



## Log of *S/V High Drama* No.23 Vietnam 2004



**Chào --ông, bà, cô!**  
**That's "Hello--: Mr, Mrs, or Miss" in Vietnamese.**

Please join us while we leave *High Drama* and travel inland to Vietnam. This Log is a companion to the previous Log 22 in which we provided our tour of Laos and Cambodia.

As we sailed through the South Pacific we developed an interest in the Marine Corps and Naval battles in the area in World War II. We were reminded of the sacrifices of our parents' generation as we sailed in Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and as we sailed up the Coral Sea off Australia to Papua New Guinea. In this Log we travel to Vietnam, where members of our generation fought and died.

### Introduction

Upon hearing the suggestion that we should consider traveling in Southeast Asia while *High Drama* was moored in Thailand we recalled how much of our personal and national psyche had been consumed by Viet Nam in the 1960s and early 1970s. (Who would have ever expected that it would become an issue in the 2004 Presidential election, especially where a slacker calls one who served disloyal?) Experiencing a deep feeling of bitterness our immediate reaction was that there was no way we would go there as tourists. Jeff had served on active duty in the Marine Corps during that era (1970-1972) but the timing of "Vietnamization" of the war by the Nixon Administration and consequent withdrawal of the Marines resulted in a tour of duty in Okinawa in 1972 rather than Vietnam. However,

after thinking about it for several months, we concluded that we must visit Laos, Cambodia, and especially Vietnam, in large part for reconciliation.

David Lamb in his excellent book **Vietnam, Now: A Reporter Returns** (2001), observed that although we refer to the Vietnam War the Vietnamese refer to it as the American War. Moreover, Lamb makes the (now) obvious point that our name for the war was a misnomer because two other countries received the impact of our war efforts. We bombed Laos and Cambodia for five years (1964-1969) before our Presidents had the courtesy to tell the American people.

We felt that we had a good handle on the impact of the war in Southeast Asia and upon our country by virtue of our own experience during and since that era. Many of our friends served on active duty in Vietnam. Some did not return. More recently we have read books and stories by Tim O'Brien and others who still battle the memories of their experience. However, we failed to stay current about what happened in Southeast Asia after the departure of U.S. forces in 1973.

Before going traveling we read several books about Southeast Asia for an update. We were shocked to learn that people in Vietnam are still suffering injuries and dying as a consequence of our military action there more than thirty years ago. Toxic levels of dioxin from Agent Orange persist in Viet Nam. According to David Lamb, since the Americans left Viet Nam in 1973 there have been 38,000 people injured or killed in Vietnam by unexploded ordinance, which includes mines, bombs, and rocket/mortar shells.

## Danang

Most of our friends who saw duty in Vietnam passed through Danang, once the largest Marine base in the world. Surprisingly, a few structures from that era are still in use. They convey an eerie feeling.



Old Marine Corps aircraft hangars

## Hue City

After landing in Danang, Viet Nam and traveled by car to the ancient City of Hue, once the capital and cultural heart of Vietnam. The Nguyen Dynasty ruled over a united country for 150 years from Hue. The Imperial Citadel, constructed as a copy of the Forbidden City in Beijing, dominates the entrance to the old city. The massive Vietnamese flag provided our first clue to the intense national pride of the Vietnamese.



Lost tourist in front of Citadel



The Ngo Mon Gate



The Moat



A temple within the Citadel

Hue City also boasts one of several museums dedicated to Ho Chi Minh. The Hue City museum is dedicated to his struggles against the French as a young man. The memory and myth of "Uncle Ho" is kept very much alive by the Communist government.



Outside of the Hue City the Tu Duc Tomb quietly pays homage to an earlier time. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century Emperor Tu Duc used the pavilion as a place for rest and relaxation away from the city. Because he had over 100 wives he must have needed it.



Tu Duc Tomb grounds



Vietnamese women in traditional dress at Tu Duc



Guards at the Tomb of Khai Dinh



Bullet holes



Formerly a school, now a plant nursery, the site of major fighting in the battle for Hue City



Kids at the nursery



A market vendor who made a sale of a XXX shirt



Goldfish as cargo



Boxes as cargo



Tourists as cargo... after the two drivers roller dice to see who drew the big guy.

## The De-Militarized Zone: Khe Sanh

After visiting the fascinating markets and temples within the Imperial Citadel we traveled by car to the Khe San Memorial of the western end of the de-militarized zone along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel which formerly divided North and South Vietnam. US forces defended the base during a 76 day siege before the Tet offensive in 1968.



The DMZ



Hamburger hill



The memorial site receives few visitors.



Ann studies the photos.



U.S. equipment on display.



The Vietnamese always smiled in war pictures.

The Memorial displayed re-captioned US photos.



The caption states that as American soldiers “panic” at Khe Sanh “What is President Johnson thinking?”

Khe Sanh was our first war memorial in Viet Nam and we soon became accustomed to their high propaganda content. The Vietnamese describe events in a way that was considerably different from our recollection. Contrary to the information at the Memorial, US forces held the base at Khe Sanh; it was never overrun by North Vietnamese forces.

## The Tunnels of Vinh Moc

On the north side of the DMZ we visited the tunnels of Vinh Moc. After this North Vietnamese village was leveled by US carpet-bombing in 1967, the local inhabitants dug tunnels for underground living. Now only 1700 meters of tunnels remain. If you remain free from claustrophobia you can visit several rooms including an underground living room, operation (medical) room where 17 babies were born, weapon storage rooms, and some of the tiny cramped living quarters where 100 families spent several years, emerging only for a few hours every few days. With my height and girth I polished both the top and the sides of the tunnel walls.



The maternity room



A family space



MỘT SỐ TRẺ EM ĐẦU SINH RA ĐƯỢC LỘNH ĐÀO HẢI.  
BABIES WERE BORN IN THE TUNNEL.

Kids born in tunnel

# Hanoi

Hanoi presents many dichotomies of modern Vietnam. The beauty of the French colonial influence remains in the Old Quarter, the motorbike traffic jams demonstrate the success of a market economy, and the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and memorial grounds pay respect to those who sacrificed since WW II. We were interested in the Hoa Lo Prison. Originally a French prison that housed Vietnamese prisoners, it became known as the “Hanoi Hilton” where downed U.S. flyers including John McCain; our Republican Senator from Arizona was a guest for 6 years. The callously disingenuous statements on the wall make imprisonment at Hoa Lo sound like summer camp for US flyers. We also visited the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum, the Army Museum and the Museum of Ethnology which described the numerous ethnic minorities in Vietnam.



The Hoa Lo Prison Museum, formerly “The Hanoi Hilton” flanked by new high rise.



US pilots who spent time in the Hanoi Hilton. McCain upper right.



McCain dropped into a lake in short distance from downtown Hanoi making rescue impossible. His flight suit and gear are now on display.

# The Military Museum



Bombs (U.S.) on display



Aircraft (U.S.) art



We visited the same day the generals stopped by.

# The Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum

“Uncle Ho” is still regarded with great affection by the Vietnamese people and according to David Lamb, for good reason. Ho Chi Minh had a much longer view than the immediate struggle and counseled that captured American flyers should be kept alive. Ho foresaw the day that peace would come and that the Vietnamese might welcome Americans.



Ho's Mausoleum. Ho's remains were in Moscow for a face lift when we visited.



Ho Chi Minh Museum.



Ho's house on the lake.



Ho trained the fish in his lake to come when he clapped. Here our guide and Ann try clapping.

In Hanoi we visited the R&R Bar run by U.S. ex-pat Dead Head Jay Ellis. On Thursday evenings the R&R deviates from rock bands and features a classical string quartet. During breaks we were fascinated talking to the musicians, two of whom received their musical training in Russia and now play for the Vietnam National Symphony. As always, these chance encounters with people not directly in the tourism business proved the most fascinating.



Jay Ellis with string quartet and Stones poster in background.

## **The Perfume Mountain Pagoda: Huong Son.**

We traveled up the Yen Vi River by rowboat. Locals vie for the opportunity to row a one hour trip. The water is calm and the view of the mountains breathtaking.



Our guide rowed with her small child.



The lighting in the morning was eerie.



The boats have almost no freeboard.



The rowers trade off rowing.



Clammers cleaning up.



The pagoda is an important Buddhist pilgrimage center.

## Halong Bay

En route to Halong bay we stopped at the at a privately run center for handicapped people, victims of mines and many more victims with birth defects as a result of Agent Orange. There were many people working in the building who had obvious handicaps. However, we were told that EVERYTHING in the center had been made by one of the people living in the center. We were skeptical that people with severe handicaps could be trained to do some of the art work available.



Workers in the weaving room.



I bought two Shi Shi lions and a matching incense burner carved out of marble. I paid about US \$35 per piece or a total of \$105. Then, I paid another \$75 for packing, needed I was advised because of rough handling. In fact, it was necessary to figure double the size and weight of the container for shipment. Then, I paid another \$100 for shipping by slow surface freight to Phoenix. So my \$105 was now up to \$280 before I walked out the door.

Then, about two months later the crate arrived in the US. The freight agent called and said that the Center shipped the crate to me COD and that I owed another \$150 for freight. My total for these three pieces topped out at \$430, but I still may have had to pay shipping from the port of entry to Phoenix. Although the Center may be doing great things for people with physical and emotional challenges, but it is definitely a profit driven business.

## Halong Bay



Halong Bay is full of limestone outcroppings.



We rode on a dragon boat.



The crew member explained the shapes required by the government.



We had fresh seafood from the bay.



Pearl farms in Halong Bay



Both women smiled after Ann bought some inexpensive pearls from our hostess.

## Miscellaneous Pictures from Vietnam



A banana vendor



A street blacksmith



Schoolgirls in Hoi An



Woman in traditional dress with guide



A "UN" truck, so named by locals because it was manufactured from spares from all trucks at a scrap yard. Note engine starting crank.



Quilt work rice and vegetable plots.



Southeast Asia

## Conclusion

Our visit left us with many mixed feelings. The fruitless policy of containment of communism in S.E. Asia did not work. Unexploded bombs, land mines and Agent Orange continue to inflict casualties on poor farmers and children in Southeast Asia. For these people

the “American War” as the Vietnamese call it is not over. But, the shift of these three communist countries to a market economy has resulted in far greater production of rice and goods. Their attitude toward us as Americans was one of acceptance, indeed eager acceptance. Not only did they see the immediate benefits of tourism, but thanks to loosened restrictions on press and television reporting they are extremely curious about the outside world. Our visit provided feelings of reconciliation with an era 30 years ago that remains vivid for our generation.

Thanks for stopping by the **Log of High Drama**. The boat was located in Phuket, Thailand while we traveled inland in Southeast Asia. We always enjoy comments and criticism of our website. Please feel free to email us at svhighdrama at (@) yahoo.com.

Jeff & Ann Brooke  
**S/V High Drama**

Bibliography:

**Another Quiet American**, Brett Dakin (2002), **Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land** (1998), Henry Kamm, **Vietnam, Now: A Reporter Returns** (2001), David Lamb, and **The Quiet American** (1954), Graham Greene. **Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors** (1997) by Dith Pran, **Survivor of the Killing Fields** by Haing S. Ngor.

Dakin volunteered to work in Laos after graduation from Princeton University. He describes working for the Laotian government in the department responsible for developing tourism. Kamm is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for the *New York Times* who has covered Cambodia since 1969 and gives an insightful analysis, including personal interviews with current players such as Hun Sen, the current Communist Prime Minister, and King Sihanouk. David Lamb covered the Vietnam War (a misnomer he points out, because the war encompassed Laos and Cambodia as well) for UPI and returned 30 years later to set up the Hanoi Bureau for the *Los Angeles Times*. For a summary about Agent Orange see The Guardian, March 29, 2003 available on the Internet.