A Hundred Happy Sparrows: An American Veteran Returns to Vietnam

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For Sister Huynh Thi Mai and 2nd Lt. Peter B. Bushey

As all good historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it, but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we might, we cannot always decipher them precisely....
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

**Prelude**

This account of my return to Vietnam does not begin with the invitation I received in 1987 via the US-Indochina Reconciliation Project. Nor with the decision I made ten years ago to go back if I had the opportunity. Not even with my original tour of duty as an American soldier. In fact, this story has as much to do with fate — or, as it’s called in Vietnam, *dinh-menh* — as it does with my own plans and goals.

I was born on December 20, 1942, in Jefferson City, Missouri. (My father was a World War 2 GI from a small farm near Marthasville and my mother was a schoolteacher from Kansas City.) That same day, halfway around the world, in Xom Giua, Vietnam, a small group of revolutionaries met to proclaim the creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF). These seemingly unrelated events lay at the foot of a path that would ultimately bring me face-to-face with Indochina twice.

I went to Vietnam for the first time in 1967, as a young officer with the 25th Infantry Division. My second visit came exactly twenty years later, when I returned as a university scholar in search of materials for my Vietnam Literature class, as a father who felt a growing responsibility for the children of Southeast Asia, and as a veteran still trying to find answers to many questions about the war, not the least of which is "Why?"

Over and over, my day of my birth has been interwoven with events relating to Vietnam. On December 20 1960, an American military advisor was killed in an ambush near Tan Son Nhut Airport, becoming the first "official" US casualty of a war that was to last fifteen more years.1
On December 20, 1967 I spent my 25th birthday on a combat operation in War Zone C near the Cambodian border. Five years later, on December 20, 1972, while traveling as a journalist in the People’s Republic of China, I visited the factory in Tsinan where the Chicom 122mm rocket that nearly took my life during the 1968 Tet Offensive was manufactured. And on that same day, Nixon launched the infamous 1972 Christmas Bombing (officially, “Operation Linebacker 2”) — twelve days and nights of high altitude warfare against Hanoi.

Thirteen years later, on December 20, 1985, while driving down Highway 96 to my teaching job at a rural Ozark high school, I encountered an astonishing sight: a legless man with muscular arms “walking” on his hands along the edge of the road, ponderously propelling his upper body forward in eighteen-inch “steps”. He was alone, with nothing to indicate who he was or what he was about, except perhaps for the camouflage fatigue jacket he was wearing. I was already behind schedule, so with a honk and a wave, I drove by. But almost without realizing it, I slowed my car and pulled off the pavement. I sat a few minutes, torn between being late to school or surrendering to the undeniable urge I felt to talk to that solitary traveler. In the end, I turned the car around, and went back.

Bob Weiland is a former 25th Infantry Division medic who was trekking from Los Angeles to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, hoping to draw attention to the war-related problems of vets. Bob had been injured by an American mortar round transformed into a booby trap by the VC. The explosion killed his commanding officer... the lieutenant who had taken the place of the man who had succeeded me (Lt. Peter Bushey) when my replacement was killed. (In thirteen months, three of my unit’s lieutenants were KIA, and one (me) was wounded.) Bob and I walked and talked side-by-side for about a mile, and made plans to meet at Springfield when he arrived there in a couple of days. Later that day, I mentioned this story to the school janitor, Dennis Cooper. He reacted incredulously, for he’d been wounded in the same ambush and had, in fact, been the guy who had loaded Bob’s “remains” aboard the medivac chopper. Dennis had been sure that Bob was dead.

On the morning of December 20, 1987, I left the States once again for Vietnam — a trip which proved to be filled with similar chance encounters. Most westerners would interpret this long and continued series of related incidents as simply coincidental, but Asians (and particularly Buddhists) believe otherwise. They know that dinh-menh determines which things happen, and in what sequence they occur. It is, as my friend Anthony Chi Tinh Do explains, an improbable but undeniable inevitability. I do know that when the opportunity for me to make a return visit to Indochina came, I wanted to go; felt com-
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pelled to go. As Sterling Silliphant has written about the Vietnam combat experience:

Something in the country, something in its earth and among its durable people, something in its dawns and sunsets, had worked a quiet spell, so that it became in retrospect not the fault of the country or of its people, but the fault of those who were blind or willful, and you remember Vietnam with inexplicable nostalgia as a place, sometime in better days if they ever come, you hunger to return to.

The fact that I couldn’t afford the trip, or that it would extend two weeks into my teaching semester, were obstacles I never even considered. I was going to go.

Travelling by way of Hawaii, Taipei, Korea, and Thailand, I arrived in Vietnam on December 30, 1987. For the next 24 days I explored a country I’d never really seen, meeting a people I’d never really known. I traveled from one end of the country to the other — from Hanoi to Huế to Ho Chi Minh City — from the former DMZ to Dalat to the Delta — going by plane, bus, car, boat, bicycle, and on foot. I visited schools, factories, communes, offices, museums, libraries, cafés, marketplaces, theaters, farms, hospitals, and private homes. It was a journey during which I ultimately learned as much about myself as I did about Vietnam.

In Transit

12/20/87 AM, Springfield. I depart on the morning of my 45th birthday, aboard an airline with the same name as my 1977 novel about Vietnam: American Eagle.

PM, Dallas. Shortly after takeoff, flight attendant Leslie (wife of a Vietnam vet) approaches me. She says her husband served with the 25th Infantry Division. She thanks me for going back — says she wishes her husband would too; she feels it would help him. Later, the captain seeks me out. He’s a pilot who flew jets out of Tan Son Nhut Airport in 1967 and 1968. He says returning is “brave”. Says he’d like to go back, but never will. When I deplane in Los Angeles, both the pilot and Leslie are waiting for me at the door. “Thanks for going back and understanding,” they say. Both are misty-eyed. I’m amazed. The journey is truly underway.

PM, Los Angeles. The currency exchange at the airport has no Vietnamese money. A black clerk about my age (a vet?) is openly hostile to my request. He mutters, “Gooks... Communists.” His eyes bore into me and say, “Traitor... Dupe.”

PM, In Flight. My seatmate is An, known as Andrew. Fled Saigon in 1981, made his way to Thailand by boat, and thence to America. Just
graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in Electrical Engineering. His mother was originally from Cu Chi, and now lives on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. We chat about our travels. Andrew’s on his way to Japan to visit his fiancée. I feel uncomfortable (why?) about my trip. I mention Korea, Thailand, but not Vietnam. He nods, and then asks, would I take a message and some money to his mother? (How does he know? Does it show?) He has not seen his family for seven years. He mails money and medicine frequently, but apparently only part of it gets to them. Would I deliver a letter with some cash? He spends the next couple of hours composing his message which I agree to try to deliver. I leave the plane in Honolulu as Andrew continues the flight. We embrace. I look back once; he’s watching me. I don’t look back again.

12/24/87 PM, Waikiki. Celebrating my 21st wedding anniversary with my wife Francie, precisely 20 years after meeting her here while on a five-day Rest and Recuperation (R&R) from the war. I recall very little about that short week. One day I was eating cold c-rations in a muddy bunker near Dau Tieng, while angry Asians were trying desperately to kill me, and then — just 24 hours later — I was having lobster in a luxurious ocean-front hotel, with smiling Asian waiters at my beck and call. I remember being tired and jumpy, and threatening to fight the desk clerk about something petty. I suppose Francie and I walked on the beach and went souvenir shopping and watched TV and attended luaus and made love. I slept a lot, and didn’t want to talk about the war at all. Then, before I knew it, I was back in Vietnam. If it weren’t for a few faded photographs that Francie took, I’m not sure I’d believe it ever really happened. And, in truth, the gaunt, sunburned GI in those pictures doesn’t look at all like me.

12/26/87 PM, Waikiki. I talk to a wheelchair-bound Vietnam vet at the Ala Moana Shopping Center. He’s bearded and bitter, and his arms are covered with military tattoos. One reads, “Willie Peter Will Make You a Believer!”3 He’s outraged I’d even consider returning to Indo-china, unless it was “to help teach them commie bastards the lessons we weren’t allowed to last time.” “Fuck them motherfuckers,” he growls over and over, “Fuck them!”

12/27/87 AM, Honolulu. The Currency Exchange has no Vietnamese money. The clerk, a refugee from Da Nang, is amazed I’d even want any. “What for?” she asks. Why would anybody want to go there? PM, In Flight. The airline movie is an American classic, the original Captain Blood; a swashbuckling pirate tale starring Errol Flynn. I knew Flynn’s son Sean, a free-spirited combat correspondent who disap-
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peared in Vietnam while riding his motorcycle toward Cambodia. (Sean Flynn was a wildman, and he served as the model for the character of the war-crazed photographer played by Dennis Hopper in the best movie so far about the war, Apocalypse Now.) Indochina draws nearer every minute.

12/28/87 AM, Seoul. I’m at the window of my downtown hotel. It’s 3:06 in the morning, and I can’t sleep. I’m too wired. In the last eight days I’ve traveled over 8,000 miles, passed through eleven time zones. And crossed into tomorrow at the International Date Line. My body doesn’t know whether it’s day or night, or even what day of the week it is. But I can manage that. It’s where I’m headed that’s beginning to get to me. Up until now, I’ve been pretty cool about this trip, but tonight is a maelstrom of memories about Vietnam. I can handle the dreams okay. Just wake up and they stop. Not real. But memories are real, and the feelings they provoke cannot be ignored. I’m still 2,700 miles and three days from Vietnam, but just being back in Asia seems too close. When I finally do get back to Indochina, will I be able to separate the veteran from the scholar from the man? I don’t know. It will surely be difficult, perhaps not even possible. Perhaps not even desirable. I think I’m frightened; not for my safety, but for something more central. I’m not afraid of what I’ll learn about Vietnam, but what I might learn anew about myself.

12/29/87 AM, Bangkok. From the air, the Thai countryside looks just as I remember. Green. Lush. Ordered. Clean. Calm. But after landing and leaving the airport, I see that Bangkok has become a major metropolis since I visited here two decades ago. Smoked-glass skyscrapers. Stainless steel office buildings. Eight-lane freeways. Neon billboards. Smog. Yet Bangkok also remains a city of hustles and hassles, clamor and confusion. Urine and sweat and rot and rain and incense and fish. Horns and whistles and bells and shouts and wails. Happiness and grief and hope and despair and anger and greed. Where swarms of swaggering and stoned GIs on 3-day leaves from Vietnam once congregated, knots of bright-eyed and befuddled American tourists now huddle together, clutching their belongings too tightly. Bangkok both is, and is not, as I remember it. I am, in that way, like Bangkok.

The first cinema I pass is showing Platoon, the Oscar-winning Vietnam war film written and directed by Oliver Stone, who served with the 25th Infantry Division the same time as I did. Outside the theater, long lines wait impatiently for admission. My taxi driver tells me that the film has been playing in town for weeks, and it is wildly popular, especially among teenagers. It is curious that young Thais, not even
born when the war was raging, and from a culture which has a historical enmity for the Vietnamese, would attend *Platoon*. But then, I recall one of my 19 year old college students explaining to me that she’d gone to see the movie three times “just to see what my parents, teachers, and politicians have been hiding from me all my life.” Maybe Thais feel the same. *Platoon*, with its meticulous attention to military detail, unflinching examination of racism, cowardice, drug use, confusion, hate and rage, and unsettling portrayal of the moral quandaries raised by the war, helped to launch the American resurgence of interest in Indochina. I’ve seen the film a number of times, and shown it to my Vietnam Literature class, but I still can’t watch it without weeping. And if I can’t watch a Hollywood depiction of the war without coming unglued, then what the hell am I doing going back to Vietnam?

**PM, Bangkok.** Briefing by Philip R. Mayhew, Counselor for Political Affairs of the US Embassy. A cool performance, with just the right touch of casualness, shoptalk and scholarship. The perfect diplomatic briefing by a glib and smooth professional. The most memorable Mayhew quote for the two hour meeting: “The US has no vital national interests in Indochina.” That’s what millions of Americans in the Peace Movement believed. That’s what they anguished about, and wrote letters about, and demonstrated about, and got beaten up about, and were imprisoned, disowned, divorced, despised, fired, or exiled about. Cassius Clay (now Mohammed Ali) put it most succinctly when he publicly refused the draft: “I ain’t got nothing against them Viet Congs.”

**12/30/87 AM, Bangkok.** In just a few hours, I’ll be returning to Vietnam. It still doesn’t seem real. My mind is seething with images, memories, impressions, emotions, so that even though I desperately need to, I cannot sleep, not this night. My apprehension is so powerful, I wonder if it is visible to others, like some sort of dark aura. I was frightened last time, sure, but also excited and even a bit eager to really see a war, to test my courage, to measure my machismo. General Philip Sheridan once said, “The bravest soldiers I ever had were sixteen year old boys, small for their age, who couldn’t imagine dying.” Part of me was like that, I guess. And even after seeing combat and becoming acquainted with the real horrors of war, I still wasn’t fully aware of the immorality of my own participation in it. That knowledge has come to me more slowly over many years. It is not an awareness that leads to personal tranquility, but a realization that unsettles me profoundly in a part of my heart where I rarely allow myself to look. So terrible are these memories and truths that I’ve never allowed them to come fully to the surface. These are memories far darker than the worst nightmares. I
fear I will finally be forced to confront them head-on before this day is over. I am not ready. I want to call it off. I want to turn back. I am no longer fascinated by a desire, or a curiosity, to see Vietnam again. Yet, I am compelled by circumstance, conscience, and dinh-menh to return. As I prepare to depart Thailand, my attempts to convert dollars to dong meet with astonished laughter at the airport. "Keep your US money," the clerks advise. "Dong are worthless everywhere, even in Vietnam."

**Back In Country**

12/30/87 PM, San Bay Noi Bai. At 1:36 PM I return to Vietnamese soil, twenty years, eight months, four days, seven hours and six minutes after I first set foot here. Customs is slow and thorough, but not unfriendly. The hassle of off-loading, processing, etc. is as ponderous and officious as any government procedure anywhere, and having to deal with it gives me little time to think about where I am; although I'm certainly aware of the sometimes hard (and always curious) glances, the NVA uniforms, the large photos of Ho Chi Minh, the distinctive and unforgettable sound of Vietnamese voices and music. I know I'm in the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I know it, but I don't think I believe it yet.

12/30/87 PM, Highway 2. I climb into a Toyota mini-bus, and head for Hanoi, 30 miles to the southeast. The asphalt road is narrow and rough, and crowded with heavy Russian trucks (and a few US Army Dodges), hauling dirt, rock, and construction materials. The land, which is part of the flood plain of the great Song Hong (Red) River, is flat and I pass irrigated fields of rice, corn, potatoes, beans, and lettuce. The Song Hong is also called the River of Life. Off to the north stretches a row of small, verdant mountains, the Ngan Son. Alongside the highway, people are working in the fields. Some are planting rice, bent over nearly double as they push small shoots into the ankle-deep water of flooded paddies. Others are repairing or readjusting dikes and waterways. Some are drawing water from irrigation ditches or small streams, using the ancient method of two people, two ropes, and one bucket, swinging the bucket up and back in a movement and rhythm as old as civilization. It is a slow, simple, labor-intensive process. The pace of day-to-day life here is inexorably linked to the land (about 80 percent of the people live in rural areas) and hasn't changed much over the centuries. Little boys herd geese, ducks, and water buffalo and swim nude in the ditches and streams. Adults and teenagers not in school are all hard at work tending charcoal kilns, making bricks, gardening, building or remodeling small masonry houses and working on the roads. In the tiny hamlets of Phu Vien and Ai Mo the houses are small, with only one or two rooms. Most cooking, washing, eating, and socializing is done in tiny hard-packed earthen courtyards framed with flowers and
bamboo.

For a moment, part of me begins to feel good, almost comfortable. But I also feel a sense of unease, a sense of unreality. After all, this is Vietnam. These people are (or were supposed to have been) the hated enemy. I feel a bit naked without a rifle, flack vest, and steel pot... and someone to watch my back. Are there crosshairs trained on me at this very moment? I want to scan the treelines and paddy dikes for snipers, but I don’t.

PM, Yen Phu. Sitting on my bed in Room 235 of the Thang Loi (Victory) Hotel, watching the sun sink slowly over Ho Tay Lake, I watch the lights begin to wink on across the water in a small fishing village. The hotel is a spartan but comfortable facility built out of reinforced concrete and native teak in the mid-1970s by a Cuban work brigade. I’m glad to have a private room, for I cannot imagine sharing my thoughts and feelings with anyone this evening. I can’t sleep, so I leave my room and stroll over to Yen Phu, which is comprised of many small masonry houses fronting on narrow, winding stone paths. The residents, used to strangers from the nearby hotel, are not surprised to see a six-foot bearded Caucasian wandering about. They nod and smile. One curious old lady asks if I’m Lien xo, a Russian.


Young children zoom around, running and playing in that high-energy, carefree manner little kids all over the world have. Older girls play jump rope or nhay lo co (hopscotch), while the boys play checkers or soccer. It’s near evening meal time, and women are cooking rice and vegetables in tiny woks over courtyard charcoal stoves. Some of the men are returning from the fields or fishing boat docks. Others are finishing up the last of the day’s work in backyard sandal shops, furniture factories, or brick kilns. I walk back to the hotel after dark, suddenly very tired. I fall asleep immediately and do not dream at all.

12/31/87 PM, Hanoi. I’m at a New Year’s Eve celebration at the Bo Ho Restaurant and Dancing Hall. I’ve just finished a meal of frog legs, beef, shrimp, snails, chicken, pork soup, eggrolls, rice, noodles, cucumbers, tomatoes, etc., all topped off with lua moi (vodka) and bia (beer). On stage the Viet My Band, 13 strong, is playing foxtrots, sambas, and tangos, while older couples glide elegantly around the floor. But from the second floor disco, I hear the unmistakable thump-thump of an electric bass, which suggests even more action. So up the stairs I go.

The disco is packed with hundreds of gyrating teenagers wearing Reeboks™ and designer jeans. The seven piece rock band West Division, equipped with modern electronic instruments and synthesizers, is playing both Vietnamese and American rock music, includ-
ing songs of the Beatles, Madonna, Whitesnake, and the Doors. The celebrants, mostly students and young workers, are friendly and talkative. They say that life is good and that they are happy. They do tell me they don’t like the fact that buses are old and jam-packed, that postage stamps are sometimes unavailable, that there is too much unemployment, that medical facilities are poorly staffed and equipped, that schools are rundown and overcrowded, that the national food distribution system is in disarray. But these young people also feel that the future is bright and they are convinced that the prosperity and freedom now being enjoyed by Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are within sight for Vietnam. I smoke a “Hero” (popular Vietnamese cigarette), drink warm Heineken (imported via Singapore) over ice, and watch the dancing. At midnight, the Year of the Dragon will begin. Since the dragon was once the symbol of the emperor, and still represents power, wealth, and good fortune, many new families will arrange that one of the two children the government recommends per marriage will be born in 1988. At about 11:30 I excuse myself from the crush of revelers. Let the country’s first postwar generation in a hundred years celebrate without me. I need to be alone.

My mind is swirling with the pictures of the faces of the nearly 60,000 GIs who didn’t live to see this new year; with memories of those families at Can Tho and Ben Tre and My Lai who were massacred during the war; with love and longing for my beautiful ten year old son Leroy, who is growing up with a sometimes strange and haunted father who gets upset too easily about a place called Vietnam. It’s nearly twelve now, and I’m sitting on the banks of Ho Hoan Kiem Lake. The streets are relatively quiet. A child runs out to the stoop and sets off a single firecracker. A solitary orange rocket arches over the water in the distance. Along the dark, tree-lined streets, fresh incense sticks glow, their evocative and haunting odor mingling with the other pungent smells of the night. Most Vietnamese are passing into 1988 quietly at home. They know it will be another tough year, to be sure, but the children are sleeping. And no bombs are falling.

1/1/88 AM, Yen Phu. I begin the first day of 1988 by exchanging money at the hotel. The official exchange rate is 500 dong per dollar (up from 80 just last month, a devaluation designed to encourage tourism). However, nearly any xich-lo (three-wheeled bicycle taxi) driver can get you up to 2,500 on the black market. Since an average hotel room is about 1,250 dong per night, and the local beer is 100 dong per bottle, US currency (crisp, new $20 bills are preferred) goes a long way here. But with an annual inflation rate of nearly 700%, prices are still very high for the Vietnamese, whose average yearly income is approximately 60,000 to 70,000 dong. Breakfast is at 6 in the morning today, so that I
can get into town in time to be one of the first in line at the state tomb of Ho Chi Minh. I’m not sure I want to go, but my hosts insist.

AM, Hanoi. Long shadows still shroud the black-slabbed mausoleum when I arrive. The tomb is located downtown, across a wide lawn of dark green grass and an equal expanse of smooth concrete. It was at this spot that Ho Chi Minh announced his country’s independence from France on September 2 1945. The Viet Minh constitution was modeled after our own Declaration of Independence, and began, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal....” The poet leader of a tiny country about the size of New Mexico (but which was able to overcome the might of China, Japan, France, and the United States), is laid to rest here; preserved for viewing in a somber air-conditioned marble building similar in style to the Lincoln Memorial. Vietnam reveres Uncle Ho with the same depth of feeling that America has for Honest Abe. I’ve been to Lenin’s tomb in Red Square, and I viewed the body there with a sense of detachment, levity even, at such a gruesome, melodramatic, and morbid display of national bad taste. But Ho Chi Minh isn’t just a name in a history book tome. I fought against his countrymen. I heard him speaking over the radio and I saw him on television and in films. And I witnessed dying VC proclaiming, “Bac Ho muon nam!” (Long live Uncle Ho!) I sensed his presence in the fabric and spirit of Vietnam. He dedicated his entire life to national reunification and complete liberation from foreign control. “South and North are washed by the same sea,” he declared. “In our hearts there can be no boundary.”

I approach his cold and forbidding crypt with a sense of dread. The glass sarcophagus is located deep in the interior of the building—a hushed place, beyond the reach of outside light or sound. I enter the main doorway just as the early morning fog begins to lift. The entrance leads up a long red carpet, then a left turn on cold terrazzo floors to a half-flight of smooth marble steps, worn slightly hollow in just thirteen years by the endless lines who queue up daily to pay homage to their fallen leader. I turn right, climb another half-flight of stairs, then turn right for about ten feet. Another right turn, and I enter the exhibition room. It is cold here, and dark, with slick marble walls and floors devoid of any decoration, even a name. The body lies at rest in a recessed pit about six feet below floor level. Ho is sealed inside a large, ornate glass case, about five feet wide and eight feet long, and his body reposes upon a bed of rich plum-colored silk, surrounded by a wreath of delicately carved and highly polished teakwood flowers. Ho is dressed in his customary olive drab military uniform, bare of medals or any other indication of rank. His delicate, small-boned hands rest lightly on his lower chest and his legs are covered by a dark purple quilt. The body angles slightly upward, so that even in perpetual repose, Ho seems to
be overlooking the visitors who line up outside in Ba Dinh Square. The
gentle old face, so often distorted in foreign cartoons, looks back at
me. The famous wispy white goatee lies slightly off to the left, as if blown
aside by a last-second puff of air when the casket was vacuum sealed.
His is, even in death, a proud, princely, fatherly face; a face to trust. The
eyelids are gently closed, but around his eyes I can see the lines of worry
and grief etched there by 79 years of war. The mouth is sensitive, as
befits a true poet, but it is also firm; a mouth that reflects the personal
resolve his countrymen never saw fatter, even in the most difficult and
uncertain hours. But there is more in this darkened room than just Ho Chi
Minh's body and silent echoes. I can feel it — on my skin and in my
heart. Buddhists believe that the soul hovers above the body in its
coffin, praying for the forgiveness of those who offended the person in
life. Of course, Ho hasn't been waiting over a dozen years just for my
return, but as I pass out of the room I glance back and picture the very
faintest twitch of a smile, as if Ho was letting me know that he knew I was
here. At this moment I realize where I am and what I'm trying to do. It
is time to actively start seeking the resolution I've been drawn back to
Indochina for. This is a turning point of signal proportion that I cannot
deny, even if I want to. I leave the mausoleum reluctantly, and walk out
into a palm-shaded garden where a warm winter sun lights the faces
of a long line of small children waiting their turn to enter the tomb. They
are laughing and fidgeting, a hundred happy sparrows full of life and
song; children who remember nothing of war, or Americans, or even of
Ho Chi Minh.

1/2/88 AM, Hanoi. Meeting with Nguyen Can, the Deputy Director of
the North American Continent Office of the Vietnamese Foreign
Ministry. He says, "Great and long-overdue changes are in the wind for
Vietnamese-US relationships." Can says he sympathizes with the
families of American MIAs, but points out that there are over 300,000
Vietnamese MIAs. And war, he notes, is never a neat business. In the
informal discussion, Can reveals that his favorite American song is Bob
Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues".

PM, Hanoi. "I thought," says Ngo Zhi Han, "that America had gone
crazy." On my 30th birthday, December 20, 1972, the Christmas
Bombing began. For 12 days and nights, at two hour intervals, waves
of US warplanes attacked Hanoi and its environs. Giant B-52s released
their complement of thirty tons of 500 pound bombs from an altitude
of six miles. Ground-hugging F-111s strafed the city with 20mm can­
nons, napalm, and willy peter. "I thought," says Ngo Zhi Han, "that
America had gone crazy." Back home in the States, Nixon interrupted
200 million TV dinners to explain that only military targets were being hit.
Most Americans didn't pay much attention to the broadcast. Han
didn’t get the message either, because she was buried in the rubble of the Kham Tien Elementary School, watching a classmate bleed to death. “I thought,” says Ngo Zhi Han, “that America had gone crazy.”

1/5/88 AM, Highway 1. Driving down the coast of the South China Sea toward Huế and Da Nang. This is the only overland route (along with the narrow-gauge railroad that parallels it) connecting northern and southern Vietnam. It was originally constructed over a thousand years ago by the emperors, who called it “The Imperial Road”. Over the centuries it has been improved by the Vietnamese and various foreign occupiers. The Imperial Road was first paved by the French in the early 1900s, and then, as relations between the two countries deteriorated into almost a century of war, became known to French soldiers as “La rue san joie” (The Street Without Joy)².

This is one of the most spectacular areas of the country. The towering and heavily forested Truong Son Mountains come right down to the water’s edge in some places, forcing the road to snake back and forth as it clings to the rocky precipices. Vietnam is only about 50 miles wide at this point, and the land between here and neighboring Cambodia is wild and virtually unsettled. Hundreds of waterfalls cascade down the mountains, cutting deep valleys where small rice paddies have been painstakingly carved out of the rock. The many streams form flat deltas when they encounter the ocean, and around them are tiny fishing villages, usually clustered around a central square and a Catholic church. In most cases, the beach is so steep and rocky that spray from the surf is flung high into the air, creating one glistening rainbow after another.

Nearer the ocean, and usually below the road, lies the railway. One train a day runs in each direction, loaded with boxcars and crammed passenger coaches. At five in the evening, the trains pull onto sidings for the night and the passengers set up camp with plastic tarps, straw mats, and hammocks. Meals are cooked, clothes are washed, children play, and just before dark everyone finds an isolated spot to “collect flowers” (eliminate body wastes). The train ride from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi covers 1,700 miles in six days, a picturesque but grueling journey.

PM, Highway 1. This whole trip, though fascinating, is very distressing. What has been for twenty years a repressed, constipating pain is gradually — under the influence of the serenity of Vietnam — become a cathartic pain, a pain of release — almost as if I were giving birth to a new awareness. I haven’t yet exorcised all my demons (if indeed that is ever possible), but I know this trip is helping me reach an accommodation with them. The most difficult people to face here are not the kids (who have no memories of war), nor the unruffled elderly, who just want
to live out the remainder of their lives in peace. No, the toughest to
confront are those of my own generation; the veterans and widows
who've lost limbs and loved ones. The look in their flat black eyes is not
one of hate, but of astonishment; a look which says, "You were our
hated enemy, how can you come back?" That's hard to take, and
even harder to explain. But still, the visit so far has been a wellspring of
release for me.

1/6/88 AM, Huế. I enter Vietnam's sixth largest city by crossing the Song
Huong (Perfume) River — named after the fragrant lemongrass which
grows in its marshes — on the Cau Phu Xuan Bridge, which connects
the two main parts of Huế. During the terrible fighting of Tet 1968, guerrillas
and regular NVA forces captured the north bank, including the down­
town area, the marketplace, and the ancient Imperial Palace, known
as the Citadel. The south shore was in the hands of ARVN and US
Marines. In nearly a month of terrible house-to-house, hand-to-hand
fighting, the central portion of one of the oldest and most beautiful
cities in Vietnam was 110 percent destroyed (the extra 10 percent was
added because not only was everything above ground demolished,
but bombs and rockets also plowed up the soil to a depth of five or ten
feet). My friend Randy, a Marine who participated in the battle for Huế,
describes the final assault to capture Cau Phu Xuan Bridge as a
nightmare he'll never be able to forget. "We tried to run, but we
couldn't," he recalls, "because we kept slipping on all the blood. Theirs
or ours, I couldn't tell, it all looked the same." Thousands of farmers,
fisherman, shopkeepers, housewives and students now cross back and
forth over the bridge every day, and no one even seems to notice the
sign at the south approach which states that the still scarred span has
been renamed Hoa Binh, or Peace Bridge.

PM, Huế. While touring the Citadel (which is being slowly rebuilt), I meet
Duong Hoang Oanh, whose name means Yellow Bird. Oanh teaches
English at the University of Huế and is conducting a tour of freshman
students. She and her charges have never met an American before,
but they have studied the US and know that my home town, Jefferson
City, is the capital of Missouri. They sing for me a traditional song called
"Long Me" (Mother's Heart) which compares a mother's love with the
immense ocean, with the sweet sound of gentle streams, with the soft
moonlight of mid-autumn. The chorus likens a mother's lullaby to the
wind breathing through the rice fields in the evening. Oanh loves Janis
Joplin, and thinks that America is "interesting and lovely".

1/7/88 AM, Huế. Along the northern bank of the Perfume River, down
a narrow, winding dirt path framed by coconut palms and red blooming
hoa giay, lies the home of Nguyen Van Huong, kitemaker. A bright pink
Larry Rottman with some of the "Hundred Happy Sparrows" outside the tomb of Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, January 1, 1988. PHOTO BY HARRY HAINES.
500 lb US bomb converted into flower pot. Located in the Thang Loi (Victory) Hotel parking lot in Nha Trang, January 10th, 1988. PHOTO BY LARRY ROTTMANN.
Mr. Nguyen Van Huoung, kitemaker at his workshop along the Perfume River in Huế, January 6, 1988. PHOTO BY LARRY ROTTMANN.

Along Highway 1, North of Qui Nhon. Grain from the fields is brought to the roadway for winnowing and shocking. PHOTO BY LARRY ROTTMANN.
The waves on China Beach advance and retreat with an agenda uniquely their own. The tides here are more accurate than American watches, more punctual than French ministers, more durable than Japanese calendars, more predictable than Chinese invaders. The waves on China Beach advance and retreat the way
wartime memories ebb and eddy around the edges of my daily routine at home, repeating over and over the gentle whisper of Ho Chi Minh, "The wheel of life turns without pause... Men and animals rise up reborn." The waves on China Beach advance and retreat, and I kneel on the sand and weep the grief I've hoarded for twenty years.

**PM, Da Nang.** During lunch at the hotel restaurant I meet Le Minh. He was a professor of Literature and Letters (Latin and Chinese) at the University of Saigon until the liberation of 1975. Minh spent several years in a reeducation camp and, after being released, drifted into the finance and export business. Although there is officially no trade between SEATO countries and Vietnam because of the US-imposed embargo, there is a lot of fudging going on. For example, Minh arranges for the transfer of Laotian and Vietnamese teak to Japanese boatyards in exchange for motorcycles and electronic goods. Minh says that life is slowly getting better and, although he has considered returning to teaching (where he is badly needed), he feels Vietnam is on the verge of an economic boom. "Soon," he says with a wry smile, "the best communist will be the one who makes the most money."

1/10/88 AM, **Highway 1.** I'm driving north of Qui Nhon, still in sight of the ocean, although I'll soon turn inland and head west into the central highlands. The more I travel this road, the more aware I become that it is much more than an avenue for transportation and communication. Highway 1 is also a 1,500 mile long workbench, and thus a perfect window on rural harvesting, commerce, construction, distribution, and socialization. For example, the road is a country-long crop drying surface. The warm, flat pavement is the perfect place to dry rice, tea, coffee, corn, wheat, shrimp, fish, manioc, and hemp. All along its length, farm families spread out their harvests on the paved shoulder, constantly turning the crops over and over with brooms and rakes. Rice and wheat and straw are threshed on the highway. Sugar cane is stacked for cutting and bundling. Baskets are built and sorted. Logs are piled and graded and peeled and cut up. Coconuts are husked. Straw mats are woven. Brickmakers stack and sort bricks on the highway. Stonemasons take their raw materials from the mountains Highway 1 cuts through, and then shape their building stones along its edges. Carpenters mill their planks into lumber, then use the wood to construct furniture right there on the road. Cattle are driven to market down the highway. Water buffalo, goats, and pigs are walked to the fields along its length. Ducks and geese and chickens are herded up and down the way. The road is also a playground, soccer field, badminton court, and basketball arena. And since the road usually is the main thoroughfare (and often the only paved street) in smaller villages, it is additionally the town square, festival center, marketplace,
dance pavilion, bus stop, wedding aisle, funeral procession path, teen hangout and community meeting place.

To get a better feel for the character of Vietnam, I ought to bicycle (or, better yet, walk) the length of this road. But the trip would be difficult, mostly because many Vietnamese have never seen an American. They are fascinated. Curious. Even a bit frightened — not of me, or of my past military connections, but of my physical strangeness. My skin color. My height. My beard. My clothes. To stop in any small town, at any time, is to precipitate a near riot. In minutes the news is passed. People of all ages come to look at me, to touch me. It’s like being an off-world alien. Everyone wants to see me, to learn about me, but no one knows who I am or what I’m doing in their village. The kids approach first, shyly but inquisitively. It doesn’t take long for them to make friends with me. I pass out a handful of Superballs which I have brought along just for this purpose; and soon the balls are bouncing wildly all over the highway. Next come the teenagers, bolder and even more curious. Then the grandmothers, who can be the sweetest and the most fun. Sometimes they pinch me hard just to see if I’m real (I learn to yelp in pain immediately and loudly. They like that). The middle-aged men usually hang way back. Many of them are former guerrillas, and are understandably reluctant to approach. Some feign indifference. Others edge closer, too interested in an old enemy (whom most never met face-to-face) to resist the attraction. Grandfathers are usually the last to arrive but are often the most friendly. The old men are talkative, eager to discuss farming and fishing. Do you grow rice in America? How do you catch fish? I show them a nearly worn-out photo of my son, which is quickly passed from hand to hand. His blonde hair and open smile draw ohs and ahs from the crowd, and an aggressive matchmaker offers me a local girl as a potential wife for Leroy. I pass around the photo of myself with a seven pound largemouth bass, a very large fish by Vietnamese standards. These pictures are a big hit and make excellent ice-breakers. Soon we’re all talking at once, and laughing as we try using each other’s native language. But a middle-aged woman on the outside fringe of the crowd reminds me sharply of a the past by shouting an all too familiar phrase: “Go home, GI. Go home!”

PM, Phu Cat. The 1986 Toyota minibus rocks through the vast dark as sharp images appear out of the blackness, then disappear: tiny roadside stands dimly lit by smoky kerosene lamps; ancient Buddhist shrines faintly illuminated by glowing joss sticks; a young couple side by side, hand in hand, on bicycles; three sleepy-eyed water buffalo; an old man pulling a handcart heavily laden with firewood; a group of laughing musicians walking home from a late performance. Unlike the working day with its hectic pace, the long night is calm and measured.
People are at rest. Animals move slowly. But my restless mind fills in the void between images with dreadful dreams and memories of my first visit here, twenty years ago. We blow through Tuy An and "Pinkville North". Inch up and down Cu Mong and Deo Ca Passes. It grows late and I become mellow. Even the turbulent surf of the South China Sea seems to become more tranquil. War damaged buildings, still unfilled bomb craters are all invisible at night. My thoughts drift. I think of peace, of resolution, of the future. Then Vinh, the driver, pops in a well-worn GI tape and Dylan intones, "All the money you make can never buy back your soul." It's still a damn good song, Bobby, but you'll never know the half of it. Not even the half of it.

PM, Nha Trang. I find it increasingly difficult to sleep on this trip, not because of poor facilities, but because I'm so keyed up. Time seems so short that I want to spend it all — day and night — drinking in Vietnam. Seeing it. Feeling it. Tasting it the way I wasn't able to taste it twenty years ago. Experiencing Vietnam as it is. At work and at play. And at peace. I'm having formless dreams, impressions without plot, images without context. Things I've seen. Pictures I've taken. All the intense experiences of the last couple of weeks piled on top of that closely-held collection of memories from the war. My brain and heart are working overtime; overloaded with complicity and good intentions. And even in restless sleep, I seek connections, looking for answers, searching for a way out of paradox, bridging gaps, forming and rejecting and reforming hypotheses, shaping responses. I'm like an over-heated early model computer, whirring and ticking, cumbersome with blinking lights, slow moving mechanical parts, and bulky tapes that can't keep up with the incoming rush of new information. I'm backlogged. My input is days, weeks, months ahead of my output. But I want more data. I'm hungry for it. Wild for it. Desperate for it. I take it all in. I cannot get enough. And my need is not for percentages or statistics or numbers or committee reports or government documents or official briefings. I need faces and names. I never got to learn who these people were the last time. I spent a whole year here before, but I don't remember a single Vietnamese person. So far on this trip I have the names and addresses and photos of 81 people whose hands I've shaken, whose families I've met, whose meals I've shared, whose kids I've held, whose work I've shared, whose classrooms I've visited. And these are real people. Not slant-eyed rifle range caricatures; not blurred images glimpsed through dusty jeep windows, over barbed wire fences, or through bunker firing ports; not gruesome, stiff cadavers stacked high after a battle or a bombing; not ragged bleached bone bags rotting under a tropical sun.

I want to meet these folks. To hold them. Touch them. Smell their life and sweat. I want to know they are alive, especially the
children. I need to be reassured that we didn’t kill or poison them all. Or destroy their individuality or their collective spirit. I wallow in the happiness of the children, and am buoyed by their smiles, laughter, sense of life and purpose. A sleeping baby. A pregnant woman. A nursing mother. A young couple holding hands and making moon eyes. These are the sights that make my day. I don’t give a damn at this point in time (and perhaps I never did) about who won the war. But I need to know that the country is alive and viable. It feels very good to know that Vietnam lives.

1/11/88 AM, Phan Rang. Whenever I think about my tour of Vietnam, the first thing I remember is the constant, terrible noise. All the time, day and night, in the local villages or big cities or thick jungles or open rice paddies — unnatural sounds. The crump of mortars, the shriek of rockets, the whistle of bombs, the clatter of small arms, the clanking of tanks, the squawk of radios, the crackle of flames, the shouts of men, the wails of women, the screams of children, the cries of prayer. But it’s not like that here anymore. It’s totally unexpected and strange to be in a Vietnam of peace and quiet, to hear everywhere natural sounds, and not the horrible din of war. The songs of birds, the grunts of pigs, the ripple of water, the echo of temple gongs, the hoofbeats of water buffalo, the patter of raindrops, the tinkle of bicycle bells, the peeping of tree frogs, the jesting of men, the banter of women, the laughter of children, the murmur of prayer.

1/12/87 PM, Dalat. In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (officially, at least) there is no Champa, no Buddha, no Sita, no Thien Hoa, and certainly no Jesus Christ. But down a crooked side street in Dalat, in a small bedroom above Dinh Gia Khan’s welding shop, I’m shown a beautifully decorated pine tree and a wall-size hand painted banner proclaiming “Happy Merry Christmas!” The whole family gladly assembles for a group photo. We laugh at jokes, exchange holiday stories. There are carols playing on a small cassette recorder. And no one notices that it isn’t an authorized holiday.

1/13/87 PM, N’thong Lha. The K’ho people of the remote mountains along the Laotian border have been weavers for centuries. Their intricately designed cotton cloth bears traditional patterns reflecting their environment and culture. In a small stall at the central market, an ancient darkskinned woman displays tablecloths, door coverings, and blankets decorated with brilliant birds, animals, and flowers, along with a single red, white, and blue shawl that clearly stands out from the rest of her offerings. On a field of the whitest white, horizontal lines of blue and red are intersected by a hundred unusual geometric shapes.
Close inspection reveals what was on the weaver’s mind as she shunted the hand shuttle back and forth in her distant village. Giant silver birds of prey that lay explosive eggs.

**PM, Bao Loc.** This is a medium sized village located about halfway between Dalat and Ho Chi Minh City on Highway 20. At an altitude of 3,000 feet, this area is famous for its coffee and tea. I buy two kilos of strong smelling, air dried coffee beans at the local market for 1,500 dong. While here, I meet Linh Huong, a shoemaker. He shows me a letter from his brother Pham, who lives in Westminster, California. The envelope has $3.28 in US stamps on it, and the postmarks indicate it took about three months for the letter to arrive. Huong is proud of his brother, who is a computer programmer, but Huong has no interest in moving to America himself. He shows me a small stack of cassette tapes sent by Pham; mostly jazz and rock and roll. “Music in Vietnam is not for amusement, but for the expression of the soul,” Huong explains. “In America the pace of life is frantic and busy, because you must be active in the body in order to remain warm. Your music is too nervous, like yourselves.”

**1/15/88 AM, Ho Chi Minh City.** Whether you refer to it as Ho Chi Minh City, as the communists have decreed, or Saigon, as most natives still call it, this sprawling, bustling town hasn’t changed all that much since 1968. I’ve been here less than 24 hours, but it feels like I never really left. The smells, sights, character, and rhythm of Saigon haven’t changed. The form of government is different, but this city, which survived, conquered, or absorbed the influences of Chinese, French, Japanese and American occupations, has never surrendered its personality. Saigon is Saigon, and like the other great cities of the world it has a soul uniquely its own. It feels good to be back.

I’m staying at the legendary Caravelle Hotel, now redesignated the Doc Lap (Independence). But Caravelle is still the name engraved on the building’s facade and etched into the room keys and embedded in the memories and dispatches of the hundreds of journalists who made this their temporary home. For nearly thirty years, correspondents from around the world gathered at the rooftop terrace bar to sip drinks, exchange gossip, pick up companions for the night, dance to the music of Filipino bands, and watch the war being fought in the distance. My room is number 208, overlooking notorious Tu Do (Liberty) Street — now renamed Dong Koi (Revolution) — and from my tiny veranda I can see the Saigon River several blocks to the east, and the docks where cargo ships from Russia, Cuba, Sweden, and Japan are moored. Four blocks to the west is the towering Catholic cathedral, in front of which Buddhist priests and nuns immolated themselves in order to protest the war. (The first woman to die this
way was Sister Huynh Thi Mai, who left this message after burning herself
to death in 1966: "I am not mad and I am not unhappy. Life is beautiful
and I wish I could have loved it to the end. But it is right for me to offer
it for our country and our faith. May the responsibility for this act fall on
the wicked men who rule Vietnam." The Caravelle Hotel is located
in the middle of Saigon, fronting Le Loi Boulevard, and just across the
street from the old National Assembly Building (now a concert hall,
where Vietnam's premier rock group, Bong Sen (Soaring Lotus) is
performing nightly).

The most obvious differences between these and earlier Saigon
streets are the absence of GIs, bars, whores, drug dealers, and Saigon
cowboys. There are few motor vehicles now, and there is a 10PM
curfew. Throughout Vietnam, all social activities cease at 10PM,
except on holidays and very special occasions. Since the workday
begins very early six or seven days a week, there are few complaints
about this policy.

1/15/88 PM, Ho Chi Minh City. Located in the incongruous setting of a
palm shaded French villa near downtown Saigon, the National War
Crimes Museum makes a grim tourist attraction. I enter past a long row
of huge American war machines: an M-48 tank, an APC-mounted
flame thrower, a 155mm howitzer, a big pile of aluminum junk that was
once a B-52 bomber, and a 1500 pound "hamburger bomb". Inside
the first exhibit building I confront a wall size enlargement of Ronald
Haeberle's famous color photograph of the My Lai Massacre victims.
I find myself drawn to this hideous picture, and move close enough to
the nearly life-size (death-size?) images to see the individual bullet
holes riddling the sprawled bodies of women, children and infants —
bullets which came from the smoking-hot guns of teenage GIs. I'm
ashamed to have been in the same army as these men. It breaks my
heart — again — to see such a wanton waste of life, such a terrible
example of US xenophobia. I flee the room to escape those lifeless,
accusing eyes and go on to the next display, which features the results
of chemical defoliation agents, as illustrated by photos of grotesquely
deformed newborns and a monstrous something in a glass jar. And
here, on the wall, is a giant blow-up of a 1971 Boston Globe article
stating: "Larry Rottmann, a former Army officer, testified that he knew
of the presence and use of CBW (chemical and biological warfare)
Defomed babies. Three-armed, headless fetuses. And, in block letters
two inches tall, my name. Seen by countless thousands of Vietnamese
visitors and foreign travelers. Forever a legacy of my first visit here. Larry
Rottmann... Larry Rottmann... Larry Rottmann...
1/16/88 AM, Ho Chi Minh City. At breakfast I’m pleasantly surprised to encounter Dr. Ralph Timperi, of the Tufts University School of Medicine. He is in-country on a health related project, and is a former colleague of Dr. Louis Weinstein, who treated me for war-related illness in 1971. Ralph also served with the 25th Infantry Division in 1969.

PM, Ho Chi Minh City. Sua Van Qunh approaches me shyly at the Saigon Zoo. “You My?” she asks (my is the Vietnamese word for American). I nod yes. “You know Bill Smith?” she inquires, and produces a faded photo of herself and a baby-faced GI. Inscribed on the back, in a juvenile scrawl, are the words, “Aug. ’66. Love, Bill.” “We engaged,” she proclaims proudly, and shows me a cheap PX wedding band with the gold plating nearly worn away. “He go States, but he promise come back for me, so I wait.” Her smile is strained, her tone resigned, but still hopeful. We sit together near the Elephant House and drink warm lemonade. I don’t know what to say, so I tell her that America is a very big place and that I don’t know her Bill Smith. She sips her drink. Watches me closely. She is painfully thin but carries herself well for a woman of late middle age. “We engaged,” she repeats, “so I wait.”

PM, Ho Chi Minh City. A meeting with the Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau, Director of the Buddhist Center, and the monk who supervises all aspects of Buddhist life in Vietnam. The center provides the three years of education and training necessary to prepare young people to become monks and nuns. Since Buddhists have always been antiwar activists, their presence and programs have historically run afoul of the various Vietnamese governments, including the communists. Thich Minh Chau explains:

We are Buddhists first, Vietnamese second. Except for the teachings of Lord Buddha, we follow the same university curriculum as prescribed by the state. There are some problems of course, but no restrictions on what we as a religious movement can believe. Obviously, the precepts of socialism and Buddhism don’t always coincide, so this form of cooperation is rather new and unusual. There is often a failure of the socialist leaders to understand how this unity of state and religion can work, or be carried out. But both of us are trying to work out these problems.

PM, Cholon. One of the most striking differences between the Vietnam of 1968 and the Vietnam of today is the cleanliness and orderliness of the country. My wartime recollections are of a chaotic and filthy society, and it never occurred to me at the time that such disarray could be due to the war itself. Vietnam today is clean and well-ordered, without the graffiti, litter, and piles of garbage that even some
of the more advanced Third World countries like the Philippines or Mexico cannot seem to get rid of. Every morning people can be seen raking their small yards, or sweeping the sidewalks and streets in front of their homes and businesses. Neatness here is a matter of pride. Vietnam’s cities and roads and parks are much cleaner than America’s. The legacy of the war is not always obvious, because for the most part the damaged buildings and bomb-cratered fields have been repaired. But missing limbs and napalm scars are not infrequent, and when I look carefully, I see US military hardware which has been turned to peacetime usage: defused bombs made into flower pots, GI steel helmets used as buckets, jet wingtanks turned into bathtubs and boats, and aircraft aluminum cut into roofing material, cooking utensils, and even a merry-go-round.

1/17/88 PM, Ho Chi Minh City. Meeting with Nguyen Co Thach, the Vietnamese Foreign Minister, at his offices (only the third air-conditioned place I’ve visited; the others were Ho’s tomb and the University of Ho Chi Minh computer center). The Minister is laid-back, friendly, and speaks excellent English. This is more of a conversation than a briefing, and there are no restrictions on topic. Some observations by Mr. Nguyen:

Without diplomatic relations, how can the US expect us to help more with the MIA issue?... This has become a neverending story... and as long as diplomatic problems exist between our countries, nothing can be done about our mutual moral wounds.... I agree with James Reston, who wrote in 1975, that “America has withdrawn from the war, but the war has not yet withdrawn from America.”... Our biggest problem is that we’ve lost all control over our economy; for example, a kilo of steel is worth only 6 dong, but a single egg costs 30 dong. This is stupid. The bureaucratic problems that exist between our countries — student exchanges, MIAs, Amerasian children, refugees, etc. — are not good. But not because of deliberately bad intentions, but because of the old wounds (both ours and yours) that remain from the war. Isn’t it time to focus not on the past, but on the future?

1/18/88 PM, Cu Chi. Sitting on the porch of Nguyen Van Sen’s farmhouse, I can see the site where I was stationed twenty years ago. Sen raises sugarcane, wheat, and rice in fields reclaimed from the sprawling 25th Infantry Division base camp. In the courtyard, Sen’s wife Kim is winnowing a big pile of rice, tossing it repeatedly into the air so that the breeze will blow the chaff away from the grain. In the distance three young girls scramble about on an abandoned US tank. Later, I
explore a few of the hundreds of kilometers of VC tunnels that were built in this area, some of which ran right under our division’s barracks. One of the longest extended for miles and was never discovered during the war because it had been constructed directly under the middle of the main highway, where no one ever thought to look, and where the US (who depended on the road) never bombed. For a while I just wander around the area, lost in thought. I am not unhappy, just reflective. My capacity for remorse has been exhausted. I’m ready, eager, to start thinking ahead. About what I might do in the future regarding Vietnam, rather than continuing to dwell so extensively — to live so exclusively — in that bitter and confusing period of the past. What I’d believed was a bottomless well of grief has been dried up. I’m too full now of new names and faces and places and experiences and ideas to have room or time for that old sorrow. Maybe my hosts understood that — expected that — and have arranged the entire visit to conclude this way, on a hopeful note; or it could be that dinh-men is once again at work. Perhaps this reconciliation has been my own personal agenda all along.

1/19/88 AM, Tan Son Nhut. For the second time in my life I’m leaving Vietnam behind, and from the very same airport. I remember that I’d thought we’d all cheer when we lifted off in 1968, but it was just the opposite. We grew deathly silent and didn’t look at each other at all. I think we were all praying that the plane would not crash or get shot down. We just wanted to go home. We were damn glad to get out of Vietnam. This time, however, I feel a great sense of sadness about leaving. I’m not ready to go so soon, so abruptly. But this Air France 747 is full of Vietnamese who are voluntarily leaving their country, most of them forever, to go to America. They are anxious to depart. Life can be very hard here. As the plane lifts off, they begin crying and laughing and clapping and snapping pictures of themselves in their new freedom. And we’re all flying in a luxurious airliner which was made in the United States and is owned and operated by a company in France... two nations who fought wars here, and lost.

BACK IN THE USA
1/22/88 PM, Honolulu. Coming through customs the agent (a vet) is astonished to see Vietnamese visas stamped in my passport. “You went back?” he asks. “Really?” He’s now only going through the motions of examining my bags. “You went back voluntarily? I hated it. Hated it.” He pauses, lost in thought, then turns up the VC pith helmet, complete with red star, that I’d traded my Bass Pro Shop hat for. The Inspector is stunned. “Where’d you get this?” he asks, almost in a whisper. I tell him. “I hated Vietnam.” he repeats. He’s lost all interest in my luggage now. He looks at me, but doesn’t see me. I wait. Finally
A Veteran Returns

1/23/88 AM, Springfield. I land at the same airport I returned to twenty years ago. On the night I arrived home in 1968, there was no one here to meet me. (It was three days before Lyndon Johnson announced he wouldn’t run for reelection and fourteen days before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.) This time there’s a group of TV, radio, and newspaper reporters waiting for interviews. I try to explain my feelings about the trip and describe what Vietnam and its people are like, but the journalists keep asking about the American MIAs and the communist government. I reply as best I can, and emphasize that I’m not a diplomat, only a concerned citizen and a veteran who went back for personal reasons. But just like many of their wartime predecessors, these reporters are more interested in political topics than human issues, and so they miss the whole point of my trip, and the larger story of post-war Vietnam. The question that really needed answering was asked by Bernard and Marvin Kalb years ago:

The war has numbed us all. It’s been going on for so long that it’s grown a culture of its own. It contaminates everything it touches — you, me, everyone. And what troubles me ... is whether the damage is temporary or permanent. Can you wash it off with a shower? Or are you dirtied forever?

2/7/88 PM, Springfield. I’ve been back for a couple of weeks now, but I’m still having a difficult time readjusting. I’m busy at school and, on the surface at least, am getting caught up with classes, correspondence, etc. But I still find myself confused for no apparent reason. I’m not out of control exactly, but I keep seeing things in a whole new light, an entirely new reality. I’m almost dizzy with distraction, and all the routine daily bullshit around me seems totally irrelevant. It’s like a dream where I’ve left my body and I’m watching myself from a distance as I go through the motions of daily living. I know I am capable of controlling the scenario, but it just doesn’t seem important enough to make the effort. I’m still on that journey which, in some basic and profound way, is altering forever who I am. I need the time and distance and space to try and put everything into focus, but I’m not
getting it. I’m wired. Strung too tight. Tuned too high. Colors are too bright. Sounds are too loud. I’m accustomed now to the pace of life in Vietnam, which is slower and deeper than in America. I know I wasn’t ready to come back yet. Part of me remained back in Vietnam in 1968, and another part of me stayed there this time. I’ve got to go back soon. I’ve been too busy since I came home to examine myself and see whether I’ve gained any valuable new perspective. But last night for the first time ever, I dreamed of Vietnam at peace.

The wheel of law turns without pause
After the rain, good weather.
In the wink of an eye, the universe throws off its muddy clothes
For ten thousand miles the landscape
spreads out like a beautiful brocade.
Light breezes. Smiling flowers.
High In the trees, amongst the sparkling leaves,
all the birds sing at once.
Men and animals rise up reborn.
What could be more natural?
After sorrow, comes joy.
Ho Chi Minh, Prison Diary

1 James T. Davis, a member of the US Army 3rd Radio Research Unit, was killed in action in December 1961, and is usually listed as America’s first Vietnam fatality. However, US Air Force Captain James B. “Earthquake” McGovern was shot down and killed while flying supplies to the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu on May 6 1954. McGovern’s name does not appear on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, since only US casualties between 1959 and 1975 are listed.

2 Stillphant, Sterling. Steel Tiger (New York: Ballantine) 1983;

3 “Willy Peter” is a slang term for white phosphorus, a deadly burning chemical used in US bombs and artillery shells.


6 The first recorded Immolation was Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, who died on June 11, 1963 in Saigon. Immolations were conducted in an orderly fashion: “Reverend Mother Thich Nhu Hue ... has been a nun for 35 years, and is in charge of all the nuns in Vietnam... It’s she who must give permission when one of the nuns wants to commit suicide, and 150 requests await her decision.” Oriana Fallaci. Nothing and So Be It.

7 Taken from testimony at the Winter Soldiers Investigation in 1971. Convened in Detroit, Michigan on January 31 and February 1 and 2, 1971 by Vietnam Veterans Against the War to provide a forum for soldiers who wanted to testify to having committed or witnessed war crimes in Vietnam.

8 Interview with the author, Springfield News-Leader (February 2 1988).

9 Kalb, Bernard. The Last Ambassador (Boston: Little, Brown) 1981: