

TRIP REPORT

VIETNAM, 4-14 MARCH 2001

Melanie and eldest son Spencer gave me a precious gift this past Christmas – a trip to Vietnam. And Spence came along. The impressions the war made on his young life were tremendous with Dad's first combat tour coming at age 1 and second tour and MIA/presumed dead coming at age 4. It meant a lot for us to make this trip back to the land of that war together.

The trip began on March 2nd. Spencer flew from Denver, Colorado via Hong Kong, and I flew from Seattle, Washington via Tokyo. Our flights landed in Singapore within five minutes of each other and we met by our adjacent gates just inside the terminal. Immigration and customs in Singapore is a breeze, and within moments we were on our way to the Le Meridian Hotel in downtown Singapore for a night in an upscale hotel before launching onto Vietnam the next day. After a morning foot tour of downtown Singapore, we got to the airport and caught our Singapore Airlines flight into Saigon.

It was eerie as we came over the Vietnamese countryside and made our approach into Saigon. I had never landed there before without staying alert for enemy anti-aircraft fire. We landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport which was the same airport that serviced the civilian passenger terminal and a large Vietnamese and U.S. air base during the war. Our

plan for our trip was to try to generally retrace my first introduction to Vietnam by coming through Saigon and then working our way up country. My first tour had been at Hue/Phu Bai in the northern portion of what was then South Vietnam. My second tour at Pleiku in the Central Highlands – right about in the middle of South Vietnam.

As we taxied in to the terminal, I was surprised at how much things had not changed. The runway, taxiways, even the old concrete revetments and shelter for the American fighter aircraft, were all just exactly as I remembered them. Even many of the hangers were the same, and the passenger terminal seemed to be about where the old one was, but was a new building. What I wasn't prepared for was the uniformed Communist soldier positioned just inside the jetway when we got off the aircraft. My reaction was sudden and uncontrolled. I think it was a shudder and a too loud utterance of "Goddamned Communist Bastards." Spence elbowed me and said "Shush!"

We continued through immigration and then customs. I was very uneasy having my comings and goings being processed by the same people who had held me locked up against my will for so long and found myself quivering all over with a rapid (but I'm sure barely discernable) shaking. It was like a high speed vibration in the rudder pedals of a helicopter that has some sort of tail rotor problem. At any rate, we got through the bureaucratic formalities and caught a cab into downtown Saigon.

We'd stayed in an upscale hotel in Singapore largely because we thought we'd pretty much be in hovels throughout our travels in Vietnam. We didn't book an organized tour (or unorganized for that matter). We just got off the plane, the two of us with our *Lonely Planet* guidebook and ten open days ahead of us, and pulled together an itinerary as we went. I did have an idea of the places I wanted to go: start in Saigon, get