



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

RETURN TO BINH DINH PROVINCE 2001

By Dick Guthrie

Thirty-three years after their first time there, a group of Vietnam veterans goes back to the old Area of Operations.

The first time we went, it was with the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry as the unit deployed from Fort Hood, Texas and traveled by ship to Vietnam in the fall of 1967. This time, we gathered at San Francisco Airport late the night of 19 October 2001. The traveling party included myself, a former company commander, now retired, and fifteen others. We had a medic who went on to a career as a firefighter and is now a trucker; a rifleman who is now the Facilities Engineer at a Zirconium metals plant; another medic who is a newspaperman; a platoon sergeant - now a home inspector; a platoon leader - now retired; a radio operator who just retired from the postal service; an old "deuce and a half" driver who is now a specialist in digital enhancement in the film production industry; another squad leader - now retired and a frequent participant in the annual Veteran's motorcycle rally known as "Rolling Thunder"; and another squad leader who farms in Minnesota. Also on board were four of our wives and our travel agent - a former Artillery forward Observer. Lastly, we had a Master's Degree student in graphic arts (too young to be a Vietnam Vet), who is doing a documentary around the trip.

The anxiety level when we came together at San Francisco International was noticeable, and it had little to do with apprehension about flying after 11 September. More likely, each veteran was pondering how he was to react when he soon revisited significant places he had not seen in over three decades. Each of us was different, but all harbored some painful memories of our time in that country, and nobody knew for sure how he would react to the shock of being again at locations where so many nightmares got their start. Many of us were motivated to make the

trip in order to pay tribute to those we had left behind half a lifetime ago.

One effect of the terrorist attacks was the powerful reawakening of patriotism and enthusiastic support for the military that our population was experiencing. Each of us applauded this surge of public sentiment, but wished fervently that our countrymen had demonstrated just a tiny part of that during the sixties.

The trip to Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City as it is now called - was long and tiring. We boarded a plane in the middle of a cold misty San Francisco night, and landed a day later stiff and groggy at Tan Son Nhut airport in blinding sunshine. During the long taxi to the terminal the plane passed an endless row of concrete revetments, bunkers, which protected our U. S. fighter aircraft thirty years ago. Seeing those vestiges of the war was the first wake-up call to a vast storehouse of memories for each of us.

The steam room heat had us soaked with sweat even before we started loading our baggage onto the carts for customs. One by one, we cleared the inspectors in their NVA-looking uniforms and on exiting the main building we clustered under a large awning to wait for the others. Just beyond were crowd-control barriers restraining a mob of relatives of passengers, taxi drivers and sign-waving travel agents searching for their clients. As our eyes adjusted to the glare, each of us in turn was delighted to spot in the second tier of that mob, three smiling young women in flowing *ao-dais* holding up signs that read: "Welcome, 1st Battalion, 50th Inf", "Play the Game, ICHIBAN" (our unit's motto), and "Peace Patrols". Artillery Observer/Tour guide Dave Gallo had clearly done his job well, and we all got a great lift from that touch.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY



Before long we breathed easier as the air-conditioned bus took us to the Rex Hotel. This was a place none of us ever got to, but we all knew it had been a favorite hangout of news people during the war thirty years ago.

The highlights of our two days in Saigon included getting used to eating the exceptionally tasty Vietnamese food with chopsticks, as well as a thrilling evening tour in a pedicab through traffic no American would believe. During that ride each of us knew for sure at one time or another that we were about to die; but it turned out that nobody came close to being in an accident.



We also met at lunch one day with COL Toi, a former high-ranking officer in the North Vietnamese Army's COSVN staff. He was gracious and interested in making sure we got to see what we were there for.



Qui Nhon was our next destination. As the Vietnam Airways plane touched down, some of us barely recognized that the runway of that city's airport was what we had called *Phu Cat Air Force Base* back when we were there before. Only the runways remain from what used to be a sprawling U. S. Air Force facility, the closest thing to civilization we knew in Binh Dinh Province. The local tour guide welcomed us as the bus bounced down the unimproved one-lane dirt road, and announced that government programs had just redone the runways at that airport so that they are *now* up to International standards. Some of us suspected that they had been at International standards thirty years ago. The access road was so bad that calling this an International airport seemed a stretch.

From Phu Cat, there is a forty-five minute bus ride south on Route #1 to Qui Nhon. This was and still is a nondescript port city, known to us only as the place where, thirty-four years ago, our battalion clambered over the railing of a troop ship and struggled down cargo nets to be ferried to shore in landing craft. As we came into town this time, the bus drove the length of a shrub-lined avenue that used to be the runway we had used back then for the short hop to An Khe, the First Cavalry Division's base camp.

Our hotel in Qui Nhon was reputed to be the former compound for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. For the next five days we were to travel throughout the old area of operations visiting sites that became important to us during the latter months of 1967 and most of 1968.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

First on the agenda next morning we met with two representatives of the Veterans' Association. This, too, was a source of increased anxiety. A person just can't know in advance how it will make them feel - or act - to come face to face with former enemy soldiers.

The time we spent in Ho Chi Minh City had been upbeat enough so that the fellows had gotten over much of the uneasiness we showed when the trip began out of San Francisco International; but going to that first meeting in Qui Nhon the stress for some of us was palpable. And the anxiety seemed to rise during the few minutes we waited in the dining room for our invited guests to show up. When we saw through the picture windows that the two of them wore parts of their old dress uniforms, the tension ratcheted up yet another notch.

It didn't last long, though, as our guests burst enthusiastically in and worked the room like diplomats, pumping hands and showing not the slightest qualm about a language barrier. Eventually we took our places at the table, and through "Tano", our government-approved guide, they introduced themselves. The president of the Binh Dinh Province Veterans' Association, retired Colonel Dinh Ba Loc, had been the Province's *Party Leader* (read Communist) during the "American War". The Association's vice-president, COL Dao Ngoc Thanh, had been commander of a regiment of the "Yellow Star" Division, a North Vietnamese unit we had fought against often during our time there in 1967-68.

The former Province Party Leader, COL Dinh, opened by extending a warm welcome to us. Binh Dinh did not get many tourists, he said, but relations between our countries were improving fast, as evidenced by the recent signing of the bilateral trade agreement, and he was confident that we veterans from both countries could show the others the way to strengthen ties to both countries' benefit. He expressed heartfelt condolences to our nation for the losses suffered in the terrorist attacks on New York and The Pentagon less than six weeks before.

I then stood and introduced myself, and asked each member of our group to do likewise in turn.

I then turned to the maps and briefed the two gents on the various locations we intended to visit over the next four days. There was an ulterior motive: portions of the itinerary we had asked for had not been approved, for reasons that were not clear. Our seasoned travel Agent Dave Gallo felt that it would be useful to run our desires by the hierarchy of the Veterans' Association. He was right, as we never again got challenged about any part of our desired itinerary. During my pitch, they interrupted often, as most of the sites were old battlefields and the regimental commander, COL Dao, had been involved in many of the engagements we had come there to revisit.

Lunch was served and the conversation was so lively that I finally asked COL Dinh to agree to a five-minute "cease-fire" so that guide Tano could chopstick down a few bites of rice.

At the end of the meal, I said a few words to thank them again for their cordial welcome and we gave them small gifts. From me, each got a key chain with the U. S. Army logo on it, and an American flag made of safety pins and tiny beads. A soldier who had been severely wounded in Binh Dinh Province on 3 January of 1968, and who remains disabled to this day, had made the pins for us, I explained. A recent medical problem kept him from being there with us that day, but he sent the pins and his best wishes.



Next, each received an M.I.A. bracelet, inscribed with the name of American men lost in action three decades ago and never yet accounted for. As he passed on the bracelets, retired postal worker Frank Romano announced that the



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

remains of another MIA -- one whose name was on the bracelet he himself had worn for years -- had been repatriated just weeks before. On the spot Frank removed from his wrist that bracelet and explained that in keeping with the protocol, he would be mailing it to the next of kin when he got back to the United States.

Former medic Russ Roth then presented the U. S. Army belt buckle he had worn during his service in Vietnam three decades ago, along with a pair of shoulder patches from his Portland, Oregon Firefighter's uniform.

Rifleman/Engineer Bill Moore gave each Colonel a pin representing his home state of Oregon. He explained that he was drawn back to Vietnam by the country's natural beauty, and he hoped more Vietnamese would have a chance one day to see Oregon's beauty as well.

Former Squad Leader and motorcycle enthusiast Fred Lohman gave them pins with the patch of the First Cavalry Division, Airmobile, while Platoon Leader Darrel Sourwine gave them 8"X10" color replicas of the same patch, signed by each of us. Medic/newspaperman Bob Melendez gave them a deck of playing cards with the same yellow horse blanket crest.

Former platoon sergeant Jack Noble had expressed for all of us the admiration he felt for the enemy *Yellow Star* Division of old. But the number of "Cav Patches" we gave made it obvious where our true loyalties remained.

Reluctantly I pushed to end the encounter. We had haunts and battlefields to revisit and homage to pay to departed comrades, and only five days available. As we parted company I felt that each group would be some time processing the emotions that meeting had brought on. Surely, I thought, the Vietnamese Veterans took home treasures varied enough to keep *them* pondering for a while.

On our way out of town we stopped the bus long enough to look out over the water at the approximate spot where the *U.S.S. Pope* had dropped anchor in August of 1967, and our time "in-country" had begun.



The drive west on route QL 19 takes you up the An Khe pass and the scene of countless ambushes as the road hairpins up from near sea level to a breezy, cool elevation of 557 meters in a very short distance. Nearly all of us had driven that terrifying road at one time or other, and many had had been assigned the impossible duty of securing it for the heavy logistical traffic our forces had put on the road to supply both the First Cavalry Division as well as the Fourth Infantry Division further west at Pleiku.

At the site of what once was the First Cavalry Division's base camp at An Khe there is an active Vietnamese army installation, so access is limited to what once was the entrance road. Our bus had to stop not far from where the old "*Sin City*" used to be, and we were allowed no further. Those who were well familiar with the base of old pointed out a few recognizable spots on what had been defensive perimeter, and we could divine where the "Golf Course" -- the vast parking area for the "First Team's" fleet of helicopters -- used to be. While we were looking in the direction of the hill that once sported an enormous yellow and black Cav Patch, we were chilled by the sight of an infantry company, fully armed, moving on patrol across our front not two hundred yards away. Had our friends from the Veterans' Association arranged this demonstration for us? We'd never know.

At An Khe we detached a small delegation with Jack Noble to travel further West in the direction of the Mang Yang pass in a rented vehicle. Jack had several locations along QL 19 he was duty-bound to revisit and pay respects to friends lost. As he told us, he *had* to get there to "Take care of business".



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

Enroute back to Qui Nhon the remainder of the group stopped at the Binh Dinh military museum. Perhaps the most striking thing we took away from our visit to this National site is how relatively little importance our American presence signifies to Vietnam's military history. America's involvement is a tiny blip in the centuries and centuries of warfare that part of the world has endured, mainly against attacking and occupying hordes from the north, but also with neighbors from the west.

We were treated as well to a fine demonstration of Vietnamese Martial Arts that seems to be as much choreography as it is fighting.

The following day we were up early and set the pattern we were to follow for the next four days, traveling north on Route #1 to revisit specific sites. We found the highway itself to be surprisingly similar to what it was the first time we were there, even though the country has been at peace for over a quarter century. The main north-south artery in the country remains a primitive road, only partially paved, but with at least ten times the traffic that there was in the sixties. The houses seem better than we remembered. Mud walls and thatched roofs have nearly all been replaced by cinder block walls and tile or corrugated tin roofing. On the other hand, the main agricultural activity, growing rice, appears to be exactly as before, and still highly labor intensive.

On the agenda that Thursday were the two "Landing Zones" (LZ's) our battalion occupied during most of its first year in country. LZ ICHIBAN was easily identifiable, although not much remains of our brief presence there. We dismounted there and instantly attracted the sort of following we were to encounter at any time. Whenever we walked around the countryside, it took no more than a minute or so for us to have an entourage of twenty or thirty fascinated youngsters of all sizes. They didn't understand what we were saying or doing, but they seemed to love the chance to observe these big strangers with the white skin, blue eyes, hairy arms and big noses.

At LZ UPLIFT just down the road we climbed part way up "Duster Hill" for an overview before

walking a portion of the scarcely identifiable perimeter road. Finding specific locations is now complicated by vast tracts of eucalyptus trees planted over the past several years throughout Vietnam. Truck driver John Nichols was disappointed that we could *not* find the cement pad marking the base camp's outdoor movie theater that he had helped build. We could situate more or less the site of the old Battalion Tactical Operations bunker, based on the expanse of "Pentaprimed" space that could only have been the old Brigade Helicopter pad. We found remnants of sand bags in a depression that must once have been a perimeter bunker, and we could identify the general vicinity of the company command posts. At the site of B company's little command post I could picture LT Howie Pontuck's (43E58) compact gymnast's frame. His boyish face nearly always glowed with the gentlest smile I have ever known. B company at UPLIFT was the last place I saw him.

Lunch was a picnic washed down with "*Ba-Ba-Ba*" (333) beer under the shaded awning of a restaurant along route #1. That afternoon we visited An Bao, the scene of a terrible battle that started on 5 May 1968 and cost our battalion the lives of sixteen brave soldiers mainly from companies A and C. Among the killed had been Lieutenants Dennis Hinton (55E17) and Frank Webb (55E35), and First Sergeant Malcolm Dulac (55E10). The account by eyewitness Darrel Sourwine was supplemented by stories others had gotten over the years from other participants in that dreadful slaughter.



Everyone in the battalion was deeply affected at the time, and most of us remained so. As our



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

group bumped along the dirt road back to Route #1 each of us was lost in thought paying homage to the brave soldiers sacrificed at that place.

We then went north and turned off Route #1 towards the far northeastern corner of the "Crescent". We visited the lakeside hamlet of Chao Truk and went as far as the road did to the area where the Dam Tra'o Lake meets the Cay Giep Mountains. On the way back to Route #1 we paused to climb the hill where Private John James Murphy (29E25) tripped a booby trapped U. S. M-26 Grenade on 5 November 1967 and became the first soldier of company B to be killed by enemy action. Former rifleman Bill Moore, who had been the last man to talk with Murphy, provided details about his final moments before the explosion.

On our way south to Qui Nhon that evening, we paused in the town of Phu My to search for both the old district headquarters as well as a refugee camp where our medics had worked and the battalion had often helped defend. Neither place was easily identified, but with the help of older locals we found their approximate locations. We also had a stock of beer chilled down for the hour and a half trip south to Qui Nhon. The ice chest the lady used brought howls from us. It was a familiar Olive Drab Marmite container, still clearly sporting the "U. S." marking. At least that was one piece of American gear left behind that ended up being used for peaceful free enterprise rather than war-making activities! We were to have the red-pajama'd lady chill twenty beers for us each day in the same container.



The following day our first stop was at an elementary school just off Route #1. They knew we were coming, and mobs of children crowded to examine us as we unloaded our two vans. It was instant attraction. They found us fascinating, exotic. We found them irresistible. Eventually we filed in to the vast room that serves as the school auditorium as the kids packed in behind us. It was a school assembly. The principal mounted the stage and made some welcoming remarks that Tano translated. The obligatory shrine to Ho Chi Minh, complete with bust and regal red and gold altar takes up nearly a half of the stage of that elementary school establishment.



The principal introduced teachers to us, then, knowing we had brought gifts of pencils, crayons, pads of paper, he appalled many of us by calling up the ten students who were high performers -- but neediest in the school -- to receive some of the gifts we had brought. How, I asked myself, could an educator of any philosophy, any nationality, any party, single out children based on financial hardship, and stand them in front of a school assembly? I nearly boycotted the proceedings to force a change the distribution system, but decided it would cause yet more grief to be a disruptive guest. As I filed down the line of needy high-performers, pinning American Flags on them and handing each a box of crayons, the confused, ashamed looks on their little faces confirmed how traumatic the event was for them. I rued my failure to get fully informed on the proceedings in advance when I might have been able to suggest another way to bestow the presents.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

When the school assembly was over we visited a first grade classroom. I think all of us were warmed by the obvious drive to learn that was so evident in the kids' eyes. We got a first-hand taste of how it is that Vietnam enjoys the highest literacy rate in the developing world. As we mingled with the children in the schoolyard for some time longer, Bob Melendez cranked up an impromptu English class and in no time had droves of bright-eyed kids reciting the alphabet, counting to ten and introducing themselves amid shrieks of laughter.

That afternoon saw us headed east on route 505 towards the South China Sea. We stopped several times, once at the sight of a house, that thirty-four years ago was covered with graffiti. One slogan on the wall which I read each time we came down the road, and remains burned in my memory was: "Do not drive tanks in the people's rice fields." In my scrapbook I have a photograph of myself in the commander's hatch of my track with that house in the background. Today, that wall of the house remains standing, but the graffiti is no longer visible.

Another place we stopped was at the spot on Rte # 505 we estimated to be where Gladys Grubb's husband Steve (23W09) had been killed in an ambush on 28 May 1969.

We looked for the place we had known both as "The Rock Pile", and as "Pratt's Corner", the scene of repeated fighting and a number of successes for our battalion. Bad roads kept us from getting close. The detour that day also precluded our passing the spot where on 2 April, 1968 a company B personnel carrier equipped with a Quad .50 caliber machinegun had been blown sky high by a booby-trapped 250 pound bomb planted in the road. The driver, Donald Queen (47E42), was one of the most respected men in the company, and his death was particularly shocking to everyone. It likely was a little old beetle nut-chewing granny who set off the bomb, but we never really found out for sure.

As our two vans doubled back west on Route 504 we paused where company B had seen some of the battalion's incredible successes during the Tet Offensive. But the successes had a price tag. In the distance we could see the

tree-lined stream where LT Bob Ballard (37E03) was fatally wounded as he attacked a bunker single-handed.



I suddenly remembered flying low-level over that same road we were standing on, as our Command and Control helicopter rushed Bob's lifeless form back to LZ UPLIFT that overcast afternoon of 3 February 1968. It was only later I was informed that a B-40 antitank rocket had entered his body through the arm hole of his flak vest, and was still inside him as I tried in vain to revive him with mouth-to-mouth and by beating on his chest to restart his heart.

The following day we went first up route 506 as far as we could. A significant landmark for Cynthia and me was the spot where I got a call on the radio, on 21 December of '67 advising that our daughter Laura had been born.



Impassable conditions forced us to turn back short of the segment of that road we had called "Valley of the Shadow of Death", where company B had the first combat encounter that



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

earned for the entire battalion the right to wear the Combat Infantryman's Badge.

At lunch back along route #1 we waited while our van driver got the hole in the oil pan welded. We had gone further up route 506 than the vehicle could take. That afternoon we went north beyond Bong Son and turned east for Truong Lam, the hamlet where, on 10 December of '67 company B was in a terrible fight against an enemy dug into a ditch that proved impassible to our personnel carriers. Those of us who had been that fight knew we owed our lives to the troops in '67 who, despite heavy losses, kept a steady volume of fire on the enemy at point blank range, and to the heroism of the crew of the flame track, "Zippo", whose action finally enabled us to break contact. Being on the flat ground in front of that ditch brought back the last radio call I heard that day before the company net was jammed by a vehicle running over radio handset, keying the transmitter and blocking all other communications:



"Sergeant Shipley has been shot, right in the head." Came a terrified call from a personnel carrier just yards from where I was crouched. I thought I recognized the voice as belonging to PFC Paul Branyan (31E71), who had been passing ammunition to SGT Drew Shipley (31E77) who was keeping the 50-caliber machine gun in action no matter how that exposed him.

I said a silent prayer to the twelve brave souls our company left behind that terrible day, and I felt they were grateful in turn for our being there. I also remembered classmate Peter Bentson (1W55), my best friend and later our son's

Godfather, who commanded the rifle company that reinforced our flank during the final attack on 11 December.

From Truong Lam we went to LZ ENGLISH. It was easy to find the large runway that is still in fine shape, but which nowadays accommodates only the drying of cassava root and rice -- rather than the fleet of helicopters and a steady stream of C-130's of days gone by. Nothing remains of the sprawling array of beer stalls, tailor shops, massage parlors, barber shops, laundry businesses, warehouses and souvenir stands that once lined the quarter mile access road from Rte # 1 to the base camp.

On the way south out of Bong Son we paused to take pictures of the bridges so many of our men had guarded at one time or other.

The Phu My beer lady was every bit as delighted to see us pull up that afternoon, as we were to down that icy "*Ba-Ba-Ba*".

Our final day of visits to the area of operations found us repeatedly frustrated by impassible roads. The highlight was the fishing village of Xuan Thanh. We had admired it for its natural beauty thirty years ago, and were surprised to discover how much more than neighboring areas it had grown and prospered in the ensuing years. A guide supplied the answer: many of the former inhabitants had become "Boat People" and escaped from Vietnam after the communist takeover. A few had reached the United States, and they regularly sent money back. Hence, we saw a level of development far higher than that of the neighboring rice planting hamlets.

We walked the beach a bit and in a flash, Russ Roth deployed the fly rod he had brought with him. Only the high surf prevented him from catching a bundle of fish, we were sure.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY



Rolling north on a new road up that mile-wide beach brought back memories of how free and easy it had been to operate across those sands with our Armored Personnel Carriers. We could open up the formation and safely roar along at forty miles an hour. Unfortunately, the vans we were in that day did not have the same capability to operate in sand.



We lost several hours manhandling them through a loose patch, only to then discover that access back to the eastern shore of the Dam Tra'o Lake was blocked from up there as well. This prevented us from getting to the town of An Lac, where Gary Parks of B company (provider of our flag pins) had been so badly wounded on 3 January, and it kept us as well from getting to the northeastern Nui Loi Mountain where our unit had seen a number of combat actions. Retracing our route was not only disappointing; it also meant getting the vans unstuck a second time.

As we headed back to Route #1 we paused several times to pay tribute to several of Delta company's battles. Medic Russ Roth told a chilling story about rushing to help a fallen

soldier together with another medic, only to find that the rest of the company had withdrawn and the three of them were isolated and under withering enemy fire. They had a litter that had been dropped to them from the battalion commander's Command and Control helicopter on a low level pass.



"I thought I was seeing my last day on this earth", Russ said.

A squad leader buddy of his, David Jones finally arrived with his squad to provide covering fires and help them evacuate the man to safety.

"I really owe him for that, as I truly believe the three of us would not be here today if it were not for those four men who stayed back specifically for us. True heroes, all of them, in my book." Russ writes.

One of the four was Thomas Ramey (45E27), who lost his life the next day, 18 March 1968, not a mile from where this fight had occurred. Sadly, impassible roads kept us from reaching the spot.

More than one of the bridges on route 505 had been the scene of fights and mine explosions that cost us so dearly. We paused at several locations to pay homage. Squad Leader Jack Noble and Medic Bob Melendez gave tribute to a number of fallen comrades.

That afternoon along with delivering our final order of "Bia 333", the beer lady gave us a large bundle of fruit as a farewell gift.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ASSOCIATION OF THE 1ST BATTALION (MECHANIZED), 50TH INFANTRY

The following day found our group scattering in several directions. One group left Qui Nhon by bus early, to travel overland north to Da Nang and the A Shao Valley where Bill Moore and Chuck Hackenmiller had served together in an Air Cav battalion. Most of the rest of us flew that afternoon back to Saigon, while Frank Romano was off to Phan Thiet, where the battalion had served some time after the original group had completed its tour. Frank took with him a candle he would fill with dirt from Binh Thuan Province, near the location where Private Joe Cardenas (10W68) was killed in May of 1970. His son had sent the candle with Dave Baker asking that someone bring him dirt from the ground where the father he never knew had died.

Just before I departed, I passed a blue ledger book to the manager of the Binh Dinh Tourist Agency. This is a Logbook I created during my first return trip in 1998, and it is meant to be a place where any returning veteran can record his thoughts and observations. A number from our group contributed photographs and comments to the book, which is being held there in Qui Nhon available for the comments from any other returning veterans in the future.



The Saigon group visited the Cu Chi Tunnels and took a dinner cruise on the Saigon River before flying back to San Francisco on day thirteen of the trip.

A question that might be on the reader's mind was also on ours: So, what did we prove on that trip? Each one probably has a very different take.

All might agree that one of the major benefits was to enable us to revisit old battlefields and by doing so, reprocess the emotions and feelings we had kept bottled up for so many years. Our grieving process was shut down by the reception we got from our countrymen, and the trip may help us to let the grieving restart and work its natural course.

I think most of us felt a sense of relief to be able to pay homage to the men we left behind so long ago on that ground which was hallowed by American blood and is kept that way by the presence of their souls. Our trip to that remote place was an act of tribute to them, and just being there brought a certain relief to our stressed emotions.

Certainly, we learned that it is possible to interact with the people of Vietnam in a most positive way. The youthful population there is essentially pro-American. Our nation's military presence in Vietnam was but one episode in a centuries-long history of war fighting; and on their scale, it was apparently not a particularly significant episode.

We confirmed a suspicion many of us harbored years ago, which is that this particular society, in your wildest dreams, could never represent a threat to our American society. Some of us couldn't help but wonder how our policymakers could have concluded differently in the late sixties, even given the historical Cold War context. After twenty-five years of peace, the main road is scarcely better than it had been when the country was plunged in war, and the access road to a so-called International Airport is little more than a one-lane oxcart track.

As the members of the group parted ways, I felt that most of us would be processing our emotions and reactions for several months to come. I think each individual got something different from the trip, and most would agree they were glad they went. Probably all who went would recommend it to other veterans who have the chance and who feel ready to take such a trip.