



Summer 2009

VETERANS VIET NAM RESTORATION PROJECT

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Dedication

We dedicate this issue of our newsletter to our donors. We are blessed by their loyal and generous support.

1988-2009: VVRP Celebrates 21 Years of Service to Viet Nam Vets!

In 1988, Fredy Champagne, a Viet Nam vet living in Garberville, California, with support of other vets, founded VVRP. The following year, Team I traveled to Vung Tau where it helped build the Friendship Clinic. Since then, VVRP has sent 23 more teams and, altogether, 125 vets (plus family members and friends) to reconcile with the Vietnamese and heal from the war.

Ted Hessleton was a member of Team III that traveled to Yen Vien, outside Hanoi, to help build a health clinic. The following is an excerpt from his journal (posted on our web site) about his last day. We feel it captures the essence of returning to Viet Nam with a VVRP team for many team members:

We went outside on the steps of the clinic for a group photograph. My friend, Truy, moved up close to me and put his arm around me. Afterwards, as we got up to shake hands and say good-bye, we started to cry. We walked around the corner of the clinic to be away from other people. As soon as we turned the corner, we both broke out sobbing. We just held each other and cried. We both knew the tears were for the war and our dead friends, as well as the sadness of parting. We were just a couple of ex-soldiers crying about the sadness of war. For a moment I forgot we had been on opposite sides.

As the bus pulled away, Truy, leaning on an anti-aircraft gun someone had parked outside the clinic gate, was waving good-bye with tears in his eyes. The guys at my vet center would never believe this scene.

VVRP Team XXIV: Mission Accomplished

Words cannot describe the emotional break through I have had....I can now say that the war is over.

Dave Aitken, Team XXIV

This past April, Team XXIV traveled to A Ngo Commune in the A Luoi District of T.T. Hue Province. A Ngo is in the A Shau Valley, five miles from the infamous Hamburger Hill. Its 10 members—eight veterans, a film maker and the wife of one of the veterans—spent two weeks working alongside the Vietnamese to add three classrooms to the primary school that serves the children of this poor, tribal region.

VVRP provided \$24,000, all from private donations, of the total project cost of \$29,000. Lotus Humanitarian Aid Foundation provided the balance. We are very grateful to our donors for their generous support.

Like the three previous teams VVRP has sent to the region, Team XXIV was very warmly received by the Vietnamese. This newsletter recounts the experience of the team members in their own words and pictures.



Team XXIV at A Ngo

Back Row (L-R) Dan Aitken, Bruce Falink, Jill Albrecht, Harold Mondol

Middle Row (L-R) School staff, Wayne Purinton, Mike Weber, Charlie Wishart (visitor) Mark O'Connor

Front Row (L-R) Dan Albrecht, local official, Irvin (Smitty) Smith, Bud Bruton

My Return to the A Shau Valley

Dan Albrecht

I served in the A Shau valley in 1969 as a member of B company, 101st Airborne as a platoon commander. When I arrived in A Ngo I had two goals. One was to meet a veteran of the North Vietnamese army who had also served in the A Shau Valley. The other was to climb Hamburger Hill with John Ward who had served in my platoon and who had been instrumental in my decision to join a VVRP team. We would be reunited after a hiatus of 40 years.

I accomplished my first goal at the A Luoi Veterans Memorial Cemetery. I had accompanied the team to the cemetery where we placed a wreath to honor the Vietnamese soldiers buried there. Afterwards, our interpreter, Tuan, introduced me to Nguyen Xaun Chuong, an NVA veteran who had served in the A Shau Valley the same year I had. His son was taking him from one cemetery to another to search for a wartime comrade he had lost. When I told him that I had fought in the A Shau Valley in 1969, he seemed a little confused and then reached his hand out to me. We shook hands. I took a red cloth bag from my pocket, pulled out my Viet Nam Veterans Memorial coin and gave it to him. He was full of emotion. He shook my hand again; he had tears in his eyes, as I did. His son later asked Tuan if I would send his father the pictures he saw my wife Jill taking of our meeting. I was happy to. Tuan later told me that Nguyen had not found his comrade. He and his son would have to continue their search.

I accomplished my second objective when John Ward and I, accompanied by my teammates Dave Aitken and Wayne Purinton, and our interpreter, Tuan, climbed Hamburger Hill.

John had been one of the best point men anyone could ask for. Last



Dan giving Nguyen Viet Nam Memorial Coin

year when I had begun to think about my experiences in Viet Nam more than usual, I started visiting Viet Nam war web sites. On one of them I was amazed to find an article by John. He related how in 1999, after accompanying a VVRP team, he had returned to live in Viet Nam as a field representative for an NGO and the VVRP's Viet Nam rep. I got in touch with him right away. He responded warmly and encouraged me to visit the VVRP web site. There I learned more about the VVRP's mission. At John's urging, I decided to join Team XXIV.

While we hadn't gotten to know each other well during the time we had served together, it was clear from the moment that we met again that we shared a close bond.

John and I reminisced as the five of us, with our guide, made

our way in a light rain to the top of the hill. It was interesting how John and I remembered different things about our experience and how our memories of the same events differed. It was a difficult climb. By the time we reached the top all four of us were very hot and huffing and puffing.

At an old landing zone area, we each found our own tree and stealthily nailed a small American flag to it in memory of the Americans who gave their lives in the battle for Hamburger Hill. I collected a bottle of dirt to take home.

When I arrived back at our hotel in A Luoi, my wife Jill, full of emotion, hugged me and cried. She realized what the climb had meant to me. What a wonderful day!

My entire experience in Viet Nam more than met my expectations. It especially helped to have the support of Jill. I feel the VVRP should encourage more vets to bring their wives.



Hamburger Hill climbers
(L-R) John Ward, Wayne Purinton,
Tuan (interpreter), Dave Aitken,
Guide, Dan Albrecht

Team XXIV: A Wife's Experience

Jill Albrecht

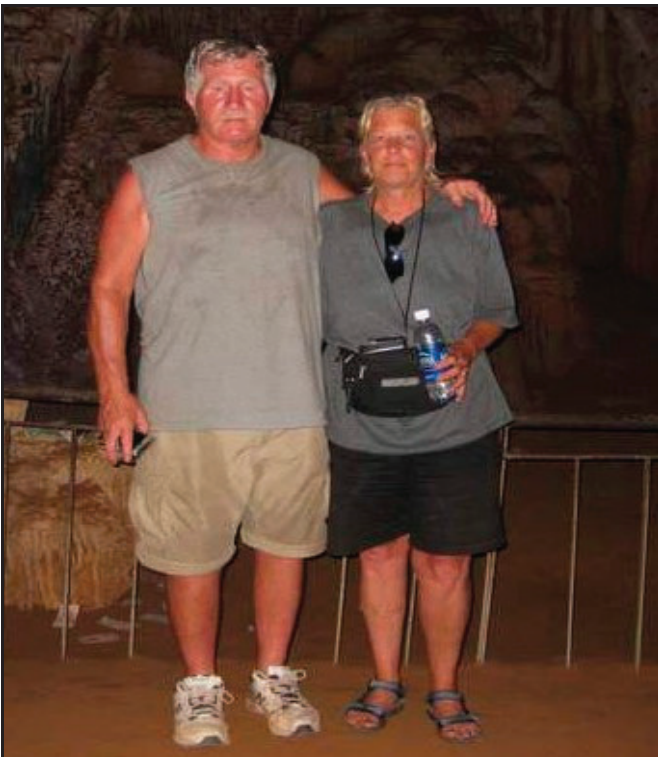
When I arrived in Sebastopol with Dan for team training, it really hit me right between the eyes that I was going to be the only female on the team. Yes, I knew it prior to arriving in Sebastopol, but I suddenly found myself face to face with male Viet Nam veterans who I didn't know and who I'd be sharing living quarters with for weeks to come! Dan kept reassuring me that everything would be okay. Thank goodness he knew what he was talking about. All of us got along well from the beginning.

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The sessions during the three days of team training were sometimes so intense that it made my heart hurt. Other times we all laughed and joked and spirits were high. We started out as strangers and ended up friends with a special bond that time will never erase. Everyday was not only challenging but heart-warming too.

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The work in A Ngo was intense (I never want to see another brick again!) and the weather was hot and humid. Yet each day there were wonderful moments—like Dave Aitken accomplishing his goal of moving every last brick to the school from the huge



Dan and Jill Albrecht



Jill with new friends

pile he had found at the work site on our arrival in A Ngo. The construction workers joined with us in applauding Dave as we laughed and cried at his accomplishment (done with a little help from his friends.)

This was an incredible adventure! I've never been involved in anything like it. Knowing I helped to make a difference in this community is heart warming. I'm proud of all of us.

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I originally was going to go just to support Dan. But like Dan and the other vets, I have come back a changed person. What an honor it has been for me to see the positive changes in everyone and to know that I was a little part in that change.

I was privileged to meet, work and live with nine people who treated me with respect and looked out for me. I'm proud to call them friends. Now I'm far more aware and knowledgeable of what my husband lived through 40 years ago. I always knew Dan was an honorable man but now he is also my hero.

I loved this experience!

**Visit the VVRP web site:
www.vvrp.org**

Team Member Reflections

I want to let the VVRP know much this trip has meant to me. Words cannot describe the emotional breakthrough I have had. Even though the "mission" was completed, the benefits will always be there. I might have been a little hard headed at the team meetings and a little compulsive at the job site, but that's me. Some things never change.

BUT there has been a huge difference in me since this trip. I went to Vietnam when I was 17. I came home a different person. I went there at 60 and I came home a completely different person as a result of working on the job site side by side with team members and Vietnamese workers who I at first resented.

My feelings changed. The kids were so innocent and curious and there was the raw beauty of the mountains and the valleys.... Climbing Hamburger Hill completed my transition from COMBAT WARRIOR to PEACEFUL WARRIOR. This was followed by a spiritual awakening... where the buddies I had served with told me to let it go and to move on with my life, but not to forget them.

The whole experience has opened another path for me. I can now say that the war is over. From the bottom of my heart I thank you all for this opportunity. GOD BLESS AMERICA.

Dave Aitken



Dave Aitken moving his pile of bricks



Team visits kindergarten classroom

Looking back on my decision to join VVRP, I feel I have come full circle with my Vietnam experience—from surviving and witnessing death and destruction during my tour of duty in the 60's to coming back 42 years later and helping rebuild the country. Taking action can be a powerful thing. I believe I have received a spiritual healing because of becoming a VVRP team member. In the end, it's all about the children and their future.

Wayne Purinton



Ta Oi friends

This trip was my best. Sometimes I cried. Sometimes I prayed. And sometimes I smiled and laughed. Going back helps you to heal inside, and it even makes your dreams not so frightening. You can chase all those bad memories with new and cheerful ones. You can lay to rest the giants of your dreams and the stressors of war.

Irvin (Smitty) Smith

A Message from VVRP President, Charlie Wishart

This, our 21st year of service to the veterans community, was a very good one for VVRP. Because of the generosity of our donors, for whom I have come to have such a deep appreciation, we were able to make the largest investment in our history—\$24,000—to help fund the three room addition to the A Ngo primary school that Team XXIV helped build.

I'm also happy to report that veterans continue to be strongly interested in our mission. We have already recruited a number of candidates for our next team.

An important development, that will greatly enhance our outreach capacity, is the production of a DVD documenting the experiences of Team XXIV. It is being produced by Harold Mondol who accompanied Team XXIV on its visit to A Ngo. It will be finished this summer. We will provide information about how to obtain a copy on our web site—www.vvrp.org.

This summer I am stepping down as President and board member to assume the responsibilities of Viet Nam Project Development Director, a position John Ward has capably filled for many years. Among John's many accomplishments, in 2007 he cleared the way for us—as well as other NGOs—to carry out projects in A Luoi District that was formerly off limits to foreigners. John will devote himself to his responsibilities as President of Lotus Humanitarian Aid Foundation and Director of Kids First, Viet Nam.

I have taken on this new role because I feel it is how I can best serve my fellow veterans, VVRP, and the people of Viet Nam that have received me so graciously. To quote many of them, "The war is over. We must now work to insure the peace." Like all who are involved in carrying out our mission, other than our book-keeper, I am happy to volunteer my services.

Finally, I am grate-



Charlie Wishart and friend

ful for the opportunity I've had to serve as a member and officer of the VVRP board. I extend my heartfelt thanks to these dedicated board members, team members, and, especially, to our donors for their support in furthering our mission of healing.



Team XXIII—Completed A Dot primary school

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 VVRP Team

The VVRP will send Team XXV to Viet Nam in April, 2010. Applications can be down-loaded at the VVRP Web site—www.vvrp.org. Please visit our web site or contact Ed Daniels for more information.

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Wreath place at A Luoi Veterans Memorial Cemetery by members of Team XXIV to honor fallen Vietnamese soldiers

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

Name: _____

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You can also donate securely to the VVRP at our web site: www.vvrp.org