



Summer 2008

VETERANS VIET NAM RESTORATION PROJECT

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Dedication

This newsletter is dedicated to the memory of the Vietnamese and American troops who fought and died in the battles for the A Shau Valley.



A Luoi military cemetery (Jim Cooper in background)

"We were all reduced to tears...."

On Wednesday we visited a cemetery for 1,800 Vietnamese soldiers who died in the War. We had a wreath made with the VVRP team XXIII name and, in Vietnamese, "with honor." We placed it at the obelisk in the graveyard and placed incense at many of the graves. Sixty per cent of the markers read "A soldier of the American war." These were the unknowns. Reading the headstones we were all reduced to tears, sharing the loss of all the Vietnamese families we've come to know.

Bob Kennedy



Andy Hlavaty places incense at cemetery obelisk

VVRP Team XXIII a Success

This visit to Viet Nam with Team XXIII was one of the best things I have ever done....

Sam Bunge

This past April, Team XXIII traveled to A Dot Commune in the A Luoi District of Hue Province. Its 13 members spent two weeks helping the Vietnamese build a six room primary school in this poor, tribal region of Viet Nam. It will serve 200 children.

The A Luoi District is located in the A Shau Valley and borders Laos. It is largely off limits to foreigners. Team XXII visited the region in 2007, opening the way for Team XXIII.

Two of the 11 veterans on the Team were accompanied by their wives.

The project's cost of \$30,000 was shared equally by VVRP, Lotus Humanitarian Aid Foundation, and Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. We are grateful to our donors for providing our share.

This newsletter recounts the experience of Team XXIII in its members' words and pictures.



Team XXIII

Back row (L-R) Charlie Wishart, Gary Thompson, Larry Hlavaty, Jim Cooper, A Luoi VN vet, Chris Meyer, Gail Sepulveda, Steve Chappell, Andy Hlavaty, Charlie Sepulveda

Front row (L-R) Wolf Seuling, Bob Kennedy, Chuck Katon, A Luoi VN vet, Sam Bunge

Finding An Old Friend

"It was a wonderful feeling of joy...."

I was a combat engineer during my tour of duty in Viet Nam in 1970. My unit built roads and bridges in the Khe Sanh area over a five month period. I befriended one of the children from a local village, a nine year old boy named Anh. I shared C-rations with him and taught him some English words. We became buddies.

In 2000 I came to Viet Nam with VVRP Team XV. One of my aims was to find Anh. But it didn't work out. I was disappointed and vowed that when I got the chance I would join another VVRP team and set out to look for Anh again. Team XXIII was the chance.

When the team took a two day break at the mid point of our project, my wife Gail and I, armed with a 38 year old photograph of nine year old Anh and a picture of the bridge I had helped build near the village where Anh lived, set out from Hue for Khe Sanh to find Anh. We were accompanied by Ushi, a lovely Vietnamese woman, and some other members of the team. Ushi owns a restaurant in Hue. She has provided a lot of assistance to the VVRP teams that have passed through Hue. She organized the trip and served as our interpreter.

After a three hour drive, we arrived at the village where I thought Anh had lived. Ushi and I showed the photographs of Anh and the bridge to several people, but no one could help us. We tried several other villages with the same result. I was discouraged, but Ushi wouldn't give up. Fi-



Nine year old Anh

nally we located the bridge I had helped to build. And there, close by, was a village.

We drove into the village, parked the van, and began going from house to house asking if anyone knew Anh. On our fifth try we were pointed toward a house where we were told a man named Anh lived.

I was very excited. Ushi, Gail and I approached the house, picture in hand. Anh's wife came to the door. She was very surprised to see us. She said Anh was away and she called him. He came right home.

I showed Anh the photograph. He looked at it, recognizing himself. But he couldn't seem to place me. He looked puzzled. Then I said, "Give me five." I put my hand out and quickly took it away, saying as I did so, "Too late." He laughed... and he remembered.

We hugged and cried. Anh's wife and two children, a 17 year old daughter and 14 year old son, shared happily in the moment as did the team members and Ushi.

The daughter wept at seeing the only picture she had ever seen of her father as a boy. She, sadly, suffers from a liver condition and her growth is stunted, probably from Agent Orange poisoning. The son, thankfully, is normal. I gave Anh's family copies of the photograph and a L.A. Lakers shirt.

I had completed my circle. It was a wonderful feeling of joy I hadn't felt in years but had been worth waiting 38 years for.

My thanks to the VVRP for all you do for vets and other people.

Charlie Sepulveda



Gail and Charlie Sepulveda with Anh, his wife and daughter

“Thank you for coming to see us. Thank you for building us a school...”



Larry Hlavaty

On the last day at the work site in A Dot, we were invited to come to the nearby Ta Oi village to meet with the people and see some of their handicrafts. I was throwing a Frisbee with some kids, when I noticed a little old lady watching me. She motioned me over to her, where, through interpreters, I learned she wanted to talk with me. She was dressed in traditional ethnic clothing, but wearing a “beanie” (stocking cap) like snowboarders wear.

She first wanted to touch my hair, as she had but a fraction of the gray hair that I have. I found that she was over 90 years old. She then removed her “beanie” and took my hand to feel the large scar on her head and a second one on her cheek.

In a soft voice, she told me that those were the wounds she received from the bombing during the war and that her whole family had been killed, she being the only survivor. My heart sank. As my tears began to flow, I told her how sorry I felt. A few seconds later, she began to smile and said, “Thank you for coming to see us. Thank you for building us a school. Thank you, thank you...thank you,” and she reached out and hugged me.

The ability to forgive is indeed powerful. This little lady gave me one of the greatest gifts, a special memory, one I’ll cherish for the rest of my life. And in that memory, she will always be the “little old Ta Oi lady snowboarder.”



Ta Oi “Lady Snowboarder”

Larry Hlavaty

Building the School

The VVRP team participated by shovel and wheelbarrow in the construction of the project. We worked only mornings and took plenty of breaks in the shade. After all, we were 55 - 65 years old, out of shape, and definitely not acclimatized. The school will be identical to the one Team XXII built.

Sam Bunge



School Team XXII built at A Luoi



Gary Thompson and friend



Construction crew

L-R: Gail Sepulveda, Chuck Katon, Charlie Wishart and Charlie Sepulveda.

Reflections

Because of the heat and humidity and "we are old" we don't get as much done physically as we want to. I have had to step back and look at just what I measure as "accomplishment".... It really isn't just getting the school built. It is making the decision to even come back to Viet Nam and then go through all the mental issues and physical issues to accomplish that decision... And it is in the peace we find in just accomplishing what we can along with the commitments we have made to ourselves to change our lives.

Gary Thompson

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It was really nice to feel welcome among these veterans. I was so glad I was there with Larry. I feel like I have a much better understanding of the challenges veterans faced during the war and of the healing that comes through coming back and seeing changes here.

Andy Hlavaty

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Beautiful gardens of food, trees, flowers.... Mr. Kiem invited me to visit his home after meeting me on the sidewalk. Fun and challenging with the language barrier.... The residents pipe in water for rice fields and drinking because the run off goes over agent orange contaminated ground.

Chris Meyer

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The trip has been flawless and wonderful.... The team pulled for each member and everyone was cooperative and committed... We all shared the emotional stress points together with great compassion and joy... What a terrific experience.

Bob Kennedy



Jim Cooper and A Luoi children



Gail Sepulveda, Sam Bunge and workers



*Team members visiting school built by Team XXII
L-R: Bob Kennedy, Chuck Katon, Andy Hlavaty, Steve Chappell and, in foreground, Gary Thompson*

Team XXIII Provides Interpreter Scholarship



Tuan

The members of Team XXIII will provide their interpreter, Tuan, with a scholarship to study English in the United States for six months, starting this autumn. Tuan is described by Bob Kennedy as an "enthusiastic, vibrant young man we all loved, without exception. Tuan was not only an interpreter, he was a tour leader, a medic, a companion....and a friend."

A Message from VVRP President,
Charlie Wishart

Friends,

I wish to begin by saying how grateful I am for the loyal and continuing support of our donors who make our mission of healing and reconciliation possible.



I've just returned from the A Shau Valley where as a member of VVRP Team XXIII I helped build a primary school for the children of A Dot Commune. It was my fifth team. And once again, as I interacted with my fellow vets and the Vietnamese, I found the experience to be extraordinarily healing.

This past year, our *nineteenth*, was a very good one for the VVRP.

Team XXIII with its 13 members was our largest in recent years, the fourth in a series of large teams. It confirms our sense that an increasing number of veterans, as they reach retirement age, are returning to Viet Nam to take care of unresolved issues. We will be here to serve them.

We did very well financially. We continue to rely entirely on private donations, and this past year we attracted many new donors, including several Rotary clubs.

Crucial to our success were the efforts of Board members who filled key staff positions voluntarily and generously supported us financially. We have no staff apart from our contract bookkeeper. And, of course, team members pay their own way.

The only downside to our situation is that inflation in Viet Nam and the declining value of the dollar are driving up the cost of our projects.

We are taking account of this in our 2008-2009 strategic plan. Our fundraising goal is to raise sufficient funds to send two teams to Viet Nam as well as to cover the anticipated additional costs of our projects. We know we can count on your help.

This is a time of transition for me. I will begin working in Viet Nam this year with our Viet Nam representative, John Ward, with the intention of eventually moving into that position.

My time with VVRP has been a life changing

experience for me. As long as there are VN Vets in need, I will continue to seek ways to serve them. Thank you again for your support.

Hoa Binh,

Charlie

The VVRP
Mission

The Veterans Viet Nam Restoration Project (VVRP) sends teams of veterans, their family members, and others to Viet Nam to reconcile with the Vietnamese and to heal the emotional and spiritual wounds suffered in the war.

Team members work alongside the Vietnamese in carrying out humanitarian projects such as housing for disabled veterans, vocational training centers, and primary schools.

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Next Team

The VVRP will send Team XXIV to Viet Nam in April, 2009. Applications can be downloaded at the VVRP Web site—www.vvrp.org. Please visit our web site or contact Ed Daniels for more information.

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Please Contact Us!

_____ *Send me information about joining a VVRP team.*

_____ *I wish to tell others about the VVRP. Send me _____ newsletters.*

_____ *I wish to support the VVRP.*

Enclosed is my gift of: ___\$1,000 ___\$500 ___\$250 ___\$100 ___\$75 ___\$50 ___\$25 ___ Other

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Members of Team XXIII working with Vietnamese to build A Dot Commune primary school

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