

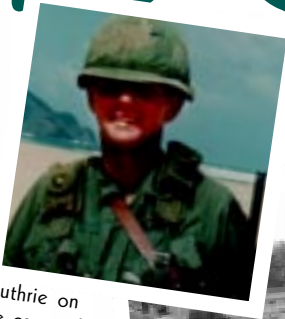
Return to BINH DINH PROVINCE 2001

by Richard P. Guthrie '63

THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER, A GROUP of Viet Nam veterans returns to their old area of operations. The first time, we went as the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, deployed from Ft. Hood, TX, and traveled by troop ship to Viet Nam in the fall of 1967. For this second trip, we gathered at San Francisco International Airport late on the evening of 19 Oct 2001. The traveling party included myself, a former company commander, and 15 others, including four of our wives and our travel agent, a former Artillery forward observer. Lastly, we had a graduate student in graphic arts (too young to be a Viet Nam vet), who is doing a documentary based on 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 Sep 2001. We are all different, but each of us harbors some painful memories of those villages and rice paddies, and none of us knew for sure how he would react to revisiting locations where so many recurring nightmares had gotten their start more than three decades ago. And many of us made the trip to pay tribute to those we left behind half a lifetime ago.

One effect of the September 11th Terrorist Attacks is the powerful reawakening of patriotism and backing for our military. Each of us applauded this surge of public sentiment, happy to see that *this* generation of young American soldiers is being sent into harm's way with *support* rather than scorn or indifference.



Guthrie on the coast of the South China Sea in 1967.



11 Dec 1967: '63 classmates Guthrie (1/50th Inf) and Benton (1/12th Cav) with members of their companies and captured weapons.



An Bao, the scene of a bloody battle that started on 5 May 1968 and cost 16 American soldiers their lives.



"Welcome, 1st Bn, 50th Infantry. Play the Game."

The trip to Saigon—Ho Chi Minh City now—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 hot sunshine. During the long taxi to the terminal, our plane passed an endless row of concrete revetments that had protected our fighter aircraft 30 years ago. Seeing those vestiges of the war was the first wake-up call to a vast storehouse of memories.

The steamroom heat in the terminal had us soaked with sweat even before we started loading our baggage onto carts for customs. One by one, we cleared the inspectors in their NVA-looking uniforms and then 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



2001 trip route annotated over a vintage map of South Viet Nam from 1968.

adjusted to the glare, we were delighted to spot three smiling young women in flowing *ao-dai* holding up signs that read: "Welcome, 1st Bn, 50th Inf. "Play the Game" (our unit motto), and "Welcome, Peace Patrols." Artillery forward observer/tour guide Dave Gallo had clearly done his job well. We then breathed easier as the air-conditioned bus took us to the Rex Hotel, a place none of us ever had seen before, but one that had been a favorite of news people during the war.

Highlights of our two days in Saigon included getting used to eating the tasty Vietnamese food with chopsticks and a thrilling evening tour in pedicabs through traffic no American would believe. As the platoon of cyclos wound through the wet streets, each

place where, 34 years ago, our battalion struggled down cargo nets to be ferried ashore in landing craft. As we entered town this time, the bus drove the length of a shrub-lined avenue that was the runway we had used for the short hop to An Khe, the 1st Cavalry Division's basecamp. Our hotel in Qui Nhon was reputed to be the former MAC-V compound. For the next five days, we'd travel throughout the old AO.

The following morning, we met with two representatives of the Veterans Association. This too was a source of increased anxiety—coming face to face with former enemy soldiers. Most had gotten over much of the uneasiness we all felt when the trip began; but going into that first meeting in Qui



In the distance is the tree-lined stream where LT Bob Ballard was fatally wounded.

of us felt certain that death was imminent, but none of us 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 COSVN staff, and a friend of his, a retired colonel of Air Defense Artillery.

Qui Nhon was our next destination. As the Vietnam Airways plane touched down, some of us barely recognized the runway of what we had known as *Phu Cat Air Force Base*. Only the runways remain of what had once been a sprawling U.S. Air Force facility, the closest thing to civilization any of us 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 to international standards. (Some of us suspected they were at international standards 30 years ago.)

From Phu Cat, it is a 45-minute bus ride south on Route 1 to Qui Nhon, still a non-descript port city, known to us only as the

Nhon, the stress, for some, was palpable. When we saw through the picture windows that the two of them wore parts of their old dress uniforms, the tension ratcheted up another notch. It didn't last long, though, as our guests burst in enthusiastically 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 COL Dinh Ba Loc, had been the province's Party Leader 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 often met in battle.

COL Dinh opened by extending a warm welcome to us. Binh Dinh Province 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 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.

We introduced ourselves and I turned to the maps and briefed the various locations we hoped to visit over the next four days. They interrupted often, as most of the sites were old battlefields and COL Dao had been involved in many of the engagements we had come there to revisit. Portions of the itinerary we had requested had not been approved, for reasons that were not clear, and 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 were challenged on any part of our itinerary. The conversation at lunch was so lively that I finally asked COL Dinh to agree to a five-minute "ceasefire" so that guide Tano could down a few bites of rice.



Medic Russ Roth told a chilling story about rushing to help a fallen soldier.

At the end of the meal, I thanked them for their cordial welcome, and we gave them small gifts. From me, each received a key chain with the U.S. Army logo on it and an American flag made of safety pins and tiny beads. Gary Parks, a soldier severely wounded in Binh Dinh Province on 3 Jan 1968 and disabled to this day, had made the pins for us. A recent medical problem kept him from being with us that day, but he sent the pins and his best wishes. Next, each colonel re-

ceived an MIA bracelet, inscribed with the name of Americans lost in action three decades ago and as yet unaccounted for. As he passed the bracelets, former RTO/postal worker Frank Romano announced that the remains of another MIA—one whose name



The hill where PVT John James Murphy was killed in action.

was on the bracelet he had worn for years—had been repatriated just weeks before. Frank explained that, in keeping with protocol, he would mail it to the next of kin. Former medic/fire fighter Russ Roth then presented the U.S. Army belt buckle he wore while in Viet Nam, along with a pair of shoulder patches from his Portland, OR, firefighter's uniform. Former rifleman, now mineral refining company executive, Bill Moore gave each colonel a pin representing his home state of Oregon. He explained that he was drawn back to Viet Nam by the country's natural beauty and 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 pins with the 1st Cavalry Division, Airmobile, patch, 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 a deck of playing cards with the same crest. Former platoon sergeant/home inspector Jack Noble expressed respect for the enemy Yellow Star Division of old. (While we did respect them, the number of "Cav patches" we gave made it obvious where our true loyalties remained.)

As we parted company, I felt that all of us would process the emotions that meeting had brought on for some time. Surely, I thought,

QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT BE ON the reader's mind also were on ours: What did we prove by the trip? What can be accomplished by going to the place where you lost your innocence? Each one of us probably has a very different take.

■ One of the major benefits was to enable us to revisit old battlefields and, by doing so, reprocess the emotions and feelings kept bottled up for so many years. Our grieving process was shut down by the reception of our countrymen upon our return in 1968, and the trip may help us let the grieving restart and work its natural course.

■ 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 hallowed by American blood and kept that way by the presence of their souls. Our trip to that remote place was an act of tribute to them and brought a measure of relief to our conflicted emotions.

■ Certainly, we learned that it is possible to interact with the people of Viet Nam in a positive way. The youthful population there is essentially pro-American. Our nation's military presence in Viet Nam was but one episode in a centuries-long history of war fighting—and for them not a particularly significant episode.



Sylvia Graham/ASSEMBLY



Guthrie and his wife, Cynthia (nee Beach).

the Vietnamese veterans took home treasures varied enough to keep them pondering for a while. On our way out of town, we stopped long enough to look out over the water at the approximate spot where the *U.S.S. Pope* had dropped anchor in August 1967 to begin our time “in-country.”

The drive west on route QL 19 climbs the An Khe pass, 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 another, and many had been assigned the impossible task of securing it to supply both the 1st Cavalry Division and the 4th Infantry Division fur-

ther west at Pleiku. At the site of what had been the 1st Cavalry Division’s basecamp at An Khe is an active Vietnamese Army installation, and foreigners are restricted to a part of the old access road. Those familiar with the base of old pointed out a few recognizable spots on the 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 looking at a hill that once sported an enormous yellow and black Cav Patch, we were chilled by the sight of what appeared to be a North Vietnamese infantry company, fully armed, moving on patrol across our front not 200 yards away. Had our friends from the Veterans Association arranged this demonstration for us? We’ll never know.

At An Khe, we detached a small delegation with Jack Noble to travel further west toward the Mang Yang pass in a rented ve-

hicle. Jack had several locations along QL 19 that he was duty-bound to revisit to pay respects to friends lost. As he told us, he *had* to get there to “take care of business.”

En route back to Qui Nhon, our group stopped at the Binh Dinh military museum. Perhaps the most striking impression we took from our visit was the relative insignificance of the “American War” in Viet Nam’s military history. It is a tiny footnote to centuries of warfare, mainly involving attacking hordes from the north and neighbors from the west.

The following day, we arose early and traveled north on Route 1 to revisit specific sites. The main north-south artery in the coun-



LZ English: it was easy to find the large runway that still is in fine shape, but which nowadays accommodates only the drying of cassava root and rice.

try is still a primitive road, only partially paved, but with at least ten times the traffic of the 1960s. 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, rice farming, seemed exactly as before—highly labor intensive.

On the agenda that Thursday were the two “landing zones” (LZs) 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 and instantly attracted an entourage. It never took more than a minute or so for 20 or 30 fascinated youngsters to materialize. They didn’t understand what we were saying or doing, but they loved to observe these big strangers with white skin, blue eyes, hairy arms, and big noses.

At nearby LZ Uplift, 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 Viet Nam. Former “deuce and a half” driver/film editor John Nichols could not find the cement pad of the outdoor movie theater he had helped build. On the



Company B, 1/50th Infantry, November 1967. Officers’ call on the shores of the South China Sea.

other hand, we found the site of the old battalion TOC bunker, based on an expanse of “Pentaprimed” space that could only have been the brigade helicopter pad. We found remnants of a perimeter bunker and could identify the general location of the company CPs. At the site of B Company’s command post, I could picture the compact gymnast’s frame of LT Howie Pontuck ’66 (43E58). His boyish face nearly always glowed with the widest and gentlest smile I have ever known, and Uplift was the last place I saw him alive.

Under the awning of a restaurant along Route 1, lunch was a picnic washed down with “*Ba-Ba-Ba*” (333) beer, as the old *Ba-Moui-Ba* (33) now is called. That afternoon, we visited An Bao, the scene of a bloody battle that started on 5 May 1968 and cost our battalion 16 brave soldiers, mainly from Companies A and C. Among the killed were LTs Dennis Hinton (55E17), Frank Webb (55E35), and 1SG Malcolm Dulac (55E10). The account by eyewitness Darrel Sourwine was supplemented by stories others had heard from other survivors over the years. Everyone in the battalion was deeply affected at the time, and most of us still are. As the vans bumped along the dirt track back to Route 1, each of us was lost in thought, paying homage to the brave soldiers sacrificed at that place. Our casualty figures would have been higher were it not for the incredible soldiering of classmate Tim Grogan and his tank company in that fight.



A flight of UH-1 "Slicks" over the Crescent, south of the Cay Giap Mountains.

We then went north and turned off Route 1 toward the far northeastern corner of the "crescent." We visited the lakeside hamlet of Chao Truk and went as far as the road allowed to where the Dam Tra'o Lake meets the Cay Giap Mountains. On the way back to Route 1, we paused to climb the hill where PVT John James Murphy (29E25) tripped a booby-trapped U.S.M-26 Grenade on 5 Nov 1967 to become the first soldier of Company B killed by enemy action. Former rifleman Bill Moore, the last man to talk with Murphy, shared details about his final moments.

On our way south to Qui Nhon that evening, we paused in the town of Phu My to find the old district headquarters and a refugee camp where our medics had worked and that the battalion often helped defend. With the help of older locals, we found the 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 was a familiar olive drab mermite container, still clearly sporting the "U.S." marking. That was one piece of American gear left behind that ended up supporting peaceful free enterprise!

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. They found us fascinating and exotic. We found them irresistible. Eventually, we filed into the school auditorium, and the kids packed in behind us for a school assembly. The principal introduced teachers to us, then, knowing we had brought pencils, crayons, pads of paper, called up the ten students who were high performers—but neediest in the school—to receive some of the gifts. How could an educator single out children based on financial hardship, and stand them in front of a school assembly? As I filed down the line, pinning American flags on them and handing each a box of crayons, the looks on their little faces confirmed how traumatic the event was for them.

Next, we visited a first grade classroom. We all were warmed by the obvious drive to learn so evident in the kids' eyes. Viet Nam enjoys the highest literacy rate in the developing world. As we mingled with the children in the schoolyard, former medic 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 we headed east on Route 505 toward the South China Sea, stopping several times, once at the site of a house that, 34 years ago, was covered with graffiti. One slogan I read each time we came down the road remains burned in my memory: "Do not drive tanks in the peoples' rice fields." I still have a faded photograph of myself and my track with that house in the background. Today, the house remains standing, but the graffiti is no longer visible.

Another stop was at the spot on Route 505 where Gladys Grubb's husband Steve (23W09) was killed in an ambush on 28 May 1969. We looked for the place we had called "The Rock Pile," the scene of a number of successes for our battalion, but bad roads kept us from getting close. The detour that day also precluded our passing the location where, on 2 Apr 1968, a Company B personnel carrier with a Quad .50 mounted on top had been blown sky high by a booby-trapped 250-pound bomb. The driver, Donald Queen (47E42), was one of the most respected men in the company, and his death was particularly shocking.

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 during a single-handed attack against a bunker. I remembered flying low-level over that very road as our C&C helicopter rushed Bob's lifeless form back to LZ Uplift that overcast afternoon of 3 Feb 1968. I later was told that my frantic efforts at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation during that flight had been in

vain, as the unexploded B-40 rocket that had entered through the armhole of his flak vest was still inside his chest.

The following day, we first went 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 Dec 1967, that our first child, daughter Laura, had been born. Impassible conditions forced us to turn back short of the road segment we called "the valley of the shadow of death," where my Company B had its first combat encounter. We recalled that it had been a sort of "Keystone Kops" firefight that, luck-



The drive to learn that was so evident in the kids' bright eyes warmed our hearts.



We discovered the vans didn't enjoy the same cross-country mobility as our personnel carriers had.



Cynthia and Dick Guthrie at the exact spot where Dick got the radio call in 1967 that their daughter Laura had been born.

ily, ended well for us, and gave us and the rest of the battalion the right to wear the Combat Infantryman Badge.

At lunch back on Route 1, our van driver got a 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 Dec 1967 Company B was in a terrible fight against an enemy dug in at a ditch that proved impassible to our personnel carriers. Those of us in that fight knew we owed our lives to the troops 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 thrower track "Zippo," whose intervention enabled us to break contact. On the ground in front of that ditch brought back the last radio call I heard that day before the company net was inadvertently jammed by a damaged handset. "SGT Shipley has been shot, right in the head," came the terrified call from a track just yards from where I was crouched. The voice belonged to PFC Paul Branyan (31E71), who had been passing ammunition to SGT Drew Shipley (31E77). Shipley knew how exposed he was, but he kept the 50-caliber machine gun in action, as did Branyan after him.

I said a silent prayer for the twelve brave souls our company left behind that terrible day and felt they were grateful for our being there. I also remembered classmate Peter Bentson (1W55), my best friend and, later, my son's godfather. Pete's rifle company from 1st of the 12th Cavalry reinforced our flank during the final attack on 11 December. Later, he was killed in action, weeks short of the end of his second tour.

From Truong Lam we went to LZ English. It was easy to find the large runway, still in fine shape, that nowadays accommodates only the drying of cassava root and rice. Nothing remains of the sprawling array of beer stalls, tailor shops, barber shops, laundries, and massage parlors that once lined the road from Route 1 to the basecamp. On the way south out of Bong Son, we paused to photograph the bridges so many of our men 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 some icy "*Bia Tiger*."

Our final day found us repeatedly frustrated by impassible roads. The highlight was the fishing village of Xuan Thanh. We had admired it for its natural beauty 30 years ago

and were surprised to discover how much more than neighboring areas it had grown and prospered. A guide supplied the answer. Many of the former inhabitants had become "boat people" and escaped after the Communist takeover. A few had reached the U.S., and they regularly sent money back.

We walked the beach a bit and, in a flash, former medic Russ Roth deployed the fly rod he had brought with him. 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



Russ Ross and Bob Melendez with new friends in the schoolyard.

our APCs. We could open up the formation and safely roar along at 40 mph. Unfortunately, our vans did not have the same cross-country mobility in sand, and 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. This prevented us from getting to An Lac, where Gary Parks of B Company had been so badly wounded on 3 January, and also kept us from Nui Loi [mountain], where our unit had fought a number of actions. Retracing our route meant getting the vans unstuck a second time.

Heading back to Route 1, we paused several times to pay tribute to losses from several of Delta Company's battles. Medic Russ Roth told a chilling story about rushing to help a fallen soldier 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. "I thought I was seeing my last day on this earth," Russ said. A squad leader buddy of his, David Jones, finally maneuvered his squad to provide covering fires and help

evacuate the wounded soldier 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." One of the four was Thomas Ramey (45E27), who lost his life the next day, 18 Mar 1968, not a mile away. Sadly, impassible roads kept us from reaching the spot where Russ wanted to leave a memento to his friend.

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 night I passed a blue ledger book to the manager of the Binh Dinh Tourist Agency. It contains photos and personal thoughts and observations from many of us on the trip. We hope the book will serve to help other old comrades reestablish contact.

The following day found our team scattering in several directions. Most of us flew to Saigon. One group left overland north to Da Nang and the A Shau Valley, where

Bill Moore and Chuck Hackenmiller had served together in an Air Cav squadron. Frank Romano was off to Phan Thiet, where he'd been with our battalion later in the war. Frank took with him a glass candle container to fill with dirt from Binh Thuan Province, near where PVT Joe Cardenas (10W68) was killed in May of 1970. Cardenas' son had sent the candle with David Baker asking that someone bring back a memento of the father he never met.

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

Editor's Note: The letter and numbers in parentheses after the name of a deceased soldier indicate the panel and row where his name appears on the Viet Nam Memorial.