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Vietnam Travelogue

Domino Theory at 70



## 1983: YEAR OF PERIL

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(Small print) Cover: President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, 1983

VBC Magazine is published quarterly by The Veterans Breakfast Club, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that harnesses the power of storytelling in order to connect, educate, heal, and inspire.

200 Magnolia Place, Pittsburgh, PA 15228 (412) 623-9029 veteransbreakfastclub.org For more information, contact betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR



You know you're getting old when the things you experienced as current events are now discussed as history. Such is the case for me with the late Cold War, when the seeming equilibrium of the USA-USSR relationship gave way to the earth-shaking events of 1983. Those who served in the military then remember the tension and hyper-vigilance accompanying every routine flight and maneuver, every exercise and test. Yet, the veterans of the 1980s often say they served in "peacetime." This issue of *VBC Magazine* reminds us just how close we came to World War III in the 1980s. It also reminds us how important it is to highlight the service of those who experienced first-hand some of less-well-remembered history between Vietnam and 9/11: Beirut 1983, Grenada 1983, Panama 1989, Mogadishu 1993, Bosnia-Herzegovina 1993, Haiti 1994 and so on. Over the past six months, we've devoted several programs to these conflicts, inviting veterans who don't often talk about their service to educate us about what they saw and did. The Veterans Breakfast Club's slogan is "Every veteran has a story." We take that seriously, and we call upon veterans of all eras, ages, and branches of service to let us know about the work they did and the things they experienced. The military leaves a permanent mark on all those who serve. Our job at the VBC is to understand that legacy and share it as broadly as possible.

Todd DePastino  
Executive Director  
(412) 623-9029  
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@veteransbreakfastclub





# UPCOMING EVENTS

IN PERSON, FACE-TO-FACE

For the latest event schedule, scan this QR code!



All in-person events begin at 8:30am and include breakfast for \$15pp unless otherwise noted. RSVP to [betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org](mailto:betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org) or 412-623-9029. Events will be added. See [veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events) for updates.

**FRIDAY, March 29, 6:00pm-8:00pm:** Senator John Heinz History Center (1212 Smallman Street Pittsburgh, PA 15222) **FREE** 50th Anniversary Vietnam Veterans Day Celebration and Recognition Event. **Details on page 6.**

**WEDNESDAY, April 3, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**THURSDAY, April 11, 10:00am-12:00pm:** National Submarine Day Tour of the USS Requin (SS-481) and submariners' stories, Carnegie Science Center (1 Allegheny Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15212), **Registration required:** [veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events)

**FRIDAY, April 12, 11:30am-1:30pm:** Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504) \$10 suggested donation

**TUESDAY, April 16, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**WEDNESDAY, April 24, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**MONDAY, April 29, 8:30-10:30am:** Bucks County Community College, Gallagher Room, Rollins Building (275 Swamp Road, Newtown, PA 18940) **FREE** breakfast, courtesy Bucks County Community College Veterans Club and Bucks County Department of Veterans Affairs

**SATURDAY, May 4, 8:30-10:30am:** University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (The Hempfield Room, Chambers Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601) \$10 pp

**TUESDAY, May 21, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**WEDNESDAY, June 5, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**FRIDAY, June 14, 11:30am-1:30pm:** Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504) \$10 suggested donation

**WEDNESDAY, June 19, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**TUESDAY, July 9, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**WEDNESDAY, August 7, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**FRIDAY, August 9, 11:30am-1:30pm:** Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504) \$10 suggested donation

**TUESDAY, August 20, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)







# ONLINE EVENTS

Mondays and Thursdays at 7pm ET.  
Join and watch past programs at  
[veteransbreakfastclub.org/events](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/events).

**WEDNESDAY, August 28, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**WEDNESDAY, October 2, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**TUESDAY, October 22, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

**WEDNESDAY, October 30, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**WEDNESDAY, November 6, 8:00am-12:00pm:** Rivers Casino (777 Casino Dr, Pittsburgh, PA 15212). \$5 pp for breakfast, annual VBC Veterans Week Celebration

**SATURDAY, November 9, 8:30-10:30am:** University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (The Hempfield Room, Chambers Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601) \$10 pp.

**FRIDAY, November 15, 11:30am-1:30pm:** Jewish Community Center of Youngstown (505 Gypsy Lane, Youngstown, Ohio 44504) \$10 suggested donation

**WEDNESDAY, December 4, 8:30-10:30am:** Seven Oaks Country Club (132 Lisbon Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

**WEDNESDAY, December 11, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ Church at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd, Sewickley, PA 15143)

**SATURDAY, December 21, 8:30-10:30am:** Christ United Methodist Church (44 Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA 15102)

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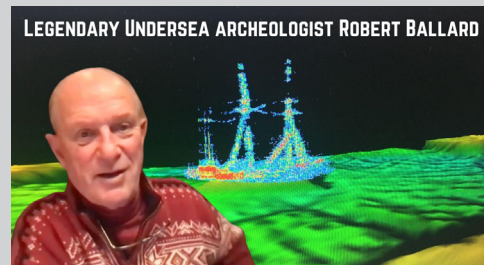
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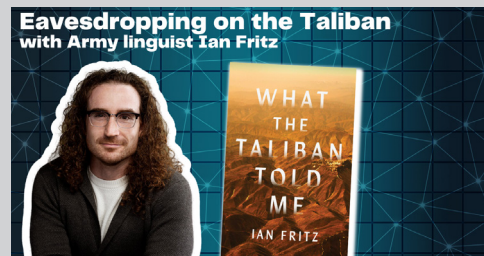
"Masters of the Air"  
Author Donald L. Miller



Freedom Rider and Vietnam  
Veteran Charles Person



TEAM LIONESS: THE FIRST WOMEN IN COMBAT, 2003-2004



Eavesdropping on the Taliban  
with Army linguist Ian Fritz





# VIETNAM VETERANS DAY

## MARCH 29, 2024

### 6:00PM - 8:00PM

HEINZ HISTORY CENTER, 1212 SMALLMAN ST,  
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## ONLINE & IN-PERSON

The VBC's Vietnam Veterans Day Event will honor and recognize all veterans who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces at any time during the period of **November 1, 1955, to May 15, 1975**, regardless of duty location.

Non-Veterans are especially welcome to attend and pay tribute to our Vietnam Veterans, hear their stories of service, and thank them for blazing the trail for every serviceman and woman who came after them.

Every Vietnam Veteran registered for this event will receive a Welcome Home Gift Bag as a token of our gratitude for your service.

For those who will be joining us virtually, the gift bag will be shipped to the home address provided.

Registration required:

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FEATURE



# 1983: YEAR OF PERIL

by Todd DePastino

**H**istory often happens when we're not paying attention.

That was the case in the early 1980s, when even those serving in the US military were largely unaware of how close we came to nuclear exchange and World War III with the Soviet Union. Even the President of the United States didn't recognize the danger until after the fact. When Ronald Reagan discovered the truth, he shifted course and helped bring the Cold War to an end.

The second week of November 1983, Soviet intelligence detected what they thought were US preparations for a nuclear attack. Fearing a debilitating first strike, Russian officials mobilized for their own preemptive assault, putting their entire arsenal of 11,000 nuclear warheads on maximum readiness. Their goal was to destroy US missile silos before they could activate.

What prompted Soviet fears was a highly realistic NATO command post exercise named Able Archer, part of the larger Autumn Forge and Reforger ("REturn of FORces to GERmany") war games held every year in Western Europe since 1969.

Days after Able Archer concluded, the Soviet state-run newspaper *Pravda* complained that NATO's exercises "are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from a real deployment of armed forces for aggression."

We now know this remark wasn't a mere observation. It was a warning: when weapons of mass destruction are on hair triggers, the slightest ambiguity in intention-signaling can mean the difference between status quo and annihilation.

The nuclear scare of Able Archer 83 wasn't a one-off near-miscalculation, but the culmination of tensions that had been

building for years. Changes in leadership, increased military adventurism, heightened rhetoric, a renewed arms race, and a growing gap between the thriving West and the declining East all contributed to the crisis.

In 1983, we came as close to nuclear war as any time in our history, including the Missiles of October in 1962.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, in fact, had marked a turning point in the Cold War. The brinkmanship of those thirteen days spooked both sides. The following year, the US and USSR began cooperating as never before, first by establishing a "hotline" between the Kremlin and the White House and second by signing the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

The Nixon administration sought even warmer relations with the Soviets. Nixon's special National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, referred to his superpower approach as *détente*, a French word meaning "relaxation."

Indeed, by the time Nixon left office, tensions between the US and USSR had relaxed considerably. Nixon's breakthrough visit to Mao's China in February 1972 was followed by a historic trip to Moscow three months later to meet with Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. That summit, which continued through two more face-to-face meetings, yielded the Anti-Ballistic Missile and Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT I) agreements, as well as a host of deals over trade, human rights, scientific cooperation, and oceanic exploration.

There was even a great Nixon-Brezhnev toast to peace followed by a spontaneous Brezhnev bear hug. The era of confrontation, as Nixon later wrote, had been replaced by one of negotiation.



It didn't last.

President Jimmy Carter abandoned Nixon-Kissinger's *realpolitik* (a hard-nosed geostrategic approach to foreign policy) in favor of a more high-minded attitude. Referring to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Carter condemned un-democratic allies like Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. He also sharply criticized the Soviet Union for its violations of free speech and worship and repression of political dissent.

Soviet leader Brezhnev, so visibly affectionate with Nixon, never warmed to Carter and threatened to walk out of further arms control talks (SALT II).

Then, at the end of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support a pro-Soviet government there. In retaliation, Carter placed an embargo on grain exports to Russia and pressured the US Olympic Committee to boycott the 1980 summer games in Moscow.

The Soviets consoled themselves that Carter, at least, wasn't a warmonger. The President claimed to believe in *détente*, and he certainly disapproved of committing US troops abroad unless it was absolutely necessary. Carter had also publicly condemned traditional American anti-Communism, the obsession that had led the country to Vietnam.

In other words, President Jimmy Carter never saw our nation's mission as defeating Communism or containing its spread around the world.

President Ronald Reagan emphatically did. A staunch anti-Communist since his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1940s, Reagan sought not to contain Communism but actually to roll it back by evicting pro-Soviet governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Reagan took Carter's moral critique of the Soviet Union and supercharged it with anti-Communist rhetoric, a dramatically increased defense budget, and a willingness to flex American muscle overseas.

On January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan took the oath of office, inaugurating what historians sometimes call the Second Cold War.

\*\*\*

Four months after Reagan moved into the White House, Leonid Brezhnev stood before a closed meeting of KGB officers and

told them *détente* was dead. President Reagan, he said, was bent on destroying the Soviet Union.

The speaker who followed Brezhnev at the podium, KGB head Yuri Andropov, hit even harder. Reagan, Andropov explained, was erratic and unpredictable. It was likely that the Americans were planning a preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union.

The situation was so dire, Andropov went on to say, that he was launching a new global intelligence gathering program designed specifically to detect NATO preparations for nuclear war.



Leonid Brezhnev, left, proposes a toast at the State Department after signing a U.S.-Soviet cooperation deal in 1973 (AP)

Its name was Operation RYAN, an acronym for *Raketo-YAdernoie Napadenie*, or "nuclear missile attack." Some agents called the operation "VRYAN," the V standing for the Russian word *vnezapnoe*: surprise.

Operation RYAN's rallying slogan was "Do not miss the moment when the West is about to launch war."

The history of Operation RYAN is an object lesson in confirmation bias. That is, Soviet agents collected only information that could be interpreted to support Andropov's preexisting belief that the US was planning a first strike. The KGB used pretzel logic to twist even the most innocuous observations—what time office lights went out at the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall or the status of blood drives in London—to bolster the case for a preemptive first strike.

Soviet experts in the West ascribed such extreme fears to "traditional Russian paranoia." But the Soviet Union's sense of foreboding in the early 1980s had both historical roots and contemporary triggers.

Every one of the 27 members of the Soviet Politburo was old enough to remember June 12, 1941, when Hitler launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union, the largest ground invasion in history. The Red Army was caught flat-footed, and the German

Wehrmacht swept east, slaughtering millions and coming within 14 miles of Red Square.

And Hitler's was only one of five major attacks from the West in 500 years, each coming when Russian power was compromised or ill-prepared to meet the existential threat.

Soviet leaders judged the new post-*détente* era of 1981 as one of those historical moments of maximum danger. The Soviet Union, they believed, had become vulnerable to defeat.



Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union members" Soviet poster, 1977

Soviets called it the “Correlation of Forces,” a pseudo-scientific Marxist-Leninist examination of the historical moment, conducted regularly to gauge progress in the uneven but, in their view, inexorable march to World Socialism. The Correlation of Forces was a broad and visionary statement of the world situation at any given time. It provided a guide for policy and action.

Things had looked great back in the 1970s, when revolutionary gains in Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua heralded a rising socialist tide in the Third World.

But now, the Correlation of Forces had turned against that tide, and Soviet world leadership was appearing to wane. The West claimed advantages in technology, economy, and international prestige. The US setback of the Vietnam War hadn't prevented the development of new and powerful weapons. Neither had it broken NATO nor stopped CIA and other covert capitalist operations around the world.

The Soviet Union was spending an enormous percentage of its GDP on nuclear weapons to the detriment of its domestic economy. Soviet leadership's grip on the socialist world seemed to be loosening. Nationalist and ethnic-driven allegiances inside the Soviet sphere, including both the Soviet Union itself and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, hadn't evaporated after decades of “Russification.” In fact, as with the Polish Solidarity movement, non-Russian populations of the Eastern Bloc were showing increased restlessness, viewing the Soviet Union more as an unwelcome imperial master than a protecting ally.

In light of the 1981 Correlation of Forces estimate, Ronald Reagan's election signaled that the United States had awoken to its advantages. Reagan came into office and immediately began poking the bear, not only with his anti-Soviet rhetoric but also with a series of off-the-books military operations intended to provoke the Soviets and probe gaps in their defenses.

Americans called them psychological warfare operations or “PSYOPs.” They were conducted by air and sea and involved violating Soviet air space and territorial waters. They began shortly after Reagan took office and followed no discernable pattern or obvious purpose, other than to spook the Soviets and reveal vulnerabilities.

The US sent bombers over the Arctic Circle and fighters along the Asian periphery. Air maneuvers ratcheted up, then stopped just as suddenly, only to restart.

“It really got to them,” one high-ranking US official recalled. “They didn't know what it all meant. A squadron would fly straight at Soviet airspace, and other radars would light up and units would go on alert. Then at the last minute the squadron would peel off and return home.”

An unclassified CIA intelligence monograph, Ben F. Fisher's *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare*, confirms the devastating psychological impact of these operations on the Soviets.

Fisher details the special effectiveness of the naval operations. In August and September of 1981, a massive NATO carrier group led by the USS *Eisenhower* (CVN-69) transited the strategic Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap—the only Atlantic sea

route to the Soviet Union—largely undetected. The NATO ships and planes used radio silence, emission controls, radar jamming, phony radar transmissions and a host of other concealment and deception measures to thwart Soviet surveillance and launch simulated attacks on Warsaw Pact forces in Europe. They even were able to evade satellite monitoring and managed to “destroy” Soviet planes during air refueling.

Then, a secret detachment of four ships peeled off the convoy and entered the Barents Sea, just off Russia's strategic Kola Peninsula (Murmansk), and stayed there for nine days. It was an unprecedented violation of Soviet defenses.

US operations grew bolder. American intelligence ships collected information while patrolling close to Crimea in the Black Sea and along the coast in the Baltic. Attack submarines under polar ice simulated strikes on their Soviet ballistic missile counterparts. The US, it seemed, was able to roam at will, and the Soviets were at a loss to respond.

The most devastating infiltrations came in April-May 1983 during FleetEx 83, a massive Navy exercise in the North Pacific. Three aircraft carrier battle groups made up of 40 ships, 300 aircraft, and 23,000 crewmembers moved from the Aleutian Islands toward the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian Far East. The Soviets jealously guarded the Kamchatka Peninsula, home of a warm-water ballistic missile submarine base. The US armada ventured toward the base to provoke a Soviet reaction that could then be studied by the US Office of Naval Intelligence.

The first week of April, several Navy F-14 Tomcat fighters took off from the USS *Enterprise* and the USS *Midway* and overflew a Soviet military base on the Kurile Islands south of the peninsula. The mission was to simulate a bombing raid.

The Soviets failed to provide a timely response to the air space violations. It was a crushing humiliation.

The Kremlin protested the incursions, launched retaliatory overflights in the Aleutians, and fired their top Far East Air Defense officers. Then, it ordered its new Air Defense commanders to place the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Kuriles on maximum alert.

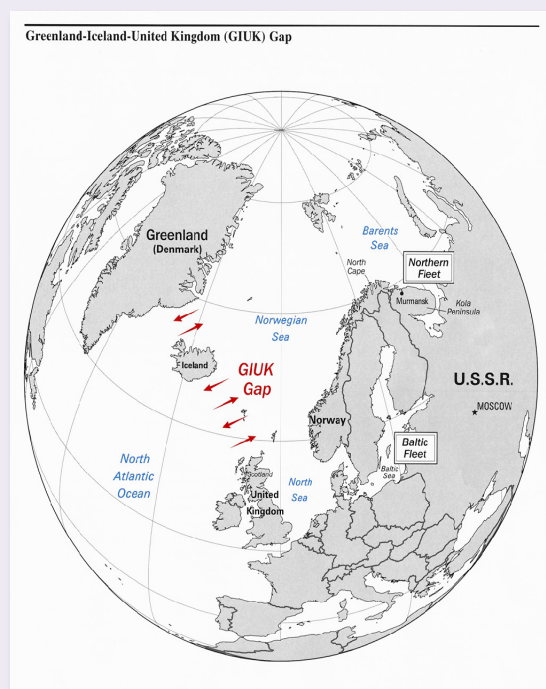
As the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral James D. Watkins, remarked in a Congressional hearing in 1983, the Soviets “are as naked as a jaybird [on the Kamchatka Peninsula]... and they know it.”

If that was true, Russia's only defense was its nuclear arsenal.

\*\*\*

FleetEx 83 was just one episode in a cascade of crises that pushed the US and USSR to the brink of nuclear war in the third year of the Reagan administration.

A month before FleetEx, President Reagan spoke at the National Association of Evangelicals convention in Orlando. His aim was to urge religious leaders to reject the nuclear freeze movement. But it was the extreme rhetoric Reagan used—calling the Soviet Union “an evil empire” and “the focus of evil in the modern world”—that caught the world's attention.



*The GIUK gap in the North Atlantic, showing international boundaries as of 1983 (CIA)*



The Cold War, Reagan declared, wasn't a mere *realpolitik* standoff between rival Great Powers. It was a holy crusade of right vs. wrong, good vs. evil, with no neutral ground.

Two weeks later, the President announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), an ambitious proposal for an invincible shield against intercontinental and submarine-based ballistic missiles. SDI involved far-out plans for lasers, particle beams, supercomputers, and advanced materials and technologies that didn't yet exist. Both supporters and detractors of the expensive project called it "Star Wars," a movie reference that combined Reagan's Hollywood past with his "Evil Empire" rhetoric and faith in speculative technology.

Most scientific and defense experts dismissed SDI as fantasy. But the Soviets didn't. They saw Star Wars as a profoundly destabilizing weapons system.

The only thing that had prevented World War III was nuclear deterrence, known colloquially as "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD). First strikes were unthinkable because they would inevitably trigger fatal counterstrikes.

But, Moscow figured, if the US could create a dome of protection around itself, nothing would deter it from attacking Russia with impunity. The only solution was to hit the US before SDI was operational.

Yuri Andropov, now General Secretary after Brezhnev's death in 1982, found some solace in SDI being years away from deployment.

Not so with the new Pershing II Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles, which the US announced were tested and ready for delivery to West Germany before the end of 1983.

The Pershing II was faster and more accurate than its predecessor, the Pershing 1a, and far more of an immediate threat than SDI. The Soviets believed--inaccurately, it turns out--that the new missile could hit Moscow six minutes after launch. That would give NATO the opportunity to decapitate the Soviet Union, preventing retaliation. A preemptive first strike of its own might be the Kremlin's only shot at survival.

\*\*\*

On September 1, 1983, Soviet Air Defenses on the Kamchatka Peninsula were on high alert. Still stung by the FleetEX 83 incursions in April, they were determined to secure the region for the test flight of a new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, the SS-25, scheduled to land at the Kura testing range. US intelligence knew of the test and dispatched an RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft to the area to capture whatever information it could about the new weapon.

The test never happened, and the RC-135 left the area. As it departed, a commercial passenger airliner, Korean Air Lines (KAL) Flight 007 carrying 269 passengers from Anchorage to Seoul, crossed paths with it and strayed into restricted Soviet

air space.

KAL 007's autopilot navigation system was either not working, or the crew had failed to switch it to the proper mode. The plane drifted off course across the Kamchatka Peninsula and then over the Sea of Okhotsk.

Soviet MiGs scrambled to intercept it. A malfunctioning early warning radar system made it hard for the Soviets to identify and keep track of the plane. Confusion and near-panic reigned at Soviet Far East District Air Defense Forces Command as it struggled to confront the intruder.

KAL 007 crossed into Russian air space a second time over Sakhalin island just north of Japan. A Soviet Sukhoi Su-15 interceptor aircraft finally made visual contact with the Boeing 747. The fighter pilot could see it was a civilian plane. But he suspected the Boeing was a mask for a military mission.

Air Defense command ordered the Su-15 to shoot the foreign plane down, even as it re-entered international air space. The interceptor positioned itself under the 747 and fired two air-to-air missiles into the passenger plane's fuselage.

KAL 007 spiraled into the Sea of Okhotsk killing everyone aboard.

In his televised address to the nation four days later, President Reagan did all he could to inflame Soviet fears:

My fellow Americans:

I'm coming before you tonight about the Korean airline massacre, the attack by the Soviet Union against 269 innocent men, women, and children aboard an unarmed Korean passenger plane. This crime against humanity must never be forgotten, here or throughout the world. . . . It was an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations.

From his sickbed-soon-to-be-deathbed, General Secretary Yuri Andropov issued a lengthy denunciation of the United

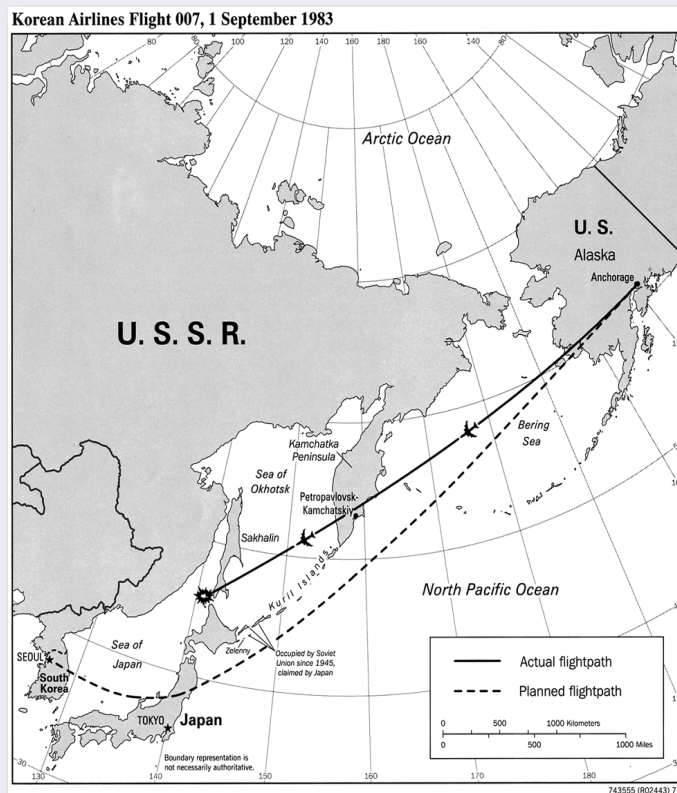
States, condemning Reagan's "outrageous militarist psychosis" and blaming him for the shutdown of KAL 007.

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko, a diplomat since World War II, remarked that tensions with the US following the KAL 007 tragedy were higher than at any time he could remember.


"The world situation," he said, "is now slipping toward a very dangerous precipice . . . Problem No. 1 for the world is to avoid nuclear war."

\*\*\*

Able Archer 83 began on November 7 as the culminating exercise of Autumn Forge. The NATO war game tested the alliance's ability to wage war on the Great European Plain in the event of the Warsaw Pact's invasion of West Germany.



Actual and planned flight path of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on September 1, 1983 (CIA)



Reforger was the penultimate component of Autumn Forge. It was a grand show of resolve that rattled nerves in Moscow, airlifting 19,000 US troops and 1,500 tons of cargo to Europe under radio silence. The Soviets never saw them coming.

Then, Able Archer. Unlike Reforger, Able Archer took place behind closed doors at NATO Command, Control, and Communications centers, from the Supreme Headquarters in Belgium through subordinate commands throughout Western Europe. Able Archer wasn't intended to intimidate the Kremlin, but to rehearse the final escalation from conventional to nuclear war.

Soviet intelligence routinely monitored the annual Able Archer exercise. But, in 1983, as documents declassified in 2015 demonstrate, Soviet analysts were alarmed by how little information they could gather. With new encryption techniques, the US made Able Archer 83 more opaque than its predecessors.

One US intelligence report later explained that the command post exercise that year had introduced "special wrinkles, which we believe probably fueled Soviet anxieties."

Such wrinkles included the loading of dummy warheads, communications with Washington and London, and an unusual volume of transmissions at command centers throughout NATO. Unlike prior versions of the drill, Able Archer 83 saw the progression of US forces from normal to maximum readiness, DEFCON 1, the highest state of alert.

On November 8, KGB headquarters sent urgent messages to agents throughout Europe to report on indications of an impending nuclear attack. Other Warsaw Pact intelligence services joined the effort. Their suspicion was that Able Archer would be used as cover for a decapitating first strike.

Meanwhile, Soviet air bases grounded their planes to prepare for combat activity. The only flights were 36 intelligence sorties to track US ground and naval movements. Soviet Air Force units loaded their fighters and bombers, reviewed their target assignments, and put them on 30-minute alert to "destroy first-line enemy targets."

The Soviet Army cancelled leaves and also its traditional participation in the grain harvest. According to CIA analysts, the Soviets likely also armed their ICBM missiles and prepared them for launch.

This activity didn't go undetected by US intelligence. Brigadier General Leonard H. Perroots, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, US Air Force Europe (USAFE) at Ramstein AFB took note of the unusual escalation. A technical anomaly especially got his attention: the Soviets had equipped their airplanes with electronic countermeasure jamming pods. These were usually left off because they caused balance problems.

Perroots' analysts explained: the pods indicated the Soviets were loading special munitions, probably nukes.

Perroots spoke to his superior, USAFE Commander, General Billy Minter. "I told him we had some unusual activity in East Germany that was probably a reaction to the ongoing ABLEARCHER," he later wrote.

The intelligence chief had no proof of the Soviet alert-Able Archer connection. It was just a guess. Perroots advised Minter not to respond in kind with further escalation.

An intelligence report of the war scare would later characterize Perroots' recommendation as "a fortuitous, if ill-informed, decision."

Perroots' gut instinct may have averted nuclear war.

\*\*\*

A few weeks after Able Archer, the White House received word of the Soviet war scare during the exercise. The information came via the CIA, by-way-of the British MI6, by-way-of a Russian KGB double agent named Oleg Gordievsky. National

Security Adviser Robert McFarlane delivered the news to the President with a healthy dose of skepticism. There's little record of Reagan's response.

But, it just so happened, the President had been quietly rethinking his hardline approach to the Soviets. On October 10, one month before Able Archer, Reagan had previewed the ABC television movie *The Day After* about an American town wiped out in nuclear war. In his diary, Reagan noted the film was "anti-nuke propaganda." Still, he admitted, "It's very effective & left me greatly depressed." It confirmed his resolve "to see there is never a nuclear war."

Before *The Day After*, nuclear war had seemed an unthinkable abstraction to Reagan, something not remotely likely to happen and, therefore, not worthy of serious consideration. Now, for the first time, Reagan consented to a Pentagon briefing on the impact of such a real-life cataclysm.

Those in the Situation Room that day described the President as "chastened." Reagan wrote in his diary, "A most sobering experience with Cap W. [Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger] & Gen. Vessey [Chair of Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey] in the situation room—a briefing on our complete plan in the event of a nuclear attack."

Reagan instructed the Department of State to set up back channel communications with the Soviet Union to minimize the risk of misunderstandings or faulty intention-signaling. "I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them we ought to tell them no one here has any intention of doing anything like that."

In early 1984, CIA Director William Casey presented Reagan with an extensive report on Soviet thinking and zeroed in on Soviet fears of a US first strike.

"Do you suppose they really believe that?" Reagan asked. "I don't see how they could believe that--but it's something to think about."

Think about it, he did.

In his memoirs, Reagan wrote of his Cold War transformation in late 1983:

Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians: Many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans. Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised me, but it did . . . During my first years in Washington, I think many of us in the administration took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves, considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them. But the more experience I had . . . the more I began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike . . . Well, if that was the case, I was even more anxious to get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and try to convince him we had no designs on the Soviet Union and Russians had nothing to fear from us.

In 1984, nudged by election-year polls showing public fears of nuclear war, Reagan began to pursue his own version of *détente* with the Soviet Union. He relaxed his anti-Communist rhetoric and looked for opportunities to work with the Soviets.

A big one came unexpectedly following the death of Soviet General Secretary Yuri Andropov's successor, Konstantin Chernenko, after only one year in office in March 1985.

Desperate to avoid appointing another geriatric, ailing leader, the Soviet Politburo selected the youngest man in its midst, a 54-year-old visionary named Mikhail Gorbachev. *CONTINUED P. 13*



# THE OTHER CLOSE CALL OF 1983

Just past midnight on September 26, 1983—25 days after the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007—Lt. Col. Stanislav Petrov of the Soviet Air Defense Forces may have saved the world through his inaction.



Stanislav Petrov, ca., 1983

Petrov had just come on duty as commander of the satellite control bunker at Serpukhov-15, a military installation 62 miles south of Moscow. The bunker was a key nerve center of the Soviet Union's new early warning system, *Oko* (Russian for "Eye"), which monitored North America for possible Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) launches.

Minutes after settling into his chair, an alarm pierced the quiet room. A usually dull panel of buttons, switches, and screens began pulsing with the command *Заняк!* - "LAUNCH!"

The new computer system, designed to interpret data transmitted by the Soviet satellites, had detected the launch of a single Minuteman ICBM from the United States. The warhead was scheduled to land inside the Soviet Union in 12 minutes.

Petrov's first response was to assume a computer malfunction, false alarm. But then, the siren blared again, announcing another ICBM launch. Then, another alarm. Then, another. In the span of a few short minutes, the United States, it seemed, had launched five nuclear missiles, the dreaded first strike of World War III.

*Oko* relied on a strict and rapid reporting of the launch up the chain of command: Petrov to headquarters, headquarters to general staff, general staff to Yuri Andropov, who would approve a retaliatory strike.

But instead of picking up the phone and initiating the sequence, Petrov did

nothing.

"I had a funny feeling in my gut," he would later say.

The computer system had been rushed into service, and Petrov didn't trust it. Also, Soviet radar defenses, which only detected missiles once they were over the horizon, couldn't corroborate what the satellites were reporting. Finally, Petrov had always understood that when the US launched its first strike, it would be massive. Not five missiles, but hundreds, intended to decapitate the Soviet state.

So, five minutes after the first siren, Lt. Col. Petrov decided not to report the alarms. Then, he sweated it out. For an excruciating 15 minutes, Petrov waited to learn the fate of his gambit. If the warheads struck, Petrov had doomed his country. If they didn't, he may have saved it.

An investigation afterward found that the false alarms had been caused by a rare atmospheric condition, related to the autumnal equinox, causing the sun to reflect off high altitude clouds over



Serpukhov-15

North Dakota, which the satellites reported as ICBM launches.

For his heroic inaction and defiance of protocol, Petrov was rewarded with an intense interrogation and a reprimand that sidetracked his career. He was reassigned to less sensitive duty and not given promotions.

The world learned of the Petrov Incident in 1998, after a Soviet general published memoirs describing it. Over the next two decades, the legend of Stanislav Petrov would grow, and the quiet pensioner would be drawn from his Moscow apartment to collect awards and recognitions across the globe, including the United Nations. In 2014, a documentary film about him came out titled "The Man Who Saved the World."

"I'm not a hero," says Petrov in the film. "I was just at the right place at the right time."

CONTINUED FROM P. 12

Gorbachev recognized the rot at the core of Soviet society, a problem he said went far beyond an unfavorable "Correlation of Forces." He wanted to restructure the whole system (*perestroika*) and introduce openness and transparency to governing (*glasnost*). He never imagined his reforms would explode the Soviet Union.

Neither did Reagan. Gorbachev engaged the President like no other adversary had. And Reagan, for his part, pushed the new Soviet leader to go further with his reforms.

Over a series of summits, the Soviet Union agreed to arms control and the loosening of Moscow's grip on Eastern Europe. They even agreed in principle to abolish all nuclear weapons.

At the final summit, in Moscow in May 1988, a journalist asked Reagan if he still considered the Soviet Union the evil empire. "No," he replied, "I was talking about another time, another era."

That other era had been just five years earlier, during a year of Cold War peril that surely holds lessons for us today, if only we choose to learn them.

The Hardest Year

A Love Story in Letters During the Vietnam War

CAROLE AND WILLIAM WAGENER

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The book cover features a green background with a silhouette of a helicopter in flight. Below the title is a photograph of a young couple sitting on a picnic blanket in a park, with several letters tied to a string in front of them. A gold seal in the top right corner indicates the book is an International Book Awards Finalist.

# US AIR FORCE VETERAN AND ABLE ARCHER BRIAN MORRA

Inspiring *VBC Magazine's* focus on the 1983 War Scare this issue was our 40th anniversary conversation with former Intelligence Officer and author Brian J. Morra on *VBC Happy Hour* back on October 30. We talked with Morra about his experiences that year and his book, *The Able Archers*. *The Able Archers* is a historical-fiction thriller that's been optioned by Legendary Entertainment for film and television.

Morra conducted extensive research into recently declassified documents to write the book, but he also had a front-seat view of 1983's nuclear brinkmanship as Chief of Intelligence Analysis for US Forces Japan at Yokota Air Force Base.

He was there when the Soviet Union shot down Korean Airlines Flight 007 on September 1, and he led an early investigation into the cause. Things were so tense, even the inquiry almost sparked nuclear confrontation with the Soviets.

Two days after the shoot-down, Soviet Air Defense mistakenly judged a US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft circling over the Flight 007 crash site as spying on Russia. Two MiG-23 fighters were dispatched to shoot the EP-3 down.

The EP-3 crew detected the threat and went into an evasive dive toward the ocean. Meanwhile, US Air Force General Charles L. Donnelly, commander of US forces in Japan, ordered four F-15s to intercept the MiG-23s.

Amidst the radar clutter caused by the wave tops, the MiGs lost the EP-3, which escaped to Japanese air space. But the F-15s found their marks and were ready to engage the MiG-23s.

Donnelly wisely ordered the pilots to break off and resume their patrolling orbit.

Brian Morra was there when another general officer challenged Donnelly's decision to backdown.

"I don't think I'll start World War III this afternoon," said Donnelly in response.

Morra's intelligence team, along with others, determined the shootdown of Flight 007 was a tragic error, not an international atrocity. But Washington had its own narrative, and President Reagan condemned the demise of the passenger plane as a "massacre" and an "unfounded attack."

Morra also served under Leonard Perroots, the Air Force general who convinced his superiors and NATO not to escalate in

response to the Soviet mobilization during the Able Archer exercise.

In order to write a fictional account of 1983 that was faithful to history, Morra wanted to disclose a lot of information that had been classified for decades. The manuscript was put to close scrutiny by the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies and cleared without a single redaction. The book is the first in a projected series of thrillers that will take readers through the end of the Cold War.

On our *VBC Happy Hour*, Brian Morra suggested several lessons we should take from the Able Archer War Scare.

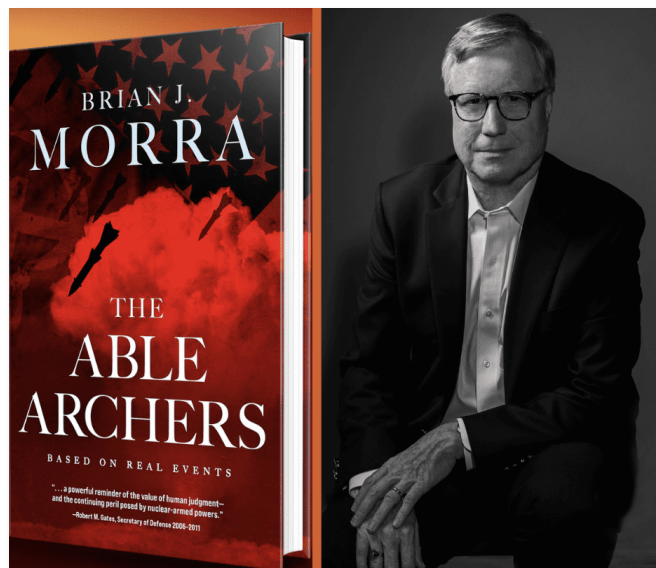
First, "meaningful communication between adversaries is essential." If there had been communication between the adversaries in 1983, tensions would not have escalated as high. Such communication is what saved the world during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Second, decisions need to be made calmly and without emotion. One principal danger is reacting too quickly, before all the facts are known and the risks calculated. Good leaders aren't swayed by the emotional demands of their peers or subordinates.

Third, know your enemy. You don't know the danger unless you are familiar with your adversary's preoccupations and patterns of behavior. "Perroots relied on his experience and gut in response to the Soviet reaction to Able Archer 83," Morra explained.

And, finally, "mirror imaging of one's adversary is extremely dangerous." The self-knowledge of Washington, DC, leadership in the 1980s was that "America doesn't do Pearl Harbors." That is, we don't do sneak attacks unprovoked and would never launch a nuclear first strike at will. But just because we believed that about ourselves didn't mean the Soviets did also. In fact, the Soviets did believe that the US was fully capable and willing to start a war.

*Brian J. Morra is a former Air Force Intelligence officer and retired senior aerospace executive. You can find out more and order *The Able Archers* (Koehler Books) at <https://brianjmorra.com>. You can read an excellent article by Morra, "The Near Nuclear War of 1983" in *Air & Space Forces Magazine* (December 2, 2022): <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-near-nuclear-war-of-1983/>*





# SEARCHING FOR THREE “OPERATION JUST CAUSE” PANAMA VETERANS TO RECEIVE AWARDS

Mary Patricia O’Connell, LTC. USAR, Ret



Four former U.S. Army Soldiers receive the Bronze Star Medal with “V” device at the U.S. Army South holiday ball, Dec. 8, 2023. The valorous awards were upgraded from Army Commendation Medals and presented for their heroic actions during Operation Just Cause in 1989. Pictured from left to right: Maj. Gen. William Thigpen, commander of U.S. Army South; former Army Capt. Linda Bray, 988th Military Police Company; retired Army Lt. Col. Mikel Russel, former commander of the 108th MP Company; former Army Capt. Kimberly Brodbeck, former platoon leader with 988th MP Company; retired Army Lt. Col. Robert Mackey, former platoon leader with 108th MP Company; and Command Sgt. Maj. Ronald Graves, Army South senior enlisted advisor.

On January 22, the Veterans Breakfast Club invited five veterans of “Operation Just Cause” to share their memories of the Invasion of Panama in 1989-1990. One of those guests was LTC Mike Russell, who took part in “Task Force Bayonet.”

A key pillar of the operation, Bayonet featured the 193rd Infantry Brigade doing battle with the Panama Defense Forces in the urban hub of Panama City.

Mike talked about the fierce fighting and mentioned that, as Company Commander, he later recommended several soldiers for Bronze Stars with the “V” devices (for Valor) during actions that occurred between December 20th and 25th, 1989.

As the recommendations moved forward for approval, they were altered and mishandled. The photo above shows four soldiers who did finally receive their awards 34 years after-the-fact. (Mike is third from the left).

Unfortunately, three enlisted men who deserved awards did not receive them. And LTC Russell no longer recalls their names.

Mike believes those awards should not have been turned down. Major General William L. Thigpen (on the left in the photo), Commanding General of the US Army South, agrees and is trying to track down the three soldiers.

We are hoping readers of *VBC Magazine* can help identify

the three deserving enlisted men who have not yet received medals.

The three men were enlistees in **MOS 95B**, assigned to the **108 Military Police Company, 503 Military Police Battalion, 16th Military Police Brigade**, out of Fort Bragg, NC. They were assigned to the **193 Infantry Brigade** as part of **Task Force Bayonet**, conducting combat operations in downtown Panama City, Panama.

The award recommendations were submitted from the **108 MP Company to 503 MP Bn**, where they were improperly downgraded. By regulation, the recommendations should have gone forward to the XVIII Airborne Corps Commanding General for final decision.

Readers with information on the identities of these soldiers should contact LTC Mike Russell at [mike@mikerussellatlanta.com](mailto:mike@mikerussellatlanta.com).

*Mary Patricia “Pat” O’Connell served for 25 in the US Army and Army Reserve, retiring in 1993 as a Lieutenant Colonel.*

You can watch the VBC program on “Operation Just Cause” at [veteransbreakfastclub.org/operation-just-cause-the-invasion-of-panama-1989-1990/](http://veteransbreakfastclub.org/operation-just-cause-the-invasion-of-panama-1989-1990/)



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FEATURE

# VIETNAM TRAVELOGUE: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 2023 VBC TOUR

by Todd DePastino

In November and December, 21 of us—including five veterans who had served in-country during the war—traveled to Vietnam, from Hanoi and Halong Bay in the North to Saigon and the Mekong Delta in the South. Vietnam is a beautiful and often bewildering place, ancient in history and now yoked to American history and memory. The country presents to the traveler more than can be absorbed. Below are select notes from the trip, not so much highlights but insights gathered day-by-day.



Army veteran Bryan Barnes heading out on a cyclo ride

**Day 1 Hanoi:** Vietnam is about as far as you can travel from the United States. It's literally half-way round the world. So, most of us who landed in Hanoi on November 28 for our two-week tour of Vietnam put in 24-hours or more to get here. That made us giddy and loopy, a good state for encountering the always fascinating and often strange capital of the country we once called enemy.

The first day begins with a "cyclo" ride through the ancient Old Quarter on what was once known as a "rickshaw." If you can put aside any post-colonial reservations about being peddled around by a poor, thin man in sandals and a pith-helmet, you get to enjoy front-row tour of Hanoi's chaotic street life. The odds are excellent you won't get hit by a motorbike buzzing past you, front and back, and, in fact, the whole experience is strangely serene.

Hanoi is the ancient cradle of Vietnamese civilization, the heart and soul of the country, where it all began thousands of years ago. It's the most Vietnamese part of Vietnam and remains, despite the nation's emergence as a tiger economy at the forefront of 21st century globalization, a deeply conservative, patriotic, and patriarchal place. You still see men (in green pith helmets) and women (in straw conical hats) from the countryside peddling fruits and vegetables, ducks and chickens on the streets at all hours. Little flashy clothing or consumer extravagance.

The air quality in Hanoi is noticeably terrible. I connected to wifi and tried to see the Air Quality Index on a common weather app. "This content is no longer available in your area" was the message. The government has banned the Weather Channel app, I believe, for reporting the air quality here.

Someone in our group asked our guide the reason for the bad air. He uttered the one-word source of blame you often hear in response to the nation's problems: "China."

Our guide Kan, a proud native of Hanoi who admits, when pressed, he's actually partial to Saigon, surprised me at lunch when he declared that Americans had never had eaten proper pho, the noodle soup that is the national dish of Vietnam.

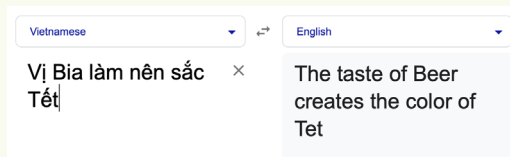
"Not true," I said. Pho is very popular in the US and is probably my wife's favorite meal.

"But you've only had the kind of pho they make in the South," Kan pointed out. "And that is not the real pho."

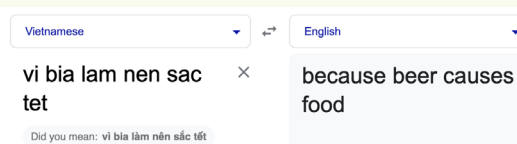
He went on to explain that most Vietnamese-Americans come from the South, home of the former Republic of Vietnam (RVN) which the US defended from the North in the Vietnam War. In the South, he said, people adulterate pho with all kind of add-ons like basil, lime, sugar, bean sprouts, and anything else that might mask the blandness of the broth. Northerners strip pho down to its bare essentials: broth, rice noodles, beef or chicken, and a light sprinkling of green onion. Nothing more is needed because cooks spend hours getting the sweet flavors of the bone marrow into the broth. Southerners, he suggested, don't have the patience for that kind of diligent cooking.

The national drink is beer, and the Vietnamese consume lots of it. Each city boasts its own slightly different popular lager. In Hanoi, the beer is Bia Ha Noi, and it's served every lunch and dinner. Bia Ha Noi's slogan states plainly why people drink beer with every meal: "Vị Bia làm nên sắc Tết."

Google translate gives this interpretation:



If you enter the Vietnamese phrase without the diacritical marks around the Latin letters, which indicate tonal distinctions, you get a blunter translation:



Pho Ga, Vietnamese Chicken Noodle Soup



After lunch came the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology dedicated to the 54 official ethnic groups that call the country home. Vietnam's immense ethnic and linguistic diversity is a problem for Vietnamese nationhood. It took centuries to unify the Vietnamese Empire—the Dai Viet—because so many non-Vietnamese people lived within the borders, especially in the Annam Mountain range that separates Vietnam from Laos.

Anyone who has lived in a mountainous area—whether it be Switzerland or West Virginia—knows that such terrain breeds isolated communities that fiercely defend their independence and don't trust outsiders.

Many of these ethnic minorities—such as the Khmer, the Hmong, and the Muong, collectively referred to as “Montagnards” (Mountain People)—sided with the Americans in the Vietnam War. And many were also present in Vietnam long before the majority Viet or Kinh ethnic group appeared there.

Now, at the museum, these minorities are celebrated—though often in muted and condescending tones—as part of the unique heritage of Vietnam, a land of “unity in diversity.” None, however, is described as “indigenous,” lest it have a claim to independent statehood.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum is a once proud, now dated, home to an enormous number of one-of-a-kind artifacts that most Americans would probably look right past, but our veterans find mesmerizing. After all, much of the US effort in the Vietnam War was “interdiction”—stopping the flow of men and materiel down what the Vietnamese call the “Truong Son Strategic Supply Route.” The Vietnamese credit their success in keeping the Ho Chi Minh Trail open with winning the war.

The spine of the route was formed from pre-existing mountain footpaths that people had used for centuries to travel the rugged mountains straddling Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In one of the greatest achievements of military engineering in world history, the North Vietnamese Army (including our guide's father) transformed those old paths into a vast network of trails and even paved roads. An estimated 300,000 full-time workers labored round the clock to maintain the trail under triple-canopy trees in a primeval rain forest.

In 1965, the CIA and Army Intelligence estimated that 200 tons and 50 people a day were arriving in South Vietnam on the Trail.

Because of that, western Vietnam and Laos became the most bombed places on earth. Three times as many bombs were dropped on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia than dropped by all sides in World War II. By the end of the war, Laos itself saw a mission dropping a payload on it every 8 minutes, round the clock, 7 days a week, for nine years. You can still see the craters in the Vietnamese countryside today. Where water tables are high, the holes now serve as duck ponds.

Hanoi's immense pride in the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the respect it garners from Americans show at the museum. There's a “hey, look how we beat you!” kind of excitement to the

exhibits. Around back, there's an elaborate memorial to some 10,000 Vietnamese who died on the Trail. It's a vast undercount. The real number is maybe ten times higher. And most died not from bombs, but disease and starvation.

Today, the Ho Chi Minh Trail is a four-lane highway in some places, and the whole network is still being improved and widened as an alternative to Highway 1, the main artery from North to South.

The day ended with a remarkable dinner at the home of a three-generation extended family. The family welcomed us, told us a little about themselves, and served an overwhelmingly abundant meal featuring items both familiar and strange. They also served us shots of their homemade rice and ginger wines. Not for the faint of heart or stomach.

Our travelers may end up saying that evening with the beautiful Vietnamese family was a highlight of the whole trip. And it was only the first day.

**Day 2 Hanoi:** One immediate difference I noticed in this year's trip to Vietnam is the absence of Chinese tourists.

In 2018 and 2020, we shared our hotels, tourist sites, and the streets with large groups of well-dressed Chinese vacationing in Vietnam. The sumptuous hotel breakfast buffets were strictly segregated—sometimes even by floor. The American buffet had Danish, omelets, cereal, and sausage. The Chinese buffet had congee (rice porridge), fried rice, cabbage, meat and noodle dishes, and all sorts of unrecognizable items.

This year, the food is still there, but the Chinese are not. The occasional Russians we saw back in 2020 are also gone.

Instead, there are many more Indians, South Koreans, Taiwanese, and West Europeans than ever before.

I asked our guide about the lack of Chinese tourism. He told us the issue was the infamous Nine Dash Line Map. This is the map China uses to claim territorial waters and a host of islands—the Spratly and the Paracel—in the South China Sea (what the Vietnamese call the East Vietnam Sea).

The problem with the map, from the Vietnamese point of view, is that Vietnam has sovereignty over some of these islands, not China. Same goes for Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, all of whom reject the Nine Dash Line Map.

China, for its part, banned the *Barbie* movie in 2023 because it briefly showed a map of China without the Nine Dash Line.

Last year, China started putting an image of the Nine Dash Line Map on its passports (it had also done so in 2012). In response, Vietnamese border officials refused to stamp the passports and admit the Chinese as tourists.

Banning Chinese tourists is an extreme move, especially given how much the Vietnamese economy depends on tourism from their northern neighbors.

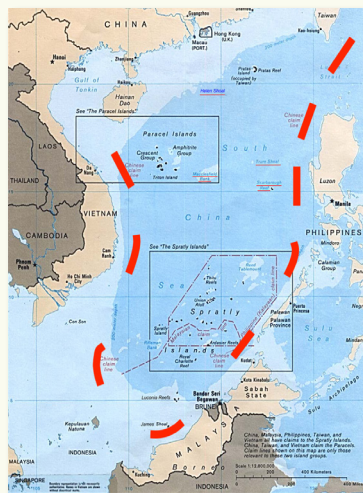
“It is hard,” says our guide, “but it is a matter of sovereignty.”



*Vietnam Family Dinner*



*Vietnam Veteran Nick Edinger enjoys the national drink of Vietnam on the first day of our trip*



*China's Nine Dash Line Map*

That sense among the Vietnamese that its sovereignty is always in peril, always threatened, not only by the giant empire to the north, but rivals near and far, explains much about the culture and the people.

One of the day's visits was to Hoa Lo Prison, the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" where 591 US POWs were tortured until finally released in 1973.

The museum doesn't emphasize this American connection to the prison complex. Instead, it focuses on the colonial history, when the French created Hoa Lo to detain, torture, and execute Vietnamese rebels and revolutionaries.

Hoa Lo Prison is a grim place—its very name means "Fiery Furnace"—a double meaning capturing its origin as a place of brick firing as well as the hell it became.

It's hard to look at the staged photos of smiling American POWs decorating Christmas trees and playing games, as if they were enjoying a respite from war. There's no mention of torture or how the years of solitary confinement bred ingenious methods among the US servicemembers to communicate with each other and boost morale.

John McCain's flight suit is on display. But you wouldn't know it unless someone told you ahead of time. The Vietnamese removed McCain's name from the display as a token of honor and appreciation to him for his role in spearheading diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam in the 1990s.

I think it's no dishonor putting McCain's name on his flight suit display, but perhaps the Vietnamese view it as a demeaning war trophy. Or, perhaps, they attach some shame to McCain's POW status.

McCain, of course, was shot down right over Hanoi in 1967. There's a marker next to the lake where he landed.

Can you spot the error on the monument?

One final stop for the day: a winding walk through narrow alleys of the Ngoc Ha neighborhood opened up on a small pond called the Huu Tiep Lake. In one corner of the pond sticks out the rear landing gear and undercarriage of an American B-52 bomber. It's been there since it was shot down on December 18, 1972 as part of the so-called Linebacker II or Christmas Bombings.

There's a plaque with limited information, some of it incorrect.

The airplane-tail number 56-0608, call sign "Rose 1"—took off from U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand. While flying over Hanoi, an SA-2 surface-to-air missile hit the plane, and part of it crashed into the pond. Two of the six crew members (navigator Richard Cooper and gunner Charlie Poole) were killed in action. The rest survived, held as POWs until 1973.

**Day 3 Halong Bay:** Our morning excursion in Halong Bay was a welcome respite from the bustle and war stories of Hanoi.

Halong Bay is a UNESCO World Heritage site and visual wonder. Two-thousand islands (officially 1,969, the year of Ho Chi Minh's death), each draped in thick foliage, stand like soldiers at attention throughout the bay.

These tall, narrow limestone towers are called "karsts," a geological formation caused by eons of erosion (they are not remnants of volcanic eruptions). Sailing among the closely grouped towers is dizzying. Exhilarating, also.

This being Vietnam, the green karsts are not just beautiful limestone formations. They are dragon pearls sent as obstacles to confuse and defeat Vietnam's enemies.

"Ha Long" means "descending dragon." The Vietnamese people, according to mythology, are themselves dragon descendants. Back in time immemorial, so the story goes, the Viet Emperor called upon Mother Dragon to repel invaders in Halong Bay. Mother Dragon and her children answered the call and incinerated the enemy to the last.

To help keep the Vietnamese safe, Mother Dragon and her children spit teeth-pearls-emeralds into the bay, leaving behind what are today the karsts. They remain there as a curtain against future attack.

In fact, Halong Bay did play a key role in repelling Chinese invasions.

The first came in 938 CE, when the Han Dynasty invaded Vietnam up the Bach Dang River from Halong Bay. Vietnamese general Ngo Quyen was waiting for them with an ingenious plan.

First, Ngo ordered telephone-pole-like spikes to be driven into the river bed, then tipped with iron points. Then, at high tide, when the spikes were deep under water, he lured the Chinese fleet upriver. He assembled a small attack armada, exposed it to the Chinese, and then had the armada flee upstream.

The Chinese gave pursuit. Then, the tide receded, and a strong outward current pushed the enemy's ships downstream so they were impaled on the poles which were now close to the water surface.

The Han were sitting ducks. Flame-throwing archers emerged from the shoreline and ambushed the Chinese fleet.

No one knows exactly how large these ancient forces were that clashed on the Bach Dang River, but estimates range from 50,000 on the Chinese side to 500,000. The Han forces lost half their army and navy that day and retreated to Halong Bay.

This was the great battle that won Vietnamese independence from more than 1,000 years of Chinese rule.

The Vietnamese would use this very same tactic 350 years later in 1288 when the Mongol Empire, led by Kublai Khan, tried to conquer the Dai Viet (Great Viet), the Vietnamese empire established after independence. Once again, the enemy sailed up the Bach Dang River, and once again, the Vietnamese unveiled a masterpiece of guerilla tactics, saving the Dai Viet from Chinese conquest.

Such sanguinary stuff was far from our minds as our travel group cruised Halong Bay. We looked for monkeys on the islands, waved at vendors and fishermen on the water, and spotted two karsts that, from the right angle, looked like kissing chickens.



Close-up of John McCain monument in Hanoi



B-52 Lake



Kissing Chickens



**Day 4 Hue:** Our attention turned once again to war in Hue, which burst into the American consciousness like a flash grenade on January 30, 1968, the first day of the Tet Offensive.

Violating the truce for the Lunar New Year holiday—Tet, in Vietnamese—the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched a massive coordinated attack across all of South Vietnam, hitting every town, city, and military installation in the country. At least 84,000 enemy insurgents and soldiers participated in the uprising. Some US-supported strongholds fell, others almost so. Americans back home watched television with horror as VC “sappers” penetrated the outer courtyard of the US Embassy in Saigon.

But, while the news media and even the US military focused on securing Saigon, the real story was unfolding further north in Hue.

The VC and NVA concentrated one of its largest forces on Hue, a city of learning and worship that had been spared fighting since the beginning of the war. In fact, it was something of an Open City, where both sides respected the spiritual and intellectual independence of the residents and thus avoided drawing them into battle.

That changed on Tet. Thousands of enemy fighters, who had infiltrated days before, rose up and slaughtered anyone who opposed them. They did so on both sides of the Perfume River, which split Hue into the old walled citadel to the north and the new modern university city to the south.

Within hours, Hue was occupied, and the flag of the VC, the National Liberation Front, flew over the citadel’s massive flag tower.

It would take over three weeks, thousands of buildings flattened, and an unknown number killed before Hue was back in South Vietnamese and American hands again. The Battle of Hue City, 1968, was the largest of the Vietnam War.

We walked the battleground, which is the city itself, and saw some ghostly remains: an old air field control tower, the blasted brick of the citadel walls, and the Truong Tien Bridge, damaged during the battle and not repaired until the 1990s.

But the most fascinating residuals of the catastrophe of Hue are the improvised shrines, easy to overlook, that perched on stone walls, metal utility boxes, even at the bases of trees everywhere.

Sometimes they’re elaborate, with kumquats, cigarettes, and cans of Coca-Cola laid as offerings. Most often, they’re just incense, carefully placed in a cup or vase and lit as an offering to those who died on these streets.

Incense burning is universal and reflexive in Vietnam. People do it any time, any place, but mostly in the morning in front of their homes. “With a sincere heart, I offer this stick of incense,” is the incantation as the long red stick is lit and a prayer is said.

Americans call them ghosts, but the Vietnamese refer to them as spirits, and they’re everywhere. When people die, they slip this veil and live beyond sight or sound, but they’re often felt, and they’re never far away.

Especially present are spirits of people who were ripped from

life suddenly, violently, and without preparation for the afterlife. These unquiet dead need to be appeased, and they need to stay connected with us. And the Vietnamese don’t make distinctions between enemy and friendly dead. The Americans who died in Hue during Tet—they are also honored.

We gathered after our tour at the well-known DMZ Bar, just a block from our hotel. Opened in 1994, the year the US and Vietnam normalized relations, the DMZ attracts foreigners but also some locals who enjoy the DMV relief map on the ceiling and colorful cocktails and the ever-present Huda Beer. Huda is the favorite beverage here in the Hue-Danang corridor, and its name reflects the connection to both cities.

After Happy Hour, we enjoyed an unusually elegant dinner, supposedly inspired by the royal heritage of Hue as the seat of the Nguyen dynasty. The food presented as whimsical works of art. Some judged it the best food we’ve eaten so far.

**Day 5 DMZ:** The Demilitarized Zone—the DMZ—stretched across the narrow waist of Vietnam, 30 km north of Hue City, cutting the country into two states along the 17th Parallel, much as the DMZ at the 38th Parallel does today in Korea.

It was never intended to be a national border. The Geneva Accords of 1954, which ended the First Indochina War between France and Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh forces, called for two “temporary re-groupment zones.” Like boxers going to their corners, the Viet Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North while the anti-Communists forged a new state in the South, eventually called the Republic of Vietnam.

The Accords scheduled national reunification elections in the summer of 1956. They never happened. The US-backed President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, made sure of that. So, in 1960, Communist insurgents and others in the South created the National Liberation Front, which Diem derided as “Viet Cong”—slang for “Vietnamese Communists.” They launched a war to overthrow the Diem government and begin some kind of reunification with the North.

The final collapse of the Saigon government on April 30, 1975, erased the DMZ and prompted the creation of a new state, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which remains the government today.

The Hien Luong Bridge is the most prominent icon of the former DMZ. It was blown up by the US in an attempt to stem crossings from the North. After reunification, the Vietnamese rebuilt it as a Bailey Bridge. We walked across, North to South, and took some fun pictures.

On our drive back south, we slowed down to check out the former site of Camp Evans, created in 1966 by the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines, and taken over later by elements of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne Division.

The brother of Kathy Jo Wells, one of our travelers, served at Camp Evans for one hard year with the 1st Cav. He was a loving and dutiful brother, but that year changed him. He died tragically soon after returning home, and the family never healed from the loss.



*The old air field control tower in Hue citadel*



*The “three amigas”—Debbie Businger, Peg Deibel, and Kathy Jo Wells—straddle the 17th Parallel on the Hien Luong Bridge*



*Kathy Jo reflects on her brother's service as we pass Camp Evans*

You can't stop at the site, and you can't take photos because it's now occupied by the People's Army of Vietnam. But we slowed down enough for our traveler to look at the place where a large piece of her brother was left behind.

**Day 6 Khe Sanh:** Back in the 1980s, Mt. Lebanon High School, south of Pittsburgh, had a great mound of landfill in the rear we called "The Rockpile."

It was flattened on top into a rectangle and used as a practice field. During track season, discus, shotput, and javelin throwers did their thing up there.

One day, during practice, a classmate with older brothers tapped me with back of his hand and pointed up at the throwers.

"The Rockpile was named after a place in Vietnam," he said. "My brother told me that."

The reference was lost on my 15-year-old self in the 1980s, but in the 1960s, when the stadium was built and the landfill mound created, everyone would have understood it.

The Rockpile entered the nation's vocabulary in the fall of 1966, when news outlets began reporting on the extraordinary battle between the Marines and the NVA for this lone Gibraltar of the jungle just 10 miles south of the DMZ.

Rising almost 800 feet straight up from the rainforest floor, it was a limestone karst, like those in Halong Bay. But this one was positioned perfectly for reconnaissance. From the peak, you could see five river valleys, as well as the East Vietnam Sea, Laos, and into North Vietnam.

The Marines fought ferociously in July 1966 for this perch, then, when the perimeter was secure, established Camp Elliott there.

Atop The Rockpile sat electronic surveillance equipment and a small crew. The peak measured 40 feet by 17 feet at its widest. It had to be supplied by helicopter, which could only hover, not land, when the weather was clear enough.

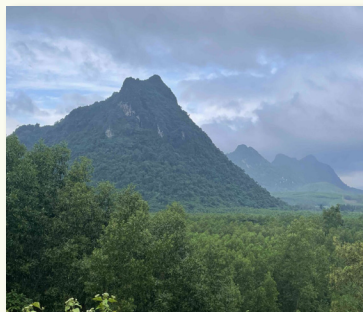
*Time* magazine ran an article about The Rockpile in the fall 1966. *Life* also published photos. The extreme, even freakish conditions of life atop The Rockpile left an impression on readers.

They also made their mark on those who served near the DMZ along the Route 9 corridor, which ran and still runs from Dong Ha in the east to the Laotian border in the west. For these servicemembers, The Rockpile was a towering landmark, instantly recognizable and useful for orienting yourself on the valley floor.

We stopped on Route 9 at The Rockpile to take photos and talk about the effort made and the lives lost in its conquest and defense.

The tiny village of Khe Sanh is only a 15 miles south west of The Rockpile. It sits at the base of another promontory, where the Marine Corps occupied and enlarged a combat base in 1966.

Three-miles square and almost 2,000 feet above sea level, the Marine base at Khe Sanh occupied a less strategic location than The Rockpile. But it could accommodate more troops. Most historians now believe the 6,000 Marines placed at Khe Sanh were there as bait.



*The Rockpile*



*A Bru Montagnard farmer shows his love*



*Danang, Vietnam*

The head of the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland, figured the NVA would not resist the opportunity to lay siege to so many Marines, so isolated and so far from reliable resupply.

He was right.

The NVA staged three divisions around the plateau—22,000 men—and attacked on January 21, 1968. For the next 77 days, they rocketed the combat base while trying to infiltrate from the surrounding jungle forests.

The NVA cut Route 9. All resupply had to be done by air.

Life inside the Khe Sanh perimeter descended into World War I-like conditions. Trenches and sandbags shielded Marines from some of the rockets, but supplies on the plateau ran low. Wounded Marines died from blood loss before they could be evacuated. Water had to be rationed.

Meanwhile, the US diverted air power to Khe Sanh to bomb enemy positions. Over 100,000 tons of bombs were dropped by American aircraft and 158,000 artillery rounds fired in defense of the base.

In April, the NVA seemed mostly to vanish. In July, the Marines evacuated the area. Both sides claimed victory.

Touring Khe Sanh is always a highlight, though its impact is subtle and dependent, in some ways, on the knowledge of what unfolded here in 1968. One of our travelers said it was like visiting Flanders Fields in Belgium and France. Looking at the beautiful scenery, you'd never guess what happened there unless you knew the names Ypres and Passchendaele.

At Khe Sanh, the trenches are gone, and so are the sandbags. But the Vietnamese have carted up abandoned US military vehicles and equipment, including a C-130, for display.

In truth, the former Khe Sanh Combat Base is a serene oasis of tropical rainforest, flanked by coffee fields and speckled with roaming chickens.

One of the delights of visiting Khe Sanh is the journey there and back. Laos is a stone's throw away, and up in the mountains the dominant ethnic group is the Bru people, not the Vietnamese. Their wooden stilt homes stand out, as does their affinity for Americans.

As we rode up to tour a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, this Bru farmer escorting his water buffalo signaled to us. I'm grateful to Valerie Brendel for catching this photo.

**Day 7 Danang:** A quick poll of our travelers at the end of Day 7 was almost unanimous: they wanted more time in Danang.

I don't blame them. If I had to choose one place to live in Vietnam, it would be Danang. It's considered Vietnam's cleanest and most livable city.

It's also thriving. Centered at the halfway mark on Vietnam's coastline, Danang has an extraordinarily diverse economy that includes colleges and universities, tourism, a bustling seaport, textile manufacturing, and high tech production and software engineering.



But it also has 20 miles of sandy beach and somehow couples all its vibrant economic activity with a relaxed vacation-town vibe. It's like South Florida with a dash of Myrtle Beach and San Jose.

During the Vietnam War, Danang was a small city that only boomed because of the overwhelming American presence there, anchored by the massive US air base. Danang was the main welcome center for American servicemembers arriving in-country for their tour of duty. They also came to Danang for R&R to enjoy the famous China Beach.

We did the same, standing on the exact stretch of beach that served as the R&R Center. It's beauty is breathtaking.

Four of our veterans spent time in Danang, and two were stationed here. Terry Choate was a Navy Corpsman assigned to the Marines in Danang. He patrolled from the base of Marble Mountain across from the Marble Mountain Air Station.

Nick Edinger served with the 1st Logistical Command right next to the R&R Center on China Beach. I took a quick selfie with Nick on the beach where he played volleyball almost daily—yes, Nick had good duty, which 101st Airborne veteran Bob Anckaitis never lets him forget.

Each was thrilled to see the place again, military buildings all replaced with resorts, hotels, restaurants, and stores.

We made two special stops along the way. You can call them photo opportunities, but they were more than that.

The first was to the Phu Bai International Airport, built by Navy Seabees as Phu Bai Combat Base back in the 1960s. It was taken over by the NVA in 1975 and today serves as one of Vietnam's smaller but busy airports.

In 1970-1971, Vietnam veteran Rich Doerr was Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the Phu Bai Signals Support Detachment, which served the 101st Airborne Division. It was here, with just a couple months left on his tour of duty, that he opened a package from his wife, played the cassette tape enclosed, and heard the crying voice of his one-month old baby for the first time.

We stopped to take a quick photo of Rich before a police officer asked us to move along.

The next stop was on a more remote mountain road in the hills near Phu Bai. We were searching for the location of Fire Support Base (FSB) Tomahawk, where Bob Anckaitis served. Most FSBs were so remote, you can't get to their coordinates easily today. Tomahawk was perhaps the only FSB supplied by road.

We found the location and snapped a photo of Bob at the entrance to the base, which is now re-enveloped by nature.

Our travelers would agree that the highlight by far of our trip to Danang was dinner at Bamboo Bob's Cafe, where we were met by our host, Rob Carscadden, the one and only Bamboo Bob himself.

Bamboo Bob Coffee is a company with a powerful social mission and vision. It supports only family farms and Direct Trade, eliminating middlemen and allowing money to go directly to support community programs in Vietnam and the farmers and families that grow the coffee. It's the product of Rob's extraor-

dinary business acumen and love of Vietnam, which is now calls home. Watching him interact with our group and honor our veterans was moving, and the American-style pizza and cheeseburgers he served were welcome and abundant.

I'd known Rob for over three years, but this was the first time I met him in-person. He's a charismatic but gentle force, orchestrating a busy restaurant while connecting with everyone there. A whirlwind of fascinating people buzzed through the cafe on their motorbikes.

Take Amira, for example. She's opening the first Soul Food restaurant in Danang, if not Vietnam. She's 28-years-old and from Pittsburgh's North Side. Army veteran Ray Brendel, also from the North Side, posed for a photo with her.

**Day 8 Saigon:** Officially, it's Ho Chi Minh City. But no one calls it that. For residents and most Americans, it remains Saigon, the former capital of the defunct Republic of Vietnam and, today, the dynamo powering Vietnam's tiger economy.

We landed at Tan Son Nhut International Airport—another one of those American-developed properties since reclaimed by Vietnam—and felt the blast of heat when we deplaned.

After lunch it was off to the former Presidential (now, "Independence") Palace, the seat of South Vietnam's government and home to President Nguyen Van Thieu during the Vietnam War.

It's an elegant and graceful building, beautiful but not grandiose. The palace is modernist architecture as its best, balancing East and West, indoor and outdoor, horizontal and vertical. It's not anything like the Baroque French buildings that had served the imperial court with ostentation.

And yet, it says something of the Communist Party's spartan taste and Vietnam's austere past, that the government treats the palace like some kind of exposé of South Vietnamese autocratic decadence. Casting the beautiful Independence Palace as akin to one of Saddam Hussein's golden-walled follies is misleading. The building in Saigon is not excessive, but a worthy home for an aspiring state.

My favorite part of the palace is the basement bunker, where everything is as it was on April 30, 1975, when an NVA tank crashed through the palace's front gate and ended the Vietnam War for good.

By that time, Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu had fled to Taiwan with 30 tons of luggage, handing the office over eventually to former ARVN General Duong Van "Big" Minh.

Minh reportedly greeted his conquerors by saying, "We have been waiting for you so that we could turn over the government."

The ranking NVA officer replied, "You cannot give up what you do not have."

You can almost feel the terror and confusion in the sweltering war rooms as the NVA moved ever-closer to Saigon in mid-April. Stacks of American radios and other communication equipment line the walls, as do telephones and large maps of South Vietnam.



Bob Anckaitis at FSB Tomahawk



Amira, a young American entrepreneur in Danang, Vietnam with veteran Ray Brendel



Rich Doerr at Phu Bai

After Independence Palace came the War Remnants Museum. The museum was founded almost immediately after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 in the building that had housed the US Information Agency. Its original name says a lot: "Exhibition House of American and Puppet State War Crimes."



*Independence Palace in Saigon, home of the old South Vietnamese government*

It's a museum of war crimes. It's ghastly and gruesome, humanity at its worst on three floors, two rooms per floor.

I lingered outside among the courtyard collection of US guns, planes, helicopters, tanks, and bombs—the best assemblage I've seen. Traveler Andy Gland and Vietnam

veteran Jerry Augustine instructed me in the differences between the M41 and M48 tanks and the comparative virtues of the 155mm and 105mm howitzers.

Most arresting is the bomb display, anchored by a giant barrel-shaped shell—the BLU-82. At 15,000 pounds, it remains one of the largest conventional bombs in the world. It was developed for the Vietnam War and first used there in 1970.

At the War Remnants Museum, the signage correctly identifies the weapon and details its destructive capacity. What it doesn't mention is that the BLU-82—nicknamed the "Daisy Cutter"—was used primarily to clear landing zones and fire support bases. Dropped from C-130s by parachute, they were designed to explode outward three-feet above the ground so as not to create a crater. They could be, and occasionally were used as anti-personnel weapons during the Vietnam War, but that wasn't their primary purpose.

That kind of nuance is absent at the War Remnants Museum, whose purpose is to show how the United States harnessed its technological abundance to devastate a country and its people. Anything that might seem like exculpatory evidence is excluded. Also absent is any reference to the US-backed South Vietnamese government as an independent or autonomous entity. It is simply the "puppet."

In other words, there's a lot about the US war effort in Vietnam left out. And there's no explanation about why the US fought the war to begin with.

Visitors are instructed to start at the top and work their way down so they can ease into the trauma. The top floor exhibits are "Historical Truths," a broad overview from French colonization through the American War, and the expertly-crafted "Requiem," about photographers killed in Vietnam. The next floor down focuses on the work of two Japanese photographers, Ishikawa Bunyo and Goro Nakamura, who captured some of the American War's destruction.

The gut punch comes the next floor down with two exhibition rooms labeled "War Crimes" and "Agent Orange Aftermath."

"War Crimes" tells stories of atrocities mainly through gruesome photographs of charred bodies and severed body parts, some being held up by American service members as trophies. There are descriptions of flame-throwers and cluster munitions, mines and napalm.

The "War Crimes" exhibit contains many small arms, including the M60 machine gun, which Jerry Augustine used in Vietnam. I preferred chatting with Jerry about the artifacts to gazing at the horrific war photos on display.

One alcove is devoted to the infamous Thanh Phong Raid led by Navy SEAL and former US Senator Bob Kerrey. Kerrey's account differs from those of other witnesses, but everyone ac-

knowledges that up to 20 non-combatants, including women and children, were shot and stabbed to death by Kerrey's SEAL team in the remote Mekong Delta village.

The My Lai Massacre also gets ample treatment, as it should. The museum makes lavish use of Ron Haerberle's infamous photos of the March 16, 1968 event, when as many as 504 non-combatants were meticulously executed (and several raped) by two infantry companies of the Americal Division.

As if these atrocities weren't enough, across a courtyard is a graphic menagerie of human deformities caused by Agent Orange, the herbicide used by US forces to defoliate suspected enemy hiding places, rice paddies, and infiltration routes.

The dioxin in Agent Orange continues to afflict those exposed to it, including US service members. More controversial is whether and how dioxin damage can be inherited. Scientists haven't been able to confirm that dioxin alters DNA of those exposed in ways that can affect the genetic material passed to their children and grandchildren.

But the War Remnants Museum expresses no doubt: Agent Orange continues to impair those born in Vietnam.

Photos of grotesque disfigurements and disabilities litter the Agent Orange exhibit. There's also two large jars containing still-born fetuses in formaldehyde, one having two heads.

One of our travelers said she broke down and cried in that room. She wasn't the only one to shed tears.

Museum visitors end up staggering through "War Crimes" and "Agent Orange Aftermath" as if in a daze. Most of the tourists there are European, and it's hard, as an American, not to feel their glances as slightly accusatory.

The unstated founding purpose of the War Remnants Museum is to justify Vietnam's one-party Communist rule.

"This is why we fought the war," the exhibits seem to say, "and why Vietnam needs us for protection."

With Vietnam's economy prospering and living standards rising, the Communist Party relies less on the War Remnants Museum's story of the Vietnam War to justify its rule. Perhaps the day will come when the museum will smooth the jagged edges of its Chambers of Horrors and present less shocking displays.

**Day 9 Mekong Delta:** We often say there was no one Vietnam War. There were many.

A unique version of the war was fought in the Mekong Delta, today's destination.

The Mekong Delta juts out from the southern end of Vietnam's curvilinear land form. It's an anomalous part of the country, a one-of-a-kind ecosystem, 50-feet, on average, below sea level, and crisscrossed by thousands of canals and streams. The rest is largely mangrove, swamp, and marsh. During the rainy season, 70% of its land is covered by water.

Yet, this seemingly uninhabitable terrain is home to 20% of Vietnam's population. It's also the agricultural powerhouse that has fed the country for generations.

The rice grown in the Delta accounts for 10% of all rice shipped globally. It's also home to Vietnam's largest fisheries, much of its coconut, and a lot of its commercial fruit production.

Our first stop was the old provincial capital of My Tho, 70km southwest of Ho Chi Minh City on National Route 1. From there we boarded a boat and chugged downstream—at least, I think it was downstream—to Ben Tre, Vietnam's coconut-growing capital.

A local resident named "Cute"—that's what it sounded like to us—described life in the Delta and also showed us how the Delta's "coconut candy"—a sticky, taffy-like confection—is made.

We then boarded sampans—large canoes—while a boat pilot steered us down impossibly narrow canals.



Buried deep within the Delta, sheltered above by arching palm-like foliage and dense vegetation on either side, you get a sense of how impossible it would be to fight a war here.

In the 1960s, there were at least 30,000 Viet Cong insurgents living in the Delta. The only way you could find them is if they attacked you. No wonder why some of the US's most imaginative tactical innovations—like the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force—happened right here, to fight guerillas in the Delta.

The Mekong Delta faces imminent peril. By the end of the century, this whole jugged landscape could be gone, drowned by the ocean, which wages war daily on the Delta.

The only thing that has saved the region from disappearing under water is the 150 million metric tons of sediment deposited from upstream each year. To stay above water, the Mekong Delta must keep adding sediment in a desperate race against ocean tides.

The fundamental problem is that the Mekong River begins 3,000 miles away on the Tibetan Plateau. The river snakes through five countries—China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia—before emptying out in Vietnam.

That means Vietnam is last in line. China has pinched the fresh water flow over the past two decades by building 10 massive hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River. These dams also create reservoirs that trap the sediment that the Delta depends on for survival.

With less fresh water and alluvial soil washing downstream, the Mekong Delta is sinking under the salty East Vietnam Sea (South China Sea).

Making matters worse are the Vietnamese themselves, who harvest the Delta's sediment for sand used to make concrete.

If you care to see one of the great and most diverse ecosystems in the world, you should probably do so soon before Vietnam's agricultural powerhouse disappears forever.

**Day 10 Cu Chi:** Today, we head to enemy country, 35 miles northwest of Saigon to a place once known as the "Iron Triangle."

Before 1966, this was the capital of South Vietnam's Viet Cong insurgency.

The Viet Cong weren't just present here. They ran the place. They were the village leaders, staffed the schools, and collected the taxes. Much of the early American war effort in Vietnam focused on eradicating the Iron Triangle.

Our stop was Cu Chi Tunnel Ben Duoc, a tourist destination with much the same perspective as the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum in Hanoi. Visitors get to marvel at the ingenuity and determination of the Viet Cong, with some sadistic-looking booby trap displays thrown in.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail, in fact, emptied west of Cu Chi, putting the region at a strategic crossroads where vast amounts of weaponry were stored and distributed.

In an attempt to take control of the region, the US built one of its largest bases in Cu Chi to house the 25th Infantry Division. Sabotage and theft became an immediate problem on the

base, even though there was no evidence of the perimeter being breached.

The Cu Chi Base Camp had been erected on top of an enemy tunnel system so extensive that its complete mapping was unknown even to most Viet Cong.

The Cu Chi Tunnels stretched over 250 miles from the western outskirts of Saigon to the Cambodia border. The tunnels had bunkrooms, hospital rooms, kitchens, and even a few classrooms. And there were escape hatches and trap doors everywhere.

The soil of Cu Chi is unique, allowing easy digging by hand but hardening when exposed to air. It was also permeable enough to allow a bit of oxygen to pass through, meaning you could live underground with a minimal amount of ventilation.

Countering the tunnels were so-called "Tunnel Rats," GIs who entered deep holes with a knife, a .45, and a flashlight. Once inside, the soldiers dodged booby traps, scorpions, snakes, and, of course, enemy guerrillas.

Greeting visitors at Ben Duoc is an eerie "Planet of the Apes"-type tableau of wrecked American guns and vehicles, including Armored Personnel Carriers, a tank, and a C-130 with tall trees grown around it.

Our guides—dressed like Viet Cong guerrillas—then led us down a trail. You could see immediately see how hard the soil gets when compacted. You also see leftover B-52 bomb craters, reminding you that this part of the country was absolutely bulldozed—literally—in order to make the region uninhabitable for the Viet Cong.

We were led to a thatched pavilion housing a light-up map showing the tunnel network and a diorama looking like a human ant farm that depicted the rooms and levels within the tunnel system. Also shown were the dead-ends, escape routes, and zigzags added to confound American Tunnel Rats.

There are a few tunnels accessible to tourists. They've been widened to accommodate American-sized bodies. Several of us crawled through. We each emerged shaking our heads wondering how anyone could live underground like that.

Along the way were displays of diabolical booby traps, including the infamous bamboo "punji sticks," and mines made from re-purposed unexploded America ordnance.

The trail then took us to a relaxing jungle spot where our Viet Cong guides served us pandan tea and cassava.

We started back from Cu Chi and passed through some old rubber plantations where rubber was still being harvested. I thought of some of our veterans, like Ron Worstell, who fought in rubber tree farms like this. For every tree damaged, he told me, the US Army had to pay the Michelin company \$1,000.

How do you fight a war like that?

**Day 11 Saigon:** Our last full day in Vietnam was a free one. Since our hotel was located in District 1—the very heart of the city—there were many options for spending the day within a few blocks. *CONTINUED P. 29*



*"Cute" speaking on board our boat. Note her khăn rằn around her neck. It's a checkered black-and-white scarf distinct to the Mekong Delta. During the Vietnam War, Viet Cong guerrillas adopted it as their signature garment. So did the infamous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.*



*One of our guides, dressed as a Viet Cong, demonstrates a hiding place in the tunnel system.*



*Part of the strange display greeting visitors to the Cu Chi Tunnel Ben Duoc is an inexplicable faux tire clock reading 11:15.*

# 7 WAYS MILITARY BRATS ARE DIFFERENT

by Rona Simmons

I'm a brat.

My father was a retired, career-military lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force. He served in World War II as a fighter pilot, exited after the war, but returned to the military after the Korean War and the birth of his first two children. He remained in the Air Force for twenty-four years and raised four "brats" while serving.



Simmons aboard Italian ocean liner with father

Years have passed, maybe decades, since I thought about being a military brat.

Recently, I canvassed other so-called "brats" to learn about their experiences and compare them with my own. Although the eleven of us hail from different military branches and formative years that span the 1950s to the 1980s, we have much in common.

When brats are asked the seemingly simple question, "Where are you from?" we answer with a version of, "Well, ah," followed by a long pause.

In my case, I say, "Well, ah, [pause] I was born in California."

Before the asking party has a moment to think I have any lasting association with The Golden State, I continue, saying, "But I only lived there nine months." If their quizzical look persists, I add, "I was a military brat." That seems to suffice, but pigeon-holes me.

So, what makes a brat a brat?

## #1 We Have No "Roots"

Everyone I spoke with agreed they grew up with a sense of being "different." At some point, we realized that not being from the town we were in at the time was a large part of that difference. As Jim Roberts remembered, everyone in the small town in West Virginia where he lived knew everyone else. "When my grandmother looked at someone," he said, "she could see their entire family tree." Jim left me with the vivid image of his grandmother looking at me or any one of us with a very puzzled expression.

## #2 We Can Pick Up and Move at a Moment's Notice

But not being from "there" also meant the tiny roots we spread were easily uprooted and replanted, for some of us every couple of years.

As we settled into a new home—wherever the military decided to send us—we knew that home, too, was temporary. We were "there" until the day our parents said we were leaving. Then, the movers came, packed up our belongings, placed them into a giant Allied Moving Van, and drove away. The family filed into our station wagon and set off with games of "I Spy" and a route map to the first in a series of orange-roofed Howard Johnson motels. Later, when my father took an assignment in Europe, we had the privilege of crossing the Atlantic in first class on an Italian ocean liner. For four years, we had maids, a cook, and a gardener. But my parents kept us grounded, and we did not come away with a sense of entitlement.

## #3 We Make Friends Quickly

But moving often meant we had known no one for more than a year or two. With each move, we had to make friends quickly,

### The BRATS

Steve Arnold	Charles Arnold, Yeoman, Sr. Chief	Navy
Alec Fraser	Powell Fraser, Colonel	Army
Chris Fraser	James Fraser, Captain	Navy
Riley Gazzaway	Riley Gazzaway, First Lt.	Army
	Walter Vargo, Leading Chief	Navy
Bill Gibson	Elmer Gibson, Major General	Army
Bernie Lee	Bernard Lee, Staff Sgt.	Marines, Army
Debbie Morris	James Duff, Lt. Commander	Navy
Sue New	Norris Smith, Lt. Colonel	Air Force
Jim Roberts	George Roberts, Master Sgt.	Air Force
Rona Simmons	Harold Simmons, Lt. Colonel	Air Force
Terry Wade	Carl Wade, Warrant Officer 4th Class	Coast Guard

which wasn't as simple as it sounds for everyone.

Debbie Morris remembers, "We were always the new kid in class and dressed and looked different—having adopted whatever the customs were from where we had moved. We had difficulties fitting in with the established cliques."

When I met my college roommate, I remember thinking, "She'll be my new best friend." Soon, however, I learned I was *just* her roommate. Her true best friend was back in Houston, where she was born and grew up.



Morris with father

As a consequence, we were *our own best friends*, which may have made some of us more introverted and others more outgoing. But when we did make friends, it was with a genuine desire for camaraderie no matter how long it lasted. Having spent much of his childhood with other brats, Bernie Lee added a slightly different perspective. "We grew to trust our [brat] friends," he says, "and had each other's back."

## #4 We Mind Our Elders

Maybe our childhood friends had met a military brat or two and found them to have an attitude.

Maybe that child was ill-mannered, immature, spoiled. But us? No.

We didn't live in a household like Ben Meecham's in *The Great Santini*, but we knew the answer to an adult's question was, "Yes, Sir," or "No, Ma'am." And we knew not to ask "Why," or plead, "But . . ." No meant No. Period. Riley Gazzaway recalled, "You got up when you were supposed to get up, you ate when you were supposed to eat, did your chores to the best of your ability, and you never questioned your mother."

## #5 We Embrace Differences



Lee, Bernard Sr. in the Army

Difficulties aside, being raised in a military family had its upsides. One was the opportunity to live in different places. We were exposed to other cultures with their own ways of living and thinking—whether state-side or abroad.

At home, race played a much subtler role in our lives than it did in the civilian world.

Bernie Lee, who is Black, says his father left the military for a short period, but could not find a comparable position as a civilian and so returned to the service. Bernie attended both integrated and segregated schools and lived mostly in diverse communities, once in a four-plex with Irish, Italian and Hispanic neighbors.



Jim, who spent much time as a child on military bases, says he never knew there was such a thing as race. Then, when his family moved to a new town, he noticed signs above public water fountains designating them for use by race. It flew in the face of everything he'd been taught or experienced. "On or off base, everywhere we went, everyone had been the same."

Regardless of our environment, we learned the similarities between people we met and respected the differences. Given the opportunity we embraced foreign customs and learned a foreign language. Living abroad gave us a better sense of what was going on in the world. That awareness stayed with us into adulthood and made us more informed, curious, and well-rounded than most people we meet.

#### #6 We Miss Our Fathers and Are in Awe of Our Mothers

Growing up in an era without a major shooting war, I was fortunate to move with my family when my father was reassigned, even overseas. He was never absent from home.

Others, like Steve Arnold, weren't so fortunate. His father was often at sea and so he missed out on many father-son activities..



Arnold YNC Arnold

"Five hundred men might be away at a time, so everyone on base was in the same situation. With five hundred wives left behind, the Navy mothers had a large support group around them."

Still, Steve never questioned the military family life and never thought of his father's absence as a hardship. He wrote to his father and received letters and photos in return. What could be more fun for a child, after all, than to welcome your father home, his arms full of gifts from faraway places?

One of my aha moments from these conversations was realizing how important my mother was to our up-

bringing. Our mothers had to fill both parents' shoes. They had to handle the household finances and take charge of getting children to school, to doctors, and to extracurricular events, like today's "soccer moms," but on steroids.

For example, Alec Fraser's mother found herself faced with taking him and his sister to Europe on her own. With one young child in each hand, she traveled to New York, crossed the Atlantic, arrived in Germany, and somehow found the right train to their destination.

Mothers also had to meet the service's often unspoken but none-the-less significant expectations for military wives. They had to participate in the women's club or officers' wives' club, entertain, and be capable of welcoming a corporal, colonel, or general into their home.

Most of all, they had to maintain discipline at home when their husbands were away. Sue New's mother filled that role without blinking, but had to take charge permanently after Sue's father was killed in action in Vietnam. "She was a good disciplinarian," Sue says. One life lesson Sue learned from her was, "If you did something, you did it the right way. If you didn't, you did it again."

Note: Those I interviewed grew up before mothers became the career-military parent and endured long periods separated from their families. I leave it to the next generation of brats to weigh in on the impact of growing up under a male-led household.

#### #7 We Will Always Be Brats

Growing up military leaves a deep imprint that's never quite erased. We are and will be nimble, respectful, and informed. In a sense, we'll always be military brats.

Debbie Morris admitted, "I still want to move every three

years, and I'm a very good packer. But now, I just rearrange the furniture."

Others observe that we have also tried to share our values—our love for our country and respect for others—with our children.

Chris Fraser said he advised his children to do what they do best, whether or not they joined the military. But, if they joined, he said (with a chuckle), he advised them to become an officer. "Life's a lot better as an officer."



Gibson with father

Several of those I spoke with followed in their father's footsteps. Bill Gibson served and had the privilege of being his father's pilot on four separate occasions, three in Korea and one at home in the US.

Terry Wade said one of the proudest moments of his life was being sworn into the Coast Guard by his father.

In turn, both Bill and Terry passed on their fond memories and pride in service to their children. Bill's son joined the military and served as a JAG officer.



Wade's father

Terry's daughter served five years in the Navy, and his son eight in the Army.

Today, the phrase "military brat" is on the outs, nudged aside by the more respectful "military family" and "military children." And today's military brats seem to have more support than we ever had: social media groups, a museum (military-familymuseum.org), and a whole month of the year (April) dedicated to them.

For me, the children of our military will always be different, something they will cherish. Most of all, my fellow "brats" will always hold a special place in my heart.

Rona Simmons is author of several books, including *Images from World War II: The Art of Jack Smith* (Cyrilla, 2016), *The Other Veterans of World War II: Stories from Behind the Front Lines* (Kent State University Press, 2020), *A Gathering of Men* (Koepler Books, 2022), and the forthcoming *No Average Day: The 24 Hours of October 24, 1944*. She also hosts and manages author events and literary festivals in her "home" state of Georgia. She can be reached at [ronasimmons.com](http://ronasimmons.com).

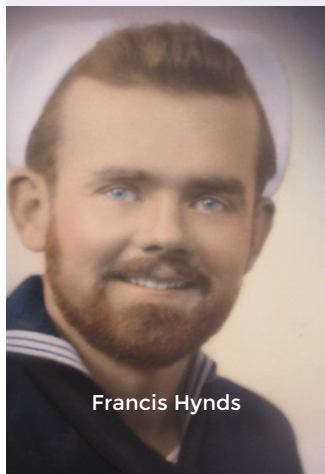
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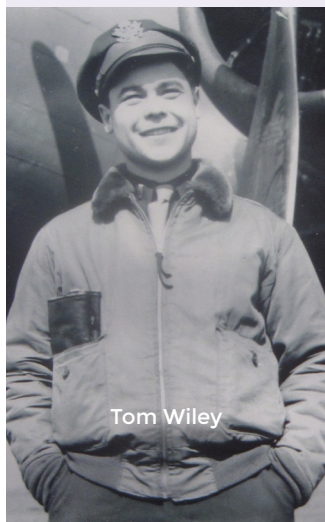
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# THE DOMINO THEORY

On April 7, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower answered a press conference reporter's question about the impending defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina with the first articulation of what would become known as "The Domino Theory."

The theory would drive the escalation of the Vietnam War over the next two decades.

At the press conference, Ike spoke fewer than 150 words on the subject, and his answer included as much about Indochina's tin, tungsten, and rubber as it did the famous "falling domino" principle of Communist expansion. But the domino image took hold. It offered a vivid mechanical



President Dwight D. Eisenhower  
(NARA)

framework for understanding why the United States should care about an armed struggle taking place 9,000 miles away from home.

The Domino Theory stated simply that Communist victory in one country or region would spark neighboring regions to rise up against pro-American governments, which would lead to more victories and further insurgencies. By keeping the first domino upright—

in this case Vietnam—the US could prevent Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and even India from succumbing to Communist takeovers.

So, was the Domino Theory correct?

Most historians say it wasn't, citing non-Communist Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia as proof. If Vietnam was the first domino, and it turned fully Communist on April 30, 1975, shouldn't its neighbors have turned Red also?

Advocates for the Domino Theory point to neighboring Laos and Cambodia, which tipped Communist after the Fall of Saigon.

One can point to earlier regime changes around the world that suggest the theory has some validity. North Korea fell in 1948, then China in 1949. These two countries' war against the US and South Korea inspired the Vietnamese's struggle against the French. The Vietnamese then assisted the Communist Pathet Lao in Laos, and so forth.



# THEORY AT 70



It stands to reason that success in one place might spur success nearby. Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara thought as much when he foresaw “two, three, many Vietnams” following from the success of Ho Chi Minh.

Political activist Noam Chomsky, a fierce opponent of the Vietnam War and critic of American foreign policy, has argued that dominoes do fall after successful revolutions because poor people in other countries see the results and ask, “why not us?” He called it “The Threat of the Good Example.”



Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara pointing to a map of Vietnam at a press conference in April 1965 (LoC)

Perhaps when we ask if the Domino Theory was correct or not, we’re really asking if the fight in Vietnam was justified in terms of US national security. It’s striking that the biggest proponent of the Domino Theory during the war, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, later confessed, “I think we were wrong. I do not believe that Vietnam was that important to the communists. I don’t believe that its loss would have lead - it didn’t lead - to Communist control of Asia.”

The problem with using mechanical theories of history to guide foreign policy is that we have no way to test them ahead of time. History doesn’t allow for controls or the isolation of independent variables. You can’t subject it to the scientific method. Things happen all at once, one time only. Then, new things happen in new contexts. Nothing is repeated precisely the same. You can discern patterns, but only broadly, over time.

There’s only been one study I know of that attempts to analyze the Domino Theory over centuries to see how it holds up as a predictive index. Two economists (not historians), Peter T. Leeson and Andrea M. Dean, reported the results of their research in *American Journal of Political Science* in 2009. I tried to read it, but quickly gave up. Any scholarship that explains its method this way is far above my pay grade:

Our SEM model takes the form:

$$\Delta D_t = \alpha + D_{t-5}\beta + X\omega + \varepsilon_t; \lambda W\Delta\varepsilon_t + \eta_t$$

where our parameter of interest is  $\lambda$ , the spatial autocorrelation coefficient, which measures the spread of democracy using the SEM model.

In the end, what’s probably most important about the Domino Theory was not its accuracy, but the hold it had over the US foreign policy establishment through at least four Presidential administrations. The theory might have saved Western Europe from Communism by inspiring NATO and the Marshall Plan. It also protected Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea from Communist takeover. But, the theory’s run of success ended in Vietnam.

In retrospect, said McNamara, “we should have begun our withdrawal from South Vietnam [in 1965]. There was a high probability we could have done so on terms no less advantageous than those accepted nearly six years later—without any greater danger to U.S. national security and at much less human, political, and social cost to America and Vietnam.”

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 Keith Zimmer  
 Ed Zirkle  
 Phil Zmenkowski  
 Janet Zreliak

VIETNAM TRAVELOGUE CONTINUED FROM P. 23

I suggested folks check out the Pittman Building, site of the most iconic photograph of the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Back then, the building was home to the CIA Station Chief, who called in a helicopter to evacuate friendly South Vietnamese from the rooftop.

Another must-see in District 1 is Ben Thanh Market, the central market of Saigon.

The place is a sensory onslaught with vendors crammed as tightly as possible, each calling out to you to check out their wares. Haggling is expected.

Part of my last day involved escorting three of our Vietnam Veterans—Jerry, Bob, and Nick—to Doi Dep Café for an interview with Fox News host Harris Faulkner.



Left to right: Nick Edinger, Harris Faulkner, Bob Anckaitis, Jerry Augustine

Harris arrived in Vietnam yesterday to start production on a documentary about her father, Army Lt. Col. Bobby R. Harris, who served three tours in Vietnam. She's traveling the country to speak with veterans, see key sights, and connect with her father's memory and service.

Our veterans spoke on camera with Harris for over 90 minutes. Harris was engaging and full of insight as she talked with Jerry, Bob, and Nick about their service then and how they view it now. I was impressed by the whole experience, and our veterans felt honored to participate.

At our farewell dinner that night, we paid tribute to the veterans who accompanied us on our trip and also to our Vietnamese tour guide Kan, who instructed and learned from us along the way.

The most moving moment at the dinner was Air Force veteran Debbie Bussinger's brief tribute. She reminded us that each of the three days of the Tet holiday are dedicated to specific Confucian-defined social roles. The first day to fathers. The second day to mothers. And the third day to teachers.

On the third day of Tet this year, said Debbie, I will pay tribute to you, Kan, our teacher.

That was about the highest compliment one could give in Vietnam. And it was a fitting salute to a country and people so different, yet so intertwined with our own.

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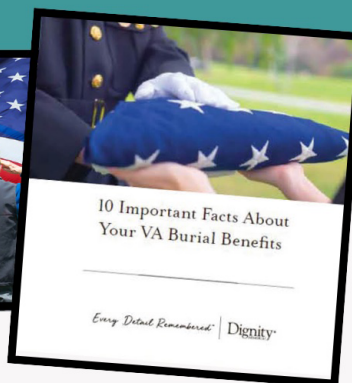
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