

The things they carried back

BY NISSA RHEE, AB'06

Squinting through the Hanoi smog, Bob Mulholland points to a mud-colored monument on the far end of Truc Bach Lake.

"That's where John McCain's plane was shot down," the American veteran tells me. "He nearly drowned and had to be dragged out of the water."

It was October 1967, and the United States was bombarding the North Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong daily. The attacks targeted railways, roads, and bridges along with a major power plant, but neighborhoods were also flattened and many civilians were killed. After McCain was pulled from the water, the locals beat him, shattering his shoulder with the butt of a rifle and bayoneting his foot and groin.

Today Bob and I stand at the lake's edge, sipping Coke and talking about the war. I had arrived in Hanoi just a few hours earlier and was going to spend the next two months in the country doing research for a book. I wanted to tell the story of American veterans who return to Vietnam to work on some of the lingering legacies of the war, like Agent Orange and unexploded bombs.

I knew that in some ways the American veterans in Vietnam were no different from those who had made pilgrimages to Normandy and Iwo Jima. But Vietnam was not World War II; the veterans who returned to Southeast Asia would be doing so as the defeated enemy, not as heroes. How,

I wondered, would the Vietnamese receive them? Could the violent past ever be forgotten?

At the lake, a Caucasian man and his son drive by on a motorcycle, towing a red balloon against the gray winter sky. The neighborhood that was once the target of American bombs is now home to a large Western expat population. Hotels and cafés abound, but from the street posts hang reminders of a darker time. Banners mark the 40th anniversary of the 1972 Christmas bombing, America's most concentrated air attack of the war. The United States dropped 20,000 tons of bombs in Operation Linebacker II, killing more than 1,000 civilians in the process.

A Vietnamese television crew had invited Bob to return to mark the anniversary. With a retired Russian general and some members of the Vietnamese military, he was to participate in a nationally broadcast town hall about the bombings. While Bob hadn't flown in the operation, he had been a member of the 101st Airborne Division and was known to speak publicly about his time in Vietnam.

Bob has been back several times. Initially he was interested in connecting children fathered by US troops with their Vietnamese family members. In 1985 he was part of the first official group of American tourists to visit Vietnam since the fall of Saigon a decade earlier. Bob carried letters and photos from the children living in the States to their mothers and relatives who had stayed in Vietnam. On that first trip back he learned that

reconciliation was possible with his former enemies. Bob told reporters afterward, "The one message we got from the Vietnamese was, 'We have an open door to America.'"

Bob and thousands of other American veterans have taken advantage of that open door since the 1980s. What they have found in Vietnam is far from the bullet-strewn battlefields they once knew. The towns shelled to rubble have since been rebuilt. Saigon, once the capital of South Vietnam, is now named after North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and serves as a bustling economic center. But most striking, returning American veterans discover that Vietnamese veterans welcome them as equals.

American veteran Chuck Searcy has lived and worked in Vietnam since the United States normalized relations with the communist country in 1995. He's worked closely with the Vietnamese, first as a representative of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and then as a cofounder of Project Renew, which removes unexploded bombs from the Vietnamese countryside. Chuck says that instead of blaming him and other veterans for the casualties during the war, the Vietnamese respect him for his service.

"They tell me that the war was a tragic situation and an awful policy of the US government, but you didn't make that policy. You served your country when you were called to and we respect that. You know what we suffered through because you suffered the same thing. We're brothers."

Recognizing shared experiences can be healing for both American and Vietnamese veterans.

"Veterans who meet today in Vietnam are sharing their sorrow and trying to move forward together," says Christina Schwenkel, an anthropologist at the University of California, Riverside. Schwenkel is the author of *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance*

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In central Vietnam, US veteran Chuck Searcy (left) discusses bomb disposal with members of Project Renew.

and Representation (Indiana University Press, 2009). “Commemorating the war together is one of the most important ways in which veterans are able to work through the past.”

A few miles from Truc Bach Lake in Hanoi, I meet Senior Colonel Phan Duc Tuan, a 43-year veteran of the People’s Army of Vietnam. Tuan got his start in the military as an 18-year-old, planting landmines meant to kill American soldiers. Today he is working with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation to remove the mines and other explosive remnants of war.

“It’s funny,” Tuan tells me. “During the war all of us in the military tried to kill each other, but now we get along well.”

Tuan’s experience with Americans during the war was limited. He was only nine years old when the United States began bombing North Vietnam. His family moved from one place to another trying to avoid the aerial attacks. He remembers making hats and shields out of straw for protection.

In 1968 Tuan met his first and only American of the war. A US plane had been shot down by a surface-to-air

missile, and the pilot parachuted into Tuan’s village. Children threw stones at the pilot, whom Tuan remembers as being very tall, young, and scared. Tuan’s father knew some English, and when he spoke to the pilot, he calmed down. Tuan offered the American a guava, but he didn’t eat it. In the brief reprieve from bombing, Tuan felt sorry for the American soldier so far from home. But the war marched on. A North Vietnamese military car soon arrived and took the pilot away. And the next day, the US planes returned and bombed his village, killing a girl from his school.

In the four decades that have passed, Tuan has never forgotten that girl and the pain of seeing his village destroyed. But the memory has driven him to reach out to his former enemies and work for peace.

“Veterans hope to never again see the terrible things they saw at war,” Tuan says. “That’s why we make good peace builders. We understand well that war is a stupid human game.”

This April 30 will mark the 39th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, which ended the war in Vietnam. While

bombs and chemicals dropped by the United States continue to claim Vietnamese lives, the conflict has largely faded from the American consciousness, often reduced to a symbol of failure, a controversial war in which the world’s most powerful army could not claim victory.

The veterans I met in Vietnam aren’t interested in winners and losers. For Americans like Bob Mulholland and Chuck Searcy and Vietnamese like Phan Duc Tuan, the war is a shared burden for which both sides are responsible. Four decades on, these veterans are teaching us one of the most important lessons of the war—how to turn enemies into friends. ♦

Nissa (Thompson) Rhee, AB’06, is writing a book about American veterans who have returned to Vietnam to help overcome legacies of the war. Her work has appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, on NPR, and in the Korean partner of the *International New York Times*. In 2011 Nissa was named a Rotary Peace Fellow for her reporting on conflict issues in the United States and South Korea.