A STEP BACK IN TIME

A “WALKABOUT” IN QUANG TRI, THUA THIEN PROVINCES, AND THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL—THE TORTUOUS ROAD TO GET THERE

by Harry C. Batchelder, Jr.

“Sometimes it is necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly.”
Edward Albee, “Zoo Story”

“Sometimes you lose your way, and life gives you a kick in the ass that lands you back on track . . . or in this case, back on The Trail.”
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UNSOUND BEGINNINGS

The misadventure began innocuously enough as I found myself sharing a ride from New Hampshire to New York City in the company of two local women, a reasonably well-preserved sixty-something brunette, and her sister. The brunette, as it turned out, was a woman on a mission; the sister was on board as her bat woman.

The Lady Shares Her Story

From the outset I was spared the burden of making conversation. More precisely, I was held captive to a personal narrative I found oddly fascinating. For close to five hours, “SI” (for “Spectacularly Inappropriate”, as I came to understand her to be) gushed obsessively about her supposedly “ex-” lover. He was “the love of her life”, “the most charming man in the world”, possessed of physical attributes and energies beyond those of mortal men; and (of greatest importance, as it turned out) he was “rich as Croesus.”

As the drive continued, SI proceeded to describe a relationship constructed on a not uncommon foundation: man and mistress shared a deep and profound love of material wealth. Their ten years together had produced a rich public display of vulgar excess, best exemplified by construction of “the Love Manor”, an ostentatious nineteen-room mansion the pair had built as a monument to their love. And lest the neighbors miss the point of erecting this supersized blight on the New Hampshire landscape, the lovers playfully conferred upon themselves titles of “native” royalty, none too subtly proclaiming thereby their superior position in the local social hierarchy. Even their two German Shepherds, a breed better suited to guarding prisoners at Dachau then greeting guests at anyone’s Love Manor, had been rechristened with royal titles of their own.

Concerning the allegedly former paramour himself, SI continued to unself-consciously describe an individual of such inherent vulgarity that I could only think of him as “NV” for “Naturally Vulgar.”

As SI prattled on I could hear my mother’s voice in the back of my mind cautioning me to steer clear of people who “gave themselves airs.” But I was too caught up in the momentum of the story to heed my mother’s words, or pay attention to the frantically flashing yellow lights that lined the roadway. Stubbornly ignoring all the warning signs and signals, I pressed ahead as though the road were clear and true.
A Visit to the Love Manor

As a couple, SI and NV oozed a private jet, a herd of show horses, and a fleet of sports cars, not to mention three mansions, including the aforementioned Love Manor. When, inevitably, I was led on a private tour of the Love Manor's grounds, SI proudly announced that it had taken two years to build, that it had cost untold millions, and that she and NV had been involved in every aspect of its design and creation.

Not versed in the finer points of architectural design and, perhaps, not with the fairest eye, this soulless monstrosity dumped into a former cow pasture reminded me of nothing so much as a Stalinist Georgian 1950s convalescent home for “security types.” I espied Yagoda, Beria and Yezhov gamboling on the lawn as they gazed longingly at a ghastly white metal Bauhaus-style storage shed, stretching out approximately a football field in length. SI declared rapturously that this year-round climate-controlled paean to bad taste housed her loved one's collection of more than two dozen sports cars. Leaving aside the mindless extravagance, it struck me that the sale of but one or two cars would feed the deserving poor of New Hampshire for a year or more.

It has been my experience that these ersatz baronial visions are not quite complete without a few life-size or larger ersatz Grecian statues punctuating the grounds, and, once again, the designers of this particular vision did not disappoint. SI led me to one such gigantic accent piece. She was a bit vague as to the statue's antecedents (Diana, perhaps?), but declared confidently that it had cost “gobs of money.” Unfortunately, the winters had not been kind to Diana, and she was tilting precariously. I did not have a firing table with me, but using dead reckoning, if Diana were launched from her present position, she would clearly impact the Bauhaus sports car shed—not such a bad thing to my way of thinking.

SI pointed out, almost lyrically, that the Love Manor was only one of the couple's love nests. NV had purchased two additional overstated homes, one of them on an island much favored by local “Lake Society” (or, to my mind, “chatter-box society.”) SI noted that, although a boat ride to their island property would take at most fifteen minutes, NV had purchased a seaplane. The island was peopled by the nouveau riche and self-styled “literati and glitterati”, and NV wanted to arrive in style, preferably just in time for sundowners with the Happy Valley crowd. I had visions of the Pan Am Clipper arriving in Lisboa circa 1939, although in this case without the classy passenger list. SI stated that she and NV were as one in believing that “a grand entrance is everything in life!”
During the tour, SI shared a touching tale concerning a recent addition to her paramour's sports car collection. NV had purchased an Aston Martin for an obscenely staggering sum of money but in doing so failed to realize that even he must take a six-hour lesson just to get the car off the lot. SI noted that NV had failed to coordinate his schedule with hers, causing her to miss “a most important” warm-up for “a most important” horse show. SI was most upset by NV's thoughtless inattention to her needs, and a lover's spat ensued. I can tell you that, by this point in the tour, issues of gross insensitivity were much on my mind. Get real—get a life—better yet, get a Zipcar or a dozen Zipcars. They are cheap. NV could purchase a fleet of Zipcars for what he paid for the Aston.

In hushed tones worthy of the divulging of a state secret, (but more likely dictated by the arrival of the Love Manor's Dominican overseer accompanied by one of the German Shepherds—what did the man think I was going to do, nick the olde familia plate?) SI murmured confidentially that NV possessed attributes well beyond his prodigious “native” talents. These, coupled with SI's declared enthusiasm for the many Shades of Grey, kept the lovers' pot-au-feu constantly on the boil. The amorous pair allowed it to be widely known that they were ripe and ready for action—so long as the action didn't startle the dogs, they were up for it.

Ruefully, SI acknowledged that, like all great men, NV was more than generous in sharing his talents. Word travels fast in small communities, in this case even faster, sped along by SI's ringing endorsements. NV was apparently human catnip, all that and quite a bit more, to the deserving and undeserving alike—un homme pour tout le monde. Some of his acrobatics were reportedly spectacular to behold—laissez les bon temps rouler!

As I exited the Love Manor's grounds, I could swear I saw Heathcliff in “native” garb serving those delicious little canapés to the same crowd that Tom Wolfe so exquisitely skewered in Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers. I violently dispatched Yagoda, Beria and Yezhov using a Makarov 9mm for good measure. It had been a most spiritually uplifting tour. Mont Saint Michel by seaplane—now that's something new!

**An Immodest Proposition**

SI remarked that with their private jet, herds of show animals, attendance at car and horse auctions for “over-the top” purchases of exotic autos and Tennessee Walking Horses, lofty status in chatterbox society, and "native" titles
of empowerment, life was very good. But, as is often the case in her lover's world, "very good" had become "not quite good enough"; and so, despite their numerous awards at horse shows, and their unapologetic self-indulgence in all manner of exotic "native" delicacies, after ten years of bliss ("was it really that long?") SI sadly acknowledged that the couple were apart, and "very much estranged."

It was here that SI announced gamely that she was launching a "Golden Age Sweepstakes" to see who would be the lucky man to succeed NV in her affections. Although not disclosed to me at the time, one such Sweepstakes had already taken place which, I later learned, had resulted in disastrous and somewhat scandalous consequences for the contestant. [N.B.: it is my considered opinion that, if the collective emotional baggage of the parties involved were to be lined up at the Equator, the results would circumnavigate the globe twelve times.] SI's sister thought I would make a good if not ideal candidate and, since NV wasn't around, what the hell, SI needed some entertainment. Looking back, I can only conclude that this was the moment when my lifelong competitive streak took off at full gallop, leaving my better judgment eating its dust. I looked up to the emotional hills and mountains, and, accepting SI's repeated assurances of deep estrangement, I agreed to enter the Sweepstakes. I subsequently found out that on the very day I joined up, SI contacted NV and informed him that she would now be seeing me. I wonder, why would she do that? As they say in my neighborhood, "calentar la plaza!"

According to SI, she had "serious issues" with NV, and they were not on speaking terms. However, soon after I entered the Sweepstakes, and apropos of nothing, SI told me (how exactly had she gotten this message, by semaphore?) that NV was leaving a hopping European capital where he had a baronial flat complete with servants to return to one of his stateside mansions (this one located three miles from her own modest home) to enjoy the balmy New England winter weather. Finding myself put in play as a cat's paw did not produce a pleasant feeling. However, given everything I had been told about the depth and breadth of their separation, I decided to stay the course. I looked up to the emotional hills and mountains one more time, and I still did not believe that they could get their joint artillery up there. For a while, SI's assurances came like raindrops at the beginning of the monsoon. However, soon after his return to the neighborhood, references to NV began to clutter her musings: "how charming", "how debonair", and "sure there are some blemishes, but boys will
be boys.” I heard the words but chose to ignore the clicking sticks, and I soldiered on.

New Year’s Eve in New York City

Under the right circumstances, New York City provides the ideal romantic setting, never more so then during the holidays. SI was coming to visit her son and I planned on spending New Year’s Eve and Day with her. On the afternoon of New Year’s Eve, SI and I had lunch with her son and friends at Rolf’s, which was decked out to the hilt with German holiday decorations; then off to MOMA and the Diego Rivera murals for a bit of revolutionary top-up; and then on to Lincoln Center to see “Blood and Gifts”, a J.T. Rogers play that chronicles the development of a C.I.A. case officer in the First Afghan War. I attempted to introduce SI to the role of a case officer, explaining that in the course of the play she would undoubtedly see manipulation, lying, deceit and betrayal, all for the “greater good” (irony unintended.) SI appeared pre-occupied; it was becoming clear that her attention was elsewhere.

During the play SI received a cell phone call and left the theater for ten minutes. When she returned, she was obviously not back in the theater but somewhere very far away—life was beginning to imitate art. I admire a good psychological operation as much as the next man, and this one was done beautifully; I just didn’t care for the fact that it was being done to me. I almost, but not quite, wanted to congratulate them on the timing—how did NV know we would be in the theater? As Mao teaches, good intelligence is everything!

Although the rest of the evening was intended to be light fun ending up on the Brooklyn Bridge at midnight, I might as well have been with Madame Nhu. SI informed me that she must return immediately to the apartment, and our parting at 1:00 am was about as romantic as a beer-fueled freshman fumble at the dormitory door.

DÉNOUEMENT

“Salute to Vienna” was for years a Christmas gift to me from my late sister—the event is upbeat, romantic and a special way to start the New Year. Le Colonial, for those who love Southeast Asia, is one of the most romantic restaurants in New York, a step back into a 1920’s planter’s house in Cochin China. It was my intention to ask SI during dinner at Le Colonial to travel with
me to Vietnam where I hoped to exorcise some demons, the Lao and Cambodian issues having previously been laid to rest. What could go wrong? Plenty!

The concert was enjoyable. How can anyone screw up Strauss waltzes and polkas? Nevertheless, SI appeared out of sorts, and complained that the music was “tricycle” music. I had never heard Strauss put down quite that way, but even I, belatedly to be sure, was beginning to recognize that a sudden slide into ice cold emotional waters might be something other than invigorating.

The walk from Lincoln Center to Le Colonial skirts the southern extremity of Central Park, and is generally pleasant. During the walk SI said little but, when she did, it was in keeping with the festive spirit of the day. She carelessly announced that when “they” came to New York, “they” always came on NV’s private jet for shopping sprees and time to recover from the plastic surgeries that fed his vanity. Naturally, whenever they were in New York they stayed at the Waldorf, with their personal limousine on call to take them to all the latest “in” and “hot spots”. SI cheerfully described the splendors of The Waldorf Astoria lobby where she and NV would relax while they waited for their limo. As we were going to pass the hotel on our way to the restaurant, she generously offered to give me a tour. I politely declined the invitation and looked to see if she was wearing a sensitivity meter; she appeared to have left it at home. It would soon become clear that this was not an oversight.

The Fog of Love and War

I recognize heavy duty incoming and this was not the 75mm and 105mm stuff of Dien Bien Phu. This was the 130mm, 152mm, Khe Sanh stuff coming straight in from Ca Roc in Laos, all of it expertly laid down and not fired for effect. I got the message loud and clear, and I decided it was going to be interesting to see how they pulled it off. I didn’t have long to wait!

Le Colonial is frequented by, among others, individuals who, as identified by Jean Larteguy in his book The Centurions, have been infected and emotionally seduced by “la fièvre jaune” of Cochin China. Put simply, Le Colonial is a most romantic and nostalgic haven for those seeking refuge from a blustery, cold, rainy New Year’s Day. Me—I was just frantically trying to find an emotional fox-hole—I never had a chance! For those of an operational bent, almost all of the seats face the door with a wall at your back. I had barely ordered drinks when SI opined again that her ex-lover was “the most charming man in the world.” She wondered aloud why “they”, in their Waldorf Astoria salad days, had not
discovered Le Colonial. Silently I gave thanks that Le Colonial is not listed in The Big Apple Guide for the Terminally Avaricious! The conversation and the temperature at the table felt like naked al fresco dining in Sapa in January. I could tell that SI was not feeling la fièvre; in fact, she was somewhere between Mars and Uranus heading out. I paid the bill and ventured out into the cold, wet night, to walk the thirty-three blocks to her son’s apartment.

During the rainy walk, SI waxed lyrical about the ten years of bliss she spent with her former love—selective amnesia was much in play during this soliloquy. One wonders, just what was the attraction—or does one? For close to a city mile I was lectured about the joys of the obscenely rich life. This was Thorstein Veblen on acid! The emotional 130mm and 152mm fell like driving rain, and then for good measure she added Willie Pete every third round. The tubes were glowing and burning up!

Fiercely, a word SI adores, I was attacked for my scandalous lèse-majesté in pointing out that if NV had, to put it charitably, “strayed”, there were better than track odds he would “stray” again—and, by the way, nobody’s getting any younger. Some of these “falls from grace” were widely known and quite close to home. SI’s retort was that “bad boys are more interesting and fun.” True enough, perhaps, but for how long until the sharing act wears thin—ten years is a long haul. There must have been other benefits. SI “fiercely” defended NV’s “style”, “dash”, “flair”, “savoir-faire” and another trait that decorum prevents me from mentioning. At this point, I had a few adjectives and even some choice nouns ready to throw into the mix, but, reminding myself I was a gentleman, I chose to exercise restraint.

Proudly, perhaps believing she had coined the phrase, SI declared that she and NV “were made for each other.” At that moment, in 3D no less, a vision of Tristan and Isolde flashed before my eyes. By the time I reached Twenty-fourth Street and Second Avenue, mahquibs, phibobs, nats in Converse Red Stars, trolls, jinns, a veritable Murderers’ Row of evil animist spirits were furiously gnawing at my heart and ass. All of the members of SEATO were there (except for the Pakistani jinns who were delayed clearing customs at JFK.) I knew if the “Day of the Dead” crowd arrived, I was going down hard.

For the next ten minutes, this gay miasmatic carnival of evil spirits was going full bore, the spectacle orchestrated, and I date myself with this one, by the Joshua Light Show. I spied Veblen accosting the few passersby, proclaiming that he had joined the “Chicago Boys” and was now a “supply side” devotee. No one
appeared amused or interested. My last stronghold against vulgar materialism had been overrun.

My reverie was interrupted by SI who indicated that, because of my scandalous affronts to her ex-lover, she was dismissing me from the “Golden Age Sweepstakes.” I need not escort her the one remaining block to her abode nor accompany her to the bus station on the morrow. Although still reeling from the emotional carpet bombing, I replied that a gentleman does not leave anyone on a New York street corner on a cold and rainy night. SI answered, with just a whiff of classless arrogance, “have it your own way.” Although I admired the pithiness of the retort, truth be told, I thought it a bit lacking in grace, and perhaps even bordering on the inconsiderate.

During the one block walk, SI was still “fiercely” blazing as to my lèse-majesté in pointing out certain obvious truths about her ex-lover. She then heroically announced that her “true love”, and here she dropped all pretense as to the real status of the parties, had, upon his return from Europe, immediately and repeatedly pledged, garanties en béton, his “eternal love”, promising that once they were together in one of his three baronial homes, all would be right with the world!

I have never known “eternal love”, nor do I at this late date ever expect to experience it. However, in SI and NV’s case, no matter how delusional the concept, I finally grasped that it was not a belief to be trifled with. Time for me to withdraw, and best to leave the field gracefully. Our parting that evening was subarctic—good manners only move people with manners—il faut en finir!

**The Dense Fog Lifts**

At this point, friendly furies took pity upon me. Earlier in the day, before the Waldorf Astoria fusillade, I had bought SI a piece of spray paint street art which she left at the restaurant—this oversight was to have unimaginable consequences for me. I returned to Le Colonial to retrieve the drawing, and as I entered the restaurant, Larteguy’s “yellow infection” embraced me and the temperature on all fronts rose considerably. Feeling like a damn fool and a lot worse, I paused to take stock. Although found wanting in the “Golden Age Sweepstakes,” emotionally battered, and facing the despair that haunts defeat, I was nonetheless still standing. Thus did the knocked-down-three-times-get-up-four phoenix raised its head, as I closed out what up to that point had been a psychological
descent into the abyss. The true adventure was about to begin, as I prepared to return to the land of mental and physical anguish that still haunted my soul.

Given that the recent mardi gras of manipulation and deceit had not actually killed me, it was now time to challenge myself physically and mentally to see if having survived the ordeal had made me stronger. As I left Le Colonial that evening, I took, as Mao would say, my first tentative step on a long journey, long overdue.

In Kaneto Shindo’s 1960’s film “The Naked Island”, a hauntingly tragic exploration of the savagery and despair of Japanese peasant life, there is no spoken dialogue. Allow me to assure everyone that the cab ride to the bus terminal—sorry baby, no private jet—made “The Naked Island” look like a simultaneous three-ring spelling bee. To enable SI to return as expeditiously as possible to the land of “native” royalty and “eternal love”, I arranged for her to take an earlier bus. Speaking as a gentleman, I wished SI and her lover every happiness and I meant it. Who knows, perhaps SI’s “fierce” defense of the spiritual as well as material benefits of vulgar wealth had made a true believer out of me!

I wait in vain for a thank you for the weekend which I still thought was a triumph of planning, even though it lacked a certain something in execution.
The Struggle to Find “The Correct Line”

Over the next several weeks I renewed my intellectual friendship with Mao, On Guerilla Warfare; Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom; Fall, Street Without Joy; and Larteguy, The Centurions. Locating up-to-date maps of Vietnam’s Central Highlands was a problem, and the New York Public Library Map Room had nothing on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Google Earth came much into play. The game was beginning to shape up.

Mao believes that in order to have a sharp mind you must “savage” (his word) the body, and so I set about to do just that, or at least build up enough endurance to walk twenty-five miles a day. I joined the Harlem YMCA as one of the few, if not the only, geriatric white males looking to become part of the gym’s “animal kingdom.” No free weights, thank you. A good friend had laminated an image of the grotesque Stalinist arch at Lao Bao as a reminder to me to press on when I faltered on the treadmill.

Once the regulars determined I was not a geriatric undercover cop, I was treated with the utmost courtesy and respect; once they saw the picture of Lao Bao and understood what I was planning, several of the older guys urged me to extend the workout to include a series they called “funning.” The routine involved crunches, low rowing, and lats, and utilized every machine for developing the upper body. They suggested this program might come in handy should any trouble arise during the “walkabout”.

I continued my workouts, the pounds started to come off, and eventually I could hold my own—the “savaging” was working. As I approached peak fitness for a man in the prime of his seventy-sixth year, I thought of Mao’s highly touted propaganda plunge into the Yangtze River. The seventy-two-year-old Chairman paddled in circles and floated on his back for a little more than an hour among the bobbing heads of countless cheering comrades. I would be hiking solo on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, eight to ten hours a day, without so much as an “attaboy” from the sidelines.

In another development for life-long use, I learned that if one plays the “Internationale” five times back-to-back, you can handle anything the bastards throw at you. As my endurance increased I could feel myself getting pumped up mentally as well. I grew impatient to go—the sooner the better. Brushing off the
last remaining crumbs of emotional stupidity, I bid farewell to the sorry smell of second-hand curry, and reset my sights on Saigon.

**Sundays with Micheline Anne**

For the very early advisors to Southeast Asia the conflict was intense, personal and, on occasion, rewarding: Never to be forgotten, you were there “doing good!” In his personal narrative, *The Village*, Francis J. (“Bing”) West exquisitely details the wrenching panoply of emotions experienced by young U.S. servicemen in the carnival of death atmosphere of Vietnam. Inevitably, despite the environment and circumstances, friendships developed, and relationships, intimate and unexpected, took root.

As a disciple of Lawrence, you never slept with the women in the country to which you were assigned—never, ever. This prohibition constitutes madness for many, but was not an issue for me; besides, my heart was elsewhere.

By chance, I met the mother of a thirteen-year old young lady of mixed French and Vietnamese parentage. Micheline Anne was not terribly attractive physically but possessed of a universe of innocence and class; I saw in her a light that would one day travel round the world. Because the air was still French, she had not yet been ostracized, which, as the war dragged into decades, would become the fate of thousands of mixed children. Her father, a French legionnaire, had abandoned the family; her mother, occupied with “other things” (charitable words) had little or nothing to do with her. Micheline Anne spoke broken English, was hard pressed to find the money for school, and was condemned to a life of indifference or worse with no hope of escape. Enter the big blue-eyed men from the East. Back to school, (Catholic—what else) and a friendship was born that burns as brightly today as it did fifty-three years ago.

Each time the men from the East returned to Saigon we sojourned to the sidewalk café on the terrace of the Continental Hotel. Three strapping Americans and this teenager in her Catholic schoolgirl’s uniform—not your everyday assembly. The ritual was fixed: Cokes all around—no Perrier for this crowd. Micheline Anne, very much the lady, held court—an island of innocence surrounded by a sea of violence, chaos, and deceit. The relationship and emotions that resulted were intense. I can only compare them to those portrayed in the 1962 Serge Bourguignon film “Sundays and Cybele”, which, when I first saw it, wounded me beyond despair for months if not years.
Micheline Anne’s English improved, her grades soared. I told her if she did well I would send her to the Sorbonne where she could learn to be a revolutionary and return to become the power behind the throne. I would have found the money somehow. The revolutionary part I would have soft-peddled, but then again, maybe not. Although the rendez-vous were not all that many, people were watching, and the “struggle” soon got very personal.

Our team returned late one evening and, as she adored ice cream, I gave Micheline Anne some piastres for the next day. She and I said our goodnights, and went our separate ways. Back at the Continental as I got ready for bed I remembered a note I had received several months earlier. It had been cut out from a newspaper and read “You shall know pain.” I was soon to learn the extent of the pain.

Early the next morning I heard an explosion outside in the block just down from the Continental, and I knew to a certainty what had happened. The ice cream and candy store opened early and when I hit the pavement I saw Micheline Anne, her body half in the street and half on the sidewalk. What was left of her head rested in a pool of dirty water that remained where the street cleaners had passed by her lifeless form. The Vietnamese were stepping over her. I saw the bloody piastres in her hand, and the light went out in a great portion of my heart, never to be lit again.

Her mother, quite properly and I did not fault her, said this would not have happened if Micheline Anne had not associated with us. She wanted nothing to do with the cremation, and when I returned the ashes to her she placed them in a closet, not on an altar. She summarily dismissed me. I had it coming, but there was nothing she could do to punish me that remotely approached what I would do to myself in the coming years. I never heard from her again and I completely understand why.

I have been told, professionally, that Micheline Anne’s murder has more than colored my views on many things; a Russian doctor, no less, recommended that I return to Vietnam to “bring closure.” I don’t understand words like “closure”. Why would I want to “move on” from someone beyond special, whose memory endures unchallenged in my heart’s embrace. In my mind, so long as I am alive to remember her, Micheline Anne is immortal; when I die, she dies. I would gladly give up a thousand lesser memories to sit with her again, sipping Coca Colas on the terrace of the Continental Hotel, and savor those halcyon days,
all too few, when a big blue-eyed man from the East and a French-Vietnamese young lady, discarded by her mother, fused an emotional bond beyond steel.

Get over it—no—I wanted to meet up with Micheline Anne and start all over—closure be damned! What do those Russians know anyway! Emotionally dead, thanks to the Five Year Plans. Still, the doctor was one of the very few who wholeheartedly supported, no, encouraged the “walkabout”; where others were horrified by the idea she was gung ho. I must learn to cut her a little slack.

**Why The Ho Chi Minh Trail? Why Not Governor’s Island?**

By way of background, military intelligence schools in the 1950s and even to this day tend to turn out “bean counters”, which totally ignores the political aspects of revolutionary war. This is not meant to fault them, as they see their mission as one of “pure intelligence”, and to slip into that “other world” is to risk corrupting their mission. The Pathet Lao/Viet Cong crowds (not to mention whatever Khmer mass murderers were around at the time) were not burdened with any such constraints. As noted by Larteguy, and also by Fall in *Street Without Joy*, our adversaries early on embraced the concept that military tactics are of secondary importance—politics will always take precedence. We have yet to master an effective response to this essential hierarchy.

Additionally, the boys in black had a broadly based intelligence net spread throughout “the masses” which provided their operations with up-to-the-minute intelligence of such a kind and volume as to severely cripple counter-operations. Mao preached, and these were not abstract concepts, that theirs was a war of “movement, alertness, mobility and attack.” Lest there be any doubt about the wisdom of this approach, consider that the nightmare effect of Tet has never been completely exorcised from the psyche of the United States military. Fall’s later chapters vividly illustrate how we were caught in the same trap as were the French, indeed even on the same roads!

In his brilliant introduction to Mao Tse Tung’s *On Guerilla Warfare*, Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith sets out in two succinct paragraphs America’s reliance on a worship of technology in missiles, bombs, and the big bang for the buck. The crowd in black relied on rigorous discipline, up-to-the-minute intelligence, and a clear picture of what they were fighting for. This is, admittedly, a gross oversimplification of the rights and wrongs in the conduct of the war, but as Fall’s early insights teach, America ignored certain precepts of “revolutionary warfare” that ultimately led us to the embassy roof.
In the 1950s, a miniscule minority of intelligence officers began to grasp the impact that the tactics of revolutionary war might have on the Army, the Navy and, to a much lesser extent, the Air Force. The minority voices were muted and their opinions were never sought. Although they took a pounding in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, these officers found intellectual comfort in the actions and teachings of Major General Edward G. Lansdale, USAF. The boys in no-rank khaki slowly emerged from these humble beginnings. Militarily, despite fierce resistance, USAF special operations squadrons were getting ready to be birthed in the not-too-distant future.

These special ops officers slowly trickled into Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, and I was invited to join. I have never been invited to Governor’s Island, nor do I expect to be—a small price to pay for social integrity. Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are!

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was General Giap’s logistical lifeline. We bombed it, sprayed it, mined it, sensored it, tried to build a fence, tried everything but boiling and fricasseeing it, and we failed dismally to stop the flow of supplies. An estimated 600,000 went down the trail and 200,000 came back. As terrain goes, it is not much of a challenge, but if you do it solo with a rucksack and a jackknife it can get interesting. According to the boys at the Lonely Planet nobody had ever walked or tried to walk the trail, because for long stretches “there is nothing down there” and no place to stop. A perfect SAS problem course. Time to “ride the tiger” on The Trail.
A STEP BACK IN TIME

Flying the Steel Bird

Given the nature and length of the trip it was not too difficult to pack; the weight of the historical emotional baggage was far more troubling. Haunted by having to deal with fifty-two years of neglect, I cannot sleep the night before my flight. Sunday morning to the gym, and I break four miles an hour on a 5% incline. Cold showers galore, then into the steel bird for a thirty-three hour joy ride to Saigon. A close friend gave me Nelson DeMille’s novel Upcountry and as I read it I realized just how thoughtful a gift it was. I would be walking in many of the same areas, such as A Loui and its environs.

I had a window seat and as we descended into Saigon, I immediately noticed that the city’s urban sprawl had passed Tan Son Nhut. A huge golf driving range—golf driving range?—loomed into view. We greased runway 25R and, as we turned on the taxi way, eighteen black lichen colored helicopter revetments loomed with landing circles still clearly visible. As we passed in review, they were at attention like a Praetorian guard for a vanished “Contain Communism” empire. In the old days Tan Son Nhut was “spooky” with frenetic activity; four of the hangers remained, but not the craziness. As we turned to the docking ramp I saw, just outside the airport, a monstrous Corona Lite advertising banner draped on a new apartment building—it had to be one hundred feet of flag—welcome to globalization.

The Return of the Native

Major Reginald Hathorn was, in 1968, an O-2 driver in Vietnam. In his 2008 book Here There are Tigers, he mentions his early upbringing in Louisiana, and writes that when he first arrived at Tan Son Nhut, Vietnam smelled, to him, “like a rattlesnake.” One of Hathorn’s first missions was to bring in “fast movers” to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a portion of which I was to walk on the first day of my “walkabout.”

My initial arrival experience differed from Hathorn’s, because as a teenager I helped my father work the most spectacularly unsuccessful dairy farm in the history of the world. There is no greater joy imaginable for a teenage boy than getting up at 4:30 in the morning at ten below zero in four feet of snow, opening the door to a tie-up where thirty-two head of cattle have been doing
their business for the last twelve hours, and having to clean up the mess with no mechanical scuppers!

Do this for a while and you will understand why Mao, in the previously referenced essay, observed that “only the men of the North are able to lie under arms and meet death without regret.” And he never experienced my father’s tie-up! Compared to the tie-up, Saigon in the late ’50s smelled to me like a Givenchy perfume factory.

Based on my initial observations from the air that Levittown had snuggled up to Tan Son Nhut, I figured that if I got bored, I could hit a few golf balls and down some Corona Lites. Then the plane door opened and it was air conditioning all the way. I thought I might be in for some fun at Immigration, and I was not disappointed.

My immigration officer was, I guessed, in his late thirties, and a sharp dresser with well-shined shoes. Reviewing my travel history he asked, in perfectly unaccented English, what I was doing in Burma (not, I noted, Myanmar) before it got trendy, and why I had visited Laos twice, coming in from Chiang Rai. I told him I was interested in “native textiles.” By this time he was joined by his supervisor, a bit older, again speaking perfect English, and sporting an equally sharp uniform and shoes. It was the two fairly recent Cambodian visas that caught their attention—I decided to get in the game.

I told them that, to my mind, 2,000 Chinese visitors a day to Siem Reap “lowered the tone of the neighborhood.” On a roll, I opined that it was a good thing the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia to teach the murderous Khmers a lesson, but the Khmer Rouge were still running the country—they had just put on suits. During this latter paean I detected a slight twitch around the supervisor’s mouth but I was mostly locked on his eyes. He then handed me back my passport with a “welcome back to Vietnam.” I had no prior Vietnamese visas in my passport—touché! With this for starters I knew my stay was going to be interesting.
The Airport Road to Economic Perdition

I climbed into a cab and, within one hundred yards of the entrance to the airport, I was floored. On both sides of the road, small entrepreneurial shops—machine shops, motorcycle repair shops, small offices, and clothing stores—were humming. Their density quickly increased, and by the time we had gone two kilometers it was wall-to-wall small enterprise. To my mind, there was no way this fit into any Five-Year Plan. As we drove further towards downtown, small, then larger tasteful office buildings began to appear and, although it was late morning on a business day, swarms of light-cc motorcycles operated by neatly dressed men and women began to clog the roads. Further on, more steel and glass appeared, as did more motorcycles. The road was a central economic planner’s worst nightmare. As we hit downtown Saigon, the French ambiance was almost obliterated by new development.

Arriving at the Continental, I looked over to the block where Micheline Anne’s murder had taken place. The block, everything, and I mean everything, including the sidewalks, had disappeared. A sign proudly announced construction of a luxury hotel, magnificent luxury condominiums, a spa, and an underground parking garage. I found myself thinking about the water table in Saigon and the money it will take just to build the garage in a city that hardly needs more cars.

The Continental, the grand dame of traditional Saigon hotels, subjected as she was to the construction symphony next door, must always be aware just how precarious life is under Red capitalism. As I entered the hotel I glanced over at the construction site and vowed I would somehow get inside. I had been back for more than an hour and everywhere I looked I saw clothing that could have been bought at a southern California strip mall; not an ao dai in sight, not even at the reception desk. The physical reminder of my despair had been vaporized, and the soft edges of Saigon replaced by hard steel and concrete. The economic aspirations
of Deng Xiaoping had found fertile soil in Saigon, and they were flourishing. I checked in, immediately went to the front veranda, ordered a Coke, and, looking every bit the “ugly American”, tried to get a handle on the changes all around me.

It is generally my practice, if at all possible, to walk a city, and I immediately headed for the War Remnants Museum. I took my time and I was more than impressed. The parks were clean, no litter on the streets, no beggars, everyone neatly dressed. The palace and every other public building were in tip-top shape. The traffic was chaotic, but with none of the vicious New York City top-dog aggression. To my mind, whatever they were doing had made the city livable and aesthetically pleasing. Even the swarms of motorcyclists appeared to get along reasonably well with each other.

The War Remnants Museum is by far the most popular museum in Saigon. The U.S. takes some body blows here, with static displays of our various aircraft and helicopters, and a “daisy cutter” thrown in for good measure.

As I entered the museum’s grounds I was pleased to see the iconic O-1 Bird Dog front and center, and the sight made me proud to be a Bluesuiter. Ravens, perhaps the greatest group of aviators ever assembled, (and who, as befits those who fly by ailerons and are required to jink every thirty seconds just to stay alive, possess an elan the uninitiated cannot even imagine) had christened the O-1 “the mightiest fighting airship in the world.”

As I toured the galleries, I noticed the conspicuous absence any exhibits referencing the 6,000 Vietnamese who were methodically listed, hunted down and murdered by the Viet Cong during their occupation of Hue. Despite some subsequent political differences, the Vietnamese were, on this occasion, aping their murderous Khmer neighbors.

On the far left as one enters the museum are a series of shops offering fake Zippo lighters from many of the war years. The lighters display the unit designator on the front, and on the back pithy G.I. philosophies which offer a glimpse
into the mind of the owner and the demons of the times. They illustrate despair: “You can fuck with the troops, but you cannot fuck with time”; humor: “If I had a home in Hell and a farm in Vietnam, I would sell both”; defiance: “Kill them all; let God sort out the innocents”; and profound insight: “Life is sweet for those who have fought for it, for life has a flavor the protected will never know.” I purchased the last of these and carried it with me everywhere.

Back to the hotel. My first impressions of Saigon were confirmed: a spanking clean city, little poverty, and a well-fed, well-dressed populace. Clearly this was more than trickle down Red capitalism at work. I was impressed, but I had not yet seen the countryside.

By chance, an acquaintance of mine had met a couple from Vietnam while they were in New York. They graciously agreed to meet me for dinner to discuss the projected trip and introduce me to the “new” Vietnam. They chose the restaurant and it was my lucky day on all fronts. She was your basic ten-star Vietnamese Cambodian knockout—charming, smart, worldly, in short, a treasure. He was a photographer lately returned from Burma, handsome, charming and worldly—in short, an incandescent couple. Any reticence between us dissolved instantly when the menu was opened. To share the unique hospitality of Restaurant Bobby Chinn the proprietor’s rules follow in their entirety:

**Restaurant Bobby Chinn**

“In the unlikely event of a terrorist hostage-taking situation in this restaurant, please DO NOT call the Russian Special Forces. I would rather be pecked to death by a duck.”

**Restaurant Bobby Chinn Rules:**

**Introduction to Menu**

“This restaurant is an Abba, Kenny G., and Gypsy King Free Zone. We also refuse to play any bands with more than one lead singer or matching sweaters. Female Teenyboppers dressed like whores with synchronized dancing are also banned! To preserve the dining experience, we request that you are well versed in mobile phone etiquette (SILENCE). All our Poultry & Meats are Halal or as close as it gets to Kosher . . . Except the pork, of course! None of the staff were harmed (physically) to bring you quality food and service tonight, or
ever. Children’s menu available upon request and duct tape is available for hyperactive children. Please do not ask us to split the bill other than by a number. We do not do ‘she had this, and I had 1/2 of that’ very well. Please note that we have smaller portions at the same prices for Anorexics and those aspiring. Also this restaurant is non-smoking, please smoke at outside, feel free to fart there also. Thank you.”

SEA
Cold-blooded seawater creatures that didn’t have a chance or even a clue!

Crispy Skinned New Zealand Salmon on Wasabi Mashed Potatoes, Vegetables, Ginger Demi Glace 456

AIR
But they spent a little too much time on land, and not enough in the air.
Then there is Bird Flu . . .
And you want to know why it’s called foul?

Apple Smoked Duck Breast with Black Sticky Rice, Baby Bok Choy & Pomegranate Duck Jus 600

Half a Rotisserie Chicken served with Root Vegetables & Mixed Green Salad 378

LAND
Dumb cows that thought they were living in India or something.
Lambs that had no idea about Islam

The Wagyu Burger, Mixed Greens & Truffle French Fries 550
Red Wine Braised Lamb Shank with Cous Cous 640
Filet Mignon 696

SIDE DISHES
We tell you “You are beautiful” all night long (includes a signed copy of the menu.) 126
Grapes Wrapped in Goat Cheese with a Pistachio Crust 264
Wasabi Mashed Potatoes 130  Truffle Mashed Potatoes 306
Mac & Cheese, BBQ Pork Ribs with Asian Slaw 252
Mashed Potatoes, French Fries, Edamame 180
Nachos 276
For the next four hours they jenned me up as to the new Vietnam—both were supporters of the trip and the conversation was stimulating and beyond. They illustrated the economic development of the country with the touching story of a young Vietnamese entrepreneur who purchased a Lamborghini. Because of his slight stature, the driver’s side had to be modified and a special team was flown from Italy to Vietnam to customize the seat. This was accomplished and he set off for Hanoi on Route 1. However, due to the poor condition of the road (torn up from overloaded trucks) and the car’s low clearance, it was necessary to have a tow truck accompany the car all the way to Hanoi and back. It took the young man three days to get to Hanoi, two days longer than the train, and four days to get back. Nevertheless, he considered the trip a success—quality vulgarity, expressed with cachet, trumps wholesale vulgarity hands down.

As I walked back to the Continental along Dong Hoi Street I was assaulted by Tiffany, Versace, Chanel, Cardin—every shop an icon of Western materialism and greed. I thought I was on Calle Florida in Buenos Aires or Fifth Avenue in New York, but Dong Hoi is a lot more intimate. I returned to the Continental, sat on the patio, sipped a Coke, looked over at the silent construction site, tried to get some answers and got none. I knew where I was going the next morning.

The War’s Detritus

I was taught that whenever I come to a new city, if I don’t speak the language, I must search out the English language newspaper and read every page. Everything—even the want ads—the lot! I arose early and got only as far as the first page of the Saigon Post and, I believe, page seven, before I was floored once more.

It appears that there are three mobile phone companies in Vietnam. The Vietnamese are cell phone crazy, and one company is ailing and another is seeking to take it over. In a dispatch from Hanoi, no less, a Mr. Thach (I didn’t get his full Government title) vehemently opposed the takeover as “anti-competitive”, and he strongly urged that even to countenance a takeover would not be “in the long term interests” of Vietnam. Mr. Thach’s position was heartily endorsed by several other Government worthies—was I in a communist country or a University of Chicago Law School antitrust class? Sure the paper’s mindless reporting of Italian Soccer League scores was of some interest, but I began to think that 1975 wasn’t the only major date in this country’s history, and that 1990 was
equally or more important. It warmed my heart to contemplate the barrels of hydrochloric acid that an article like this must dump into the stomachs of Hanoi’s Marxist ideologues—are there any left up there? It was more than delicious to contemplate how they must choke on their morning coffee when greeted each day by such news. Tell me please, who won? I decided to have a chat with an individual I believed to be just such an ideologue.

In 1951, in two highly different academic astrospheres, Harvard’s Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Eric Hoffer (his academic milieu was a caboose on a Western U.S. railroad) published, *The True Believer*. Reduced to their absolutely basic theses, both come to the same conclusion: “if you scratch a brown shirt (Nazi), you will find a beefsteak (Red).” The particular intellect of “the true believer” inclines him toward absolutes, and inspires within him a relentless drive to destroy the non-believers. Hoffer’s book is as relevant to today’s media creation, the so-called “Arab Spring”, as it was to a very frosty cold war which was soon to erupt in Korea. Arendt and Hoffer believe that the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary have much in common, as their beliefs spring from identical intellectual premises, but that each takes a different path in the forest. I was soon to test this theory.

**Four Pots of Tea with a Side of Versace**

Lotus is a jewel of a shop on Dong Hoi, tucked among the behemoths of Western materialism—the small shop sells nothing but revolutionary propaganda posters. Lotus is an experience not to be missed as the proprietor will graciously spend hours tying each poster into Vietnamese history and detailing its relevance to “the struggle”. My initial intent was to purchase some posters as gifts for a disillusioned SDS ‘60s friend—he was mad for a Giap poster—and a New York female Rad of some notoriety, but the purchases were a secondary mission to what I believed would be a little “revolutionary” tutorial.

I armed myself with two pots of tea—one that vile green tea that almost immediately tears the enamel off your teeth, and the other, good capitalist Tetley black tea. I was dressed for the part in Ray-Bans, an NBO safari shirt and cargo pants—into the fray.

The shopkeeper, whom I will refer to as “M”, (I use this designation to protect the innocent) came to the door. I presented the tea and opened with, “how do you like your new neighbors?” M replied, “Now we even allow big blue-eyed men from the East into our shop, they are some of our best customers.” I
liked the retort and over the next four hours M graciously showed me the collection of posters, as we took an emotionally precarious journey over six decades of Vietnamese revolutionary history.

I advised M of my total disillusionment with the Dong Hoi experience and asked “Is this what 60,000 plus Americans died for?” Evenly, although such tact was probably not called for, M answered “We lost millions.” I told M that I would soon be walking on the trail where hundreds of thousands perished, and that it was clear to me the “revolution” had been betrayed, and the Hanoi ideologues had sold out. Deftly skirting the questions, M replied “nationalism is a great thing.”

I asked, looking out toward M’s neighbors, if the sight didn’t continuously poison M’s thoughts. I got the same “Nationalism is a great thing” and “Why did you arrogant Americans believe you had the right to dictate our form of government?”—Touché! I slammed back—had M bought any lovely Tiffany charms lately, the ones that cost six months of an average Vietnamese worker’s pay? I offered to accompany M across the street to help with the selection—your move.

I had held back the Giap card and now I played it—Giap, perhaps the greatest military man since Mao, [although his greatest triumph, Tet, was based on Mao’s “Feint in the West (Khe Sanh), strike in the East (Tet)”] had recently and very publically opposed bauxite strip-mining, stating such mining was inimical to Vietnam’s national interest. This was much to the dismay of Hanoi bureaucrats and Giap had become a “non-person” à la Trotsky. I advised M that I was looking for Giap shirts for my Rad and SDS friends. After some gentle prodding, M replied that I would not find them in Saigon but maybe Quang Tri City, as “red roses still bloom brightly there.” Nevertheless, M was able to dig up a Giap/Ho poster which will bring joy to a bummed out SDS cadre. I thanked M for going the extra mile and asked if there were any more Giap/Ho posters? I was told, with a little smile, that they were scarce.

After consuming four pots of tea, it was time to leave, and I asked M, as we stood now, who won the war? M indicated that in 1975 they did, and today, given Dong Hoi Street, we did. Then M added that we, you and I, both lost, but that at least I did not have to walk to work every day past Versace, et al. I told M I walked to work every day on Wall Street, and that I waltzed every day with moral indifference in America. Sadly, during my four hours with M no other customers arrived. I bought some additional posters and left the shop secure in the knowledge that Arendt’s and Hoffer’s theories were alive and well. I never spent a better four hours with a dyed in the wool ideological adversary.
“Has Anybody Seen General Giap?”

I decided to hire a driver and motor scooter to search for a talisman for the trip and to recondo for Giap T-shirts. This is no small decision as it is best not to get a driver who is too cautious. As I spoke no Vietnamese, it was a crap shoot, and I won. My driver’s initial “grand gesture” was to go four blocks against traffic to make a left hand turn—returning a cowboy back to the Ben Thanh market.

Before leaving the U.S. I was told by a Vietnamese client that I would be disappointed by the market, price-wise and in terms of selection—he got that right! We searched in vain for Giap T-shirts—when we asked, we were greeted by stares reminiscent of a Stalinist Central Committee meeting considering the Trotsky issue—some professed not to know him, even when my driver colleague queried them in Vietnamese—we were shopping for an image of a non-person. Traditional crafts such as lacquer were reduced to one stall, talismans and hill tribe fabrics were nowhere to be found. By chance I was able to convince a seller to string a small Buddha on a
brown leather cord, which I prominently displayed from that day forward. Otherwise I could have been, except for the tea and coffee, in a cut-rate American clothing store—rubbish.

I then travelled to Cholon to review old acquaintances and it, too, now looks like a California strip mall. We canvassed both the Binh Tay and An Dong markets in search of Giap T-shirts. If you want to see private enterprise in its rawest form, sit yourself outside the Binh Tay market and watch the “sweat shop” action. Human beings as beasts of burden, à la the Singapore docks in the 1950s. It is a great advertisement for unionism! No Giap, no traditional crafts. Back to the hotel veranda, another Coke, malevolent thoughts for the construction site—well into the night—solo—no friendly spirits. Tomorrow: back into the fray.

**Seeking Out the Spirit of Saigon**

Religiously, without fail, upon our return to Saigon. Micheline Anne would take us to the Jade Pagoda and give thanks for our safe return. Given what had happened in my early life, I was never too fired up about this ritual trip, but I thought I had to return to get closer to her memory—wrong.

The place was jammed and the cash registers were singing. I sat down and watched the “action” and, to my mind, if Luther were to come back to earth and land here with a small chainsaw the place would be matchsticks in minutes. Supplicants, paying fistfuls of money to keep the oil going for the lamps, and the air thick with incense. I am not knocking incense, but how does a spirit sort out whose incense is whose? I sat there quietly, a relative term, with the hordes seeking benefits. I waited patiently, hoping there would be a seventh inning stretch—there was none. I watched the hustle, and I use that term in the street sense, and sadly reached the conclusion that if Micheline Anne’s spirit were to be found, this was not the place. I lit my handful of joss
sticks, made my way out of the sanctuary, and was greeted by an altar that captured it all for me.

Giving a new meaning to “pay your way into heaven”, the altar is guarded by its own steel safe. I sat down to watch and see if you prayed first then paid, paid first then prayed, or applied for spiritual Medicaid. Leaving aside the cynical nature of my voyeurism, the results were quite startling—capitalism and bourgeois morality ruled, as all but three worshippers paid first. But I was pleased to note the three who took the low road. If you want to get in touch with the spirit world in this place, bring lots of dong, because if you spend even a few moments watching “the action” Marx’s “opiate of the masses” springs readily to mind. Micheline Anne and I will meet in some tranquil spot—this did not even remotely approach such a spot. The Jade Pagoda has none of the tranquility of Lao,

Japanese or Burmese temples. It is an oil-burning, money-making spiritual casino with not the slightest hope of a payout—no solace.

I decided to head away from the madding crowd and hit the Military Museum. The trip was interesting, on a very modern road, old structures juxtaposed with new high rise apartment buildings.

I arrived at the entrance where I was greeted by two neatly dressed high school age guardians of the revolutionary flame. She, I noted, was studying advanced algebra and he quantum physics—both books in English. I was escorted into two cavernous halls which
meticulously detailed the NVA’s ‘73 and ‘75 campaigns. I was politely asked if I wished to be escorted as I toured the exhibits. I declined the invitation, but asked if there were any additional visitors that day; there were none.

The halls were huge, with military maps detailing the developing events and numerous small machines of death everywhere. The big machines of death were outside. As is my wont, I decided to explore the building, and in the next room I entered a large banquet hall that was beautifully decked out in white for a wedding to be held that evening. Much hustle and bustle setting up for what I guessed to be a wedding for 400 “intimate” friends. Despite my recent strange interlude of l’amour fou, I decided to investigate. As is the custom at Vietnamese weddings, pictures of the bride and groom were prominently displayed. She, youngish and your basic ten-star knockout, he considerably longer in the tooth, jowly, with triglycerides on fire—a match made in heaven.

It was the seating that got me. Chairs were lined up in rows of thirty—no tables. Now, I have been led to believe that weddings provide fertile ground for wolves of both sexes to prowl. How do you prowl when the object of your desire is in Seat 24 and you are in Seat 2? Despite recent personal setbacks, I am still a believer, à la Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s initial encounter; here, alas, there was little chance for potential lovers’ eyes to lock over the Gruyere. An invitation, no
matter how subtly nuanced, to view the '73 Highlands campaign, or perhaps in the next room the '75 Highlands campaign, hardly strikes a romantic chord. A coquettish suggestion to take a moonlight stroll amidst numerous machines of death—planes, tanks, and B-52 wreckage—leaves a great deal to be desired romantically, with the possible exception of a chance to steal a kiss in the shadow of the clearly erotic SA-2.

Although not able to attend, I wished the couple and their guests, as they hike the romantic trails of life, well.

A little down from the museum I treated myself and the driver to warm Cokes and contemplated “the meaning of it all.” L’amour fou is such a ludicrous concept; the game is fixed from the start.

I returned to the Continental, got another Coke, and sat on the veranda. Across the way in front of the opera house, actors in traditional ancient costume posed for tourists and were much the rage. It struck me that they did this fifty years ago to attract patrons to the evening’s performance—the actors worked hard for two hours, but I noted that none of the tourists proceeded to the box office to purchase tickets.

As the sky grew dark I attempted to get into the construction site but without success as the site was guarded. Another evening of increasingly malevolent thoughts as I sat on the veranda. The hotel people were great. They left my table but put away all the others. Empathy, or afraid I might go off? I walked to the flower market, purchased eleven yellow roses (my calling card) returned to the
site, estimated where Micheline Anne had fallen, laid the roses there and spent
the remainder of the night guarding them until I went upstairs to pack. When I
came down at 04:30 they were still there—inadequate and terribly sad, but the
best I could do.

I had an 0 dark thirty flight to Hue. When I arrived at the domestic ter-
minal things were a bit slow so I had tea and a roll. I moved to a seating area
and, strangely, saw my server running after me. Explaining I had overpaid she
handed me a 200 dong note (10 cents). I estimated she left her post and ran 200
feet—behavior that is far from the norm in the U.S. When I thanked her I hoped
she was as touched as I was by her gesture.

I read in the morning’s Saigon Post that Viet Nam was experiencing an
economic downturn. You could not divine this from the domestic terminal, which
was soon jammed wall-to-wall and out the door. My dawn patrol flight to Hue was
chock-a-block full, and I was the only roundeye.

As we taxied out I saw an example of capitalism at work that I had noted
while waiting for my flight: numerous domestic airlines bearing exotic names
had sprung up. One of these “exotics” was on a different runway and the aircraft
was clearly a DC-9—what model I could not make out—the mists of history dim
the senses. I made a mental note never to fly that airline. Better to walk in.

**Air Vietnam to Hue at Dawn**

The flight to Hue was interesting as we played dodge ball with thunder
heads up to 35,000 feet—beautifully ominous, because if it started to rain it would
rain for days. Landed without incident, and where the ride into Saigon had been
a free enterprise eye-opener, the ride into Hue was just the opposite. Early in the
morning, little traffic—architecture crumbling French with some Stalinist accent
pieces.

We pass some small shops starting to open, but no people shopping. A tell-
ing point about the city: the taxi driver drove the speed limit and barely honked
the horn. None of the Saigon motorcycle hordes in evidence, a slow downtown. I
liked it already.

I was staying at La Residence. If you can, don’t miss it. The former Gov-
ernor General’s home, and it merits all five of the stars given by the Vietnamese
Travel Bureau—a jewel, staffed by gems.
I had previously corresponded with the hotel’s travel director and I made a beeline to meet him. You would have thought I was the prodigal son returned. He immediately expressed, and for the next two days constantly reiterated, his grave concern about the “walkabout”. He shut down his desk, and we adjourned to a café next door; this café was to have a major impact on my stay in Hue. The travel director and I sat down, and I engaged in a “self-criticism” struggle with him about my plans. He soon understood my reasoning.

I have a spiritual aversion to being charged five dollar for a can of Coke or a bag of M&M’s. I found out I could buy a can of Coke at this café for fifty cents. Also, I was put off by the way Vietnamese treat their lotto sellers. Sure, everyone knows the lotto is fixed and crooked, but these kind, elderly women are gentle souls, living a marginal existence and, unlike beggars in other cultures, never aggressive. It torqued me to see them waved off with a disdainful flip of the right hand, or worse, completely ignored. I decided to do something about it. I quickly noted that the café was quite exclusive. In fact, two other parties sitting five feet from each other barely spoke. Not a word exchanged as one passed a newspaper to the other.

**Welcome to “Harry’s”**

The next lotto seller came by. I immediately bought two dollars’ worth of lotto tickets, invited her to sit down with us, ordered a Coke and handed the lotto tickets to the proprietor—an unprecedented occurrence I am sure. The joint was now mine, and I named it “Harry’s”. While in Hue I made it my headquarters and over the three days following my “good luck” gift to the proprietor I received oceans of free black tea. There is something so delicious when a club manager knows what you drink and what your guests, three lotto sellers, drink—Cokes all around. A new blow for American capitalism. The atmosphere in Harry’s was
peaceful, relaxing, and on a subsequent visit I jealously guarded the panache of the club. The old women and I could not communicate with each other, so we sat in companionable silence, taking a load off, and contemplating the “meaning of it all.” Sadly, it could not last forever. I reminded myself that when I return I must bring some Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Wagner’s “Overture to the Flying Dutchman.” This will put us well ahead of the pack musically: he who controls the velvet rope sets the tone.

Harry’s was to provide another personal highlight of the trip. Way back in the ’50s I became enamored of a style of Chinese scroll painting I called “karst painting.” At the time I believed the scenes were all in the artist’s head. I was wrong, but it took about forty years to correct my misinterpretation.

I had mentioned karst painting to a client’s brother and he set me straight by inviting me to join him on a trip to Guilin on the Li Jang River—a more than moving experience provided by a man who even in defeat knew victory. After coming off the river the client’s brother and I repaired to a piano bar at a Holiday Inn where a most enjoyable tuxedo-clad piano player entertained the two of us. Still on a high from the river, I noted the pianist playing many romantic songs in a very distinct style, including a song which would turn out to be Richard Claydermann’s “Murmures.” I asked him to play it again and I was on a roll: champagne—two bottles—for the pianist
and my client's brother. I don't drink, but I have been told they thought it was a
great party. Richard Claydermann touched my romantic soul.

While at Harry's on the evening of the third day, I heard a Claydermann
song and asked the owner to play it again, and he did. When it finished—he spoke
no English—the owner handed me the disc and said “un souvenir pour vous.” I
politely declined but the moment will never be forgotten.

“The Imperial City of Hue,” the former royal capital of Vietnam, had been
a seat of learning and the arts. When during the war it was captured by the Viet
Cong, 6,000 inhabitants who had been selected for liquidation prior to its fall
were murdered. For several weeks Hue held out, despite continuous air assault,
which pretty much leveled the city. The Viet Cong flag flew over the citadel and
was a continuous target for the besiegers to knock down. I once saw a T-shirt for
a mortar crew which showed a 91mm mortar with the caption “We are into
earth-moving and instant urban renewal.” We pounded it non-stop, but never
completely succeeded in knocking the flag down. The psychological point was
made and is still being made today.

The city was going nowhere and falling into decay until 1990 when
somebody recognized that tourism could bring it back. Whatever your political
persuasion the promoters have clearly done a good job—particularly with the wind
machine that blows the flag (half a football field in length) that flies over the citadel day
and night. Before I toured the citadel I wanted to walk around it. This was great fun
because the fortress is sur-
rounded by an impenetrable
fence of small enterprise
shops selling every-thing—
clothing, electronics, even a Viet Cong flag, which I immediately scooped up for
my SDS friend.

I returned to Harry's for an evening with Richard Claydermann—it does
not get much better than this! Clearly Hue exhibits a cachet that Saigon might
have done well to consider, but unfortunately it is now too late, as Saigon has
gone too far down the Lotus and Lamborghini path to turn back. Vulgar materialism has not, for a multitude of reasons I suspect, overwhelmed Hue. Not such a bad thing to live in a less materialistic backwater.

Today I meet my travel mentor for another round of strenuous struggle and self-criticism, and I tell him to forget about trying to talk me out of the walk-about. I am going, and I need some help. He asks who is Bernard Fall and why am I so interested as to where on Route 1 he died—no one knows him or has ever heard of him! He persuades me to take a tour of Hue and its environs, and suggests that perhaps some tombs would interest me. I am skeptical, but again I am to be proven wrong, not about the tombs, but, as it turns out, about the social activities attendant to the tour.

**A Long Day with Emperors Long Dead**

I dread tours, but when the small van arrived, I thought we were a tour of four: myself, another man who was leaning against the door, and two dour Danes. Off we went, the Danes giving me quizzical looks and pointing to my left where a young couple emerged from a death clutch. The eight-limbed body became two, and when she came up for air I guessed she was fourteen and he not much older. Vietnamese honey-mooners on their way to see the Tombs of Emperors Two, Three and Four—can it get more romantic than that?

It was Children’s Day and many visitors to the tombs appeared to be deep into necrophilia. While no doubt intriguing, I was more interested in the social aspects, past and present. It appears that King Three was “as one” with his Khmer buddies across the river, having spent thirteen years in France. He decided his tomb should be made all of glass with little or no Vietnamese input—France will do that to you. To pay for his monument, he raised the taxes on food 50% and cut the rations of his workmen.
Voila! Starvation of the peasants and the death of 50% of his workmen.—Jayavarman II was alive and well in Vietnam.

The guide was quick to point out that this king, although childless and down to twelve from his predecessor’s two hundred concubines, was not gay. France will also do that to you, and clearly there is a serious issue here that must be addressed by the gender industry crowd.

Scientifically, I am not sure how the guide arrived at his conclusion, but I took it at face value. In a conversation later that day a Vietnamese nationalist journalist observed that this glass tomb was the first of many curses the French had inflicted upon the Vietnamese people. Decorum prevented me from probing further to ascertain the other curses French civilization had bestowed on Vietnam.

As previously noted, it was Children’s Day and with hordes of children everywhere it was difficult to get a handle on the “meaning of it all”, but one tableau was worth the trip.

Approximately twelve or more Vietnamese teenagers, all relating to the past glories of their emperors, cavorted by the tombs. All had cell phones and cameras, virtually all were talking on the phones, and one, in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, was doing an excellent rendition of a Hollywood starlet, cameras blazing away. This went on for several minutes and I was pleased to see that they were all dressed
like MTV goons. You gotta love American TV and the “civilizing” influence of cell phones.
However, all was not lost. As I was leaving the last tomb I encountered a young banana seller, bought all of her bananas, and tried to put the other Rocky Horror Show out of my mind.

Tours of this type the world over always end with the obligatory shake-down when you are herded into a curio shed or shop. However, as these things go, this one wasn’t too bad: I learned how they make incense and conical hats. Sadly, despite a fleet of other tour buses little incense appeared to be changing hands. I bought some for Harry’s, gave it to the manager, and that evening the owner and the lotto sellers got on a cosmic rail to heaven knows where. As we left the curio caves the male honeymooner and the driver were having some fun at what I believed to be the young lady’s expense. This did not bode well for a life filled with
marital bliss. As we pulled out of curio alley I spied a flower seller, told the driver to stop, and bought eleven roses—the seller was puzzled by the number, but I didn’t have time to give her a précis of Japanese romantic gestures. Back in the van, roses presented to the couple, the overall temperature much improved, we continued our drive.

As I was being dropped off at the hotel I invited everyone to Harry’s, and I was floored when everyone accepted, even the dour Danes—free soft drinks will get them every time. A most unexpectedly pleasant hour as night fell. I give the Vietnamese couple two years at best!

Back at the hotel the travel advisor told me his astrologer had suggested I go to the countryside as good things would happen to me if I did. I agreed, and the next morning, in a meeting that bordered on the bizarre, the astrologer gave instructions to the scooter driver, and we headed into the countryside in search of the Thanh Toan Bridge.

Within fifteen minutes we were traveling through small villages, with paddy cultivation as far as the eye could see—on the point on a motorcycle! Except for some modern improvements the villages were as they were one hundred years ago. A field problem every five hundred yards; those death dealing tree lines were everywhere, with burial mounds thrown in for good measure. It sent chills up my spine as the real Vietnam came to life. It was magical—and it was to get better.

I once heard a trooper describe “walking the point” as the ultimate sacrifice. (N.B. For the type of personality who relishes “the point” one can do no better than Tiger Force by Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss.) This same trooper likened “search and destroy” to the old county fairs where they had metal ducks on a chain in a water tank, and if you shot so many ducks you won a prize. He said the only problem was, when you are crossing the paddies and walking on the dykes you’re moving a lot slower than the ducks in the tank. I spent the better part of an hour looking at tree lines, figuring in and out routes—right back into it, and if you can do this trip don’t miss it. No guides, just you and your scooter driver. Do not go in a car. It would destroy the ambiance.

I arrived at the village which, although small, is a gem. And, coming from Grafton County in New Hampshire where Stanley Grafton lived and completed the last modern day covered bridge, I appreciated Thanh Toan Bridge which was completed in the 1400’s. What I didn’t appreciate were the young teenagers
using the altar to set up their card tables. Six others dressed and behaving like American teen-age trash were jabbering on their cell phones.

I walked across the bridge looking for a small museum I had been told I should visit. What no one prepared me for was the human treasure trove that awaited me. As I neared the museum I saw, huddling like Macbeth’s witches, three elderly women, one of whom saluted me, and not a bad salute at that. I gave them a saw-adee from the sky and we were off and running.

The museum was a sad attempt to recreate peasant life. There was a foot operated paddy pump which one woman offered to demonstrate, but I said it was not necessary. Cokes for everyone. But then providence entered the game with the arrival of an elderly Vietnamese woman. She spoke broken English but was
able to unlock a cask of tragedy that illustrates the depth and scope of the Vietnam War better than any book.

She was a laundry worker at Phu Bai, an army helicopter base; she met a captain, and they were married. In 1968 during the Tet offensive he was killed. Her language skill allowed me to extend the conversation to four other women who had lost sons, lovers and children. The toll exceeded seven. One woman cannot visit her son in Texas! I spent an afternoon I shall never forget, and their willingness to open up their hearts more than touched me. However, the observer will note that my initial muse did not drink Coke, but Lipton tea—a character lapse that I will not hold against her. I cannot find an adjective that would adequately express my feelings for that day. I told the motorcycle driver to go slow as I wanted to savor the countryside as we returned to the hotel through the paddies—twilight field problems every 500 yards. When I hit the hotel I told my travel guru that I was leaving ten bucks for the astrologer. He said that ten was too much and I should leave five, as we did not want to give her the idea we were anything but skeptical about the accuracy of her readings—heady stuff!

**Searching for Fall’s Ghost:**

As previously noted, Bernard Fall provided an initiation and constant companion to any young special operations officer in the early 1950s. His books were devoured by young officers and sadly not understood by the “heavy metal” guys. One of the cornerstones of the trip was to walk “The Street Without Joy” and to attempt to honor Fall by learning where on Route 1 he was ambushed.

I spent three days asking anyone and everyone where Fall had been ambushed in February of 1967. Some professed not to know him and none knew where he was ambushed. My tribute has to be a mental one, but it is a debt every special operations officer who served in Southeast Asia, or anywhere else for that matter, owes to a very special man and warrior.

My travel maven said he had the finest guide (a woman) in Vietnam and when I asked whether she knew what I was trying to do he said she would know by the time we met. He urged me to take a car all the way. I rejected this out of hand. I told him to have her meet me in My Chanh the next morning and be prepared to walk twenty-five miles. I was dubious about meeting a female guide who knew nothing about military matters for a walk on “The Street Without Joy”. This jaunt was to be a warm-up for the trip into the Highlands, a shakedown cruise, if you will.
A Walk with Comrade Chris on "The Street Without Joy"

Cool, overcast

We roll into My Chanh. I meet my guide, henceforth referred to as “Comrade Chris”. Short, cadre haircut, those terrible cadre glasses, a real apparachniki. And just what I needed: Blessed with a quick mind, so sharp you could cut steel with her intellect, and a blazing sense of humor that made our twelve hours together the most interesting and hilarious I have ever had the good fortune to spend with anyone. She opened with “Captain, I couldn’t get any U.S. military maps, but I did get the French one at the time.” With this opening I knew I hit the guide jackpot. I just didn’t realize what a monster jackpot it was going to be.

In simple terms, “The Street Without Joy” was an approximately twenty-five mile stretch of road that paralleled Route 1, the main north-south road connecting Saigon with Hanoi. Viet Minh used to come from fortified villages to ambush road traffic on Route 1. The French mounted perhaps the largest joint
military operation since World War II with the object of trapping the Viet Minh in a bottle. The operation failed because although the trap was sprung, a lack of knowledge of precise weather conditions, local terrain, and some poor and over complicated planning doomed it to failure. Hard to believe, since they had been in the country for thirty or more years, and faulty or not, intelligence on their adversaries’ dispositions led to about an equal number of casualties on both sides. The French military pronounced the operation a resounding victory. The troops knew otherwise.

We headed to a small crossroads town, which on the earlier maps is named Van Trinh, but has been renamed Xuan Vien. Set our packs and started down a level one-lane road, but not until after having been the center of attention in Xuan Vien. I told Chris the locals were staring at her and she answered that they haven’t seen many “big men from the East with Ray-Bans” as we were pretty much all driven out after ’68. The little apparachniki has very sharp teeth and claws!

We had only gone a few kilometers and the field problems quickly became clear: tree lines to both east and west bisected by a large dyke, and you were in the duck gallery as you moved down the road. Chris checked off the fortified villages from the 1950s as we progressed down the road. We even passed the occasional errant bomb crater from the last war. As we walked I told Chris of my failures in obtaining a Giap T-shirt, and
she said we might get lucky in Quang Tri City as it was still red. I learned that Chris’s husband, a thirty year Party member, had come down from the North and they married. She was proposed for membership in the Party but her husband—I would love to meet this guy—said one communist in the family is enough; there should always be one parent out of jail to take care of the kids.

When I queried Chris about Giap she indicated he is her kind of communist, but my lefty friends should realize that Giap T-shirts are probably a thing of the past—they may have a better shot in America. I pondered this revelation.

I told Chris that I would never go above the 17th parallel and that I fly the South Vietnamese flag in my New Hampshire home; the neighbors don’t know what it is. Her retort—and it was a beauty—was that the best pho noodles come from above the 17th parallel and because of my 17th parallel phobia she would deliberately not feed them to me because if she did she would be held accountable for my death and her spirit would never know peace. But if someone else fed me the noodles, that would be another story.

Little traffic and we move steadily ahead—clear indications that every inch of cultivatable land is utilized, even front areas of nice homes under refurbishment. We pull into our first checkpoint and find the driver asleep.

During the walk Chris expressed grave concern that I did not have children and wanted to organize a contest of women with traditional style hair worn to the waist, who would have to walk from the Da Krong Bridge, in heels, to the Delta. She did not believe there would be many takers and about 10 kilo-meters should weed out all the pretenders. I told her I was touched by her concern, but no Party members, thank you. Chris indicated she would add Mr. Dung of La Residence, my travel guru, to the search committee, but would not tell him the finish line was the Delta.

We are there for barely five minutes when people appear and question us about what we are doing as nobody walks in the area. Three people:
journalist who had been in a labor camp for fourteen years; his wife interned for four years; a mother, whose son was ARVN and was killed, held for three years—the tales, all gut wrenching, but no overt bitterness toward the United States. I am positive I would not be so magnanimous.

We moved along quickly and soon came upon family memorials flanking the road. Relatives were supervising the construction of and tending to monuments to their ancestors. Some of the descendants are themselves approaching the century mark and are most willing to talk about their families. The field problems keep changing but as we approach the place the trap was to shut, the ground turns marshy and I understand where things went wrong.
At our next checkpoint our driver is again asleep, and we again become the object of attention. Some women have an aura of elegance about them—I call it the Elvira Madigan syndrome. We were to meet such a woman at this check-point. She approached us and queried what the big man from the East was doing walking in this area. Chris explained.

The woman appeared to be in her middle seventies and indicated she had three sons, two killed in the war, and another son who had fled to the United States and was doing well. She indicated that in 1975 the North Vietnamese had come down and taken everything, even peoples’ homes. At this moment a somewhat younger male, all dressed in loose black except for a white T-shirt, came over and I told Chris to switch the conversation to the weather.

Cheeky Chris asked if I wanted to learn where he was fighting in the South as maybe we had been shooting at each other. My reply was for Chris to go home, and ask her husband what he had taken when he arrived—Mexican standoff. But candidly, I think she got the better of me. We made good time and continued to meet friendly people and come across interesting and incongruous buildings such as a lavish Catholic church in the middle of no-where. We found the driver asleep, woke him up and I ordered him to take Chris to her hometown of Dong Ha where we could have an early supper and discuss my walkabout—best move I ever made.
In the next hour and a half Chris revised the trip, cutting out the walk from Cau Viet to Dong Ha, doing it instead by local van, and cutting out the walk from Lang Ve to Lao Bao so as to spend more time at a more leisurely pace on the trail. Chris indicated I must carry a stick “to keep the animals” away. As it was Sunday we couldn’t buy one today, but I should attend to it as soon as possible. My instructions for food, beef or chicken soup, and my pleas for shelter were written out. She would never know what a lifesaver these two small pieces of paper would be.

As we parted Chris advised that tomorrow she was escorting a group of rich Americans to Khe Sanh. I told her I would be on Route 9 and she might pass me. Chris replied that she would languidly put her hand out the window and acknowledge me, but just barely, as I was the big man from the East who, because I couldn’t buy her a Honda Dream, made her the butt of a never-ending stream of insults as we walked along “The Street Without Joy”. I rarely laugh, but this brought me to my knees. Sadly, we did not cross paths the next day, as I would have paid big money to see that put down. Comrade Chris left, but not out of my life—her laissez-passant was the most important document of the trip.
**Why Routes 9, 14, and 49**

The walk was originally to start at Cau Viet and then proceed down Route 9 to Dong Ha. Comrade Chris suggested the walk start at Cau Viet along the beach, then drive directly to Dong Ha as there wasn’t much to see from Cau Viet to Dong Ha. Additionally she suggested that I ride to Lao Bao from Lang Vei, to give some additional time should anything go wrong on the trail. Made sense to me, and that was the route I would take the next day.
Approaching the Fortified Villages • Vietnamese Arches • The Tree Lines
Cool, overcast

Couldn’t sleep and an O dark thirty start by car to Cau Viet—pitch black outside of town, but I knew from the beginning there would be no sun as the front had stalled.

Cau Viet had been the initial entry point for the logistics which supported most of the Central Highland operations and Khe Sanh. Did not get into the town but headed for the sandy beach which stretched for miles. I walked about five kilometers on the beach. The ocean was calm, tide going out, and the beach was dotted with traditional craft and circular skulls, tubs almost, that fishermen generally use solo. Not terribly early, but for some reason no fishing was going on. I spied the car parked about a kilometer away. I walked off the beach and as I did I happened to look down and see an almost five foot bamboo walking stick—just lying there by itself, nothing around it. I picked it up and knew that I held the sweetest weapon, other than a gun, I’d had in my hands in the last sixty years—it almost sang to me.

Scoped out the dunes and walked a bit inland to where the ground was more marshy than sandy. You could see where the heavy stuff might get bogged down. In the summer it must be a hopping place with restaurant sheds stretching for miles—hard to tell them apart. I continued my walk up to Route 9 and the car.
The road to Route 9 parallels the beach; little traffic, most pleasant. The driver spoke broken English and said since we were so close he would drive me to a relic of the McNamara line. We had to run across a busy four lane highway and scramble up a hill, but the only hardware left of the two billion dollar line is a vine-covered armored earth mover. So much for electric fences to keep the barbarians out.

The driver knew what I was about to embark upon and he offered to find me a Khe Sanh bus. I offered to buy him a Coke and we sat on a curb just before the bridge in Dong Ha. As he left, he beeped his horn. I knew I didn’t have to come out of the gate running; Cam Lo was but a short way (12 klicks) and I would stay the night there before climbing into the Highlands. The road is a two lane asphalt with small businesses of every type on both sides. Lots of truck traffic going both ways.

Vietnamese truckers, especially the tandem rigs, have made overweight into an art form. The last four wheels on those rigs are already half way to hell. I walked in the road and got into a rhythm. All the small shops had mynah birds and a slew of other species and when you passed they commenced singing—a bird symphony! The mynah birds have a haunting call and I was serenaded almost every step of the way.

Pack too heavy, but I was doing well until about a klick outside Cam Lo. I was still walking in the street and stupidly not paying too much attention to my immediate surroundings, I came across a woman selling dog meat from a card table. I noted two other men behind her and I continued to walk past when a man dressed all in baggy black, about 150 pounds, put his right hand on my shoulder, and I noted a four or five inch blade in his left hand. Stupid, stupid, stupid to let him get that close—I didn’t like his eyes. No way to run or get the pack between me and him, but I did have the club between us. I had to neutralize his right hand so I could get a shot to drive his left side ribs into his lungs—I needed about three
more feet and then I could move on to the other three. They could surround you, but if you carried on you could use head shots on the others, then coming back, and with due deliberation, have a full and frank discussion with the downed guy. If I could get just a little space, his left rib cage had a bullseye on it, nothing to stop the blow, because I had the arc on him. I needed a foot or eighteen inches.

Several things went through my mind. First, my father always taught me if you strike, strike to kill; second, I felt sixty-two years of the yoke of civilization slip off my back like a beautiful Jim Thompson silk shirt. Next, as any kendo master will tell you, plan four or five moves ahead. I wanted to down all four of them, and in my mind it was doable. Lastly, as anyone who has served in Cambodia will tell you, boy soldiers, or indeed most Cambodian soldiers, with lead flying so thick you can walk on it, say they can see death flitting on the battlefield. Robin Koch in his book *Highway to a War* makes specific note of it. I saw Micheline Anne in her school uniform standing off to the right, and now it was payback time.

I never hesitated. I smashed the club down, crossbody smash from about eighteen inches, and he fell back, and in doing so his left side opened up. My left foot was centered on him, my right angled, and he had dropped the knife when I hit him. I didn’t take the shot—old, slow—stupid, no explanation. I wanted all four of them and I wanted to turn the place into a real abattoir.

I know that when I meet my father at the gates of hell I will have to explain my failure to him, but when I had a chance to live up to Micheline Anne’s belief in me I failed again. She will forgive, he will not. A professional has told me I chose life—that is rubbish, pure and simple. I stupidly did not take the shots. He and the others didn’t move as I had that club about three feet from him. He waved me on. “Funning” had paid big dividends and I owe those Harlem YMCA guys a dinner. I was not souped up; in fact I wasn’t twitching, but I wondered if this was the start of a gauntlet. From that point on in the trip, I became a disciple of Yao We Nyuan, an apologist for the Tiananmen Square massacre, who opined that in “struggles” to come violence does the trick. I reminded myself to ask Santa Claus to give me a sirupate kukuri, twelve inches please, for Christmas—just the trick for encounters of this type. I figured things might get interesting.

I am not spiritual, but whoever or whatever put that club in my hand saved my life—some powerful kami was in my corner on this one. Incredibly, as I moved into town I was offered rides by two cyclists who indicated they were going to Khe Sanh. I politely declined. I could visualize the headlines: “Crazed
Geriatric Vet Kills Four Free Enterprise Roadside Butchers in Cam Lo.” I could think of a lot worse ways to go out.

Because of geography I had to stay in Cam Lo that night but Comrade Chris’s guesthouse selection was in the part of town where we had just taxed the outer limits of the “People to People” program. I sat down at a small drink store, and immediately became the object of interest to school children who had mastered “hello.” I remained there for an hour or so until an impeccably dressed Vietnamese, in unaccented English, asked what I was doing. I decided to raise the stakes by telling him I was walking to Lang Vei—screw him. He did not pry, and said it was unusual and he had never heard of it being done. I was, perhaps unfairly, getting into it, and added that I was interested in “native textiles.” Always a good one, and then I told him of my little misunderstanding with one of his countrymen and asked whether I would be running a gauntlet all the way to Lang Vei and down “The Trail.” This got his attention and he apologized for his countryman, saying that amphetamine abuse was rampant among the lower classes in Cam Lo and Dong Ha. He said that contrary to today’s experience I would be of great interest to locals on the trail as no one ever walks down there.

He spent a couple of hours with me discussing the trail and walked with me to a guesthouse and advised the manager I wanted to have an early departure, and if anything required assistance they were to call him. I watched the two wheels in hell traffic for a while and went to bed. Not the ordinary start for a trip. Comrade Chris: Cam Lo is unfriendly—skip it!
There is No Elevator to the Highlands

Cool, overcast

The stretch from Cam Lo to Da Krong town was 51 kilometers and a climb of more than a thousand feet. This was the road that the relief columns had to travel to relieve the more than sixty day siege at Khe Sanh. Zero dark thirty start and I immediately began to climb. As a field problem the assault on this stretch would have come from the South; the northern side of the road dropped off precipitously.

Began to see stilt houses, then a small mountain, about 1000 feet high, that had been cut in half and fed into a spanking new gravel pit. Here you could control the road with tubes, even recoilless rifles. To break the monotony of the climb, I devised a contest: I would race the tandem trucks! I started this about 15 klicks out, and, as the drivers struggled with their half-in-hell loads, I would race them as far as I could go, then rest. Before long they got into it; honks and waves from many truckers.

The road was busy with every variety of truck known to man. On my side the trucks were struggling, but in the downhill lane the drivers were redballing. I thought it likely that the redballers had not seen an AAMCO service shop recently, if ever, and I had visions of their brakes letting go and a spectacular launch into the valley. About twenty kilometers out it became clear you could be attacked from both sides of the road, and a good tubeman could make your life miserable; ambush points were everywhere. If you were to move forward at this point, you had to secure both sides of the road. Put simply, you were in the open and you were going up—ugly sledding.

I could see I was starting to move up. Although stilt houses were becoming more common and no one was in tribal clothing, the ubiquitous cell phones were in use everywhere. Another common phenomenon: clear cutting and slash and burn agriculture. Large tracts on both the north and south sides of the road were barren, and large scale erosion was rampant. Little to see except an ascending highway, but I am offered rides on two occasions. When I politely refuse, the motorcycle drivers appear puzzled. The truckers going east continued redballing with a flair, tempting the fates to rocket them straight to the “Ticket-takers at the Gates”, into heaven or to hell.

About twenty klicks out I could look down to the North and see I was making progress. As I passed by houses, people would stare and then get on their cell phones. I kept on racing the tandem trucks. About 30 klicks into the climb, I
thought it best to try the local transport. It turned out to be hilarious, great fun, and a lesson in the strength of the combustion engine.

I was on a not so steep incline when a blue van of unknown vintage, chassis so out of whack that it tilted, and overloaded beyond belief both on the roof and, I subsequently learned, inside, came up slowly, clearly in first gear. Here is where the fun began. I waved the van down, and it was going so slowly I could keep up with it. Out jumped an aging female fury, incredibly strong, who threw me into the aisle between the driver and the seats. We never stopped, and I must have looked like the Golden Fleece to them—a roundeye paying client.

To make room, the fury shoved an older woman further back into the van, which was already chock-a-block full of people (I counted six). When granny hit the back I was unceremoniously deposited on a fishmeal sack. I told them I was going to Da Krong town, and we carried on for the remaining 20 kilometers. As the van continued the ascent, the military issues increased from every angle. With hills all around and a river parallel to the road, tubes on all sides (never mind mines) must have made progress very difficult.

Then the driver’s helper noticed my ring—Navajo hummingbird pattern—and the fun began. He asked if he could see it and he showed it to everyone—much close examination. At this point the driver’s helper made an airplane gesture with his hand, and whistled the bomb down. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, I shook my head no. Not content, he held his arm like a machine gun and made chattering machine gun noises—much laughter all around. Even knowing that they understood not a word of what I was saying, I stuck to the “native textiles” story—it was as good as any—and if they had taken a poll I believe the machine gun would have carried the day. I marveled at the van’s engine because we were so overloaded we should have been smack on the highway to hell. I just didn’t see how the cab could stay on the chassis. I was asked where I had come from and where I was going, and everyone wanted to feel my legs, I guess to find out if they were strong enough to get me through. The passengers knelt in line to see if I passed the test.

It was getting dark as we pulled into Da Krong town, if you can call it that, and we stopped on the only level piece of ground for miles. The driver asked for two dollars and I gave him three. I watched the van slowly pull away, the cab tilting almost fifteen degrees to the right, as it crabbed its way up the hill to Khe Sanh.
I took stock, and the military problems on the south side of the river were more than grim, with high hills everywhere; and the hills to the north towered over the village—not an easy nut to crack! As I continued to watch the van struggle up the hill, I saw another come upside it and into the lane where redballers would be barreling down. I couldn’t bear to look.

Chris had written out, in Vietnamese, the name of a guesthouse in Da Krong town, and I had a clean room for $6.00. The proprietor spoke some English and asked what I was doing and, when I told him I was going down the trail, he said I must see the bridge immediately. In no time I was on the back of his bike, and we drove the seven klicks to the bridge. It was impressive, built by Cubans, and as we looked at the bridge and beyond, we could see little of the trail. The proprietor turned to me: “Don’t do it. There is nothing down there.” Back to the hotel to prepare for the run up to Khe Sanh.

“They Just Disappeared” “We are in the Middle of Nowhere, Fighting for Nothing”

Cool, overcast

The Battle of Khe Sanh has justifiably entered and added lustre to the Marine Corps legend. Khe Sanh was a centerpiece of General Westmoreland’s vision of grinding up the North Vietnamese Army in a set piece battle.

Khe Sanh was more than a nightmare for the military, the President and the government as a whole, as the spectre of Dien Bien Phu ricocheted day and night from the Oval Office on down. Indeed, “Whiz Kids” became “grand strategists”, and the services fought among themselves as to how the battle should be waged, if waged at all. Army and Marine commanders became gamecocks with no quarter asked or given. It was not a “can’t we all just get along” atmosphere at Joint Headquarters. Some suggested Westmoreland delayed relieving the siege so he could “bomb away”, but one thing is clear—the political ramifications of the North Vietnamese holding Khe Sanh hostage for more than seventy days, while USAF’s “Operation Niagara” rained down ordnance and “Operation Pegasus”, joint Army, Marine, and South Vietnamese relief force, attempted to break through, had not been foreseen by the Commander-in-Chief and his advisors.

As I left at first light and started the 21 kilometer climb, it was clear that the road uphill to the base could easily be hit hard from both North and South. Cynics say the delay in relieving the siege was deliberate. If you walk the stretch from Da Krong town to Khe Sanh, even without being in the military, you are on a slog which, without protecting your flank, could quickly turn into a debacle.
You don’t need a program to know you are in Khe Sanh. I arrived in town about 1:00am, went to the hotel recommended by Comrade Chris, and the adventure began. I was greeted by a young Vietnamese woman, dressed in a red housecoat with a red feather boa. I live in New York, and, stylistically, nothing floors me, but this was beyond Dada. I told her I wanted to go to the battlefield and we spent the next five minutes in a dialogue of death until a French muse opened the door. Ms. Red Feather Boa indicated she would be my guide, but I would need to hire a cycle driver to take me to the site. She spoke little English, but assured me I could rely on her to be my interpreter—figure that one out.

We took off and soon arrived at the battlefield. I mistakenly believed you could not walk on the Khe Sanh runway, and two Marine Corps friends had asked me to bring back a souvenir. I was not convinced that Ms. Red Feather Boa’s language skills were up to the challenge, so I showed Comrade Chris’s note to a local who produced a guide, and what a guide he was. Sizing up the note, the young man I will refer to as “Christopher” asked “Where do you want to start—northeast or southwest?” I told him to carry on. We started on the northeast and looked over at Tiger Tooth Mountain in the mist, and one of the five helicopter revetments still extant.
It was “Children’s Day” and school kids were everywhere. The runway is half the size it was when operational, as the other half has been turned over to agriculture. As we walked I got a blow-by-blow of the siege from the North’s perspective. I sought to spice the stew and threw out that the Hanoi crowd had sacrificed the Viet Cong forces in Tet so that when the North won they could take over the best positions and jobs, since all or most of the Viet Cong cadres would have been wiped out. Christopher candidly admitted there might be something to that statement—I was floored—but that we failed to appreciate the psychological impact in both North and South of the NVA holding the world’s mightiest military machine in check for more than seventy days. Hard to argue with that!

We continued to walk the runway and, as few can, he made history come alive—with a different perspective to be sure. Even those not of a military bent can quickly comprehend, and those who served there will never forget. The runway ground cannot forget, bearing silent witness to a war that ended 37 years ago.

From conversations with Marines I learned that the mountains were often cloaked in mists which harbored evil spirits. Marines occupied “bad ground” here, as they did in Lebanon, and were fighting, in the view of some high-ranking Marine Corps officers, “for nothing in nowhere”. Heavy tubes in Laos rained down on the base making simply going to the latrine a dance of death, and two direct hits on the main ammunition storage dumps brought the base as close to hell as you can get without entering.

Supply of the base was by air, and both going in and coming out pilots and loadmasters shoving the stuff out the door faced a daily deadly crap shoot.

The guide was speaking to me in English and to the driver and Ms. Red Feather Boa in Vietnamese. At this point the driver spoke, and he informed us that his two uncles had fought in the siege, and had simply vanished—vaporized, never to be heard from again. I stepped back and thought about that, and how chance had put us together on the Khe Sanh runway.
Christopher questioned me as to why I wanted to walk on the runway, and I replied I was doing a favor for some Marine friends. He then asked if I was going to Lang Vei, and I told him yes. He said I would be disappointed. Why was I walking? I told him I owed it to some friends. He then asked did I owe it to some friends to walk “The Trail”? Given that I had not told him I was going to walk the trail, I told him that was all on me. I did not throw out the “native textiles” dodge. He was far too smart for that.

After the “they just vanished” disclosure, what happened next was equally startling. Christopher indicated that since I was clearly interested in visiting the battlefield and because today was Children’s Day the crowds would probably be too distracting. He volunteered that if I showed up at 6:00 the next morning I would have the place to myself for two hours, as no one would arrive before 8:00. He would leave the gate slightly ajar so I could enter.

As we passed a bunker he noted that with the passage of thirty years or more the Vietnamese preferred United States-made sandbags to new sandbags from China; the U. S. sandbags lasted a lot longer.
As we were about to leave I looked around and saw that the hills were still wreathed in mist. As we parted, with a wry smile Christopher said I think you will be disappointed in Lang Vei, but if you look to Laos, as I am sure you will, it will bring back memories, probably not-so-good memories. Many brave men died on both sides fighting for that worthless piece of territory. I told him if he continued to smoke he would never see his granddaughter play games or attend her wedding. As we were leaving, I asked Ms. Red Feather Boa how she liked the tour. She said it was her first time to Tacon—she was going to be my guide?—and she gushed that she learned a lot! Floored again!

As we returned to Khe Sanh I spied a local dress shop which featured what the stylish Central Highland ladies are wearing. Sad, oh so sad. The triumph of MTV.
Comrade Chris: “The Bru All Became Christians, Now They All Have Cellphones”

Cool, overcast

Up early for a quick run to Tacon and as promised the gate was slightly ajar. Mist wreathing the hills, and a farmer walking his cows to pasture on the runway. We are the only persons on the base as morning birds start to sing. Hard to imagine the cacophony of battlefield sounds—fire, explosions, Willie Pete—all the organs of war going full bore—now silent!

I move to the runway to pick up some dirt and a few stones for my Marine friends, and, as I take a rock and start to scoop some dirt into a medicine bottle my driver, whose two uncles had disappeared, takes another rock and starts to help me gather up the stones and the dirt. I was bowled over.

For the next hour and a half, except for the tinkling of cow bells, we sat on the runway looking at Tiger Tooth Mountain and the mists, each with his own thoughts. A Zen master would have been hard put to set this up. The irony of the two of us together on that runway in the enveloping silence, given the loss he had suffered and my clear allegiance, I doubt was lost on either one of us.

About eight, Christopher arrived and asked how we found the silence, adding that he always found it evocative. He advised me that I would have no silence in Lang Vei as the road went straight through the camp. Not much was left, but I would remember the saddle into
Laos because we lost so many in the cross-border operations. He looked me straight in the eye when he said it.

I told him I would be walking from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei, and he replied, I thought so. The red mists began to stir. He asked if we would like to share some tea with him before we left and we accepted. And then commenced the second out of body experience of that day.

Christopher opened the conversation by asking whether I was familiar with the Chinese “plant a seed in the other land” program. I told him I was not. He proceeded to detail how the Chinese had launched a program offering high prices to buy the front feet of water buffaloes. There appeared to be no rhyme or reason for their doing so, and Vietnamese farmers sold the Chinese their buffaloes.

Soon afterwards the Chinese offered most generous terms for tractors, and now almost all tractors in Vietnam are Chinese tractors. This was soon followed by the Chinese offering the Vietnamese cheap power, and, as Vietnam is power deficient, the Vietnamese government enthusiastically entered into a deal. After a period, and for no apparent reason, the Chinese cut off the power sites and sold power generators to the Vietnamese. Then, after another stretch of time, the power was mysteriously restored.

I told him the Chinese were doing what the Japanese had done earlier in the 1960s. This was good old capitalism, securing market share—nothing wrong with that because obviously the boys in Hanoi had approved all this, and his concerns were just Vietnamese xenophobia. He laughed and said it was all well and good for an American to say this because the tiger’s tail is not in his country, or is it? It is better not to step on the tiger’s tail, wherever it may be. The April 7th issue of The Economist makes a telling argument, a bit more subtly to be sure, concerning China’s military rise—clearly, based upon this article, it is best not to step on the tiger’s tail anywhere, any time.

Christopher suggested that when I returned to America each time I purchased something I should check where it was made, to see if a tiger’s tail is growing in America. He then wished me luck on the walk to A Loui, and he was impressed that I would go it alone. I told him 400,000 of his countrymen had died on that stretch of road, and I wanted to see if I could do it. He said it was a strange thing to do in this time, but I told him I had no other motive. He smiled and said again “alone”. He wished me well once more and said he was sorry we were not on the same side, but the next time around perhaps we would be on the
right side. I thanked him again for allowing us to enjoy the silence. He smiled and said “Walking to A Loui” and I repeated “Walking to A Loui.” At this point a spanking new bus with approximately sixty Lao tourists arrived to enter the compound. Christopher smiled again and said, “In those days you went to Laos, now we bring Laos to you!” I hitched up the ruck as I knew I had 12 klicks to go and set off—another Ambush Alley as the road for tube work was clearly visible from both sides. The Lao mountains loomed to the west and family scenes began to emerge.

Lang Vei, a Special Forces camp that fell in 1968, was the first base attacked by North Vietnamese armor; it had been used extensively as a jumping off point for cross-border operations into Laos. Seventeen Americans, about three hundred ARVN troopers, and a large number of Bru tribesmen who were used as scouts were killed. Controversy still resonates around the conduct of the Marines in not allowing the survivors to enter the Khe Sanh perimeter.

Route 9 runs right through the base, and little of it remains, but one haunting, human image will stay with me forever. The hills to the west of Lang Vei were often covered in mist, and this day was no different.

As I pulled into what was left of the compound area I saw a Soviet tank memorial front and center—oh my kingdom for some armor piercing. I tried to orient myself as to the command bunker, but despite scrambling around I was unable to set it right in my mind.
What I did notice was, according to my driver, a Bru woman seated on a curb. She was facing east, and looking towards what I remember was the Bru village, which was peopled with kids and the Bru families. I sat down beside her and she moved her razor sharp sickle to her other side. She was not crying, but keening, an almost other-worldly sound. She had a piece of wide yellow plastic string, and as I watched her she appeared to be attempting to make a cross—it just wouldn’t come out right. I sat there for an hour listening to her. She took no notice of me but kept staring down the hill toward the tree line. Then I remembered Comrade Chris telling me the missionaries had been very active with the Bru, and many had become Christians. She continued to try to make a cross, continued to fail. Her eyes did not look at you, but through you, to a point beyond you, and the chanting never stopped. She never acknowledged me and I just sat with her until I had to leave.

I told the driver to take me to a point five klicks from Lao Bao as I wanted to walk in. Lao Bao was, just as Comrade Chris had said, nothing but a large border crossing for smuggling from Laos. An officious Vietnamese border guard would not let me closer, but I did get a picture with the flag. However, all was not lost, as Chris had told me I would be able to see the remains of the old French prison where many “politicos” had perished during French colonial times.

We found the prison and purchased our tickets, but there were no guides and the guidebook was useless. We probably
appeared as bewildered as we were when a dignified French tourist detached herself from her group and took us in hand.

The Frenchwoman showed us the prison cells and described the conditions under which the prisoners were held—barbaric. The cells were clearly nothing more than large coffins, and no one could have stood upright in them. The heat must have been close to the temperature of hell. Our guide brought us to the memorial to the prisoners who had been guillotined, and then to the present government’s monument to those early martyrs. She spent the better part of three-quarters of an hour with us, and only left when her tour bus began to honk. Another example of beyond gracious hospitality. Three in one day.

I told the driver that on our way back I wanted to return to the Lang Vei site. I wanted to see if the Bru woman was still there—she was, and she was still trying to make the cross from plastic string. I looked out to Laos as dusk settled, she looked inward and continued to chant. A more than memorable moment. I felt helpless and didn’t know what to do or how to help. I returned to the hotel to contemplate The Trail.
“You will be the object of attention, hospitality, offered rides all along the way.”

Bamboo Boy, Lonely Planet Forum

Cool, overcast

Today starts the unknown part of the adventure and I am concerned for several reasons. I wanted an early start so I requested a zero dark thirty call—no need, no way I could sleep.

In preparing for a solo walking trip in an area reported to have “nothing down there,” it is mandatory that you hit checkpoints; you are going to be asking people permission to stay in their homes, or looking for public rest houses, and there are long stretches between points. The checkpoints provide not only a sense of accomplishment, but also give you a reasonable timeline to complete the journey. In a trip like “The Trail”, strange as it may seem, maps are hard to come by, and I am indebted to Stan Volynsky who was not only a constant source of support, but was also able to create a virtual program which allowed us to select villages that appeared to offer reasonable checkpoints; the hospitality part rested on Comrade Chris’s “laissez-passer” which I was to present to Vietnamese as I moved along. The trail program covered the Da Krong Bridge to A Loui, with Route 49 to Hue posing its own set of problems.

I appeared in the lobby at 04:30 and was greeted by Ms. Red Feather Boa who had slept behind the desk. I was wearing a Buddhist talisman and Spetsnaz ID—as Stan said, I covered all the bases on this one. Ms. Red Feather Boa queried me as to the Spetsnaz signature on my hat—she had previously seen the Buddhist
talisman. She informed me that Russians and Buddhism don’t mix—at such an early hour her observation brought a smile to my face. Then she confided that in the early ’80s her aunt had a tumultuous relationship with a Russian, and I should get off the Russian kick and go with Buddha. Another little smile. I told her I needed all the help I could get, and I was going with both.

Ms. Red Feather Boa told me she was very concerned that I would not be able to walk to A Loui, and if I would stay she would give me two free nights in the hotel, and I could then catch a motorcycle to A Loui. She appeared genuinely concerned and what I experienced next will never be forgotten. She brought out three joss sticks, lit them up, bowed three times and placed them in the shrine altar in the lobby.

I was more than touched that she was trying to put me on a celestial rail; the incense was pleasant, and all I could offer her in return were my sincerest thanks. She added that she understood a van would be going to A Loui in two days’ time and she would have them be on the lookout for me. If my father had been there he would have smacked me to my knees for having been such a social snob the day before. I must learn to be more considerate of Red Feather Boas, day or night. On this note I left the hotel with the motorcycle driver whose uncles had “disappeared.”

The town was silent, no lights in homes, and we moved quickly down Route 9 to the Da Krong Bridge. It was still dark when we arrived, and we waited for the false dawn. As it broke the motorcycle guy rubbed my legs, gave me a thumbs up and departed. I looked across the bridge. Then I looked at the sign and it brought the second smile of the day to my face.

The trail was no longer a trail but a well surfaced two lane road. I started off and tried to imagine what it was like weighing 140 lbs and pushing 150 lbs of munitions down this road. Hundreds of thousands had carried, pushed, dragged and lugged all the necessary war supplies for the Viet Cong troops in the South.
Hundreds of thousands went down the trail. Fewer than half came back, victims of bombs, disease, malnutrition and exhaustion.

The initial stretch was up and down with large hills on each side. I was walking on that part of the trail that Major Hathorn described as one of his first missions in *Here There are Tigers*. I would occasionally go close to the river. A stilt home in a classic slash and burn field exemplified the isolation of the trail. At times the landscape would break out and the tireless industry of the Vietnamese peasant farmer would be juxtaposed against the slash and burn activity of the hill tribesman.

For those who have walked the point, the Highland mists, which keep it cool, are a constant reminder of the spirit world. I moved along, going up and down several hundred feet in five
kilometers, but the walk was not stressful. I adopted Joyce London’s view: “Remember why you are here and enjoy it.” I knew somewhere further down was a 2,500 foot climb with a screwy checkpoint at both ends.

American style laundry came into view and the family washing was definitely Southern California. Stunning landscapes showed the effects of slash
and burn activity, and I could oversee large fires from across the river. For four hours the silence was deafening—nothing passed me, and I passed no towns of any significance. I was getting into it when incongruities began to show up. At what I thought must be half way to the checkpoint at Ly Ton, I noticed a stilt house with satellite TV and another putting in a driveway for that Lotus second car. As I moved along I looked mostly west and tried to imagine what it must have been like when the first 0-2 appeared—marked smoke and you knew the fast and slow movers were seconds behind. The trail continued to rise and fall, and then I heard my first motorcyclist who almost crashed while looking at me.

When Stan and I selected Ly Ton as the first checkpoint we did so because there was not much on either side, but now I was getting antsy because I had passed no one to ask how much further I had to go. I carried on going up and down with super scenery on both sides. Two more motorcycles passed me, and I began to comprehend “there is nothing down there.”

On toward afternoon I saw the sun for the first time and I realized it was the enemy. I tried to walk in the shade, but for long stretches it was impossible to avoid the sunlight. I stopped for one hour, as I never move during the noon hour; but when you are trying to hit a checkpoint your anxiety goes up after the noon hour because, as everyone knows, when night falls in the Highlands you cannot see the hand in front of your face. I pushed on now more to reach the checkpoint than to live the trail. The terrain was hilly, the river had vanished, and still nothing around.

I hit a work site and asked everybody which way to Ly Ton. I got blank stares. I showed them my map—it might as well have been written in Sanskrit. Best to go low key in these situations, but I was getting quirky, and for the rest of the trip I always threw in Center Sandwich. No matter, I got the same response. Then the road crew offered me food, and one guy said 20 klicks. Another said nothing. I knew the guy who said 20 klicks was off because what had I been doing for the last six hours? One pointed to Laos. Now I was in the game, but what game?

It was getting late, the pucker factor started to kick in, and I pushed up the treadmill speed. I found an individual who walked with me for two kilometers to Ly Ton, which I would have missed on my own, as it was about 200 meters off the road. A small modern town of about fifty modern homes, and I quickly became an object of interest to the younger cell phone set. There were no elderly people in sight.
I produced Chris's laissez-passer and it was handed around to much merriment. I rapidly began not to like this crowd, and I guess it was mutual because they gave me that contemptuous right hand wave and told me, in effect, to get out of town. It was still light and there was nothing for miles, but I returned to the road where I saw a young man in a hammock. I presented my pass to him and he motioned me to wait. Out from a beautiful stilt house came a most dignified individual. He motioned for me to come into his home, and pointed to the floor in the family room. I had gone from hell to heaven in barely 400 meters.

I went to the veranda, took off my boots and leaned against the house. My host came out and put a pillow between my back and the wall. For the next hour as the mists came in from Laos, I watched him make bamboo strips with a razor sharp sickle as he wove the most exquisite small round basket I had ever seen. Me, I had made my check, I had a place to stay, and I was remembering what it was like to feel good. I was in for a bit more.

As I re-entered the home I looked up and saw two (not one, so he was obviously a cadre of some sort) Viet Cong certificates and a three foot long picture of Ho. My host’s red star officer’s pith helmet hung from a hook near the certificates. We could not communicate with words, but I made him understand I was walking to A Loui. I ate with the family, watched Vietnamese television—yes, TV on the trail—and spent the rest of the evening practicing English phrases with my host’s son. Everyone gathered round to sample my PowerBars (chocolate won out over oatmeal), and they all had a grand time with my Swiss Army Knife—does it get any better than this?

Before I went to sleep I pondered why we have the McNamaras and they have this guy—it just doesn’t seem fair! And I made a mental note to put Ly Ton on a list, and they should be in the first frag order.
A Further Stroll Down The Trail to Meet the Wild Crowd

Overcast, warm

A zero dark thirty start and it was more than touching. My host woke me and as I dressed he motioned me to the veranda where he offered me a home-made cigarette. I signaled that I did not smoke. We sat together on the veranda in silence as light came over the hills. When he finished his smoke he walked me to the head of the courtyard, smiled and gently showed me to the road. We laughed as I moved off. I looked back and he was still standing in the yard until I turned out of sight. To my mind he defined, in its truest sense, the word “class”, his ideology be damned. I needed to go no further to make the trip a success. My plan had been to travel as fast and as far as possible, so that on the third day I would be close to the climb, with Thon Ke as the destination, 31 klicks away. I never made it. I was having too much fun.

The road was a gradual climb with nothing, and I mean nothing, out there. For scenery, triple canopy jungle on each side, and I was alone again for hours with the silence. The trail was open, and the hills on each side became steeper. No birds, nothing, for miles. Two motorcycles passed and gave me no notice. Hills steeper still, houses with dish TVs appearing out of nowhere, then on to more nothingness.

The idea that I should hustle to Thon Ke was good, but candidly I was enjoying myself too much, and I slowed to take it all in. I kept looking for bottle-necks and found none—the trail hugged the hill halfway up, open to the winged death coming from the north, south and west but not east. Because of the hill, coming in from the east would not give you a good run and you would over-shoot. I kept looking to the west and tried to imagine seeing aircraft coming over the hills on a run. More than sobering to contemplate. More silence, more reflection, slower pace. Although it appeared I was not climbing I noticed a strain on
my legs. The scenery was like the day before, but the hills appeared higher and closer to the trail. No one passed me for five hours.

The sun came out and it started to heat up—here there was no shade. I saw a van pass headed for Tarot and I knew I was not as far along as I hoped—I quickened my pace, but more climbing and still no shade. I fell further behind on my schedule. I came across a work crew and asked for A Deng, and showed them the map. I got the idea I could have showed them Chaucer in old English and done as well—vacant stares. Just to keep a hand in I asked for directions to Center Sandwich and got the same response. No surprise.

I passed a very small town I believed to be A La, and I stopped to get water. I quickly became the center of attention in this 100 yard town, and I peeled off my rucksack which was soaked with sweat. I opened it up and found my strip map was soaked, as were my notes from the previous day. I sat and tried to plan my next move.

An older man tapped me on the shoulder and motioned that he would like to see the strip map and notes. I motioned OK. He carefully opened the map and notes and put the individual sheets in the sun to dry. He then went back and sat on his haunches while I pondered a lot of things about his conduct—good things. I stayed there serenaded by the birds. Thirty minutes and nothing passed in either direction.

As I made to leave he carefully refolded the map and notes, wrapped them in plastic and returned them to me. Floored again! He motioned a request to see my ring, and asked if he could put on my sunglasses. The camera was not working. A shot lost for the ages. The whole town appeared to see me off—does it get any better on a cruise ship?

I had some decisions to make, and although relatively cool, the sun was starting to make my decisions for me. I knew I was never going to make the next checkpoint. The ground started to rise, I hit A Deng, and the fun started all over again. I stopped at a small store, cum
restaurant, and the group was, to say the least, eclectic. I was particularly enamored of the camouflage worn by one of the guys. My Buddha talisman got things started, and then the ring. It was as if the blue van crowd had sent the word down the line. First, the bombing routine, then the machine gun routine. Polite denials.

I knew I was at least ten miles short of the checkpoint but the climb had taken its toll. I produced my laissez-passer and the family enthusiastically showed me where I could sleep—a table in their establishment. It looked good to me. The mynah bird and others were going full tilt—more than pleasant.

One of the most renowned chroniclers of industrial design is Henry Petrosky, and while waiting for evening to fall I witnessed a scene worthy of his insights. A van arrived and two huge boxes were off loaded, a young man struggling under their weight. Along comes a diminutive Vietnamese young lady on, I believe, a Honda Dream which was already loaded up with plastic jugs of cooking oil. The bike had been modified to accommodate two large metal wire baskets, wings almost, on either side of the rear wheel. The young man staggers, lifts the two boxes onto the wings and slashes them down. The young lady mounts the bike, and with a grain bag on her lap fires up the machine. At first it doesn’t start, and when it does, the bike almost rolls over from the load. Finally the engine
wakes up and bike and driver wobble off, drawing to a close the afternoon’s human drama.

For the rest of the afternoon I watch life pass by—nothing—but when I tell the group I was headed to A Loui, Mr. Camouflage gives the universal sign for sex; he was heading out to get some and did I want to come along. He departs in a cloud of dust. I quietly watch the night approach, walk to the end of town and scan the ridge lines—they looked higher. My host and hostess offer me food, and I note that up until I went to sleep nothing passed us—this was the end of the line.

A Night on Bald Mountain

Overcast, warm

I knew before I started that I was in for a bit of a go. The family saw me off. Camouflage had not returned from his sexual adventuring. I was at least ten kilometers behind schedule, and I was looking at a 2,500 foot climb. The sun was coming out and from Thon Ke I faced 10 kilometers of nothing on this side of the hill. I needed to get to Ta Ay—not going to happen—because I had time constraints and no money if I missed my flight. Comrade Chris’s wisdom in building in a day came into play. I had to move—onward and upward.

As soon as the trail turned east I was climbing, and I mean climbing. The northern vistas were small canyons of triple cover jungle. The southern were steep hills close to the trail. My camera was acting strange and the best approximation I can offer would be a black and white Sebastian Laval photo of the High-lands. The surroundings were beautiful, not to be missed, but a bitch for me, and my “walk 100 steps, rest 10 seconds” was not cutting it. The trail was below the ridges, but with a steep drop 2,500 feet into the small canyons. To your right the hill was right on you, and the grade steep. Hard to appreciate all the beauty when you are slogging to reach an unattainable goal, but I had discovered a targeteer’s choke point dream. I do not care how strong you are, when you are push-ng the equivalent of your weight up 2,500 feet you slow down. You are more than vulnerable, especially on a switchback. In this instance your bombing or strafing run would come from the south, and you could slide the whole hill into the canyon.

I take a few moments to ponder this. True, many years had passed, but I would have thought the area would still look a bit like the surface of the moon. Not so. To me there seemed to be no visible damage at all. I continue to walk, and I am definitely straining. I pass a road repair crew with a blue tent and a table,
but I press on. I will quickly regret this decision. I think again about what it must have been like for porters to carry, push, drag and wheel their body weight up this hill. I was only carrying 30 pounds. They were carrying 150—better men than I. I will never again look at a climb up Mount Chocorua as anything more than a pleasant stroll.

Once more, Joyce London’s admonition kicks in, and I let myself take it all in—but this Ansel Adams moment is tinged with anxiety, because where am I going to stay? I can either throw myself into the canyon or find a break in a nine-foot drainage ditch, and drainage ditches harbor all sorts of unfriendly creatures and unpleasant things, not to mention the water. Plus, I could feel the humidity beginning to ramp up.

Prior to my leaving the States, one courtroom deputy declared dismissively: “Batchelder is going to Vietnam so he can sleep in a ditch.” At this point in time a dry, reasonably safe ditch would have done me just fine—there simply was no dry ditch, and no way I could climb over the ten or eleven foot upside retaining wall.

Nothing had passed for hours, and besides, I was damned if I would ask for a ride. I couldn’t quit because there was no place to sit down. I cursed my stupidity in not staying at the work station. The pull was beginning to get to me and my stride was shortening. I increased the length of my steps. Finally, I was able to scramble gracelessly over a somewhat lower retaining wall—a memorable sight had there been a passer-by.

I could go no farther—had to spend the night. A steep grade, but some sturdy if not large trees. I had faith in my equipment and I went into attack mode. Two things of concern were snakes and leeches. I tied off my ankles and waist and put my feet in the ruck and cinched it up—belt till it hurt—and then got into a cocoon poncho which I cinched up, everything in it cinched about as tight as possible. Knees up, tied it all to the tree. Time to take in the view. For two hours I watched the mists come in, and then pitch black.

Just before it all shut down, a guy on a Honda Dream came racing by talking on his cell phone, and that, to my mind, was an act of devotion, because if he slipped he was gone forever. No one would ever find him in that triple cover 2,500 feet down. I hope his dinner was warm. I sprayed myself and all around me with insect repellant, not knowing if it was a good or bad thing, but if it had been Strontium 90 the area would be a hot spot for a million years. The repellant tasted vile, and I hoped it would discourage any uninvited guests from entering
the cocoon. There were no noises or sounds whatsoever. No stars, no light, pitch black. Although not an ideal situation and not in the travel brochures, I wasn’t too badly off—the cocoon poncho was almost tent like, if a bit snug. Although the insect repellant was vile, I felt reasonably safe, and I was on the very road where 400,000 ghosts and shades patrolled. Although not exactly a relaxing evening, the bastards hadn’t put me down, nor was I going to quit! I was so cocooned up I could not get to my water and PowerBars, so I just had to hold out the night—the porters had endured a lot worse.

Before going to sleep I flashed back to summer session of my first year of law school at the University of Virginia. Charlottesville is a lovely spot, but if you are straight out of Southeast Asia and have been cooped up for nine months with no money it tends to addle the mind.

In those days the school had a shirt and tie dress code, somewhat relaxed for summer, but promptness was mandatory regardless of the season. My roommate and I were living in a cave apartment that was so damp mold grew on our shoes. When he cooked a sumptuous repast for a lady friend she politely indicated she would forgo the pleasure of returning to our abode and would instead, in the future, cook meals for us.

Anarchism or whatever was in the air and we, both veterans, wanted to make a statement. I had a Japanese yukata complete with wide sash, and even straw sandals. I do not remember what he was wearing, but as he is an intellectual and very inventive, it was surely wildly inappropriate.

It was raining hard when we emerged from our cave. As we got to the top of the stairs some guy started playing, loudly, some discordant, weird, powerful and haunting music. We stopped. I asked my roommate what it was, as he knew everything. He answered, Mussorgsky’s “Night on Bald Mountain.” In the pouring rain we listened through to its conclusion.

You were never late for class and above all you never made anything that could be construed as a “grand entrance.” Professor Bunn said nothing as we entered, but it was the talk of the law school for the year. More importantly, although I can’t hum it, “A Night on Bald Mountain” stuck with me through life. Additionally, I had recently discovered Mozart’s “Piano Concerto 20”—and who doesn’t know 21—and its haunting first movement was burned into my soul.

On that desolate mountain in the Central Highlands the eeriness of the Mussorgsky, and Beethoven’s equally haunting cadenza to Piano Concerto 20, were companionship enough. Quiet, no lights, emptiness—with companions like
these we will do okay, and we did. I went to sleep without a hitch and, although I missed my check, I was still in the game. Attack, attack, attack, and if you fail, attack again and the world will yield.

The Gay Caballeros and the Ambiance of A Loui

I awoke at first light and slowly, ever so slowly, shook things out. No leeches or unwanted intruders, but I am ripped at myself and on a mission. By my calculation I am just below the big switchback, and I have about 21 klicks to go and a 1,000 feet climb. The camera works for one picture, I hope, and I am moving out, and I mean moving out. I was so furious at myself I was almost glowing. I got into a new regime. I took little notice of my surroundings until I hit the 18 klick marker from A Loui and found myself on level ground. The houses were more modern and I soon began to pass small towns. Then, to my surprise, I came upon a wide boulevard town with some French Colonial architecture. I was surprised because I had not expected anything so grand. I realized it had taken me almost eighteen hours to do 26 klicks—must do better with the elevation planning.

I passed, of all things, a three story glass and steel hotel, and I do not understand to this day why I continued on, but I did. Propitious choice leading to many hilarious moments. I came to a small café, cum music store, where four Vietnamese caballeros were seated. One picked up a Coke can and held it high, shook it and motioned for me to sit down, which I did. They bought me a Coke and we started the pantomime. Much checking of my legs, and when I pantomimed I was walking to Hue they offered a ride. Although I didn’t speak their language they were all enjoying themselves so I silently joined in. I was the recipient of another Coke. I didn’t tell them that although not a
drinker I was in such a fury at myself I would have tossed back absinthe if they had offered it.

After my second Coke I noticed the music sounded familiar—it was Clad-dermann playing “Rhapsody in Blue”, to my mind the anthem of New York. We listened for almost an hour and one of them came back with the disc and offered it to me as a gift. I politely declined. Clad-dermann, seventy-five miles down the trail with four guys I can’t speak with drinking Cokes—how cool is that?

I indicated I was hungry and they directed me to a shop next door. I presented my food note from Comrade Chris (“I want beef soup” or “I want chicken soup”) and ordered chicken. I had seen the chickens as I entered, which gives new meaning to the word fresh.

My beef soup, not chicken, arrived but I didn’t care if it was rancid wildebeest, it was going down; Power-Bars had lost their luster at this stage of the game. The cook, with a great flourish because she decided I was not skilled with chop-sticks, stuck a large pair of shears which had been God knows where into my soup and cut up the noodles. I did not care where they had been—it beats PowerBars. Hot food! Over the top!

While I was enjoying my wrong soup, a large heavyset woman in a tight-fitting green muumuu arrived and seated herself a few tables away. She took out a ledger and appeared to
be reviewing the entries. A few minutes later a Vietnamese young lady arrives on a tricked out Honda Dream, wearing a beautiful tan suit and sensible shoes—your basic ten and a half. She would float down Fifth Avenue.

Madam reviews the ledger, counts out about twenty bills, and Miss A Loui departs. Me, I am into my soup, but about ten minutes later my interest piques when another ten and a half skirt, not so sensible shoes, arrives on a tricked out bike—velvet crash helmet no less—and sits down with Madam who counts out more bills. Ms. Second Skirt A Loui departs and, although slow on the uptake, I think I have an idea about what is going on—lucky Camouflage Guy, whichever one he got, although it may be that only time will tell.

At this point Madam notices me, gives the universal sign for sex, holds up fingers one and two, grabs her cell phone and starts to make a call. By this time, after much practice on the trail, I have the dismissive Vietnamese right hand wave-off down pat, and I flash her one. But to be gallant I blow her a kiss. Sadly, she did not appear to be amused. However, this little tableaux explained why Camouflage Guy was so hot to blow out of town the other night.

I pantomime with the caballeros and they confirm the hotel is owned by Chinese. When I give them the universal hand sign for sex and hold up two fingers—they hold up three. No wonder Camouflage was still MIA. One of the caballeros takes me to a five-dollar guesthouse; I want to get out of my clothes, take a shower and become a “new man”.
I attempt to register with a reasonably attractive young lady who is charmin-
gly clueless. Next, as if on cue, a grossly obese older man with his belly hanging
over his belt appears and starts yelling for my passport. I turn it over. I must
check with Comrade Chris to see if this belly over belt routine is meant to be a
fashion statement.

My room is basic but clean and gives new meaning to the phrase “the
water heater is in the bathroom.” The showerhead, no bathtub or stall, sprays
water right onto the bathroom floor, not exactly the Waldorf. Before I showered
I thought I would charge my camera as it had been acting screwy. I put the
charger into one socket and it shoots into the middle of the room. Undaunted, I
put it into another outlet and this time it shoots six feet into the air. A Maquib
exorcism is clearly called for, but not before I take a shower. No hot water, but
the Harlem Y had cold water showers. I dove in, and almost immediately the
power came on. The mist and the wires intrigued me. I had visions of “Geriatric
Vet Electrocuted In Vietnam Under Mysterious Circumstances,” but I refused to
quit—I had to get that insect repellant off me to open the pores. I soldiered on,
and the water was nothing compared to the Y. All new clothes laid out for tomor-
row, and then it hits me. The walkabout will soon be over. I wanted to keep going
to Saigon. Ennui.

**The Way Home**

**Overcast, warm**

Stan and I knew precious little about Route 49 except that it was 62
clicks to Hue and there was no place to stop. The standard response to inquiry
was: no water, no place to stop. Little water, yes, but if you love the Highlands
the experience is magical—truly magical. The terrain is downhill, and much
can be accomplished in the shade until the ground levels out. Once again I was
walking through a living Sebastian Laval photo. I was enchanted.

I didn’t want it to end. I got up early and made my slow, solitary way
out of town, or so I thought at first. As I walked I noticed I was joined by more and more kids. I thought I was big stuff but as we came to a school they all dropped off—big man from the East crushed by his arrogant assumption. As I moved along I came once more to a clash of East and West. Despite the stilt house in the distance, grandmother and granddaughter have both feet in the West, whereas the peasant woman with her bike could be a porter on the trail.
I knew the Hue turnoff was about 8 klicks from the hotel, but when I came to a local market I sat down for a cup of tea—I just didn’t want to let it go. I began to think about Ashau, only 24 klicks away. It can’t be as tame as A Loui. Then on to Saigon—get behind me Satan, just not too far. I asked the guy at the next plank for Hue, and he pointed to a group of low buildings down the road. What was I supposed to do, walk through them? I tried again and got the same response. He must have thought I was nuts, and I was sure he was off. Finished tea and walked on. By chance I looked over and the Hue click marker was there; if I hadn’t turned my head I would have been on my way to Ashau. Not such a bad thing!

No farewell, just a small one lane paved road. I entered a tree lined canopy and I was headed home. I climbed for a couple of kilometers and then saw the most spectacular Highland view—another Sebastian Laval postcard come alive—little traffic, and I started going down gradually. Wall to wall vistas of the Highlands. Walking in the shade, it was magical. As I walked on it was all before me, with a few ups, but the vistas were awesome—beyond magical—clearly no place to stay, but I reluctantly kept up a good pace. Very light traffic. Every cyclist who passed me offered me a ride, and after thirty kilometers towns appeared. I didn’t want to let go so I slowed down.

I was getting close to the plains and the heat and humidity began to attack, but I was still high on the first part of the trip. As close as I could figure I was about seven klicks from Quoc. I engaged in a bit of civil disobedience. I went into a schoolyard and watched the world go by. I am used to New Hampshire’s beauty—its mountains are higher. Here the drop off into the valleys reminded me of the Helambu region of Nepal. The silence settled comfortably on my shoulders; once an hour a bike rolled by. I stayed on the school veranda and nobody seemed to mind.
Where is La Residence?

Rainy, warm

Yesterday I could kid myself that it was not all coming to a close, but today I had no such illusions. As I moved toward Quoc I began to encounter small businesses and almost immediately the bird symphony commenced—pleasant, now familiar sounds. The day began to get hot and I started my search for La Residence—this proved to be more challenging than any French boxwood maze. I kept walking until I hit a huge concrete bridge and I knew I was crossing the Perfume River—lots of stares as I walked across the bridge. I was a bit lost, but I knew if I turned north I would be OK.

My reasoning was just follow the river, hit the Citadel, and then into La Residence. Sounds good but that only works if the road follows the river—it does not, and I might as well have been in the casbah in Algiers. I must say I was pretty much ignored by the outskirts crowd, and I didn’t much care if I had to wander around all day. I just didn’t want it to end. I was going to walk in as I walked out. I spied a green taxi, hailed him, got a quizzical stare which soon turned into laughter—he didn’t know where La Residence was, these five stars are hard to find! He got in the game, went to his base. La Loi Street was the rallying cry. He drew me a map and when I tried to give him money he refused.

I set off and when I emerged from the casbah I knew I had it made. At this juncture city folk became as curious as country folk about this strange apparition in their midst. I walked into the lobby of La Residence with eight days growth of
beard, a club, a Spetsnaz signature on my hat with a Russian airborne roundel on the cap. I think it can be fairly said I was not one of the usual lobby denizens.

The front desk crew had been most helpful before the trip and came over to quiz me about my adventure. I complimented them on the beauty of their country, and the hospitality and kindness of the people I had encountered.

The ice cream at La Residence is so expensive, but oh so good—ice cream for the reception staff and two scoops of coconut for me. I took a seat near the bar and savored the smooth coolness of the ice cream and the subtle coconut flavor—for three months I had disciplined myself not to eat ice cream. While I contemplated the “real” meaning of coconut ice cream, two couples, two Governor’s Island types, one in camouflage shorts, the other in yellow shorts, and their two wives, a bit out of sorts by the look of it, in Talbots and Ms. Brooks, gingerly sat down at the adjacent table.

Camouflage Shorts wore NATO pattern, thank God it wasn’t tiger stripe. (Where do they find these war fashionistas?) He opened the conversation by stating they had spent the day touring the DMZ but “it was a great waste of time,” as there is not much up there.

Camouflage Shorts looked at the “equalizer” and told me I didn’t look too good, whatever that might mean, and he asked me what I had been doing. I told him I was walking in the countryside studying “native textiles”, and the stick was to keep the animals at bay. I was pleased to see that this mollified the group and I was no longer considered an interloper assassin that hotel security had failed to latch onto. I did not elaborate further, but I asked if they were headed to Ho Chi Minh City; it is better to use this appellation rather than Saigon, especially when you are speaking to someone wearing NATO camouflage shorts in Southeast Asia. I told them that everything they could conceivably want was on Dong Hoi Street. I was a bit put off initially when I saw the camouflage shorts, although when I recovered my manners I wished them “good hunting” on their shopping expedi-
tion. The camouflage value of courtesy to obscure the sharp edges of scorn never ceases to amaze me.

I pondered “nothing much there” for a while—well, for starters, probably 20,000 U.S. soldiers died or were wounded in the Highlands; and whatever your political persuasion, at least 400,000 Vietnamese, give or take 100,000 souls, perished in the Highlands. I was reminded of a statement attributed to Stalin that a single death is a tragedy, but two or more is a statistic. I don’t quite see it that way, and if my walk taught me just one thing, it was that I had a lot of company from both sides every step of the way. Maybe that was what Camouflage Shorts was getting at—sadly, I don’t think so, and, perhaps a bit cruelly, I didn’t think Ms. Governor’s Island was thinking of anything but damaging that Black American Express Card on Dong Hoi Street.

The photos that follow show a few of the treasures “up there”, missed by the Camouflage crowd, who shared their time and hospitality with me if only for a few brief moments. The gentleman sitting on a rock, a former recondo scout out of Da Nang, spent seven years in a “reeducation” camp. Marines always have it harder; the average camp time was about three and a half years. His English was good, now cutting weeds—everything gone, family, the lot! Also “up there” was an unnamed driver whose two uncles simply disappeared at Khe Sanh; Ms. Red Feather Boa, whose concern on the day of my departure would melt a heart of stone; my first Viet Cong cadre who by his simple gesture of hospitality lifted despair off my shoulders; the shopkeeper who carefully separated my maps and papers, put them out to dry in the sun and then just as meticulously put them back together; and, among a host of others, the “Four Gay Caballeros” who listened dreamily to Richard Claydermann—I guess who and what’s up there depends on how you look at it. I know how I look at it, and that is why I don’t stay in first class hotels that require me to associate with the vapid vulgar rich who are not merely boorish but, unforgivably, oh so boring—go get ‘em, Tom Wolfe!
Those eight days are nothing to Sierra Club fanatics—could do it in a day and see what? Wat's more, this little adventure will have no impact on world peace, global warming, gender equality; in fact no impact at all on any deeply meaningful issue.

What it does prove is that if you plan carefully, prepare yourself physically, and aim higher than you should, you can achieve a lot more than people give you credit for. The SAS motto “Who Dares Wins” is a good one for life. On a personal hygiene note, “The Trail” gave a giant boost to rinsing the sordid stench of curry from my personal life.

**The Last Days**

I had a day and a half to kill but before embarking to socialize with the bridge crowd I checked in at Harry’s to see that all was well. Customers “light”, but I was put in charge of the red velvet rope, and when I returned the three lotto sellers were waiting for me. Lotto tickets and Cokes all around. Who says good news doesn’t travel fast, even in Hue? Oceans of black tea—appointment made for tomorrow. I spent the day with the coven at the bridge and the stories flowed like water. Back to Harry’s to patrol the velvet rope, on guard against the avaricious. I told the proprietress I would be leaving the next day.
**Back into the Steel Bird**

Next morning at Harry’s the three lotto sellers were waiting, and they ordered me a Coke. They were drinking vile green tea, and when I went to pay I was told by the proprietor it was their gift. We sat silent for an hour and when I got up to leave they each gave me a lotto ticket to remember them by. Despite the fact that we could not communicate except through the proprietor, and despite the fact her English was broken, I never in my life had a better sendoff. I took the flight to Saigon, and as we taxied on the runway I spied a very poor tag of the peace sign on Revetment 4—how did the guy get out there to do it? He was clearly in a hurry; sedition everywhere! Arrived at the Domestic terminal and walked over to the International Departures terminal. I had four hours to kill, so I sat and watched the “action” at International Departures.

**Avarice and the Steel Bird**

I thought I had experienced enough vignettes to last me a lifetime, but they just kept coming! For reasons I cannot explain I craved a Whopper, and when I arrived on the outside of the International concourse I saw Burger King was at one end and a Pizza Hut at the other with nothing in between; Pax Americana through fast food. I thought if I got lucky something ludicrous would happen, and I was not disappointed.

I ordered my Whopper, no pickles please, and they got the order right. As I went to sit down a middle-aged Vietnamese couple arrived. She sported 15 to 20 carats of diamonds and the obligatory half an arm of gold bangles. I projected that if she fell in a mud puddle she would drown from their weight. They sat down at an adjacent table. She had seven pieces of Vuitton, one of them being the old steamer trunk of the twenties. I figure this small impedimenta would keep Caesar’s legions on the march for a week—talk about a “grand entrance”! As they say in my neighborhood, bet you they burned up twenty large or I will buy you a bottle of Henny. Governor’s Island, anyone? All aboard—worse was to come.

He was tricked out in four hideous pieces of Rimowa—all the rage with the trend sensitive—save me from this! I was pleased to see it was all in red. This is a communist country, you know! The guys in my neighborhood would lay it would kill six large. Then they noticed the Buddha talisman and started to chat me up.
Bottom line, they had just nipped over from Singapore, where they live, for three days of shopping in Saigon. People like this and I have a hard time with the Ho Chi Minh appellation, but for totally different reasons. I said you must have hit Dong Hoi Street hard. They said they come every two months and do not go anywhere else. She rapturously cooed “It’s all there.” From the looks of it quite a bit of “it” was not still there. Their Whopper with fries arrived and they, as did I, devoured American fast food—Pax Americana!

The C-130 is an American cargo aircraft with dirt field and STOL capabilities. It set the operational bar so high that even today it is the workhorse of several nations. The aircraft is coveted for a multitude of reasons by countries up to good and to no good. As I was waiting for the call for my flight, as is my wont, I ambled down to Gate 20, the last gate on the concourse. I walked beyond the gate and spied a C-130 approximately one hundred yards down the tarmac. It was unusual in that it appeared to have all new engines, and it was all black—no, and I mean no, national markings or markings of any kind—a most unusual sight.

I watched the plane for two hours and then saw another peculiar sight—a crew of three roundeyes, USAF flight suits, and two Vietnamese with no flight suits, but some kind of uniform. They fired her up, headed for 25R, and took off for who knows where? You could almost go back 52 years when aircraft like this were a dime a dozen at Tan Son Nhut, and the smell of JP4 was everywhere—who won the war? Indeed, or more ominously, what was this most useful relic of a bygone age doing on that runway without markings? Ours don’t leak oil like the Russian ones do so that gladdened my heart. Something to think about. They called my flight, and I was soon on my way back to the land of the Big BX.

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Thanks for this little adventure go out to Comrade Chris for her insights, blazing humor, a laissez-passé and a much needed ideological tune-up so I could find “The Correct Line”; Stan and Ilyna Volynsky for gifts of equipment and food, and oceans of patience as we worked the maps; a big Spanish Harlem shout-out to SI and NV for the torch of “eternal love” en beton that lit the fuse; Bamboo Boy of the Lonely Planet Thorn Tree Forum who provided thoughtful advice; and finally to Andy Greenberg and Carol Prendergast because they were “True Believers” in the very best sense of the term—they never wavered, although I do suspect they thought I might have gone “a bit too far” this time.

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