

was far too optimistic about the war during the early years, and he didn't look out for the welfare of the soldiers. One short talk with an advisor in the field, and he may have taken steps to get us free mail, better weapons, and combat pay much sooner than he did.

General Taylor looked tired, and he looked older than recent pictures we had seen of him in the Stars and Stripes. Before the briefing started he said, "Keep this in mind, what you tell me I am going back and tell the President." He asked very few questions as the briefers put a very rosy spin on everything that was taking place in Vietnam. A lot of highly optimistic numbers were tossed out during the briefing. I thought that so many favorable numbers were mentioned because the briefers thought that McNamara would be there, and the rumor was that McNamara liked a lot of numbers.

When the last briefer finished his presentation Taylor said that it was clear that we had the war almost won, but we could not expect to see a VC general walk out of the jungle to sign a peace treaty. He asked how we would know when the war was over. No one was ready with a quick answer for this unexpected question. I thought the famous general would ask a lot of tough, skeptical questions. He did not. As he left the room I thought that he knew less about the war than when he entered.

Shortly after I arrived in Bien Hoa I was issued a pair of jungle boots. These boots were better than the combat boots I wore during combat operations in rice paddies and in the jungle. I learned that the first shipments of these boots had arrived in Vietnam several months ago, but they were first given to Americans in Saigon and those at other higher headquarters, and the last people to get them would be the advisors in the field. Also, when I arrived at Bien Hoa I was told that I could draw an automatic weapon. Now I didn't need one any more than I needed the boots. Where were they eight months ago?

Our comfortable compound included a small library, an outdoor basketball court, a mess hall, a room for nightly movies, and comfortable quarters that were secured 24 hours a day by Vietnamese guards. We rode to our offices that were about a mile away. Our counterparts were in a nearby building and I saw my counterpart about three times a week. Each visit lasted about an hour. In a month I had far fewer hours of contact with him than I had with Tuan in a day. This amount of contact was typical for those of us in misery level two jobs.

At times my counterpart, the G-4, and I would talk about the possibility of a coup, but I noticed

that the Vietnamese officers at division level were more restrained when talking about this subject than were the officers at the 7th Regiment who discussed it freely.

When the coup was initiated it happened with lightning speed. Elements of the 7th Regiment, with Tuan in the lead, stopped briefly at Bien Hoa and dropped off the American advisors and headed toward Saigon to initiate an operation that would not include any Americans. Other division units left Bien Hoa and headed for Saigon to overthrow the government. Once the coup started it was over in a few hours. There was almost no support for Diem. Some of the soldiers who participated in the coup couldn't remember whether the tanks in Saigon that were to support Diem ever fired a shot. The palace guard infantry offered very little resistance as the palace was secured by the coup units, and within a matter of hours the bodies of Diem and Nhu were delivered to General Duong Van Minh and Tran Van Don the coup leaders.

When Tuan returned to Bien Hoa he did not have a hat or any insignia. A joyous crowd had carried him through the streets and had taken these items as mementos. I was told that for his participation in the coup Thieu was to be promoted to general and given command of a corps. Over the years I have heard it said on many occasions that we shouldn't have let the Vietnamese initiate this coup. I have always thought that this was humorous because maybe steps taken by the US could have influenced when the coup would take place, but we could not have stopped a coup. The hatred of Diem by the Buddhists, the peasants, and the military was at such a level that a coup was inevitable.

Tuan frequently said that Vietnam would not be ready for a democratic government for many years. He hoped that until Vietnam was ready to be a democracy the country should be ruled by a benevolent dictator.

While at Bien Hoa I remembered what a division staff advisor told me during my first few days in Vietnam. He said that being a division staff advisor was a dull job but at times you could do something that made it exciting by putting yourself on the fringe of danger. While serving as G-4 advisor I found out exactly what he meant. As the G-4 advisor I could make visits or inspections to outposts and provinces. These visits weren't made during periods when the lead was flying as it was so frequently at Pho Binh. While flying in and out of these sites there were times when a few rounds were fired at our helicopter and

once in awhile a few VC could be spotted for a brief moment in the jungle. For those who hadn't spent time in the jungle and on the rice paddies these experiences would certainly trigger the feeling of danger.

Usually visits with province advisors were enjoyable and informative. Most of the province advisory teams were stationed in safe towns. They gave many briefings because visitors from the States and from Saigon liked to visit the province capitals. At province level visitors got the feeling that they could really see how the war was going.

Some of the province advisory groups had a large map of the province covered by transparent acetate. The acetate was colored green to show the areas that were controlled by the government, yellow to show contested areas and red to show VC controlled areas. It seemed to me that the provinces that had a senior advisor who was about ready to depart had a map that displayed a lot of green, and a province with a recently assigned senior advisor had a map that showed a lot of red. This gave the newly assigned advisor the opportunity to show "progress." Some of the areas that I had walked through with the 7th Regiment that were colored yellow should definitely have been colored red. These areas might have been yellow as we were passing through, but as we left the area it was red. I remembered that during my first three days in Vietnam I was talking to an advisor who had completed his tour and was on his way back to the United States. He had already been at the bar for a considerable period when I joined him, so our conversation was a bit disjointed. I well remembered one thought that he passed on to me. He said that the jungle is like a lake. The water is everywhere. You can take a paddle and put it in the lake and the paddle controls that one small spot. Move the paddle and the water again occupies that spot. The VC are like the water and the ARVIN is like the paddle. The ARVIN can displace the VC at any one spot, but as soon as the ARVIN moves the VC take over.

One morning we were informed that President Kennedy had been killed. Fortunately, I was not a lone American in the field with the Vietnamese when I first heard this news because at a time like this you need someone to talk with about such a monstrous act. At first there was disbelief that such a thing could happen in the United States, and the disbelief was accompanied by shock and anger. Sudden unexpected death was not a stranger to many of us in Vietnam, but Kennedy was now much more popular in Vietnam than he had been a few months earlier before he started giving us combat pay and a few other perks, such

as awards and free mail, which were expected by servicemen who were in combat.

Within hours after we had received this tragic news the main topic of conversation was about the impact this assassination would have on us and on the war. Most of us thought that Lyndon Johnson would take the same steps that Kennedy was taking and continue the draw-down and within the very near future end the US involvement in the war. However, we were somewhat concerned about Johnson because he had shown that he knew next to nothing about Vietnam when he stated that President Diem was the Churchill of the decade.

Since the coup a strange quiet engulfed the country. There was a significant decrease in the number of operations initiated by the 5th Division, and the VC were less active. Now that Diem was gone district and province chiefs and military commanders at all levels started to submit honest reports. They now felt free to say that the hundreds of hamlets that they had been reporting as government controlled were actually controlled by the VC, and large areas that had been reported as government controlled had never been secured. We were informed that the three generals, Duong Van Minh, Tran Van Don, and Ton Tat Dinh, who were the leaders of the coup, had said that strategic hamlets were not the answer to ending the insurgency, but they did not reveal what actions they were going to initiate. During November of 1963 the smoke screen was gone. It was now clear how strong the VC were and how weak the government was. There was absolutely no light at the end of the tunnel.

It was not difficult to see how the Viet Cong had gained control of most of the population and such a huge chunk of the countryside. While the pro government Vietnamese in the cities were leading their normal lives, and reluctantly providing some of their young men for the draft, the VC of all ages were energetically working throughout the countryside to win the support of the uncommitted peasants. The Vietnamese leaders in the countryside who couldn't be won over by the VC were eliminated. The VC lacked weapons, so they would watch the ARVIN soldiers who were guarding bridges and manning outposts. They knew that the time would come when on a quiet day in the hot sun there would be a time when the soldiers would let their guard down and a far superior number of peasants could quickly overrun them and take their weapons and fade away long before a reaction force could come to their rescue.

The Vietnamese who supported the government were not willing to provide all of their sons for

the draft. While with the 7th Regiment I was told that it was unlikely that we would see the sons of the influential in the ranks. During the years ahead we would see the same thing in the United States.

During my contacts with Americans who were in misery level one and misery level two positions I heard many derogatory comments about the Vietnamese soldiers and many laudatory comments about the fighting ability of the VC. Based on my observation the ARVIN was much better than many said and the VC were not ten feet tall. In my opinion both the ARVIN and the VC were very good, tough soldiers. In my mind's eye I could see pictures of ARVIN soldiers dashing through heavy fire to reach the jungle's edge so that they could seek out the VC. I remembered many instances where ARVIN medics raced through heavy fire to get to wounded on the battlefield. I don't remember an ARVIN soldier argue about an order or ever hesitate to carry it out. I never saw a soldier complain when he was not fed and not paid.

As in any army there were instances when there was a breakdown in discipline and mistakes were made because of shortcomings of junior officers. Instances such as company officers participating in an all night card game with enlisted men when they were going to launch an attack the next morning did happen, but very infrequently.

Fortunately, the ARVIN did have officers like Tuan, Khe, and some battalion commanders who were absolutely superb in every respect. Tuan was as fine an officer as I have ever seen in any army. Unfortunately for us the VC also appeared to have highly competent commanders.

During his fiery, "If we fail here," speech that General Timmes gave us when we first arrived in Vietnam, he said that the weak link in the ARVIN was the junior leaders. Timmes should have been looking higher and closer to home for the weak link. As was evident at the debacle at Ap Bac the weak link was the high-ranking Vietnamese generals who refused to initiate the steps that would have wiped out a large Viet Cong unit. And while I was with the 7th Regiment it did not appear to me that high ranking Vietnamese officers even existed. They certainly didn't seem to care whether their troops were fed or paid.

The Vietnamese generals appeared to have little interest in the war in the countryside. On several occasions I saw Major General Timmes, the second highest ranking American officer in Vietnam in dangerous areas, but not once did I see a Vietnamese general with him. Couldn't Timmes get his

counterpart interested in the war? On a significant number of occasions I saw the ubiquitous Colonel Wilson in hot areas, but the only time I ever saw him with his counterpart, General Ton Tat Dinh, was when they made an administrative visit to Ben Cat and not to the field. On numerous occasions I saw our division senior advisor LTC Kurtz Miller, in hot spots in the field, but only once did I see his counterpart, Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu in the field. Other US generals including Bob York and "Cider" Joe Stilwell visited us in some hot spots, but never a Vietnamese general. Not once did I ever see an ARVIN general or colonel stop and say a single word to a peasant. It cannot be denied that the senior Vietnamese officers did a great job in planning and executing the coup, but it appeared that their primary interest was politics. The non-involvement of the senior ARVIN officers in the war must have been extremely embarrassing to high-ranking US officers who obviously did not have any influence on their own counterparts and these US generals were in the uncomfortable position of exhorting junior US officers to demand more from their counterparts.

In some respects the war was more demanding on the ARVIN soldier than it was on the VC. The ARVIN soldier was almost always operating in enemy controlled territory. He knew that he was always subject to attack. He knew that at any time he could step on a mine or trigger a booby trap. The VC could choose when he wanted to be an innocent peasant working in the field or when he wanted to be an armed combatant. He could almost always pick the time and place to start a fight, and he determined when the fight would end. At almost all times he knew where his enemy was. He knew where the tunnels and other safe areas were located, and where he could get food and water, and he knew that he would be well supported by the peasants. They were usually his friends and relatives. He wasn't ten feet tall. He just had a lot going for him on the battlefield which he knew so well because he lived there. He did not have a fixed term of service. He was in the battle for life, but depending on where he was located he could go for weeks or even months without being in a firefight. He had a lot of time to recruit and train.

December 15, 1963 was the day I was supposed to leave Vietnam. Usually orders were received about two weeks before the day of departure. When December finally arrived I started to look for my orders, but as the early days of December were marked off the calendar no orders were received. Our adjutant made a call to Saigon to ask about my orders, and he was told that there was a delay in getting

orders out because of the unusually large number of servicemen who were being returned to the States.

Finally, about eight days later than expected my orders arrived. Those eight days seemed like an eternity.

About the day I received orders my wife called a neighbor whose husband had left for Vietnam on about 12 January 1964, over two weeks after my Christmas day departure. She was shocked when the phone was answered , not by his wife, but by Major John Todd who was already home.

My last few days in Vietnam were spent in Saigon out-processing. The army had taken over the Continental Hotel in the center of Saigon to billet the servicemen who were about to leave the country.

Years ago this had been a swanky hotel where many movie stars had stayed, and I was surprised to find out that it didn't have hot water.

The Continental was bulging with army and air force personnel who were going home. The hotel had a large veranda where we gathered and the main complaint that most of us had was why we were being sent home about eight days late. During one of our first out-processing stops at the MAAG compound we got our answer. A colonel explained to us that during his recent visit McNamara had told them that because we were reducing our forces in Vietnam it would be a great morale builder if those who had arrived in Vietnam during January of 1963 were sent home before Christmas. Because of the limited number of aircraft going to the states they were having a difficult time complying with McNamara's order. When we asked why they weren't getting those of us who came over in December home before Christmas, we were told that McNamara didn't tell them to get the December people out by Christmas, just the January people. Things like this made us love McNamara and the people who interpreted his orders.

Some of the army and air force officers I had worked with in the TOC and in MACV were still in Saigon. They were still extremely unhappy in their misery level one assignments, but not unhappy enough to seek a field assignment. Those from the TOC said that since Diem had been killed the reports they received from the field were not nearly as optimistic, and that they were surprised by the number of hamlets that were completely under Viet Cong control. General Harkins was still telling visitors how well the war was going, and now he was one of the very few who could still see a light at the end of the tunnel.

After dinner one night on the roof of the Rex Hotel a lieutenant colonel from MACV Headquarters, who I had worked with in the past, spotted me just as I was leaving. He told me that on that

every day something really big had happened and that now total victory was just around the corner. I asked him where we had won such a huge victory, and he said that there was no victory on the battlefield. It was something much bigger than that. He went on to say that just today, at MACV, they had identified the problem and now that the problem was identified the war would end very soon. After hearing this I knew that those in MACV had learned absolutely nothing about the war.

The next day I had some free time, and I decided to go to the III Corps Advisory Headquarters and pay my respects to Colonel Wilson. This confirmed bachelor would not be leaving Vietnam until he was forced out of the army. I remembered the numerous discussions soldiers of almost all ranks had about Wilson and arguments as to whether he was the best soldier in the army or the meanest. I had decided that he was both. I wondered if he would be as abrasive during my farewell visit with him as he had been during my "welcoming" visit.

I suddenly realized that I had not obeyed one of the last orders that he had given to me when I was in the field. At that time Captain Peter Jones was the senior advisor to the 1st Battalion of the 7th Regiment and 2nd Lieutenant Edwin W. Sweeney was his assistant. Sweeney was one of the very few 2nd lieutenants I had seen in Vietnam, and he was a superb officer. He was also very fluent in Vietnamese. While in the field during a long operation they shared a hole in the ground covered by a piece of canvas and a poncho. Jones had a rash, and he had white medicine in a bottle that he applied daily. Sweeney had a persistent stomach problem, which because of the food and water was very understandable. He also had a small bottle of white medicine from which he took a mouthful several times a day. Late one night in their little hut Sweeney's stomach started to bother him and he reached for his medicine and swallowed a mouthful. He immediately became violently ill. In the dark he had grabbed the wrong bottle and had taken a healthy swig of Jones' rash medicine. A chopper was immediately requested to get him to the hospital. Sweeney was so sick that Jones thought that Sweeney might not make it. We had always been assured that if an American was seriously wounded or seriously ill a helicopter would be rushed to the scene. However, there was a breakdown in communications between two helicopter units. Each thought that the other was making the evacuation. Sweeney was not picked up until three hours after the call. We were later informed that doctors said that Sweeney had gotten to the hospital just in time. On the day I got the good

news that Sweeney was recovering, Colonel Wilson arrived for a visit. He asked me if I had received the latest report on Sweeney, and I told him that I was extremely happy to hear the good news. He glowered at me and said that I needed to reprimand Sweeney for being careless and because it cost a lot to send the chopper out for the evacuation. Of course this reprimand was never given, and I often thought that someday he might ask what action I had taken. I did tell Jones that the next time that they had a medicine mix-up to reverse everything. Jones was to rub some of Sweeney's stomach medicine on his rash.

I was informed that Wilson was away for the day, but he had left some papers that he wanted me to read. I opened the sealed envelope and saw that it contained a copy of an officer efficiency report. While in Vietnam I never thought about an efficiency report because other things, including survival, seemed more important, but now I realized the importance of this combat report. I blinked as I looked at the numerical score in the overall performance rating. My rater and Wilson, my indorser, had each given me a much higher score than I expected. The last comment in Wilson's remarks seemed to make the long year somewhat worthwhile. In closing Wilson said, "I know of no other US officer so dedicated in his service to the current effort in this country." I couldn't help but be dedicated when I was fighting with people like Tuan and Khe.

Now, for the first time since I left Saigon about ten months ago I had the opportunity to talk with a significant number of Americans who had served in a wide range of positions throughout South Vietnam. December 1963 was a most pivotal and significant month. It was a month during which we had no idea as to what the United States was going to do next in Vietnam. Only a few weeks ago Kennedy had clearly indicated that he was going to pull US forces out of Vietnam. Now we wondered if President Johnson would follow the path that Kennedy was taking and continue the withdrawal or if he was going to take another course of action. There were rumors that instead of withdrawing Johnson planned to expand the war. Kennedy's death was most untimely. It was very obvious that Johnson knew absolutely nothing about Vietnam because he had said that President Diem is the Churchill of the decade. This should have made Churchill turn over in his grave.

It was the untimely death of another president that led to our involvement in Vietnam. President Roosevelt was not going to permit the French to return to Vietnam, and if the French had not returned it is

most unlikely that the US would have ever gotten involved. Only about a month before he died Roosevelt, when talking about the French and the people of Indochina , said "...they should not go back to the French. They have been there for over a hundred years and have done nothing about educating them. For every dollar they have put in, they have taken out ten. The situation is a good deal like the Philippines were in 1898. The French have done nothing about it."

Truman did not follow the path that Roosevelt was taking. During July 1945 Ho Chi Minh pleaded for US support to keep the French out. Instead, Truman worked with the British and helped the French return. However, it was President Eisenhower who led us into the Vietnam War. While displaying incredibly weak Presidential leadership by allowing Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Admiral Arthur W. Radford to make radically different statements to the French about what role the United States would play in Indochina. Eisenhower showed how poorly informed he was about Indochina and all of Southeast Asia when he said that if Indochina fell it would cause the other nations in Southeast Asia to fall like a row of dominoes. Little did he know that ten years later his domino theory would be the butt of American and Vietnamese jokes. After only a very short period of time in Vietnam it became obvious to me that there was no row of standing dominoes that might be toppled. Instead, there was only one domino, and it was probably already lying flat on the table. It was Eisenhower who agreed to the canceling of the scheduled 1956 general elections in Vietnam. The cancellation of these elections triggered the massive buildup of the VC throughout South Vietnam and all but guaranteed that there would be a major war in South Vietnam. It was Eisenhower who started the buildup of US forces in Vietnam. Also, Eisenhower was our Commander-in Chief when the first Americans were killed by the Viet Cong on 8 July 1959, and it was under Eisenhower that the readiness of our armed forces dropped to a dangerously low level.

During 1963 it was difficult to understand why in 1959 the United States was not getting better armed and equipped when so many leaders in our government, including Eisenhower, believed in the domino theory and of course our involvement in the war would be necessary to keep the dominoes from falling. Pay was poor and recruiting objectives could not be met, and as we entered the Vietnam War our helicopter pilots were flying obsolete H-21 helicopters. We were using marginally effective, out-dated shoulder weapons, and the artillery pieces were so worn they could not be depended upon. Funding for the

army during the 1950's was certainly not what was expected with a retired general serving as our Commander-in-Chief.

During these last few days in Vietnam I had the opportunity to talk with many advisors that were processing to leave and to a few soldiers who had just arrived. I remembered how much I had learned from departing advisors during my first few days in Saigon, and I tried to be as helpful as possible to the newcomers. I was astounded at how little they knew about the war in Vietnam, and how they had been misled about the strength of the VC, and the results of the battles that had taken place throughout the provinces. They did not appear to be any better prepared for Vietnam than we were when we arrived a year earlier.

The departing advisors had served in all provinces in Vietnam. It was interesting to note that among these advisors there was a lot of disagreement over how the war was going and what the United States should do now. This was not surprising because I remember reading that years ago Kennedy had sent two high-level aides to Vietnam to see how the war was going. When they arrived in Vietnam they went in different directions and saw different things, and talked to different people. They returned and gave Kennedy their reports. One report was very optimistic and the other very pessimistic. Kennedy asked if they had gone to the same country. Some of the returning advisors were saying that we were supporting the wrong side. I heard many say that if they were Vietnamese they would be VC. Some were saying that while the war was not going well the ARVIN could still win. Almost all said that Kennedy did the right thing when he started the draw-down. Almost without exception those who had served in the misery level one and misery level two positions were far more critical of the performance of the Vietnamese soldiers than were those who fought with them in the field.

At the Continental Hotel I met a number of advisors, including Major Dominick J. Orlando and Captain Walter E. Klepadlo who had been in my Fort Bragg advisory class over a year ago. This was the first time in the past year that I had seen any of my former classmates.

As part of our out-processing a one hour talk by General Timmes was scheduled. We remembered that when we arrived one year ago Timmes predicted that we would see the end of the war. During the year things had not gone as he had predicted, but if Kennedy had not been killed he might have been right

about the war for Americans ending shortly after 1963. We heard that he was still giving the same, "If We Fail Here," speech to the new arrivals. Obviously, he would have to change some of the dates he used in the speech he gave us. We were never to know what he planned to tell us. Just before he was to speak an officer rushed in and told us that something urgent had come up that General Timmes had to take care of, and he regretted that he would not be able to see us.

Later that day we met several of the soldiers who were out-processing with us. After we had been released they went to a fashionable French club called the Circle Sporteff. Here they found out why Timmes had been to busy to see us. He was playing tennis with a Vietnamese general.

Of the approximately 200 who were in the room processing for departure it was not hard to tell who had served in the misery level three positions in the field. Those in the room who were wearing a khaki uniform that looked about two sizes too large, had probably served in the field. Since I left the 7th Regiment my weight had jumped from about 150 to 170, but my khakis fit when I arrived in Vietnam weighing 205. There were other ways of identifying the soldiers who had spent considerable time in the jungle. They did not have a healthy tan. The rays of the sun seldom reached the jungle floor that was protected by a thick, green canopy. In their wary eyes was a hint of dread or apprehension. These were the men who would leave Vietnam but were destined to carry Vietnam in their minds every day for the rest of their lives.

RETURN TO THE WORLD

The day of departure had finally arrived. There were two flights leaving for the states, two hours apart. Klepadlo was leaving on the first flight and Orlando and I on the second one. As we stood at the curb and watched the busses load for the first flight I remember hearing someone say that the people in the states would no longer receive accurate reports about Vietnam because David Halberstram was also getting ready to leave. As the busses for the first flight departed Orlando and I went back to the veranda to spend our longest two hours in Vietnam.

The pilot of our Boeing 707 told us to sit back and enjoy the flight, and that he would tell us when we reached the point of no return. As we took off I could see the tents that housed the JOC. I thought that

by this time of day the most recent information they had received was already posted on the maps, and the Vietnamese would be playing one of their board games or getting ready for a mid-day nap. By now the Americans would be reading paperbacks. For the Americans in the TOC it would be a long and dull year, and they would know very little about the war when they departed. They, as well as the other Americans who were assigned to the Saigon area, would think that the VC were losing the war. They would believe this because of the inaccurate, highly optimistic reports that poured in from the field and also because of what they saw each day. Each day they saw the streets of Saigon filled with policemen and ARVIN soldiers and thousands of Americans. They also saw numerous trucks and tanks and large numbers of aircraft roaring in and out of Ton Son Nhut. They also saw that the civilian population didn't seem to be worried about the outcome of the war. These Americans would wonder how anyone could believe that the poorly armed peasants who had no aircraft, no artillery, no tanks or trucks and little money could be regarded as a serious threat.

The Americans assigned in Saigon would not have the opportunity to see how hard the men, women, and children in the countryside fought against the ARVIN. They would never know how determined the peasants were to prevail regardless of the odds against them. They would know as little about the war as did General Paul D Harkins the MACV commander who on 31 October 1963 said, "Victory... is just months away, and the reduction of American advisors can begin anytime now... I can safely say the end of the war is in sight."

As we gained altitude I looked at the large patches of jungle to the Northwest. Elements of the 7th Regiment might be wending their way through the underbrush in one of those jungle areas seeking the elusive VC. From several thousand feet it was surprising to see how close the Iron Triangle and Zone D were to Saigon, and how small the areas were that were controlled by government forces.

As we neared Hawaii, where we were to have a three hour layover, Orlando and I planned to take a cab to Waikiki and have dinner at a restaurant on the beach. After we landed at Honolulu we only got as far as the warm lawn in front of the terminal, and we woke up just in time to catch our flight to San Francisco.

Now for the first time in a year we were among Americans who weren't soldiers or civilians

directly involved in the war, and we wondered how Americans would react to us. I remembered what I saw in Movietown news films during the 1940's. There were huge welcoming ceremonies for soldiers as they returned from combat zones on crowded ships. There were bands playing and crowds of well-wishers to greet them and ticker-tape parades. Years later when I was a student at the University of Washington I cut classes to go to the pier in Seattle where the troop ships docked that were bringing soldiers home from the Korean War. Again there were bands and parades. What kind of reception faced us at about 0230 in the San Francisco airport?

For a year I had looked forward to seeing the California coastline, but only lights could be seen below as we neared the airport. The pilot announced that air force personnel were free to leave as soon as they got off the plane, but all army personnel were to report to a desk inside the terminal.

Three years in Alaska, including nights in a pup tent in the field when it was forty below zero had not prepared me for the blast of cold California night air that hit us as we exited the plane and my loose khaki summer uniform provided absolutely no protection against the chilly blast as we walked the short distance across the tarmac from where the plane landed to the terminal. The airport was as deserted as it was on the Christmas morning we departed. I thought that there might be a sign or a banner, something saying, "Welcome Home," but there was nothing. A tired army sergeant was sitting behind the desk, and he gave each of us a paper upon which he stamped the date we arrived. As he handed me my paper he said that he wished that the army would send us back on flights that arrived at a decent hour, so that he could get some sleep.

A group of demonstrators at the airport with "Baby Killers" or "Murderers" signs would have been a better welcoming than what we received. Sign carriers would have at least let us know that someone in the states knew that we had been away, and that they knew that we had been fighting a war. The very few civilians we saw at the airport didn't know anything about Vietnam, and they didn't care. We had been sneaked out of the States a year ago and now like thieves in the night we were sneaking back in.

Our group quickly dissolved. Very few were met at the airport because we didn't know when we were going to arrive in San Francisco until we arrived in Hawaii, and there was little time to notify friends or relatives who lived in the area. Several soldiers who planned to catch flights hours later were

trying to sleep in chairs in the terminal. Eight of us were going to continue our journey by train or bus, and we were informed that the last city bus for the night that was going to the train and bus terminals in San Francisco was leaving in thirty minutes. We raced into the restrooms and quickly got out of our summer khaki uniforms and put on the only other clothes we had, lightweight civilian clothes, and then we raced to catch the cold city bus that would take us one step closer to home.

THE END

On April 30, 1975 the Communist flag was hoisted over the Saigon Presidential Palace. This was an extremely sad day for Vietnam veterans, especially those who had fought with the ARVIN and had many very close friends in the ARVIN. The end came much sooner than many veterans expected. There was no need for the commander of the Communist forces, General Van Tien Dung, to send any of his forces to the 14 heavily populated provinces south of Saigon in the Mekong Delta. For many years these provinces had been almost completely controlled by the Viet Cong as were the provinces just north and west of Saigon. When the Communist forces entered Saigon there was very little resistance. There were many Communists including some ARVN officers, even generals, who had been VC spies during the entire war. They paved the way for the Communists as they entered Saigon.

Ho Chi Minh was not alive to see the victory. He died on 3 September 1968. In 1946 when he said that there would be a war no one could have imagined how long and costly the war would be. For the Vietnamese it lasted 29 years. During this period over 40,000 French and over 58,000 Americans had been killed while fighting the guerillas and Ho's army. Estimates as to the number of Vietnamese who were killed vary but the total in North and South Vietnam combined could be well over one million.

While the Vietnam veterans worried about the fate of their Vietnamese comrades, they were being shabbily treated at home. The veterans could not understand why they were ridiculed and abused by their own countrymen. For years the percentage of Vietnam veterans who were unemployed far exceeded that of their fellow countrymen who had dodged service in Vietnam. Only one powerful entrepreneur, Ross Perot, became famous nation-wide for seeking and giving preference to Vietnam veteran job seekers.

Instead of being punished many of those who had refused to serve were treated as heroes. Who could forget Mohammed Ali's refusal to serve? Instead of being severely punished, this draft-dodger was made a national hero by some of our highest elected officials. Those who fled to Canada or a country in Europe were quickly forgiven. Many of the rich and privileged, who avoided Vietnam by using their family's influence to obtain a "safe" national guard or reserve slot which all but guaranteed that they would not serve in Vietnam quickly lost their interest in the reserve components when the war ended.

Perhaps the worst slap in the face to the Vietnam veterans who served honorably in this difficult war was administered by Nixon. A US Army officer murdered many Vietnamese children, women, and old men. These victims were either innocent civilians or prisoners of war who he should have been protecting. He was sentenced to life in prison by an army court. After only a few months in confinement he was released by Nixon. Nixon freed a mass murderer.

For all Vietnam veterans watching the ARVN lose the war was an extremely bitter pill to swallow. These veterans had made so many sacrifices, been abused and degraded by their fellow countrymen and had seen so many of their comrades killed. These veterans knew that they did not lose the war. The enemy had no chance of winning as long as we were involved, and it didn't appear that we had any chance of winning unless we resorted to genocide, which was supported by only the very few who wanted to employ nuclear weapons. The Americans who were in close combat with the enemy and who had witnessed the resolve of the peasants knew that the war would end quickly if we withdrew our support.

Many veterans who are bitter about the outcome of the war say that we didn't win because we had to fight with one hand tied behind our backs. Some say that our other hand would have been released if our politicians, especially Johnson, Nixon, McNamara, Rusk, and Laird had gotten completely out of the picture and turned the war over to the military. But we must remember that in 1963 our MACV commander, General Harkins said that based on what we were doing the war would be over in a few months. Could we have given complete control of the war to someone who obviously knew so little? In 1967 General Westmoreland said that we were winning and could withdraw in 1969. He was given almost unlimited resources, but when he left Vietnam we were no closer to victory than we were when he arrived.

Some said that more bombing would have released our other hand. However, we dropped more tonnage of ordnance on tiny Vietnam than we dropped throughout the world during World War II.

Some say that the way we could have untied our other hand was to double or triple the size of our force in Vietnam. At first we thought that three thousand Americans were all that was needed. Then we thought fifteen thousand, then half a million. With these huge increases we still weren't able to silence the enemy, so could we really expect that a much larger force could do the job? Obviously, the American people were in no mood to put more than half a million soldiers in Vietnam.

A few say that the way we could have untied our other hand was just to start dropping "nukes." After all didn't Japan surrender after just two primitive "nukes" were dropped? This, of course, was an option the American people would not accept.

As the years passed our political leaders and the American people continued to reward those who had dodged Vietnam and ignored those who had served. In 1988 George Bush selected Dan Quayle, a Vietnam evader, as his running mate. Four years later the American people elected Bill Clinton, another Vietnam evader. Both of these presidents, as well as Ronald Reagan, who served before them, picked very few Vietnam veterans to serve in high places in our government.

Finally Congress decided to give some recognition to some Vietnamese veterans. A bill of rights was passed which provided educational and other benefits to those who served in Vietnam after mid-1965. Once again our elected officials chose to overlook and degrade the efforts and sacrifices of those who served during the first six years of this war.

THE WALL

We finally found a parking place on Potomac Drive, and my wife and I joined the crowd that was walking across the grassy fields toward the huge, beautiful, and famous Lincoln Memorial that glistened in the bright summer sun about a half a mile away. As two small boys, walking between their father and mother approached, the older one looked up at his father and said, "Daddy, we didn't walk up to see the Lincoln Memorial." We wouldn't be walking up to see it either. We would hardly notice it. Now this famous memorial, which until now had been one of the most popular tourist attractions in the country,

was nothing more than a landmark that would guide us, and so many others, to the new main attraction. What was now the main attraction was a squat 500 foot wall that was erected in a ditch. It would forever cast a shadow over the towering Lincoln Memorial.

Even though it was now over 20 years since I first returned from Vietnam on that cold December night I was still not prepared to see this wall. Probably no Vietnam veteran could be fully prepared to see this wall which is called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I knew that the wall was actually two walls, the East Wall and the West Wall, which intersected at a 125 degree angle. Each contained 70 panels, and the names of over 29,000 Americans who died during the longest war in our history were engraved on each wall.

The East Wall with its lower right end pointing toward the Washington Monument contained the names of over 29,000 who died between 8 July 1959 and 25 May 1968. They died under four presidents, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. The names of over 29,000 who died between 25 May 1968 and 15 May 1975 are engraved on the West Wall. They died while Nixon was president.

As we neared the Wall I recalled that about 20 years ago when Kennedy was killed we only had a few hundred servicemen in the field who were in direct contact with the Viet Cong. At that time the total number of Americans who had been killed was about 200, and we were starting to withdraw our forces. At first it appeared that Johnson was going to follow the path that Kennedy was taking. On 21 October 1964 Johnson said, "...We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." However, while he was saying this he was sending American boys nine or ten thousand miles to fight this war. By 27 July 1964 he had increased our forces in Vietnam to over 21,000, and this build-up and the subsequent build-ups meant that there would be over 58,000 names on the wall instead of 200.

The years after I left Vietnam were not happy ones for the 7th Regiment. One event that I was informed of which took place almost exactly one year after I left Vietnam was an especially sad one for me. During early January of 1965 I was told that a helicopter was taking a very good friend of mine, Major Roy Congleton, to a spot in the jungle where he was to join the 7th Regiment as the senior advisor. The location was not far from where I had joined the regiment during 1963. As the chopper landed a number of Vietnamese officers approached to welcome him to the regiment. Evidently, a Viet Cong sniper

about 300 yards away realized that Roy was a very important person, and he fired and made a lucky, deadly hit, so the helicopter that carried him to the area took his body back.

About ten months later, while I was assigned in Washington D.C., I was walking past a newspaper stand and I saw the heading of an article that said that a Vietnamese regiment had been destroyed. I bought the paper and quickly put it in my briefcase because I was not prepared to read what I was sure was in the article. I wanted to wait until I was alone before I read it.

I tried to tell myself that there were thirty regiments in the South Vietnamese Army, so there was only one chance out of thirty that it would be the 7th Regiment. I knew that I was only kidding myself because there was only one regiment that operated in the most deadly area in South Vietnam, the 7th Regiment. A couple of hours later I opened the paper and read the article. The regiment that was destroyed was, as I knew already, the 7th Regiment. It appeared that early in the morning, just as the regiment was breaking camp and preparing to move, the VC launched their attack. It sounded like a repeat of the VC attack on 10 May 1963, only this time the VC were not beaten off. The name of the regimental commander was given. It was not Major Tuan. Now I was left to wonder if Captain Khe and many of the other Vietnamese I had known so well were killed in this battle. The jungle in the area where the attack took place is extremely dense, so it is likely that some members of the 7th could have escaped. Of course the regiment would be rebuilt, but the 7th Regiment I had known had been destroyed. The article described where the battle had taken place. It was only about 3 miles from where we had tried to build Pho Binh.

As we started walking along the West Wall I couldn't help but be amazed that we had a Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. before there was a memorial for World War II veterans or for the veterans of the Korean War. Both of these wars, especially WWII, were far more popular with the public than was the Vietnam War. Of course World War II veterans had huge memorials all over the world. The largest being a free Europe and a democratic Japan. The Vietnam veterans had no memorials anywhere.

Vietnam veterans owed a huge debt to Jan Scruggs who worked tirelessly for years to make his dream for the memorial become a reality, and we owe a debt to Ross Perot who provided the early financial support. Scruggs said that he hoped the wall would be a wall that healed, but one look at the thousands of names and I realized that nothing could heal the pain and anguish that was attached to each name on the wall.

As I walked down the pathway in front of the panels of the West Wall I realized the magnitude of our losses. There are enough names engraved on these beautiful shiny granite panels to man four US Army divisions. For every man killed in combat there are probably at least two who are seriously wounded, so the number of seriously wounded could staff eight more divisions.

Like a magnet I was drawn to where the East and West Walls met. On the upper left hand corner of the first panel of the east wall the year the war for Americans started, 1959, was engraved , and the names of the first two Americans who were killed when the VC attacked an American compound in Bien Hoa, Dale Buis and Chester Ovnard led the list of over 58,000.

The names of older professional servicemen dominated panel 1 of the East Wall. Unlike the vast majority of those whose names are etched on the other 139 panels, many of those on the first panel were not fighting under the stars and stripes when they died. They were fighting under a yellow flag with three wide, red, horizontal stripes. Some of them died when our president was denying that they were in combat. Most of these died a lonesome death. There were few, if any, Americans comrades in the area when they died. There were no American medics available who may have been able to keep them alive until they could be evacuated. These were the Americans who were not receiving combat pay when they died, and our government didn't think enough of what they were doing to allow them to be considered for many military awards.

A large number of those whose names are engraved in the top half of panel 1 of the East Wall had volunteered for Vietnam and had volunteered to serve in combat positions. They died when so many of us believed that if the VC won, millions of people in many nations would become slaves under ruthless communist dictators and that the United States would be weakened to the extent that we would no longer be a major power. They died before we knew how little support the Diem government had with the millions of peasants and before we knew how determined they were to bring Ho Chi Minh to power. They died when the war was an adventure and thought to be a noble, and not a vain endeavor.

In sharp contrast to this first panel a very high percentage of the names on the other 139 panels belonged to the young. Johnson shied away from calling up reserve units to satisfy the rapid build-up of our forces in Vietnam. Instead, he relied on the draft. Many of the wealthy avoided the draft by becoming professional students and for many years they got student deferments. Many others who were rich and

famous were able to use their connections to obtain coveted spots in reserve and national guard units. So the young, poor, and the disaffected along with professional NCOs and Officers fought the battles and suffered the losses. At no point along the wall was there a cluster of visitors looking at the engraved name of someone who was famous or influential. They had found ways to avoid Vietnam.

As we were leaving I took one last look down the 500 foot wall which contained the names of so many friends and so many who I had served with over the years. As I looked at the faces of many veterans who were leaving I could see the wall had a significant impact on each of them, but I knew that what we lost in Vietnam was far too enormous to be healed by this beautiful and impressive memorial.

THE FRUIT OF DEFEAT

Our large Princess cruise ship was heading for Vung Tau. Now, in 1997, quite a few Americans were visiting Vietnam, and most of the passengers on our ship wished that we could spend more than one day in this small Communist country. I hadn't been in Vietnam since 1970 which was five years before the ARVIN, which numbered well over 1,000,000 men, had surrendered to the much smaller North Vietnamese attacking forces. By now, according to all the wise men who believed in the domino theory, the Communist Vietnamese forces should have overrun all of Southeast Asia and be invading Australia and New Zealand.

In the lounge I found the Vietnamese who were going to give talks to the passengers that night and I asked them about what we could expect the next day when we went ashore. I asked them if the Vietnamese harbored a great deal of hatred for Americans. To my surprise they told me that the Vietnamese were extremely fond of Americans and that it was highly unlikely that I would meet a single Vietnamese who disliked Americans. I asked how the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese could not hate us after we had dropped so many bombs on them and had fought so many bitter battles against them. Also, how could the Vietnamese who fought for the ARVIN not hate us after we pulled out and left them to face the VC and the North Vietnamese alone. They told me that the Vietnamese regarded their war with America as just one more step they had to take to gain their independence after having already fought for their freedom against the Chinese, Japanese, and French.

They told me that almost all of the Vietnamese had forgotten about their war with America, and that since that war ended they had fought a brief, but very sharp, war against China. They stressed that for many years the Vietnamese had wanted to have close and friendly relations with the United States.

During their formal evening briefing to the passengers the Vietnamese briefers said nothing about the war. A great deal was said about the interesting trips that passengers would be able to take in Saigon to lacquer and pottery factories. I asked the ship's officer who was in charge of entertainment why nothing was said about the war. She said that the war was not mentioned because it was sad, and they only wanted to talk to the passengers about happy things.

Buses for Saigon were waiting for us as we came ashore on the ship's tenders. I would not have recognized Vung Tau which I last saw in 1963. The town had grown a great deal. It appeared that the population of the town had more than tripled. Our bus moved very slowly as we went through town. The streets were jammed with motorcycles and bicycles.

We didn't move much faster when we got on the highway to Saigon. Large sections of the road were under construction. There was very little equipment being used on the long sections of road being repaired. The work was being done by thousands of laborers with shovels and wheelbarrows. This is how the road work was done in 1963 and 1970. As we crept along the road, the workers smiled and waved.

As we neared Saigon, which I had last seen in 1970, I recognized a few landmarks, but things had changed a great deal. There were numerous smoke-belching large and small trucks clogging the highway. Large areas that had been rice fields were now the home of large and small factories. Not a single military vehicle was to be seen.

The trucks started to disappear as we neared the center of Saigon and there was a dramatic increase in the number of motorcycles and bicycles. Suddenly we were in the center of Ho Chi Minh City which almost everyone continued to call Saigon.

The city had changed a great deal between 1963 and 1970. During this seven year period the population in Saigon more than doubled. In 1963 it was a fairly clean city. In 1970 it was filthy. Traffic had increased and the air was so polluted it was difficult to breathe. In 1970 there were far more Americans in town, and the vast majority of these Americans were young men in their early twenties who did not display the same level of respect for the Vietnamese as did the older Americans who were

there in 1963. In 1970 the Vietnamese were far less friendly than they were in 1963. Now I was to see how much the city had changed during the past 27 years.

Now there were almost no trucks and very few cars on the downtown streets, but motorcycles and bicycles were so numerous that it was difficult to cross any street. The city was clean, and the air was clean. Tall buildings were going up throughout the city. The seven story Caravelle Hotel that had been the tallest building in town in 1963 was being expanded, but comparing it to the new buildings, it looked like it had shrunk.

The Continental hotel had lost all of its charm. The large open porch that bordered Tu Do street had been converted to offices. While many new buildings were rising little maintenance was being performed on the older buildings and a great deal of work needed to be done on the sidewalks throughout the city. I expected to see numerous red propaganda banners, but there were none. Once in awhile a small red star could be seen on a building. On the grassy plot in front of the Rex Hotel stands a monument of Ho Chi Minh. There was no sign of the large memorial to the ARVIN soldier that had been on the lawn across the street from the Continental hotel. The Vietnamese briefers said that the Vietnamese had forgotten about the war, but not far from the center of town a museum devoted to the war is maintained.

Unlike 1970 there were now very few panhandlers on the streets. Most of the few had lost an arm or a leg which I assumed had been lost during the war. A number of small children followed us and in a polite and shy manner tried to sell us cards and souvenirs.

At noon the relatively quiet sidewalks sprang to life as thousands of mostly young Vietnamese workers poured out of the buildings that were under construction and raced to the numerous outdoor eating facilities. Every one of these workers smiled and appeared very happy to see us.

We were able to have in-depth conversations with a few Vietnamese. When I asked the most fluent and intelligent Vietnamese about whether the Vietnamese people were better off under the Communists than they would have been if the ARVIN had prevailed, they seemed very uncertain. They said the people couldn't complain because the government they now had was what the vast majority of them wanted. They gave no indication as to which government they would have preferred.

The briefers on the cruise ship had been right about how friendly the Vietnamese would be to Americans. I told one group of workers who did not speak English that I had been an American advisor

during the war. They all smiled and spoke excitedly and many of them grabbed my hand. At this time I began to feel that for me as well as for them the war was over.

The air conditioner on our bus wasn't working during our long and slow ride back to Vung Tau. Now that I had seen Saigon after the Communists had won the war I wondered what it would have been like in Vietnam if we had not withdrawn our forces.

I remembered that during the early months of his presidency Lyndon Johnson had said, "In Vietnam, too, we work for world order ... Let no one doubt for a moment that we have the resources and the will to follow this course as long as it may take. No one should think for a moment that we will be worn down, nor will we be driven out, and we will not be provoked into rashness." Johnson was wrong. I wondered if we had stayed, would we still be fighting this endless war in 1997. Obviously, we had the resources and the manpower to continue fighting this low intensity war indefinitely. In 1975 when the war ended our enemy had the strength to take offensive action and defeat an ARVIN force of over one million in just two months, so they had the capability to continue the war for a long time. If you think that the war couldn't have continued for another 25 years, you need to remember how much we had under estimated the enemy in the past. During October 1963 General Harkins, the American who should have known the most about the enemy, said that the war would be over in a few months. He was not only wrong by nine years, he picked the wrong winner.

The war didn't continue for another 25 years because the American people thought that a fifteen year war was long enough, and President Nixon frantically sought a way to end our involvement. We were starting to believe the Vietnamese when they said if necessary the war would be fought by their children and grandchildren.

If we had significantly increased the size of our force in Vietnam, to perhaps over one million, and stepped up our bombing over a long period of time, we may have been able to get the North Vietnamese forces to withdraw. However, even if they had withdrawn we would still have been faced with a huge number, perhaps as many as twelve million, South Vietnamese peasants who lived throughout the countryside who would have refused to submit to an unpopular government that had been thrust upon them by a foreign country.

After World War II ended we had a huge occupation force of over 150,000 in Europe for over 40 years. We have maintained a force of over 40,000 in Korea since that war ended over 40 years ago. If we had "won" in Vietnam one can only speculate how large an American force would have been required to control the millions of peasants in the countryside in South Vietnam who would certainly have hated us. Also there would always be the threat of North Vietnamese forces slipping back into South Vietnam. During March and April of 1955 we saw that a one million man South Vietnamese army was no match for the North Vietnamese forces who were well supported by the peasants. Perhaps an American occupying force of well over 100,000 would have been necessary for an indefinite period to keep in power a Vietnamese government which we supported. This would mean that we would have won a very costly victory.

In 1945 Ho Chi Minh, who supported us throughout World War II, let us know that his government wanted to be a friend and ally of the United States. Instead of accepting his offer we chose to support the French. Now, over 50 years later, Ho Chi Minh's government, now in the hands of his former lieutenants, is once again wanting to be our friend and ally.

As a result of the war we lost a great deal. In addition to the more than 58,000 who died, the many additional thousands who were wounded, and thousands who were not wounded but in other ways were scarred by the war, billions were spent on this vain endeavor. Also, we lost the respect of many nations throughout the world who thought that we should not be fighting what Lyndon Johnson called a "Little piss ant country."

I have heard it said that our involvement in the war gave millions of Vietnamese the opportunity to live ten more years under a government that allowed them to be free. Those who say this do not know what it was like in the countryside while we were involved in the war. The Saigon government had absolutely no control over the peasants during the war, and the peasants detested the Saigon government.

The opportunity we now have in Vietnam, to have an ally and a friend that costs us nothing, appears to be exactly the same opportunity that we had in 1945. If President Roosevelt had lived one year longer, the French might not have returned to Vietnam and the eight year French-Indochina War and the U.S.-Vietnam War would never have been fought.

Unfortunately President Truman and Eisenhower didn't understand what was taking place in Vietnam, and they appeared to have no desire to listen to Ho Chi Minh, a harmless looking scraggy peasant who had a few poorly armed and equipped battalions.

If President Kennedy had lived the Wall near the Lincoln Memorial might have less than 300 names. Kennedy listened to many advisors and military leaders who continually assured him that great progress was being made, and that the war will be over in a few months, and that we see the light at the end of the tunnel. But Kennedy was shrewd enough to listen to the man who knew most about the Far East, General MacArthur. MacArthur advised Kennedy not to get involved in a war in Vietnam and in 1963, when Kennedy started the draw down, it appeared that MacArthur carried far more weight with the young president than did McNamara and Generals Harkins and Taylor, and so many more of whom David Halberstram refers to as the Brightest and the Best.

By the time that President Johnson and President Nixon took office it was crystal clear that the Vietnamese had no intention of knocking over a long row of dominos, but by now there was a desire to have coon skins to hang on the wall and no desire to go down in history as the first president to lose a war.

As we were getting back on the ship a man who looked like he was about 35, who would have been a young teenager when the war ended, asked his wife why we fought a war against the Vietnamese. I thought that there were probably millions of Americans who would like to hear a good answer to that question. I thought that I knew the answer until I spent many weeks in the jungle and in VC controlled hamlets, and found out that there was no row of standing dominos that was going to be knocked over.