



50TH ANNIVERSARIES RETURN TO VIETNAM MHT PARTICIPANT'S RECOLLECTIONS



MHT's Vietnam Quad-Pack of Articles by Tour Participants Jim Herak, Dave Mellon, Steve Bowen & Dick Wilkerson!

MHT provides this historical forum as part of it's
Reveille Online Series as an interchange of ideas
amongst of Veteran Participants.

Table of Contents

<u>Article</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Pages</u>
Vietnam—50 Years Later A Recollection	Jim Herak	3—6
Vietnam—50 Years Later Operation Buffalo	David Mellon	7—10
Vietnam—50th Anniversary “A Happy Experience”	Steve Bowen	11—14
Vietnam Perceptions	Dick Wilkerson	15—18
Steve Bowen’s Rebuttal	Steve Bowen	19

Acknowledgement: Thanks to all our authors and to Dave Wall for recommending them. MHT regrets to report Steve Bowen was called to his final duty post on 6 July, 2017 to a short but courageous battle with lung cancer not long after he provided his insightful articles.

As Marines, we all knew Steve Bowen as an up beat, can do guy, who had an admirable zest for life. It is regrettable that he has passed away, prematurely in a certain sense. We will miss him greatly. Jim Herak



Left: Steve an
Artillery
Forward
Observer in
Southern
I-Corps.
Right: Like
Father, Like
Son. Steve III
followed his
father into the
USMC.



Vietnam - 50 Years Later A Recollection

by Jim Herak

This past March (2016), I visited the Democratic People's Republic of Vietnam, 49½ years after I first landed in what was at that time "South Vietnam." The "two Vietnams," North and South, had been warring against each other since the mid-fifties, a struggle of "independence" for each side, which was supported by competing super powers, namely Mainland China and the Soviet Union versus the United States.

I landed in South Vietnam in late October 1966 as a brand new Marine Corps 2nd lieutenant, attached to the 3rd battalion, 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment, initially as an artillery forward observer. My "tour" in South Vietnam encompassed an area south of the "demilitarized zone, from Gio Linh to Con Thein, down to the town of Dong Ha, west along Route 9 to Cam Lo and an area known as the "Rockpile." I also spent some time in Ca Lu, 6 miles south of the "Rockpile."

The year of 1966 had seen many battles and engagements with the North Vietnam Army's (NVA) regular forces and their allied irregular Viet Cong forces by many Marine Battalions of the 3rd Marine Division and to a lesser extent, the 1st Marine Division to the South.

With the exception of a number of admin trips to Da Nang, I had not visited any areas of South Vietnam other than the DMZ. So, my expectation in planning this trip, was to see a substantial number of other areas that Marine forces conducted operations, as well as to see how the Vietnamese are living a half a century after the height of the U.S. presence in their country.

Our I-Corps tour was conducted by **Military Historical Tours** located out of Northern Virginia and is staffed by Marines who are either retired or were on active duty at one time or another.

The first week of our two-week tour started in Da Nang and proceeded to China Beach, Marble Mountain, Hoi An, Chu Lai, My Lai, Liberty Bridge, the High Van Pass, Phu Bai and onto Hue City. We spent several days in Hue City where we gained a significant appreciation of the '68 Tet Offensive Operations. One of our tour guides was Chuck Meadows, a retired Marine Colonel; he was the CO of Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment (G/2/5) during that offensive to retake the city. Chuck provided a detailed review of the three weeks he had spent in Hue, engaging the NVA, building to building, house to house in intense urban warfare. By any measure, it was a tough three weeks for those who fought there.



Group at the Cam Lo Bridge.



Col Chuck Meadows, a retired Marine Colonel; he was the CO of Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment (G/2/5) during that offensive to retake the city. Chuck provided a detailed review of the three weeks he had spent in Hue, engaging the NVA, building to building, house to house in intense urban warfare. By any measure, it was a tough three weeks for those who fought there.

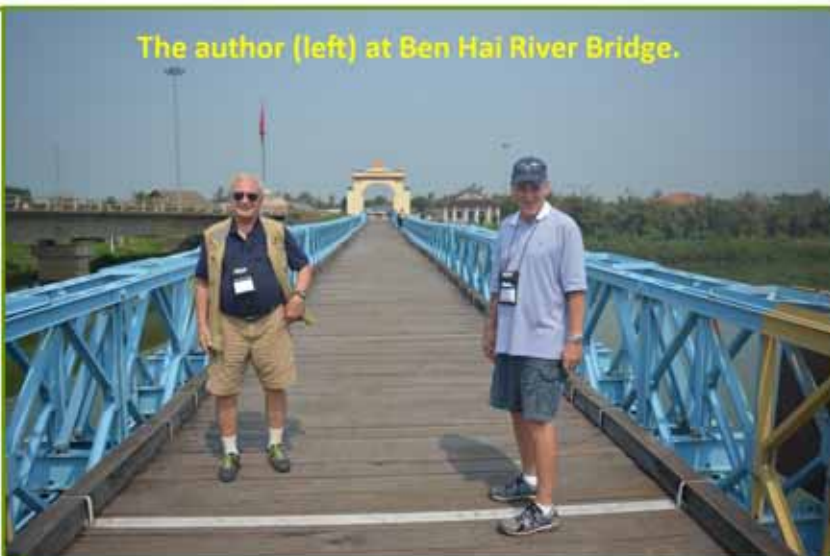
Col Chuck Meadows takes the group thru the Battle for Hue City Tet '68.

Our second week took us to Dong Ha, Route 9 out to Camp Carroll, the Rockpile, Ca Lu, Khe Sanh, Lang Vei and the Laotian border crossing. Coming back down Route 9, we were able to see the Razor Back and Dong Ha Mountain; we spent the night in Dong Ha. The next day, we went north from Cam Lo to Con Thein, over to Gio Linh and the Ben Hai River Bridge. We then returned to Dong Ha and proceeded to the Phu Bai airport for a flight to Hanoi.

In Hanoi, we visited the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, Ho's quarters on the same site, the War Museum, the Hanoi Hilton, and the lake where John McCain landed after being shot down. The afternoon of our last day, we were able to walk around on our own; I revisited the War Museum and took in the Opera House, which was originally built by the French.

The entire tour met my expectations and I would certainly recommend it to anyone who wants to see Vietnam from Chu Lai to the Ben Hai River and Hanoi. Having said that, I offer some observations and comments on what I saw in today's world and return to what I remember from my first "tour" in wartime conditions.

I would say that our accommodations, as well as the restaurants, were 1st class by any measure. For the most part, the Vietnamese were engaging, helpful and attentive. They basically liked conversing with Americans. In Da Nang, I was amazed at the road and bridge network which had been constructed. The only bridge I remember was the steel bridge the Sea Bees constructed from the Southside of Da Nang to China Beach. It is now a foot bridge. Route 1, from Chu Lai to the Ben Hai River was a modern, paved highway, with two lanes in each direction. There was even a motor-scooter lane on the right hand berm. Same for Route 9. Speaking of "scooters", they were ubiquitous; they moved like a mass of machines driving over bridges, making turns in unison. There must be one scooter per capita for the country. It was not uncommon to see "papasan" driving the



The author (left) at Ben Hai River Bridge.



The omnipresent motor scooter.



"One Dolla" will get you a foldable Non La conical hat!

scooter, with "mamasan" sitting behind, one kid in her arms and the 2nd standing in front of his father, holding on to the handle bars. In the countryside, the rice patties are as lush green as ever and the fields are still attended by barefoot men and women. Black pajamas are out, colored pajamas are in, but the traditional Vietnamese conical straw hats are still seen everywhere.

The Citadel in Hue was an interesting visit not only from the military perspective of the '68 Tet Offensive, but also as the home of the Emperor and his family for a century and a half. The massive palace contained numerous buildings which have been restored to pristine condition. We moved from one building to another in this "forbidden city" as if we were on a giant check-board. At one corner of the grounds was a display of military equipment, both NVA/Viet Cong and RVN/US, including a USAF "Huey" and a Army 175 mm self-propelled gun.



Group at the Citadel, Hue City.



The Imperial Palace, Hue City.

Up in the DMZ area, the town of Dong Ha is built up to such an extent that it is unrecognizable. The Third Marine Division HQ compound and the nearby Phu Bai Airfield are completely built over with housing and shops. While the "Rockpile" and "Razorback" were unmistakable, the areas where Camp Carroll and Con Their provided fire support bases are now rubber plantations. Across the street from the "Rockpile" is ironically a large working quarry. Ca Lu was an open field when Ki-lo 3/3 out posted the area on New Years Day 1967; today, it is a small city with paved roads with a huge military monument in the center of town. Having not served at Khe Sanh, it was revealing as to just how isolated that combat base was during the war. Also, it is difficult to imagine what force level the NVA would have needed to over-run the base.



Jim walking the ground back at the "Rockpile!"

Gio Linh, the fire support base occupied by my parent unit, Charlie Battery, 1/12, is now surrounded by housing and is home to another huge monument dedicated to the women who fought for the NVA/Viet Cong during the war. I saw a bunker from the old French constructed fort which was next to our fire support base. Because it was surrounded by a minefield back then, I wasn't about to wander into the woods to check it out. We crossed the Ben Hai River Bridge, which is now a foot bridge. Route 1 now crosses the river nearby via a concrete overpass. We visited a bunker complex, which served as an NVA supply point, at the mouth of the Ben Hai River as it empties into the South China Sea. The area was a frequent target for my battery of 105mm howitzers to fire upon. The complex was deep in the ground and I can appreciate the fact that our 105 shells probably did little to interrupt the NVA resupply operations.

Moving on to Hanoi, since I had never visited this city, I had no reference point from the past. Restaurants and accommodations are great as previously mentioned. As we visited the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, students from grade school to high school literally packed the facility, honoring their "Uncle." Surprisingly, the Honor Guards were armed with AK-47s fixed with bayonets. As I was taking a photo of Ho's office, I noticed that framed pictures of Marx and Lenin were hanging over Ho's desk.



In front of Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum, Hanoi ironically 900 yards away is a Kentucky Fried Chicken!

One little kid, probably 8-10 years old asked me in English, "where you from?" "America," I stated. "I know," he responded, "but what state you live in?" "Georgia," I answered. He says, "Yes, I know where that is." "Very good" I declared and we shook hands. Presumably, he went on to explain our conversation to his buddies. Or maybe, they all understood our conversation and they were having a conversation in Vietnamese that I was not included.

As I toured Hanoi, to me there was a glaring sense of irony. In visiting the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum and surrounding grounds, you see a man of austere comportment, a communist who was committed to his version of Vietnamese independence. Walking down the street, across from the War Museum is a large bronze statue of Lenin, atop a granite column. Two western back-packer type guys with their skate boards, are attempting to use the base of the statue as a "half pipe" for their skate board acrobatics. Vietnamese kids were attempting to mimic the actions of these western guys. Further down the street, I notice that all of the iron trellises over the street have a "hammer and sickle" forged in the iron and painted yellow. Yet, a few blocks down the street, I come up on two cars parked on the sidewalk. One is a Bentley soft top, the other a Rolls Royce sedan. In this supposed communist country, I thought to myself who can afford these vehicles? I then walked down to the Opera House, a nice French colonial building which was not open to the public that day. I proceed across the street and stumble upon the "Hanoi Stock Exchange", complete with a knockoff of the Merrill Lynch "Bull" from our Wall Street. Really? A stock exchange in Hanoi? Across the street is a "Prada" store, the upscale clothing, footwear, handbag and perfume merchant. Up drives a "Series 700 Beemer"; a 30-something, attractive, very well dressed Vietnamese woman gets out and enters the Prada store, presumably to shop for the latest Italian fashion offerings. Meanwhile, a few stores down the street, an entire Vietnamese family operating a small hardware store, sits on the sidewalk, stir frying a late lunch over a propane burner.

My closing remarks: Vietnam today truly a place of ironic images!

Jim will have to return to get a drink at the "Coming Soon" DMZ Bar!



Vietnam - 50 Years Later Operation Buffalo

by Captain David L. Mellon, USMCR (Then Second Lieutenant Platoon Commander, Bravo 1 July 1966 – February 1967)

As the 50th Anniversary of Operation Buffalo approaches in 2017, I encourage veterans of 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and others who have an interest in the historical significance of "Operation Buffalo" including the initial engagement on July 2, 1967 and the subsequent conduct of the Operation to consider joining the **Military Historical Tours** upcoming tour "First Battalion, Ninth Marines – "The Walking Dead Return to I-Corps" (8 – 20 April 2017). The tour leader will be Col. Dave Wall, USMCR (Ret.), an OCS and Basic School Classmate of mine. I have revisited Vietnam with MHT twice, in 2006 and again in 2008. Given the



flexibility of the tour leaders on those visits and their willingness to accommodate specific requests, I was able to spend several hours walking the ground where I served as a platoon commander in 1966 and 1967.

When I joined Bravo Company, 1/9, my platoon was already in position on the North side of the ferry crossing of the Song Thu Bon, after completing Operation Liberty. The ferry crossing later became the site of Liberty

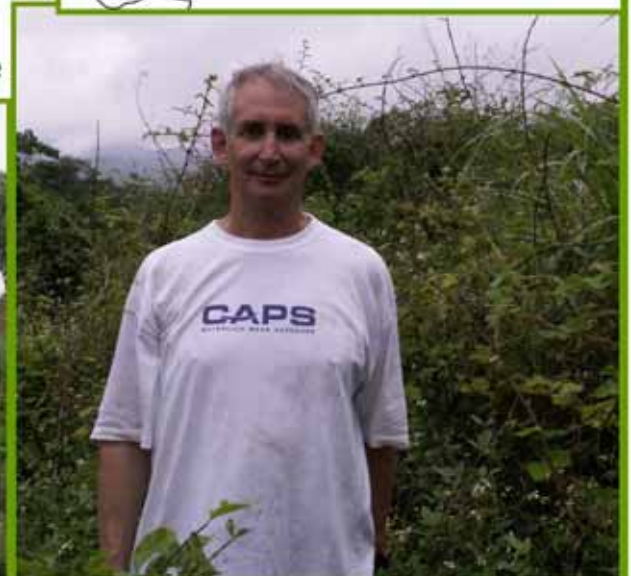
Song Thu Bon with Liberty Bridge in place 1968

Bridge. In both 2006

and 2008, I spent time walking the ground where my platoon had been emplaced.

Later on both MHT tours, I was also able to spend time in search of the location on the southern approach to Hill 861 near the Khe Sanh Combat Base, where I was wounded on February 25, 1967. Using a GPS device in 2008, I believe I was able to exactly locate the firefight site (seen below.)

Site of Firefight where I was wounded, Mausoleum now on site



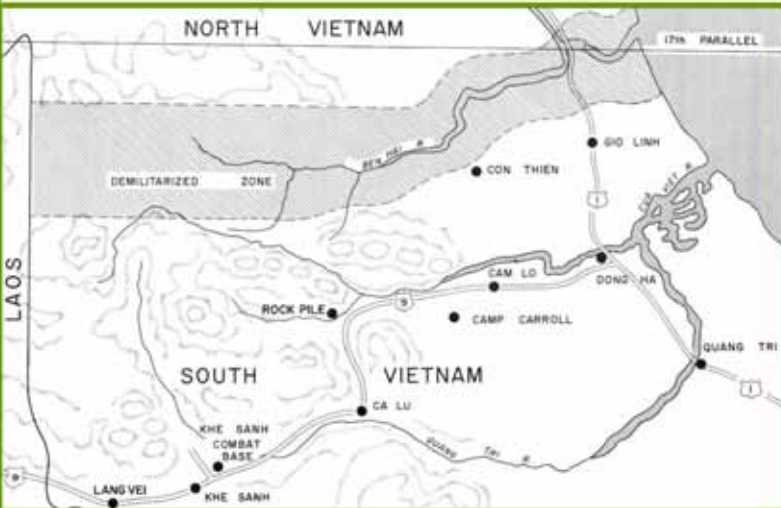
The Author at the site of the Marine Air-strip at Khe Sanh, Dong Tri in background

In addition to these personally important sites where I was able to spend solitary time, I was most appreciative of the opportunity to visit and study Con Thien. I had read of the incredible loss of life in my unit, Bravo Company, on July 2, 1967, while I was in a light-duty status on Okinawa, recovering from being WIA (Wounded In Action.) I also learned of the devastation of 1/9 CP by a 152mm delay fuse artillery round, which killed my OCS/Basic School classmate and friend, 1stLt Jerry Howell a posthumous recipient of the Navy Cross.



Old French Bunker at Con Thien

Over the years, it became important to me to visit the area and see the sites of these devastating events. In 2008, again, based on the flexibility of the tour leader, Dave Wall, I was able to locate the site of 1/9 CP and the Market Place. For those, unfamiliar with the events of July 2, 1967, let me provide a brief review as 1/9 launched Operation Buffalo, a sweep of the area north of Con Thien. As the infantrymen moved



along Route 561 in an area called the Marketplace.

In the days before July 2nd, the NVA were prepositioning infantry forces in advance of a coordinated offensive intended to overrun Con Thien and Gio Linh. Two battalions of the 90th NVA Regiment (the 7th and 9th) had moved into camouflaged and fortified positions north of Con Thien and were awaiting the order to attack. The NVA had also moved several artillery batteries into the DMZ north of Con Thien and put effective communication capabilities in place to allow for coordinated infantry attacks supported by artillery and mortars. LtCol Schening, CO of 1/9 had tasked two of the Battalion's companies, Alpha led by Captain Slater and Bravo under the command of Captain Coates, with screening Con Thien to the north for the first 10 days of July.

On July 2nd, Bravo Company was moving North on Route 561 (north east of Con Thien) and Alpha Company was about two clicks (kilometers) to the West (due north of Con Thien) and just north of Route 605. As Bravo Company moved out on the morning of July



Satellite view of the Marketplace, now a NVA Graveyard with approximately 490 graves

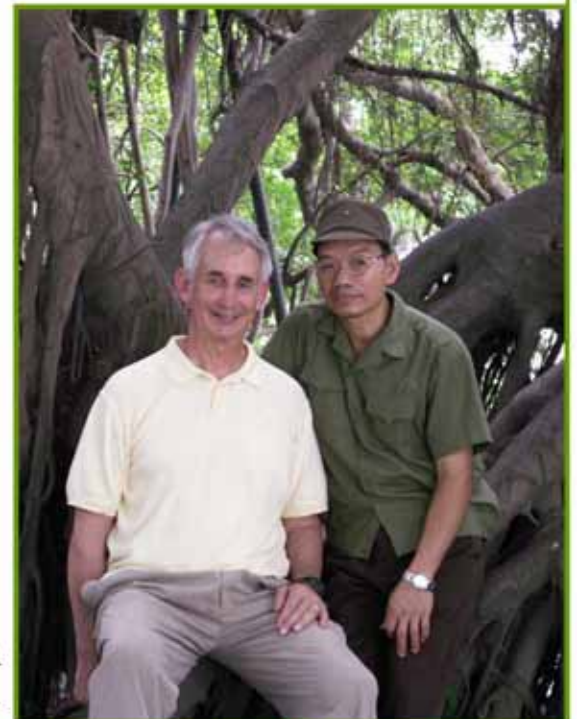
2nd, they approached the NVA's fortified positions and prematurely triggered an NVA ambush. The story of the collision of these NVA and USMC forces is well told by author, Keith William Nolan in his book, "Operation Buffalo - USMC Fight for the DMZ", which should be read by anyone considering visiting Con Thien. The running battle that developed in the aftermath of the initial contact was to quickly involve other 1/9 units, in addition to Alpha and Bravo Companies. A composite relief column left Con Thien led by Captain Radcliffe, who was tasked with taking command of Bravo Company. The relief column included the 3rd Platoon, Delta Company under 2ndLt Turchan and a platoon of tanks. The balance of Delta Company under the command of Captain Sasek and H&S Company under Lt. Dixon provided the perimeter security for the 1/9 CP at Con Thien. The next unit committed was Charlie Company commanded by Captain Hutchinson. They were heli-lifted into an LZ south of the Trace, *(The Trace was an 11 kilometer long by 600 meter wide strip of cleared land that connected the firebases, known as Alpha Positions, just below the DMZ. Anything that was on that strip, be it forest, jungle or hamlet, was flattened by the bulldozers blade. The land was muted: hills shaved, valleys filled in. Construction of both the Trace and the firebases was done by the 11th Engineers. The Trace ran between the land's two major high points: Alpha 2 on the east, known as Gio Linh, to Alpha 4 on the west, known as Con Thien. Alpha 3 sat in the saddle between the two.)* after a brief stand-down at Dong Ha. With all of 1/9's Companies totally committed and more NVA infantry being moved into position to sustain the prematurely initiated contact, 3/9 under Maj Woodring was committed on July 2nd and BLT 1/3 under LtCol Wickwire was committed on July 3rd.



The front of the Marketplace NVA Cemetery

As darkness fell on July 2nd, the Battalion's losses were recorded as 51 KIA, 160 WIA and 34 Missing. Once the bodies were recovered from the battlefield on July 5th by BLT 1/3, the first day's casualty figures were revised to 84 KIA, 166 WIA and 1 MIA. These totals included 6 Navy Corpsmen. The remains of L/Cpl Wayne Wilson were never recovered. He was a member of a 3.5 inch rocket launcher team from the Bravo's Weapons Platoon.

Bravo Company's losses on July 2, 1967 (including the FO team from 2/12 and the FAC team) totaled 61 KIA, the largest single day loss of life by an infantry company suffered during the Vietnam War. The total casualty figures for 1/9 for the 13 days of Operation Buffalo were 113 KIA, 290 WIA, 1 MIA. The NVA employed artillery with devastating results over the balance of Operation Buffalo, including two direct hits on 1/9 command posts. The first on July 6 on the Delta Company CP killed 6, including the CO, Captain Sasek. The second on July 7 on the Battalion CP killed 14, including my Classmate, 1stLt Howell, the Battalion S-2, and wounded 25.



Two veterans of I-Corp fighting

The total Marine casualties sustained by all units participating in Operation Buffalo were 159 KIA, 345 WIA and 9 MIA. NVA losses for the period were listed in official USMC history as 1,301 NVA KIA. Many of those NVA who died during the battle are buried in a graveyard erected on the site of the ambush.

During Operation Buffalo, countless Marines of 1/9 and their Corpsmen distinguished themselves with individual acts of personal initiative, leadership, heroism and sacrifice. Some of these actions were later recognized with awards and personal decorations:

Navy Cross

S/Sgt Burns
1stLt Howell*
Capt Slater
L/Cpl Stuckey

Silver Star

Maj Danielson
Capt Hutchinson
2ndLt Lubutti
Capt Radcliffe
PFC Sankey

Bronze Star

Cpl Bradley
1stLt Budinger
Capt Coates*

*-posthumous

Again, in 2008, due to the flexibility in scheduling, I was allowed the opportunity to attempt to locate the site of the Marketplace, where Bravo Company suffered such devastation. In doing so, I located the NVA cemetery where most of their KIAs from the battle were buried.

The I-Corp tour visits all of the major locations where Marines served during the Vietnam War. It is an incredible experience to walk these historic battlefields and combat bases where your friends lived and died. I found one of the most profound dimensions of the return to Vietnam with OCS and Basic School friends to be the opportunity for each member of the tour to tell their unique stories in the geography where the events actually occurred. It requires that the members of the tour “open up” to each other, but it lends a very personal touch to the tour. I strongly recommend Marine veterans consider “Returning to Vietnam.”

Lt Jerry Howell’s Navy Cross Citation: The Navy Cross is awarded to First Lieutenant Gatlin J. Howell, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism while serving as Intelligence Officer, First Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division (Reinforced), in the Republic of Vietnam from 2 to 7 July 1967. While manning the command bunker at Con Thien on 2 July, First Lieutenant Howell was closely monitoring the progress of Company B, First Battalion, as it became heavily engaged with an estimated two battalions of North Vietnamese Army Regulars near the Demilitarized Zone. When the unit suffered heavy casualties and was in danger of being overrun, he volunteered to lead a relief force to rescue the beleaguered Marines. Displaying exceptional leadership and tactical skill during his advance, he fearlessly exposed himself to enemy mortar and small-arms fire as he kept the relief column intact, pointing out directions of fire for the tanks and providing effective flank security as he moved rapidly to Company B’s position. Immediately evaluating the situation when he arrived in the battle area, he established a defensive perimeter and moved to rescue the forward elements of the besieged company. As he searched for the wounded,

he observed two men in a hole fifteen meters beyond the friendly lines. With complete disregard for his own safety, First Lieutenant Howell ran through heavy small-arms fire to treat the men and carry them to the safety of the perimeter. When his right flank was threatened by a North Vietnamese squad, he directed heavy fire against the assaulting force, undoubtedly saving the lives of at least three injured Marines caught between the enemy and the friendly lines. Subject to intense enemy mortar and artillery fire and road mines that disabled two tanks, he moved the casualties to the landing zone. After ensuring that the casualty evaluation process was well under way, he refused medical treatment for himself and instead returned to the forward area to determine that all of the wounded had been moved. During a rocket attack on 7 July at Con Thien, First Lieutenant Howell was killed in action. By his intrepid fighting spirit, daring initiative, and selfless devotion to duty at great personal risk, First Lieutenant Howell was instrumental in saving many of his fellow Marines from capture, injury or possible death, and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service He gallantly gave his life for his country.



A NVA Soldier who died on July 8, 1967, at the NVA Cemetery on the site of the Marketplace where Bravo Company was ambushed by the NVA



Right: The author upon Graduation from OCS in December 1965



1stLt Jerry Howell USMC

Vietnam - 50th Anniversary "A Happy Experience"

by Steve Bowen

I returned to Viet Nam last week after almost 50 years. I did not expect what I found.

The primary reason for my trip is that I'm developing a feature film set in "The American War" (the Vietnamese term for the 1965 to 1973 active combat) with my co-producer and writer, former lead Producer for the CBS Evening News, Tom Flynn. I also brought my grown son, Dan, as an assistant for our efforts.

But the subplot for our visit is the fact that I served as a Marine officer in Viet Nam from 1966 to 1967. I was a forward observer attached to the 7th Marines for most of my tour lasting 13 months. I have unlimited respect for my fellow Marines who endured endless search and destroy patrols, terrifying night attacks by skilled and determined enemies, and tense helicopter assaults into unknown places.

I left active duty in 1969, incredibly fortunate to have served alongside some amazing men from all walks of life whose courage, love of country and unvarnished belief in something bigger than themselves changed a somewhat closeted 1965 graduate of Holy Cross from Greenwich Ct. in ways that no other experience could.

I jumped back into "mainstream" American life in 1969 and joined the then biggest ad agency in the world, J Walter Thompson, where I ultimately rose to become President of the US Compa-



Above: The Author returns to Hill 55

ny. Viet Nam quickly became a distant memory, occasionally brought forward by a news piece or a chance encounter with a former comrade or simply seeing a young Marine in the airport. Like most of America, despite all the dramatic college protests against the war and the political uproar, I focused on everyday life in a country rich with opportunity for those both capable and determined to take advantage and pushed the Viet Nam war as far out of my mind as possible.

Flash forward to Da Nang airport on a hot evening, August 4, 2014. I certainly didn't recognize the clean, modern airport waiting for me and, unlike the last time I was there, no one shot at me! But I did immediately recognize a distinctive smell....a sweet/sour blend of things growing, dying and burning all at the same time.

That began a 12 day tour of former USMC combat sites throughout what was called I Corps.....the area from Quang Nai south of Chu Lai up to the DMZ where the Marines suffered the highest casualty rate of any major conflict in their history.....almost one in four Marines was killed or wounded.

We were part of a tour group with an outfit named Military Historical Tours who specialize in well-organized and informed tours for veterans to WW II, Korea and Viet Nam battle sites. Our leader was a terrific 83-year-old retired Marine we nicknamed Capt. Grumpy.

Knowledgeable, disciplined and full of information from one tour in Ko-

rea, two in Viet Nam and over 100 tours conducted in country, he took our group to most of the major battle sites and to places where each of us had particular memories. Our group included a highly decorated chopper pilot who did a second tour flying jets, a re-

tired First Sergeant who had run platoons with combined Marine and Vietnamese platoons (one of the most dangerous assignments in Viet Nam with an almost 100% casualty rate) and myself, a 2nd lieutenant attached to the infantry as an artillery forward observer.

A propos of nothing but that I find it amusing, we learned a delightful Vietnamese expression for a rather dreary subject. Traveling on a bus with a bunch of guys all over 70, there was a understandable, constant interest in when the next bathroom stop (pit stop, head call, men's' room, washroom, etc.) might happen. Rather than any of those dreary descriptors, our Vietnamese guide called it ...the Happy House! We all quickly picked up this delightful phrase and have promised to bring it back home.

Each of us had strong memories of many of the places we visited, shared very colorful, often funny stories, and each seemed to have been strongly moved by some deep memory of people or events that remained buried inside him.



The author (center) at lunch with OCC Classmate Col Dave Wall USMCR(Ret) (left) and the legendary Capt Ed "Grumpy" Garr USMC(Ret).



there was a understandable, constant interest in when the next bathroom stop (pit stop, head call, men's' room, washroom, etc.) might happen.



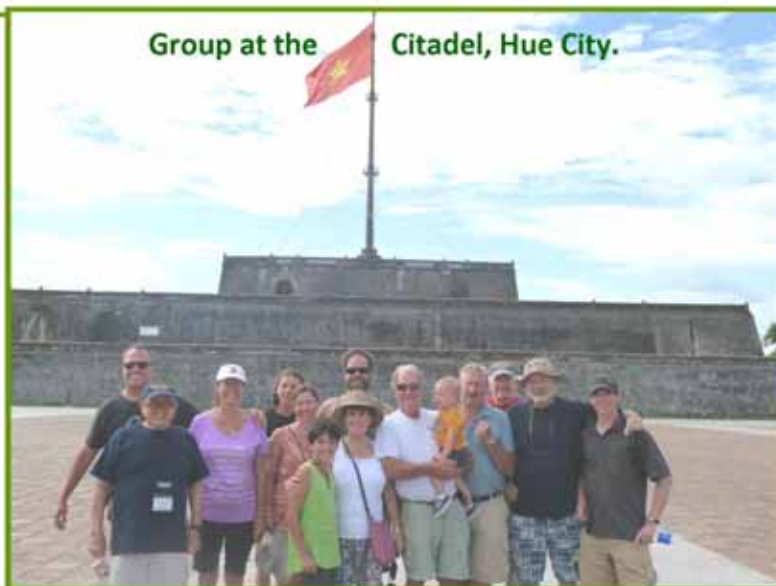
Above and below on the MHT Fun Bus in Vietnam!

While I expected that Vietnam would have changed after 47 years, I was unprepared for the amount of building and construction we saw all along Route 1. While still a rural and rice growing economy, the entire distance from Chu Lai to the DMZ {about 125 miles} is dotted with new roads, new sewers and new buildings/homes to replace the old thatched roof "villes" that we all remembered.

Our tour ended with a 3-day stay in Hanoi, a city that became, for American troops who fought in Viet Nam, almost a symbol of evil to be conquered.... the on ramp to the Ho Chi Minh trail, home of Hanoi Hannah, and the Red River Dikes, just sitting there for us to bomb and thus effectively destroy the enemy.

I didn't have high expectations for Hanoi, frankly expecting a dreary combination of Soviet architecture and 3rd world poverty. Instead, I found a charming, graceful and vibrant city teeming with ambition.

Our last night in Vietnam found my producing partner, my son and myself in the lovely home of the extended family of a former North Vietnamese officer, who is also a poet and an author. His daughter in law runs a major Vietnamese film company and two of her daughters are coming to NY City this year to attend top universities.



Group at the Citadel, Hue City.

Steve & Son on the omnipresent motor scooters that you have to be Beaucoup Dinky Dao to drive!!



With the interpreting help of the daughter, we determined that the North Vietnamese officer and I had served in direct contact with our respective forces in 1966-67. With that discovery, we enjoyed a happy toast, enthusiastically joined by our children, to celebrate the fact that we had both been "bad shots"!!

A moment I won't forget.

I'm still absorbing the experience and the information, both for my own personal well being {I've been led to believe by current standards that I must have PTSD, yet at age 70 I can't find it!} and for purposes of our movie script.

But I am drawn to make an observation, perhaps well beyond my paygrade, that seems very relevant to the question that dominates US foreign policy today....what is America's role in the world? Put another way....can we help humanity by encouraging democracy and our principles or is it a futile, narcissistic and naïve American conceit?

Since the American war in Vietnam is the event that ushered in the prevailing distrust of our leaders and of the merits of our values, the status of that country we invaded in 1965 and retreated from in 1973, in the first ever American military defeat, is perhaps of some relevance to the current debates.

From a two week visit to Vietnam, admittedly limited primarily to the northern part of the previous South Vietnam and the city of Hanoi in the former north, my overwhelming reaction is.... while we may have lost the war, if the battle was for the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people, we won that one.



(L to R) Steve who was a Forward Observer, son Dan and Anth Richardson who flew F-4 Phantoms in I-Corps!

Capitalism through Fried Chicken & Hamburgers!



Our principles of liberty and belief in the merits of capitalism have achieved in Vietnam what our bombs and bullets could not.

Along with the recognition that began with Vietnam {and has been reinforced by Iraq and Afghanistan} that "nation building" doesn't work, perhaps we should also conclude that we should have greater confidence in the natural appeal of our way of life as a desirable role model.

I realize the world is a complicated place and I am ignoring the admitted complications of fanatical religious terrorists

and the dictates of oil, but before we decide as a nation that we either "go to shooting" or simply retreat to our own continent, we might consider the example of Vietnam.

A bitter and fierce adversary that we failed to conquer by force is slowly but surely embracing personal liberty and the merits of capitalism, but very much in their own way.

Vietnam has effectively turned its back on Russia and China as undesirable models for its people and may very well join South Korea as shining examples for Asia directly attributable to America's valiant efforts.



As I approach the 50-year anniversary of my 13 months of combat, I think that's a very good thing for America and a real point of pride for all Vietnam military veterans.

The Author was a Lieutenant in Vietnam and a member of OCC 38th & The Basic School Class 3-66. He has sketch done in Vietnam.



Vietnam Perceptions

By LtCol Dick Wilkerson USMC(Ret)

[Editor's Note: Dick has been a Tour Leader to Vietnam with MHT and is a frequent contributor on historical issues. MHT welcomes his essay as part of the free flow of opinions and exchange of ideas on the Vietnam War and its continued importance to all historians and most importantly to those who served their country during the conflict. Everyone's comment are appreciated particularly the four authors we have featured since November.]

I read with interest Steve Bowen's article in the MHT Newsletter *Reveille Online January 2017*. The history of the Vietnam/American War is very complicated involving the French era, the Domino Theory, and the Communists theory. I was disappointed to read some of the comments by Steve Bowen. If he produces a documentary, I hope he will consider this essay because three of his statements are cause for concern about how he will portray the history of the Vietnam/Second Indochina/American War.

#1) We did not invade South Vietnam. The US Marines were in country as early as April 1962 when a squadron of Sikorsky UH-34 helicopters [Operation "Shufly" – Marine Medium Helicopter (HMM) Squadron – 362] was deployed from the USS Princeton (LPH-5) to support the ARVN in the Mekong Delta. That support continued through 1963 and 1964. Different squadrons were rotated in and out of Vietnam and supported the ARVN before and after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. *[Ed. Note: Please go online to read our good friend Dave Hugel's excellent article Shufly: The marine Corps' Beachhead in Vietnam, April 1962 that appeared in MCA&F's Leatherneck – Magazine of Marines.]*

In February 1965, the 1st Low Altitude Air Defense (LAAM) Battalion was deployed to the Da Nang area to provide air defense for the Da Nang Airfield. Not as invasion.

On 8 March 1965, the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) made an administrative landing across Red Beach in Da Nang. This was not an invasion. They were greeted by

local officials and young women in áo dài (literally "long shirt", the traditional silk tunic gown worn over pants) with a banner that said "Welcome U.S. Marines."



BGen "Ffred" Karch, USMC Commanding General of 9th MEB on 8 March, 1965



A 3rd Bn, 9th Marines M-37 rolls into Da Nang from 9th MEBs landing at Red Beach 2 while 1st Bn, 3rd Marines landed at the airport

#2) We did not retreat from Vietnam. President Richard Nixon started to withdraw our ground forces in order to give responsibility for all military operations to the South Vietnam military forces, along with our support. Retreat implies defeat. We were not defeated. We continued to operate in an advisory role through 30 April 1975.

#3) We did not lose the war. Our government under President Nixon

pledged support to the South Vietnamese government. Due to the liberal 94th Congress of the United States all financial support was withdrawn and we abandoned the people of South Vietnam that we had pledged to support with military supplies. The south could not survive without our support and they finally fell on 30 April 1975. Our liberal politicians were overly influenced by

the leftwing anti-war movement in this country which doomed the people of South Vietnam to years of suffering at the hands of the Communist government. It is well documented that the North confiscated property, imprisoned former soldiers and civilians who



No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now. Rarely have so many people been so wrong about so much. Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic.

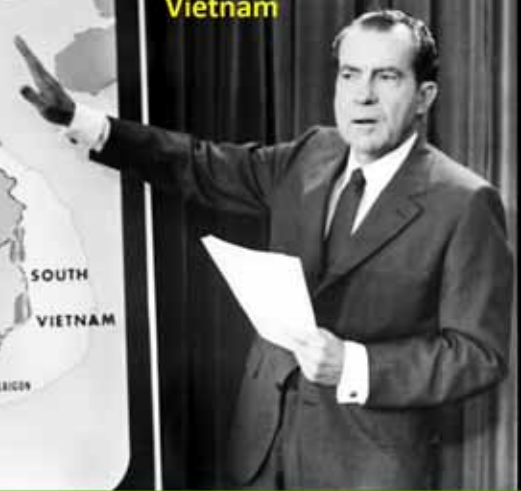
(Richard Nixon)

had worked for or with the South Vietnamese government and the US military. Some of our liberal politicians even laughed and joked about their belief that the people of South Vietnam would now be better off after the fall of Saigon. Actions of Anti-War Activists and liberal politicians in the 93rd and 94th Congress resulted in bad decisions being made resulting in the U.S. turning over the war's conduct to the South Vietnamese Military that was not prepared for this responsibility. We did not lose. Our government quit due to the Anti-War movement and a Congress dominated by liberals who did not have a clue what was going on in Indochina, before or after our involvement. Congress refused to honor our commitments made by President Nixon to the South Vietnamese government and people. They ignored the appeals of President Ford for emergency aid for our South Vietnamese allies right up until the end. They abandoned the people and government of South Vietnam.

Reeducation Camps were the official title of the post-war prison camps for dissidents



President Nixon Briefs on Vietnam



Accordingly, distortions of history do not serve us well. The communists to this day have their own warped view of the war. The children of Vietnam are taught from Kindergarten right through college that America and American people are bad. I know this for a fact since my adopted son, now a Lance Corporal in the U.S. Marines, and I have had lengthy conversations about what he was taught from Kindergarten through 5th grade in Da Nang.



Every college student in Vietnam today is required to be a member of the Communist Youth Party (CYP) of Vietnam. If they don't join they are not allowed to attend college until they do. Things are changing with the younger generations as they become more inquisitive of their own government and of America, through social media, the internet and cultural incursions from TV shows to Hollywood movies. However, they are still required to be members of the CYP and any open disagreement can still result in dire consequences.

I suggest two books to gain a good perspective of what resulted after we withdrew our ground forces and to learn what happened after the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. First, *Ride the Thunder; A Vietnam War Story of Honor and Triumph* by Richard Botkin. Second, *Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narrative of Escape and Survival* by Mary Cargill (Editor.) *Ride the Thunder* the story of the U.S. Marine advisors (COVANS) and the Vietnamese



Marines who continued the fight after the U.S. departure and is also a movie now available on DVD. If you like Hanoi Jane [Ed. Note: Jane Fonda visited Hanoi in July 1972 as part of her anti-war activism. Fonda was photographed seated on an anti-aircraft gun; the controversial photo outraged a large number of Americans and earned her the nickname "Hanoi Jane". In her 2005 autobiography, she wrote that she was manipulated into sitting on the battery; she had been horrified at the implications of the pictures and regretted they were taken. "If I was used, I allowed it to happen ... a two-minute lapse of sanity that will haunt me forever ... But the photo exists, delivering its message regardless of what I was doing or feeling. I carry

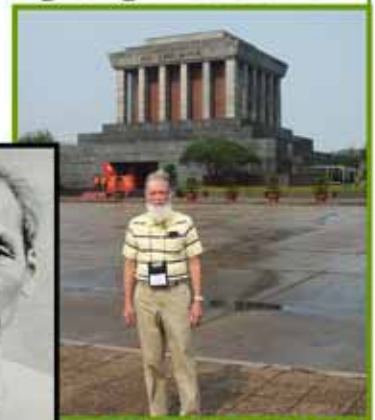
this heavy in my heart. I have apologized numerous times for any pain I may have caused servicemen and their families because of this photograph. It was never my intention to cause harm." Still many will never forgive Fonda for the radio broadcasts on Hanoi Radio throughout her two week stay and calling the returning POWs "hypocrites and liars and pawns", adding ignorantly about the prisoners she visited, "These were not men who had been tortured. These were not men who had been starved. These were not men who had been brainwashed."]



and Traitor Kerry [Ed. Note: Former Secretary of State John Kerry who served on Fast Patrol Craft (PCF) known as swift boats in the rivers and deltas of Vietnam during 1968-69. After returning to the United States, Kerry joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. On April 22, 1971, Kerry appeared before a U.S. Senate committee hearing on proposals relating to ending the war. The day after this testimony, Kerry participated in a demonstration with thousands of other veterans in which he and other Vietnam War veterans threw their medals and service ribbons over a fence erected at the front steps of the United States Capitol building to dramatize their opposition to the war. Some are still angry that Kerry threw some of his own decorations and awards as well as some given to him by other veterans to throw. As Kerry threw his decorations over the fence, his statement was: "I'm not doing this for any violent reasons, but for peace and justice, and to try and make this country wake up once and for all." Critics have questioned several aspects of Kerry's military service during the 2004 presidential campaign as 200 Vietnam-era veterans formed the group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT.) Members of SBVT have questioned his other medals and his truthfulness in testimony about the war. Defenders of John Kerry's war record, have charged that organizers of SBVT had close ties to the President George W. Bush presidential campaign and that the accusations were false and politically motivated.] I suggest not reading the book or watching the movie.



Last, I have traveled to Vietnam many times. My wife is from Ba Hang Town, Pho Yen, Thai Nguyen, North Vietnam, 53km north of Hanoi. Her father, deceased in 1987, was a career soldier in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) for over 20 years fighting in both the French Indochina War (1946-1954) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Her father was at the siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 when the French were defeated and he was at Ban Me Thuot at the end of the American War. Her uncle and aunt were career NVA officers each with over 20 years of service. Her uncle was in Saigon for its fall on 30 April 1975. I assure you they have a different view of the war than most of us do but that is an essay for another day.



Right: Two chin-bearded guys whose places are only 1000-yards apart in Hanoi. One is upset about that! Two more capitalist fast-food merchants at the Da Nang Airport.



[Editor's Note: Here is Steve Bowen's comments after reviewing Dick Wilkerson's rebuttal. MHT appreciates this active exchange of ideas.]

I appreciated Dick Wilkerson's comments on my observations about returning to Vietnam with Military Historical Tours and enjoyed some of the analysis he offers about the Vietnam War and Vietnam today.

My purpose in writing that personal reflection was not to provide a political/historical resolution to the perhaps most controversial war in American history, one about which millions of pages of non fiction and fiction have been written and one whose controversies continue to roil American politics and policy to this day.

Instead, I merely wanted to, in effect, record my personal experience of returning to a place where, as a young Marine officer, I experienced the rigors of combat against a determined enemy.



I judge that much of Lt Col Wilkerson's response was motivated by an understandable misunderstanding that my film project would be a documentary intended to resolve factual issues regarding this war. I am in fact working on a feature film that is designed to be an entertaining movie in the vein of *Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* or, more recently, *American Sniper*. I do intend that it be accurate in tone and detail, but its purpose is to entertain and move

audiences.

Specifically to his expressed factual concerns, triggered I'm sure by my observations about America's involvement in major Vietnam combat begun in 1965 and ended "in retreat" in 1973, I am not attempting to add my opinion to the 1000's of books and articles written about Vietnam. Rather I was offering a personal observation from the perspective of a young civilian's experience as a Marine officer 50 years later returning to experience that country in peacetime. I am also aware that the perspective of a career Marine officer will naturally emphasize aspects of this most controversial American war that a civilian film maker will either ignore or not address.

The very last thing I intend to resolve by my film is the on-going emotional debates {e.g., the John Kerry "swift boat" episodes or Jane Fonda fights}, though I would be naïve or dishonest to claim that the emotional debates that surround Vietnam will not enhance the commercial audience potential for a good movie. I ended my observations with a personal reflection on the experience of the tour with what was, at least for me, a beneficial recognition that, despite the on going "hawk v dove" debates that have and will surround the Vietnam War, there is a clearly positive effect from the American and Vietnamese sacrifices.

Being there with the informed resource of MHT and the company of fellow Marines was an uplifting experience for me and served to enhance my pride in having been a Marine in service to our Nation.

[Ed. Note: Thanks again to Jim Herak, Dave Mellon, Dick Wilkerson & the late Steve Bowen.]





MILITARY HISTORICAL TOURS

13198 CENTERPOINTE WAY - SUITE 202 WOODBRIDGE, VA 22193-5285
(703) 590-1295 * MHTOURS@MILTLOURS.COM