



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

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### Part II Section 4: Da Nang, Saigon, And Back Home

We returned to Da Nang on Monday, May 13th., with a stopover in Hue to tour the Imperial Palace. We had an entourage. Co Hue and her husband were with us. They stayed with Tuyet and her family until Thursday. During the week we toured Hoi An, Hoi An Beach, Marble Mountain, Da Nang, and China Beach.



Hoi An is a stunning collection of Buddhist Temples and old homes, most in excess of 450 years old. It was satisfying to watch Co Hue and her husband as they went excitedly from one tourist spot to another. They had never toured the Imperial Palace...the Temples of Hoi An [they are Buddhists], the 450 year old homes in Hoi An, or the scenic areas in and around Da Nang. The 550000 dong it cost me for the car, entry into all the tourists spots, etc., represented four of five months income for them. I considered that the money would have been better spent had I simply given it to them. But then they wouldn't have the memories and pictures of their tour through their cultural and religious heritage.

Thursday morning Co Hue and her husband boarded a bus for Phuoc My. That afternoon I boarded the train in Da Nang for the 18 hour trip to Saigon. I was not alone. Diep and Tuyet's 16 year old daughter, accompanied me.

Of the many cultural differences between Viet Nam and America, the trust that Tuyet and Diep placed in me ranks high on my list. I was virtually a stranger, having only exchanged a few letters over the past two years. Yet they trusted their beautiful 16 year old daughter to me on the train, in a private compartment, for 18 hours.

When I commented to Tuyet that I was a stranger, she looked horrified that I would say that. I had been a guest in their home, so I was no longer a stranger. Unbelievable! I don't think I would have done the same in their place! But then, I grew up in America. They simply trust people. I hope they don't have to change in the near future.

**One of the fifteen pictures. Later I learned that Phuong Quyen did enter the "Beauty Contest" in 1997. She won "Miss Da Nang Province"!**

Before we left, Phuong Quyen asked a favor, one that only a wealthy Ugly (figuratively, I hope!) American Tourist with several expensive cameras could fill. As I understood it, she needed a portfolio of pictures in order to enter a beauty contest in school. See'ns how I was the only wealthy American with several expensive cameras there, how could I refuse? Tuyet visited a neighboring home and returned with a rather striking Vietnamese dress, and we proceeded to take a series of 15 set-up shots, some of which are included here.



During the train ride to Saigon, I was looking forward to beautiful scenery and hours of sparkling conversation with Phuong Quyen. The scenery did not disappoint me. We boarded the train at 3:30 P.M. By 5:00 P.M. Phuong Quyen was sound asleep in her berth! She may have been exhausted from the tortuous (ten minute!) session posing for the pictures earlier that day. She woke up just in time to disembark from the train in Saigon.

Be that as it may, I finally climbed into my berth about 7:00 P.M. and slept restfully until 4:00 A.M. on the 14th. In the wee hours of the morning, however, I heard the door to our compartment open. Opening my eyes only enough to see what had caused the commotion, I saw one of the policemen from the train peeking in. He entered our compartment, and looking to his left he saw Phuong Quyen comfortably asleep in her berth. He glanced up to me, then turned and left. That may be standard procedure on the train. However, I'm inclined to believe that word was out that an American was traveling alone with a young Vietnamese woman.

Eighteen hours after it had begun, our odyssey ended in Saigon. Two more days, then home.

### **Before We Leave Da Nang...**

If you visit Vietnam, and plan on spending time in the homes of the people, wear slip on shoes. Whenever we visited one of the nicer homes, both in Phuoc My and later in Da Nang, we always removed our shoes before we entered.

My first day in Phuoc My I wore laced running shoes. Off and on became a nuisance as we moved from house to house. My friends tried to tell me I didn't need to take them off, but, when in Rome... I replaced them the next day with a pair of deck shoes. After a few days, however, I realized that nobody removed their shoes when they entered Co Hue's home. I asked the interpreter why. He simply pointed to the floor.

Dirt floor.

Everybody else had cement floors.

I guess you need not worry about offending them if the people you are visiting are so poor they can't afford a cement floor.

### **Back on the streets of Saigon.**

I spent my final two days on Dien Bien Phu Street mixing with my friends the street merchants. They remembered me from two weeks prior, and they welcomed me back like a long lost friend. We laughed together, and I took pictures.

And my friends protected me from the streets. That was evident Saturday night as five street youths walked past me on Dien Bien Phu Street. In a scene that would have caused mild panic in New York City, I noticed that the looks I was getting from these young men were not all pleasant. I was uncomfortable as they approached, thinking I was about to encounter Viet Nam's version of street toughs.

The fact that I was an American and stood out like the proverbial sore thumb only served to enhance my continuing trip into a fantasy induced paranoia-land. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that each of the women I had been visiting with all day were watching this group intently. More than once I had watched a Vietnamese woman take a disobedient young lad by the ear, twist, and lead him to whatever task he had been assigned. I learned that nobody crosses the women of Viet Nam.



Nobody!

### **Back In Saigon Having Dinner With Phuong Thu & Phuong Quyen.**

I relaxed. I could not have been better protected had I been sitting at home in my family room. I was one of them; my street friends were watching out for me.

Saturday afternoon Phuong Thu took me to her home for lunch with Quyen and Phuong Thu's college classmate. That night I enjoyed dinner with Phuong Thu and Phuong Quyen. The restaurant was on a sidestreet just off Dien Bien Phu Street, a few blocks from the boarding house. We were sitting in the open door restaurant less than ten feet from the street when it happened.

I am not totally sure what caused the noise. It was either a back-fire from a passing motorbike, or someone with a few firecrackers. Either way, two quick "shots" penetrated the silence... and my extremely thin veneer of false bravado. My worst nightmare had come true! "They" had found me. You can use your imagination for the rest.

We all laughed about it when it was over...Phuong Thu, Phuong Quyen, and the other patrons of the restaurant. They knew. There was a time when their laughter would have sent me into fits of anger. But no more. It was the light laughter of empathy, and I took it as such. I'm reasonably sure quite a few of them have some not-so-pleasant memories of life in Viet Nam, also.

The next morning Phuong Thu and Phuong Quyen escorted me to the airport. I boarded a plane for home, burdened down with gifts, my two weeks of renewed love and friendship at an end.

### **Did Any Positives Come Out Of Your Two Weeks In Viet Nam?**

Too many to count.

People will never again convince me that we had no friends in Viet Nam. Nor will they tell me that our former enemies, on a one-on-one basis, are still enemies. Perhaps we will someday again find ourselves at odds with their political system. But that is politics, something over which we, the often impressionable little people of the world, have no control.

However, when given the opportunity to meet my counter-parts, all of them, former enemies and allies alike, took me into their homes and into their shops. They offered me their chairs and protection on Dien Bien Phu Street.

### **My Former Enemies**

My former enemies sat with me on the street corners and in side street shops. We had guarded conversations about our war. I came to a better understanding of those with whom I had been angry for so many years.

We'd had an interpreter in our CAP compound in 1967. I was wounded and sent to Phu Bai to recuperate. One day one of my fellow CAP Marines from Phuoc My passed through on his way home. He told me that our interpreter had been a "spy". He was caught and sent to prison. I thought of the times we had sat in meetings with the village chief. I had thought of the interpreter as my friend. So I got angry with him. In 1967, or virtually anytime since, I would have gladly shot him out of anger and hatred. For twenty-nine years I have stayed angry with him. He had betrayed me.

Betrayed me?

Everything in life is a matter of perspective.

Did he travel half way around the world to America to fight a war? Did he come to my homeland where I could have fooled him and disappeared into a sea of Caucasian faces?

Need I answer that?

I went to his country. I went to an ethnic/geographic area that was divided against itself. This would have given even the dumbest of military strategists a variety of opportunities to trick me. My enemy was far from dumb. This was not the British army of our Revolutionary War. The Viet Cong did not wear bright red uniforms. They didn't stand in neat lines as we hid behind trees and killed them. Perhaps I am angry because they didn't permit themselves to die an "honorable" death, whatever consolation that is to the dead.

Since he spoke English, he had participated in the war in a manner for which he was uniquely qualified: he hid in a sea of Vietnamese faces, and he deceived me. And that made me mad! Even as I was fighting a war for his right to the freedom of choice, I despised him for the choice he had made.

Now there's an example of illogical Yankee arrogance for you.

Multiply that scenario several hundreds-of-thousands of times over, and you have the legacy that is the Vietnam War.

But I am no longer angry. After 29 years of soul destroying hatred and anger, I have made the choice to put an end to it.

And it feels good!

### **My Former Allies**

Nor will I ever forget that we had allies in that war.

Those who had been my allies took me into back rooms in their homes. There they showed me small Buddhist shrines. Behind each shrine of burning incense I saw pictures of their fathers, sons, and brothers. All wore the uniform of the South Vietnamese Army. Each had been killed. After a reflective pause, we bid adieu to their loved ones once again, and we left.

Our former allies say little about the war. Each deals with his/her pain in their own way. There are no psychiatrists; no government sponsored systems, or percentage rated disability checks designed to help them deal with their PTSD.

There is only hard work and a meager existence.

One former ally sat at a table in his home. He proudly lifted a pants-leg to show me the scars on his leg incurred in a battle with the Viet Cong south of Saigon. His wife sat stoically beside him watching me. I wondered if she had slept in that home while I was sitting on a night ambush a few hundred meters away in 1967. I wondered if she had felt safer because we were there.

I wondered about so many things.

During our visit we did not need to remind ourselves that our mutual sacrifices had all come to naught when South Viet Nam fell in 1975. He knew it. I knew it. It was best left unspoken. So we simply sat in silence for several moments.

A Vietnamese and an American. Veterans of the Vietnam War. Twenty-nine years after we had shared the combat experience.

That is what my involvement in the Vietnam War boiled down to: this former ally, his wife, and me. In retrospect, that was the moment I had returned to Viet Nam to experience. Everything that had transpired over the past two years had led inexorably to that meeting in his house, on the edge of Highway 1, Quang Tri Province, Vietnam.

As I sat with cameras and cash that equal fifteen years of hard work for them, my years of self-pity seemed almost sacrilegious. I have reached an emotional equilibrium: I am no longer angry with my enemies, nor am I apologetic for my allies. This man had been my ally, as had the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who had fled the country after the fall of Saigon in 1975. I could not feel guilty for having helped him, or them, fight for his vision of what was best for his country.

Strip away all the political rhetoric. Others may delve deeply into the overall attitude of the Vietnamese people in the 1960s. They can discuss politics; perhaps they will count supporters and enemies and put them on a scale to see which way the true political winds were blowing thirty years ago in Vietnam. They can hash over lies and alleged lies.

Both governments will continue deny fault. Each will mount a soapbox and preach their particular gospel of self-righteousness.

### ***Just so much political verbal diarrhea.***

I will always remember the look on his face. We had been allies once, and he wanted me to know that. We had shared his dream. We had fought as best we could. We had lost.

There was nothing left to say.

It was in that home that my thirty year war in Vietnam ended. I thanked them for their hospitality. I silently thanked him for providing me with the peace I had traveled half way around the world to find, and we left his home.

These former allies were the throw-aways of the Vietnam War. They were the people we left behind. Yet there was not one word of complaint. No accusatory "Why did you leave?" comments. These survivors of the war do not want their children to go through what they went through. Their country is at peace for the first time in decades.

They simply thanked me for my friendship the only way they knew how...they fed me more food than I could eat...they continually filled my cup with tea, literally and figuratively...and they smiled.

They are a tough lot, and they have earned my respect.

Life had to go on for them.

And it has.

And so has mine.

Timothy  
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