

***TWO WOMEN....ONE
DUCK***

***DEDICATED TO OUR BAHNAR FAMILY
OF CHRONG II, VIETNAM***

***BY
MICHAEL & MARION LITTLE***

JUNE 1996

Prologue

This story has two authors, Mike and Marion Little; however, in order to make the text easier to follow, we've used the first person narrative style. The "I" in the story is me, Mike, but the reader should know that Marion's style and substance, heart and soul, are imprinted on every page.

When I met Marion, over seven years ago, the topic of Montagnards came up when Marion visited my office (employed by the same company, she had come West for training). I needed little persuasion to discuss my favorite subject and she easily detected the deep emotion in my words. We could never have imagined where the path would eventually lead us.

Marion was 6 years old when I fought in Vietnam in 1968. In fact, her father, a Marine, was in Vietnam during the same time. She, to this day, has vivid memories of her dad's absence. Each night she watched the evening news with Walter Cronkite, knowing in her heart that if anything had happened to her dad that Mr. Cronkite would be able to tell her. So Vietnam was nothing new to Marion, but the Montagnards were.

As our personal relationship grew, so did our family. We both have young daughters from previous marriages, and a 3 year old son of our own. Our extended family, however, is much larger. Living 10,000 miles away, in a small jungle village, our adopted family totals over 25 people. Marion had never met this part of her "family," had never been to Vietnam and had little idea of what to expect beyond the stories I had enthusiastically shared over the years. What she did have was unlimited compassion and the desire to embrace the unknown. She packed these traits, wrapped in a large loving heart, and waved good-bye to one world, in search of another.

Most people have a difficult time understanding the reasons for a trip to Vietnam. Although many tourists from Europe and Asia are now vacationing there, veterans and businessmen are the only Americans venturing forth in any numbers. One objective of our book is to answer the question "Why Vietnam?" The other, a much more meaningful objective, is to leave behind a "memorial" to all the wonderful people we encountered on this journey. Thanks to them, we lived our dream.

1996, the Year of the Rat....the sociable rat, the first to arrive.....

Mike & Marion Little
June, 1996

I. GETTING THERE

In The Beginning

*F*or thousands of years, they lived in Vietnam's Central Highlands, unhindered and untouched by outside influences. Their tribal societies grew and prospered above the "noise" of civilizations that existed below the morning mists of their highland sanctuaries.

I am referring to the indigenous people of Vietnam, the Montagnards. Over 30 distinct tribal groups....Bahnar, Jarai, Sedang, Koho, Rhade and Bru....and many others, ranging in size and geographical location.

In the middle of the 19th century, French missionaries entered the Highlands, initiating Montagnard contact with the outside world, a relationship that would ultimately envelop them in two wars and leave them outnumbered by ethnic Vietnamese within their ancient domain. The end of the 20th century has brought the Montagnards to the brink of cultural extinction, and has re-classified them as "ethnic minorities," struggling on a daily basis for their existence.

It was the French who gave them their collective name, Montagnard, meaning mountaineer. It was the Americans who became their staunch allies and strong supporters during the Vietnam War. Together, they made a formidable force in the fight against communism in the Highlands; in addition, Americans acted on the Montagnard's behalf when dealing with the government of South Vietnam. Because of the long-standing animosity between Vietnamese policy and Montagnard sovereignty, there existed a strong mistrust and anger between the two groups. Often, Washington leadership acted to preserve Montagnard dignity and civil rights in Saigon, maintaining peace between these conflicting cultures...as all three fought against northern aggression.

When Vietnam fell to the communists in 1975, the Montagnards were left to fend for themselves. The Highlands, increasingly populated with re-settled Vietnamese to create "economic zones," have seen its tribesmen driven deep into the remaining forests. Land has become scarce, and the quality of life has deteriorated. The rights of the Montagnards as a people have been crushed in such areas as religion, education, land ownership and ethnic traditions...all replaced by a plan to "Vietnamize" the mountain peoples.

Members of what was once a proud and independent culture have become second class citizens in their own land, outnumbered and outmaneuvered by outside forces too strong to combat. Their numbers, placed at about one million before the war, have surely dwindled due

to the difficult conditions. For the longest time, it seemed the world had forgotten the Montagnards.

The Set

I went to Vietnam for the first time in August of 1967 as a soldier in the American Army. Trained as a military policeman, I was assigned to B Company, 504th MP Battalion, in the central highland town of Pleiku. Immediately I became a *Roadrunner*, one of a specialized team of combat MP's that I was proud to join. Our job was to patrol Highway 19, the lifeline of the highlands, where military convoys converged daily, delivering the supplies of war. In armor plated gun-jeps, we lived our tour on that infamous road, from checkpoint to checkpoint, ambush to ambush, death to death. It was a good job as far as war goes.

As in any unit, friendships were made, usually contingent as much upon time in-country as a common sense of humor. In my case, I had friends like Tate, Devenney, Peyton and Layne; working together, we became very close and often talked of life after Vietnam. We gave our collective dream a name...the Set. We continually fantasized about life after the war, how we would stay together and "do" the world. Of course, it was merely youthful escapism. Everything changed once we made our way back home.

We had all seen Montagnards since their villages were commonplace along Highway 19. To me they appeared to be something out of *National Geographic*, in their loincloths, toting crossbows, bare-chested women. My inexperienced mindset told me that they were unapproachable and far too foreign for me to make contact. Like all of my buddies, I had much to learn about humanity. All I had learned in Vietnam was that man was capable of extreme violence and terror. I had lost my sense of innocence. I was part of it, the violence, and realized the capacity to kill was inside of me. It was an uneasy discovery.

And then...the Set discovered the Bahnar.

Miracles: One Point Of View

The Ayun River crosses Highway 19 about 30 miles east of Pleiku. In 1967, the bridge had been destroyed by the enemy, and a single lane D-file was established over the river. This meant that MP's were needed on each side of the river to control traffic, ensuring that the convoys passed unimpeded. We spent a great deal of time at this critical checkpoint; as did many young Bahnar children (the Bahnar are one of the larger Montagnard tribes). Their village was nearby and each day they stood by waiting and hoping the American soldiers would be generous with their leftover c-rations.

Already eight months into my tour, my life was about change forever. The Set would soon fall in love with these children. Subconsciously, the decision was made to quit the war on a personal level and replace it with something we desperately craved: the chance to regain our dignity. A redemption.

Our remaining months in-country were filled with the laughter of children, and I was caught up, indeed, transformed by the whole experience. A transformation as complete as that of any man who becomes a father for the first time. "My kids" ranged in age from three to ten, young enough to stay out of the rice fields and spend their days with me and my buddies at the river. We learned so much about each other...language, customs, beliefs...but the biggest lesson I learned was so simple: that we are all part of one family, the human family, and despite all our obvious differences, we laugh and cry and dream as if we were one.

The closer we grew to the children, the more trusted we became by the village. Soon, many of the children were permitted to spend nights with us in camp, discovering for the first time "miracles" of the modern world. It was hot running water; it was electricity; it was spoons and forks; it was toilets; but most of all, it was television. Those nights in camp were special, and remain some of my fondest memories.

The Roadrunners also built a house for the most needy family in our village; it took two months but we did it with all of the patrols lending a hand. Sadly, one American life was lost in the effort, a truck driver killed at Deadman's Curve. This young man was hauling a heavy load of lumber on Highway 19 and took the curve too damn fast. He provided the lumber we needed for the house at the ultimate expense. After we recovered his body and turned him over to grave's registration, we climbed down the embankment and stole the lumber.

Without thinking of it consciously, the Set and the village had become "family," but the nature of things dictated that the soldier return home after one year of service. We went home as our times came up, leaving a void after each departure.....and eventually it was my turn. After a brief, inadequate farewell to my Bahnar family, I returned to California believing that my war was over, a thing of the past. I was so totally wrong. My war was over, but my love for the Bahnar children was not. Their bracelets were on my wrists, their story on my lips to whomever would listen, their voices in my heart tearing at my soul, invading my dreams.

Once home, I lost all contact with the Bahnar since they had no mail service. South Vietnam fell to the communists in 1975, and any hope of news about the children faded behind an iron curtain. All that seemed to remain was a silver bracelet on my wrist, old photographs in my wallet and love for them in my heart. With all the obstacles and the long years of separation, I eventually reached the conclusion..."the only way I will see the children again is when and if we all make it to heaven."

Mat Ih Bu?

Soldiers...large men, black and white, carrying powerful guns, as mighty as anyone in the world, and they had an endless supply of food. Bahnar children....small, dark skinned, shy, half naked, and always looking for their next meal. What finally brought us together was the boundless sense of humor each side possessed.

The first thing we had to do was learn the language, no easy task. And the first words we needed were: "What's your name?" Mat ih bu?

I wrote all their names down in a book and on my helmet cover.

There were the brothers Kenh, Kun, Kil and sister Koch; brothers Prot and Pril; brothers Jhon and Jhuk; brothers Blup and Blui, sister Blar; Pset and Grek, and the beautiful Bhen. There were so many others that remain nameless, but nonetheless joined us for the daily swim in the Ayun river.

Kenh and Prot were my favorites "sons." They were 6-year old boys and good friends long before I met them. They soon became the heart and soul of our redemption, assisting with language studies and helping us with the other villagers. Kenh's father had died of malnutrition in 1966, so he and his family were quite poor. Still, he was strong, proud and carried himself with a confident assurance. Prot, on the other hand, was light skinned and very slight of build. He was as bright as he was energetic, and could recite numerous songs that the French missionaries had taught the Christians of his village. Together, these two children were the fireworks and "glue" that provided us with a reason to wake each day, alive with anticipation.

I loved them with all my heart, and without ever giving voice to the emotion, we adopted each other. I was the father and they were my children. It was just as simple and as complicated as that. The battles along the highway continued, so did the dying. But through the smoke of burning trucks, there was now a spark of hope, a tiny glimpse at what **should** be. In the faces of my boys, Kenh and Prot, I could see that I was okay, a decent human being in spite of the inhumanity that surrounded us.

Sometimes, in our lives, an event or person makes such an impression on us that we are changed forever. The war did that to many of us who served in Vietnam. To my benefit when I close my eyes at night, I see the faces of the children. It is their love and not the war's hatred that has, for me, survived.

Miracles: Another Point Of View

The years rolled by like seasons. It wasn't until 1985 (the 10th anniversary of the war's end) that things began to happen. For the first time in my life, I felt as if my actions were "lead." Not having practiced Catholicism since the war, I wasn't inclined to consider myself

religious....but as events unfolded, I could not deny the feeling of being guided by a higher power. I was being offered a chance at something, and it was up to me if I wanted to follow.

I followed.

In 1986, 200 Montagnards (remnants of a freedom fighting force found in Cambodia) were resettled in North Carolina. I flew from San Jose to Los Angeles to greet them during their first layover. As they deplaned, I looked into each face hoping for recognition, none came. New friendships, however, were started and valuable information came to light about the plight of Vietnam's Montagnards. Finally, I felt I was reconnected and I learned more each day from a ever widening circle of contacts.

Working with the **Highlands Assistance Project**, I returned to Vietnam during the Spring of 1992. Although not allowed to visit the highlands, I did make contacts that would prove to be invaluable in 1994. It also gave me the opportunity to put the war behind me, not forgotten, but simply in a safe, peaceful place. I wrote a story of that trip entitled: **My New Vietnam (It's Not Just A War Anymore)**.

In 1992, around Thanksgiving, another 400 Montagnards were rescued from the jungles of Cambodia and flown to North Carolina. Over the Christmas holiday, I visited them and celebrated their entry into the United States. There was much fanfare and media coverage, but still no word of my children. The Central Highlands remained closed to outsiders, particularly Americans.

Just prior to the Spring of 1994, with the nineteen year U.S. Embargo of Vietnam lifted, the highlands were finally opened to tourists. With Joe Devenney at my side, I returned to Vietnam with the hope of finding new answers. Never did either of us believe that we would somehow find the children, who were, by now, grown adults.

My next story earned the title: **Miracle In The Highlands**. Armed with only memories and old photo's, we found our Bahnar family, living deep in the forest. Sadly, some of the children had died (Jhon, Kil, Blup), but Prot and Kenh lived in the same village, so did Kun and Koch. Even old mother Sut was there to shake our hands. It had been 26 long years of separation, but the family was reunited. Our time together was all too short and many questions remained unanswered. As tearful farewells were said again, there was something tangible this time, something we couldn't have hoped for in 1968.....it was our future.

Consequences

“*P*lease watch over our family living so far away....” Our children in America are ages 3, 6 and 8; each night before dinner, our prayer includes the Bahnar families living in the forest 10,000 miles away. It is one of the legacies of having found them.

Another less palatable result of that miracle in the highlands was the intense questioning that our Bahnar children were subjected to, by the security police after our departure. It was a reminder that Vietnam is still a dangerous place, a communist country with a complete disregard for the civil and human rights of its indigenous peoples. The Vietnamese government continues to be suspicious of any relationship between American and Montagnard, leftover paranoia from their unity during the war.

The most important question after the miracle of discovery was, “What now?” Before the trip, I had not prepared myself for actually finding the children. My wife, Marion, and I discussed this in depth upon my return. There was still no easy way to get mail to them, and it seemed to us that communication was the key to everything if we were to make a difference in their lives.

Cry Uncle

*H*is first letter showed up 8 months after the miracle, and I immediately distrusted its authenticity. I had never been told about an Uncle Bok Yong, someone who spoke and wrote English and was a blood relative to Kenh, Kun and Koch. With little choice but to respond, I crafted a letter back that was filled with generalities (my own paranoia seeping in), more of an attempt at “feeling-out” to see if this Yong fellow was legitimate.

I should have realized it was all part of the “plan.” In subsequent letters (and eventually phone calls), Yong proved to be exactly who he said he was. He had learned English during the war while working with American doctors and bible translators in the Pleiku area. To this day, he treats Montagnard leprosy patients throughout the Province and preaches his faith to villagers. He quickly became our friend and the vital, prayed for, conduit between us and our Bahnar family.

Letters and photographs began to find their way, back and forth, over the ocean. When I heard Kenh’s voice on the phone for the first time, I nearly had a heart attack. The world as we knew it had changed forever...again. There was talk of another visit. And there was talk of moving to America to be with us. And there was a difficult discussion of why that was not possible. With Yong’s help, we learned so much about each other, and as our knowledge grew, it became increasingly apparent that Marion and I needed to go back...this time together. To our Bahnar kids we were mother and father, and they desperately wanted to meet their “mom.”

Good-bye, My Son

*I*n August of 1995, I received a phone call from Uncle Yong and Kenh. My son, Prot, had died on July 29th of cancer. Marion had to take the phone while I grieved in private.

Prot....my son who remembered all the songs we sang together in 1968, my son who guided me through the complexities of Montagnard life, my son who slept by my side as a 6-year old child....my son Prot was dead at the age of 33. I knew that his wife, Sok, and their 5 children would have a difficult time making ends meet without him. My only consolation was the knowledge that we had touched each other before he passed away. I know in my heart that "He's guiding us now," and I refuse to let Prot go, "from above."

I learned a valuable lesson from Prot's death, something I should have thought of before, that with great joy comes the possibility of great sorrow. Had I not gone back to the highlands and found my children, the wonderful memory of our times together in 1968 would have gone "untouched." I would never have known of their deaths, their misery or the suffering endured since the war. Prot would have stayed "alive" until the day I died. By finding the children again, we opened up a new chapter in our relationship, one founded in the present and not the past. A chapter that brought new responsibilities as well.

Although we had received a letter from Prot dated two weeks prior to his death, we would have to visit his grave in Chrong II to say good-bye. Quite often, I like to re-read his letter: "Everyday I remember you, I look at your picture. When I go here or there, I keep thinking about you, waiting for the day you come to us. I would like to be with you, happy together; please remember us....may you live well, may you stand well....thanks to all of you. That is all."

Easy Rider

*H*aving found the children in 1994, I began to search for ways to help them. Hence the birth of **Cattle Drive '95**. In my mind, I assumed the most urgent need for my Bahnar family was cattle, since they had made it known that meat was a rare commodity for them. Besides, the name had a nice ring to it.

Marion and I created a flyer that described the program: by raising enough money (about \$1,000), we could buy a half dozen head of cattle for our family. By circulating these flyers to friends and co-workers over the course of a few months, enough money was donated to make the purchase. My good friend and fellow veteran, Karl Klink, was going back for a visit and was eager to deliver the money. But as it turned out, the connections couldn't be made in Pleiku to buy and deliver the cattle, so Karl returned home with most of the money (he was able to deliver a small portion of it to Kenh and Prot).

At first, these events totally disheartened me. But then, through letters from Bok Yong and talks over the phone, I learned that cattle was not the most urgent need that our children had. I finally got it through my thick head that it was better to **ask** than to **assume**.....”What is it you want most?” I asked Kenh. “A motorbike!” was his excited response.

So the **Cattle Drive** switched gears (literally) and to my everlasting gratitude, our contributors stuck by us. We needed a bit more funding as the motorbike would cost \$1,500, but it all came together by November of 1995. Originally, I suggested to Bok Yong that we bring the money with us during our 1996 visit; however, he advised against it since we might arouse scrutiny by the local authorities. So, we decided to send the funds via VINAFA, a Canadian company that transfers money overseas. Although we had used their service in the past with much success, there had never been more than \$200 at stake in any one transaction. ...we held our breath...

About a month later, a photo arrived showing Kenh seated on his new Honda 70. Once again, all the anxiety was for naught....the money arrived as planned and the purchase of the bike went off without a hitch. For the first time in their lives, our Bahnar family had their own motorized transportation, a link from their remote jungle village to the outside world. Kenh and Kun’s smiles were all the thanks we needed. How proud and happy they looked. I sent thank you letters and a copy of the picture to everyone who contributed to the effort.

Mission Possible

As 1996 rang in, we were only three months from our planned visit to Vietnam. As much as we acknowledged that we both had to go, we had a complicated, unresolved logistics effort on our hands. It would, in many ways, have been easier for me to return alone. Marion, however, knew that she would have to “live it” herself before she could allow herself to accept the honor of becoming “Mom.” My oft repeated promise “you’ll never be the same.....” convinced her that the logistics effort would be well worth it. Our two children in residence, Amanda and Sean, had to be cared for in our absence. This required quite a bit of creativity. Amanda, we decided, would fly to her dad’s house for the Easter break, while our son Sean would stay with my daughter, his half sister, and my ex-wife in Northern California. I’ve always contended, “You really have to want to do this.”

We began counting down the days in January, a hectic time in our lives as we were completing the move from Texas to California. Through all the confusion and uncertainty here, we maintained our focus on Vietnam and our family there. It’s easy to find reasons to stay put; it takes a certain resolve to listen to one’s heart. As ever, we listened.

I have a wide range of contacts, from veterans to former missionaries to former nurses, all who worked with the Montagnards during the war. As Marion and I prepared for the trip, we received countless phone calls from our friends. “When you go to Vietnam, would you mind...” was how every conversation began. We were asked to deliver bibles, letters, money, pictures, and even a microscope. There was never any hesitation on our part as we agreed to each “mission of mercy.” Offsetting the responsibility and anxiety we felt in relation to some of the more controversial deliveries was the knowledge that each delivery would be greeted with great thankfulness and celebration. Who could turn down such an experience!

As we closed in on March, the feeling that we were embarking on a mission grew. Despite the pace of our “normal” lives, the impending trip developed an inertia of its own...our bags began to overflow with the stuff of America, bound for the land of the Bahnar. After two years of planning, the dream was about to begin. How strange it is to live one’s dreams.....

When Dreams Become Days and Days Become Dreams

*O*n March 29th, about 5 minutes before midnight, our China Air flight departed Los Angeles International Airport. Two weeks later, we boarded another China Air flight that would begin our re-entry to America. It’s those 14 days and nights that are the focus of this story. While the dates are in “black and white,” the rest of the journey is anything but clear. All we have to offer are words; nowhere on these pages can you smell or taste or hear the Highlands of Vietnam. You won’t be able to hear the laughter of the children in the river, or the hushed conversations in a Montagnard longhouse. One has to experience those firsthand.

There is no describing Vietnam, especially for those of us who are somehow “attached” to it. It isn’t a place, but more like a memory, constantly calling us back. On countless occasions in-country, Vietnamese asked me “why are you here?” “This is my country too,” to many, a baffling, yet totally accurate, explanation. For those who allow it, Vietnam will consume you. Going into it, our hopes were intact; coming out of it, our dreams were realized. Each day offered promise; each hour promised the unexpected....we drank it up like fine wine.

II. SAIGON

Skateboards For Vietnam?

The SuperShuttle van arrived at our home five hours prior to our scheduled departure and we were as ready as we would ever be. Marion had made sure that there was some “method” to our packing “madness” especially when it came to the carry-on items. The 17-hour flight wasn’t the right time to be missing the essentials: candy, gum, books, St. Christopher medals, and inflatable whoopee cushions. Passports and visa’s, along with the list of important contacts, came on board with us....as did money belts strapped to our waists. Marion, having occasional trouble with claustrophobia, also carried on a prescription drug should the long hours of confinement on board the aircraft prove intolerable. Many times I answered her question “How long will we be in the air?”

The shuttle made one more stop in Mission Viejo before heading north to LAX. Two LA city firemen climbed aboard with an abundant assortment of gear. When we asked, they told us about their foray into private enterprise via a line of clothing for skateboard enthusiasts. They were on their way back East for a trade show with high hopes of landing both orders for clothing as well as a sponsor to provide the much needed financial backing for their small business venture.

All this talk had me thinking: “I wonder how skateboards would do in Vietnam?” Marion has always been skeptical of my off-the-wall schemes, but even she had to admit the idea was intriguing. The predominant mode of transportation in Vietnam is a bicycle or a motorbike....I had never seen a skateboard in Vietnam. Soon, I was envisioning a factory in the Highlands turning out skateboards by the thousands, and being managed by our Bahnar family. Before I could take myself too seriously, the van deposited us at the international terminal.

The Day That Never Was

Row 44 on China Air flight #7, bound for Saigon, via Taipei. Thirteen hours on the first leg, about four and a half on the second. In and out of restless sleep. Movies, meals, and the constant drone of the 747. The two things we had going for us were adrenaline and a sense of humor. Our progress was plotted by a diabolical computer and projected on the screen at the front of the cabin. We watched as it kept track of the minutes and miles, time and temperature, speed and tail wind. Its hypnotic effect was real. How far had we gone....how far to go....time since departure, time of arrival....time...time....it moved in imperceptible increments.

Somehow, one survives the passage of time. And somehow, we lost a day in the process. March 30th, my Dad's birthday, never existed; the international dateline made sure of that. Happy birthday Dad.

Marion had the window seat, I was in the center, and next to us was a young Vietnamese man named Duan Le. His family was from Saigon and this was his first trip back since emigrating to the United States. Our conversations with Duan were enjoyable, although his English wasn't always easy to understand. His companionship helped us pass the time, and we exchanged Saigon addresses hoping to see each other again in-country. However, we lost sight of Duan in Taipei since he wasn't on our flight into Saigon.

Taipei Tony

He approached us while we were seated in the Taipei terminal waiting for the flight to Saigon. His initial question was related to the book he was reading, "Do you think it's okay to bring this book into Vietnam?" Neither of us thought a William Faulkner novel, **The Sound and The Fury**, would raise eyebrows, but this poor gentleman looked as though he were about to fight for not only his rights, but indeed his life. Tony, apparently his adopted name, was now a proud American....an American citizen who once belonged to Vietnam.... and this was his first trip back to the country of his birth, since fleeing for his life in 1975.

Tony had spied us at the terminal in Los Angeles and had wondered why two Caucasians were traveling to Southeast Asia on what appeared to be a vacation! When he watched us move to the gate for the connection to Saigon, he became increasingly perplexed. As I excused myself to use the men's room, Tony approached Marion. By the time I returned, they were chatting like old friends. Inside of that brief forty-five minute layover, we were exposed to the first of countless "stories" of the people from Vietnam...those who had left, those who had stayed...everyone in, and out of, Vietnam has a story to tell.

Time accelerated and soon we were boarding the next jet. Tony gave us the high sign as he passed our row and held up his novel. I'm unsure whether Faulkner was raised in an act of new found confidence, an act of defiance, or a little of both. In any case, we watched Tony carefully once we arrived in Saigon and began the much feared process of clearing Vietnamese customs. Marion and I passed easily, much to our surprise. As we were being swept through document verification, we watched as Tony made it to the head of the line, only to be turned away by the customs official. Tony appeared to be undaunted, making changes to his paperwork as he moved once again to the end of the line. Godspeed Tony, and welcome home...

Wayne's World

Ten thousand miles is a long way from home, and the importance of having confidence in one's travel agent cannot be measured. On my trip in 1994, there were major snafu's in the arrangements that left me with a certain distrust and pessimism towards the travel industry. This time, with my wife at my side, I wanted everything to go as smoothly as possible.

In 1995 I began contacting various travel agencies in the U.S. My objectives were two-fold. First, I wanted to obtain the best possible flights and hotels at the lowest price, but second, and more importantly, was my need to build a relationship that might restore my confidence. I was getting good feedback from competent agencies, many who tailored programs with veterans in mind, but none seemed to understand our special needs or the fact that we weren't tourists in the traditional sense. Finally, it came down to a recommendation from Karl Klink.

Wayne Truong (a former pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force) has an office in Little Saigon, Orange County, California. The agency name is Saigon Express and is located about 30 minutes from our home. Over the phone, Wayne was very matter of fact, asking all the right questions and seemed eager to assist us. He arranged hotels, airport transportation and flights. When the tickets and visa's were ready, we drove to his office and met him face-to-face for the first time. Under his glass desk cover were old photo's of himself in pilot's uniform, posing in front of a jet fighter. His unassuming dignity was easy to like, and we put our faith in him.

All that said, I was still very nervous when we landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport. We carried nothing with us that guaranteed reservations or ground transportation to the hotel; so when we successfully passed through customs and moved into the throngs of waiting Vietnamese, the sight of a placard saying "Marion and Mike Little" generated a huge sigh of relief. Wayne had done his job well.

Tran Quang Dao, former infantryman in the South Vietnamese Army, politely greeted us. Walking point, he maneuvered us through the masses of humanity at Tan Son Nhut to the air conditioned car assigned to take us to the Que Huong Hotel. Dao's English was quite good, and it was obvious that he enjoyed blowing the dust off of the language he hadn't used in years. He was very candid when discussing his life since 1975, and even related how he had hacked off a finger in order to avoid the killing fields in Cambodia. He held up the stub with a survivor's pride. It was easy to like this survivor.

The Longest Yard

Although it was Sunday and Dao's only day off, he offered to accommodate us in any way. The one thing Marion wanted to accomplish before we flew to the Highlands was buy an *ao dai* (the traditional Vietnamese "long dress") for herself and Amanda. Because of her near 6-foot stature, Marion knew the dress would have to be custom made, so she asked Dao if he could recommend a shop. "Of course! After I take you to hotel, I get my wife and she go with us to buy *ao dai*." We couldn't turn down an offer like that!

Familiar faces abounded at the Que Huong Hotel from previous stays in '92 and '94....cyclo drivers, front desk personnel, even the old woman selling cigarettes out front. It felt good to be recognized and welcomed back. The only room available was a large suite, a "honeymoon suite," which suited us just fine having paid in advance for only a standard room. The first order of business, since Saigon was smack in the middle of it's warm season, was to change into shorts and to ensure that the small refrigerator and air conditioning were in working order. Downstairs again, we converted some U.S. dollars into Dong (10,600 to one) and waited for Dao's return.

Cramped into a small car we were warmly greeted by Dao's wife, who seemed excited about the opportunity to meet Americans, although she spoke no English. One of Marion's first lessons in-country was to accept the driving conditions and techniques in Saigon (mostly "honk and swerve"), with complete trust in divine providence. Every vehicle known to mankind traverses the streets of Saigon in continual motion to the chorus of beeps...and nearly all of them, with or without motors, miraculously arrive at their destinations unharmed.

When we reached the recommended shop, Dao and his wife accompanied us while our driver remained with the car. Beautiful silks of every color and design covered the walls, and while pleasing to the eye, Marion realized this was going to take more time than she had anticipated. With Dao's wife explaining to the shop keeper what we wanted, the right colors and patterns were easily chosen and a price agreed upon. With the selections made, we walked two doors down to see the tailor.

I sat down with Dao while Marion was measured for her dress. To the delight and amazement of everyone in the shop, the tailor exclaimed in Vietnamese, "she is too tall for the tape!" It was so obvious what was going that we all shared in the laughter. Arrangements were made for the dresses to be completed in ten day's time, when we returned to Saigon. Dao took us back to the Que Huong, and we said our farewells to his wife who was still smiling at Marion with that look of "understanding" that all women share when it comes to shopping.

Dear Son....Love, Mother

*M*y close friend Roy Russell, who also accompanied me to Vietnam in 1994, has a Montagnard friend who made her escape from Vietnam to the U.S. in 1975. In a different lifetime, she was married to a Vietnamese man and gave birth to a child during the war. For a host of very complex reasons, her son was taken from her when he was only four months old. This young man grew up knowing nothing of his mother.

Hearing this story, Roy promised to follow some leads during his next trip to Vietnam. Last year, he found Ngo Tien Dung (nickname Tri) living in Saigon and attending the university there. Although his mother remained a world away, their connection was finally re-established after two decades.

Marion and I were asked if we would deliver some items to Tri (a hand-made sweater from mother to son, letters from his half siblings that he had never met, pictures, a tape and a small amount of money). We didn't have to be asked twice.

Aboard her first cyclo, Marion rode beside me through the labyrinth of Saigon, through the noise and stench, on the first of our many missions. We knocked at the door of a two-story building that had seen much better days. A young man answered, politely trying to understand our intentions, and asked us to wait one moment. In a few minutes, Tri came to the door. In a manner that conveyed complete excitement, he invited us upstairs. In a crowded one-room flat, barren of any luxuries, seven university students shared their meager existence, not completely unlike a college dorm in America.

While the other six boys lounged on the floor watching a soccer game on a the small TV, Tri sat with us, eagerly reading the news from his mother. His English was very good, so we had little trouble communicating. He was a shy, very polite man, a son who would make any mother proud. Not wishing to overstay our welcome, we made our way down the rickety ladder and back into the Saigon sun. A couple of pictures were snapped and we climbed back aboard the waiting cyclo's. Despite his obvious anxiousness to play the cassette tape and to hear his mother's voice for the first time, Tri continued to wave until we disappeared from sight.

Klink Klank

*D*uring the TET offensive of 1968, one of our men was seriously wounded in downtown Pleiku. He had spent the night with his girl friend and heard a commotion outside during the early morning hours. When he opened the door to investigate, he saw enemy troops running through the town. Unfortunately, they also saw him. A grenade blew him into unconsciousness, but his girlfriend saved his life by dragging his broken body back inside their room. He was eventually rescued and immediately sent back to the U.S. to recover, never to return to Vietnam as a soldier.

For Karl Klink, the connection to Vietnam did not end that fateful morning in Pleiku. In time, he recovered from his physical wounds, although a good deal of metal still floats inside his body, and he has gone on to lead a somewhat normal life. Karl has raised his children and has also become the chief of police in a small Delaware town. But the memories have stayed with him. With ringing clarity, Vietnam beckons him back.

Karl has made a number of trips back to Vietnam and has a strong desire to live there one day. He loves the people, the country and his wounds fare better in the warmer climate. I teased him, “You don’t make as many clanking noises when you walk!” Each time he returns to Pleiku, Karl spends a good deal of time sitting by the “door” he opened that morning. A door that, to this day, carries shrapnel wounds from the same grenade that nearly claimed his life.

Karl and I have been in touch for the last six years by way of a group he help found, the Pleiku 504th MP Association. Through annual reunions, our friendship has grown, both of us sharing a love for Vietnam, past and present. Very early in the planning of mine and Marion’s trip, Karl decided on an itinerary that put him in Vietnam at the same time. In fact, having the luxury of four weeks’ vacation, he departed two weeks before us to visit friends in Saigon.

Our phone in the Que Huong rang, and Karl’s booming voice at the other end welcomed us to Vietnam, “Hey Tee Tee!” It was good to hear a familiar voice. We waited for him in the hotel lobby, and nearly fell down laughing when we saw him arrive. Karl is a big man, and sitting on the back of a small Honda driven by a young, petite Vietnamese girl, was a sight to behold. The “chief” was back on the job and loving every minute. Catching his breath, he quickly brought us up-to-date on the important news, “We were waiting for our dinner the other night and this dog kept barking outside....and then I heard this kind of a muffled noise, the barking stopped and the next thing I know, the waiter is serving the food!” Our friend’s humor added to our own....we would make quite an impact on the people of the Highlands.

Melatonin Melancholia

By early evening, our bodies were in full revolt. A much needed nap caused us to miss a dinner rendezvous with Karl and his friends at the Saigon River. By the time we got to the restaurant, Karl had already left. The cyclo drivers began to get on our nerves, latching on like leeches, and all we really wanted was a good night’s sleep. We’d bought a bottle of Melatonin before leaving the states. Melatonin is an over-the-counter vitamin that helps people sleep. It is often recommended for travelers as it helps body clocks adjust naturally to new time zones. It was magic! Our bed sagged like a hammock, but we slept like babies.

Sneaking Out The Backdoor

We had one full day left in Saigon before heading up to the Highlands. Although anxious to move on, we resolved to make the best of it and “do” Saigon. Our first decision was to avoid the cyclo drivers by leaving through the hotel’s side door. It wasn’t that we didn’t feel compassion for these men, as they hold one of the lowest jobs in Saigon; but we constantly fought against being cheated by them. There are also turf wars between rival cyclo’s, and we didn’t want to get in the middle of those jealousies again. Taxi’s have recently invaded the city and fares for hungry cyclo drivers are becoming harder to find, especially from the foreign tourist and businessman. So, all things considered, we walked.

The city is quickly changing, not the poverty, but the influx of foreign business. Office complexes and high-rise hotels are going up everywhere. Ho Chi Minh City is swelling with humanity (about 7 million according to Dao) and the closeness of all that activity created a kind of claustrophobia and personal insignificance that left us catching our breath, waiting for the chance to escape. We kept our eyes on the cathedral and radio tower to maintain some sense of direction.

On the way to the museum, we passed the old U.S. embassy building. A woman approached us with outstretched hands, and at first we thought, “Oh no, another beggar.” But sensing that we were Americans, she simply wanted to thank us in near perfect English for returning to her country. Marion began to understand the “connection” between this land and Americans. We chatted for awhile with her, bid farewell and moved on.

By noon, we tired of art galleries and shops and heat, and were definitely ready for a break. Into a blast of cold air, we entered the surrealistic world of the Rex Hotel. Famous for its wartime reputation, the Rex has continued to cater to the wealthy and has been beautifully maintained. After a morning in the streets and markets of Saigon, its luxuriousness was almost too incongruous to comprehend, but soon the air conditioning brought back reality. Lunch was excellent, as was the ice cold beer at the roof-top bar. From the railing, we looked out over Saigon; this vantage point filtered out much of the noise and pollution, and we lingered a long time before re-entering the world out there.

Vietnam News: Friday, April 12, 1996

Coffee Destroys: **DARLAC** - Up to 70 per cent of the 70,000 hectares of new coffee plantations in forest-rich Darlac, one of the four provinces on the central highlands, comes from clear-felled forest land.

Fast forest destruction caused by both locals and new settlers from elsewhere in the last two years was mainly attributed to the expansion of 70,000 new hectares of coffee growing area.

Currently the province has about 137,000 hectares under coffee growing, but half of this area is suffering a prolonged and severe drought.

Saigon Bandits

*T*he most common form of transportation in the city is motorbikes, the countless riders and frenetic energy reminding me of salmon swimming upstream to spawn. For protection against the fumes and the sun, many of the women wear long colorful gloves, traditional ao dai, and silk scarves over their nose and mouth. Hardly an inch of skin is exposed. They look like thousands of beautiful “robbers” floating through traffic making their getaway, fleeing the scene of their crimes.

Wollin’ Down The Wiva’

*F*inally, darkness descended upon Saigon and the temperature pretended to drop. We met Karl, his young friend, Phung, and her chaperone for dinner on a river boat restaurant. A large party was already present, about 100 Chinese celebrating a birthday. We were ushered to a partially filled table near the railing, and immediately embraced the party atmosphere. A live band was really working everyone into a frenzy...Chinese partygoers literally dancing in the aisles.

A steady breeze from the river was refreshing, but I soon sensed motion, “Are we moving?” I asked Karl. “Naw, this thing stays at the dock.” Within a few moments, however, we were being steered out into the Saigon River, and I razzed my buddy for his lack of understanding when it came to the Vietnamese language, “You really know what’s going on!” His only response was “Shit!” Although Karl always kept a American to Vietnamese phrase book with him, it only ever seemed to add to his confusion.

The cruise lasted over an hour and was thoroughly enjoyable. Good food, cold beer, recognizable music...and Karl paid! Only one thing was missing.....Credence Clearwater’s rendition of **Proud Mary**. Often during the war, I had heard Vietnamese versions of that tune when the vocalist would lose the pronunciation battle and spit out the hilarious “Wollin’ down the wiva” verse to soldiers who didn’t really care.

Had the band played that tune as we rolled down the river, Marion might have even been able to talk me into a dance. As it was, she was a little disappointed, “After all you’ve told me about that stupid song, I really wanted to hear it...Damn!”

III. THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

Incoming

As promised, Dao arrived the next morning to take us from the hotel to the airport. Karl had joined us earlier at the Que Huong and somehow the three of us found a way to fit into the limited real estate available in the car's back seat. Vietnam Air flight 342, Thon Sa Nhut to Pleiku, was scheduled for departure at 11:20 am. As the plane built speed for takeoff, thunder clouds began to build to the north. Despite the rough weather, our plane landed right on time, about 12:35pm. I was home again.

The Pleiku terminal is quite small and unassuming, but a good sized crowd was gathered to receive those who had just arrived, and to bid farewell to passengers taking our places. In the distance, as the weather continued to bear down on us, a booming thunder clap made my head jerk around. It was easy to flash back to 1968....the unmistakable sound of artillery....incoming, outgoing.....the dark sky now resembling the smoke from of a smoldering gasoline tanker after being hit by a rocket. Karl and I exchanged glances, "Just like old times, buddy!" Marion, who noticed our faces, could only imagine the memories that were playing back...

Under those threatening skies, we strolled across the tarmac and into the terminal where we were greeted with a smile and a handshake. Siu Cham.

"12 Swiss...4 Elephant...They Drive Me Crazy!"

I had met Siu Cham briefly during my 1994 trip. He is a Jarai Montagnard and speaks excellent English, having served with the Americans during the war and studied English at the University of Michigan. After 1975, he survived many difficult years before he landed a job with the state owned Gialai Travel Company. As fate would have it, Wayne Truong had contacted Gialai Travel to be our "host" during our days in Pleiku. Cham's office was also located inside the Pleiku Hotel.....which happened to be our hotel of choice.

Cham seemed as pleased to see us as we were him. In '94, he had asked me to locate his school records from the University of Michigan. These records were vital to him so that he could continue to teach English on the side. Despite Marion's persistent efforts, the University could not find Cham's paperwork....it was a dead end. I had mentioned the dilemma to Roy Russell before his last trip to Vietnam; at my urging, he met with Cham in Pleiku. A friendship

developed, and Roy promised to obtain the necessary documents when he returned to the States.

“Cham, did you receive the papers?” I asked when we were alone. In a quiet, reserved tone, he leaned over to me, “Yes, thank you.” With the help of friends at the University of California, Roy arranged for “special” records for Cham, and had mailed them to Pleiku.

Although he is often a serious man (the politics of Vietnam necessitates a good deal of sobriety), Cham’s most delightful attribute is his sense of humor. The two of us never missed an opportunity to poke fun or take a shot at each other. According to him, dozens of European tourists were coming to the Highlands, and he was kept quite busy with his guide duties. At Galai Travel, he was the English expert; another employee spoke French. If tourists didn’t speak Vietnamese or one of those two languages, they were in trouble.

The tour groups that visit Pleiku generally buy “the package deal” which includes an overnight stay in a Montagnard village and an elephant ride. Tourists experience a traditional Montagnard village of years past, complete with dance and music. It’s a “show” and not a true portrayal of current conditions in the Highlands; but the villagers receive 20% of the fees collected by Gialai Travel. I continue to have mixed feelings about all this. On the one hand, I am sure that the quality of life in this one village has improved with the tourist trade. There is, however, so much poverty, disease and suffering everywhere else that I am concerned that outsiders will be duped into assuming that all Montagnard life is as pleasant as the village they were allowed to visit.

One day, twelve Swiss tourists arrived, and Cham had his hands full. When we saw him, he was at his wit’s end “Twelve Swiss, four elephant...they drive me crazy!” For some unknown reason, two of the required six elephants were out of action, resulting in angry Swiss becoming testy with their small Jarai guide. Cham swallowed the abuse, but from that point, I never missed a chance to needle him about the elephants. “Today, Cham, I eat the elephant!” Each daily variation on the joke caused our friend to shake his head, “Yeah yeah.” By the end of our week together, he finally started to anticipate our unyielding sense of humor, and got the jump on us, “Yeah, yeah, I know, today you ride elephant in jungle, see many tiger....” The Swiss, obviously way too serious to appreciate their tour guide, never did say good-bye to Cham. At least we made him smile.

Pleiku Paranoia

As we drove from the airport to the Pleiku Hotel, I craned my neck out the window hoping to see a familiar face, a Montagnard face. Karl and Marion made conversation with Cham, while I secretly hoped to see one of my Bahnar children ride past. I saw no one that I recognized.

The hotel had our reservations in order, and we surrendered our passports. Karl, who had not made a reservation, was in luck and had no trouble getting a room. The large, open lobby was filled with comfortable sofa's and chairs, and a TV that later became a nuisance. Off to one side of the lobby was a small viewing area that offered a museum's assortment of stuffed animals in ferocious poses...bear, cats, deer, birds. Most of these animals can no longer be found in the area, disappearing in step with the harvesting of the jungle. A number of Montagnard items were also displayed... blankets, crossbows, bracelets. It was difficult to tell whether or not this was a sincere effort to take pride in the cultural diversity of the Highlands, or merely another exploitation of that diversity.

But something was wrong. Not more than two weeks before our departure, Bok Yong had told me on the phone, "I'll meet you at the hotel when you arrive." Where was he? Where were the children? After all the months of planing, it seemed impossible that our family wasn't there to greet us with open arms. I searched the faces in the lobby. And deep in the recesses of my panicked mind, paranoia began to grow. Had local officials, who knew we were coming, taken steps to prohibit our reunion? Did Cham know something he wasn't telling? Was the young man behind the front desk a secret policeman? Was Yong in jail? I was unarmed, but I wanted to fight. "Marion, what's going on? Where is our family?" There were no good answers. We unpacked our bags and met Karl downstairs.

The Pleiku Hotel might have been a good idea when it was built, but poor management had allowed it to deteriorate. The average structure in Vietnam, if built by the Vietnamese, looks more like a concrete fallout shelter in the U.S. than it does a hotel or a home or a school or a business. The "style" does give everything a sense of uniformity, but is an ugly uniformity. This rambling shelter of a hotel had waterways and fountains that ran through the complex, that might have softened its appearance, but in each case they were half filled with stagnant, fetid water...breeding grounds for mosquito's and who knew what else. A solitary fish was trying hard to survive....it was obvious its mates had already perished in the neglect. The word "cesspool" came to mind.

The hotel we guessed to be about a thirty minute walk from the center of Pleiku. Battling the paranoia, we decided to get out and see the town. Marion had become accustomed to the long stares of the adults, and the children's banter as we strolled among them. Always smiling and waving, we answered the universal questions: "Hello! Where you from? What you name?" Each time we passed Montagnards, my heart would stop, but no recognition came. "My children, we are here, among you....come find us, please," I prayed to myself.

Our destination was the central marketplace. Much to our disappointment and surprise, the old outdoor market was gone, replaced by a giant hole in the ground. Progress had come to Pleiku. A two year project was underway to construct an indoor market like those found in other large towns in Vietnam. "Pretty soon, we won't recognize this place." While all the construction was being done, the market had "gone to the streets." Where traffic had once

dominated, shops were set up and business conducted as usual. We entered the fray, fought off the flies, and avoided the motorbikes that refused to let a marketplace block their path. The Vietnamese have a wonderful way of adapting to situations.

That night, we were all pretty tired from the heat and the emotional toll of the day. A few 333 beers helped restore our bodies, but my heart still ached from the disappointment of not seeing Bok Yong and our family. Karl joined us for dinner in the hotel dining room. The food was quite good and we made plans for the next day. Responding to Karl's generosity from the night before, buying us dinner, I paid the tab....\$5.40.....the total for three meals with drinks. "Thanks, you're a big spender!" Chief was a great travel companion.

It rained heavily while Marion and I slept soundly.

Nhung From Nowhere

I had written Mr. Hien a few months before our departure, counting on him to provide us with transportation in the Pleiku area (as he had done for me and Devenney in 1994); but we were disappointed to learn from Siu Cham that Hien was in Saigon. That left us without any means of transport, the main topic of conversation over our complimentary breakfast in the hotel dining room. On top of that, there was still no sign or word of Bok Yong. The fear in my gut mixed with the French bread and fried eggs, but we remained upbeat enough to saunter out into a crisp April morning.

"Let's just start walking towards town, maybe find Hien's wife, and see what happens," I suggested to Karl and Marion. Cham was gone with some tourists and we were definitely on our own. None of us spoke Vietnamese, but in this land of former allies we knew that there were many veterans who still remembered their English.

"Hello!" It was a man's voice, robust and strong, obviously pleased at seeing the threesome pass his hangout a few blocks from the hotel. "Where are you from?" We answered this second question with the response he wanted to hear. "America!" we shouted in unison. His name was Tran Dinh Nhung and he was not only destined to become our trusted guide, but our newest friend. We began our relationship in front of a multitude of curious onlookers who admired Nhung's efforts to recall his English, which turned out to be quite adequate after so many years of non-use.

During the war, Nhung had served with the South Vietnamese Air Force in Pleiku as a security guard. When he learned that Karl and I had been military policemen, he shook our hands and declared our newfound brotherhood. Since his rank had been sergeant, he didn't have to endure long years of confinement after the war; however, times had been tough on the former tailor, and he was now operating "Nhung Tours," personal guided tours by car or

motorbike. Much to his delight, we became his first American clients on the spot. His smile and non-stop chatter won us over (it didn't hurt that he also had two grown sons living in America), and a price tag for his services was agreed upon. Our plan for the day was to visit the town of Kontum, so Nhung went to work on finding a vehicle, suggesting we wait for him at the hotel.

"That's the way it goes over here, honey, things just seem to happen," Marion nodded in agreement. "We've got to trust someone." We still didn't know all the answers as to where our family was, but we were getting back on track. It didn't make sense to wait around and let things happen.... It wasn't long before Nhung appeared in the lobby with a driver and Japanese built car. Stuffed into the back seat, we turned northward onto highway 14 for an hour's drive through Bahnar country. Tea and rubber plantations had replaced the jungle, the land had been conquered.

Jesus Of Kontum

Dr. Pat Smith founded a Montagnard hospital (Minh-Quy) in Kontum during the late 1950's and maintained it up until the very end in 1975. Over the years, she had many different nurses work at the hospital, both Montagnard and American. One such nurse, Hilary Smith (no relation to Pat) wrote a book, **Lighting Candles**, that detailed her experiences at Minh-Quy. I happened to find and read her book in 1995, and wrote to the address listed inside. To my surprise, Hilary answered my letter and we began to exchange news about the Highlands. When she learned of our impending trip, she asked if we could deliver a microscope to the Catholic convent in Kontum. As with the other requests we received, our response was, "it would be our pleasure!"

During the war, I had always liked the town of Kontum, and our patrols converged there on a daily basis for lunch at the MACV compound. It possessed a particular charm that continues to be absent in Pleiku. Despite the large Vietnamese military presence in the area, Kontum holds a special place in my heart. Nhung guided the driver through town and soon we pulled up in front of a "primitive Notre Dame," an aging Catholic church that was the center of Montagnard Christendom in the area. On first glance, we were awestruck. Its grandeur, its apparent immunity to the destruction of the past held us in disbelief. "I had no idea this existed," was all I could offer. We pulled onto the grounds and parked in the shade of large trees.

Young Montagnard men were preparing the grounds for the upcoming Easter celebration, but stopped their work long enough to glance our way. Nhung had mentioned on the drive out that he knew the priest. Soon, he was introducing us to Father Lien, the pastor and Nhung's friend.

With Nhung's help, we were able to communicate quite well with Father Lien as he guided us through his church and orphanage. The church was empty save a Montagnard woman dusting off the upper windows with rag at the end of a long pole. It was then that Marion and I knelt before the altar and offered our fears and paranoia up to God. "Father, whatever happens, we know it's your will." From that moment, neither of us worried as much about the missing Bok Yong or our Bahnar family. A huge weight had been lifted from our shoulders as we entrusted out destiny to more powerful hands.

In the orphanage, we met two French tourists who were spending a few days in Kontum. They seemed to possess a sincere desire to help the nuns caring for so many small children. Marion asked one of the sisters how so many children had come to be without parents: "When a mother dies in childbirth, the father is often unable to care for the infant and do the work necessary to feed the rest of his family. This is usually their last resort and most fathers visit when time permits. Once the child reaches the age of twelve, they return to their village to live amongst their family." There were so many children, so many babies....

We still had a heavy microscope to deliver, so we made our way across the street to the convent. Before leaving, Father Lien invited us for Mass the next morning, when Montagnards (Sedang, Bahnar, Jarai, Koho) from all around would congregate. As much as we wanted to attend, there was no way that Marion and I could make a 5:00 am Mass, so we declined graciously. Father was quite grateful, however, when I gave him my lone Bahnar dictionary....I knew that it had the potential to dramatically improve his communication skills with the tribespeople, and could think of no place where it would be better utilized.

Karl isn't Catholic, but by the time we finished our stay at the convent, he might have considered converting. Sister Y Vang Beatrice and all the other nuns treated us to instant friendship and marvelous humor. Playful teasing became the sport of the day, but our Chief took the brunt of it. He loved every minute. As the day wore on, it wasn't easy to say good-bye to our new friends; we snapped a few photo's, exchanged addresses, and promised to stay in touch. As we walked to the car, dark Montagnard eyes followed our every step, for most, the first time they had seen Americans. I smiled from ear to ear and received the same in return.

A late lunch followed in a restaurant belonging to another friend of Nhung's. As we finished our meals, the proprietor presented Karl and I with small Montagnard pipes as a souvenirs, a nice gesture that topped off a very rewarding day. I held that pipe proudly between clinched teeth on the ride back to Pleiku. Storm clouds were building on the horizon, and Karl turned to me, "Its too early for the monsoons, isn't it?"

“You Sure You Live Here?”

Back in Pleiku, we drove down a narrow alley to Nhung's house to take care of business. The outside of his home was very unassuming but our presence in the neighborhood drew the expected crowd of children and curious onlookers. Along with his oldest son, Nhung tried all the keys at his disposal but none would unlock the padlock on their front door (evidently his wife had the one key and was still at work). Frustrated, they went off and returned with a large set of bolt cutters and "broke into" their house.

"So Karl, you think Nhung really lives here?" My question was only half in jest since anything was possible in Vietnam. Finally, we were ushered into the modest living room, invited to sit for tea, and made ourselves at home. After paying the \$60 fee for the day's transportation and guide services, we chatted for awhile and made plans for the next day. In addition, I was fitted for a Bahnar shirt. I had purchased a Montagnard blanket at the orphanage and had asked Nhung to make a shirt for me. I think secretly he was pleased to be paid for his tailoring services again, after so many years.

This first day with Nhung provided much insight into his sincerity and character. At the church and convent he was not only very respectful, but seemed to be genuinely interested in meeting and understanding the dark-skinned mountain tribespeople. This was a first for Nhung. He had lived his entire life in the Highlands, but had never spoken to a Montagnard. We initiated him and he was as delighted as we were in the presence of these wonderful souls....our reason for coming to Vietnam in the first place. "Mr. Mike, I learn from you....you are my teacher!" He would repeat those words over and over during our time together.

And Then We Were Four

From Nhung's house, we walked back to the Pleiku Hotel; clouds were building again in the distance. Holding my breath, I entered the lobby hoping to see Bok Yong....still nothing, not a message or sign that he had come looking for us. Siu Cham was out with tourists, so there was nothing to do but forge ahead, drink a few beers and shower off the day's travel dust.

And, as expected, we added a new face to our team. Brent Clark. A thirty-one year old marketing manager from Houston, Brent was in Vietnam for his second "tour." In 1994, Brent's office was directly across the hall from mine in the Houston headquarters of Coca-Cola Foods. When my travel agent offered a great price on a package trip to Vietnam, I half-heartedly yelled out, "Hey Brent, wanta go to Vietnam?" Never had I expected his enthusiastic and immediate response, "Hell yes!"

Single and adventuresome, he must have fallen in love with the country and its people, because he was back again in 1996. Although he wasn't spending all of his in-country time in the Highlands, Brent wanted to share a few days with us to experience the Montagnard culture and meet our Bahnar family. He was a welcome sight! His flight from Saigon had landed in

Pleiku prior to our return from Kontum, and he'd passed the time alone in his room. Now, he was ready to see some of the town.

As the four of us pondered what to do for dinner, we must have been an arresting sight to the Vietnamese who crossed our path. Marion, a 33-year old, 6-foot woman with a smile for everyone....Karl, the war veteran police chief who bears a striking resemblance to A.L.F. (a 1980's sitcom about an Alien Life Form, hence the acronym, that had a heart of gold covered by layers of bluster, big talk and attitude)....Brent, a bearded young man with a serious face and the eccentricity of a college professor....and me, a 50-year old gray-haired comedian sporting a new beard. With every step we took, we lived our undeclared role as "ambassadors," Americans abroad, winning hearts and minds. It was nirvana to accomplish it without guns and bombs.

"It Probably Won't Rain...."

A storm might have been brewing outside, but inside the Pleiku Hotel a wedding celebration was in full swing. As hard as it was for us to accept, given the condition of the hotel and its grounds, this was "the most luxurious hotel in Pleiku." And only the best would do for the daughter of the province police chief. Because there were so many invited guests (1,200 in all), two receptions were to be held. Six hundred guests attended the morning reception (while we were in Kontum), and the balance were in attendance for the evening. As a result, the hotel dining room was closed, leaving us no other choice but to leave for dinner.

The optimist in me predicted, "It probably won't rain; and if it does, it'll blow over real fast." Sometimes, it's better to keep quiet. Two blocks from our hotel, the skies burst, and it was impossible to continue. Luckily, we were near a series of store fronts that provided protection, at least in the short term. It was obvious that prolonged rain would cause problems, as the water began to rise around our ankles.

The store we huddled in front of was a shoe repair shop; the family's living quarters were directly behind the small business area, and our predicament did not go unnoticed. My three companions shot glances my way that said "yeah right, no rain my *ASS*." Just when it looked as though it couldn't rain any harder, it found a way.

A small river had developed at our feet when the family of the shoe store rescued us by offering refuge in their home. Not only were we saved from the elements, but were treated to the warmest hospitality and kinship. There were four adults and a number of children, all quite content to stare at the stranded Americans. Neither group understood the other's language (even with Karl's handy phrase book), but it didn't really matter. For two hours, we sipped tea, watched the Vietnamese equivalent of MTV, and exchanged smiles and nods. Outside, the streets were flooding with no respite in sight.

Marion was being eaten alive by the mosquito's and we finally decided that it was time to go. It was still storming and quite dark by now (electrical power was intermittent), so we had to be careful. Just as we prepared for a mad dash our hosts motioned us to wait, as they brought us large plastic bags to cover our heads. Cautiously, we jogged to the hotel, where dry, well fed, and mostly drunk party go'ers were indifferent to the wet, hungry and bored foreigners who scrambled through the lobby.

The Great Pumpkin

Although the wedding cost about \$2,500 USD, a small fortune in equivalent Dong, the family would make out nicely. It is Vietnamese custom for cash gifts to be offered to the newlyweds from the guests and receptions are paid out of those "gifts"....no doubt a profit was turned.

The groom was dressed in a gray suite, at least one size too large, and followed like a puppy behind his dearly beloved wherever she roamed. One could not easily miss the bride, for she was decked out in an orange and black gown that prompted Brent to remark, "She looks like The Great Pumpkin!" Indeed she did. From our perch on the second floor balcony, we observed her float among her admirers, one photo shoot to another. Trick or treat.....

We must have looked ragged because it didn't take long before some of the young men brought each of us a bottle of Saigon beer. They were blasted but in good spirits when it came to dealing with us. As with so many of the young in Vietnam, they were intrigued by Americans in their presence. It was getting late and the cleanup crew was clearing tables. We headed downstairs with our beers and wandered outside. Protected from the rain by the entrance canopy, we stood there while the last of the guests departed. "Thanks for coming, hope you had a good time," but of course no one understood a sarcastic word we said. Even with hunger pains, it was easy to get caught up in the frivolity of the evening.

That is, until the father of the bride, a.k.a. police chief, approached us. He took me by the arm and guided Marion and I to the front desk so the clerk could interpret his questions and our answers. "Why are you here?" was his lead question. He was totally business-like and completely drunk. His tone struck fear in us both. This man, we knew, could determine the outcome of our days in the Highlands. We carefully choose our responses to the his questions as Brent and Karl observed from a sofa across the lobby, concerned expressions on their faces.

It became an interrogation....no bright lights in our face....but plenty of pointed questions. We used every people skill in our arsenal, even bringing out pictures of our small children in America to appeal to his fatherly pride. The young desk clerk was obviously nervous but did a credible job for both sides. I tried to gauge our progress by his expressions. In the end, after an hour of probing, our drunken father-of-the-bride turned to the clerk and proclaimed in

English, “Nice couple.” He turned abruptly and walked away, joining his wife who was waiting to leave the hotel.

As a visitor in Vietnam, it is very easy to forget that it is still a police state. The kindness of the people can disguise a government that is capable of great injustice and cruelty. This meeting acted as our wake-up call. It served to remind us that the welfare of our Bahnar family was at stake, and that everything we did was subject to scrutiny by the police. Our only solace was the chief’s last remark; maybe we had passed his test by convincing him that our mission was one of family reunion.....no politics or hidden agenda.....parents in search of their children. Perhaps he understood us on that level.

Shootin’ Gecko’s On The Wall

*T*hat night in bed, Marion and I relieved the tension of the interrogation by revising the lyrics of an old tune. Our version seemed right for the circumstances and became our theme song for the trip. “Shooting gecko’s on the wall, that don’t bother me at all; smokin’ opium and watchin’ Uncle Ho Chi Minh; now don’t tell me I’ve nothin’ to do....now don’t tell me I’ve nothin’ to do....”

Which Side Of The Cage Now?

*T*he first rooster crowed at 4:00am, followed by a chorus from the adjacent backyards. We didn’t need a watch.

A tasty breakfast of eggs, coffee, French bread and pho (Vietnamese soup).....and still no sign of Bok Yong. Hundreds of empty Saigon beer bottles were stacked nearby. Loaves of bread, used as missiles the night before, floated swollen in the fetid waterways that wound through the lower level of the hotel. The rain had finally subsided during the night and the morning air was crisp and clean. Time to embrace the day.

Before reaching Nhung’s place, we stopped long enough to deliver some gifts (cigarettes, gum, Frisbees and shirts) to the shoe store family who had welcomed us the night before. We also returned the plastic bags that had shielded us from the downpour.

Outside Nhung’s office, we watched the morning commute, workers and school children weaving their way through a never ending flow of humanity. “There are not enough vans to take you today,” Nhung’s words hit our paranoia dead on, sounded conspiratorial, and then he added, “but I will keep trying to find one.” Since we were so visible, a number of young children stopped peddling their bikes and surrounded us, curiosity getting the best of them. Over their heads, I saw a Montagnard man on a motorbike intently watching us from the

opposite corner, and for a second thought it might be one of our family. But he eventually moved on.

Brent summed up our collective feelings when he posed a rhetorical question, “Which side of the cage are we on now?” It felt like a turning point....which way would we be allowed to go? Nhung’s son stayed with us while his father was off looking for transportation. To relieve our tension, we bantered with the children.

Out of nowhere, Nhung reappeared on the back of a motorcycle, wearing his customary beret and field jacket, and a confident smile, “You go to my house and wait, I keep looking.” It wasn’t the answer we were looking for, neither was it a definitive “No.”

Once again, bolt cutters were needed to unlock the door (who had all the keys?), and we waited inside. After a half hour, a van pulled up in front of the house and our faithful guide announced that we were at his disposal once again. A new driver today, but a good man and quite capable. Our shock at this good fortune drove us quickly into the van for fear that some unseen force might change its mind.

Highway 19 was calling me back. Karl and Brent sat behind Marion and I. Nhung might have been our official, hired guide, but I was the one who really knew this road and the people who lived in its shadows. It had been my home. It had been my coming of age.

When God Smiles

I wanted the window down so that I could lean out and taste the memories. I also wanted to see the small groups of Montagnards, usually in three’s and four’s, as they slowly, doggedly made their way on foot. Most carried heavy loads on their back, probably going to or from the market in Pleiku. Before long, Marion could easily pick out the Montagnards from the Vietnamese....skin color, clothing, and basketry gave them away.

And so did their smile. As they heard the van’s horn sound, often the Montagnards would look up from their next heavy footstep and catch my eye....and my wide, friendly American grin. In return, the world was brightened by the most uninhibited, joyful smile. Like long lost friends setting eyes on each other after years of separation. The men smiled in a proud, heroic fashion; while the women often reacted in a shy, coy manner....and if their hands were free, they’d wave.

“A smile like that could only come from one place,” Marion said to me above the noise inside the van, and shifted her eyes upward.

War Stories

*B*rent called me the “navigator from war,” as we drove down Highway 19. I couldn’t help it. Even though Karl hadn’t fought on the road, he understood my need to tell the stories. So did Marion....she’d heard my tales before, but being on location made those old war stories come alive.

At times, I had to pause and wipe at the tears, often a memory became too difficult to express. I tried to remember every death, every experience.... “here’s where they died; here’s where the ambush blew up the tanker trucks; here’s where the village was located; here’s where the civilians were killed in a wreck; here’s Black Hawk fire base, home to the Cav armor; here’s the whorehouse; here’s Deadman’s curve: here’s the spot where I almost hit that little boy when he ran in front of my jeep; and here’s the Mang Yang Pass where all the Frenchmen are buried....”

Like a morbid travel guide, the memories poured out of my soul and rolled off my tongue. It was a different experience from the time when my buddy and fellow vet, Joe Devenney, had toured the road in 1994; he needed no explanations. But the road had changed so much over the years that I felt obligated to tell of its unpleasant past. Where jungles and soldiers once covered the landscape, plantations and homes and video stores have taken over. Amidst the peacefulness of the modern Highway 19 (still a rugged 2-lane blacktop), I replayed the war for my wife and friends.

“Back then the Pass was a foreboding place, jungle everywhere, and easy to be ambushed. The truck drivers didn’t like it. When you look at it now, it is only a road cutting through barren hills.....guess it doesn’t look too scary. But trust me, it was.”

Reuters, January 6, 1996 (newspaper clipping)

“*V*ietnam’s forest cover has dropped from 35 million acres in 1943 to 21 million acres today, the SRV Minister of Environment Dang Huu tells journalists. The forest is being destroyed to make way for cash crops such as coffee, rubber and to create industrial zones around major cities. Rampaging elephants are a destroyer of trees.”

The Ayun

*W*e asked Nhung to pull over at the Ayun River. This was the place where, so many years ago, I had become a “father” to my Bahnar children....Kenh and Prot and all the others. The river never looked so good, full and robust, without barbed wire and tanks and soldiers or remnants of a destroyed bridge. Traffic passed over the new, unimpressive bridge without

knowing the history, my history, the war's history, the Bahnar's history. Was it really 28 years ago that I witnessed the entire village being baptized in this river?

We hiked down a hill to the riverbank, meandering, cooling ourselves in the swift-moving waters. Brent searched for leftovers from the war, perhaps a rusted C-ration can....but settled for part of a M-79 grenade. He offered it to me, but I declined, "Hell, that thing might blow up!" If I closed my eyes and concentrated really hard, I could hear the laughter of the children....how we were all reduced to acting like kids in the river....in the shadow of tank cannons, we would swim together until the sun went down. The war seemed to stop long enough for us to play.

Walking back to the van, I asked Nhung what all the craters in the sand were for; he told us, "the people are very poor, they dig in the ground to find metal from the war so they can sell." In places, it resembled an excavation site....my past was buried somewhere down there.

"Hell, The Fall Will Kill Ya!"

Enough was enough. Here we were in the middle of Bahnar country, with no plan, no Bok Yong to lead us, and unsure of what to do next. "Let's go see Blar," I proposed to the group, "that dirt road over there is the way to her village." I knew this with certainty since I had traveled it a few times in 1994. Armed with backpacks, I became the team's pointman into the land of the Bahnar, and I was starting to feel good again. The sun wasn't at its zenith yet, all the same, it bore down on our backs as we began the long hike.

Finally, we came upon "the bridge." I had bragged of my crossing this rickety, bamboo suspension bridge many times after my return in 1994. It had been easier then with adrenaline pumping through my body....a reunion with my children as the reward for crossing. Now, it appeared more precarious, and if that weren't enough, the river below was swollen from the recent rains. "Marion, you go first!" My wife shot me a look that said, "Kiss my ass!" but she climbed right up and began crossing. I fell in behind her.

"Looks like the water is pretty deep," Marion called over her shoulder.

"Don't worry honey, the fall will kill ya!" my reassurance only made her doubly doubt my sanity. Not to mention my sensitivity.

I think she understood how her husband lived for this kind of experience, how adventure was his equal to lost youth. She accepted the challenge and never faltered. Crazy, brave.....or just plain stubborn.....there's a fine line.

When it was Karl's turn to cross, I really wondered if the old bridge could stand up. I snapped a photo of him in the middle of the bridge, hanging on for dear life....

Brent swore he heard boards breaking underneath his feet.

Blar

Surviving the bridge, we continued our climb upward, past the slashed and burned forest, until we entered Chrong I. Just as I had remembered it, this village was the home of Blar. Blar was a little girl from my war who was now a mother and wife, and with whom I had been reunited in 1994. She and her husband were easy to find, and we enjoyed an emotional reunion. Introductions were made, and the villagers seemed quite pleased that we were in their midst.

"We're not in Kansas anymore," Brent was awestruck by his first moments in the Bahnar world. Children swarmed around us as we tried our best to communicate with Nhung's help (some of the Montagnards speak Vietnamese as a second language). Still fearing the police, I handed Blar's husband a note and requested that he deliver to my son, Kenh. He looked dumbfounded, not comprehending why I didn't deliver it in person. "Kenh is looking for you," words that pierced my soul. "He knows you are here." It seemed so simple, yet I was so worried about Bok Yong's disappearance and possible police intervention. I insisted he take my note....even tried to do it in secrecy. The power of fear.

On the brighter side, Marion was quickly making friends with Blar and the other villagers, while Karl and Brent began inflating balloons and tossing out Frisbees. It became a party atmosphere, showing the Bahnar children how to blow bubbles with the gum and catch the Frisbees. We were asked to linger awhile, so that Blar could finish sewing a bag that she wanted to present to Marion. No one was in a hurry. Marion and I decided to tour the village.

"He Knows You!"

With Nhung a few steps behind, Marion and I walked down a path lined with bamboo fences. Up ahead was a tall, well-built Montagnard, who prompted me to comment in a low voice, "Look at that man, what a striking face."

I approached him and shook his hand in greeting, speaking enough of his language to say hello. I'm sure we took him by surprise, and when he did speak, it was almost in a whisper. Nhung began to converse with the man, then turned to me, "He knows you!" "Mat ih bu?" I asked, unable to hide my excitement. "Mat inh Jhuk," he answered. I have worn a silver

Bahnar bracelet on my right wrist for 28 years, given to me by a boy named Jhon.....Jhuk was Jhon's younger brother.

Jhon was killed in the jungle during the 80's, cause unknown, but I clearly remembered Jhuk from 1968. He used to pal around with my son, Kun, who was the same age at the time (about four). I hugged this man, a stranger to me in adulthood, but a special memory from times past. As Marion took our picture, the feeling of "homecoming" overwhelmed me. I felt as if I were walking straight into my past. Although our cultures were light years apart, we had common ground here, hallowed ground. If anything, I wanted Marion to feel that same sense of "humanity" and family that I felt.....she did.

Visiting Chrong I was not on the original agenda when we planned our trip, but we were so grateful for the rich experience. I placed a St. Christopher's medal over Blar's neck; and she gave Marion a beautiful, hand-woven shoulder bag. The connection had been made. Our hike back to the van was lighter, each of us silently replaying what had taken place in the village. Nhung thanked me again, "you teach me so much!"

Lunch, Flies And The Turning Point

*B*rent, anxious to see the infamous mountain, asked if we could visit the Mang Yang Pass and the French graves before lunch. Ever accommodating, Nhung pointed our driver in the direction of the Pass. Not long after Deadman's curve, we began the climb. Unfortunately, the trail to the French graves above the Pass was restricted, so that part of the tour had to be abandoned. My patrols had often taken sanctuary at the site of the 1954 French defeat in an effort to distance themselves from the turmoil below. Standing on the Pass, I described a few incidents from the past, but the bare hillsides no longer looked imposing and it was hard to impart the fear soldiers felt here during the war. At least the view was still breathtaking.

The noon hour had passed, and everyone was hungry. Remembering a roadside restaurant near the river, we decided to head back there for some lunch. Since it is a Vietnamese custom to toss everything on the floor, and we were arriving well after midday, the restaurant was a pigsty. Braving the flies and foraging dogs, we sat at a table and ordered. Beef and rice, along with a few beers served warm over ice, was quite tasty, in spite of the disgusting scenery underneath the table.

The topic of conversation was, "what now?" "Mike, I don't understand why we don't just go." That easily, Marion settled the debate. With Bok Yong's no-show and my own dose of paranoia regarding police intervention, I had been hesitant to go directly to our family's village, Chrong II. Karl and Brent adopted Marion's position and even Nhung was supportive. "Let's go, this may be our only chance." I grabbed my backpack and walked outside into another afternoon that threatened thunderstorms.

I easily identified the turnoff from Highway 19 to the village, ingrained in my mind from two years before. There were no warning signs forbidding passage, so off the paved road we rumbled, past the pines and through the manioc fields....slow going but determined.

When The Stars Lined Up

The dirt road to Chrong II jostled our insides and tested the van's capabilities. But our driver was fearless. He had no idea where he was or what might be waiting for him deep in the jungle. Sixty bucks a day was buying a lot of adventure!

Approximately two kilometers down the road, we passed a Bahnar man walking in the opposite direction....I leaned out the window to wave, and he yelled back in surprise, "Tee!" The sound of my name stirred me to the bone, "He recognized me!" I shouted above the scream of the engine. At that moment, I knew that Marion's decision to continue to the village was right. The man was a stranger to me, yet he was aware of my presence in his land....there was no doubt in my mind that Kenh, Kun and Koch awaited our arrival at the end of this road.

There wasn't much time left, police restrictions dictating that we return before dark, when we finally pulled up to Chrong II. My heart raced as we climbed out of the van and excited villagers ran towards us. But our family was not in sight....someone pointed down a trail....I turned the corner....there was my son Kun coming home from a day in his field....hot with fever. Soon afterward, Kenh nonchalantly walked up a similar path....unaware of our presence....until our eyes met.

Tears of surprise and joy....we held each other tightly, erased two years of separation....stood back and looked at each other, wiped away the tears, smiled. And then they saw Marion....mom. As a father I shouldn't be jealous, but the complete outpouring of their affection towards my wife was unexpected. Marion melted. And then my daughter, Koch, arrived and the moment became even more moving. With many tears and hugs, Koch greeted Marion like a long lost parent, miraculously found again. Sut, the biological mother of Kenh, Kun and Koch, pushed through the crowd smiling like an ancient angel, completely at peace and enjoying every moment. "I brought my children into this world, they belong to God now," were words she had sent to Marion via Bok Young when the children began addressing her as mom in 1995. She had no problem accepting Marion as a new "mom." When they finally met, all became right with the world. I've always loved Sut, ever since the days when she stood at my side, building her house together.

Brent and Karl immediately went to work with the kids of Chrong II. Out of bubble gum, they resorted to blowing up balloons, nearly hyperventilating in the process. With Nhung's

help, Marion and I made sure our plans for the next day were understood...we would return in the morning to spend the day. This seemed to please our family, although tension developed when a drunken man (a distant relative of sorts) began to interfere with the discussion in broken, slurred English. It was very obvious that Kenh was deeply distressed by this man, but was unable to quiet him. Marion, who is a pretty good judge of character, took an instant dislike to the guy and feared that he would cause trouble.

At this point, we sorely missed Bok Yong and his ability to translate for us. Accurate communication was our first priority if we were to enjoy to a successful visit with our Bahnar family. Misunderstandings could lead to disaster, and often times, we simply didn't understand what was going on. Brent noticed a suspicious looking Vietnamese man in civilian clothes drive up on a motorcycle as we made plans to leave. He later heard that he was a policeman, "I felt a chill go down my spine when I saw him...I sensed evil."

As our van carefully pulled away, we waved goodbye to the people of Chrong II, promising to return in the morning. The evening thunderstorms continued to build and we needed to reach Highway 19 before the skies broke loose. We barely made it to the pine trees (planted along the road by former soldiers of the South after the war) when the downpour came. We drove to Pleiku in weary silence, occasionally speaking of the day's events. "Even if something happens and we can't see our family after today, I'm glad we came, thanks for convincing me go ahead with it," I wanted Marion to know how much she had helped push me forward that day. She smiled at me and understood.

"Hey, did I tell you guys what it was like to drive a gun jeep, with no windshield or top, during the monsoons?"

"Yeah, Mike, only about a hundred times!"

Uncle, Where Have You Been?

After the daily payoff at Nhung's house (this time he didn't need a bolt cutter), we entered the hotel lobby tired in body but not in spirit. It had been a good day. Siu Cham greeted us and explained that he had managed to contact Bok Yong, who would arrive soon to meet with us. With our spirits greatly improved, Marion and I retired to our room to clean up and enjoy a cold beer, while Karl and Brent did the same. Then the phone rang.

"Mike, this is Bok Yong."

"Where are you?"

"Here in the hotel."

“We’ll be right down!”

We had seen pictures of him, and we’d talked on the phone, but this was our first face-to-face contact. We welcomed each other like old friends. It was so good to see him and to learn why he had been unable to see us upon our arrival. Evidently his ministry had called him to Saigon at the last minute, and he was unable to contact us before we had left our home in California. A logical answer to my illogical paranoia. Marion, however, remains convinced that our meeting with the police chief the evening before, and the timing of our successes were a little too coincidental for her liking. Accompanying Yong was his eldest son, Samson, who spoke little English.

Marion and I excused ourselves to return to the room and prepare our gifts for Bok Yong. We had six Bahnar bibles (donated by John and Betty Banker of Texas, missionaries who had worked with Yong in Pleiku during the war), several Vietnamese children’s bibles, a large amount of cash (we’d sold our second car and the money would allow Yong to buy a new motorcycle), and many other items stuffed into a duffel bag that we wanted to hand off right away. Brent added some medical supplies to the collection of gifts. In a hushed whisper, we told Yong about the contents of the over-stuffed bag. Since we were still in plain sight of hotel employees, he subdued his happiness for the moment and did not open the bag. He did assure us later that everything was all right.

Just before leaving the lobby the power went out again, blanketing us in darkness. Brent hit it right, “God must have knocked out the lights so that we could make our escape!”

As arranged earlier in the day, Nhung met us outside the hotel to join us for dinner. Together, we went downtown. Samson, carrying the duffel bag and riding his father’s old motorbike, stayed very close as we walked to the restaurant. In the dark, I looked back and saw Yong and Nhung walking hand in hand and talking, getting to know each other. The restaurant was Nhung’s choice and quite nice (the power to Pleiku had been restored). We had a large, clean dining room to ourselves and enjoyed a wonderful meal. Karl and Brent were both impressed with the cuisine and the cleanliness. A far cry from lunch.

Sitting next to Yong, he told me that he was going to contact the police after dinner and request permission for us to spend at least one night in Chrong II. He’d had preliminary discussions but nothing definitive had come from them. He was cautiously optimistic, “I think it will be okay.”

It was a beautiful highland evening by the time we said our farewells. The walk back to the hotel was quite pleasant and our spirits were high knowing that Yong was finally among us. Nhung dropped off and said good night as we approached his neighborhood, promising to pick us up in the morning. There was no doubt he would.

Sweet dreams.... “shootin’ gecko’s on the wall....”

Loaded For Bear

At 6:00 am each morning the lobby TV was turned on, and always at full volume. Karl, who had a 2nd floor room that opened on to the lobby, had a reliable alarm clock whether he wanted it or not. About an hour later, we all met for breakfast to discuss the day’s plan. Karl decided to remain in Pleiku to see friends (as fate would have it, it was a blessing that he stayed behind...spending most of the day in his room with a dose of Ho Chi Minh’s revenge). Brent was going with us since this would be his last day in Pleiku.

Prompt as usual, Nhung and his driver were waiting for us in the hotel parking lot. “Good morning, Nhung, how is your family today?” I asked in greeting. “They are the same as the day before, they never change, every day the same.” Then he made sure he understood our intentions for the day, “Go to market, then to village?” We affirmed that was indeed the plan.

Our driver parked the van on the edge of the marketplace, near a small grocery store. While Nhung went off in search of an ice chest, the three of us split up and ventured into the market to find food and gifts for the village. Bananas, pineapple, dried beans and peas, flowers, bread, candy, bracelets, Cokes and beer, ice....anything we thought was useful and could fit in the van. These purchases were added to the inventory we’d brought from the States (coloring books and crayons, T-shirts, earrings, vegetable seeds, toys). I also bought sandwiches at the store for Nhung and the driver so they’d have something for lunch while we were in the village.

Another splendid morning, full of promise. Bok Yong was supposed to join us in the village later in the morning to give us an update on our request to spend the night.

We made good time after leaving the confines of Pleiku. The now familiar sights of Highway 19 sped by us. Relaxed, we waved to friendly passerby’s, mostly Montagnards. And then, just a few hundred feet from the village turnoff, we ran into the police roadcheck. “My God, what now?” Each of us held the same thought. There was no doubt that this display of power and control was meant for us. Our driver pulled over, as ordered, and Nhung went to work conversing with the four armed policemen. From what we could tell, it didn’t look good for continuing to Chrong II. We were allowed past the checkpoint, but Nhung thought it would be best if we parked at the pines.

Waiting there for us there were our sons, Kenh and Kun, Koch’s oldest son Ki, and her husband Yaih. Their smiles were bright until Nhung began to explain our dilemma. It became clear that Kenh disagreed with Nhung’s assessment that we not continue to the village. I held my breath as Kenh turned away and resolutely walked off in the direction of the police. Yaih hurried to his side and they disappeared over a hill. “Kenh was so proud and brave as a

child,” I told Marion, trying to ease some of the tension, “that big chest of his would puff out, the quiet but strong type.” That was the longest fifteen minutes of our trip.

When we saw Kenh’s smile as he strode towards us, we knew the way had been cleared. Permission had been granted, not for overnight stays, but daylight visits only. I was totally impressed, “Don’t know what he told them, but it worked,” I was proud of my son’s actions....it’s not easy for Montagnards to approach the police. Nhung was pleased as well with the outcome, “You teach me so much,” repeating this familiar sentiment yet one more time. Before anyone could change their minds, we squeezed into the van for the slow, bumpy ride to the village. God, I was happy. My boys were seated on either side of me and we were going home.

Ki followed closely behind on a motorbike, a red Honda 70. Our Christmas gift to Kenh, Kun and Koch. Our friends and relatives in America had donated money to help us provide their first form of motorized transportation. It was great to watch him riding the bike, living proof that our aid was making a real difference.

Christmas In April

As we piled out of the van, many children ran towards us at breakneck speed and grinning from ear-to-ear. It was reminiscent of any scene, anywhere, when the most favored of relatives arrives for a much anticipated visit. Yong was not there yet, so we did the best we could with my limited knowledge of Bahnar. The would-be uncle (the drunk from the day before) was also there but sober this time. He was actually some help with the language barrier and showed us a good deal of respect. Nhung and our driver retired to a shady spot to study English and pass the day until we were ready to leave.

Walking by Koch’s house (a fine wood structure built on the ground unlike the traditional bamboo homes on stilts), we noticed a 5-foot square cement slab and a metal pipe about four feet off the ground. Evidently UNICEF had come to Chrong II in 1995 and installed five of these “water points” by running a long pipeline from the Ayun River into the village. Running water! These additions had improved their lives considerably. Not to mention the four grateful Americans who rinsed off under the water tap during hot highland afternoons.

Kenh led us into his home where we all sat on mats, making room for as many family members as possible to join in. The exchange of gifts began. Marion and I were honored with hand-woven blankets and bags and a special gift from Kun....a crossbow and arrows. His fever had come down a bit since the day before, but he still wasn’t feeling well. Despite the fever, he took obvious pride in presenting his handiwork, a beautiful crossbow engraved with a date (May 15, 1995) and inscribed (USA).

Youngsters took the coloring books we handed out, while I did my best to explain the use of the crayons; the ladies tried on the earrings that Marion presented; Brent placed brass bracelets (bought in the hotel gift shop) on our son's wrists. When I handed Kenh a box of stationary, I exclaimed, "You write letters to your mother and father!" He opened the box but a look of concern crossed his face, "There are no lines."

I decided not to unpack and distribute some of the items in the large duffel bag, telling Kenh privately, "You open after we leave, keep the bag." Nodding that he understood, I knew he would be fair when dividing the clothing and seeds to the rest of our extended family. The evidence was easy to spot...on subsequent days, half the family was wearing new T-shirts.

It was dark and stuffy in the house, but now and then I would sit back and focus in on the interior, trying to "connect" to my son's existence here in the jungle. There were a large number of gourds, all sizes, hanging from bamboo beams, and large jars along one wall. Clothing hung from hooks, but otherwise, the one-room house was void of clutter or unnecessary objects. Above the entrance were toothbrushes, a small mirror, a hair brush and a bar of soap. There were no windows, no chairs, tables or stove, no refrigerator or bathroom, no telephone or TV, no bed or sink....yet there was no place on the earth that I would rather have been. For Marion and I, this house held everything....family. Kenh, his wife Yoih and their six children lived here....and soon there would be another mouth to feed. Yoih was eight months pregnant, and showing every day of it.

Prot

Koch's husband, Yaih, had excused himself, but soon returned with an old cassette tape recorder. After a number of attempts to attach a battery, the machine finally came to life. We had no idea what he was going to play. And then we heard an innocent voice brought back from the dead.....Prot.

In 1968, during one of the many nights that the boys spent with me at Camp Schmidt, I had recorded Prot and Kenh. On an ancient reel-to-reel, I had captured thirty minutes of mostly idle conversation and singing. Along with a few minutes of movie footage and old photo's, the audio tape had been a central piece of their legacy. Their tiny voices brought me much joy over the 26 years of our separation. After finding them in 1994, I sent back a copy of the tape, knowing the pleasure they'd get from hearing themselves as kids.

Now, in his old friend's home, Prot's voice spoke to us from the grave. He was in that room with us, singing and laughing and teasing....and I understood why that tape was made in the first place. To be played at exactly this time, this place, in this company. Some of Prot's children were gathered around, Nu and Nek, and when I looked into their eyes, I saw my son, their father. Prot.

When the voices on the tape began singing in Bahnar, **Angels We Have Heard On High**, I softly joined in to the best of my memory, despite the lump in my throat. Family members stared at me, then smiled. For those few minutes, Prot was alive, and there with us. When the tape ended, I felt Prot's absence once again.

It was difficult sitting for very long in such cramped quarters (all three Americans being quite tall), and we were sweating profusely. When the tape ended, Kenh motioned that it was time to leave, "we go to grave now, okay?" Outside, the fresh air and slight breeze felt good. We put our shoes back on and descended the ladder. In the distance, thunder rolled again.

Paying Respects

*I*n my letters to Bok Yong and Kenh, I had asked to spend time at two graves during my visit: Prot's and Kun's oldest daughter who had died unexpectedly during the summer of 1995. Brent and Nhung followed at a distance while Sut, the matriarch, led our procession to the cemetery. Prot's wife, Sok, was near us as we slowly made our way to the edge of the village.

In silent reverence, we approached the first burial house which was surrounded by a small wooden fence. "Prot," Kenh whispered to me. I fell to my knees and began to cry and pray for my lost son. Marion stood behind me and placed her hand on my shoulder. Using a small ladder, Sok climbed over the fence and dropped to the ground, wailing, crying out her husband's name, beseeching him, mourning for him. Everyone else was completely quiet, respectful of this moment of pain.

As if there was a time limit for grieving, our attention was soon turned to the second gravesite, Kun's daughter. Here both Sut and Den, Kun's wife, entered the sacred ground, and a similar scene of heartbreak and sorrow played. As quickly as the despair begins and ends, it seems that the sense of loss, the sadness, is reserved just for these times "inside the fence" ...I found myself wondering if life on the "outside" is just too demanding for these proud people to add a heavy heart to their daily burden. Once it was over, cheeks were wiped dry, clothing dusted off and smiles were only a few steps down the trail..

Marion put an arm around my waist and whispered, "Are you all right?" I nodded that I was but added, "Tough business." The time for words would come later.

Nam Hum Tadok?

*K*enh's question, "Do you want to go swimming?" helped to relieve the residual sadness from the visit to the cemetery. Again, in letters to Kenh, I had mentioned how much I would enjoy

going for a swim together, just like we had done on so many afternoons in 1968. Without hesitation, I answered with an enthusiastic “Let’s go!”

On the way to the river we had to cross another bamboo suspension bridge; this one even more tenuous than the one on the way to Blar’s village. Narrower, higher, swaying in the afternoon breeze, and meant for people smaller than us. Once again, Marion led the way across. “I think we finally found a job for you, honey!” She mumbled something beneath her breath and I am grateful that I could not hear her.

Wherever we went a large group of villagers followed, so there were about fifty people watching me discard my shoes and shirt, and dive headfirst into the Ayun. Kenh had assured me that the water was deep enough for diving. The sandy bottom was only a few feet from the surface and the water felt wonderful. A half dozen kids from another village, who had been swimming before I arrived, scurried to the opposite bank, not knowing what to make of the stranger. For a moment, I felt alone and “exposed” in the middle of the Ayun so I motioned for Kenh to join me (it was clear that Marion and Brent were content to remain dry).

Before long, my son was beside me. I could only imagine what his thoughts were. Like me, was he recalling those days so long ago? Was he remembering when I would toss him and Prot high into the air so they could splash down into the brown water? Over and over...until the sun began to set and soldiers returned to heavily guarded camps, children to unprotected villages. Kun stood on a log and snapped our picture. One of Prot’s sons held my backpack.

Brent yelled out from shore, “Is this the second best day of your life?” He was referring to 1994 when I commented, after finding the children, that it had been the “best day of my life.” “Comes damn close!” I shot back at him from the river.

Scarlet Toenails

*M*arching back to the village, we were happy to see that Bok Yong had arrived. His conversations with the police had been cordial and somewhat productive, “You can not stay in village at night, but can come every day.” His report sat fine with Marion and me...we were taking small steps, winning the trust of the local authority one day at a time, setting the stage for years to come. Our main concern, the well being of our Bahnar family, had been adequately addressed and it seemed that our presence was now sanctioned by those in charge. I wanted them to know everything we did, leave no doubt what our intentions were, and allow us the freedom to “be family.”

Inside Kenh’s house again, the conversations flowed easier with Yong there to translate. I produced a letter from Joe Devenney and Yong read it to our family. Joe had written how

sad he was that he couldn't be there with us....enclosing pictures and money....and telling of his impending marriage. "I hope my wife and I can visit next time." His words greatly pleased everyone and I'm sure the letter was read many times after we left.

A late lunch was served, rice with manioc leaves, and it was wonderful! I will, however, offer a word to the wise, watch out for Montagnard red pepper! Thank goodness the ice chest was filled with cold drinks....CPR for the mouth. There wasn't much air circulating through the house as the room became quiet. The only sounds to be heard were the chorus of people smacking as they ate and the rhythmic beat of chopsticks.

With her shoes off, Marion's painted toenails soon caught the attention of the young women who gathered round her. They had never seen anything like it before, and soon everyone was leaning closer to get a better look at her scarlet toes. With a conspiratorial smile, Marion looked at me and said, "I want to go to the market tomorrow morning. I have an idea...." Our visit was living up to all our expectations....we were learning about each other...Bahnar and American....we were falling in love all over again.

A Toast For The Missing

In 1994 Prot had shared a jar of rice wine with me to celebrate our reunion. Having remembered similar ceremonies from 1968 with much fondness, I had eagerly participated. Since the rest of my family has converted to Protestantism in recent years, and no longer consume alcohol in observance of their faith, it had been just the two of us. Now, two years later, Sok invited Marion and I to honor Prot's memory by drinking again from his wine. No one took offense. I watched as Marion experienced sucking rice wine from a large earthen jar, tied to a pole, through a long, curved straw. It is a very solemn moment, filled with much ritual and honor.

Enjoying the moment, we took the opportunity to toast the memory of loved ones who were no longer with us.....Prot and Kil and Blup and Jhon....Bahnar children from my past who had died over the years. It seemed fitting to honor the children who had been my salvation in 1968 on the anniversary of Christ's death on the cross...Good Friday 1996.

"It's not that bad," Marion announced between pulls at the straw, "it's not that strong either." I shot her a sideways glance that warned, "good thing we have to get going." The wine ceremony is known to sometimes last for days. "Did I forget to tell you about the dead rats that are sometimes at the bottom of the jar?"

Brent The Baptist

The ever patient Nhung helped us gather our belongings and loaded us back into the van. Good-byes were pleasant since we knew with certainty that we'd be back tomorrow. Our first full day together in the village had gone so well, and I had reconnected. I was also very proud of my wife. She had instantly "become" Bahnar, survived the rice wine ceremony with grace, and accepted the honorary role of "mother." This was her family now and she communicated with everyone on the most fundamental of levels with many smiles and her abundant love for people.

I was glad that Brent had the chance to meet our family. He has a good heart and I'm sure would have made an excellent missionary in another life, baptizing the masses in the River Ayun. As we bumped our way down the road from Chrong II, the skies ahead looked ominous. In fact, we were soon to find that it had already rained over part of the road, flooding the deeper potholes. Our driver, as good as he was, chose a course that resulted in the van burying itself in thick mud; which wouldn't have been a big deal, but we had a deadline to meet. Brent Clark had a plane to catch.

When Brent was in Saigon in 1994, he had visited the only Baptist church in the city and maintained contact with the clergymen after his return home. Now that he was back in Vietnam, he planned to celebrate Easter with the Baptists in Saigon.

So our buddy was leaving the highlands...he'd been a welcome guest. We managed to extricate ourselves from the muddy hole, but it rained all the way back to Pleiku. Still, somehow, we got him to the airport with plenty of time to spare. In the archives of my memory, I replayed the a video of buddies waving so long, beginning their journey homeward after a year of war. In the midst of a downpour, we hugged Brent good-bye, "See ya buddy, I'll call when we get back to the States." Unlike promises made during the war to keep in touch, we would stay close to Brent. He was a "highlander" now.

The Dinner Party

My friend, Mr. Hien, had returned from Saigon and immediately came in search of us at the Pleiku Hotel to invite us to dinner at his house. It turned out to be an affair fit for kings. As arranged, Hien met us at the hotel where it became obvious that two motorbikes weren't enough to ferry Marion, Karl (who'd recovered from his brief illness) and myself to dinner. At least for now, the rains had stopped. I waved so long to my wife as she nervously sped away on the back of Hien's Honda, hanging on for dear life...her first ride on a motorbike. By the time Hien returned to pick me up, I hoped Marion was still intact and smiling. Thankfully, she was, a veteran of yet another Vietnam experience.

Besides Hien and his wife, Ksor Gat, Siu Cham and Professor Ly (a gray-haired, 70-year old English teacher who wanted to relocate to the U.S.) joined the party. It was crowded in

Hien's small dining area, but room enough for a delicious meal and an endless supply of Saigon Beer. Our glasses were never empty, thanks to our host, and the conversation grew boisterous and loud. It was a good way to unwind after our day in the village, although the contrasts between Kenh's house and Hien's were striking.

As the evening wound down and the beer kicked in, exhaustion took us. As we began to leave, Marion made her only mistake of the day....she decided to use the bathroom. "This ought to be fun," Karl said in a conspiratorial tone. When she reappeared, her only comment was, "That's the last time I do that!" Karl laughed, knowing what she meant, "Hittin' that little hole ain't easy, is it?"

Whackin'....Wheezin'....And Spittin'

*E*ach dawn was ushered in by the roosters; which was okay by us, we knew there was still time before we had to get out of bed. However, there were other, less natural sounds that drove us crazy. Sounds that could only be made by the animals in other rooms...humans.

Perhaps it is customary....it must have been since we heard these rituals from Saigon to Pleiku to Qui Nhon....other hotel guests, of Asian descent, began the day by clearing their throats, coughing, clearing and snorting....in loud, retching fashion....punctuated by spitting frenzies. After awhile, we began imitating the noises in retaliation. Childish, yes, but we gained a degree of satisfaction by slamming the door extra hard on the way out as a sign of our disgust. "Unreal," shaking our heads in disbelief, "what'a load!"

Seems as though cleansing the body is an art form in this part of the world.....

Good Morning Pleiku, Where's The Polish?

*T*he Saturday before Easter, we knocked on Karl's door on the way to breakfast, "Yeah, I'll meet you there in a minute." The Chief decided again to remain in town to spend time with Ksor Gat and other friends (I understood, afterall, he had been assigned to town patrol during the war). The town was to Karl what Highway 19 was to me.

Nhung met us at 8:00, bright eyed and ready for another day. I think he was impressed by our relationship with the villagers and eager to learn more from it. Each day with him and our driver reinforced our belief in their sincerity and honest desire to assist us. "Nhung, did you see the police last night after we left you?" I asked, already knowing the answer to my own question, but wanting confirmation. "Yes, of course, they ask me many questions and I must bribe them with money." This was all part of the game, the corruption that governed his life....and controlled ours.

On this particular morning, Marion put Nhung to the test. “Can you find six bottles of red fingernail polish?” she asked. It required a few minutes of explanation before our guide understood what she had in mind. “Yes, yes, I understand,” and after we parked near the market, Nhung set off alone to fulfill her request. The poor man didn’t have a clue where to begin, but his plan included checking with his wife and daughter.

In the meantime, Marion and I entered the market, again buying drinks, ice and sandwiches. We also found a woman who could supply us with all the items on our shopping list. With great enthusiasm, she scurried about the market in search of enough candy for a whole village and four conical hats. Midget-sized chairs were provided for us, so we sat back, enchanted with the flurry of activity around us. Nhung appeared in time to ensure the total price we paid was fair....and he beamed, “I find polish!” I patted him on the back, “You’re a good man, my friend.” Marion was in her “element” now.

The Falls

About a mile east of Pleiku, we came to the “falls,” a checkpoint that we soldiers had often stopped at to admire the serenity and to relax in relative safety. These waterfalls weren’t especially dramatic or spectacular, but it was the closest thing to beauty we could find at the time. And they fell into a river that ran next to the Catholic church.

“Nhung, let’s stop here,” I wanted to take a minute to visit this special place. After taking a few photo’s at the shrine near the falls, we walked over to the church. “I used to escape from the rain here...take a nap in the church while my men screwed around outside.” Especially late in my tour, I’d take refuge where it could be found. By then, I’d had enough of the war and the daily boredom, and was losing so much weight that my bones were tired. The church was safe and I’d curl up on the cement floor of the vestibule to sleep like a baby.

An elderly Vietnamese gentleman in a dark gray, pinstripe suit strolled nearby, and it struck me that this might be the pastor. With Nhung’s help, we started a conversation and learned that this man was indeed the priest for the area, a former chaplain at Camp Holloway where I had been stationed during the first months of my tour. After 1975, he’d spent thirteen years in prison for his “sins,” but his spirit and faith had remained strong. His congregation consisted of both Vietnamese and Montagnards. He also tended to a Bahnar leprosy community situated on a hill behind the church.

The priest (we never learned his name) invited Marion and I to Easter Mass which would be held at 7:00 the following morning. We promised to attend, and continued on our way. “I

guess you know there was a reason for stopping here this morning,” I suggested to Marion as the van climbed back onto Highway 19. That sense of being “led” was never stronger.

Beauty And The Bahnar

Bok Yong, who had planned to spend the day with us, was already in the village when we arrived. I explained to everyone why Brent and Karl were absent, why it was just Marion and myself. Our Bahnar family, who accepted the missing Americans as dose friends, were genuinely disappointed at not seeing them again. The hats were presented to Koch, Sok, Den and Yoih (the ladies of the family), and candy given out to the children. In Kenh’s house, Marion set up shop, surrounded by girls anxious to have their nails done. It didn’t take them long to figure out that “if you can do the toenails, why not the fingernails?” My wife had her hands full. “If we ever move here permanently, I know where you can get a job,” I chided her, “I’m going outside, and leave you women alone.”

The boys followed me, so I dug into my backpack. Frisbee. This game was new, but it took only a few tosses for them to master the basics. Before long, I had quite a game going, dodging trees and chickens, snagging the elusive disc. Leaving a number of Frisbee’s with the kids, I couldn’t help wondering how their abilities might grow over time...and the movie, **The Gods Must Be Crazy**, came to mind. Some of the things we were introducing to their culture might have been as far fetched as that Coke bottle dropped from heaven in the film. “Sure hope they don’t walk to the edge of the world to drop these things off the cliff....”

While Marion slaved away in her makeshift beauty shop, I leisurely roamed the village, taking photographs of the people. Kenh and Kun stayed at my side. Normally, I didn’t care to spend much time with the camera; but it was important for me to capture the villagers going about their daily lives. My attentions were received with a variety of reactions, from the fearful tears of babies to the wide good-natured grins of mature women. I knew these images would become prized possessions back home.

Nervous Nellie

With half the village women now sporting 20 red nails, I retrieved my wife from Koch’s house. She was thankful for the reprieve. The day before, I guess I had volunteered her for kitchen duty, “My wife, she cook for you,” or something thoughtless like that. We found her in Koch’s house, sweating over an open fire that Sut was building with twigs, biting her lip and wondering what she was going to do next. “Hey, honey, want to come with us to see the cow?” Marion’s expression told me that I’d made the right decision to rescue her. Not ten steps down the path, in a very quiet voice, she promised in very colorful vernacular to get even. “Don’t you ever volunteer me like that again!” One day I am sure she will even the

score, and that she will make every effort to ensure the circumstances are as uncomfortable for me as that hour in Koch's kitchen was for her.

Around the beginning of March, we had sent \$200 to our family to buy a cow. The animal was to have been sacrificed upon our arrival in celebration of our visit. Now that the police had prohibited spending the night in the village, the feast was canceled.....and the cow's life spared. With our family leading the way, we hiked up and down narrow pathways and burnt-out forest to an open field where the cow was tethered.

This poor animal physically shook as Marion and I approached him, never seen such a nervous cow. "Damn, suppose he knows what was on our mind?" Maybe he sensed the Big Mac's under our skin, but he definitely wanted no part of us. It was a young calf, not yet fully grown, and Bok Yong explained that since we weren't going to eat it, he might be utilized to help cultivate the rice fields. He looked like one relieved animal when we left him alone and headed away up the mountainside. I know Marion was glad that she didn't have to witness the ceremonial "death" and "drink cow's blood," like I'd warned her. Bok Yong had strong reservations about it also, fearing that too many villagers (outside of our family) would over indulge in a rice wine orgy.

Kenh's Commute

*H*and in hand, our merry band probed deeper into the jungle, "Kenh," I asked, "can I help you work in the fields?" "Not today, father, I do not work on Saturday!" Besides it was still about a month until the planting season.

Along the trail, we came across a pile of boards and Yong explained, "Kenh will make a new house, he cut this wood himself." Six large timbers were propped against a tree, accumulated for the construction. "Each one take me a day to make," Kenh was obviously proud of his accomplishments, "I cut down tree and drag through forest to this place." It was then that he nonchalantly pointed to the ugly horizontal scar that knifed through the toes on his right foot. "Ax slipped, much pain." Without any medical aid, the wound took two months to heal. My son smiled up at me as if to say, "oh well....it was nothing."

The afternoon sun bore down and Marion and I were given hats to combat the heat. Actually, there was plenty of shade and the pace was easy. The young girls, ever watchful, made sure Marion didn't stub a toe or stumble on the twigs or rocks. We soon passed Prot's fields on the right, heavily overgrown from neglect, and I wondered how the farming would be done without him. His eldest son, Nang, who is about sixteen, would have to shoulder the heavy burden for his family.

I had two reasons for visiting the fields. The first was simply to see for myself how and where our family carved out their existence. I knew from letters that they would often exhaust their supply of food because of poor yields (our monthly monetary contributions are intended to

plug these gaps). It was important for me to “frame” them in my memory, standing tall in their fields....so that with eyes closed back home, I could visualize my children tilling the red highland soil....and beg forgiveness for not being able to work at their side.

The second motive was a bit more vague. I wanted our family to “own” a memory of Marion and I... walking along their well used trail....standing in their fields with a smile on our white faces....and maybe the mountain would echo our laughter during a strenuous day. “...to feel our presence in their lives when we’re gone,” I tried to verbalize feelings that were still new. I halted the procession, “Anyone have a knife?” Yaih produced a rusty key, “that will do.” Bok Yong understood what I intended, and pointed, “Try that one there, it’s softer.” Now, when the Bahnar go by, they will see our names carved into a tree and know it wasn’t a dream.

Koch and her husband, Yaih, farmed typical rice paddies, latticed into the lower side of the mountain. In the middle of the paddy was a small hut, occupied by a family who helped work the fields. Yaih retrieved a hoe and gave me a quick farming lesson, which created a howl of laughter, even from my wife. “You’re doing it wrong.” I needed a lot of practice. Koch, at half my size, was twice as efficient and she had the extra weight of a baby strapped to her back!

Further up the mountain, Kenh pointed to an area off to the left, “A plane crash there long time ago.” Extremely interested, I turned to Bok Yong for more information, and he related that everything had been taken away shortly after the crash, they thought sometime in the early ‘70’s. Had we more time, and fewer observers, I’d have asked to investigate the site.

In places, the jungle was on fire, as more land was being “slashed and burned” for farming. Halfway up the mountain, we finally came through a thicket, where dozens of gourds were stacked (“your sons use for drinking water”) and entered the farmland belonging to Kenh and Kun. The steep jungle had been burned off, trees cut, ground cleared. Blackened stumps dotted the hillside. My heart sank. “Now we know why they run out of food each year,” I spoke softly to Marion, “it must be hell growing anything up here.” The ashen, scorched earth cracked beneath our footsteps.

We figured the hike up from the village to these fields was at least an hour. “I want you to think about this the next time you complain about your commute,” Marion remarked. I attempted to visualize what working in these fields must be like during the heavy rains of the monsoon season and shuddered.

The Frugal Gourmet

Back in the village, we rinsed off at the water point in Koch's front yard. For awhile, we congregated in her house, sharing cold sodas and handing out candy. The culture in Vietnam is not as formal as the west when it comes to dining etiquette, and it is perfectly acceptable to smack as one eats and to belch after a good meal. In fact, I am convinced that the better the food is, the noisier the diner. As with everything in Vietnam, I embraced the opportunity to adapt. Marion, on the other hand, couldn't abandon thirty plus years of programming and always had to suppress her surprised expression as a big belch sounded across the room, or her shudder as I sat next to her smacking away. I kept telling her that smacking helps to release the flavor of the food. ...She wasn't buying it.

So there we were, sitting in Koch's home, as forty people enjoyed a rare treat, a piece of candy. The room filled with a deafening chorus of slurps, smacks and hmmm's. "It sure sounds good" Marion whispered to me, "they sure enjoy sweets!" No doubt about that. I was just glad everyone knew to remove the plastic wrapper...(I'd once handed out candycanes to Montagnard refugees during Christmas and seen them eat the treat, wrapper and all).

Koch's kitchen was a flurry of activity....dinner was cooking; however, the heat from the inside fire soon became stifling and we moved on to Kenh's. Not a huge improvement in the midday heat, still the hint of a breeze would occasionally reach us through the front door. Clouds were building again, "Rain today?" Kenh assured me that it would not.

Our meal was delicious, plenty of rice and a few chunks of bony chicken....Koch and mother, Sut were quite the proud chefs. We handed out loaves of French bread that we'd brought from town that morning. Interestingly, hardly any of our family touched the bread....probably not something in their daily diet.

As usual, Bok Yong handled translating between bites, mostly lighthearted conversation. Kenh dug out a map of the U.S. that I had sent him a few months earlier; on it were marks where his American friends lived....Devenney, Tate, Layne, Peyton, and myself....all former soldiers who had been a big part of his past....it was difficult for Kenh to comprehend the vastness of America, even with Yong explaining. But it was important for him to connect, albeit in a vague way, "Will they come to Chrong II someday?"

"Maybe so."

Not So Easy Rider

Nhung sauntered over and let us know that it was nearly time to go. On the way to the van, Kenh asked if I'd like to ride with him on the motorbike. "Hell yes!" I held onto his shoulders

as my son craftily guided us through the village labyrinth. I waved to passerby's and soon we were cruising along a deserted forest trail. I had no idea he had a hidden agenda.

Kenh brought us to a stop under some large trees. "Great," I thought, "some quiet time together, just the two of us." When he began talking, I had to make sure I was understanding him correctly, "Father, how much money did you give to Bok Yong?"

"I gave him \$50 for you, Kun and Koch...and same for Sok." Handing off money was a delicate process, not something for public notice, so we had often utilized Yong as the main conduit for secret distribution to the family.

"Yong he keep some for himself. We do not trust him."

I was totally shocked. My first reaction was, "damn, who can I trust in this country!" At that moment, our inability to fully understand each other's language led to awkward silences and long faces. Kenh was outwardly disturbed but I didn't know what to do in the short time we had together. We couldn't stay away for long. Fumbling with my money belt, I pulled out a fifty dollar bill and handed it to himwith hesitation, he accepted it, but I'm sure Kenh had no idea why the money was being offered. Money. Seeds of discontent. Distrust. Greed. "Who needs this shit!"

On the way back to town, as I told Marion about my conversation with Kenh, she voiced some concerns of her own. She was pretty sure that with Prot gone, the money we were sending each month was not shared with Sok equitably, if at all. Bok Yong had also told her that Koch and Kun had questioned him many times about the money. "Tomorrow, I'm going to sit down with everyone and lay it all out. I need to make sure that everyone understands that we cannot continue to send money if this is the result." I was in complete agreement and proud of her desire to take charge. Neither of us believed that Bok Yong was cheating our family, we admired him too much. But if there were misunderstandings, "we'll damn sure clear them up before we leave!"

The Government Giveth....It Also Taketh Away

*D*inner at the hotel....too tired to go out. Karl was off with Ksor Gat, so Marion and I invited Siu Cham to join us in the dining room. "Ride any elephants today?" I teased my friend, "today we see many tiger in the jungle!"

"Yeah, yeah." Cham could smile and frown at almost the same instant.

Our dinner conversation was easy as each of us shared the day's activities. With the passing of each moment, we were growing closer to Cham. His sincerity and devotion to his family

was likable, and when he spoke of his two young daughters, his chest swelled with pride. Still, something was wrong this evening, something was really eating at him:

“I live in very small house, close to here, and paid much money to make it bigger so my wife could change clothes when visitors come....before they must go outside because the house too small. Now, the government will make this road wider and destroy my house because it is in the way. But they will not pay me for the improvements I make. They say to me, ‘you know this government house, why you do this?’ I tell them we must have room to live! They will make us live far away and I cannot walk to my work.”

I slipped Cham a modest gift under the table and thanked him for being our friend. It wasn't pity and we wished it could have been a million bucks instead of a few dollars. He was surprised and quite modest about accepting it.

Before we parted for the night, Cham mentioned that his wife's father lived in Qui Nhon. Since he would be taking us there in two days, I suggested “Why doesn't she come with us? There'll be plenty of room in the car.” He explained, “One time we did that, but the French tourists complained to my company and I got in trouble.” “Cham, your wife is going with us if she wants to, and there won't be any complaints.” He invited us to dinner at his house the next night.

Vietnam News 4/12/96: “Vinamilk Tops List Of Favorite Products”

The popularity of Vinamilk products in the domestic market has been confirmed by a nationwide opinion poll conducted by the Dai Doan Ket weekly.

The “polling,” which took place from September last year till February this year, has turned up the top ten consumer products for Vietnam in 1995.

Vinamilk was in the third position in the previous poll conducted by the paper, and along with Daso soap powder, P/S toothpaste, 333 beer, and Rang Dong bulbs and flasks, remains in favor with consumers.

“Wherever You Go....Whatever You Do...”

Easter morning. A first for us, we had actually requested a wake-up call! Because Mass was at 7:00 am, we asked Nhung to be at the hotel at 6:00. We needed time to stop at the

market, gather supplies for our last day in Chrong II and make it to Mass on time. Readying ourselves for the day, we tried hard not to become melancholy. The end of our stay in Pleiku was fast approaching, and there was too much to do on this special day to allow time for sadness. Karl was still sleeping as we passed his room on our way downstairs. “Bet the Chief had a late night with Gat...”

“Nhung, how are you this morning?” The familiar sight of our friend coming towards us in “uniform,” sporting a huge grin that lifted our spirits.

“We go to church...then pick up Bok Yong...then go to village?”

“You got it! First we stop at the market, buy soda’s and sandwiches. Happy Easter to you.”

After stopping at the same place for several consecutive mornings, the shopkeepers had come to expect our arrival. Today, we were the first customers as the town slowly came to life. Earlier than usual, we’d preceded the bread delivery so there were a few minutes to kill while we waited for the sandwiches to be prepared. Marion and I strolled out the store’s back door where there was a small open air restaurant. Although the café was vacant at this early hour, the stereo was playing one of Marion’s favorite songs. The lyrics had held great meaning for her in the early days of our relationship and once she had written them down and sent them to me in a letter.

*Oceans apart day after day
And I slowly go insane
I hear your voice on the line
But it doesn’t ease the pain*

*If I see you next to never
How can we say forever*

*Wherever you go
Whatever you do
I will be right here waiting for you
Whatever it takes
Or how my heart breaks
I will be right here waiting for you*

Richard Marks’ tune, **Wherever You Go**, spoke to us on a different level that morning. No longer as lovers, but as parents about to be separated from their children for a very long time. To her surprise, I reached out for my wife’s hand and began to dance. Holding onto each other, we allowed ourselves a private moment. It seemed like the thing to do. Nhung was smiling at us from inside the store as tears filled my eyes. Long day ahead...

A Familiar House

We pulled off Highway 19, and parked in the field by the church. Like Easter services anywhere, the crowd was spilling out of the church, standing room only. A well dressed Vietnamese gentleman approached us as we exited the van and politely asked that we follow him inside.

The entrance hymn had already begun, as we conspicuously walked to the front pew which had been reserved for us. The church was packed with both Vietnamese and Montagnards, dressed in their Sunday best, and it felt like every eye was on us. The music was lively, a beautiful combination of cultural styles. On both sides of the altar, young boys and girls stood in rows, solemn, but extremely curious about the Western guests in their presence. They tried not to stare, but couldn't help it.

As Mass progressed, I found myself fighting back the urge to sob uncontrollably. I dared not look at the parishioners. Joining me as I walked through the vestibule that morning were the souls from my past, all the dead from war-torn Highway 19. In this holy place where I once took refuge, it felt as though I had been chosen to pay respects, to pray for them, to remember them. Beside me, Marion fought with demons of her own. We struggled to maintain our composure during the entire celebration.

The Catholic Mass is steeped in tradition. Before the Gospel is recited by the priest, two other passages from the Bible are read by members of the congregation. On this holy morning the first verse was read in Vietnamese, the second in Bahnar. It was a hopeful sign, as respect was afforded to the Montagnards in our midst. For an hour, at least, both races were equal. There's been an uneasy balance in the highlands since the first group of "resettled" Vietnamese arrived in the area during the 1960's. At the end of Mass, as the church emptied one group went to the left, one to the right.....the cultural chasm reemerging between them.

During Communion, Marion and I waited until the last moment before rising from our pew. With such a large crowd, it looked like the supply of hosts might be prematurely depleted (the priest was forced to break them into much smaller pieces to accommodate so many people). When we were sure there were enough hosts for us as well, we held out our hands to receive Communion. At that moment, we realized that the priest had saved two unbroken hosts for us. Touched and honored we returned to our seats to pray.

To our right, Nhung motioned for the priest to come over. We had no idea what he was doing. Then, in one of the most respectful gestures I've ever seen, Nhung quietly handed Father the host he had been cradling in the palm of his hand, "I do not know this custom, please forgive me," he explained, and sat back down next to our driver. He had been holding that tiny piece of bread as if it were his own newborn child.

As Father made his closing remarks, he mentioned the American couple in their midst, and smiled at us for the first time that morning. We had no idea what he'd said in Vietnamese, but it felt like an introduction. We walked outside and were mobbed by joyous parishioners.

The Road To Heaven

In the rectory, we were greeted by the parish elders, who, along with the ever-present children, seemed quite pleased by our presence. Most of the conversation centered around our background, where we were from, why we were in Vietnam. In particular, the subject of age came up, a recurring topic throughout our two weeks in-country. "You very old, she very young!" an elder pointed at me, then Marion.....and laughter could be heard for miles. The disparity in our ages (16 years) caught everyone by surprise and raised a number of eyebrows.

The previous day, Father had said he would take us to the Bahnar leprosy village about a mile behind the church (I have been involved with leprosy projects since 1992 and never miss a chance to observe conditions firsthand). Good to his word, he invited us to go. The van was soon loaded with people, but managed to climb the hill and navigate the winding trail. As we bumped our way forward, Father leaned over and said to me, "This like the road to heaven." I understood and nodded in agreement. Soon we stopped at the village gates. It was such a bright morning, the highland plateaus clearly visible in the distance.

While Father explained our visit to the gathering villagers, we moseyed over to what appeared to be a chapel. There were no walls, just a wooden frame and a thatched roof, an altar at one end and a set of doors at the other. The doors, very old and grand looked out of place on a building with no walls.....and they were even padlocked. "How do you figure that one?" Marion just shook her head, another one of those images to be sorted out later.

The people were very kind and tolerant of the intruders. Father explained his ministry, the type of treatment available, why the aid was sorely inadequate, and how difficult life was. Marion met her first leper, a widow living with her young son. The disease had already cost her a husband, an eye, toes, and most of an arm and hand. We were invited to enter her hut which was one of the crudest dwellings we had ever experienced. The only beauty to be found in her home was a crucifix adorned with silk flowers. One of the most difficult acts we faced in Vietnam was turning around and walking away from people like this. The incongruities of life begs the question, "Why?" Marion took the woman's deformed hand in hers, holding on for a time.

We waved good-bye from the van, returning Easter morning back to their quiet suffering. Went back the way we'd come, down the road from heaven.

Easter Bunny Spotted On Highway 19

*F*or unknown reasons, Bok Yong's village was off limits to outsiders. We parked the van in front of a roadside café on Highway 19 where Yong was scheduled to meet us in about an hour. "Honey, let's take a walk," I didn't want to sit around. Always game, she hurried to my side, and asked, "Which way?"

On this stretch of highway, homes and businesses lined both sides of the road and the area bustled with activity. In all that humanity, however, we still stuck out like dinosaurs....fingers pointed at us, toddlers scurried to their mothers, adults waved, school kids practicing their English said "Hello!" "Feel like you've walked into a party with your pants down yet?" "No," Marion replied, "for every long stare there has been hundreds of smiles. Want to buy some candy?"

No one in this land knew the first thing about an Easter Bunny, but Marion and I, in our own spontaneous way, adopted the role. We dispensed hard candy to every Montagnard who dared to come near enough, to every Vietnamese child who smiled our way, and to each other. We thought of our children back home (Sean, Amanda and Taylor), knowing they'd be filled with the excitement and joy of Easter, and a ton of sweets. Here on Highway 19, it was just another day for most. I stood in the middle of the road to take a picture of a boy I guessed to be ten years old, riding on a cart pulled by a giant water buffalo. We were really enjoying our "Sunday stroll."

Although it was only late morning, the heat really slowed our pace. As we passed by one house, a woman motioned for us to join her at a table in her front yard. Who could deny such hospitality! Soon, she was busy bringing Cokes and ice for us; the husband and kids sat down also, taking time out from their chores. Unable to verbally communicate we broke out pictures of our children, without words there was still understanding. When I asked to take a picture, the woman ran inside to pretty herself. Marion held her infant child in her arms, and the shutter opened for an instant, catching the light. The kindness went both ways.

"Someday," I told my wife on the way back, "I want to walk from Pleiku to the Mang Yang Pass, and back....take a whole day." "Maybe on our next visit," she took my hand.

King Of The Bahnar

*B*ok Yong had been conducting secret religious services with the Christians in his village....when he finally arrived at our meeting place along the road, it was nearly noon. Accompanying him were his two daughters and wife, Sel. On the ride to Chrong II, we chatted lightheartedly, exchanging Easter experiences.

My Bahnar family had a different idea for a Sunday surprise. As soon as the side door was opened, Kenh and Kun took my hands and led me away from the crowd. “What’s going on, Yong?” I shouted. “I think your family want to make you like Bahnar,” he guessed.

Stripped to my shorts, Kenh began the process of dressing me in a traditional Montagnard loin cloth. “Whoa, baby!” I pleaded each time he yanked that thin strip of cloth tighter between my legs. Marion was doubled over in laughter, while the rest of the village was enjoying her laughing at me. I yelled out, “Tee, king of the Bahnar!” And got cheers from the crowd.

Then it was Marion’s turn. Sut, Koch and the other women wrapped her in a Bahnar skirt, but the shirt wasn’t quite finished yet....the cloth had been woven, but it still needed the finishing touches (they would work feverishly all afternoon to complete it before we left). Until then, Marion kept her old shirt on, despite my flippant suggestion to the contrary, “You know, Bahnar women used to go bare-chested...”

It was quite a sight. There we were, the only two people in Chrong II wearing traditional Montagnard clothing. Gone are the days of the loin cloth and the beautifully woven clothing. Today’s villager wears Western style pants, a T-shirt and rubber sandals. As the Montagnard world is being overrun by the Vietnamese people and the 21st century, their cultural traditions are quickly fading. My personal feelings on this are mixed. History has always dictated change; one world is replaced by another. Look at us: we bought them a motorbike, not a water buffalo. What I cannot tolerate is the poverty and injustice that Montagnards are subjected to by those in power. In a sense, they are stuck between the past and the future....unable to go back to a homeland that no longer exists, they are forced to play “catch up” with a future that is often denied.

I wouldn’t have taken that loin cloth off for a million dollars.

Little Fish, Big Fish

“Tee, do you want to swim?” Kenh beamed, “we show you how to fish.”

When I said, “Let’s go!” all the children let out a collective “Yes!” This was going to be a special treat for everyone.

Kun showed me his fishing net as we began the long walk to the Ayun. We were taking a different path today that took us further down river. Curious, I asked Bok Yong to translate, “Kun, what kind of fish do you catch?” Looking perplexed by my question, Kun shrugged, “Little fish and big fish.” While the art of fishing may have been part sport for these men (they took great pride in their ability), it was primarily a case of feeding the family. The type of fish,

being of no consequence, they had not assigned names to their prey. There were just some fish bigger than others.

Yet another bamboo suspension bridge....and again, it was in worse shape than the ones before. "Be brave, don't look down." "Yeah, right!" and off she went. The Ayun rushed below, swollen by all the rains. We were really in the middle of it now, as Marion and I tried to stay up with our family trudging through the thick jungle. In the mid-day heat, we followed our children over ancient logs and boulders, wondering if we were ever going to stop. There were so many scenic areas, but each time it looked like we might stop, our determined band waved us forward. Kenh would often turn his head and smile at us....his adeptness in this environment was remarkable....he glided through the underbrush, making little noise, hardly ruffling a leaf. Occasionally, he'd offer his hand to help Marion over a rough spot on the trail.

Kun and some of the older boys stripped down to their waists and jumped into the Ayun with their fishing nets. We halted for awhile to observe and marvel at their technique. "I think these guys are part fish," I smiled with fatherly pride to my wife, "they look like they belong in the water." As we hiked further along the banks, Kun and the other fishermen worked their way against the current, their brown skin blending with the brown water, they became invisible.

At long last, Kenh stopped us, "We are here," and motioned to a wide stretch of river with sandy banks. It was breathtaking in its beauty. The Ayun tried mightily to push through, but large, smooth rocks were slowing it down, creating pools and waterfalls and the sound of rushing water. Soon, the river was also filled with joyful children of all ages, "It's amazing to me that they all know how to swim and there's no adults out there to supervise," I was taking off my loin cloth, anxious to jump in. Although she had a swimsuit on underneath, Marion left her shorts on, and together we carefully followed Kenh into the river.

Submerged boulders, not to mention the swift current, made wading difficult....no such problem for our companions. But oh how refreshing! Even Bok Yong took refuge in the cooling waters. Children were splashing and playing everywhere, and just down river, we could see Kun making his way towards us, still busy with his net. Only a few white clouds in the sky, "I could stay here forever." Marion overheard me and swam over, "That's what I'm afraid of."

Resting on large flat rocks, we let the sunshine dry our bodies, and laced up our shoes. On our walk back to the village, Marion pulled up beside me. "I just realized I forgot something," Marion's hushed tone was concerned, serious, "I didn't take off my money belt." She had about \$1,500 in cash on her during the swim, and now it was soaked. My immediate response was, "Oh great, now what do we do?" As usual, I'd over-reacted. Money will eventually dry out. When I calmed down and realized it wasn't the end of the world, I put an arm around her and teased, "You take this money laundering thing a bit too far!" At least we hadn't lost it.

To our relief, Kenh guided us back to the village taking a different trail, much shorter and with no bridges to cross. We passed more burning jungle, and were engulfed by the smoke. With a huge grin, Kun presented his catch of the day....it was several “small fish”....we were looking at lunch.

The Root Of All Evil

Our Easter feast was being prepared in Koch’s house, but before sitting down for dinner, there was the unfinished business of money. “Yong, please tell our family that I want to speak with them,” Marion was determined, “I want Kenh, Kun, Koch and Sok all present.” We crowded into Kun’s house, allowing only family members to join us inside. It became very quiet. Yaih sat beside Koch, who was cradling their baby. The children spread themselves around. Marion did all the talking, firm yet gentle: “I believe there are misunderstandings about the money we send you from America. This makes us very sad. In the future when we send money, we will write a letter first that tells how much each of you is to receive. That way there will be no doubt in your mind when Bok Yong delivers it to you. We can not allow our gifts to pull you apart or make you angry at each other.”

As Yong translated, I was proud of my wife, her insight, her strength. All eyes were downcast, embarrassed....unable to read minds, I’m not sure if anyone was ashamed or upset. But Koch’s husband, Yaih, spoke up and admonished the others for making this kind of trouble. No one contradicted him. Part of the problem was our own lack of understanding and sensitivity to their strong feelings of “fairness.” Some gifts we handed out with the assumption that they would be divided equally....this caused confusion and bickering. We had learned our lesson. With five families to support, all gifts would come in “five’s” from now on.

On the subject of gifts, our family apologized for their perceived lack of nice things to give us. Even with our persistence to the contrary, it was difficult for them to believe that their gifts of blankets and bags, bracelets and necklaces, crossbow and arrows meant so much to us. Before ending the meeting, I made one last request of my family, “You can give us the greatest gift of all,” everyone held their breath, “you must be good to each other!” We’d made our point, and it was time to eat.

Was It Just A Dream?

Now that the air had been cleared, the older children seized the opportunity to show me their work in the coloring books. These were not easy illustrations, so their expertise and attention to detail astounded me. Each figure was colored between the lines, displaying a strong sense of color and imagination....and were truly works of art. They were quite pleased with the

praise I lavished upon them. “I had no idea they could do this kind of work,” I admitted, “I thought color crayons would give them trouble....next time, let’s bring watercolors.” Somewhere in Chrong II, there is an artist waiting to be discovered.

In the few days that Nhung and our driver had been in the village, they had earned the respect and friendship of the villagers and our family. An unusual gift to be bestowed on these Vietnamese from our Montagnards. Quite pleased, they were invited to our Easter dinner. Large bowls of rice, small bits of chicken and pork, and Kun’s fish were carried into Kun’s house. Yaih also brought a dozen bottles of Vietnamese soda; combined with our ice chest full of drinks, this was quite a treat. Bahnar rice is stickier than usual and is very filling, but our Vietnamese guests seemed to enjoy trying new foods. When Marion and I finished, we handed our small rice bowls to those who hadn’t yet eaten. When the food was gone, the dinner was over.

A hush fell over us. Kenh spoke so softly it was like a prayer, “It has been like a dream...when we wake tomorrow, you will be gone.” His words spoke volumes and there was nothing we could say beyond “we will be back.” A sadness beyond expression began to pump through my veins. Despair. Leaving was inevitable. Out of the corner of my eye, Nhung was motioning that it was nearly time to go.

Prot’s wife, Sok, delayed our departure by bringing out one more jug of rice wine. Bok Yong nodded that we shouldn’t refuse. The village chief and a few elders also appeared, and joined us in the wine ceremony. Their mood of celebration countered our own sense of desperation. The time came for us to take the final pull on the straw.

“....I’ll Be Right Here Waiting For You....”

*E*ven if I’d wanted to I was unable to speak, the lump in my throat ensured that. At the bottom of Kun’s ladder, I was once again outfitted in my loin cloth. Marion’s shirt had been completed during the day and she was helped into her Bahnar skirt and blouse. At this point, with heads high, we began the final walk.

Slowly, very slowly, Kenh and I led the procession to the van. We held hands, Kun a step behind, Marion with Koch and the children. The camera was stowed away. Villagers lined our path, waving, telling us goodbye. Off to my right stood Jhuk, whom I’d seen in Chrong I, and I wondered what brought him to this place, to this moment. Was it the “connection” that we’d discovered in Chrong I? We turned left and soon he was gone from sight.

As soon as I saw the open van doors, I lost my composure. Embracing my sons, I sobbed...we sobbed...unable to speak, forcing out nothing more than names. Marion was going through her own agony, but I had no idea where she was. Through my tears, I sought out the “grandchildren,” trying to touch each one....most were dry-eyed....I don’t think they were used to this kind of an emotional display. When I hugged Sut, I told her “thank you for my children.” She asked, “When will you return?” After I said, “maybe in two years,” she quickly added, “you must come sooner.” I know time is running out for her.

I somehow found my way inside the van and waited. Marion was still saying her good-bye’s to the young girls whom she had completely enchanted and they her, then to Sut, Koch, Kun and finally Kenh, her favorite son. She held him for a long time and with a great deal of reluctance, she let go and made her way to my side. As the engine of the van came to life, the panic set in. In two years’ time I had lost two members of my village family. Would I lose anyone before I could return? Can I stay? Why do I have to leave? Isn’t there a better way? Why do we have to go home? All these questions rapid firing in my head, adding to the bewilderment and emotion of the moment.

The tears in my eyes began to act as a filter on a camera’s lens...as the van pulled away slowly, the haze of loved ones before me became surrealistic....”was that Prot’s daughter? Is that you Kenh? Where’s Koch? There’s Kun. Ki, be careful on that bike!” I refused to wake from the dream.

It should have rained. But it didn’t. Inside the van, it was silent. I couldn’t stop the tears, didn’t want to. There was a time back in 1968 when I couldn’t shed a tear for anyone, but those days are over. Nhung, who was normally very talkative, had little to say, “I feel your pain,” were the only words he spoke. His silence was his way of showing respect.

Before dropping off Bok Yong and Sel, I was able to express my gratitude to him for all he had done to bring our family together. With Chrong II behind us, it felt like the rest of our days in Vietnam were marked by one goodbye after another. “God bless you my friends,” Yong prayed, “and God protect our family.” It wasn’t until we reached the outskirts of Pleiku that my tears began to ease. Marion, with her arm around me voiced the words of the song we’d danced to that morning....seemingly years before....“They’ll be right there waiting for you...”

“What Wrong With You?”

*P*arked once again in front of Nhung’s house, I shook our driver’s hand and thanked him for all his help. His smile told me that he was happy for the experience (and the generous tips).

Although we were all quite drained, Nhung invited us in for a quick cup of tea. It was also time for us to collect the Bahnar shirt and peasant pants he'd sewn for me.

The shirt was beautiful and fit perfectly. Despite a warm evening temperature, I decided to leave it on (I was still wearing the loin cloth as well). As we readied to walk back to the hotel, Nhung, obviously sad that we were leaving Pleiku the next day, presented us with his own special gifts. Small sets of antlers, no longer than four inches, and a antique carving stone....these were precious to him, and it was all he had to offer. We graciously accepted, but later I told Marion, "Next time we come here, let's bring these things and give them back as our gift to him."

"Mr. Mike, you no want to change clothes?" Nhung asked, seeing that I was going to leave wearing my full Montagnard attire. "No, Nhung, I go to hotel like this. Thank you for everything, we'll see you before we leave in the morning." He kept smiling until we turned the corner.

Marion knows better than to question my madness, and fell in proudly beside me as we made our way through Pleiku. We nearly caused a number of accidents, men and women on motorbikes and bicycles twisting their heads in disbelief. I stood erect, letting the Vietnamese stare and joke....but each time a Montagnard rode by and witnessed the spectacle, they would smile at me as if to say "Thank you for remembering!" An elderly Montagnard woman went so far as to approach me and shake my hand before scurrying away. "Damn it Marion, today there will be a king of the Bahnar!"

We walked into the hotel lobby and our front desk attendant, who had helped us out with the police chief the evening of the wedding and had come to accept that Americans operated outside the seriousness with which most people in his country approached life. He watched me carefully as I neared his desk, "What wrong with you?" I thought Marion would die. It was contagious. "I wish Karl could see you now," she said between bouts of uncontrolled laughter. The timing was right....the humor of it all pushed us away from the sadness... at least for a few minutes.

Cham's Invitation

Karl came by the room for a beer and invited us to dinner with Ksor Gat and his wife, who had just come up from her home in Ban Me Thuot. "But Chief, we've already promised Siu Cham that we'd dine at his house this evening...maybe we can hook up with you later." It was difficult to please everyone; our time was limited and often a declined invitation offended someone....but choices, as always, had to be made. We were honored to have dinner with Cham. He met us at the hotel and together, we walked the few short blocks to his house.

There was no dining table in the tiny three room dwelling, so we sat on the floor. The scant pieces of furniture they did own were too small for us anyway. His wife, a nurse and Vietnamese, was very charming, their two daughters shy and beautiful. One had been ill recently and was now on the mend. Cham reveled in their accomplishments at school and related all their triumphs. He was indeed a proud father, and the trait endeared him to us all the more. It was a delicious meal, and although we had feasted in the village, it wasn't hard to do her meal justice. We also did our best to consume all of Cham's Saigon beer!

Despite the sadness from a few hours earlier, we were really enjoying ourselves which pleased our host and hostess to no end. The conversation centered around family, stayed clear of politics and touched on their housing dilemma. "My wife will go with us to Qui Nhon tomorrow," Cham announced, "our daughter is better now." This news pleased us enormously. After dinner, Cham gave two exhausted Americans directions back to the hotel.

"Can you believe we're leaving tomorrow?" in bed, staring into the darkness, "I think Kenh was right, it **has** been a dream..." The date with the rooster was still hours away. We weren't ready to go.

The Getaway

*O*ur duffel bags were filled with the precious gifts from our family. Kun's crossbow had presented the biggest challenge, but somehow we managed to pack everything. The \$1500 dollars had dried out overnight. Our time, somehow and inexplicably, was up. We knocked on Karl's door, "Chief, time for chow!"

Our last breakfast at the hotel was quite an event in itself. Ksor Gat and his wife pulled up chairs, barely forgiving us for not having joined them the night before....Nhung, his son, and our driver....Siu Cham....Karl...we pushed three tables together to fit everyone in. Fried eggs, French bread, pho, cafe danh...a cool breeze and the sound of Monday morning traffic coming from the open windows at the back of the dining room. More photographs were taken here and later in front of the hotel.

"We'll see you in Saigon, Chief," I shook my buddy's large hand, "meet us at the Que Huong on Thursday." Marion wrapped her arms around the big man, buddies despite the barbs they consistently traded. My nerves were still raw, and tears formed easily despite attempts to quell them. I held Nhung's hand in mine, "Thank you again my friend." He smiled back at me "Do not forget me, tell your friends about me, I help them when they come to Pleiku." I understood him. I also knew in my heart that Marion and I had made a difference in his life....we had been good teachers as well as good students. I presented my "Indiana Jones" hat as a final gesture of goodwill to Ksor Gat; he resembled a cowboy...happy trails!

Cham had arranged for an air conditioned car, which was a big step up from the van, and we stopped to pick up his wife. Heading down Highway 19 for the last time, “Do you think anyone will be there?” I asked Marion, “the turnoff isn’t far.” The pine trees came into view....but up ahead, the road to Chrong II was deserted....our family had stayed home. “In a way, I’m glad they didn’t come here to see us...it would’ve meant one more tough goodbye,” I was only being half truthful with myself. I looked back until the pines disappeared around the bend.

We made only two stops before reaching Qui Nhon two hours later. The first was outside the town of An Khe (noteworthy for their miniature horses), to take a few pictures before leaving high country. The second stop, at the bottom of the An Khe Pass, was a much needed “personal break,” as Cham described it. The coast was near....we didn’t need a map to find it....the heat sucked us in. Like a river, we flowed out of our beloved highlands and ran into the South China Sea.

IV. QUI NHON

Two Women....One Duck

“There’s the road to my father’s village,” Cham’s wife pointed, “last time I come here the road was flooded and we must walk.” It was nearly 11:00 am when we reached the city of Qui Nhon. Our purpose for coming here was to relax and spend a few days by ourselves, taking the first steps towards re-entry to the lives we’d left behind in America. The South China Sea glistened in the mid-day heat.

Unlike Pleiku, Qui Nhon is a city of many charms...its coastal heritage, ruins from the ancient Cham dynasties, a trade center, fine restaurants and a shopping center...it is also home to Vietnam’s largest, most famous leprosy community, Qui Hoa. We planned to spend a good deal of time there.

“Cham, would you like to have lunch with us?” I asked as we drove through town, “after we stop at the hotel.” He checked with his wife and nodded yes to our invitation. We pulled into the parking lot of the Hai Au Hotel (Sea Gull Hotel), located on Nguyen Hue Street, right on the beach.....just as I had remembered it from my trip in 1992. Once again, Wayne Truong’s follow-up was clearly evident; our reservations were in order and a room was ready. Quickly, we put our bags away in the second floor room and met Cham downstairs.

The hotel clerk recommended a place for lunch, and it wasn’t far. Downtown Qui Nhon was buzzing with activity, but I suppose that could be said for any town in Vietnam. We stopped in front of a clean-looking restaurant, and were politely ushered to a street level table. Marion had been eating Vietnamese cuisine for a couple years in the States, but was, nonetheless, pleasantly surprised at the quality of food served in-country. The trick was knowing what to avoid.

During our meal, Cham’s wife excused herself and went outside to a woman selling mango’s. They squatted in Vietnamese fashion and began the bargaining process while we observed from inside. “There’s an old Vietnamese saying for this,” Cham was motioning towards his wife and the mango woman, **“two women, one duck....makes a market!”** Marion and I roared with laughter as our friend tried to stifle his own child-like glee for fear his wife might notice and take exception. Of course, I agreed with the spirit of the “parable,” but was careful not to laugh too long. Women, as do men, have a way of sticking together.

Cham’s wife gave us two mango’s as a parting gift when we got back to the hotel. Again, my eyes watered...I didn’t want to say goodbye....Cham was a highlander and I knew I’d miss

him. Once, when discussing police motives and the like, he had told me, “Mike, some things better if you do not know them.” I never questioned his sincerity; he would do the best he could for us, while keeping the welfare of his family as top priority. Who could ask for more? I shook Cham’s hand, proud of his friendship, sad for the miles between us. We waved until the car was out of sight. They never looked back.

Order Of The Holy Cross

*F*or years, the mother of one of my childhood friends has lived alone in the same old house in my hometown of Orinda, California. Ernestine Angelo. She and my mom have stayed in touch over the years, and she knew of my impending trip to Vietnam (her son had also served in Vietnam). Here’s how fate worked this time: Ernestine told mom that some Vietnamese nuns were now living in the convent in Orinda....mom told me....I asked, “where are they from?”.....Ernestine checked and found out that they’re from Qui Nhon....I called and offered “would they like me to look up anybody while we’re there?” Later, “Yes, they will send you some things to take to the nuns at the convent in Qui Nhon, would that be okay?” Over the phone, “No problem, it would be our pleasure.” I have never been so right.

“Well, partner, what do we do now?” Marion’s question echoed my own feelings, now that we were left to our own devices in Qui Nhon. “Let’s find the convent,” I suggested, “remember the cathedral we saw on the way into town, maybe that’s where we need to go.” Making sure the letters were stowed away in my backpack, we left our key at the front desk and walked back into the sunshine. Outside, we showed the address to two cyclo drivers who swooped down on us like vultures, but we were on our way again.

At the cathedral, we met the pastor, a priest in his forty’s who spoke French and understood English fairly well. He read our letter of introduction and after a brief exchange of mixed languages, we followed him down an alley, hopefully to find the nuns from the Order of the Holy Cross. Through large steel gates, we entered the aging convent and elementary school. A good deal of construction was underway (we later learned that some of the convent buildings were being repossessed and renovated by the government). Sister Jeanne, one of the older nuns, was summoned and greeted us warmly....in English. She spoke our language quite well and was very glad to see us. It was the beginning of a wonderful relationship filled with humor and discovery.

We met Sister Thao and Sister Elizabeth, both very young and enthusiastic, hoping to improve their English by conversing with us. We fell in love with them. The atmosphere there was uninhibited and easy and everyone quickly became friends. After giving Sister Jeanne the letters from America and an envelope containing \$700 in cash, we felt relieved, “Sure glad that money dried out,” I admitted, “the pressure of carrying it around was getting to me.”

“Will you come for dinner tomorrow?” Sister Jeanne took my wife’s arm. “We want you to meet our Mother Superior, who is away at present.”

“Of course we will,” Marion replied, “can we bring anything?”

“No, thank you, we will see you at 3 o’clock.”

We left our newest friends so they could complete their daily chores, and walked over to the waiting cyclo drivers. Not wishing to return to the hotel right away, I asked that we be dropped off near the beach. Cyclo drivers tend to dig their hooks into tourists, becoming possessive, even angry, if you decline their services. These two were the worse we had seen since our arrival in-country. When we pulled over at the curb, I tried to pay them a fair price, but they made a scene, demanding more, screaming, yelling....to rid ourselves of them, I tossed more Dong their way, grabbed Marion’s hand and stormed off across the street, cussing the whole way. That was the last time we hired cyclo drivers in Vietnam.

Tiptoe Through The Turds

We walked through beachside cafés making our way to the shoreline. From a distance, this section of the Qui Nhon beach was picturesque, heavily populated, with a fleet of colorful fishing boats anchored offshore. Compared to the stifling heat and incessant clamor in town, the sea breeze was invigorating. At the end of a row of buildings, we turned right so we could continue up the beach. In doing so, we entered another world.

This was the fishing center for the area. Fishermen and their families lived in shanties all along the beach, their wooden boats either swaying in the sea or resting on shore for repairs. Garbage was everywhere, so were children. Thousands of Vietnamese looked up as we passed, some smiling, some waving, some yelling what we were sure was not a welcome. Two outsiders were traversing their “office,” and often the locals were too absorbed or busy to be courteous. “No where near as romantic as I thought it would be.” No turning back now.

Three elementary school girls, cute in their school clothes, began to follow Marion at a safe distance. They became her shadow. “If they suddenly run away,” I told her, “then it’s time to start worrying.” It was definitely a different crowd here, and we both felt somewhat “trapped” if anything should happen. Up ahead was a large, boisterous crowd, mostly women, “Wonder what that’s all about...” They blocked the entire beach, so there was no avoiding them.

The catch of the day was in, and these ladies were there to buy and sell. We stopped to enjoy the bargaining and the bickering. Giant stingrays, tiger shrimp, and a multitude of other exotic fish were in abundant supply. So were the flies. Holding my camera, I motioned that

I'd like to take a picture if that was acceptable. All activity immediately ceased, baskets put aside, money pocketed....so my subjects could strike their most flattering pose.

Because the garbage was so thick in places, we were careful where we stepped (thankfully, we weren't barefoot). "Look at that little boy," Marion motioned towards a toddler squatting with his pants down, "is he doing what I think he is?" We'd seen a number of "piles" during our brief walk and had assumed they were deposited by the packs of roaming dogs we had encountered. "Lookit honey, there's another one over there doing the same thing!" It was then that we realized we were walking through a "mine field" of human "turds." It was everywhere and so were bare butts. The first one had been cute, the rest weren't. "I guess the tide flushes it all away, at least I hope it does." To our Western sensibilities, it was disgusting. "You sure know how to impress a lady." I merely shrugged, carefully stepping around another pile.

Where the beach ended, I took Marion's picture with the three "shadow" girls. It was time for them to go home and for us to find another beach.

Charlie Don't Surf!

At the end of "turd beach," there was a natural break, and we climbed back up to street level, glad to be free of the filth. We soon realized that there were two distinct beaches, one for the fishing industry and one for swimming. An important difference that will not be forgotten if ever we return. Our hotel was located on beach property in the second "swimming" stretch of real estate. Although it was going through renovation, the Sea Gull was a few steps above the Pleiku Hotel. One could dine or relax in the open air patio, close enough to hear the waves breaking. A tennis court was available, as was easy access to the beach.

We finally found our chance for a leisurely, peaceful stroll along the shoreline. Our only company, as we strayed far from the hotel, was an occasional jogger that might have belonged to either the university across the street or the Olympic training center a few miles away. It felt good to unwind, to be alone together, to give introspective thought to all we had seen and done over the past few days. Our emotions were drained. A weariness set in. It was too much trouble, too much effort to begin sorting things out in any detail.

This stretch of coastline was quite nice by any standards....somewhat fenced off from Nguyen Hue Street while still running parallel to it....surprising with all it's natural beauty there were no other resorts or restaurants except the Sea Gull to be seen. Only abandoned buildings, open fields or shanties. "One day, somebody with money will turn this place upside down," I prophesied, "can you imagine a Marriott here?"

“Would you like to sit down for awhile?” I asked Marion....it was too early for dinner. “Sure!” So we fell onto the warm sand behind the hotel, expecting to enjoy a private sunset.

“You know what’s interesting?” Marion was looking at a group of young people playing soccer in the sand, “I never see anyone swimming.” I wise cracked a line from the Vietnam war movie, **Apocalypse Now**, “Charlie don’t surf!” Too bad he didn’t. Within ten minutes, we were completely surrounded by at least fifty college students, eager to meet Americans....no one had warned us that there was a university across from our hotel specializing in English language studies. They weren’t carrying guns....but they were loaded with curiosity. After we got past the “what you name? where you from?” syndrome, more probing questions were fired at us. Some referenced the war, “Were you a soldier?”

Girls gathered around me, the boys around Marion (funny how that works!). Topics ranged from women’s rights, to the war, to the weather in America this time of year. They were delightful company, engaging, smart....I quickly forgot my desire for anonymity, while Marion was planning an escape route. One girl next to me turned very serious (like being in a classroom), posing the most definitive question, “What is the legacy of the Vietnam war?”

Since arriving in Vietnam, I’d avoided any talk of politics with locals (for their sake as well as mine), so I took my time trying to formulate an answer, truthful, yet comprehensible, “For me, the legacy of the war in which I fought is right here,” I watched her wince, unable to catch my meaning, “for me it’s no longer about the death and suffering....it’s about healing and making new friends. If the war hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be here right now learning about each other, enjoying each other.” She might have expected more, but that was all I had to offer. I had the war to thank for my Bahnar family. And for the company of these fine students. Without it, Vietnam would never have been part of my life.

The sun was sinking, the air turning cool, so we rose to leave. Two boys, clearly the brightest of the group, invited us for coffee at a nearby student gathering spot. I promised to meet them outside after dinner. Emotionally, Marion was running on empty after her stay in Pleiku and being held up to ridicule during our walk up turd beach. This was not an invitation she had expected or was prepared for. She had seen these few days in Qui Nhon as time alone and it was quickly filling up with errands, missions, invitations and her good sportsmanship was almost overwhelmed.

“I’ll Have The Grilled Shrimp”

With the breeze, it was a comfortable evening on the outside patio. Tourists from other continents sat at tables inside the hotel dining room, but Marion and I distanced ourselves from them. The Sea Gull menu was filled with a variety of good looking choices....our waiter was *another* young man eager to practice his English....he delivered two beers, took our orders

and then hung around to review many of the same subjects that had been discussed on the beach. It had been some time since lunch with Siu Cham, and hunger was driving our decisions for a change.

Marion had spotted a favorite on the menu, fresh grilled shrimp! Her decision for an entree had been all too easy. When the waiter arrived a bit later to deliver our selections, Marion stared down at her plate....a lone, solitary shrimp. "I guess grilled shrimp meant grilled *shrimp!*" A good laugh made up for the skimpy portion, but somehow, despite the hunger, we were suddenly too tired to eat.

After dinner, we met the two young men and walked in darkness to an outdoor coffee house. As with so many in Vietnam, they were fascinated by the strength of the American dollar versus their Dong, and were very interested to learn how much we'd paid for the hotel room. When I told them I thought it was about \$35 per night, they were amazed, "We must live on \$20...my parents send each month." We were the equivalent of millionaires in their eyes...

On the way back to our room, I checked with the desk clerk to confirm our transportation for the morning. Finally, at the end of yet another long day, we fell asleep beneath a mosquito net with the sound of the surf rushing through an open window.

Qui Hoa And Sister Luca

"It's ringing!" I held the receiver snugly to my ear.

"Hi Daddy!" it was my daughter, Taylor, so far away, yet sounding so close. Then, "Hi Dad!" from my son, Sean. How good it was to hear their tiny voices.

We made two calls from our room at the Sea Gull, one to California and one to Florida. Our kids were fine and happy to hear from us. Easter had been filled with candy and many other goodies. Marion was speaking to her daughter, Amanda, who was in Florida with her father, "...and honey, we went to a shop in Saigon and bought you a beautiful pink ao dai with pretty flowers painted on it...." she heard a click, continued speaking for a moment, and then realized the line had gone dead.

"Do you need to call her back?" I asked, "or should we go?"

"No, that's okay, she was great! Let's just go." The world had become smaller now that we'd heard the voices of our children.

The driver was downstairs waiting and it was time to visit a special friend and a remarkable place. All we had to do was turn south on Nguyen Hue Street, ascend then descend one good-size mountain, and follow the signs to the leprosarium....Qui Hoa.

Founded by the Sisters of Charity in 1929, Qui Hoa spans nearly a mile of pristine coastline, while its homes, medical and religious buildings stretch inland for about a half mile. It is Vietnam's largest and most notable leprosy community. Four hundred patients are joined by twice that many family members with half of the children attending a school on site, while the older children are bussed into schools in Qui Nhon. In many ways, Qui Hoa is an independent "town," striving to become self sufficient (although it does depend on government assistance to survive). While it is State-run, thirteen Franciscan nuns are also on the staff. Communism and Catholicism coming together to treat the victims of this ravaging disease, seemingly strange bedfellows...

Throughout the ages, leprosy has evoked fear among the non-afflicted. Lepers continue to be segregated into special communities, like Qui Hoa, and must endure the rest of their lives "in exile." I remember writing once that "lepers are people too"....but often they must bear their suffering in solitary confinement....out of sight, out of mind. The tragedy in Vietnam stems not only from the fact that the disease exists at all, but that treatment for Montagnards is almost non-existent. Qui Hoa's victims are Vietnamese; Bahnar lepers live in remote jungle villages, crawling on their hands and knees for a drink of water.

Throughout the immaculate grounds, Catholic statues stand guard; so also do the giant busts of men of medicine. The likeness of Dr. Hansen himself, the man who discovered the cure for leprosy, watches over the entrance to the hospital. Often, a visitor's initial impression is colored by the serenity of Qui Hoa. Resembling a resort more than it does a hospital, and having become a tourist attraction, it is hard to believe that in the midst of such beauty, Hansen's disease is alive and well. It is not going away. I had come to Qui Hoa in 1992 and been introduced to the heinous disease of leprosy. As painful as that experience was, my spirit remained intact due to the newfound friendship of a nun named Sister Luca. She was my reason for coming back.

Our car stopped at the front gate, where we paid a nominal fee to enter (both new additions since 1992). As we continued along the tree-lined gravel path that paralleled the deserted beach, I noticed a souvenir booth beneath the pine trees. "Can you believe that! This place is turning into a tourist mecca. I sure hope that the hospital is getting a cut." Marion breathed it all in, "It's beautiful here." "Yeah, it is, but the beast is lurking just beyond those walls." We were the only foreign visitors present.

An assistant led us into the director's office, Dr. Nguyen Quang Thuan. Originally from Hanoi, Thuan is a stout man, quite outgoing and easy to like. We did our best to converse for a few minutes....then Sister Luca arrived. She burst into the office, all four and a half feet of her, and threw her arms around me. We'd exchanged letters since 1992 and she knew we

were planning to visit....but her obvious joy and delight at seeing us warmed my soul. She and Marion behaved as though they had known each other their entire lives (Marion admitting later that Sister Luca could easily have been her Great Aunt Maine's sister so similar they were in nature, bustle and opinions). Thuan stood by respectfully and let us rejoice.

With Sister's ability to speak and translate the English language, we were able to conduct a brisk paced conversation over refreshments. When I handed Thuan my Coca-Cola business card he was impressed by my affiliation with such a popular and affluent company. Coca-Cola has a reputation in the world community for giving back to the people and so Thuan proceeded to make a plea for help. In 1995, a group operating out of Thailand, World Vision, had donated \$11,000 USD to Qui Hoa for the purchase of a new fishing boat. "We named it Qui Hoa 1," Dr. Thuan spoke with pride, "maybe Coca-Cola can buy us second boat?" Explaining in detail how another vessel would improve the lives at Qui Hoa, I suggested that he put a request in writing, an official document that I could use to solicit support. Thuan agreed, shook my hand and smiled triumphantly when I announced, "We could name it Coca-Cola 2!"

We followed Sister Luca out of the office, into the heat, and entered the convent next door. As we caught up on each other's news, I mentioned that we had attended Easter Mass in Pleiku. "You know," Luca began in a hushed voice, "Dr. Thuan was raised a Catholic but did not practice his faith for a very long time. On Easter, he received the Sacraments again for the first time in twenty years!" While there seemed to be a peaceful co-existence between Church and State at Qui Hoa, it greatly pleased her that the director had renewed his faith.

I reached into my backpack and removed an old leather purse. Inside was my gift for Luca...Rosary beads that had been mine for forty years. "I want you to have these Sister." She kissed the crucifix and blessed herself with the beads. I knew she'd take good care of them.

Our arrival on this exact day had caught Luca by surprise, and she apologized for not being better prepared. We assured her that an apology wasn't necessary....but that didn't stop her from serving a light lunch in the small dining area. A plate layered with lettuce and soft noodles, topped with two fried eggs, was delicious. We were left alone to eat and write an entry into the Qui Hoa visitor's log. Thumbing through the journal, which dated back a year, it was interesting to read passages from people all over the world....glimpsing their lasting impressions of Qui Hoa. One, in particular, caught my attention: "My father was a doctor with the army in Qui Nhon during the war, and often spoke of this place....for him, helping the people at Qui Hoa was the most rewarding work he ever did....I came to see for myself."

"Today we no have time for long visit. Tomorrow you come again, spend time on beach, see all Qui Hoa....and have lunch with Thuan." Marion had lobbied for the next day to be spent alone for our makeshift honeymoon, a day she had looked forward to for some time, and yet she could not refuse Sister Luca. "I really don't mind," Marion said on the way back to town

trying to hide her disappointment, “Can I at least spend one hour, *uninterrupted*, on the beach to finish my book?” I promised that we would, smiled inwardly, knowing that Qui Hoa and Sister Luca had reached into her heart....and found something.

Candy, Kids, And Another Feast

With time to kill before going back to the hotel, we had our driver drop us at the central marketplace, “We’ll meet you here in one hour,” hoping he understood the plan, “then we go to hotel.”

Markets throughout Vietnam are centers of activity, and can be a source of entertainment in themselves. This one was a square, three story complex, open air at the center where all the food and organic matter was displayed for sale in the courtyard, under giant tents. Most of the noise and flies were coming from there, so we walked upstairs to the second level. If one had the money, it was all here for the taking....malls back home would have trouble offering the wide variety of merchandise being sold at the Qui Nhon market. We paid 80,000 Dong (\$7.50 USD) for an obvious knockoff, LA Gear duffel bag and, right on schedule, caught our ride back to the Sea Gull.

Armed with a trusty map of the city, Marion and I felt confident about walking to our dinner date at the convent. The heat, however, was another thing. Once isolated from the sea breeze, the warmest part of the day descended upon us with a vengeance. Stubborn to the core, we snubbed the cyclo drivers outside the hotel who were eager for our business....and were hounded all through town by other idle drivers. Sticking to the shady side of the streets, we made steady progress. Even stopping to buy candy for the school children.

“Honey, we have time for a beer, care to stop over there on the beach for a cold one?” It didn’t take my wife long to find a couple of vacant beach chairs. The outdoor cafe was not more than one hundred yards down from “turd beach,” but the wind blew away any stench. 333 Beer over ice....who could ask for more.

“Where you guys from?” the question came from a young Vietnamese man who was having a drink. Surprised by his excellent use of English, we told him, then he volunteered, “I’m from San Jose, back here visiting some of my family.” Small world. “I think California has annexed Vietnam, or vice versa...” Bolstered by the cold drink and the chance meeting, we resumed our trek to the convent and cautiously picked the right alleyway....punctual for our 3:00 appointment.

Sister Jeanne was waiting and introduced us to the Mother Superior, Sister Francienne, a lovely woman in her fifties who understood much but spoke little English. She had opened the envelope containing the \$700 and was quite happy to welcome us into her world. With school still in session, we were given the tour, hundreds of dark haired, round-faced children

questioning the presence of the tall strangers with their eyes. Of course, we had the “equalizer”.....candy. Unabashedly, we bribed our way into their tiny hearts and loved every minute. The “sweet tooth” in Vietnam is alive and well!

The pastor, whom we’d met the prior afternoon, was joining us for dinner, but wasn’t scheduled to arrive for at least an hour. That left Marion and me with the two young, energetic nuns, Sisters Thao and Elizabeth. With enthusiasm and humor, we conducted an impromptu study hall where only one language was allowed, “Speak English!” was my command every time a Vietnamese word was uttered. Laughter all around....a common ingredient in convents, as we came to learn. Nearing the dinner hour, Sister Thao asked if we could find a book for her (Vision 2000: Praying Scripture in a Contemporary Way) when we got back home. Knowing that government scrutiny would make it impossible to mail a copy, I promised, “We’ll bring it to you.”

A bell summoned us to a round table where Jeanne, Francienne and the pastor were already seated. The younger nuns would act as waitresses, and were surprisingly pleased at being bestowed “the honor” of serving us. One of my all-time favorite movies is **Babette’s Feast**....and this meal was reminiscent of that film. It went beyond a mere dinner....it was an experience. Each of the many courses was delicious, and it became obvious that our host and hostesses had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to prepare the best Qui Nhon had to offer.

“How much did all this food cost?” The subject of money had been discussed earlier, and so the question was not inappropriate.

“About \$30 U.S. dollars,” Jeanne responded, looking embarrassed, “we never spend so much to have a meal like this.” Marion and I exchanged a knowing look...before we left that evening we would ensure that a generous donation was made. The money we had delivered to them from their sisters in the States had far better uses than to be spent entertaining the two of us.

We didn’t start walking back to the hotel until well past 8 o’clock, too full and too tired. “We keep filling these days up,” I held Marion’s hand as we made our way through the darkened streets and alleys, “even when we have nothing planned.” She understood, squeezed my hand.

Like cocoons, we huddled under mosquito netting back in our room, and drifted off to Chrong II.

Harold Melvin And The Gas Fumes

“*H*ow can this be our last day in Qui Nhon?” Our time in Vietnam was winding down and a sadness crept in, “Tomorrow we fly back to Saigon.....in a couple days, we’ll be back home....**I**F I get on the plane!” Marion took my idle threat with a grain of salt, all the while knowing one day I might just follow through on it.

Breakfast on the back patio was quite pleasant; again, we had the talkative waiter. A few European types lingered near, but we were content to speak only to each other, enjoying the coolness of the morning fog.

After breakfast we were greeted by a different driver, and unfortunately, a different car. As we began the drive to Qui Hoa for the appointment with quiet time on the deserted beach, followed by a special lunch, the engine began to sputter....then it died. Our driver motioned not to worry, got out and seemed to fix the problem. After two more stalls, it was obvious the car was no match for the mountain between Qui Nhon and Qui Hoa. Something was wrong with the fuel lines, ‘Do you smell gasoline?’ I asked, ‘hell, look down here....it’s gushing across the floor board into the back seat!’ That was enough for us.....we bailed.

While our fearless driver argued for us to reconsider, a Vietnamese man and woman on a motorbike stopped abreast of us. “Where are you from?” the young driver asked in perfect English. When I told him Southern California, he smiled and said “we’re from Los Angeles!” With his help, we explained to the driver our desire to walk to Qui Hoa, requesting that he pick us up at 3 o’clock *if* the car was repaired. “Have a good visit,” with that, the young couple sped off towards Qui Nhon. Before walking out of view, we looked back and saw our driver sucking gas through a small hose.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we heard a loud explosion any second....” There was still half a mountain to climb and only a few vehicles on the narrow road. “Just another part of the adventure I guess,” we remained lighthearted to the end.

Walking down the back side of the mountain was much easier; the road wound through the forest and resembled a nature path more than it did a road. Almost on cue, we both began to sing....completely off key....songs from one of our favorite 1970’s groups, **Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes**. “Wake Up Everybody....no more sleepin’ in bed....no more backward thinkin’, time for thinkin’ ahead....” With no one around to critique our musical ineptness, we let loose as loud as we could, uninhibited butchery of some fine tunes. It may have kept the tigers away. The words meaning more to us on that day than they ever had before, “The world won’t get no better....if we just let it be....Got to change it girl, just you and me.” If one thing can be said of our two weeks in-country, we never simply “let it be.”

Near the bottom of the mountain we rounded a corner, still carrying on like idiots, and passed a roadside stand. An elderly Vietnamese woman looked out and was clearly relieved that the source of the awful racket was only two crazy Americans. Embarrassed at having been

caught, we flashed smiles her way and sneaked by. Silence returned to the mountain. And there was no explosion.

R & R

The attendant at the Qui Hoa front gate was expecting us, and declined the entry fee (“you pay yesterday....”). While we walked, he peddled a rickety old bike very slowly and led us through the back side of the hospital grounds to the rear entrance of the convent. We were an hour late, explaining to Sister Luca, “we had to walk all the way.” Impressed with our “bravery,” she then relayed the day’s schedule: “you go to beach for one hour...I come get you at 11:00...we go on tour of Qui Hoa....then you have lunch with Dr. Thuan.”

It sounded good to me, so I turned to Marion. “I don’t care what we do as long as I have time on a beach, alone with you and my book!” Marion was quite adamant about that, “this is my honeymoon, damnit, and we’re going to do some relax.”

No argument from me. We walked through the pines, and emerged on a half mile of deserted, immaculate beach. Near the water’s edge, Marion sat down with her book, “The Venetian Mask,” enjoying the sun’s warmth on her legs and arms. “Mind if I go look for seashells for the kids?” I felt like getting wet. “Not at all,” she said, simultaneously sticking her nose back into the book.

Off to the right and about a hundred yards offshore was the Qui Hoa fishing fleet. There was very little activity this time of day. I pocketed a number of shells and pieces of coral, quite easy to spot in the clear surf. Occasionally, I’d glance up to check on my wife....our days had been so full....it was good to see her finally carve out time for herself, even if it was only for an hour.

Good to her word, and punctual, Sister Luca summoned us at precisely 11 o’clock. Inside the church she posed for some photographs, while dressed in her religious habit, looking very much at home. Back outside, she held a conical hat to shade herself from the sun and led us through Qui Hoa. Because it was nearing lunchtime, we didn’t see many patients; however, we did approach one house at Luca’s invitation. The family residing there had a relative living in America, and when asked “where do they live?” they produced an envelope showing a return address....San Jose, California. “It seems like everyone in this country has a friend or relative living in the States, no wonder there’s so many ties between the two countries.” I stated the obvious.

“It is time to join Dr. Thuan for lunch,” Sister led us to the administration office, “but I will not dine with you.” When asked why, she explained, “they drink much beer at lunch.” Disappointed at her decision, we would soon learn the reason for her discretion.

“Fifty!”

Dr. Thuan and five male members of his staff sat down with us at the Qui Hoa restaurant, outdoors overlooking the ocean. Despite a relaxed atmosphere, there was a distinct purpose for the hospitality we received....to continue the discussion about assisting the community of Qui Hoa through the boat project. Thuan had typed an official document, detailing the need for a larger fishing fleet and what it would mean to the patients there. I accepted the sheet of paper and carefully put it away, assuring all present that we would do everything in our power to help. With business out of the way, it became time to enjoy good company and good food.

Tiger Beer pounded faster than waves on the beach. I learned that Thuan was turning fifty in 1996, “So am I!” I exclaimed. Toast after toast, the battle cry for men reaching the half century mark... **‘Fifty!’** Empty cans collected in a large heap on the ground. We were bonding in the true sense of the drunken word. All the beer persuaded Marion and I to try the “baked birds,” tiny *full-bodied* birds in a bowl. Not for the squeamish, or the sober...one bite was enough. Overall though, the food was first rate.

During lunch, we noticed a tourist sitting off by himself, which got me curious. Thuan thought he was an American, so I approached him, “Where are you from?”

Learning he was from France, touring the countryside by himself on a motorbike, I was about to return to our table when he stopped me, “Can you help me order food? I cannot make myself understood to these people.” Seemed incredible to me that someone who was spending so much time in-country would be so totally inept. I ordered the shrimp and wished him well.

Dr. Thuan invited us to stay with him in Hanoi during our next visit to Vietnam; he was a very gracious host. “Coke 2!” were his parting words. After wishing him well and making donations to the hospital and the convent, we said our farewells to Luca, who’d been waiting for us. She forced us to pick out a few gifts in her shop, “for your children,” rings and necklaces made from seashells. We never seemed to have enough time to spend in one place....but it was time enough to make lasting connections.

Same car, new driver. Thuan had offered transportation, but we declined because of the “contract” we’d made in the morning. Luca closed the door behind us and I rolled down the window to take her hand. “God be with you.” We waved good-bye to an angel.

“Well, I don’t smell any gasoline,” was my only consoling remark. Our driver gunned the engine at the base of the mountain, and raced upward as fast as possible. Still, we stalled twice. “If we can just make it to the top, we can coast.” Neither of us felt like walking back to Qui Nhon; the beer and the heat had taken their toll. We crested the mountain and drifted back to town like a wave pulling away from the shore.

Dear America

“Let’s order a bottle of wine,” Marion sat across from me, relaxing in the Qui Nhon evening, “they have some French wine that’s not too expensive....afterall, it’s our last night here.”

I agreed with her, “We should toast all our friends.” It was the first red wine we’d had since leaving home, and it was a real treat.

And we almost made it through dinner by ourselves. About the time exhaustion set in for the night, we were joined by the two students from the university. The Sea Gull’s front desk had made it difficult for them, but they eventually convinced the clerk to let them visit us on the back patio. We didn’t want to be rude....they were such good kids....so we invited them to sit. A couple of Cokes and a hundred questions later, we said our good-byes, “We will always remember you,” one boy promised, shaking hands, slowly disappearing into the darkness on Nguyen Hue street.

Our room was equipped with a remote control TV....Vietnam has come a long way....and we usually turned it on to see what kind of programming was available. Mostly it was STAR Sports out of India (usually a cricket match), or the music channel, also from India. At first it was amusing, later boring. We fell under the mosquito net, and I pushed the POWER button, “Just to see what’s on....” The screen came to life, and I instantly recognized the program.....**Dear America, Letters Home From Vietnam.** This acclaimed documentary journal of my war was being shown in Vietnam. “Who could believe it?!” Who would?

When the phone rang, I nearly hit my head on the ceiling....we never got calls. The clerk at the front desk had some exciting news, “there is show about the war on television, I want to tell you.”

I had never told him that I was a veteran; he must have assumed it since we were Americans. My sense of equilibrium was shattered, watching the war from a hotel room in Qui Nhon in 1996. “Now that we have a living relationship with our Bahnar family in Chrong II, our

documentary could be called.... “Dear Vietnam, Letters Home from America.” Vietnam, our home too.

Beep Beep, Toot Toot....Where’s The Airport?

The hotel had notified us that the departure time for the Air Vietnam flight to Saigon had been changed....from 1:00pm to 8:45am....so we arranged for a car to meet us at 7:00am. Since I hadn’t flown out of Qui Nhon since 1968, I had no idea the closest airport was now in Phu Cat, a good hour’s drive from the Sea Gull. Driving in Vietnam will fray the nerves of anyone eventually....the trek to Phu Cat was the last straw.

Our newest driver was as nervous as the cow in Chrong II....accelerate, brake, swerve left...right, lean on the horn, two blasts at a time, just miss side-swiping an oncoming truck, run a cyclist off the road, hit the horn a few thousand more times....it was worse than being on the ocean during a storm. Marion began to develop motion sickness. I began to hate the driver. Our heads jerked like those plastic dogs you see in rear windows. All the while, the radio played at full blast.... American tunes performed by Vietnamese artists, terrible renditions, grated on us like fingernails on a chalkboard. “Turn off the fuckin’ radio!!” we wanted to scream....but the driver didn’t speak a word of English. “God, I hope this guy knows where he’s going....”

Somehow, avoiding any permanent damage, we stopped at the gate to the airport. The guard took pity on us and allowed our passage. When we stood before the primitive terminal, seemingly in the middle of nowhere... bags at our feet... the sense of relief, as the car disappeared from view, was tangible. “I feel like we just got off a boat.”

Activity in the terminal was slowly building, but none of the staff spoke much English. What I finally learned only added to my confusion. It seemed that the 8:45 flight was yesterday’s change....our flight was still set for 1:00. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but at least we’re out of that damn car....let’s go across the street to that outdoor cafe and have breakfast.” Marion took the news gracefully; she’d come to anticipate and accept the realities of Vietnam. Flow with it, but keep books and writing paper handy at all times.

A breakfast of eggs, French bread and coffee was excellent. “Even if we have to sit here for a few hours, it’ll be good to read and write letters,” Marion was still looking for the rest and relaxation part, “but it’s too bad they just ran out of coffee.” Only in Vietnam...

Bus loads of travelers began to arrive, so we went back into the terminal. I had gotten the wrong information earlier....the flight to Saigon was, indeed, departing at 8:45, and there was space for us. Back on schedule.

Climbing above the morning clouds, we looked back towards the mountains, and were quiet for a long time.

V. GETTING BACK

Vu Who?

Saigon. At Tan Son Nhut airport we searched for the smiling face of Mr. Dao, but were greeted instead by Mr. Vu Trong Nguyen, also a South Vietnamese veteran. “Before 1975....” so many dissertations began this way, “after 1975...” and ended with a tragic story.

An excellent communicator, Vu gained our trust from the start. He knew about the dresses we needed to pick up, and asked the driver to take us to the shop. Marion’s blue ao dai was beautiful, so was the pink one for Amanda. Even Vu was impressed, “You must wear it,” he smiled.

The staff at the Que Huong was happy to see us again, so were the cyclo drivers out front. This time we got a standard room right above the noise of Hai Ba Trung street. “It seems like a year since we were here,” Marion remarked as I tried to fix the air conditioner, “where has the time gone?” We’d felt this way back in Qui Nhon, but being in Saigon was the end of the line. Tomorrow morning.... “Let’s go outside.”

The afternoon was ours, alone in a city of 7 million....we walked until the heat forced us to stop for 333 Beers. The young couple, at a small shop where Marion had bought silk blouses two weeks before, perked up from their afternoon nap, and shared their wedding pictures with us. The clerk at the art studio still wouldn’t come down in price for the painting I wanted....so we passed on it. An elderly man saw us contemplating a restaurant whose menu was listed on the front window, and began a tirade, “Too fuckin’ expensive...I hate communists...communists make it tough to live!” jumped on his bicycle and sped off. He was right.

Two little children, brother and sister, swam naked in a public fountain and posed for our camera. There was always something going on in Saigon.

Vietnam News, April 12, 1996.....”HCM City Rocks With Live Musicians”

HCM City now boasts over 30 pop rock groups, each trying to put their own spin on this Western musical idiom to attract fans. The number of groups has mushroomed since the first Pop Rock festival organized in the city in 1991. New up-and-coming acts such as Den Trang (Black and White), Da Vang (Yellow Complexion), Ba Con Meo (Three Kittens), Buoï Sang

(Morning), Dai Duong (Ocean), and Mat Troi Be Con (Small Sun) have burst on the scene, rousing audiences tired of more traditional music.

Miss Saigon

“You look like a million bucks!” I stood back to get a good look at my wife dressed in her new ao dai, “heads are going to turn tonight, that’s for sure. Doubt if anyone has ever seen a 6-foot American woman dressed like that.” I had on my new “VC” pants that Nhung had made for me, and together we looked like expatriates....except that we knew better...our bags were already packed, waiting.

Karl and his lady friend, Phung, met us at the hotel for dinner. “Boy, you’ve come a long way from that Montagnard village! You clean up pretty good.” Karl never missed a chance to tease Marion. The waiters were visibly pleased to serve us, appreciating the respect we showed for their culture. For as quiet and polite as they had always been around us, we knew that when our waiter turned to Marion to tell her how nice she looked that evening, it wasn’t easy for him. Our meal lasted a long time....no one was ready to “give it up”.... “Hey, you guys wanta go downstairs and check out the dancin’?” I got complimentary passes at the front desk and proudly took my wife by the arm, escorting her into Saigon’s nightlife.

The dance club was located in the Que Huong basement. In near total darkness, we were guided to a front row table by a hostess and a tiny flashlight. The Vietnamese band was in full swing, too loud as usual, and not very good. We sipped our beers slowly, easing into the scene, working up enough courage to hit the dance floor. Young couples filled the circular floor, moving in unfamiliar dance steps. As each song began, dry ice “smoke” was blown onto the dance floor, creating a “fog” for the dancers. Damndest effect we ever saw. Two “Johnny Walker Scotch girls” stopped at our table offering a special price on their drinks, “They were doing this two years ago when I was here,” I yelled above the music.

Karl and Phung were the first to dance, Marion and I followed later when the band tried a tune we recognized. During the break, a pair of professional roller skaters burst onto the dance floor and entertained us with a number of tricks that all looked the same after awhile. The woman skated in circles, until her partner caught a hand or her waist and would then launch her above his head and spin. The crowd was appreciative, “Not something you would ever see in the States!”

The highlight came during the break when the sound system reverberated with a few oldies-but-goodies. “....Everybody’s doin’ the Locomotion....” We Americans sang at the top of our collective voices, mindless of who might hear.

Over the noise of the club, Marion and I said goodbye to the Chief. “Call me when you get home...and try to stay out of trouble.” We passed through the black light and the “fog,” aware that the dream was ending.

T-Shirts To Takeoff

After enjoying a final breakfast of pho at the Que Huong, we carried our bags into the lobby. Everything, even Kun’s crossbow, fit into the three duffel bags. There was time before Mr. Vu was scheduled to arrive, so we went out front to say goodbye to friends. The T-shirt woman (who’d sold us at least a dozen shirts) came by with her a young daughter. As they posed for the camera, I couldn’t help but tease her one last time, “You rob me blind!” At \$3.00 a shirt, the price had gone up by a dollar since 1994. “But now they made better, 100% cotton,” was her excuse.

The cyclo driver, whom I’d befriended back in 1992 (the last honest driver in my opinion), wanted to bust out of the “cyclo rut” by getting a drivers license....this would allow him to gain employment as a taxi driver (taxi’s are quickly becoming the ride of choice in Saigon). The problem was \$250. I’ve often told Marion, “There’s no way we can help them all.” Yet, I felt compelled to do something for this honest man. As we shook hands, I placed an envelope in his hand, wished him well, and turned back towards the hotel. His grateful smile lit up the busy Saigon street.

At least a hundred foreigners rode by the hotel in cyclo’s, heading downtown, part of a large tourist group....their drivers wore special blue caps signifying the attachment to the touring party. “Next time we come to Vietnam, let’s not stay in Saigon,” I thought out loud, “too many people.” Marion agreed, “Yeah, I’ve seen it. I don’t need to see it again.”

Although Vu was a bit late, he delivered us to the airport in plenty of time. Gracious and helpful to the end, Vu assisted with the bags and walked with us as far as he was allowed. A slight glitch at customs, due to a missing piece of paperwork, heightened the sense of adventure, but it was soon cleared up. In the modern waiting area, we spent the last of our Dong on two 333 Beers, raised the cans in a toast, “Goodbye Vietnam....until that time.”

And then, in the light of day, we went home.

Epilogue

The first thing we did after landing at LAX was call Wayne Truong to thank him and let him know that all his planning had paid off. Then, we began the process of getting our children back under one roof. Readjusting to our lives in Southern California, however, is taking time. It's so easy to feel distance between ourselves and those around us. We think it comes from "seeing" too much, not unlike a soldier returning from war....a strong sense of detachment

Because this story is a work in progress, it will never really end. There are, though, a few legacies that we want to mention:

- Kenh's wife, Yoih, had her baby. A healthy girl who was named Tan, after her grandfather Tee. Kenh and Bok Yong called to deliver the good news. The planting season was keeping them busy in the fields, but otherwise, all was well.
- Marion's stomach, after six weeks, has returned to normal.
- We've started the '**Boat Project**' in an effort to help Qui Hoa hospital. Proposals are being sent to a number of Foundations and interested parties.
- We received a letter and photograph from Sister Y Vang Beatrice in Kontum. In it, she wrote, "From the day that I met you here until now I always picture you before my eyes with all your happiness and joy.....I pray for you and your family every day, especially during mass, never missing once since I met you..."
- I met with Sister Josefa at the convent in Orinda, California, and delivered the letters and gifts from the nuns in Qui Nhon (Sister Jeanne). Surrounded by ten shy Vietnamese students who were aspiring to become nuns, I recounted the journey to Sister Josefa. After two hours of visiting, we went outside. I mentioned then how, as a young boy, I'd been the first gardener at the convent.
- Susan Little called. She had been a nurse at Minh-Quy hospital during the war, working with Hilary Smith. Hilary had sent her my phone number and recent letter. She called to introduce herself, learn more about our time in Kontum, and asked for advice on her upcoming return to Vietnam. We talked for an hour.
- We look at the photographs of our trip every day. If we think about our Bahnar family too hard, tears come. We miss them.
- Marion has a number of things that she doesn't miss at all: beggars on the Saigon streets, dogs with no names, elastic pink toilet paper, flies in the food, car horns, trash.

“You’ll never be the same.” Marion will tell you today that my prediction was 100% accurate.

We’ll Meet Again. Who Knows Where. Who Knows When.

“I wonder what they’re doing today.....”

Michael & Marion Little
18 Argento Drive
Mission Viejo, California USA 92692
949/460-0443
littlecrazy3@cox.net