operated on time and, this time, there were no scrambles to make connections. Marcus and I even had time to enjoy a couple of beers during the 2-hour layover in Hong Kong. We checked into our Saigon hotel in the very early hours of February 28th; falling asleep was not a problem. Later, after we awoke, we met some of our tour companions at the hotel's breakfast buffet. The rest of the morning was spent exploring the streets surrounding our hotel's neighborhood in central Saigon. That afternoon we joined a few of our companions who were interested in a tour of the War Remembrance Museum. This time there seemed to be no resentment regarding either the cold hard facts or the bias presented in the displays. That evening a get-acquainted group dinner at a nearby restaurant was the tour's first organized activity.



First morning walkabout, Marcus thought it appropriate to have his picture taken in front of Saigon General Hospital. Perhaps he was missing work?

Saturday was spent touring Buddhist and Hindu temples, a central market, and the former South Vietnam Presidential Palace. The overall tour itinerary was nearly identical to the '12 tour and the excursions at each stopover were the same as those Sharon and I enjoyed two years ago. The most significant difference for me was my companion, Marcus, rather than his mom who stayed behind in Tallahassee to look after our grandsons and dogs.



Wrapped up our first evening in Saigon with a nightcap at the Rooftop Bar at the Rex Hotel.



In front of Reunification Hall, the former Presidential Palace where NVA tanks crashed through the gates in April 1975 marking the end of both the war and South Vietnam.

On Sunday morning we bused to the Mekong River Delta town of Ben Tre and boarded a boat that transported us first to a brick kiln then a coconut processing operation before we had lunch at a small settlement. All were familiar for me as we retraced the steps of the '12 tour. A brief segment of the return to Ben Tre was via sampan and I'm relieved to note that there were no debilitating knee injuries reported on this year's tour. Sharon injured her knee sitting in the sampan on our tour. It wasn't too bad at first but by the end of our tour she could hardly walk. Some six months after we returned Sharon gave up on the idea of time healing her still painful knee and she made an appointment at an orthopedic clinic. An MRI revealed a torn meniscus. She had arthroscopic surgery and by the first anniversary of her injury she was pretty much back to normal.

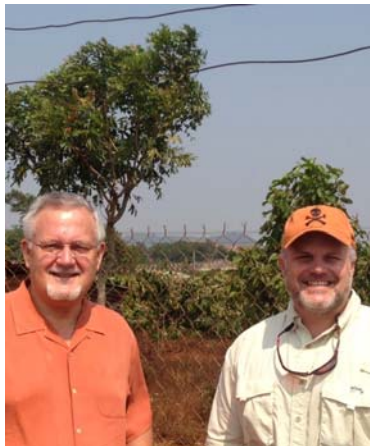


Marcus, unlike his mom, was relaxed and enjoyed the sampan ride. The lady rowing and steering the boat was so relaxed that she made and received several calls on her cell phone.

From Ben Tre we bused back to Saigon for dinner then it was time to go to Tan Son Nhat Airport for our flight to Pleiku. The flight on a Vietnam Airlines turboprop was comfortable and uneventful. We arrived at the Pleiku airport that once was Pleiku Air Force Base and my home for the final 5 months of my tour of duty 43 years ago. Our arrival was late in the evening so Marcus and I enjoyed some bourbon he had carefully packed and then turned in.

The next morning was Monday, March 3rd, I mention the date because Sharon and I were married on that date 41 years ago and she was most gracious about my absence. We boarded our bus

and drove through Pleiku to what once was Camp Enari, former home of the US Army 4th Infantry Division. Two years ago I felt very emotional seeing the town after so many years and pondered what had happened to its inhabitants since my departure. Not this time, the 2012 tour was cathartic, now I'm just enjoying time with my son. I think that this and the next three days were Marc's favorite part of the tour. This is the area where I spent my part of the Vietnam War and he wanted to know about my recollections of my time here and those of the other veterans in our group as well.



On what once was the runway at Camp Enari, 10 miles southeast of Pleiku. On the left, Dragon Mountain is in the background. The imprint of the solid steel planking (SSP) that was the runway surface, long since removed, can still be seen in the hard red clay.

Next we stopped at the scenic lake just north of Pleiku, Bien Ho Lake. More than 40 years ago I flew over this beautiful lake countless times and marveled at the tranquility in the middle of a war zone. We then returned to Pleiku for a delicious lunch at a restaurant on the edge of the large rice paddy that lays between the former Pleiku AFB and former Camp Holloway which were my home bases during the war. The remainder of the afternoon was free time for the exploration of Pleiku on our own.



Tranquil and beautiful Bien Ho Lake.

Two years ago in anticipation of our visits at orphanages Sharon and I purchased and packed gifts before embarkation. After a few days in Vietnam we realized this had not been necessary. You won't find a Wal-Mart or Target in Vietnam but everything that can be found in those stores can be found in Vietnam. Marcus told me that on the way out of Pleiku that morning he had observed a display of soccer balls at a shop along the way and that he was sure that it was not far from our hotel. We set out on foot in search of said soccer balls. We walked more than a mile along the route we had traveled by bus that morning but, alas, no soccer balls. It was still worth the effort although the sidewalks are in

terrible condition, even dangerous but everyone, especially the children wanted to say "Hello!" and we basked in their goodwill.

By dusk we had given up on scoring gifts and returned to our hotel where we joined our companions for dinner at the hotel's restaurant and then closed out the evening with a nightcap at it's rooftop bar.

Tuesday morning we visited the Jarai Montagnard village, Plei Phun, northwest of Pleiku where hard working indigenous people eke out a living raising rice, coffee and peppercorns. After another delicious Vietnamese lunch in downtown Pleiku we shopped for gifts to be presented during our visit at orphanages in Pleiku and Kontum. Marcus and I were able to purchase soccer balls, crayons and reams of paper.

Next we visited the orphanage in Pleiku operated by Catholic nuns who dedicate their lives to caring for forgotten children. This was an emotional experience for everyone on the tour; God knows what would happen to these children were it not for the selfless sacrifice of these future saints. The nun who was in charge distributed cards with her name, Sister Madeline Sophie, and contact info as there was much interest among the travelers in providing future financial support. These orphanages receive no support from the government. That Sister laughed when I told her that, in 1954, I entered the first grade at St. Paul's Catholic School in Lexington, Kentucky and my teacher was a nun in the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth; her name, Sister Madeline Sophie.



Sister Madeline Sophie with some of the beautiful children whose lives have literally been saved by the selflessness of these wonderful nuns. I told the Sister Madeline Sophie that she and the other nuns are angels who will, someday, be saints. She humbly non-concurred.

Next we departed Pleiku to the east where we visited the Bahnar Montagnard village, Dektu. We walked about the village and visited its most interesting cemetery. Later we were regaled with traditional music and dance performed by the young and unmarried men and women of the village and sampled their rice wine.

On Wednesday morning we bused north to Kontum and then on to Dak To (pronounced Doc Toe) and then west to the site of the former fire support base Ben Het which is just a few miles from the intersection of the borders of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This is the part of my unit's operating area where I experienced the most anxiety during my tour of duty. This was "bad guy" territory and when flying in this area I was always on edge. Marcus was very interested in the environment here and understood its significance. Major battles had raged here and countless lives were lost on both sides. We stopped at the site of the former Dak To airstrip, which was once a staging area for the movement of troops into the surrounding dangerous terrain. Marcus grabbed a couple of beers from the cooler on the bus and we walked onto the former runway and toasted the day, a day that except for good fortune may have never come to be for us.



The Dak To airstrip from which I ferried infantry to places they really weren't interested in visiting.



Dak To memorial celebrating the North Vietnamese Army's victory here in 1972. American troops had long since departed the area and the eventual outcome of the war became a foregone conclusion after their victory here.

In the early afternoon we returned to Kontum and visited a large orphanage, also operated by Catholic nuns. Following that we visited the wooden Catholic cathedral built by French colonials in 1913. What followed was the highlight of the tour for me.



On the 2012 tour we spent a night in Kontum and, like this year, we had a group dinner in our hotel's restaurant that evening. Two years ago one of the tour members was approached by a high

school girl named Tram who asked if she could practice her English with him. He agreed and then invited Tram to join our group at dinner that evening. Tram was, perhaps, the most charming 15-year old we had ever met. After dinner Sharon and I walked with her through the hotel lobby to her bicycle parked in front of the hotel. As we walked Tram requested our assistance with her study of English via email. I could not resist and immediately agreed. Soon we were exchanging email messages and I answered Tram's thought provoking questions about word meaning and usage. After several months Tram requested that I assist her through the use of video chat on Skype, again I agreed. A relationship soon developed, first a student-teacher like relationship and then a relationship more like one between a grandfather and granddaughter. I dearly love my "Vietnamese granddaughter." Tram's English vocabulary and proficiency have soared over the past two years.

As plans for the 2014 tour came together Tram and I were very excited at the prospect of a reunion. She and Marcus were equally excited at the prospect of meeting in person. I invited Tram and her parents to join our group for dinner at our hotel's restaurant then she threw me a curve ball. Tram explained that her mother is inviting Marcus and I to their home, she wants to prepare special Vietnamese food for us. Well now, that is very nice but, what about the group dinner? There will be a lot of people who are excited about meeting Tram and her family. Before I can mention this dilemma to Tram she tells me that her mom wants to invite the entire group to their home. I had only seen photos of their home but it is clear that there is no way 22 guests can be accommodated, especially if they intend to feed them. I think that this is madness but there is also no way I am going to offend Tram and her family.

I agonized about this problem for several weeks and upon arrival in Vietnam still had no solution. The matter had further been complicated when Tram advised me that her father, a tailor by trade, wanted to express his appreciation for my assisting his daughter by making a shirt for me. She asked my shirt size and I responded, "extra large." When she pressed for specifics I took several photos of one of my favorite shirts with a metric tape measure laying across it in a way that I was certain would be helpful. I emailed the photos to Tram and heard nothing more on the subject.

After arriving in Saigon I emailed Tram advising her both of our arrival and my desire to iron out the details of our Kontum visit. I received no response however, at our Pleiku hotel on Monday evening, I received a Skype video call from Tram on my iPad. She apologized for not responding to my email and then told me of sad family news. Her paternal grandmother had died the previous evening at her home near Hue, about 350 miles to the north. The death was not surprising as her grandmother had been in poor health for some time. Tram's mother had already completed the 8-hour bus trip and her father was boarding a bus for Hue as we were speaking. She went on to say that her father delayed his departure in order that he could finish my shirt. Tram explained that due to school pressures she was remaining in Kontum and that her brother, Tuan, was with her having traveled by bus from his home in Saigon earlier that day.

To say that I had a mixture of emotions would be an understatement. I'm so sorry for their loss and very disappointed that I'll not be meeting her parents. At least I would not have to contend with the dilemma of an oversized dinner party at Tram's tiny home. My relief was short lived; Tram's mom had garnered the support of Tram's aunts who live in Kontum and the party was on. The aunts would prepare the special meal. I did some surprisingly fast thinking for an old guy and explained to Tram that most of the travelers in our group were as old or older than me. I told her that this trip was arduous for persons of a certain age and that, although everyone was very excited about meeting her at the group dinner, most insisted that they would need to rest at the hotel following the day's travel in order to attend the dinner that evening. I advised Tram that no more than six would join Marcus and I at her home. I suggested that we should enjoy some of the special food that her aunts had prepared in the late afternoon and then she and her brother should join Marcus, the other guests and I at the group dinner at the hotel. She agreed and I cannot describe the relief I felt.

During the first days of the tour I made a point of getting acquainted with our companions and had an idea as to who would most appreciate the opportunity to visit Tram's home. Two couples, Jim &

Sheila Mack and Tim & Lois Sheane seemed a perfect fit and they were very interested. John Mihalec who had also been on the 2012 tour and has since corresponded with Tram via email was also invited. That would make it a manageable seven guests including Marcus and I.

I explained to Tram that the group would return to our hotel around 4:30, she advised that her high school classes are dismissed at 5:00 p.m. Tram said that her brother would be at the hotel when we arrived and we should join him for the 20-minute walk to their parents home. We did just that and arrived a few minutes before Tram returned from school.

What followed was pure joy; I got a long anticipated hug from Tram and met her aunts, uncles and cousins. Introductions were made between Tram and her family with Marcus and the other guests. John and I presented Tram with small gifts before Tram briefly disappeared and then returned with the shirt her father had made. The shirt was beautifully tailored and would have been a perfect fit 50 years and 100 pounds ago. I thanked Tram profusely while she expressed embarrassment about the fit. She told me that the numbers on the tape measure were too small for her father to read and he had to guess the dimensions. It seemed pointless to explain that she could have zoomed in with a few mouse clicks. The shirt is a treasure nonetheless.

Soon we took our seats on a mat spread on the floor and the feast was served. The food prepared by Tram's aunts was delicious and abundant. Now we have, yet another, small dilemma. Tram, Tuan, Marcus, the other guests and I are expected for dinner at our hotel in 90 minutes. We don't want to arrive with full stomachs and we don't want to risk appearing unappreciative of the effort of the aunts. I asked Tram to explain our situation to her aunts and I think an international incident was averted.



After dinner we walked back to the hotel and joined the rest of our companions at our evening's second dinner. I made some background and introductory comments before the meal was served. Following dinner many of our travel companions approached Tram and Tuan for a personal hello and brief chat. A little after nine the party broke up and most of our companions retired to their rooms. Tram and Tuan suggested that Marcus and I join them at the riverfront sidewalk café across the street from our hotel. We conversed until after eleven and I can't say how much I enjoyed that. It was a school night for Tram and Tuan had to travel to Hue the next day to join his parents at his grandmother's funeral. We said our final goodbyes and exchanged hugs and it was over all too soon. I don't know when or if I will see Tram again or if I will ever meet her parents. What I do know is that memories of a lifetime had been created that evening in Kontum.

The next morning we boarded the bus and began the long journey to the fishing port city of Quy Nhon on the South China Sea. Just like the 2012 tour we passed thru Pleiku and then the infamous Mang Yang Pass. Unlike the '12 tour we stopped in the town of An Khe for lunch and then went to the

site of the former Camp Radcliff and other former military sites. This tour included former pilots who had been based at Camp Radcliff during their tours of duty. I had flown through the area and refueled at camp Radcliff many times but it was never my home base. Afterward we continued east through the An Khe Pass and on to the coastal plain. Our Quy Nhon hotel was very nice and across the street from a beautiful beach. This was the first departure from the itinerary Sharon and I experienced in '12. Two years ago the tour stopped for lunch in Quy Nhon then continued on to Tuy Hoa where we spent one night before continuing to on to Nha Trang.



*Tram, Marcus & I
in her family's home.*



*With her brother, Tuan, and '12 & '14
tour member, John Mihalec.*



*At a riverfront sidewalk café
where, after a 2-hour visit, final
goodbyes were exchanged.*

Marcus and I did a bit of exploring in Quy Nhon on our own and then joined others for some dining adventure. The former Quy Nhon airfield is now the site of a shopping mall and the old runway now a broad boulevard. Our group also toured a 900-year-old Cham Temple and visited the picturesque beach at the Hanson's Treatment Hospital, formerly referred to as a leper colony, three miles south of town.

Saturday morning it was back on the bus for the five-hour ride down the coast to Nha Trang. The scenery is stunning and we passed countless fishing villages and towns. We checked in at our hotel and then Marcus and I explored the neighborhood on our own. We spent part of the early evening at a nearby Irish Pub where Marc enjoyed some Guinness on tap, one of his favorite brews. Sunday morning the group visited the ancient Po Nagar Cham Towers. The brick temple's origins go back the 8th century. Next we visited the central market for some shopping. That evening we enjoyed a delicious dinner on the beachfront at the Sailing Club. The hotel and activity was familiar for me as Sharon and I had a nearly identical experience 2 years earlier with one notable exception. Our transportation to the restaurant was via cyclo. A cyclo is a pedicab tricycle in which the passenger rides in front of the driver. It would be a relaxing form of transportation if cyclo operators did not seem to believe that they are exempt from traffic rules. I had to close my eyes as we plowed through busy intersections, sometimes against traffic lights and was amazed that the motorized traffic yielded to us. The '12 group was transported to the Sailing Club via conventional automotive taxi; Sharon would have had a heart attack riding in a cyclo.



The cyclo ride to the Sailing Club was an adventure and the western food was much appreciated.

Monday morning we packed for the return to Saigon and then enjoyed a Vietnamese lunch at a nearby café. Two years ago the stay in Nha Trang was followed by a long bus ride to Phan Thiet for two more nights at a beach resort followed by another long day on the bus back to Saigon. This was a good change as most of us were “beached out” and suffering from “bus butt” by now. The airport at Nha Trang, formerly a US airbase, is now a Vietnamese military airfield. The former US airbase at Cam Ranh Bay is the international airport serving the Nha Trang area and just a 30-minuted bus ride from our hotel. We arrived at Tan Son Nhat Airport after a very brief flight on a Vietnam Airlines Airbus jet.

After checking in to the same hotel where our adventure began we gathered at a nearby restaurant for a farewell dinner. On Tuesday most of our companions began their long journeys home while a few others either stayed in Vietnam a few more days or flew to Cambodia to visit Angkor Wat.

Marcus and I had initially planned on spending the rest of the week in Vietnam and celebrating his 40th birthday there on Saturday. Eventually we decided against that and spent Tuesday exploring Saigon on our own before heading back to the airport to board our late night departure for home via Tokyo and Washington, D.C. Marcus has recently become engaged and he was feeling pretty good about not having further delayed the return to his fiancée.

We arrived home safely in Florida on March 12th twenty-five hours after departure, more than twenty of which were in the air. Marcus and I agreed that our two weeks had been a marvelous, once in a lifetime, adventure. The time spent exploring the cities, towns, villages, countryside, and culture that is so different from our own was beyond merely interesting. Marcus not only enjoyed the stories of my Vietnam experience but also the stories of our twenty companions that included 7 other Vietnam veteran army aviators, 5 of whom had served in my old unit, the 189th Assault Helicopter Co. Three others had served in Vietnam in other capacities including one who worked for the State Department and we also enjoyed the stories of their Vietnam experiences. Many were accompanied by their spouses and one other veteran, like me, was accompanied by his son. The son had also persuaded his cousin to join the tour. Including myself there were 5 repeat participants from the 2012 tour. The variety of the life experiences of all tour participants made for many fascinating conversations. Marcus, all of our tour companions and I were in agreement that ours was an extraordinary experience that will be a forever-treasured memory.