

One Marine's Second Tour in Vietnam

Written by:

John W. Ames

ABI President-Elect

Greenebaum Doll & McDonald PLLC; Louisville, Ky.

jwa@gdm.com

By an incredible stroke of luck, I met Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States, Nguyen Tam Chien. During the course of our evening together I was asked what my legal specialty is, and he noted that chapter 11 reorganizations were becoming a problem to Vietnamese businesses. I was asked to go to Vietnam to address government and business leaders, to teach them how to reduce risks and protect Vietnamese businesses in U.S. chapter 11s. This provided a business focus for my trip, which ultimately had many more layers than simply lecturing about bankruptcy in Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City (Siagon).

The business aspects went exceedingly well, with wonderful audiences consisting of business leaders with sophisticated questions and comments during the three days of lectures. From a business standpoint, the trip was a smashing success. On a more personal level, there were times prior to my departure where anxiety of the past had almost gotten the best of me. I had not been back to Vietnam since I took off from Da Nang on May 9, 1969. I was apprehensive about the reception I would receive, especially in Hanoi.

Obviously, during my period of 1968 and 1969, I had not visited Hanoi, nor, ironically, had I ever gone to Saigon. My 13 months were served in I Corps only, where most Marines were. So when I first headed out from the Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel, I didn't know what kind of reception I would receive.

I soon realized that Americans are certainly a favored people in Vietnam, even in Hanoi. Once it was discovered that I was from the United States, I typically had a stream of people coming up to me, sometimes just to sit next to me and smile, other times to shake my hand, other times to bring their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to shake my hand. This was extremely unexpected and heartwarming, especially since many of the gentlemen who would come over would be approximately my age; in other words, we may have "met" previously in 1968 or 1969.

Over my entire two weeks in Vietnam, I never encountered one single instance of any negativity whatsoever. This was, to me, unique, since the same people that would come to greet me would ignore the many other non-U.S. caucasians, such as Australians and Europeans who were present in the same area and location.

One of the chief attractions is the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum complex, which not only includes Ho Chi Minh's tomb, which

resembles Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow, but also a museum adjacent to the mausoleum that includes Ho's two residences. Everything has been kept as it was when Ho Chi Minh died in 1969.

I specifically wanted to see West Lake, where John McCain had been shot down and ultimately captured, and also what remains of Hoa Lo prison, more famously known as the "Hanoi Hilton." It was the site where U.S. POWs such as McCain were incarcerated. Much of the prison itself has been torn down to create a modern office complex with tall buildings. Only a small part of the original site was made into a museum, but it is chilling to tour.

Going to the central part of the country was a moving experience for me. I had scheduled the visit three days before I would lecture in Da Nang, and I decided to fly into Hue/Phu Bai airport. Having flown into this location previously, I was trying to recall where I would wait with my pack for incoming C-130 and C-123 flights on helicopters to take me either to Da Nang or to other places in Vietnam.

This was the start of the greatest single revelation of this trip; in dealing with places I'd visited previously, very little if anything, has remained the same! The Vietnamese after 1975 made a very concerted effort to erase any U.S. presence from what was formerly South Vietnam. A short drive from the airport to central Hue City certainly illustrated the massive amount of construction that has taken place. My last view of Hue was immediately after the Tet Offensive in 1968, when much of Hue was in shambles. Much within the massive Citadel and Forbidden City was destroyed. I chose a hotel, the Saigon Morin, which is immediately on the Perfume River across and down from the Citadel. It was a lovely hotel with a gorgeous courtyard for breakfast in the morning. The weather fit my mood—overcast and misting. The tour through the Citadel with an excellent guide had me looking for the bullet holes in the ancient walls instead of at the attempts by the Vietnamese to reconstruct this once Forbidden City. Huge gardens now exist where parts of the palace were. The moat and the parks surrounding it have been landscaped beautifully.

I elected to hire a private guide to take me the approximately one and a half hours from Hue up Highway 1 to Dong Ha. Dong Ha was once the site of the Third Marine Division Headquarters. It was a sprawling U.S. base and airstrip at the intersection Highway 1 and Highway 9, which went East to West to the Laotian border, some 47 miles away. We picked up a local guide so we could find some of the more obscure Marine fire bases and landing zones along Highway 9. The de-militarized zone is a short 10 km from Dong Ha, lying along the seventeenth parallel and the Ben Hai River.

The first and most noticeable thing was that the road with which I was familiar in '68 and '69 used to be a lane-and-a-half or two-lane dirt road with vegetation growing up to the sides of the road, inviting ambushes, etc. Now it is four-lane in spots, and a good two lanes completely to the Laotian border. I decided to ask my guide to go to Camp Carroll, some 3 km south of Highway 9. This was the site of a very sizable Marine Corp Fire Base for artillery and supported Marine operations around Dong



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Ha mountains, stretching to the DMZ. A memorial exists, and you are able to walk through the plateau, which still has some concrete footings and pads, but no bunkers or other structures. As with all the former military sites, having a good guide is essential. Land mines and unexploded ordnance still exist, providing a dangerous scenario. I don't remember the view being this beautiful, but it certainly was sobering, both then and now.

Going back onto Highway 9 and continuing west, we arrived at the little village of Hwong Hoa, or as we knew it, Khe Sahn. What was a small minor "ville" during the siege commencing in January 1968 is now a relatively thriving city township at which begins the free trade zone to the Laotian Border.



In Khe Sahn, we took a right and went 2 1/2 km to locate where the infamous Khe Sahn Combat Base existed. The world remembered it was under siege for 77 days from January to March in 1968. It

is now a coffee plantation with a very small portion carved out for a small museum with recreated bunkers and some rusting hulks of helicopters and other military equipment. I was able to see olive drab sand bags that formed bunkers for the Khe Sahn defenders. I tore off a piece of it and took some of the red clay that was symbolic of this area and placed them in a baggie. They are now on my office desk.

As we searched the coffee plantation, we were able to find various articles that were left behind some 39 years ago. Picking up small glass vials and rusting tins, my guide pointed to something that I remembered to be an anti-personnel mine. At that point, I felt that we had reached the limits of where I wanted to go in exploring the Khe Sahn Combat Base.

The vast majority of my 13 months in 1968-69 was spent in and around Da Nang, some two hours south of Hue. Traveling in an air-conditioned Toyota surely beat the open-aired Marine Corp M-151 Jeep with snipers occasionally taking pot shots at us.

One of the defining features on this trip is an escarpment of a mountain that juts from the north-south chain to the sea. There is a pass, HaiVan (Sea Cloud) Pass, which has for centuries been the natural defense post and means to go from the more temperate north to the more tropical south just beyond HaiVan Pass. I had made this journey a number of times.

For old times' sake, I wanted to be able to go to the top of the pass without worrying about sniper shots on the way up. The views are incredible for picture taking. The scene from the top of the pass looking south was as truly stunning as I remembered it in that, at least here, the landscape hadn't changed. North of Da Nang, along what was known as Red Beach, where the Marines landed in 1965, was a massive Marine Corp logistics and supply area called Force Logistic Command (FLC), affectionately known as "FLICK." It was

one of my favorite places because we used to be able to get donuts from the bakery 24 hours a day. You had to bring your own paper bag and sprint back to the jeep before the grease ate through the paper bags. Ah, what a 22-year-old's stomach used to be able to endure!

Force Logistic Command is gone now, as is much of what I remember Da Nang to have been. Da Nang had a crucial role in the Vietnam War: It was the point of embarkation and departure for all Marines coming into or leaving Vietnam.

Nearby, we set off for one of the major surprises of the entire trip, the Furama Resort. It had been billed as one of the finest high-end resorts in all of Indochina, and I absolutely have to agree. What was even more surprising was the location of this beautiful hotel.

My parent unit in Vietnam was the Fifth Communications Battalion (5th Comm). It was located on My An Beach, better known as "China Beach," a name made famous in the United States by virtue of a TV show of the same name. To my recollection it was not a hospital; rather, it was an in-country rest-and-relaxation (R&R) area where one could go and get a hamburger. Troops were rewarded for good effort by 2- or 3-day passes to go and lounge on this beautiful beach.

Pulling in to the Furama Resort from the new road was like going into a whole different universe. This open-air, beautiful, luxurious resort with its infinity pools and reflecting pools throughout and magnificently manicured gardens certainly befitted the location on this particular beach. I immediately set out to look at the beach. Two things became clear. The actual beach where I was standing on May 1, 2007, was my beach! The memories of the location or very close by, in 1968 and 1969, mirrored what I was seeing, and in looking at the photographs I had taken with me, the mountain known as Monkey Mountain looked the same as it did then.

Had they built this five-star resort on top of my 5th Comm Battalion base camp? Keeping in mind that 38 years has a way of dimming one's recollection and memory, I set out to try to find some really identifiable sites. I was Battalion Officer of the Day about every 4-5 days for months. As such, I had to "walk the wire" or perimeter every hour. I had it paced off so that in my mind I knew exactly where, even in the dead of night or in rain, the next bunker or tower would be. I had to make sure that the lookouts were still awake. Obviously, there are no bunkers, no towers and no triple concertina razor wire today. Now there are palapas, beach bungalows and volleyball courts on this beach. Much better! All those hours I spent on the beach thinking to myself, "someday when this war ends, this place is going to make one hell of a resort!" has come to pass. I was "home" at my base camp after 38 years.

As I sat on the beach, memories flooded back, some bittersweet. But being a positive guy, I tend to remember those that would make one smile, such as the memory of the day before meeting my wife, Janet, in Hawaii on R&R, in January 1969, when I decided I would learn how to surf. I had the California Junior Surfing Champion in my platoon. He would teach me. His lessons were simple, telling me how to paddle out, pick a wave, swing around, paddle like hell and stand up. Lo and behold,

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I got up on the first try. Unfortunately, no one told me exactly when nor how to get off. So when I did get off, I hit a sandbar, breaking my toe. I had not been wounded up until that point, and I break my toe surfing in Vietnam. Instead of receiving a purple heart, that night I was given at the officers club an award called the "Purple Toe." This came along with a certificate as well, written tongue-in-cheek, as if it were a commendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor. I still have it!



My May 2, 2007, lecture in Da Nang went well. It was held at a hotel in the middle of the city. We were on the 10th floor, and I was able to get a commanding view of the entire area around Da Nang. In

Da Nang, there were marshes that provided excellent infiltration routes to the south of the city. Now there were soccer stadiums, a new ultra-modern arena being constructed, a massive water park, various other parks and wide boulevards that are beautifully landscaped and sculptured.

The three days I spent at the Furama were not enough. The excellent quality of the food, facilities and so forth just begged for more time to relax. However, I had to be in Ho Chi Minh City on Sunday. I was heading out of the lobby when I ran across four Americans who sat a few tables away from me at breakfast that morning. I inquired as to the time to get to the airport, and one thing led to another. I discovered that they were members of an MIA (missing in action) recover team. This was especially important to me, since the best man in my wedding, Bob Hagan, was reported MIA in May 1969. The details of his situation were never made completely clear to me, even after he was declared KIA (killed in action) in 1996.

I managed to ask if there were any possible way that I could find out more about Bob. As luck would have it, one of the four individuals, Bob Maves, had the information not only on his laptop, but I believe he was part of the recovery team that found Bob's remains in 1996. He e-mailed me immediately the description and the location of Bob's grave in Arlington Cemetery as I was standing there with my Blackberry. Needless to say, this had a huge impact on me. A closure and a peace came over me that I didn't realize could occur.

An hour's flight from Da Nang brought me to Ho Chi Minh City, where we landed at Tan Son Nhat Airport. This was a huge airport with a new terminal being built but not yet in use. I am told this is basically the same facility that existed 35 years ago. Again, I noticed out the window numerous revetments and bunkers with Vietnamese military aircraft, including helicopters the entire length of the runway.

The name Saigon is still used by many in this area, especially for the District 1 or central part of Ho Chi Minh City, or HCMC. It is a going place. Literally thousands of mopeds and motorcycles zoom up and down the road, going

around traffic circles in unimaginable ways—ways that would make American drivers completely lose their minds.

For \$80 I was able to have a private all-day tour, which included lunch and all the museum passes, a superb guide and an excellent driver. I saw parts of the city that I would not have seen ordinarily and was taken into the museums and given preferred treatment. One of the more disturbing museums I have ever seen exists in Ho Chi Minh City, the War Remnants Museum, recently renamed. Previously, it was known as the Museum of French, Chinese and American Atrocities. Building Three is the most disturbing, with some of the most graphic depictions one can imagine having to do with not only the Vietnam War but war in general.

After seven hours of touring Ho Chi Minh City, we came through the Reunification Palace, which was the home of the former south Vietnamese presidents. It is a huge building that is remembered for April 30, 1975, when its middle gates in front were crushed open by tanks crashing through, the symbolic end of the Vietnamese War.



To try to summarize the emotions that I had coming home on a plane would be virtually impossible. In some instances a unique peace had been achieved, and in others I wished I had more time to

explore to find places, even if they didn't exist any longer. At the age of 22, a lot of things that I now view with respect to the beauty of the country of Vietnam were lost. I always appreciated the fact that had there not been combat, it probably would be a very lovely place. But I was totally unprepared for the warmth and hospitality of the Vietnamese people. Three million perished in what they termed the American War, what we know of as the Vietnam War from 1965-75. Of course, we know that 55,000 Americans were killed during this time and approximately 1,700 are still MIA. It was good to see that even more than 30 years after the last U.S. involvement, the U.S. government is still very actively and aggressively pursuing each and every lead with respect to these 1,700 MIAs. The gentlemen of the MIA team indicated that they are receiving excellent cooperation from the Vietnamese.

I was asked immediately upon my return to the United States, "will I go back there?" Given the opportunity, which I hope will be forthcoming very soon, I hope my law firm will be doing additional business with Vietnamese companies and Vietnamese lawyers. I plan as incoming ABI president to take an expanded educational program back perhaps as early as next spring. I found sufficient interest from the several hundred people who attended the three lectures to recommend we do have such a program.

Until then, I will be looking at the more than 400 pictures I took, replacing 1968 and 1969 memories with new ones. ■