

GOOD MORNING VIETNAM!!!

This was my first thought upon waking my first day in-country. Although saddened by the death of Robin Williams, I knew this phrase was appropriate under the circumstances. I thought this movie captured the reality of what we all experienced during our tour of duty back in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. Can you recall sitting on the top of your bunker listening to that great music? I sure can, and this was a big part of my decision to return to Vietnam—to feel the feelings again, to revisit my youth and make peace with a country and its people that I hated for several years after returning to “The World”!

I landed in Saigon on Friday, January 13, 2017, after suffering through a “trip from hell” that started in Portland, OR (my home town) on Wednesday, January 11. The night before my flight, originally scheduled to start in Portland, then to Seattle, then to Seoul, South Korea, and finally to Ho Chi Minh City (please note that I refuse to use this name for Saigon, as do many of the natives), it snowed about 8 inches, and this shut down all flights out of Portland until later in the day. We were late getting to Seattle, missing our connecting flight by a mere 7 minutes. Therefore, we had to fly to Tokyo and then to Seoul. This really didn’t seem like much of an inconvenience since the turnaround from Tokyo was quick.

My travel partners were a married couple whose son works for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. He is provided a most lovely and spacious three-bedroom, two-bath apartment in downtown Saigon, just across the street from the former Presidential Palace (now called the Unification Palace), on which roof the final evac of American troops occurred), which provided us a marvelous place to stay while in Saigon. I spent most of my ten days in-country in Saigon, but spent two days revisiting QL-1 from Qui Nhon up to LZ Max, just Southwest of Mo Duc. I will write more on this part of my visit later.

Saigon is a beautiful, modern and happening city of approximately 10 million people! And apparently every one of them rides a motor scooter! I can’t remember seeing as many scooters in one place as I did there (although I visited China in 1984, and at that time they rode bicycles, of which there were many). The city is clean, for the most part and has many high-rise buildings downtown. The Vietnamese people are so warm and friendly, bearing no apparent grudges from the invasion of their country. Although it is now a Communist government throughout, many of the people indicated their desire to go back to their former status as free people. They must not make public announcements of their feelings, of course, but many that I talked with left no doubt of this. The city is very busy, very noisy and has lots of modernity, including great shopping centers, cafes, office buildings, government buildings, etc. My friends and I took an escorted scooter ride over much of the city, and in most places, it is a clean and wonderful place. There are still some areas of the city that are still as they were in the 60s. Most of these are the simple, impoverished neighborhoods, and when I saw them, it took me

right back. There is a separate neighborhood for the expatriates, which is off limits to tourism, but I was told there are a great number of them in Saigon, many of them Americans.

In short, I was stunned by Saigon! I would gladly return there to spend time in the city with its people. There is so much to do and see in this part of Vietnam, primarily the Mekong Delta and the war memorials that this rugged and deadly area experienced. You can take boat tours on the Mekong River, see the floating markets, visit former underground tunnels used by our enemy during the war, visit War Museums and just revisit your past if you were based there. Or you can remain in Saigon and see its many interesting sites and drink the wonderful Vietnamese coffee! There is an active night-life there, also, although for many of us veterans, our 9 pm bedtime precludes this activity!

Then North to former haunts!

I was somewhat anxious making this trip. I flew to Qui Nhon and met my driver who would take me by car to my former basecamps. Or so I thought. There is no way of identifying the location of anything that I remembered! Of course, 50 years is a long time, and the countryside changes. In this case, commercial "development" now lines the road, unbroken for the most part. The lean-to's are much as we all remember, serving as both business and residence. However, these almost unbroken lines of structures now line the roadway. I remember them being further off the road and certainly only occasional. There were other more substantial new buildings, many serving as Communist Party offices. These were set farther off the road, of course. I tried to converse with the people as we drive north, getting out of the car several times to do so. However, they apparently did not speak or understand English and I quickly realized I would have no meaningful conversations. So I settled in to simply enjoy the ride.

I tried and tried to recognize anything that would jog my memory from Bong Son north for five or so miles. This was my first basecamp (35th Combat Engr. Bn.) after leaving Qui Nhon, and I remember it being just north of Bong Song, which at that time was a meager little village with just a few huts for the people living there. It is now a rather bustling town! Since it has grown and expanded so, I could recognize nothing. What a disappointment that was!

Heading north again, we passed the former location of LZ English, LZ English North, Tam Quan and LZ Lowboy. Standing prominent on the horizon at Lowboy is the very rock quarry at which I loaded deuce-and-a-halves with gravel from my front-end loader. Those memories came rushing back, and suddenly I could see the construction of what is now QL-1. Oh, the memories of that roadway! I walked it, drove over it, guarded it, swept it for mines, built bridges on it and fought the enemy on it. I could not access the quarry, which is still operated by the Vietnamese government, because of a chain across its entrance. So I didn't get to see the present-day workings going on there. But its face is a large, almost unchanged swath of bare dirt where the gravel has been dug out. I couldn't have missed it had I tried! And BTW, QL-1 is a beautiful, paved four-lane highway, still serving as the main thoroughfare from Saigon to Hanoi. Thanks to all the brave men who faced all kinds of danger, worked their asses off and spent their time

10,000 miles from home to rebuild the one lane muddy and unusable roadway that greeted us when we arrived! Thank you brothers for all you did!

I continued north again, passing the former LZ Thunder ending up at the former LZ Max. The countryside doesn't change much along the way, except for the climb up to the pass where so much action occurred. I said a prayer for all the brave brothers who did not make it back home alive. This sadness overwhelmed me for some time. I had been camped somewhere along this last stretch, most likely closer to LZ Thunder than LZ Max. I remember that my basecamp was somewhat west of QL-1, but that is all I can recall. I probably could not have found it had we gone looking for the site. My guide informed me that going down that road would be dangerous as there are still Viet Cong in the area who do not like Americans. They must have very long memories! BTW, my former base camp was where the NVA soldier surrendered voluntarily. This was a pretty big deal at the time. My guide had grown up in this part of his country, and was a small boy when I was in-country. He said that he remembered an Army base there, and he included a picture that is labeled "former Army base" in the pics he emailed me.

Other than using common sense to avoid any possible danger, and I believed my guide about the presence of former Viet Cong, there did not seem to be any place that was off-limits to me. Like I said, the rock quarry at LZ Lowboy was locked up, so there was no apparent way to explore it, but I saw no other obvious restrictions on my movements. Further, although I could not converse with the people, they all had big smiles for me when I would stop to take in the sights. And just so you know, the rice paddies are still plentiful and as beautiful as ever. However, I saw no water buffalo in those paddies at any place along the way.

Finally back at Qui Nhon, I realized that my hotel room overlooked the very beach on which me and my unit, and many others, first came in-country on a November night in 1966. This really took me back. I recall the very night we came ashore in rafts, with the rain falling as hard as I have ever known, having no idea what was awaiting us in this strange country we had only read or heard about. But ashore we came, and what waited us was transportation to the site of our first basecamp. We set up our tents, surrounded them with sandbags about three feet high, established our guard posts, and dug in! I remember little about the next several weeks, after which we loaded into the trucks again and headed north to Bong Son.

What memories, some sweet, some sad. I somehow made my peace with Vietnam. I had returned to "The World" angry with the Vietnamese people and their "second-rate country", and the government that sent me and my brothers to this strange land, to risk our lives for the building of a roadway. I had a big chip on my shoulder when I got home. The last of this chip was removed during my visit up north. I can't explain how or why, maybe looking back as a seventy-one year old man to that twenty-year old boy. I grew up there. I saw people die there. I separated from reality there. So much happened and changed me during the year I spent there. But somehow I made my peace with all of that.

I left Vietnam on Sunday, January 22, one day after my birthday. I turned 21 in Vietnam and I turned 71 in Vietnam. That seems so meaningful to me. A golden anniversary! I departed with a satisfied soul, promising myself to return sometime soon.

Enjoy the memories!!

P.S. I can't end without thanks to some brothers who helped me prepare for my trip. Fred Smith provided me so much useful information. My journey would not have been as meaningful without it. Rudy Mandeville reminded me of so many lost memories. John Boyle set me straight on several factual issues, and Jose Diaz has helped me get this posted on the website. Thanks to you all!



COMMUNIST PARTY FACILITY IN BONG SON



TRAFFIC IN SAIGON



OUR SCOOTER RIDE GUIDES AND FRIENDS ON RIVER (DOWNTOWN SAIGON



MARKETPLACE IN SAIGON (MASKS ARE WORN DUE TO AIR POLLUTION)



UNIFICATION PALACE DOWNTOWN SAIGON (FORMER PRESIDENTIAL PALACE)



CHAM TOWERS IN AN NHON



BEACH IN QUI NHON (WHERE WE ALL CAME IN-COUNTRY!)



YOUNG MAN GIVING US DIRECTIONS IN SAIGON (DON'T YOU JUST LOVE HIS HELMET!)



PHU CU PASS BONG SON



POSSIBLE BONG SON FORMER ARMY BASE (COULD BE MY 35TH BASECAMP!)



ART DISPLAY ON SAIGON SIDEWALK (GIRL IN RED DRESSED FOR TET HOLIDAY)



BEACH AT QUI NHON (WHERE WE PROBABLY CAME IN-COUNTRY!)



FORMER U.S. MILITARY BASE QUI NHON (RECOGNIZE ANYTHING?)



LZ LOWBOY (BRING BACK ANY MEMORIES?)



NHONG PASS BETWEEN LZ LOWBOY AND LZ THUNDER (LOOK AT THAT BEAUTIFUL HIGHWAY!)



PADDY FIELD AROUND DUC PHO



LEAN-TO BUSINESS/RESIDENCE NORTH OF DUC PHO (SEE THE TIGER PISS BEER? YUM YUM!)



**STRETCH OF QL-1 BETWEEN DUC PHO AND MO DUC (B CO, 19TH COMBAT ENGR BN
BASECAMP HAS TO BE CLOSE BY; LOOK AT THE SEMI HEADING SOUTH! AND HOW MANY
PAIRS OF SHOES DOES HE HAVE ON THAT MOTORBIKE?!)**



NEW RESORT PROPERTY SOUTH OF MO DUC