Thirty-Two Years After the Raid: Son Tay©

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- I -

The casual Vietnamese reference to the ancient city of Son Tay as the Soldiers' Capital is no accident. Meaning "West Mountain," Son Tay served as the origin of and a primary source for thousands of soldiers for the People's Army of Vietnam throughout the duration of the Vietnam War. Although ringed with low-lying hills in a rural picturesque setting, no unique geographical features distinguish the town of Son Tay from any other northern Vietnamese town of similar size. Nor is there a centuries-old event that would give rise to its historical importance in Vietnam or elevate Son Tay from its rural sleepiness to social or political prominence.

Virtually unknown, or forgotten today, many Americans may not be familiar with the name of Son Tay and that it was the location of a small, briefly used prison that held American airmen shot down and captured during the war. More notoriously, however, and where Son Tay gains special recognition and assumes its historical significance for Americans, it was also the same location of a daring and, some say, desperate US raid to free the American POWs from that prison. The name has become singularly synonymous with that incredible historic raid. Son Tay takes it place in American military history as a small but significant chapter in the American POW experience as well as in the much larger chronology and choreography of the Vietnam War - a war without parallel, a war that spawned deep American skepticism and national wide-sweeping cynicism; a war that tarnished America's pride and scorched her soul – a war, the Vietnamese called, as if self-inflicted by their antagonists, the American War.

Inside Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi

Unlike other prison sites in North Vietnam, which were given colorful, if not ironic nicknames by the American POWs - names such as Portholes located near Vinh, or Dog patch located near the Chinese Border, or the more pleasant sounding Plantation in Hanoi, or most notable of which, Hoa Lo in downtown Hanoi, dubbed the Hanoi Hilton - Son Tay prison retained its local name and conjures up special meanings to this day.

My first visit to Hanoi occurred in 1994. I was surprised at how simple it was to obtain a visa to visit Vietnam. Even though efforts were being made by the United States and Vietnam to reconcile a painful past and put aside differences, there was no Vietnamese embassy in Washington at that time. Visas were easily obtained, however, through the Vietnamese delegation to the United Nations in New York City. Once in Vietnam, all

foreigners were closely watched, and such was the case for me during my first visit to Hanoi. Vietnam was opening to the west in incremental stages but paranoia still prevailed. There were not many foreigners, certainly very few Americans, during my first visit to Vietnam.

The Entrance to the Knobby Room

One evening I visited Hoa Lo, which was closed to the public, and, at that time, may not even have been used as a prison. I walked completely around the prison but was not able to see inside. Most of Hoa Lo has been razed and what remains of Hoa Lo today has been turned into a museum. The interior of the prison, now one fifth of its original size, consists of Little Vegas, New Guy Village, the Meat Hook Room, the Knobby Room, the main entrance and foyer with side offices, and two or three ancillary buildings all connected by narrow corridors. All other interior features have been demolished to make way for a highrise apartment building and commercial center called the Hanoi Towers. How strange now to swim in a luxurious olympic-size pool, or buy souvenirs, or shop in a wine store in air-conditioned executive surroundings where Camp Unity and Heartbreak Hotel once existed.

The main entrance to Hoa Lo is, not surprisingly, on Hoa Lo Street from which the prison derives its name. Hoa Lo meaning "fiery furnace," has no architectural appeal, no redeeming aesthetic quality at all - just a solid complex of buildings built by the French at the end of the 19th century. I stood in front of the main entrance and, looking up at the top of the wall, above the heavy wood and steel door of the Porte-Couchere, I read the innocuously sounding and improbable French words "M A I S O N C E N T R A L E" written in large capital letters in a semi-circle. The words are curious because, in English the translation simply means "Central House." Because it is a prison, the establishment would have been more appropriately named *maison d'arret* with the more facilitated and literal English translation of "Prison." Whatever the name, the place exudes a definite unpleasantness, and makes any visitor uncomfortable. It's dark, dank, musty, dirty, and onerous, to say the least; and those are the good points. The formidable walls consisted of thick masonry about 20 feet high topped with glass fragments, typical of colonial design seen in many parts of the world, and, on steel posts above that, insulated electrified wiring. Guard towers were erected integrally with the wall at each corner of the prison and are clearly visible from the outside. Only two guard towers exist now,

The Author at the Main Entrance to Hoa Lo

separated by a 400 feet length of wall, with the main Porte Couchere entrance being in the middle equidistant from each guard tower. The buildings that comprised Hoa Lo were used for one specific purpose: containment of Vietnamese thought to be a hazard to the general public or a threat to the ruling government. General Vo Nguyen Giap's first wife died in Hoa Lo. Nguyen Tai Hoc was the first Vietnamese person executed in Hoa Lo by the French. He was beheaded, typical of the French method of execution, by guillotine. The original guillotines are still on display there.

Leg Irons in Mint within Little Vegas

The first American POW to arrive at Hoa Lo was Everett Alvarez who was to survive more than 8 years of captivity in the North Vietnamese prison system. An A4 pilot from the USS Constellation, Alvarez was shot down over Hon Gai in August of 1964 when he encountered a withering hail of anti-aircraft fire. When he first arrived at Hoa Lo, the Vietnamese did not really know what to do with him. Later, as the American population grew within Hoa Lo, the luckless inhabitants who had piloted a myriad of planes on diverse missions and were shot down by various means included men with names such as Stockdale, Encsh, Souder, Franke, Rollins, Risner, Merritt, McCain, Peterson, McGrath, Southwick, Plumb, McKnight, Denton, Coker, Guarino, Shumaker, Stratton, Bliss, and Peel, to mention but a few. I have had the good fortune to meet many of them. There is a lot to be learned from these individuals and their outlook on life. By the mid-sixties, Hoa Lo was being transformed into an American colony, albeit a colony of dire, filthy, depressing circumstances, and seemingly deadly consequences – a community of American men with hope and faith as their only assets and each other as their only allies, a colony from which there would be no escape. By the end of the war, almost 900 Americans were held captive in the North Vietnam prison system, with many more being held captive in South Vietnam and in Laos.

The Hoa Lo Prison Wall on Hoa Lo Street

Taking photographs of the Hoa Lo prison, at the time of my first visit, was not allowed. On that same trip to Vietnam, I took a photo of the Hai Duong Railroad Bridge midway between Hanoi and Haiphong from Highway No. 5 and immediately lost my camera to a policeman. I retrieved the camera after 20 minutes of arguing but had to relinquish the roll of film. Fortunately, that picture was the first shot of

the roll, so it didn't much matter to me that I lost the roll of film. The camera would have been another matter.

As for Son Tay, as many times as I have traveled to Vietnam, I have never had an overwhelming inclination to go there. Never really thought about it. I had heard of Son Tay years ago; that it was a POW site and that an airborne raid to rescue American POWs had occurred there towards the end of the war.

The Ham Rong Bridge at Thanh Hoa

Because of my newly found interest in two individuals who became POWs (their aircraft having been downed during a mission against the famous Ham Rong Bridge in 1967), I became acquainted with Lee Humiston, whose partial e-mail address is "nampowfriend." Lee has taken a keen and sincere interest in the POW experience and has made significant contributions of POW related items and documents to the museum at the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado and to the Richard M. Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California. After many conversations and much correspondence with Lee, and learning of his intense interest in the POWs and Son Tay, I decided I would visit the site on my next journey to Vietnam and perhaps bring back souvenirs for his private collections now located at the two institutions.

But where was Son Tay? I did not have time to research the location of the prison prior to my trip, so I did not know where it was. I knew, however, that a Vietnamese colleague of mine would know. His name was Hoang Tran Dung – the last name being an unfortunate spelling in English, but in Vietnamese, the name is pronounced Zung, as in Zoong. Hoang would take me to Son Tay.

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Hoang is an interesting person with a lively past. I have known Hoang for several years. He holds an electrical engineering degree from the University of Hanoi. Hoang joined the North Vietnam Army late during the American War. When Hoang told his father, Mr. Dung, he was joining the army, his father was saddened to the point of crying. In a more composed moment, Hoang's father said that he knew Hoang had to join because it was the Vietnamese peoples' war, and that is what young Vietnamese men are supposed to do. He was, and remains today, intensely proud of Vietnam and more so of Hoang. He accepted the reality that Hoang had to fight for his country. His father told Hoang had he been younger, he too, would have joined the military. After his graduation from the University of Hanoi and basic military training, Hoang studied communications and received advanced training in Moscow.

The North Vietnamese infiltrated South Vietnam in many ways: by boat, vehicles at night, through Laos, etc. By ground, they all went south along the Ho Chi Minh trail, starting, as a jumping off point, near Vinh in Nghe An Province. The Americans, realizing the significance of Vinh, leveled the city, leading to the commonly used phrase among American airmen "Not a thin in Vinh." Soldiers heading south shifted their southerly path west of Vinh to escape the disruption of constant air attacks.

Not common knowledge, but most North Vietnamese who went to war in the south did so by walking in groups of 20 broken down further into cells of between 3 and 5 people. Separated by 20 minutes from each day's or night's jump-off, each cell walked steadily, inexorably, south but not by any known road. They walked largely at night, and sometimes during the day, to reach their ultimate destination. In Hoang's case, it took him three months to reach Pleiku, his destination, to report for duty. When I asked how many from his group survived the trip, Hoang held up three fingers.

Hoang was given leave in late 1972 and walked back to Hanoi to visit his family, his return sojourn requiring again another three months. He happened to be in Hanoi on leave during the US Linebacker air raids of 1972 and the Christmas bombings. He becomes reflective and sullen but quite animated when he relates stories about the bombings, with American jets flying over Hanoi, and the machine gun, rifle, and AAA fire and SAM launches. "Make more noise than you believe!" he said as he shook his head. Having arrived in Tu Liem District of Hanoi mid-morning, the blue gray, cloudy skies overhead immediately erupted with the scream of fighter jets. Air raid sirens, loudspeakers blaring, cars screeching and honking, explosions of anti-aircraft guns, bombs, machine guns, air raid sirens, and people screaming while diving for cover added to the incredible noise. He had found himself in the middle of an American air raid.

Air Raid Warning Speakers in Hanoi

During the course of the war, the Vietnamese had made intense preparations for air raids. They had constructed large underground air raid shelters and along the streets of Hanoi, they had installed thousands of one-man shelters. These shelters took the form of large diameter concrete pipes stood on end and buried with a 4-inch thick concrete lid that could be slid over the opening. The only problem was they had no drainage and during the rainy season, they filled with rainwater and had to be drained by bucket. There were brigades of women who did just that. Hoang took cover in the only place he felt safe - oddly enough in an open area beneath a tree - and waited for the all clear. Hoang preferred to remain in the open so he could run if he needed to. "I see America planes everywhere, and black smoke and trails white and silver, and explosions," as he pointed to the sky. "I see planes with fire and smoke long, sometimes

parachutes, and it easy to see smoke of SAM," he continued. "Planes and guns make much noise, too much, and sound of fenton jet was more worse," he said, scrunching up his face and covering each side of his head with his hands imitating protecting his ears from screaming, terrifying sounds now long past, but still indelibly etched and resonating in his memory. "Phantom jet, Hoang, Phantom jet," I said. Then articulating each syllable with exaggeration, "Phan … Tum… Jet," I said again, this time a little slower. "Not fenton jet." Hoang looked at me and said, "Yeah, I know. I say fenton jet," thinking he had heard me correctly. After the all clear would sound through loudspeakers placed on steel lattice or wood poles along the streets and boulevards of Hanoi (and some loudspeakers, still mounted atop the poles, can be found throughout the city today), citizens would not re-emerge for 20 or 30 minutes to allow all the flak and artillery debris, now 15,000 feet in the air, to descend to the ground. "Bup… bup… bup…bap bap bap." Hoang said, imitating the sound of fragments landing on rooftops or in the street. Hoang did not move from beneath the tree for an hour before finding his way to his home.

At the end of the American war, Hoang was stationed in Saigon, Can Ranh Bay, and Bien Hoa. It was at Cam Ranh Bay where his eyes were opened to the vastness and hyper-abundance of American supplies as he visited warehouses overflowing with leftover American military gear and equipment. He knows every American airplane and weapon by number: F111, M16, M48, A6, A4, B52, M79, etc., he knows them all. When Hoang was released from his military duties in South Vietnam, or more appropriately now, the southern part of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, he was able to ride back to Hanoi from newly named Ho Chi Minh City in a jeep, for he had reached the rank of lieutenant (I am sure he was a captain but he insists not) in the PAVN. It was at Nhatle where his jeep slipped off the ferry with him in it and fell into the Dong Ho River. He was scared to death but did not drown and he laughs about it today. Every time we cross that river, he re-tells the story. I asked, or rather assumed "But you can swim, right?" After a long pause, Hoang responded "No." I smiled, and said, "You were a lucky man."

Hoang served in the army for a total of 8 years, first in South Vietnam fighting against the Americans, and later against the Cambodians and the Red Chinese during those brief disputes. Afterwards he joined the merchant marines, did not care for the life, returned to Hanoi, and began commercial business.

Where or how Hoang learned English, I am not certain. I sometimes mimic Hoang's English. Although he has several phrases that he uses which are not quite correct in American usage and are comical, they are, nevertheless, completely understandable. After he says something to me, he will end his sentences with "You understand me?" Or, if I try to pull his leg or make a joke, and if he catches on, he will say "Joking only, right?" At other times when we talk about money or the amount of gasoline left in the tank, he will say simply "Not enough." Or, if I ask him whether something can be accomplished, he will say "Easy" or "So shimple,"- he can't quite pronounce 'simple.' My favorite expression of Hoang's is "Everything, no." This is an oxymoron – is that word still around these days? –a contradictory, imprecise statement; but if heard in the context that he means it, it is totally decipherable. "Their office not good. No machine of

fax, no telephone, no computer, no printer. Everything, no." This is uniquely and quintessentially Hoang Tran Dung, at his candid best in my language. If Americans can slaughter the English language, so can HTD. But, as alluded to earlier, Hoang's command of the English language is not bad. We have had many detailed conversations. Sometimes when he is not talking, it's an indication he is angry with me, and at other times, he is just in a pensive mood. But the same goes for me too. We have known each other for so long that we have developed a mutual sense of humor and have created and contrived jokes that only we understand, or, if told to others, would be so much babble.

Hoang Tran Dung in Hanoi

Now in his early fifties and being of slight build, he is incredibly resourceful, very practical, and polite. He is unassuming and delicate in his manners. He is first and foremost a Vietnamese, full of pride for his country and for what the Vietnamese accomplished and are accomplishing today. He remembers the euphoria that swept through Hanoi when General Giap defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Hoang said he would take me to Dien Bien Phu, far to the west of Hanoi on the Laotian border, but the trip would require 3 days each way by road and the flights to and from Hanoi are irregular. I have not had the time to go there.

Hoang makes no excuses for the war with the Americans, or the Vietnamese conduct of it, or his role in it. He is proud to have served his country. We talk about the war often and he never hesitates to tell me his experiences or the experiences of his people during the air assaults.

Hoang loves Vietnamese music but he is also knowledgeable about western classical music. He thrives on techno-gadgetry and has a complete array of electronic wizardry in his home. He is caring for those who are dependent upon him and is considerate of others. His son, Hieu, achieved the high honor of being the top rated mathematician in Hanoi at only 14.

Hoang is from Ha Tinh province but has lived in Hanoi most of his life. His father taught history at the University of Hanoi and was a personal friend of Ho Chi Minh; and to this day he speaks affectionately of his country's deceased leader.

Ho Chi Minh is an assumed name meaning "one who enlightens." He was born Nguyen Sinh Cung in Nghe An Province in a small town called Kim Lien, not far from Vinh. During the American War, he lived in downtown Hanoi in a very modest wood house built on stilts. His remains rest in a mausoleum, just like Lenin's, where anyone can view them. To enter the mausoleum, one must line up outside the mausoleum, then, *ensemble*,

march in military style by twos up to, into, through, and out of the mausoleum. Viewing time is less than a minute.

Hoang has just finished building a house in Dong Da District of Hanoi complete with a ten-feet high wall fountain at the back. Hoang destroyed his old home on the same location, cleared the debris, and built a new place. Hoang's new home is an elegant six-story structure (with elevator) that consumed two years of his time and considerable money. I sometimes tell him that he has built a fort and all he needed was a triple-A gun on the roof. "Joking only," he responds as he smiles with pride. In fact, during the war the roof of the building that was his old home sported a battery of city air defenders manning machine guns.

Hoang, like many Asians, has lots of hair, but it is coarse and very unruly. He combs it by running his hands through it. I sent him a comb once, as a half-serious joke, but he never uses it. Through Hoang's patience with me, and my wanting to understand the Vietnamese people, Hoang and I have become good close friends.

With Hoang's assistance, I made two trips to Son Tay, the first being in late January 2002, and again in late March of the same year. The weather on the second visit was more agreeable and in stark contrast to the intolerably cold, wet weather I encountered during my first visit there. January in northern Vietnam is a bleak affair: skies are overcast and depressing, and temperatures dip into the low 40s. The sun almost never shines. Yet, by March, hats, jackets and sweaters give way to short sleeve shirts, even though dark, low-lying rain-laden clouds persist. But northern Vietnam, above the famous 20th parallel, and even somewhat south of there, does not really enjoy especially good weather at anytime of year. The country is often ravaged by two distinct monsoon seasons.

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Typical Rice Fields in the Red River Delta

Located about 43 kilometers from Hanoi, not quite as far north as west, Son Tay town is reached from Hanoi by traveling on several highways that traverse through typical Vietnamese rural landscape of cultivated rice fields, brown in winter and lush green during the growing season.

Descending from the Chinese, thousands of years ago, the Vietnamese inhabited first the Red River delta in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. As the culture developed and their population flourished, the Vietnamese began to expand west and south, river by river, down and along the coastal plains. The Vietnamese are primarily farmers, so it is

not surprising that the major population centers are located today, as they have been for centuries, along the banks of major rivers, or in the flood plains of river deltas and along the flat coastal areas. Rice is the major agricultural crop and food staple. Seemingly cultivated since before the beginning of time, rice is grown in the region west of Hanoi towards Son Tay and is the predominate crop. The cultivation technique differs from that seen farther downstream along the Red River or in the delta surrounding Hanoi and Haiphong, or elsewhere along the coastal plains.

Traveling to Son Tay by vehicle, not far out of Hanoi, steep, jagged, and acutely sharp limestone outcroppings rise several hundred feet above the surrounding terrain adding exotic mystery and foreboding drama to the rural landscape. These pointed outcroppings, like so many chess pieces in disarray, contribute to, what is commonly called, karst topography and serve as silent sentinels guarding the rice fields and the people who work them. Sometimes, the Vietnamese workers display large Vietnamese flags, easily recognized by a single yellow five-pointed star embedded in a sea of blood red, on top of construction equipment, buildings, dikes, and atop the jagged karst outcroppings. The flags add a shock of color contrasting with the surrounding surreal, sometimes drab, landscape.

Terracing of Rice Paddies near Son Tay

The rice paddies, as seen when one drives west from Hanoi, are leveled by terracing and contouring. The rice growing plots are smaller than the large boundless acres of rice being grown closer to Hanoi. Water canals of varying sizes crisscross the landscape and often one can see family and ancestral cemeteries in the middle of the terraces.

The terracing and contrived flatness of each rice terrace, combined with the ponding of water, gives the sensation that the lay of the land is flat. Not so, in reality. The gradual, almost un-noticeable, up-sloping terrain is a telltale sign that the area is the beginnings of the piedmont rising to meet the mountains in western Vinh Phu Province. The small berms, dikes, and dams curtail the errant flow of unmanaged water, which would otherwise flow arbitrarily and unabated through the fields and be lost. The natural water resource in this area is highly monitored and regulated, not so much by government intervention as by farmers who are one with their land. They understand that survival of the community depends on their effective resource management practices.

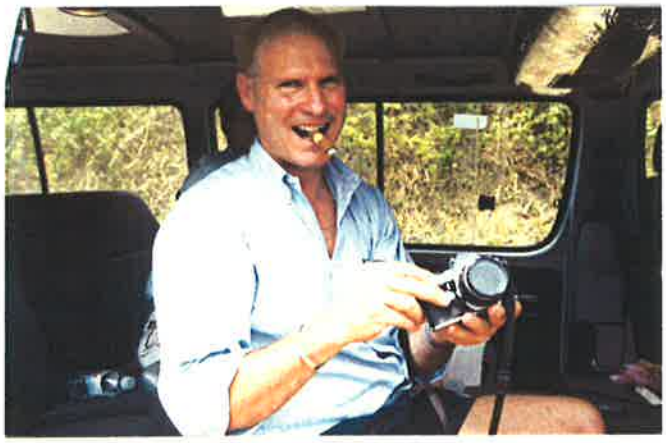
A tributary to the Red River, the Song Con River – actually the Vietnamese word "song" means river – meanders around the area and, like all rivers in Vietnam, plays an important role for all cultivation and food production. To the Vietnamese, rivers are family, and, like the earth, they know how to work them to gain maximum benefit for the community without depleting or destroying a valuable resource. It is on the Con River -

sometimes referred to locally as the Tich River - that Son Tay town is found, and it's on its very banks in a crook of that river that the buildings that would come to be used as an American POW prison camp were constructed.

Farther west and north of Son Tay, the mountains rise up and from there the Red River Delta can be observed with Hanoi, meaning inside the Red River, being faintly visible in the gray humid distance.

Hoang told me the day before the first trip it would take one hour to drive to Son Tay from Hanoi. Next day, we left Hanoi at 8:30AM and arrived at Son Tay town at about 11:30AM. So much for the one-hour journey. Instead it had taken three hours. Evidently, one never goes straight to one's destination in Vietnam: too many distractions and obligations. So it was during our trip to Son Tay. There were fresh farm eggs to be purchased at a certain place and fresh fruit or vegetables, unique to an area, to be purchased elsewhere. Plus – and I did not know this at the moment - we had to buy some gifts for a family we were to visit in Son Tay town. We stopped at a kiosk on the outskirts of Hanoi – Hoang knows the merchant - and bought wine, dragon fruit, a bag of apples grown especially around Hanoi, and some chocolate cookies. Hoang paid for everything from a large fold of money he had in his pocket. Loading all this in the back seat, we climbed in and drove off, as usual with me in the passenger seat. Hoang lit a cigarette and slipped a cassette into the player. Very strange discordant sounds emanated from the speakers. Hoang hummed along with the music while he smoked.

Hoang smokes Vinataba cigarettes. He is an incessant smoker but strangely, cannot tolerate cigar smoke. Once, while driving together in Quang Tri Province on the infamous Highway No. 9 at a sharp u-turn over the Rao Quan River Bridge, I unwrapped and lit a cigar I had brought with me from Jamaica, and began puffing it. The odor from the cigar struck him and his friend Phat (pronounced Fass), who was with us, like a brick wall. Phat was an infantryman during the American War and was captured twice. He is now a professional cameraman specializing in environmental documentaries. He scrunched up his nose, stopped the vehicle, and immediately jumped out. "Hoang, what's wrong?" I asked. He responded, "You smoke cigar. Not good." "Yeah," I said, "but you smoke cigarettes all the time. What's the big deal?" Hoang did not answer and instead merely walked away from the van and sat on a stone wall overlooking the Rao Quan gorge. "Well," I thought, "if that's the way you're gonna be about it…" He never lets me forget that incident.



The Author on Highway 9 near Khe Sanh

A Funeral Procession on the Highway to Son Tay

The drive to Son Tay is no different than a drive to any destination in Vietnam. Simply speaking, it is hazardous. Hoang never lets me drive – well sometimes he does when there is no traffic. That's OK with me. I would rather look at the scenery, a luxury one never has while sitting behind the steering wheel. "You not make enough sound of horn when you drive Mr. Gary," Hoang tells me. "People need sound of horn," he emphasizes. Hoang is a competent and safe driver, but he uses the horn constantly. The roads and highways are clogged with pedestrians and every imaginable type of vehicle, all traveling at disparate speeds. Thank God Son Tay was a mere 27 miles away. Road trips south to Vinh and Dong Ha from Hanoi, for example, take one and two days respectively, all day, each day. The trips are nerve wracking more often than not, and driving at night is not a healthy proposition; in fact, it's suicidal. Yet, Hoang and I have driven at night many times, much to my dislike.

Hoang put on another cassette tape of Vietnamese music. The music is made by a sort of steel guitar and a one-string instrument called a Dan Bo. The sound is interesting but only to a point. It takes 15 years to play the Dan Bo proficiently. The musician barely touches the string and, depending on where she touches it, and how she moves a modulating handle that tightens or loosens the string, multiple and simultaneous chords will emanate from it. It is far more intriguing to watch someone play it than to listen to its sounds on a CD or cassette. After a short while however, to my ear at least, all Vietnamese music sounds the same. I sat on the passenger side of the car mildly interested in the music, impassive to the traffic, and absorbed in the scenery rolling past as the vehicle continued along. Sometimes, in these types of idle mesmerizing moments, I sing or hum tunes that I like. I drowned out of my ears the music now playing on the cassette player by trying to remember songs I like. A song that often comes to mind is "Blue Bayou," made popular by Linda Ronstadt but originally sung by Roy Orbison. "Southern Cross," and its elusive reference to the Marquesas – "*making for the trades on the outside…*," sung by Crosby Stills and Nash is another favorite song that comes often to my mind. It is a haunting song about failure, rediscovery, and admitted denial, with forlorn regret and the persistent pain of love's labor's lost: "And o*n the midnight watch I realized why twice she ran away*," being the exact words. I can never remember the entire song or the precise storyline, and the harmony is difficult, so I seldom sing it. Then there's Don McLean's song about the day the music died, "*I met a girl who sang the blues, and I asked her for some happy news. She just smiled and turned away.*" Rap music? Out of the question – totally! Who can think of that stuff, let alone actually sing it? Talk about the day the music died! Really. It's a funny thing these days, I see young kids listening to music all the time, just like I did, on their headsets, but take their earphones away and that can't remember the words, much less what the song is about.

Thinking of the air war that ensued thirty-five years ago and the pilots whose lives were interrupted or whose lives met a worst fate, words from another favorite song came to my mind and I began to sing softly "*From thirty thousand feet above the desert floor, I see it there below. A city with a legend, the west Texas city of El Paso…*" Then I fell silent as I looked out over the landscape.

Hoang lit another cigarette and hummed along with the cassette music while driving. Hoang then asked me "Mr. Gary, why you quiet now?" "I'm not sure I know, Hoang," I said, looking out the side window. "I suppose that it's because when I come to Vietnam, everything seems strange to me, in an eerie sort of way, and when I observe my surroundings I am constantly reminded how ironic it is for me to be here; and so often." I could see the lack of comprehension on Hoang's face. "I not sure understand me what you say," Hoang said. "I know," I said as I continued looking out the window at the farmers tending the rice fields beneath the gray sky. The scene was pastoral as the farmers were bent over planting rice, or in the distance, hoeing or plowing with water buffaloes. Farming in Vietnam is not very mechanized but field labor is inexpensive and more a way of life than an economic necessity. In the fields, the Vietnamese talk among themselves but their conversations are very quiet. A sense of serenity and tranquility always pervades rural Vietnam. Hoang did not respond.

But while the fields seem orderly and peaceful, discord - no, chaos - reigns on the highway. Straight ahead, through the windshield, I could see mountains or hills in the distance, but the clouds obscured the hilltops.

Under my breath, I sang, *"...Where long ago I heard a song about a Texas cowboy and a girl; and a little place called Rose's where he used to go and watch this beauty whirl..."* Listening to me, Hoang said, "You not like Vietnamese music?" "Hoang, I do," I said, "but it is foreign to me and I can't sing it, so I sing what I know." "You sing America music," Hoang said. Puzzled at the statement of fact, I turned my head to look at him and responded, "Whadya want me to sing, Russian music?" I continued: "*I don't recall who sang the song, but I recall the story that I heard. And as I looked down on the city I remember each and every word...*"

"Not good music," Hoang said. I turned off the cassette player and continued to sing: "*The singer sang about a jealous cowboy and the way he used a gun, to kill another cowboy then he had to leave El Paso on the run...*"

"You not sing good," Hoang said. I responded simply by punching him in the arm, and said to him "You not sing good either." We both laughed. He said "You too ugly." I could see he was trying to think of something more clever to say. His eyes lit up and he said " Next time come Vietnam, immigration not let you in country, cause too ugly."

About half way to Son Tay, we stopped for some tea and some gasoline. "Not enough," he says. "You understand me?" he asked with a grin. The table and chairs at the little restaurant adjacent to the service station were more appropriate for a dollhouse than for a

restaurant, and the tea was served in thimble-size glasses or cups. While not desiring a cold drink at this time, I was reminded that even in summer, asking for something cold is futile. Hoang lit up another cigarette and looked at me with his arms folded. Finally, he asked me "Mr. Gary, Why you want see Son Tay?" "I don't really know, Hoang. The place has deep meaning to Americans, at least to some Americans," I said, reflecting on what I may see once there. "Also," I continued, "I met a man in the USA who has taken an interest in the American POW saga and asked me if I could visit Son Tay, and I told him I would try." Hoang said "But nothing there." "I suppose," I said, "but we're half way there so let's continue on."

Typical Roadside Restaurants in Vietnam

Drawing on his cigarette and then flinging it to the floor (the Vietnamese throw everything on the floor), Hoang said, "OK. We go there," then adding "So shimple." And finally, after a short pause, "But I not understand you." "That's because you too old." was my rejoinder, as we both predicted what I would say. "And you too ugly too," I said a little louder. Hoang said "You right: joking only."

We left the small restaurant and continued to drive on, eventually turning onto Highway No. 21A, the last highway link leading directly into Son Tay town, known locally as the Cuban Highway due to its having been constructed by the Cubans during the Vietnam War. "Did you have a lot of Cubans here during the war?" I asked. Hoang looked at me and smiled. "Many," he responded with a big grin. "Some look like Americans, tall and big like you…but they all had hair" he added with obvious reference to lack of hair on my head. We laughed. "Did you learn Spanish?" I asked. "No, I learn Russian." Pretending not to understand why he would learn Russian during the war and mimicking his sentence structure, I explored further. "Why you learn Russian?" You can't go anywhere with Russian. With Spanish, you can go anywhere." "Where?" he asked "Well dummy, Spain for a start." I knew he was joking with me and I was joking right back. "Anyway, you learned Russian. What did you think, you were going to live in Moscow and wait in long lines to eat cabbage and potatoes and overcooked Russian food and drink vodka?" I asked with a grin. "They don't even have rice or pho (noodle soup and a Vietnamese breakfast staple)." I said again. "Was it easy to learn Russian?" I asked. "Not easy," he said. "Did you meet any Russian women?" He caught the drift and we both

Son Tay: Four more Kilometers

looked at each other conspiratorially. We both tried to maintain a straight face but neither one of us could. "Too tall," he said, and then "Understand me?" he asked. "You mean you too old," I said, smiling at Hoang through the words. As we drove on, the population on the roadside and congestion were beginning to increase. The road had become wet with a passing rain, which had stopped, but the clouds were not lifting as we entered the little town of Son Tay

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Son Tay town is small in size but it is large enough to have a pleasant park surrounded by a moat. The park is lush and appeared to be well maintained. On the day of my first-ever visit to Son Tay, many workers were busy laying sidewalk and street-paving stones. The town, crawling with workers and wheelbarrows, seemed to be receiving a facelift. The crowded town center buzzed with commercial activity much like other Vietnamese towns, with everyone in the streets shopping and performing other chores as may be expected on any given day. All shops were open but as is often the case in the smaller towns of Vietnam, it's in the streets where most commerce is conducted. Of course there is the constant melee of motorbikes and bicycles and pedestrians and children playing in the street and the continuous cacophony of two-cycle motorbikes of varying makes, each with a driver and two or three passengers, all in a sort of orchestrated confusion as each driver navigates his or her way through the traffic and pandemonium. Everyone was bundled up in sweaters, jackets, hats, or whatever could be found that would provide warmth. The streets, forever congested, are narrow without a recognizable geometric or regular layout to the town. Typical of Vietnam, all vehicles and pedestrians occupy the center of the city's streets and roads. Cross traffic is oblivious to oncoming traffic and drivers simply cross at will, without looking in either direction. Accidents occur, of course - some are serious - but interestingly, or rather amazingly, not as often as one would surmise.

Son Tay Traffic

Most homes and commercial buildings throughout Vietnam exhibit a common trait: they are narrow in width, long in length, and tall. Hoang's new home is no different. This type of building construction, I am told, is due to the tax structure. A tax is levied on any building wider than 4 meters. I have also been told that the reason for such narrow buildings is the need to preserve arable or cultivatable land, or that this is how Vietnamese families divide and give land to their offspring. It is still not clear to me just why the homes are so narrow. Whatever the reason, Vietnamese homes and buildings resemble a small box for wood matches turned on its side. Government and institutional

buildings appear to be exempt from the tax levy or any dimensional constraint. Aside from they're being government buildings, they are more substantial and resemble more the western concept of architecture. They incorporate an aesthetic geometrical proportionality, heavily influenced by the French, while exhibiting less exaggerated lopsided dimensions. Another trait of the Vietnamese home is that when one enters through the "front" door, he or she steps immediately into the family sleeping quarters; the very core of the house, which, during the day, also doubles as the living or family room. Everything except toiletry and substantial cooking occurs in this room. Homes in Son Tay town are no different.

Typical Vietnamese Architecture

Hoang had arranged for me to meet a family in Son Tay, the same family for whom we had made purchases earlier that day in Hanoi. The head of the household and my hosts, respectfully, were a Mr. Ty and his wife, two daughters, two granddaughters, and Mr. Ty's father, Mr. Tuyen, who was a highly decorated doctor/soldier during the war.

Vietnamese names can be confusing. Family and first names are in reverse to the order of western Christian names. To the Vietnamese, I am Mr. Gary, not Mr. Foster. It is difficult to remember which name to call newly met individuals in Vietnam because conventions of how to address them are not consistent. I was introduced to Mr. Ty as Mr. Ty, but to his father as Mr. Tuyen, yet they both have the same family name. Anyway…

The Tuyen Family in Son Tay

True to tradition, their home was narrow, and, as usual, stooping through the low front door situated just off the street, I entered directly into their home, stepping immediately into the bedroom. The beds had been shoved into the corners and a table with dishes on top had been arranged in the middle of the room. Before proceeding on to the prison site, we were going to take our lunch there with this Son Tay family. We dined in the virtual presence of Ho Chi Minh, who was sternly staring down from a painting hung high on the wall, I thought, most likely at me, They treated me like a celebrity and brought out their best traditional food. Other than the rice and leaves, I was not sure what the other dishes were. Mrs. Ty cooked on a small portable gas stove with two burners, both soon ablaze, that she had set

on the table. She smiled throughout the meal, saying little. She seemed to enjoy cooking for all of us and evidently for a stranger, an American at that. We never removed our coats or jackets, the house being drafty with all windows and doors open. The kids, like kids all over the world, continuously ran in and out of the house making lots of noise. These kids were not shy.

Coincidentally, Mr. Ty and his father, at the same time but without either knowing it, fought at Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri Province in 1968, a place I had visited two years earlier. Using Hoang as interpreter, they told me many stories about their experience there. They hated the American spotter planes because the noise overhead was incessant, like a mosquito in one's ear, from sun up to sundown and drove everyone crazy. One question I have always been curious about since my first visit to Khe Sanh was why the NVA never actually attacked the main combat base. Mr. Ty and his father both told me that it was impossible to attack. First of all, there were the B52s and other air power that they did not possess - that much they knew - but the base, they said, was too well fortified and an all-out attack would have been costly. General Giap was not prepared to pay the price.

Meals end abruptly in Vietnam, and this is another interesting characteristic of the Vietnamese culture. The meal ended as if on cue with handshakes and salutes with a wine liqueur made from bumblebees fermenting in some alcoholic liquid in a large jar, much like one would find a worm in the bottom of a bottle of Mexican tequila. You know, "Go for the worm!" To hell with the worm, "Go for the bee!" Everyone smoked cigarettes, and the room quickly filled with wafting smoke, even if it was drafty.

After lunch and several farewells, we exchanged final goodbyes, but not before many photos were taken of the family and of Mr. Ty's father and myself. Then we climbed into the vehicle and drove away. Mr. Ty, who joined us, would act as our guide during my visit to the Son Tay prison.

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The Son Tay prison is located not more than 10 minutes from the Tuyen home or, really for that matter, from the center of town. To get there, one must have a guide because there are absolutely no signs pointing to the location of the prison. The site evidently has not received recognition from the Hanoi government as a "Vestige" (historical site), as has Hoa Lo and Khe Sanh. Turning off a main road and crossing the Con River over a narrow bridge, the last leg of the trip to the prison site is along a very narrow asphalt paved road to a perpendicular dirt, but more often mud, path that takes one into the prison compound. Turning off the narrow paved road onto the path, the vehicle can travel only a short distance before it is blocked. This path, more of a footpath really, would be easily missed by an uninformed visitor. A small restaurant with dirt floor, grass roof and no walls, and furnished with tiny table and chairs, typical of Vietnam, sits at the junction of the asphalt road and the narrow dirt path that leads to the prison buildings. The area defies colorful characterization. Like so many of my adventures in Vietnam, I arrived at a location of some mutual American/Vietnamese historical significance not knowing what

to look for or what to expect. I experienced the same sensation and ambivalence during my first visit to Khe Sanh two years earlier, the very location at which Mr. Ty and his father had fought many years before. There before me in the midday heat, at Khe Sanh, lay the sprawling large historical USMC combat base, but I had no idea where I was or what I was looking at, and, since it was totally overgrown, any orientation that I may have had, vanished.

The Khe Sanh Combat Base in Quang Tri Province

Having evidently arrived at the Son Tay prison site, we drove up this muddy footpath and stopped the vehicle beside a building with people living inside. Hoang was out of the vehicle quickly as was Mr. Ty, our guide. I was a bit slower climbing out because I was not sure we had arrived anywhere in particular. Mr. Ty and Hoang had been conversing in Vietnamese but Hoang had not conveyed anything to me in English. In my own mind, in fact, we had not arrived anywhere at all.

Not fully convinced of where we were or what I was seeing, I opened my door and stood down in the mud. Next to me on my left was a low building with several compartments or apartments. Young students were occupying the enclosure at one end. There must have been about 4 or 5 roommates. A dark gray shell of a building with large cavities in the walls surrounded by eucalyptus trees stood in front of the vehicle. Directly opposite of the first building, next to which we stood, to my right across a small vacant lot (if it could be called that), was another building similar to the first. But none of the facilities, including the inhabited and empty buildings, was impressive. There was nothing about them that inspired any sort of description: just small, dark, ugly, algae-covered buildings. The buildings, not the typical narrow tall buildings described earlier, looked similar to some other rural farm buildings I have seen in Vietnam; unpainted and unkempt, seemingly deserted. I couldn't tell whether the two inhabited buildings had been constructed and were now falling apart or they were still being constructed. One thing that one observes in Vietnam is that construction is an on-going process. Nothing ever seems to reach conclusion and even when building construction attains a degree of completion, it never seems to be quite finished: done perhaps, but not finished. Buildings, which are complete or give the appearance of being complete, are often surrounded by

The Son Tay Prison Grounds

piles of sand or stacks of bricks, or other construction debris, remaining there perhaps for many years. Everything in Vietnam is in some state of construction, repair, or disrepair, as if in a continuum. But, I had to admit to myself, as I reflected on Hoang's new home in Hanoi, it is complete, and finished, and spotlessly clean.

Hoang motioned for me to follow him and I climbed out of the vehicle. We walked toward and past the empty building that stood in front of the vehicle, through some banana palms and other trees, and past a second, equally lifeless building, located to our right and perpendicular to the first. Upon reaching the riverbank, Hoang pointed across the river and told me the "main" camp was there where he was pointing, implying that the river had divided the camp into two parts. I said "But, Hoang, there's nothing there." The area to which he pointed was a large parking lot for an industry of some sort built within the last five years. I became confused: a river dividing a prison camp? How could that be? I stood there surveying the entire area, looking across the river, up and down the riverbank, back towards the car, and then at the empty silent buildings we had parked near to, and had just walked past. I scrutinized the area enclosed by the two perpendicular roofless buildings. Surmising that the prison would not have been large, I said, "Hoang, I may be wrong. I doubt the prison was divided by the river and if this is the prison area, I think these are the prison buildings," and motioned to the two empty perpendicular gray shells formed by the walls of the buildings. As at Khe Sanh, during my first visit, I did not have an aerial photo or any other reference material that would allow me to discern anything about the area. I did know, however, that, unlike Khe Sanh, the Son Tay prison area would have been small. Had to be small. Also, it seemed incongruous for a prison or such a small area requiring heavy security to be divided by a river. Nonsense. Further, I mused, if the 'main' prison was on the other side of the river, why, if we were going to visit the POW prison, were we on this side of the river? I shook my head and ran my hand through my hair, ever conscious of Hoang's earlier comment about hairy Cubans.

Hoang at Son Tay Prison

I turned around to leave the edge of the steep river bank and, pulling my jacket collar tighter around my neck to ward off the creeping cold and wind, I walked back through thick weeds and other heavy and wet ground vegetation, dodging the skinny eucalyptus trees, towards the two silent deserted, dilapidated, perpendicular, skeletal buildings. I passed piles of debris and what appeared to be latrine facilities or bathhouses and a rectangular concrete well of some sort. I heard Hoang conversing in Vietnamese with Mr. Ty and then Hoang told me that Mr. Ty confirmed my suspicions: the buildings to which I had referred and next to which I was now standing were the American POW prison

buildings. "Mr. Gary," Hoang said, "I wrong. This prison for pilots America." This was Hoang's first visit too.

I stood still for a few moments and listened to the distant sounds and noises and wondered whether the POWs heard similar sounds 32 years ago. What did they hear? What did they see? I could hear sounds of traffic, noises from the industry across the river, the wind as it whistled through the trees, the rustling eucalyptus leaves, and some muted voices. It seemed to me as if all time had stood still and was encapsulated there amongst the prison ruins. I have the impression today that the site, wrapped in total silence, will never give up its secrets - a thought reinforced by the cold mist hanging in the air and the otherwise dismal weather.

Author's note: Before my first visit to Son Tay, I did not know the names of any of the facilities that had been given to them by the US Airmen. I was to learn these later upon my return to the USA Reference to them here is due, not to my prior knowledge, but rather to post-visit readings and the necessity to orient the reader should he have been a POW or a Raider. Upon my return to Hanoi from my first visit to Son Tay , I sent an e-mail to Lee Humiston describing what I had seen and lamenting that I did not know with 100% certainty that I was at the site. I had no reference. Through an exchange of e-mails, and my descriptions to Lee of what I had seen, especially confirming the two buildings adjoined with a common wall, I received the following message from Lee. "Nothing else needed," meaning no further descriptions are necessary, "You were there!"

The best way to describe the area is through the use of a diagram for graphic orientation purposes, which I made (included at the end) as I walked around the grounds and later refined on my second visit. A narrative description of the site is also instructive and will provide good reference. This description is based on my two visits and other documentation, and correlates the juxtaposition of the structures and facilities. From the diagram and narrative, anyone should be able to place the features of the prison camp. It is neither vast nor complicated.

Within the site and throughout the prison courtyard, young eucalyptus trees, as alluded earlier, are abundant. Their dense presence distorts the dimensional perception of the site layout as they do not allow for a clear view of any structure or permit an uninterrupted visual survey of the entire area. The young trees are taller than the buildings. Soon, merely by their towering height and prolific numbers and the natural decay of the man-made structures, the buildings themselves will become visually insignificant, if not relegated into oblivion. In addition to heavy ground cover, the area is also cultivated in some sort of plant, the type of which I did not recognize.

Vegetation within the Son Tay Prison Site

Now, in more descriptive physical detail, the actual prison buildings are set back from the narrow paved road by about 100 feet. In essence, there are two back-to-back "U" shaped courtyards separated, or adjoined by an empty building. Arriving at the prison site, one must stop the car, as we had, to the left of the first courtyard, located immediately off the paved road, next to one of the administration buildings that now serves either as a dormitory or an apartment house. Directly opposite this building is another like building that is being used either as a residence or an office of some sort. The third side, at the top of the upside down U, is bounded by the aforementioned roofless, deserted structure devoid of windows or doors or hardware common to windows or shutters. This is Cat House. Now, flip flopping to the opposite side of Cat House, on the side of the structure facing the Con River, there is a second courtyard that is bounded by Cat House, now at the bottom of the U and, to the right, a much longer structure, perpendicular to Cat House that the POWs named Opium Den and Beer Hall. These are the same structures I had walked past on my first visit, the names of which I did not know. The Con River also defines the limits of the second courtyard. The outside perimeter prison wall in this area is entirely missing. There are no other standing dormitory type structures at the immediate site: there is nothing else, except for a very small, thickly walled structure located near Cat House.

Cat House

On the north side of Opium Den and Beer Hall, there is a low barbed wire fence, a row of eucalyptus trees and, further on, a pile of rubble in the shape of a square that must have been the remnants of a building that crumbled. Beyond this rubble pile, farther north by about 30 feet, is a low brick wall, about shoulder height, with glass shards on top. This wall wraps around to make a perimeter with the Con River. Whether this wall existed in the late 60s is unknown, but because of its shortness, I doubt it. Next to the north side of the low brick wall is evidence of a latrine facility, half standing and, like the other buildings, roofless.

Throughout the site, I counted about 8 structures, or remnants thereof, and several wells. One can see how some structures have fallen through disuse and abandonment. The two administration buildings that bound the first courtyard are in use today. Other buildings on the grounds include a bathhouse, latrines, wells, and an assortment of decaying or fallen down structures that do not appear to be large in size. There are outlines of other ancillary buildings about the property but they are so crumbled that it would take considerable research to know what they were used for. So unimpressive and non-descript is the layout, that in my mind, the whole area could have been easily mistaken for an unused farm with deserted farmhouses and workers' sleeping quarters.

Cat House is about 25 feet wide by 50 feet long. I examined the still standing exterior walls, and noticed that the door openings on the side facing the river had been filled in with masonry. The supporting roof structure is completely missing, but the exterior gables at each end of the building, which supported the roof beams, are still recognizable. Large faded letters on the exterior walls to the side of and above the windows must have denoted each cell compartment. Gapping rectangular holes now exist where windows (or perhaps not) and shutters once existed. Metal hinges and hardware were completely missing. However, looking closely, one can see that on the exterior walls on each side of each window, an eyebolt had been installed. These pair of eyebolts must have allowed for an iron bar to be slipped through them thereby securing the shutters in a closed position. This feature is not found on the two in-use buildings closer to the main road that bound the first courtyard and that may have served as administration buildings during the POW incarceration years. Thick ground vegetation, rising to about knee height, has overwhelmed the outside extremities around Cat House in the prison courtyard. Looking inside Cat House through the large openings that were once windows, the riot of vegetation, with the same tangled density as that found outside, also covered and consumed the interior concrete floor. Inside the building there is evidence of brick walls that divided the building into three compartments. These interior walls are gone now. The bricked up entrances, recognizable only from the outside, have been plastered over on the inside. Louvers, by means of placing bricks at an angle, were installed in the masonry wall above head level in the gables and allowed for minimal circulation of air. There is nothing architecturally impressive about Cat House, the shell of the walls and floor now being the only remnants of a dilapidated single story square building. Other than the walls and concrete floor, loose brick, chunks of plaster, and broken roof tiles, not to mention other human waste and debris, there was, like Hoang had said earlier in the day, nothing there. Reflecting on Hoa Lo in Hanoi, and making a comparison, there was nothing to suggest that this building served any unique purpose. Yet I knew it must have housed perhaps at least 25 US airmen, perhaps more. I reflected on what I was seeing. I could only imagine their daily lives in such conditions, and, here and now in January 2002, almost 32 years after the raid, it was penetratingly cold and depressing as it must have been then. Furthermore, I was casually strolling around the ruins much the same as I have explored deserted ranches and farmhouses in the American southwest. Just prior to leaving the inside of Cat House, I looked but could not find any scratched messages or "hieroglyphics" that may have been left on the walls by the American POWs.

Interior of Cat House

As for the combined Opium Den and Beer Hall, the longer building perpendicular to Cat House, more or less, the same situation applies. This building in overall length measures about 80 feet and still about 20 to 25 feet wide. Like Cat House, this building is not tall. From the ground to the top of the gables, I would estimate the height to be about 15 to 18 feet, but no more than 20 feet. Irregularly shaped large holes now exist where once regularly shaped window openings existed. Interestingly to me, the structure appeared to be actually two buildings, or large rooms, separated, yet connected, by a common wall, more or less in the middle on the short dimension of the building. The common wall at the time of my visits had a large opening in it so one could pass from Opium Den to Beer Hall and back without exiting the building. It's not certain, based on my observations, whether this opening existed in the 60s/70s. I could not imagine the reason for the adjoining common wall. The floor of Opium Den is about 10" higher than the floor of Beer Hall.

Looking into Opium Den from Inside Beer Hall

On the floor of Opium Den the outline of a badminton court has been enscribed and painted on the concrete slab. The floor is void of debris. Obviously this was used after the war and even more recently as a recreational facility.

What is interesting to observe, through inspection of the construction is that the complex of buildings must have been a school at one time or some other common usage facility. The telltale sign that the buildings became a prison is that on the lower windowsills, seen especially in Opium Den, concrete had been placed on top of the masonry so as to facilitate insertion of vertical prison bars. The bars are gone but the round holes they left in the solidified concrete are still there as evidence. The variance in the construction material and technique employed would indicate that the Vietnamese had to prepare the buildings for their new inhabitants. It was not originally intended to be a prison: the prison bars were not installed with the original wall.

Window Sill in Opium Den