



I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You Part I: The War In Viet Nam, 1967

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Part I Section 4: Three Decades Later

I continued to think about the children of the village often over the ensuing twenty-eight years. Frequently all I could envision was the marketplace in Lai Phuoc destroyed, and Hue and others the victims of "friendly fire." As I reminisced of those beautiful children sitting on my lap, tugging at my chest hair and giggling, I came to despise the term "friendly fire". What a heartless face we assign to such a horrible event.

Years later, when I read that Quang Tri was the center of intense fighting during the Tet Offensive of 1968, then again in 1972, I worried about all of my "family" in Lai Phuoc and Phuoc My. As the years passed, I would often look at the picture Co Hue had given me. That did little more than fan the fires of concern for all of my friends in the village.

After the Americans left Quang Tri Province, a natural reaction of some of the Vietnamese people was to feel deserted, particularly those who had risked everything for our cause. Many of them were sent off to "re-education camps" where they died by the hundreds-of-thousands.

The thought they had been abandoned would exist in a little hamlet in the northern portion of Quang Tri Province. A beautiful young woman in Lai Phuoc would wonder as she entered her twenties. Viewing the world through her window of rice paddies, it is not likely that she would know anything about embassies, international relationships, and boycotts. All she would know is that, as all those years passed, none of her dinky-dow Wakee friends returned. The funny looking CAP Marine with the missing tooth, the one she had asked to remember her, had disappeared with the rest.

Eventually, Hue married. Over the years she had five children. She moved with her family to Phuoc My and opened a small roadside shop, just like many of the villagers did when Viet Nam opened its doors to free enterprise. Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City. It was rebuilt, along with Da Nang, Hue, and other metropolitan areas. These areas continue to grow, complete with high rise buildings and busy thoroughfares.

For the villagers of Trieu Ai, renamed Trieu Giang in 1975, nothing really changed. Their lives still consist of rice paddies, backbreaking work, and family, just as they did before the war. Hue and her family live in a crude hut built from remnants of American buildings, possibly even items left behind from the CAP compound. If it is left over from the CAP unit, then twenty-eight years of monsoon rains and 110 degree heat have taken a toll. She hopes to build a new house in the summer of 1994.

In 1985 I did a little research on the CAP program. While at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, I met Connie Menefee. She helped me with my research. Those efforts resulted in her taking an active interest in the CAP Unit Veterans Association. Eventually Connie became our unit historian. In early 1993 she announced that she was taking a three week trip to Vietnam with several veterans. She asked if I wanted to go along. I did not. My reluctance was not for reasons we normally expect. I did not fear opening old wounds, nightmares, flashbacks, and so forth. My reasons were less dramatic than that. I did not go because I was afraid to find that my worst nightmares about the children of Lai Phuoc and Phuoc My were true. I did not want to be confronted with the truth while in the village.

That is one of the personality mood swings found in many combat veterans. Much has been written of warriors engaging

in the bloodbath of a heated battle, only to be moved to tears at the plight of an innocent victim of the war. That scenario was played out thousands of times in CAP 'Villes in Vietnam during the war. I have called in air strikes on enemy positions, strikes that resulted in bombs or napalm. I've toured the results of those attacks and stood in arrogant triumph over the bodies of the victims, in one instance it was the body of a pregnant teen-aged girl. The fact that she was on the wrong end of a .30cal machine gun waiting to ambush me is of some consolation.

Hours later, back in the village, I've sat and laughed heartily as a 3 year old Vietnamese child sat on my lap, tugging at my chest hair, and giggling because she had never seen chest hair before.

While I only vaguely remembered the carnage of the war, and had given no thought to the dead enemy, I'd never forgotten the feeling of those little girls tugging at my chest hair. I'd lost many a night's sleep with visions of them as victims of someone else's napalm.

On April 20, 1994, Connie and Tom Harvey, a former CAP Marine, were passing through Lai Phuoc on their way to Khe Sanh. I had given Connie the picture that Hue had given me in 1967. It was a very bad picture. Even I have difficulty remembering her face by looking at it. The group had a Vietnamese friend from Da Nang, Tuyet (To-Wit), to help during their trip. Tuyet said she knew of the hamlet of Ai Tu, so that was where they started their search. The six other American tourists with Connie and Tom were taking bets. The odds were heavily against ever finding Hue. They had seen the picture!



They were very nearly right. Tuyet took them directly to Ai Tu where she began showing the picture to the villagers. It was a long search, but eventually she found a young lady, Co Dang Thi Que, daughter of PF Ha Si Phu, who recognized Hue. Co Quy gave instructions to another villager, and Connie and her group followed her to a small roadside shop in Phuoc My. While the Americans waited in the van, Tuyet entered the shop and showed the picture to the proprietor.

The Picture Co Hue Gave Me In 1967 Enlarged And Almost Recognizable

Tuyet asked, "Do you know this person?"

Hue said excitedly, "That's me."

Tuyet asked what she remembered about the picture. Hue told her that she had given it to a Marine in 1967. Oh, and incidentally, she also said that the Marine had a missing tooth! Tuyet then told her a tourist had brought the picture from America.

What was going through Hue's mind those first few moments? She explains her thoughts in a letter.

"Do you understand that at the first time Connie met me I felt so stupefied and scared?" she said. "I wondered why American people stop in my house so suddenly. I feared and stayed anxious. Then the interpreter said that Connie, a friend of Tim, was looking for me, so I felt recovered."

Co Hue was trembling by the time she got to the van. Connie gave her a picture I had sent of Phil Prince and me. Within minutes the van was surrounded by a small group of villagers. They passed the picture around; they pointed at my unsmiling picture, tapped their teeth in memory of my missing one, and they laughed. They remembered me, gap faced smile and all. Throughout the visit Hue held tenaciously to Connie's hand. It was a virtual death grip. Her hands never stopped trembling. The tour then moved on to Khe Sahn, telling Hue that they would stop on the way back.

In their absence Hue went out into the village looking for people who remembered us. She located Nguyen Chong, one of our PFs. She then sat down and wrote me a letter. In her letter she mentions Ha Si Nam and Ha Si Phu saying, "Your friends they all dead." She talks about how stunned she was when told that an American tourist was looking for her. She could not believe that I would remember "...a child from Vietnam."



Connie had told her that I have a married daughter. In one touching comment Hue said, "I think you would not to remember me and send me an announcement." Could this charming lady be hurt that I

"forgot" to invite her to the wedding? She asks that I "...come to Vietnam so my family can visit with your family." She sent me another picture (above right), this one taken in 1973, writing on the back, "For Your Memories".

In a letter to me after his return, Tom Harvey said the group was nearly moved to tears by the experience. Dan Sharp, a Lt. Colonel with the 101st. Airborne Division, had commented after an earlier visit to a CAP 'Ville, "...we never experienced anything like this."



Since that day, Hue has become somewhat of a celebrity in Trieu Giang Village. Every day the villagers come to her shop and ask about news from her dien cai dau Hoa-ky friend. She begs of me to write more letters. "It would be a shame," she says, "to not tell me everything in only one letter per month."

Co Hue also sent this picture (left) taken in 1970. It has become my favorite, for no other reason than the emotions of this particular pose. By 1970, she had survived five years of major American involvement in the war. She had survived the Tet Offensive of 1968. That offensive devastated much of her home province. There were no young men in her hamlet, all having been killed or off to war. She had no "Senior Prom", no holding hands as she walked the river bank with a childhood sweetheart. Yet the war had no apparent end in sight. What could have been going through her mind as she posed for this picture? Only she could answer that question.

She looks for mail every day. She scolded me in one letter because I had failed to...

"...tell me everything about your life. What work does your wife do? How do you spend your days? Why do you not send me a picture of your home? Are your parents still living? Do you live close to your family? What does your daughter do for a living? What does your son-in-law do for a living? Put an accurate date on your letters; I want to see how long they take to get here."

In picturesque language, she continues in a subsequent letter...

"When you left me to your home I handed you one photo and at that time I felt so sad...I do not believe that you still keep those memories until now. Being separated in the war years you are still thinking about me..."

Later in that same letter...

"...even if being on one side of the world, I hope you notice that there is a friend, Co Hue, who is always beside you so that I feel enough happy and, in your turn, you do so with regard to me. I think that a bridge once broken would not be rebuilt. Then, when it is rebuilt, it becomes a dream."

With reference to my return next year, she says...

"...if you want to do it please let me know one month in advance, then I will prepare my spirit for reception."

Hue was a child of 16 when we were in Lai Phuoc. She has stated that the day I left her hamlet was the saddest day of her life. I thought of reminding her of so many other horrible

In 1967 she had asked me to remember her, then she was stunned to find that I actually did.

Vietnamese friends who read her letters for me laugh and cry their way through each one. Twenty-eight years later this lovely product of the war continues to touch people with her gentleness. In the same letter in which she said, "I keep it in my heart and wait for you," she repeatedly seeks assurances that I will return. She seems, once again, afraid that I will forget her.

However, the diplomatic bridge has, indeed, been rebuilt. Soon I will once again walk the paths of Lai Phuoc and surrounding hamlets. This time I will not be carrying an M-16 rifle and hand-grenades. I will not be in the company of Marines and PFs. I will once again view the beauty of Viet Nam, but I will not be looking through the eyes of a warrior. I will walk with Hue, her family, and many others of the villagers who eagerly await the return of one of "our Marines".

I will not forget.. I have learned the value of friendship from an exceptional Vietnamese teacher. When it comes to remembering this most charming of friends, **I keep it in my heart.**