

The small structure, rounded at the top with sturdy thick walls, located between Cat House and Opium Den and Beer Hall that caught my attention earlier continued to intrigue me. I tried to guess its function but could not. I well imagined however, that this would have been excellent as a solitary confinement facility. It could only hold about one person but not comfortably. There was only one door and there were no windows. The building and dome roof are unpainted. The walls are about 16 inches thick.

I walked back to Cat House and retrieved a fragment of roof tile and a piece of wall plaster from inside the roofless enclosure. These I would send to Lee Humiston for his POW museum collection.



Students Living on the Prison Grounds

I lingered around the grounds for a few more minutes and visited with the young students in their apartment. We could not understand each other but they were very congenial as they tried to communicate with me. They were probably 16 or 17 years old. I have seen better living accommodations; much better.

I tried to memorize all landmarks that I had seen but, as I was to learn two months later, I had missed many important ones. Years before during my visit to Khe Sanh, I tried to fix in

my mind all the hills and their geographical relationship to one another. I was saddened to leave Khe Sanh. There was something there that kept tugging at me to stay. Not knowing much about it at that time, Khe Sanh represented a compelling mystery that beckoned, in my mind, to be solved. At Son Tay, with its ominous setting and sad aura, more or less, I was ready to leave. If nothing else, I wanted to find some relief from the cold.

We left Son Tay prison after having spent about 2 hours there. Mr. Ty was going to show me where the helicopters landed and where several had crashed. "Crashed?!" I exclaimed. "Couldn't be," I thought. We drove to the end of the road and made a 90-degree left turn and parked in front of a sugar factory. Mr. Ty pointed to an area back towards the prison and told me this was where the helicopters landed, "here, here, and here," he said, looking off into the distance. I had no idea. Then, again through Hoang, he told me that many helicopters had crashed because the trees were taller than the pilots had anticipated. Where they crashed precisely, he could not show me. This all sounded intriguing and reminded me of the invasion of Grand Anse Beach on the Caribbean island of Grenada. Several helicopter pilots evidently landed their aircraft in trees. There is a famous photograph in St. George's (the Capital) of a Huey helicopter sitting inside a hotel room with its tail boom and rotor protruding out through the wall overlooking the beach, perhaps to the surprise of an unsuspecting hotel guest and, most assuredly, to the

chagrin of the hotel owner. It appeared as if the helicopter had simply parked itself in a hotel room, like it was a garage.



The Secondary School

as well as from the sugar factory, would become, in itself, an infamous landmark during the raid.

We turned the car around, and drove back past the prison camp and across the bridge back into Son Tay town. I did not know at that time that the sugar factory had been identified as a light industrial area in 1970 and that the road we had been on with its distinctive 90-degree turn at the end, just prior to the sugar factory, would show up clearly in aerial reconnaissance photos. I would learn later, that another large building, called “the secondary school,” near the prison and easily seen from there

We returned to Son Tay town and said goodbye to the Tuyen family with whom we had had lunch. After being treated to tea and being presented with a gift of Vietnamese vodka and some fruit, Hoang and I left Son Tay town around 6:00PM. Just prior to leaving, the entire family, each in turn, shook my hand and, through Hoang, told me I was welcome there anytime. I took more pictures with my digital camera using the flash. Finally we loaded into the vehicle and drove away, leaving Son Tay the same way we entered it. The sun had already set and the lights of the oncoming vehicles were shining through the windshield into our eyes. Hoang drove, as usual. Both of us were tired, wet and chilled. Hoang had to be home soon so as to attend a school function with his son. I knew he would be late but he didn’t say anything about it.

The weather during my first visit to Son Tay was the same at the end of the day as it had been at the beginning: cold, damp, and dreary. We arrived in Hanoi well after dark. Hoang worked his way through the interminable Hanoi traffic, up and down narrow side streets, up main boulevards, finally arriving in the Hoan Kiem District of town at the Hanoi Hilton – not the prison, although we did drive past the prison – but a real Hilton, officially called the Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel under the very capable management of Wibo Wilmink, the General Manager. Wibo was subsequently transferred to another Hilton hotel in Sri Lanka and has been replaced by the equally capable Mr. Jerome Auvity as the new General Manager. I always pay close attention to these things because hotel staff can be your best friends in strange places. I always stay at the Hilton, have come to know everyone very well, and I make it a point to know the General Manager. The Hilton is like my second home. Those who travel as often as I do soon realize the mutual inter-dependency that exists between hotel staff and guests. I like the Hilton because of its convenience and location in Hanoi. It is situated on Le Thanh Tong Street immediately adjacent to the French built Opera House and not far from the Press Club

and the famous Metropole Hotel, where Graham Greene wrote "The Quiet American." By the time of our arrival at the hotel, the weather seemed to have turned colder and damper. A hot shower and a cold beer were soon to be a welcome relief. It was comforting to see the bright lights of the Hilton lobby and to be greeted by familiar faces of the Hilton staff who all know me and who have never failed to take excellent care of me. I was starving and couldn't wait to dine on a steak.

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I left Hanoi for the USA two days later from the newly constructed, capacious terminal at Noi Bai Airport. The airport is actually the MIG airbase just north of Hanoi that was called Phuc Yen – yet another unfortunate spelling that proved irresistible to Lyndon Baines Johnson. Not lost on the President, it has been reported he picked up on its approximate English phonetics, as only a Texan can, and called it by a more crude but familiar expletive common to less refined American parlance. Those Texans. And this, just two years after his sarcastic and irreverent reference to Khe Sanh as another "Damn Din Bin Foo." You gotta love the guy!

The weather on my day of departure had improved but was still somewhat gloomy and cold. Driving to the airport, we crossed the Red River via the large, massive concrete bridge constructed by the Russians after the war. Vehicles travel in each direction on the top deck while trains pass beneath them on a lower deck. We had to stop and pay the toll (about 80 cents). The toll collector is located on the passenger side of the car, and I enjoy handing the toll collector money. They never expect to deal with a westerner and their



The Author at the Hanoi Air Defense Museum

reactions are always interesting. On the other side of the bridge, if one knows where to look, bomb craters are still visible but have become ponds. At this point we were about 15 kilometers outside of Hanoi. I asked Hoang where the SAM sites had been constructed and he pointed all around and said "Everywhere." "Dien Bien Phu of the Air," he said. "Understand me?" "You mean "Din Bin Foo," I said. "What?" he looked at me quizzically.

The Vietnamese call the fight against the B-52s "Dien Bien Phu of the Air." They shot down so many B-52s that they have developed a boastful pride at having fought tenaciously against an enemy they could only see on radar screens. The Vietnamese government even issued a postal stamp commemorating the struggle and their believed victory. Remnants of B-52s are scattered throughout Hanoi and there are several museums displaying B-52 parts and assemblies. My own thought is that when a

The Vietnamese call the fight against the B-52s "Dien Bien Phu of the

B-52 crashed, the effort required to remove such an enormous amount of debris was too taxing, so the next best thing was to turn the pile of debris into a museum.

There are many large advertising billboards on the way to and from Noi Bai. So many in fact that I have often commented to Hoang, that for a communist country, the Vietnamese don't seem too reluctant to embrace capitalism, certainly the more obnoxious side of it.

Hoang dropped me off at the entrance of the airport departure hall and parked the car as I checked in, then he rejoined me. I said goodbye to Hoang at immigration control as I always do, finally boarded the Air Vietnam airplane (an A320 Airbus) and two hours later, punching down through the overcast, I landed in Hong Kong, an intermediate stop on my way home. Leaving or arriving Hanoi by air, I always sit in a window seat so I can see the ground. I try to imagine what it was like during the war with AAA and SAM missile installations constructed throughout the countryside. I have tried to spot old SAM sites but haven't seen any of them yet.

Immediately upon my return to the USA, I sent the pieces of tile and wall plaster I had collected at Son Tay to Lee Humiston for his collection. To me they were just that, tile and plaster, but I knew to Lee and others they would be regarded as historic artifacts, worthy of display and protection. I hand-carried them back to the States, fearing they would sustain damage or be broken in my luggage. The thought never crossed my mind as I was leaving Vietnam days earlier that Vietnamese airport security may have become overly curious or suspicious of my bringing out strange pieces of broken tile. Why should they? They're inert and meaningless. But then again, still, why would I want them? When going through the x-ray machine, the shapes are highly irregular and a closer inspection could have raised some eyebrows. Nothing was said, nor was I questioned.

I had no plans to return to Son Tay, but as it happened, once back in the States, I stumbled across an excellent book entitled "The Raid" written (and recently revised and



Main Entrance to Opium Den

re-printed) by Benjamin Schemmer. The book provides a thoroughly detailed and riveting account of the preparations for the Son Tay raid and the raid itself. So highly readable was the book that, in the words of Dennis Mannion, a veteran of Hill 861 near Khe Sanh and a friend of mine, it was "un-put-down-able." I completed the book over a weekend. To anyone interested, I would highly recommend reading this book.

Briefly, the 1970 raid at Son Tay, conceived many months before, unfolded in the early hours of November 21, 1970. Executed from Thailand, it was a direct assault from the air by an assortment of aircraft, key of which was the large HH53

helicopter, that was to serve as the POWs' Pegasus, and, the somewhat smaller, HH3 helicopter, which met a strange but planned fate. The raiding party consisted of about sixty individuals who risked their own lives to save about the same number of POWs. The "Raiders" were supported by hundreds of men and women. For me, the most interesting element of the raid was the daring insertion – in fact, an intentional crash landing - of a helicopter inside the prison compound.

Now, having read Schemmer's book and being able to precisely correlate place names with where I physically had been (always a catalyst for developing one's interest in history, and an element often missing for young students who have to labor through and endure enervating, if not boring, history classes without benefit of physical tangibility), I decided I wanted to return – no - must return to Son Tay the next time I was in Vietnam to see if I could identify place names mentioned in the book. I wanted to know concretely and for sure that I had seen Cat House, Opium Den, and Beer Hall as described in the book. I talked with Lee Humiston about this and told him I wanted to identify the exact location of the events the book detailed. Excitedly in agreement, Lee told me he knew Ben Schemmer, and suggested that perhaps I would like to talk with him directly.

Lee asked me if I could bring back some more souvenirs. I agreed I would try and I told him I would also try to find, for his collection, a metallic piece of the HH3 helicopter piloted by Herb Kalen and Herb Zehnder (with Dick Meadows onboard) that was



The Interior of Opium Den

intentionally crash-landed inside the compound. What I learned from Schemmer's book, which was significant to me, was that only one helicopter had crashed but this crash, of course, was contrived. I was very impressed by the thinking behind this. What better way to storm a citadel or a fortress than from the sky, sacrificing a helicopter! The result being, the raiders were immediately – boom - right inside the compound. What brilliant, if not completely audacious, planning! While it was true that the trees were perhaps taller than the

planners had assumed, according to Ben Schemmer (and Mr. Ty), they were also thicker and, as the big blades churned through the wood mass like an industrial-size blender, the resulting intentional crash-landing was rougher than anticipated. One can only imagine the din caused by trees and tree limbs being torn and cut to shreds, the turbines and tail rotor whining, the blast of the exhaust from the jet engines, the wind and whopping noise generated by the main rotor blades chopping through the air, the tail rotor embedding itself in a tree trunk, and the helicopter thrashing about as it was twisted around by the torque of the main rotor. All this combined with the aircraft arriving nefariously from nowhere, slamming onto the ground, in the middle of the night. Everyone onboard survived, although some were injured. (Again, for a vivid account of the event, I would

refer the reader to Mr. Schemmer's well-documented book.) There were no accounts of other helicopter crashes during the raid, and I thought back on Mr. Ty's comments about those other supposed incidences. He was mistaken.

By the time of my return visit in March, I had the good fortune of being able to make contact with Ben Schemmer, the author, himself. We exchanged e-mails and talked by telephone. As a result of my discussions with Ben and from reading his book and other accounts, I was more prepared to understand the layout, location, and the history surrounding the POW experience at Son Tay and, of course, the unprecedented nocturnal American raid.

The raid, lasting less than an hour, went down in history as unsuccessful as the camp was empty - the prisoners having been removed from the Son Tay site to another nearby prison facility just weeks prior to its occurrence. Whether the raid was well planned or effective may be debated by so called "experts" for many years. But, as a result of the raid, many things were certain.



Latrine Facilities on North Side of Opium Den

to remain POWs for another two years or so, it is safe to assume, without ever their having realized it, that the POWs had turned an important corner in their imprisonment, survival, and, ultimately, toward their return home.

In the annals of the American POW experience, it was probably the one singular event that inspired hope among the POWs and renewed and congealed their determination to live. As a result of the Son Tay raid, POWs from neighboring prison camps were rounded up and concentrated at Hoa Lo and other facilities close to Hanoi. An organizational structure within the burgeoning POW ranks quickly developed and the POWs gained strength, mutual support, and identity through numbers. Although they were

From the Vietnamese perspective, it must have provoked fear and deep concern that their country was vulnerable to US airborne land actions heretofore unseen in North Vietnam. Basically, the United States invaded North Vietnam - not on the scale of the Normandy invasion in 1944, but an invasion nonetheless. The raid was proof that other similar ground actions in North Vietnam could be planned and executed, and with relative impunity. The raid was a bold, unprecedented, courageous undertaking. It was highly risky, and extremely dangerous for all participants. But, as is evidenced by the raiders, there were, and are, committed Americans willing to risk their own lives for the benefit of others. Heroism is not a myth.

Surely, but without knowing exactly, the raid and its planners must have contributed to the planning of another similar and, perhaps, even more risky raid to rescue American hostages held in Iran about 10 years later; the results there, through a series of missteps, being less than satisfactory.

I was scheduled to return to Vietnam, in March 2002. I collected many articles about the raid and made some photocopies of photos of the prison. My primary objective of this visit to Son Tay, if I could afford the time, would be to confirm other structures and to see if I could obtain information on the helicopter that crashed in the compound, and, as I had told Lee Humiston, maybe even obtain a piece of it.

The day before my departure, I received a curious request by e-mail to try to ascertain whether Red Chinese troops had occupied the secondary school coincidentally during the raid. Evidently no one knows for sure, or at least, those who do know aren't talking. The Chinese had built a rail line from China in an effort to bolster overland shipments of military materiel into Vietnam. To protect their investment, they felt obliged to protect it from air raids. They sent air defense crews and equipment into Vietnam to assist with the air defense system north of Hanoi. It is not difficult to imagine that their role expanded over time. The area must have been crawling with Chinese troops.

I would try to find out about the occupants of the secondary school but I knew my chances were not very good, and besides I was neither on a spy mission - although I have been suspected of being a spy on more than one occasion - nor a fictional character from a Nelson DeMille thriller. I would be in Vietnam on business and my visit to Son Tay would have to occur on a Sunday or on a holiday. My schedule was tight.

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In a tradition I am fast learning in Vietnam, I returned to Son Tay, my second trip, on a



Exterior Wall Detail of Cat House

Sunday bearing gifts, as I knew I would again meet the Tuyen family who had welcomed me there on my first trip. I had the photos I took of the family framed in the USA and, while in Hanoi, I bought wine and fruit for the family and some hats for the kids. Hoang and I left Hanoi at around 9:00AM and we stopped at the same little kiosk on the outskirts of Hanoi for additional fruits and candies, and of course, Vinataba cigarettes for Hoang. The weather had vastly improved from what I had

experienced in January and, even though the sky was cloudy, by 10:00AM, I was down to a t-shirt wet with perspiration. We drove the same highway as before with the same

crowds, buffaloes, and motorbikes. The fields were being worked and the clouds hung low again, as before, obscuring the tops of the mountains.

We stopped at a roadside restaurant for tea as on the previous trip, near brick and tile making factories. Workers were busy making roof tiles just behind the restaurant and down a sloping incline. We climbed out of the vehicle and sat down at a table with chairs, as usual, not more than 8 inches off the ground. Tea was brought for us and Hoang lit up. "Mr. Gary," Hoang started, "We come Son Tay two times now." I nodded yes. "I don't understand why you so interest in Son Tay." I thought for a moment and said "Hoang, it's not Son Tay especially, it's the whole American-Vietnam experience that has me intrigued, especially now as I become more familiar with your country and your people. Also, the American-Vietnam history is long passed but still very tangible and I enjoy learning about it and seeing it with my own eyes." Hoang just looked at me.

Then Hoang asked, surprisingly, "Do you think Hieu can come USA for university in mathematics?" "Of course he can, Hoang. Why not?" I replied. "But he will have to take tests to get accepted." Hoang drank his tea and told me he had to buy gasoline. "Not enough?" I asked. "Not enough," he said.

I wanted to see how the tiles were made behind the restaurant, so as Hoang smoked the last of his cigarette and walked towards the vehicle, I left the restaurant and walked a little farther along the road and turned right down the incline behind the restaurant to where the people were making roof tiles. They slam a ball of clay, the size of a



North Exterior Wall of Beer Hall

basketball, on to a mold and then cut it horizontally with a wire, leaving a flat slab in the mold. The consistency of the clay is such they can extract it by hand in one piece and lay it on the ground to dry before baking it. They were as fascinated with me watching them as I was with watching their procedures. The level and loudness of conversation among the workers increased amid laughter as I walked in and around them. Hoang followed me down the incline in the car and picked me up. "It's fascinating, Hoang, to watch how your people make things."

I said. Hoang shrugged his shoulders and drove away, smiling. "What are you smiling at?" I asked. "I hear the people talking," Hoang said. "They say you look funny, like crazy America man." With me sitting next to him, accepting the jibe, Hoang, a cigarette dangling from between his lips, laughed as he put the car in gear and let out the clutch lurching the car forward up the incline. He reminded me of Mr. Blond in the movie "Reservoir Dogs." We eased up to the roadside and then, with a sudden acceleration, Hoang, drove onto the paved highway from the dirt road and merged with the traffic. All

four tires bumped on the rough pavement edge bouncing the car precariously. We were away.

I remembered that on my previous trip to Son Tay, I had sung a Marty Robbins' song and conjured it up again. I don't know why this song sticks in my mind so often. The story line is easy but the precise lyrics are difficult to recite. *"The cowboy lived and rode away, but love was strong, he couldn't stay. He rode back just to die in that El Paso sand..."*

Hoang looked at me and said "Same song last time?" "Same song," I said. "Why you sing same song?" "Same like you," I said, "Same like Vietnamese music, all the time same." I said, reflecting on the fact that when one is around someone who does not speak perfect English, one tends to formulate sentences in their structure and syntax. I have observed this in many people, not just me. Not that we Yanks speak perfect English, of course - just ask any self-respecting Englishman or proper English or Welsh woman, for that matter, and they'll not fail to point this out: *"Too right!"* Americans speak abruptly. Our syntax and sentence structure are corrupted by TV-isms and cute phrases with a reliance on over-used non-descriptive adjectives (it's so neat) and abuse of the verb "to get." The English, though more precise, sprinkle their rhetoric with pauses, plausibilities, and insidious and confounding nuances, not to mention erudite offhanded politeness. As for



Looking to the North from Inside Opium Den

the French, *Mon Dieu*, don't get me started. The English language has 5 vowels (a-e-i-o-u). The Vietnamese language has the same letter vowels, *mais grâce à les Français*, with various circumflexes and accent marks, the Vietnamese are encumbered with 20 vowels. Imagine!

Continuing with my song for no apparent reason, except I couldn't think of another one, *"...I try not to let you cross my mind but still I find there's such a mystery in a song that I don't understand."*

"What you sing? Song now and before?" Hoang asked. "Oh, it's an old country-western song that I'm fond of. I don't care for country-western music very much but I do like this song and the song that preceded it. It's a song about a song," I said. "What's name?" Hoang asked. "El Paso City," I said. It was written by Marty Robbins years ago," I continued. "What country western?" he asked. "Uh, it's a type of music that is popular in America..., umm..., well its... Never mind, Hoang," I said. "You too old," Hoang said. "Anyway," I continued, "Marty Robbins was more of a balladeer than a country western singer, at least in my mind," I stated. "He was from Phoenix." Hoang looked at me, "Same place parents?" "Yep," I said. "Same place my parents live." "Hot there?" he asked. "Very hot, Hoang." We continued on.

Driving past the rice terraces and karst landscape and along the Cuban highway again, we entered Son Tay town for a second time in as many months. But this visit to Son Tay, I would soon find, would be different from the last one. I can't say exactly what I was experiencing but I could sense uneasiness in Hoang as we arrived in the town. Because of what I was perceiving, I found I was uneasy. In a pensive mood and to distract my mind, I returned to my song "...*My mind is down there somewhere as I fly above the badlands of New Mexico. I can't explain why I should know the very trail he rode back to El Paso.*"

We stopped in town and paid our respects to the Tuyen family, leaving behind the framed photos, fruit and the wine. But since only Mr. Ty's wife was home, we decided to



Mr. Ty's Daughter serving Tea In the Tuyen Home

continue on to the prison site without further delay. The air conditioner in the vehicle was at full blast. Again I sang, "...*Can it be that man can disappear from life and live another time..*" Hoang looked at me, grabbed a cigarette, as I moved my hand to intercept his hand trying to turn on the cassette player. We armed-wrestled in the car for a few minutes. "You not sing good!" he said. Once into the ballad, it's difficult to stop. I continued "... *And does the mystery deepen cause you think that you,*

yourself lived in that other time." Hoang covered his ears with both hands.

Perturbed by my incantations, Hoang fumbled with the cassette player on the dashboard. "Hoang," I said, "please put your hands on the steering wheel. Not good what you do."

When we crossed the narrow bridge over the Con River, itself a target during the raid, and arrived at the prison camp, which I now recognized by the small open-air restaurant at the beginning of the footpath leading into the compound, I immediately jumped from the vehicle and began to go to the exact location, just behind Cat House, where the HH3 helicopter was intentionally crashed-landed by Herb Kalen and Herb Zehnder. I knew just before they departed Son Tay, the raiders had set charges with a delayed fuse to destroy the helicopter but perhaps I could still find a small piece of it. I was a determined individual. Hoang abruptly stopped me and said we had to go back to town, register with the police, and obtain permission to visit the site. "What? We didn't do that last time. And why have we come here now, and all of a sudden have to go back into town?" Hoang, now straight-faced, did not respond. Evidently not the master of my destiny, I joined Hoang and we climbed into the car and drove back over the narrow bridge into town. Back to Marty Robbins' song. "...*Somewhere in my deepest thoughts familiar scenes and memories unfold. These wild and unexplained emotions that I've had so long, but I have never told...*" Hoang fell silent and did not smoke. Something was up but I didn't know what.

Now back in town, after having asked for a few directions, we arrived at the police station, which resembled anything but. Remembering, however, that everything in Vietnam is in a constant state of construction, the police station was no exception. To enter, one had to traverse around piles of sand and construction material. New tiles had been placed on the floor and wood planking had been placed over the fresh tile to protect it while the grout cured. The planking had long rusty nails protruding upwards. No one had bothered to remove them or even bend them over so as not to be a hazard. Had to pay close attention while walking there. There was lots of discussion between Hoang and a young man and a young woman, neither of whom wore a uniform. I walked to the back of the police station and looked into a courtyard filled with construction material and then up to the sky. The dark clouds were breaking up a bit, but still no sun. Turning to me, Hoang said "Give man passport." I was incredulous. "What?" I asked. He told me again to give him my passport. "You want see Son Tay, give man passport." And this is when it became interesting, and a little disconcerting, for me in Son Tay.

Through Hoang to me, the young man, thumbing through my passport upside down, asked: "Why you want see place?" "I'm curious." I said. "How many times you here come?" "Once." I answered "Once now, and once before - twice, I suppose." "Why again you come?" he asked. "Curious," I said, "And also I am doing someone a favor." "What you want see?" "Just the grounds and the buildings."



Helmets of American Pilots

"Why? Nothing now there." "I know," I said, "but it is historical, and I am doing a favor to those who were here." He looked at me for a long moment and said "You mean America men: pilots?" "Yes," I said. Then I added, "It's in their honor that I am visiting Son Tay." He said, "Many people America come here." "Yes," I responded, "I would imagine. Even I

have come here." The man, much shorter than myself, looked at me for at least a minute. With cigarette smoke swirling around all of us, and each of us exchanging glances – me not knowing exactly what was going on – the silence thickened, as there was a long pause. Then a quick, heated discussion resumed between Hoang and the man who was posing as some seemingly important official. Hoang again turned to me and said, "He think you's POW." I said "Impossible. Look at my passport. I was old enough to be in the war, but, I was too young to have been a pilot then, and only pilots were kept at the prison camp." Once Hoang comprehended what I had said, he nodded in agreement and explained this to the man. The man tried to find my birth date in my passport but couldn't. I didn't volunteer to help him either. At any rate, he evidently agreed with Hoang and my logic because he smiled - well, sort of smiled. Abruptly, the man left the building, started his motorbike, and drove away with my passport. Hoang told me, to make copies of the passport page. Hoang and I sat down on a low couch, dusty from the

open windows and construction activities. The air was still and hot but the noise, typical of Vietnamese cities and towns, persisted, assaulting my ears. Hoang took a last drag on his cigarette and, in a continuous motion, lowering it from his lips with his left hand, flicked the cigarette butt out the open door bouncing it on the sidewalk. It came to rest, still sputtering smoke, on the side of a pile of sand. "Jesus H. Christ," I exclaimed, as I looked around at my surroundings. Then I asked myself, "Now, why again, exactly, am I doing this?"

To mitigate worrisome thoughts, I hummed, "...*Like every time I fly up through the heavens and I see you there below.*" Hoang looked at me, frowned, and lit another Vinataba. I walked around the room, stepped into the back courtyard, and watched the workers as they hauled concrete in small pails to the top of the building using a rope. Then back inside, in the tiny room without circulating air, with nothing else to do but sit and wait, I continued to amuse myself by working towards the end of the lyrics of a song I had started in the car during my first trip to Son Tay two months previously, "...*I get the feeling sometime in another world, I lived in El Paso.*" The shirtless, barefooted, sweating workmen continued sawing boards and mixing concrete on the street surface outside the office, and stacking blocks behind the building in preparation for adding on another room. I continued Marty Robbins' ballad "...*Could it be that I could be the cowboy in this mystery who died there in that desert sand so long ago...*"

The man came back after 30 minutes, sat down at a desk, unlocked a box and withdrew from it a telephone, made a call, talked, and then hung up, returning the phone to the locked box. "All OK," he said. "You go prison," and handed my passport back to me. Understanding the meaning of what the man was saying, but reeling from the literal translation, Hoang and I, especially me, shook his hand, and PDQ, left the building, being careful of the upturned nails in the planking. We opened the doors on either side of the



Looking into Beer Hall from Opium Den

car and climbed in, both chuckling - Hoang more than I. Neither of us bothered to fasten our seatbelts, which is something I always do. After Hoang started the ignition, I asked, "Hoang, what was that all about?" "Everyone, Mr. Gary, here need show power," he said. Changing the subject, I asked "Hoang, why don't they take the nails out of that wood on the floor?" "What wood?" he responded, as he shifted into second gear and we once again bounced into the mayhem and impossible *embouteillage* of motorbikes and the *mélange* of other vehicles in Son Tay town. Careening through the streets on our way back to Son Tay prison, I remembered the man's exact words and repeated them to myself, "OK, You go prison." An unsettling thought as I settled back in the seat. Bringing the ballad to an end,

I sang quietly to myself for the last time on that trip, "...A voice tells me to go and seek, another voice keeps telling me... maybe death awaits me in El Paso"



Landing Zone of HH3 Helicopter

Ten minutes later we were at the site again, and, as before, I tried to go directly to the HH3 helicopter crash site behind Cat House; I was determined to retrieve even the smallest metal piece or wire from the helicopter. Surely I could find a rivet or a piece of wire. But like before, earlier in the day, my efforts were thwarted. "We need come here first," Hoang said, pointing to the occupied building on the left of the dirt path on the left side of the administration courtyard, 50 feet from Cat House. "OK; whatever." I said, with some surprise. "Jesus, You mean we have to check

in again?" I exclaimed. "But I thought all had been arranged," I mumbled at Hoang. No response.

We entered the little smoky dingy house, more of a series of rooms separated by curtains and smelling of open cooking fires with a hint of peanut oil, and talked with the guy inside. I thought to myself, "If Melanie and Chris (two women with whom I work back home) could see this, they would just die." The guy was wearing a pair of dirty shorts. No uniform, no insignia, no shirt, no shoes. Hoang did all the talking. On the floor, I spotted what I thought was a chrome or nickel-plated toy automatic pistol, like a .45. It looked real, but I thought it couldn't be real, and dismissed it. Later also lying on the floor in a different location, I was to spot the slide of another automatic pistol, this time blued not nickel-plated, and I thought this to be too coincidental. Twenty years ago, when my curiosity about such things would have been too compelling, I would have picked it up and examined it, but no, not today. We went to the back of this guy's little house and we sat and talked for about 30 minutes, as he scratched his neck and hairy chin and smoked. The man arranged some small teacups on the table, but he never poured anything into them. A Vietnamese soap opera was playing on a 6-inch TV and Vietnamese music was blaring from a cassette player. A young boy, who I supposed was his son, dressed just like his supposed father, was playing with some cards on the cot-like bed as a wet scrawny, disheveled cat scurried about on the floor. The cat, and later I was to notice it was cross-eyed and a target of discarded cigarette butts, was too reminiscent of "Bill the Cat" in the comic strips. Finally, the man smiled. No teeth. Where was I? I don't think this is what Paul Short, an entertaining person I know who likes to imitate the famous wrestler, with the moniker of "The Nature Boy," would have in mind when he brags about "*Walking the Big Aisle*," implying super celebrity status, not to mention excess greatness. There was no big aisle here.

I had to show my passport again, and like before, the guy thought I was an ex-POW. We gave the same explanation as before. He took my passport and disappeared on his motorbike; then returned. Then he and Hoang left again on the motorbike, but not before

Hoang told me to not move from the house. "What? Stay in this dump?!" I exclaimed. "No way, man." I said. Continuing, "I'll go to that little restaurant on the road just at the entrance to the prison complex and have a beer," as I pointed in the direction of the little restaurant away from the prison buildings. "OK, Go there," Hoang said, seemingly perturbed at the inconvenience. They left and I walked to the restaurant and sat down at a small table to enjoy a cold (in my dreams) Hanoi beer. The restaurant's roof was so low I could not stand up straight. Everyone stared at me, but that is something I have grown accustomed to in Vietnam.

Remembering that I was asked whether there were Red Chinese at the secondary school just up the road from the camp, I took my beer, rounded up my driver, and we drove to the secondary school 300 meters or so away. Finding nothing there or anyone to talk to, we returned to the grass hut restaurant. I re-entered the restaurant and sat down at the same table. The other patrons of the restaurant kept staring at me. Reflecting again on what the man at the police station had said, half amused, I again repeated to myself "OK, you go prison."

Shortly, Hoang and the Vietnamese guy returned and we retreated again inside the dark and dirty house. My passport was handed back to me and I quickly put it away. I don't like being separated from my passport while overseas. Yet twice in the same day, practically within the same hour, I was relieved of my passport in the middle of nowhere.



Ruins of Stag Bar on North Side of Opium Den

Hoang told me the man allowed me 30 minutes to look at the grounds. "That long." I said. I did not hesitate to leave Hoang and the man behind in the house as I walked quickly away. I went straight to the courtyard nestled between Cat House and Opium Den and began scrounging for metal helicopter artifacts. Surprisingly, I found nothing.

But, not long afterwards, I did locate the perimeter prison wall foundation and wall debris. I stood on the landing

zone of the two helicopters that landed outside the wall immediately south of the prison complex and tried to imagine the night of the raid. I stood where the wall had been blasted to make an opening into the compound. A few minutes later, back in the prison courtyard, I found the primary circular well located near the river's edge – 5 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep, or so - completely dry. I missed this landmark on my first visit. It was so prominent from the aerial photos, that on this visit I located it easily. I spotted more latrines. Best of all, moving beyond Beer Hall, I located the ruins of Stag Bar, which has totally fallen down into a rubble heap; the same pile of debris I spotted north of Opium Den on my first visit. The layout indicated the building was smaller than the other ones. Cat House, Beer Hall, and Opium Den were exactly as I had remembered them two months previously with no noticeable change.

Determined to find something from the helicopter, I returned to the spot where Kalen and Zehnder had crash-landed and continued my search for pieces or small parts. I took some time to look closely at the area and had to admit that it was a very tiny place for a helicopter to land in. The navigation and descent had to be precise, the flight controls – cyclic, collective, and tail rotor - all working and moving in sequential and intricate harmony to drop a multi-thousand pound aircraft into a very tight spot. Must have been a hell of a sight to see: a helicopter coming down through the trees in the flare-lit darkness shearing off limbs and devouring tree trunks as the aircraft descended. I searched again through the undergrowth for any remains of the helicopter. I lifted and kicked the foliage aside, peered beneath the ground covering, bent down and lifted small plants, but saw not a trace of a helicopter part. Again, nothing.

But now I stood silently in the open area bordered by Cat House, Opium Den and Beer Hall and listened to the same sounds I had heard before on my previous trip. The eucalyptus trees still rustled in the breeze, and the Con River, now low in its banks, gurgled below the riverbank. The sounds of the passing traffic on the small road could be faintly heard. There were no other sounds or voices. Since Hoang stayed inside the house to talk with the “official,” no one accompanied me on this site tour. Knowing what I now knew, I recalled names I had read in Mr. Schemmer’s book. Names like Schierman, Baker, Makowski, Dutton, Venanzi, Doremus, Warner, Tschudy, and Clower all came to mind. I did discover later that Mr. Clower’s US military identification card is on display in the air force museum in Hanoi. In addition to Kalen, Zhender, and Meadows, I recalled other Raiders’ names: Simons, Kittleson, Wingrove, Jakovenko, and Suarez. I have never met any of them.



Mr. Clower's Military Identification card in Hanoi

Thinking that there must be a protocol I was not aware of, I went back to the “official’s” house to ask if I could collect some souvenirs for Lee’s museum collection. I was surprised when the Vietnamese man nodded yes. So I returned to Stag Bar and collected a large roof tile fragment from the rubble heap, then a piece of wall plaster and another roof tile fragment from Beer Hall and, as I was proceeding back to the car with the artifacts, I spotted a fragment of a gray porcelain rice or soup bowl about 20 feet outside of Cat House, and picked it up too. I

placed everything in the vehicle and then I returned to the structure that had captured my curiosity on my first visit: the small rounded but thickly walled structure. I think, but cannot confirm, that this structure was called “Bat Cave” or “The Oven” and was used for solitary confinement. I took pictures of it, walked inside it, and looked around.

I took several more photos of the buildings and the crash site. I returned to the administration building where Hoang and the guy were smoking cigarettes and talking;



Thought to be Bat Cave or The Oven at Son Tay Prison

I thought for a minute, knowing he had been talking with “the official,” for a period of time and decided he knew something I did not know, and agreed. Soon we were driving out of Son Tay town as we began the return trip to Hanoi.

about what, I could not discern. I really had worked up a sweat. Hoang asked if I was ready to depart. I told him I was. We shook the man’s hand - he did not smile - and then climbed into the vehicle, backed out of the small pathway onto the narrow asphalt roadway and turned to go to Son Tay town across the narrow bridge. As we crossed the bridge across the Con River, I said, “Hoang, I need to go back to the secondary school and take some photos.” He looked at me and, without smiling, said “Not good idea.”

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Both of us were silent on the return journey from Son Tay along the Cuban Highway and through the piedmont back to Hanoi. I have experienced this silence before with Hoang. I knew Hoang was deep in concentration. I have often wondered what he thinks of me as I express and exhibit an enthusiastic curiosity about the war and take the time to visit certain sites where many of his comrades and American servicemen met an entangled death. Surely he thinks about that from time to time.

Hoang takes very good care of me and it’s ironic to think only a few decades before, we could not have been friends. It remains interesting to me that two would-be, or could-have-been enemies, or at least members of opposing armies 35 years ago, often sit side-by-side in a car driving through the Vietnamese countryside smoking cigarettes, stopping for tea or a beer, and generally talking about our respective lives. But regardless of how comfortable I have become and am becoming in Vietnam, I never fail to remind myself: I am the stranger in his country.

Now, driving back to Hanoi during the late afternoon, we confined our respective thoughts to ourselves perhaps thinking about the events of the day, or maybe reflecting on a tragic past that must never be repeated. Hoang and I have traveled together so many times to so many locations, that we know each other’s traits and habits and when to give each other some space. Again, as before, we sat side by side in a car returning from another historical place shared equally by Vietnamese and Americans. We drove on.

Re-entering the plains, characteristic of the Red River delta that warned us we were approaching Hanoi, we passed again the jagged limestone karst outcroppings and crude monolithic brick-making factories enshrouded with billowing white smoke from slow smoldering fires burning within the squat oven structures. Next to these large brick ovens, people were still tending the rice terraces and paddies. I wondered if the mystery of the Vietnamese personae was derived from the equally mysterious landscape that is Vietnam. I looked out of the car window and could see women in the distance wearing white conical hats irrigating the paddies from the main irrigation canals into the smaller distribution canal system using water shovels with ropes attached on either side. They would slacken the ropes allowing the water shovel to dip into the water reservoir then tighten the ropes by pulling on them to make the shovel emerge, and, continuing in one fluid movement, pour its contents into the adjacent but higher canal. Their movements were in single rhythmic unison as they shoveled load after load of muddy water from a lower level up to the next and into their rice paddies to feed this year's rice crop. A technique, I was sure, they have employed without change for a thousand years. Never underestimate the resourcefulness of the Vietnamese, I thought to myself.

The sun, now below the cloud layer, cast a golden hue over the flat landscape creating long lonely shadows that cut silently through the jagged steep karst peaks. The undersides of the heavily laden clouds were tinged burnt yellow. The rice chutes in the rice paddies, so early in the growing season, turned translucent yellow-green as the horizontal sunrays struck and passed through them. It was good to see a glint of sunlight, if only briefly, as I had not seen sunshine in two weeks. We passed a small red and white concrete road marker stating we were only 20 kilometers from Hanoi. Looking back at the concrete marker as we drove past, I read the words Son Tay and the reverse distance: 23 kilometers. Turning back around in the seat, sure enough, ahead of us through the thick traffic, made crazier by everyone trying to go home, lay the lights of the capital. If one looked closely enough, one could discern through the haze and late evening sky, the silhouette of the taller buildings, topped with red flashing aircraft warning lights, that are beginning to define Hanoi's modern skyline. Soon we would be on the outskirts of Hanoi encountering the first of many traffic circles on our way back to my hotel near the Opera House. Reflecting on the events of the day, I supposed this would be my last visit to Son Tay: there was no compelling reason ever to return there.

Breaking the silence that had prevailed between us, interrupted only by the occasional question not requiring a lengthy answer, Hoang asked for a cigarette. After lighting it and taking a first drag on the white paper stem - the tip glowing red - Hoang exhaled the light blue smoke and started to speak, but then held his words. I sensed he wanted to say something important to me, and was re-thinking what he was about to say. I looked over my shoulder out the car's side window, a movement designed to remove the awkwardness of the moment and to give Hoang some latitude.

Night would, within a matter of minutes, be upon us as we drove farther from Son Tay closer towards Hanoi. Suffused by the deepening enveloping darkness, the Son Tay prison buildings, those empty, hollow, ghostly remnants, were rendered a memory now; a memory without complexities for me, but for a small number of Americans, a memory

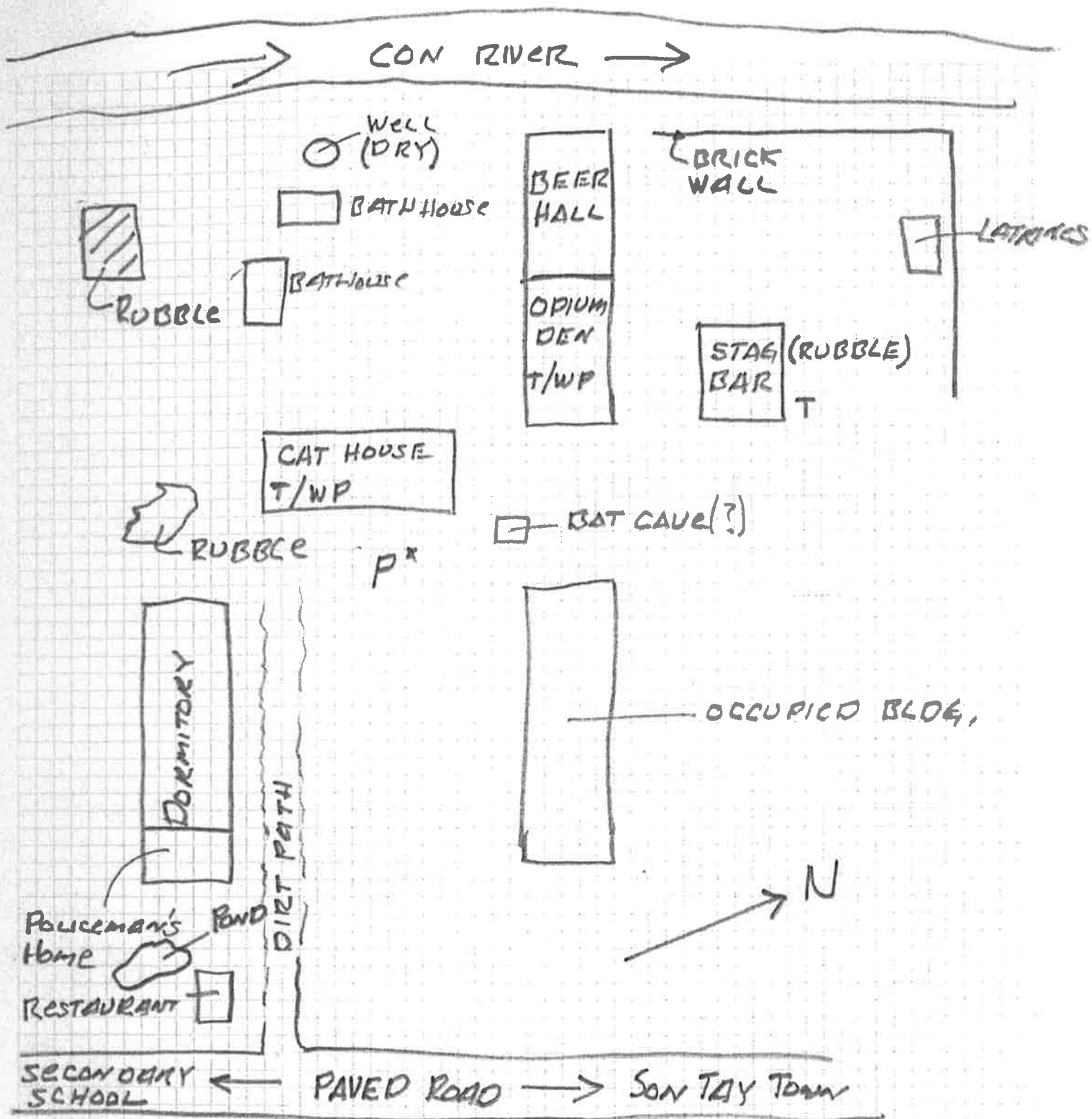
with much sadness and hopeless desolation - a memory more acutely painful and heart rending than I could imagine.

Without accusation, or hidden anger, and with no hint of being perturbed, Hoang said "I still not understand why you want see Son Tay. All day we travel, see nothing," I didn't know how to respond so I simply said, "Thanks Hoang, for your help." Then pausing briefly, I went on to state "I feel it was important that I return to Son Tay; important to many people, not so much for me." "But what you see?" he asked. "Nothing," I said. "You right," he said, "I tell before. Nothing," he re-iterated, this time with a wry smile.

Quiet again, except for the drone of the tires on the pavement. Hoang looked at me and, as he has so many times before, sometimes forgetting the general requirement of English grammar to place the adjective before the noun - which he did not do on this occasion - said in a thoughtful respectful tone, "Mr. Gary, you strange man."

Completing its trajectory below the imperceptible horizon, finally plunging the northern Vietnamese countryside into total darkness, the last golden fragment of sun slid quietly - silently - behind West Mountain.

Gary Foster is a Vice President with Stanley Consultants, Inc., Muscatine, Iowa USA. He travels often to Asia and in particular to Vietnam. He has published many articles and this is the second installment of his trilogy about his visits and experiences while traveling in Vietnam His first installment was about his visits to Khe Sanh and the last installment, not yet completed, is about the events surrounding the downing of a US Navy fighter jet he found in Hanoi. He can be reached by telephone at 563-264-6305 or by e-mail at fostergary@stanleygroup.com.



T- TILE ARTIFACT
 WP- WALL PLASTER ARTIFACT
 P- PORCELAIN ARTIFACT

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 JAN/MAR, 2002
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