

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.



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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.



The author (left) at Ben Hai River Bridge.

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 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 Thein 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.

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!



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

