



I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You Part II: The Return, 1996

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"The final battle against intolerance is to be fought--not in the chambers of any legislature--but in the hearts of men."

**Dwight D. Eisenhower
October 19, 1956**

Part II Section 1: Setting The Stage

I have opted to answer a few questions I've received since my return. The result will be a somewhat random collection of notes and thoughts.

Were You There During The Rainy Season?

No. I timed the trip for the end of the monsoon, but prior to the stifling heat. We had one day of monsoon rains, and a few heavy showers during the week in Phuoc My. However, it was early enough in the summer that the temperature never got much above the 110° mark.

How Much Had Things Changed Since You Were In Nam?

If you consider the inevitability of the jungle, and its eagerness to continually renew itself, then everything was exactly as I had remembered. But each familiar scene was in a different location.

Phuoc My hamlet lies just south of the hamlet of Lai Phuoc, which in turn is about 1 mile south of Dong Ha. Lai Phuoc was the marketplace for the village of Trieu Ai when we were there. The old marketplace in Lai Phuoc has now reverted to jungle. A new marketplace has been set up slightly north of the hamlet.

There was but one recognizable landmark in the 135 mile trip from Da Nang to Dong Ha: the island in the rice paddies where we had our CAP compound. If I hadn't seen a sign indicating I was entering Phuoc My, that island would have been my only landmark.

For three months after I was wounded in 1967, I had traveled Highway 1 from Phu Bai to all our CAP units south toward Da Nang. Each day we stopped to re-supply the compounds on the way. I thought I would recognize a few of the hamlets on the trip. I did recognize one abandoned Catholic church just south of Phu Bai. I have a slide of that church taken in 1967. Other than that...I recognized nothing!

So everything was different, but everything was the same. The jungle provides a logical basis for that contradictory statement.

How About The Water?

I drank nothing but bottled water, and the occasional Coke.

(I've never have quite developed a taste for beer. However, in 1967 when the villagers offered something, I could not refuse. Particularly if the offer came from the Village Chief. During our CAP training we received several warnings about refusing something the villagers offered us. So, while sitting in Co Hue's family cafe in Lai Phuoc in 1967, the Village Chief had offered to buy a beer for Sgt. Phil Prince and myself. I had never tasted beer, so I refused. I asked Co Hue's mother to bring me a Coke.

The Chief offered again, and I refused again. Co Hue's mother stood patiently, my potential beer in hand, waiting to serve me. Sgt. Prince quietly, but in a firm USMC Sergeant's whisper, reminded me that I had insulted the chief by rejecting his offer. But I would not be intimidated. I knew he wouldn't shoot me or anything.

Then I heard considerable talking among the villagers standing nearby. As I adamantly stood my ground, I heard laughter ripple through the cafe. The villagers were pointing, talking, and laughing...all directed at me.

Turning to our interpreter, I asked what was so funny. He responded, "They not understand why Ha Si (Corporal) Tim no drink beer. In Viet Nam only girls no drink beer!"

That's worse than being shot! I drank the beer!

The bottled water is replaced daily in the hotels, and each home I visited had a more than adequate supply. It seems that they, too, are somewhat afraid of the potential for drinking Agent Orange, along with any variety of unidentified organisms in their water supply.

How Did You Survive The Long Flight And Change In Time?

The worst was the 14 hour leg from San Francisco to Hong Kong, which actually turned out to be 15 1/2 hours. Accepting the fact that I could do nothing about it, I took a few music tapes, a walk-man, and a good book. The flight was not all that bad. It was daylight the entire way, but everyone shut down the blinds on the airplane, and we were able to sleep throughout much of the flight.

There was a large group from Thailand on the flight. I sat in the right of four seats directly behind the divider between front and rear sections. A young lady from Thailand sat in the far left seat of that row. Without ever exchanging a word, using nothing but hand signals and facial expressions, we managed to laugh our way through the entire fourteen hour flight. We laughed about our efforts to straddle the two middle seats so we could sleep. If one found what appeared to be a particularly comfortable position across the seats, we would watch amusedly as the other tried to imitate it.

We laughed about the movie we were watching. I think she was particularly pleased when I watched carefully to see how she prepared the meal we were served for dinner late in the flight. It was an Asian meal, and it required "assembly". She noticed me watching, so she smiled brightly as she held up each item, then patiently showed me how to prepare my meal.

I was reminded again, as I had learned in Vietnam in 1967, that under any circumstances you can communicate...if you want to; you can laugh...if you want to, and you can make friends...if you want to.

And you don't have to talk to do it.

I now have a friend in Thailand. I don't know her name, nor she mine. But we are friends. I hope she told everyone in Thailand about the American friend she met on the airplane.

By the time I got to Saigon, I had managed to adjust fairly well. I went to bed the first night at 12:30 A.M. and woke up at 5:30 A.M. ready to see Saigon.

And it was a good thing I woke up when I did!

At 6:20 A. M. I heard an ever so gentle rap on the door. I opened it to see my hostess at the boarding house (**See "What did you do for two weeks?"**) standing with a tray of breakfast. Breakfast was not the traditional Kellogg's Corn Flakes, bacon and eggs, hash browns, toast, and coffee. Well...there was coffee.

I was not really hungry, since my hostess had fed me what can best be described as a nine course meal when I had arrived at 10:30 P.M. Saturday. As I was to soon learn, there is little concern as to whether or not you are hungry. In Viet Nam, you eat three times a day...period! My first morning in Viet Nam I dined on a bowl of noodle soup with bits of meat, chives, a hard boiled bird's egg, and a variety of vegetation for flavoring purposes. A small dish of salt, pepper, and a sliced red pepper was on the side along with a loaf of French bread. Two cups of Vietnamese coffee (**make that Vietnamese COFFEE 'cause it is potent stuff!**) completed the menu for my initial venture into a morning banquet Viet Nam style.

It was unique, filling, and delicious. An excellent start for my first day back in Viet Nam.

What Did You Do For Two Weeks?

Nothing that I had planned on doing! My introduction to Saigon Saturday night was on the back of a Honda motorbike driven by an 18 year old college student. I had anticipated that she would meet me in a taxi. That was the first of many surprises that were to set the tone for the next two weeks.



Nguyen Hoang Phuong Thu, oldest daughter of Nguyen Khac Diep and Hoang Thi Thy Tuyet from Da Nang, met me at the airport. If I had anticipated the shy Vietnamese young lady of the 1960s, as I had remembered many of the young ladies of the hamlet, I was in for a surprise. Phuong Thu greeted me and immediately tried to relieve me of my luggage as she guided me quickly toward the exchange window. Still fighting over control of my bags, I exchanged my American dollars for Vietnamese dong.

Nguyen Hoang Phuong Thu: Honda Jockey and Escort

Then she headed across the parking lot...me chasing along behind wondering why we were moving **away** from the taxi cabs! My unspoken question was answered when she disappeared into a small parking area, then reappeared perched on the driver's seat of a Honda motorbike. **This** was my **taxicab**?! Accepting no protest what-so-ever from me, she grabbed my bag and draped it across the gas tank. She then waited patiently as I gradually got the picture....**it was either the Honda...or walk!** As she blasted away from the airport, I almost fell head over heels off the back of the bike. I hadn't quite allowed for the 75lb backpack I was wearing.

I soon learned, however, that Phuong Thu has a voice so soft it makes falling rain sound like a standing ovation. I spent the next two days with my ear cocked toward her as she whispered at the top of her lungs. That was the only thing about this gracious young lady that drove me crazy! She was the first member of a very dear family that I was to come to love during my two week visit to Viet Nam.

I rode on the back of my chauffeur driven Honda across town to the boarding house where I was to stay for two nights. She had reserved a room for me with Mrs. Ha Thi Nhan, 513/6 Dien Bien Phu Street, Dist. 3, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. My first view of my home for the next two nights was a little frightening. The boarding house was halfway down a dark, unlighted, street that would have to be upgraded to pass for an alley in America. At first glance it was dark and ominous. I did not want her to take me down that street! She did not share my fears, however...so down the street we went!

To be perfectly honest, there was really nothing ominous about the street. I was simply nervous on my first night in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam! A visit to the Vatican would have made me nervous that night...if it had been in Ho Chi Minh City.