

Viet Nam 1999

A report by Brian Wizard

TOOLS OF ENGAGEMENT

If I've heard it said once, I've heard it said many times, "The Viet Nam War is over, done, finished. You lost. Let it go."

Most people who tell me that weren't there. Those who were there and believe the verbal claims, are right. They did lose and the war is over. Obviously, their commitment to the struggle for freedom did not rival mine. I took it to heart. Not necessarily any of the political rhetoric spewed forth from any side, but definitely the idea that life in a free and open society is the best. We all want the best. We all deserve the best.

When I fought for such an ideal in Viet Nam I was only nineteen years of age. I was too young to vote for the politicians who sent me into harm's way for whatever personal or professional justifications they might have had. I was also too young to handle the intoxicating effects of alcoholic drink. I sure could kill, burn, maim, and cripple, though. I had what it took to execute the military rules of engagement from a frontline position. The alternatives of incarceration or self-exile to a foreign country didn't interest me.

To set the record straight, no, I could not personally handle the psychological aftereffects of my over-the-edge, on-the-job-training as a frontline combat warrior. I needed just as much, if not more, retraining of my combat-conditioned mind and body to bring me back into the peaceful lifestyle of a civilian as went into giving my civilian mind and body the mental capacity and physical wherewithal to wage war.

I am no longer a naive nineteen-year-old. I now possess a much larger data base from which I can draw conclusions based on experience. Let me share some of that knowledge with you. I did not lose the fight for freedom in Viet Nam.

Thirty years beyond my hands-on effort as a teenage soldier, I remain committed to bringing peace and freedom to all countries of the world. This is not to say that my interests are in returning to the military rules of engagement. On the contrary, I will use knowledge, friendship, communication, tolerance, and prosperity as my tools of engagement.

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On May 12, 1969, at approximately 0200 hours, I departed Viet Nam after my mandatory military tour of combat duty. For ten months I held the position of an assault helicopter door gunner. Yes, I saw some action. Yes, what I saw and did had a long-term effect upon me. How? The whole ordeal disturbed my well-being socially, spiritually, professionally, emotionally and mentally. Unattended, I had to carry not only the burden brought on by the lack of treatment for what is now documented and judged to be a service-connected, psychological combat wound, but I also

had to engage in another conflict in order to obtain professional attention. This new war was a battle for justice, and it is still being waged. I have taken my initial Veterans Administration claim all the way to the Supreme Court. I wage this war not for myself, as much as for every member of the active military and military veterans.

Thirty-odd years ago I left Viet Nam with unresolved issues and a lack of closure. What happened after I left? Who lived? Who died? What about the people I met? What about my dog, Bitch? What about the towns I frequented? How has Viet Nam changed? Has the country, the land, recovered from the explosive misery of war?

This is a report on my efforts to resolve issues and stimulate closure. My memories of Viet Nam and what it meant to be a soldier in Viet Nam, emanate from a core of negativity. My job as a soldier was to negotiate peace through the barrel of a machine gun. That was then.

This is now. Thirty years and thirteen days after I departed Viet Nam in 1969, I returned. On May 25, 1999, I landed at Ton San Nhut Airport, Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, at approximately 0100 hours. I had no problem passing through customs and immigration. Nonetheless, the government employees of both departments possessed a hard and unfriendly countenance. Beyond the uniformed heavies, I found just the opposite: people who were kind, friendly, ready to smile, talk and please. The exact kind of people I remember meeting, and defending to the death, three decades ago.

From the airport, I took a taxi to the Empress Hotel. The streets were quiet, almost empty. If you plan on going to Viet Nam, make your first night's hotel reservations yourself by contacting any of the hotels directly. If you make a reservation through your travel agent, you will spend three times as much money. It is not the hotels' or the travel agents' fault. It's the middleman between the travel agents and the hotels who jacks the price up 200 percent.

The staff at the Empress Hotel was very friendly and helpful. The Empress is located downtown Ho Chi Minh City, and close to the Hong Kong Bank, which at the time of my visit had the only ATM in the city.

The Rex Hotel is government owned and twice the price of the Empress, but it is twice the hotel. The Empress cost me \$28 U.S. The Rex cost \$56 U.S. I am sure all the prices have increased since my last visit.

Public transport around the city comes in three forms:

Scooter. You can rent one and drive it yourself, or you can ride on one as a passenger.

Cyclo. This is a three-wheeled rendition of a Chinese rickshaw. It has a man behind a large passenger seat who peddles you around.

Taxi cab, which is truly the fastest and safest, but the most expensive.

The flight from Seattle to HCMC had been grueling. Nonetheless, I awoke only a few hours after I went to sleep. My heart raced with excitement at the realization that this was not the recurring dream of being back in Viet Nam. I was back in Viet Nam.

As soon as I opened the window of my third-story hotel room, the purpose of this journey engulfed me. My goal was to explore myself, my past, my disability, my enhancement, and not only my future, but my future relationship with the Vietnamese people. My mental reconditioning started with the sights, sounds, and smells of present-day Viet Nam. The indigenous ambiance gave the very air I breathed definition. It was Vietnamese air.

Among all that existed to stimulate my memories there was one thing lacking. I didn't miss it, but every sensor in my body, mind and spirit felt its absence. There was no war. Without fear of death accompanying every second, Viet Nam was a very comfortable place to visit.

With the stress of war not barking at everyone's heels, there was no collective fear permeating the aura of the people, or their city.

The struggle the people have now is ages old, economic. In fact, the collective cry I heard repeated by the people was, "Economics, not politics."

I knew this cry all too well. I, too, wanted to succeed at business, before I allowed myself time to play.

On my first day back in Viet Nam I rode around town on a cyclo. This allowed me a slow moving and personal contact. The cyclo driver was more than happy to tell me about the different aspects, sights, and intricacies of the city.

Many cyclo drivers are former ARVNs. They did not fare well after the communist takeover. Reduced to the bottom rung of the social ladder, former ARVN soldiers found advancement difficult. Many cyclo drivers spoke English better than the younger, more affluent taxi drivers.

I let fate send me wherever this cyclo driver took me. I knew some sort of business opportunity was out there. I brought a few copies of my two non-war related books, Heaven On Earth and Shindara. Even if I had to give the books away, someone would want to read them.

First stop on the cyclo driver's tour was the Hong Kong Bank. I needed to hit the ATM for some Viet Nam dollars. The ATM asked an interesting question. How many dollars did I want? It gave me two choices: 1 million or 5 million. Having just arrived, I thought five million would be a good

start. Even in \$50,000 V.N. bills, five million is a large wad of cash to carry. That was only \$350 U.S. How far it would take me, I didn't know.

The cyclo driver then drove me to what he thought I should see: the War Remnants Museum. The story told inside the museum had a serious anti-American bent to it. It was sort of like watching a sit-com re-run: an old story built more on fiction than fact with a script I knew by heart. What I saw appealed to my business sense and encouraged me to meet the museum's director.

The director was eager to help me. I told her I would like to show her a video of the war that portrayed my personal perspective, a perspective not seen in her museum. She invited me back the next day with a promise to give me some of her valuable time.

The museum also has an extensive market on its premises. With a firm business contact under my belt, I had time to play. It was early in the day and the main flow of tourist traffic had not yet arrived. A saleswoman sat behind her cash register reading an English-language novel. I struck up a conversation with her. Not only did she read English well, she also spoke it well. I asked if she would like to read a novel I wrote. I gave her *Shindara* to read under the condition that she do it soon so she could give me her harshest critique over supper sometime in the near future.

There are some dangers in Ho Chi Minh City. If you wear or carry anything of value you will become a target of the street thieves, especially when riding on a cyclo. There are no police patrolling the streets. Let me give you an example:

Later in the week, after spending two days riding around in a hired taxi, with a driver and an interpreter I needed to do some laundry. The hotel charged \$2 U.S. to wash one T-shirt. I lightheartedly complained to the front desk clerk. She told me I could buy a new T-shirt at the nearby market for \$1 U.S.

I hired a cyclo driver and went to the market.

Tropical evenings have little twilight. After enjoying a couple of beers with the cyclo driver in order to pick his brain, I forgot I was wearing a silver necklace. Had I known I was going to be riding around on a cyclo after dark, I would have left this necklace in my hotel room. The necklace had a hefty silver chain with a large quartz crystal strung on it. The crystal was one I had personally set, and the setting included one of my signature silver leaf embellishments. This bright and shiny piece of jewelry was an immediate target for street thieves.

I had a beer-buzz going on and I was having fun. We picked up a young lady the cyclo driver introduced me to, who sat between my legs as we rode among the scooter, cyclo, and taxi traffic on our way to dinner.

Suddenly, from my five o'clock position, a scooter with driver and passenger, both young men, pulled up beside us. The traffic was so thick that this did not appear unusual. The passenger reached toward my neck and yanked the necklace from my body. They sped away as best they could.

It took me a nano-second to think, "How rude." The rest of the second I spent unlocking my combat frame of mind. I became the warrior of old and gave chase to my new Vietnamese enemy.

My left leg went up and over the girl. I hit the street running, my bag of T-shirts still in my hand. The traffic congestion slowed the rip-off artists' get-away to a crawl.

If I had had an auto-focus camera with me at that moment I could have snapped a great photo. The look on the rear thief's face when he turned around, no doubt after hearing the sound of my feet slapping the pavement at an accelerated rate, was precious. His eyes bulged, and his face stretched in awe and surprise. He tapped madly upon his driver's shoulder. I can only imagine his words were something to the effect of, "Dee dee mow! That crazy tourist is gaining on us!"

When I saw the wild expressions of the cyclo driver and my female companion, as they caught up to me, I appreciated having their company. I had someone to talk to about the incident.

My intent was to retrieve my necklace. Lucky for me, the scooter-mobile thieves broke right and sped away down a less congested side street.

Why was that lucky? Public fighting is a crime. Prison was not on my itinerary. The driver informed me, "No one gives chase! Police will arrest you if you hurt a Vietnamese. No matter why."

The next day, I went to a police station and asked the man at the front desk for confirmation about the consequence of fighting back. He affirmed the cyclo driver's words. I had no right to attack the thieves. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked. "No one has the right to rob me without retaliation."

"Bring the thieves to us," he told me.

"Yeah, right. In a body bag," I wanted to tell him, but I kept that to myself.

I returned to the museum to meet with the director. She took me to an air-conditioned room. After she had prepared the television and VCR, and her secretary brought us bottled water and glasses, we took seats at a table to watch my video documentary, Thunderhawks.

The air conditioning was a relief. Viet Nam's heat and humidity have not decreased. I remembered how good it used to be in my airborne capacity; fast-moving assault helicopter gunners and machine guns were air-cooled.

After watching my video, the director congratulated me on my honesty in portraying my side of the war. As we walked through the museum, I told her that the honesty of the museum was not at the same level as my video. As we viewed various captioned photographs, I pointed out the propaganda. One photo depicted a GI carrying the upper torso of a dead NVA. The caption read, "GI laughing at the mutilation of a Vietnamese soldier."

I told her, "That man is not laughing. He is grimacing. He's on body bag detail and not enjoying it one bit."

I suggested that the museum needed to open up to other sides of the same story, my side included. She said she would have to discuss this with the committee.

Eight months later, I received a request from the museum for my Thunderhawks video documentary and the novels that make up my Viet Nam War-related trilogy, *The Will He Make It Saga*. The committee decided to include them in the museum's archives. I regard this business activity to be a healthy step toward the mutual healing of the people of both countries. It is definitely part of our walk together across the bridge of peace, understanding, and prosperity that spans the time between our negative past and our positive future.

On the following day, I hired the taxi and its crew for a two-day drive-around adventure. Our first stop was Bien Hoa, my base camp during the war. I felt a rush of excitement similar to what I felt upon the return to my hometown after the war. Had I known how good going "home" to Bien Hoa would feel I would have done it decades ago. In Bien Hoa I became reunited with some old friends: the downtown water tower, still standing tall, and the Esso gas station, now a Shell gas station, and still pumping gas, and between those two landmarks I found the small park that is still the center of a four-way intersection. I could see all three landmarks in a glance during liftoff from and return to the Birdcage, thirty-odd years ago.

We drove through downtown once, just for a recon. On the drive back, I looked for another landmark, the original Dong Nai Hotel. I remembered this hotel to be a place where officers and civilians used to live in luxury. I had wanted to visit the hotel during my tour of combat duty, but never could due to my low rank and matching low pay. I felt disappointed when I could not find the hotel as I remembered it. It turned out that the hotel I remembered has become sheltered by a new addition. As we drove by the new addition, I looked through its foyer, and there in the background I found the old hotel.

As we parked in front of the entrance to Bien Hoa Airbase, I told my interpreter, "I'm home." This homecoming was a deep psychological re-conditioning. I was among old friends. Inanimate as they were, their images had never been diminished by time.

I wanted to climb the water tower's ladder. I remembered too vividly the time our perimeter took enemy fire from the water tower during TET. A gunship solved that problem. I thought the view from that high vantage point would make a good video shot. I walked toward the ladder with the intent to climb it until I heard a voice yelling at me. My interpreter explained to me that I would have to seek permission from the Water Department. We went to the Water Department and asked for the permission.

My interpreter told me his goal was to become a lawyer. We discussed law several times throughout my stay. One discussion was about how bribery is a mainstay in the process of getting permission to do anything in Viet Nam. I experienced this when the Water Department official told me that I could not climb the tower.

“He says you might want to poison the water supply and kill everyone in the town,” my interpreter told me. I laughed at the thought.

We left somewhat disappointed. As we were about to exit the government compound that housed the Water Department, two men ran up to us. My interpreter listened to what they had to say, then told me, “For \$200 U.S. you can climb the tower.”

I explained to him that I don't do under-the-table bribery. That is not appropriate governing. If they want money, then they should ask for a fee, up front and tabletop.

I went to the Dong Nai Hotel. My mission was to shoot some video from the hotel's roof. I had to walk through the new hotel's lobby, where the man at the front desk greeted me enthusiastically. “You want massage?” Perhaps I looked as if I needed to unwind, or get laid.

“No,” I told him. “I want to go to the roof of the old hotel.”

“No problem,” the receptionist told me. He assigned me a young lady to show me the way.

I sensed the days of old as I walked down the narrow hallway and glanced inside a few of the rooms. The place felt haunted.

On the roof, I found the laundry crew. Mamasans squatted around laundry as they sorted the day's work. Sheets hung on clotheslines flapped in the gentle breeze. Two generations later, and thirty years back, I existed in a convoluted time frame of then and now. The old and the new combined their realities. I enjoyed a sense of floating within time.

I chose to stay in the past for a while. My next goal was to spot another old friend: Non-directional Mountain. This hill was a landmark we used to set up the flight's approach to the Birdcage. This partially carved-away mountain had been a threshold of safety that announced I had most likely survived another day defining the frontline of combat.

It didn't take much to find the landmark. From the top of the hotel I knew exactly where to look. I smiled when I saw this sentinel of safety. My memory of this landmark's shape and position has never faded. The silhouette I looked at in 1999 was exactly the same as that of my memories and my dreams.

A small forest now grows where the 118th Assault Helicopter Company flight of Hueys used to sit. I wanted to stand where my revetment used to be. I wanted a piece of the asphalt that made up the Birdcage.

I left the hotel and walked into the area that used to be a mine field separating the airbase from the town. I wasn't far from the area of the Birdcage and the place my ship, Pollution IV, the company smokeship, used to park. Something new stood in the way of my goal: a stone wall. Unfortunately, as I approached the front gate of the military compound, the unfriendly, authoritative voice of a guard told me I could not enter the base, nor could I video its entrance.

Another landmark of old was the Newport Bridge. I had to find it, and I did. The bridge was exactly the same as I remember it. It still had its guard houses at each end. The ruts worn into the wooden footpaths on both sides of the metal bridge were thirty-odd years deeper.

Standing on the bridge, I saw the old Viet Nam I remembered, with palm trees standing tall and thickets of nipa palms lining the river bank. Grass hooches and wooden docks stuck out of the foliage. A fisherman peddled his sampan down the river with oars he worked with his feet, the way he would peddle a bicycle. This was in contrast to the new renovated Viet Nam, with its new multiple-lane, American-built bridge that now spans the river only a few miles away.

We then drove to Xuan Loc. I wanted to find two places: the old airstrip and the French-owned rubber plantation that had a large swimming pool.

Xuan Loc has not been as developed as Bien Hoa. This means I was able to remain back in the days of old. Thirty years ago, Bien Hoa was a shanty town with dirt roads. Xuan Loc is much like Bien Hoa used to be. While sitting at a restaurant for lunch, I enjoyed the external stimuli of food, sights and sounds emanating from all directions. The dream-like scene actually taking place before me was dirty and rugged, yet beautiful.

I remained in a time warp. I could easily have believed that fourteen assault helicopters sat shut down not far away. I could be on a stroll into town, while the flight waited for the ground troops to make their sweep through hostile territory after a recent insertion.

I re-experienced the difference in cultures when I went to pee. I stepped up to a hole in the tiled floor. A bucket of water with a ladle stood in a corner to help flush things down.

Two reality checks came when I paid the bill. I didn't pay with Vietnamese piasters or dong. I paid with Vietnamese dollars. I didn't board my assault helicopter and fly away, either. I climbed into a late model Japanese car and drove away.

After lunch, our first stop was the airstrip. What we found was a vegetable field. Where were the girls from Flight Operations? They are grandmothers now, I suppose.

Excitement rushed through me when we drove into the rubber plantation and I spotted the swimming pool. We used to circle this pool whenever we had the chance. We would use our trained hawk-like eyes to spot French girls sunbathing poolside.

This time, I was poolside. I looked up and saw the airspace I had flown through many times before. The people of Viet Nam own the land because they live on it. If that is the case, then I owned the air space above the pool because that is where I used to live. I could easily imagine the sight the girls used to see as my ship circled overhead.

Next time through the area I'm going to go swimming in that pool. Next time, I want bathing suit-clad French girls, food, drinks and fun. I still have a dream I want to make come true, pun intended.

Our next stop was a hotel in the town of Song Be. Some confusion arose between my interpreter and me. I wanted to go to Song Be Mountain. He thought I wanted to go to the town of Song Be, which is a totally different place. I will have to check the old maps to be sure, but I don't think this town existed thirty years ago. I could be wrong.

The driver and interpreter needed naps before dinner. "Fine with me," I told them, but I didn't need a nap. I needed to mingle and have a Tiger beer.

What I experienced in Song Be brought back another flurry of memories. The monsoon season had just begun. I made the walk from the hotel to the nearest bar in a downpour. The dirt shoulders of the road turned to mud soup. There were no sidewalks. I carried an umbrella, but it didn't help much keeping my pant legs dry. Billions of huge rain drops pummeled the world around me.

The bar was an opened-faced cement building. I walked down an aisle between tables and chairs, as well as orchids, palms and ferns. The plants gave the interior a jungle-like ambiance. The place was devoid of customers. Music played over the stereo speakers. I inhaled the mix of fragrances deep into my nostrils. This was Viet Nam: hot and humid, with the odors of sweat, plants, and food wafting through air that was slowly churned by overhead fans.

I was 19 years old again, and walking straight into the lion's lair. Three young female lionesses looked up from their mundane chores. When they saw me standing there, no doubt looking as dumbfounded as I had looked thirty-odd years ago, they broke into smiles and rushed toward me. They were classic bar girls. With no one else to serve, their collective attention focused on me. They directed me to a chair at the far end of the room, closest to the food and drinks.

I placed my order. Ready to please, the girls brought me a dish of roasted peanuts and a six-pack of Tiger beer. I had lived this scene before, only the beer was different. I had enjoyed similar bar scenes thirty-odd years ago, too.

I don't think they've had many Americans frequent their bar lately. I was a source of entertainment, and exploration. The oldest of the three was twenty-five years old. She could speak enough English to carry on a conversation. She wasted no time in getting physically friendly.

A new twist in the restaurant scene was the provision of a platter laden with chilled, moist towels that were individually wrapped in plastic. Yes, I sat there and let two of the three young ladies open the sealed towels and wash the sweat off my face, arms, and neck.

The youngest girl, a mere seventeen, wanted to know how well endowed I was. With all the touching and seducing going on, I admit, they got me somewhat excited. Old Sparky was feeling nineteen-years-young his own self. When the oldest of the three girls reached down and found Sparky ready to play, she squealed with excitement to express her approval of Sparky's wherewithal to her cohort. The youngest girl's eyes widened as she held up her left arm to clasps her right hand around her forearm. With slow and meaningful strokes, she said something in

Vietnamese I couldn't understand. Her brazen, yet embarrassed laughter and body language clearly explained her understanding of Sparky's health. She asked permission to have a feel for herself. Being the gentleman I am, I told she'd have to wait another year. Maybe she didn't understand me, maybe she didn't care, but before the tryst was over, she copped a feel. (I felt so cheap. I was just a piece of meat to those girls. Oh, the trauma!)

Back at the hotel, I tipped over around eleven. I had a room to myself. Lying back on my bed, I watched geckos raced around the walls. I slept well every night I was in Viet Nam except for one, which I'll explain later. I had no dreams of war.

The next day took me back to Tay Ninh. It was great to see the Black Virgin Mountain standing tall, with a crown of clouds adorning her peak. I wanted to go to the top of the mountain. I would walk all the way if there was a cleared trail. Cleared of booby-traps, that is. There was a path up the mountain, but it led to the Buddhist Temple on the northeast side. I didn't remember the temple from before. It was the perfect place for me to go. I had also returned to Viet Nam on a spiritual quest.

I didn't have to walk up the trail to the temple. I took the gondola. That's right. I said, "The gondola." It was the closest thing to a low-leveling Huey I experienced this time around.

This ride was more of my ongoing rehabilitation, too. There I was, flying low and slow over banana groves and thick jungle foliage. Every once in a while I could see the exposed path below, and sometimes people walking on the path.

I told my interpreter, "Movement, two o'clock." My feigned warning flew right over his head.

From the landing at the top end of the gondola I saw something I had never seen before: a huge body of water. Tay Ninh Province had been one of my major areas of operations, thirty-odd years ago. In my video, Thunderhawks, you see an aerial view of the area where I now saw water. The video shows the triple-canopied jungle torn apart and the ground up-churned by extensive B 52 bombings. The way the Vietnamese decided to deal with this earth-in-upheaval was to flood it.

What took place next might be hard for some of you to understand, but for me it was the pinnacle of my journey.

I have a theory that when a person commits his mind, body, and soul to a fight to the death, the killing of his living body does not deter the warrior's spirit from its intent to win. Therefore, a spirit liberated from the physical limitations of earthly bondage may be able to continue the fight on a spiritual level. In doing this, the liberated spirit can project itself into its enemy's body, clinging onto life by a sharing of spiritual space. If this is so, perhaps an ongoing, spiritually based conflict is a major source of extreme combat trauma and stress.

Why would one person have limited space on its spiritual level? Could not one living human being be possessed by his own spirit, as well as by the spirits of those he physically killed in mortal combat?

It's just a theory, as are all spiritual speculations. I had a well-defined spiritual quest, though, and I needed to speak to a monk about it. Through my interpreter, who told me later that he found my spiritual quest quite interesting, I explained to the monk something to this effect:

“During the war I killed many Vietnamese in and around Tay Ninh Province. I believe some of the dead soldiers' spirits have clung to life within me. They share spiritual space with my spirit. This has caused some chaos and confusion within me.

“Today, I have done all that I can do to bring these spirits back to their homeland. My hope is that they will understand this and take this opportunity to move on. What do you suggest I do to make them understand that it is okay to move on?”

The monk listened intently to my interpreter as he told him my story. The monk nodded to my interpreter, acknowledging his understanding, then looked at me. Lifting his right arm, he pointed to a place further up the mountain.

The interpreter repeated the monk's instructions. “Further up the path is a place called the Soldier's Cave. It is where many wounded soldiers died or recovered from wounds. This is where you can make a prayer and tell the spirits within you that this is the time and place for them to move on.”

Sure enough, there it was, the Soldier's Cave. I'm not real good at making with the prayers. I personally consider my life to be a form of worship; my every breath is my prayer and my acts are the workings of a greater consciousness than mine. Nonetheless, I gave it shot. I told the clinging spirits that this was the best I could do for them. “I brought you home. The war is over. It is time for you to move on.”

Just before I gave them a swooping arm gesture to send them on their way, I added, “It's been a hell of a ride for the past thirty years. I hope you had as much fun as I did. I might have another thirty years left in me. If you don't want leave now, I understand. We can all go together after this body's demise.”

I raised my arms over my head and gave them a powerful swoop in front of me, ushering out the guests, and pulling back an emptied space. I turned to my interpreter and announced, “I'm free!”

Walking around in the heat and humidity made me thirsty, so my interpreter and I patronized a refreshment stand on the path between the Soldier's Cave and the temple.

While I took a moment to come down from my emotionally charged spiritual experience, I noticed an older Vietnamese man pushing a rock-filled wheelbarrow up the hill. His objective was to reinforce the wall behind me. He looked as if he needed some water, so I asked the interpreter to ask him if I could buy him a drink. He accepted. It turned out that this guy used to be the police chief of Plieku. Of course, that position bought him no favors from the conquering government.

After we talked, I passed him some money, suggesting that he buy himself a beer after work. He said, through the interpreter, "I'll buy rice, instead, if you don't mind."

The driver remained at the base of the hill. He was always in search of a card game. We found him at the cafe next to the entrance to the gondola. He had himself a game going with five other men. They all looked up with surprise when I walked up to their table and sat down. "What did I want?" they all asked me with their eyes. My driver told them I was with him.

While they played their game, they asked why I was there. My interpreter explained my situation. The guy closest to me laughed and told the interpreter that he was a Viet Cong. He thought it was amazing how his side held the middle of the mountain, while my side held its bottom and top. He had been active in combat in 1968 and '69. We were enemies at that time.

The man at the far end of the table was a former NVA. He came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the early seventies, after my time. The man to his right was a former ARVN. I could not have organized a better reunion. The best I could do was buy a round of beer and pass out King Edward cigars. I always thought that if we could have done this during the war, we could have negotiated peace.

Around lunch time I was in search of Tay Ninh West. Just before I left in 1969, the large hospital at the end of the Tay Ninh West airstrip had taken some direct hits from NVA rockets. All that remains of the complex is the water tower. A park has since replaced the hospital. The airstrip is now a through road.

We stopped at a restaurant at what I considered to be the general area of Tay Ninh West. This cement building was two stories high. It was clean, neat, and served a great spread of food. I had Cambodian fish, rice and vegies. The food was nourishing, but it did not quench all of my hunger. I wanted to meet the people. Satisfaction came when I met the restaurant's owner. She came to my table, and asked, "Who is this man?"

My interpreter told her my story. She left my table with something on her mind. She returned from her living quarters on the second floor. On the table before me she plunked down a red cloth-covered display of two Ho Chi Minh combat medals. She had been a former VC and received the medals for her combat role as a frontline infantry soldier. She claimed to have killed two American soldiers.

"They gave you two medals!" I exclaimed. "I received twenty-six from my government." This could have been a point of contention, leading to confrontation, but that was not my mission. This time in Viet Nam I ran the show. My mission was to make friends, not war. I stood up and gave the woman a hearty hug. "We can be friends?" I asked my interpreter to relay to her. She was very willing and happy to be my friend.

It was later that night that the scooter-bandits snatched my necklace. That experience kept me on my toes. All was not safe in this communist wonderland.

Let me tell you of the most moving experience I had. It came from many of the Vietnamese people I met and befriended. "Thanks for being here before," was a phrase I heard from many of them. Some were ARVNs of old. Others had not experienced the war, as it was before their time. Still, they understood that I had had good intentions as a person when I was a combat soldier.

Again, what happened next might be hard for some of you to understand, or believe. Nonetheless, it happened.

This was the one night I did not sleep well. I slept safely tucked away in my hotel room at the Empress. Two days earlier I had returned the spirits of the soldiers I killed to the Buddhist Temple part way up Nui Ba Din. Remember how I told them they didn't have to leave if they didn't want to? I awoke startled after I clearly heard a voice state, "I am here. I am here."

It didn't take my subconscious a split second to detect a serious intrusion into the private space of my hotel room. Normally, I keep a weapon in the area where I sleep. I was feeling very vulnerable without one. I immediately turned on the lamp beside my bed to see who, if anyone, was actually in my room. If there was an intruder, there would be a confrontation.

I saw no person, but I did see an energy form. This nondescript form floated at the foot of my bed. I felt its awareness of me. It moved faster than I could and before I knew it, this energy mass entered my body. My head and shoulders became weighted down. I stood up and exhaled powerfully. This action seemed to help the energy disperse its weight throughout my body.

I went to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I saw nothing different. Other than the heaviness, there was no change. It was an experience that affirms my theory about the ability to share spiritual space.

I accepted this intrusion, after all, I had invited this guest to remain within me. So, I guess I'm possessed. Great! For a moment there, after I released all of the clinging spirits, I had worried I'd be all alone. It was good to have a friend close by. I did make it clear, though, that this time I wanted some serious cooperation: winning lottery numbers, whatever. Something to help carry the weight.

Some of the events that happened next are examples of how my new mental conditioning will change the memories of what I did in Viet Nam. Remember the clerk I met at the War Remnants Museum? I gave her a book to read, with full intentions of hearing her opinion of it. We dated several times. Dated! We went on bona fide, getting-to-know-one-another dates.

We went to my favorite eating establishment in Saigon: the Trade Center. Thirty-two stories above the seven million inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City is a restaurant with a spectacular view. You can see Non directional Mountain, Nui Ba Din, Bien Hoa, Ton San Nhut Airport, and much to my surprise, a large amusement park, with Ferris wheel and other rides and attractions. (I did not go to the amusement park. I will the next time, though.) From this elevated vantage point you can see old Viet Nam, as I remember it, and new Viet Nam, with this skyscraper included.

On one date, I took Nhung and her sister bowling. This was a great new memory of what I have done in the country of Viet Nam. Instead of knocking down people, I knocked down 157 out of a possible 200 bowling pins in my best string.

I also met with the one man who buys all the books that come into the southern part of Viet Nam. I put a total of nine books, five copies of Heaven On Earth and four copies of Shindara, on consignment with him, for distribution to the various bookstores in the area.

I also met with the head of the university's foreign exchange department in Ho Chi Minh City. I thought it would be good if I could do a tour throughout Viet Nam's universities to show my video and tell my side of the war story.

In Conclusion

Over the past thirty-odd years of living with combat stress I have found several methods of dealing with the never-ending malady. My first approach was to ignore it. This was easy due to my lack of knowledge about such inner turmoil. In retrospect, I realize that my most successful method of dealing with the combat stress incurred in Viet Nam was to incur more combat-like stress by continually risking my life. I should have become a policeman, fireman, or an ambulance EMT, but that was not possible due to my condition.

To this day, I cannot understand why the people in charge of my young and impressionable teenage mind did not realize that after the institutional reconditioning of my civilian frame of mind into the mental state it takes to become a ruthless warrior they did not provide equal debriefing, retraining, and reconditioning to assist in my re-entry into normal civilian life. I completely understand that the troop rotation system implemented in the Viet Nam War was unique, and was supposed to reduce the incidence of combat stress. I know for a fact that the architects of the Viet Nam War who implemented this course of action also realized that some combat soldiers would return psychologically messed up, in spite of the troop rotation strategy. Their error was not providing a follow-up program to bring combat soldiers like myself back from enjoying a life of conflict, danger and risk.

The architects of the Viet Nam War were negligent, irresponsible and incompetent in their handling of this country's greatest assets: its young warriors. In all of the rhetoric I heard from the military mental hygiene professionals, the Veterans Administrations psychiatrist and mental health experts, I received no solace.

I personally had to carry the burden of combat stress and its detrimental effects alone, unattended by any mental health professional for twenty years. At the brink of my demise, due to the adverse effects of the war of attrition waged upon me by those responsible for creating this inner disturbance, I had to retaliate. I fought this battle for four long years. It was harder than any battle I fought in Viet Nam. It was the new war. My enemy's stronghold was the reluctance of the VA to perform its duties adequately, as well as appropriately.

I won my battle against the VA's incompetence. This victory has helped many veterans who

followed in my wake. I did not win the war, though. I fought for full compensation for the detrimental effects the combat malady created. I took my fight from the Regional VA to the Board of Appeals within the VA, to the Court of Veterans Appeals outside of the VA, to the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals, and finally all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States of America. You can find this battle in the public records of the Supreme Court under docket No. 99-7176.

Unfortunately, due to the status quo of denial on the part of the governing bodies, I lost that battle. I have not lost interest in seeking justice. The core of my case is the breach of contract on the part of the United States government when it did not provide adequate medical attention to soldiers suffering from combat stress. This breach of contract continues in such cases as Agent Orange poisoning, and Gulf War Syndrome. It will continue until the incompetent, irresponsible, and negligent officials in charge of providing immediate and adequate medical attention to all combat-related wounds uphold the mutually binding contract between the government and its military personnel.

With the judicial system exhausted, I am now moving the battle onto the Congressional battle field. Keep in touch, and find out what happens. It could save you, your children, your grandchildren, as well as all of your descendants' lives.

With all of that said and out of the way, I want to express my belief that the best therapy I have experienced over the past thirty-odd years was this recent return to Viet Nam. I recommend that every Viet Nam combat veteran consider such a trip. It will be good for your head, your heart, and your soul if you return with the intent to make friends, not war. The Vietnamese people are friendly, happy and willing to make your trip a good one. There are risky elements, so be careful. As careful as you would be in any city, town or country.

As for me, I am desperately trying to turn the whole negative experience of war into a positive conclusion. You can help by purchasing any of the books, videos, or other artworks I have created.

The sequel to the Viet Nam War video documentary Thunderhawks , titled Viet Nam 1999: Make Friends, Not War, will be coming out as soon. Don't forget to look at the photos from my latest trip.

Sign the guest book, and especially visit the tribute to the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion's webpage and sign its guest book. This webpage presents a good history of the 145th CAB's action. This webpage is maintained by the sales of Brian Wizard books, etc. It is okay to support a veteran. Thank you for your time.

Yours truly,
Brian Wizard

This report is a continuation of the Will He Make It Saga, which is composed of:

Permission to Kill, the Viet Nam War story based on the author's and his friends' true life experiences told through the fictitious character Willie Maykett's combat duty as a helicopter door gunner.

Back in the World and Permission to Live are two sequels to Permission to Kill that follow Willie through the next thirty years of life dealing with the aftereffects of his combat experience. These stories are also based on true life experiences of the author and his friends.

Thunderhawks, the video documentary, is composed of actual combat footage shot from the door of Pollution IV and other combat assault helicopters by the author and his friends.

Heaven On Earth and Shindara are two non-war novels that have their inspiration and creation within the text of Back in the World and Permission to Live.

Brian Wizard Sings For His Supper is a music CD created and performed by Brian Wizard and friends. It contains eleven original songs, five of which are found within the text of various novels, plus the sound track to the video Thunderhawks.

All the above come in one package titled, Brian Wizard's 20th Century Anthology. This collection of work is accompanied by a signed and numbered Certificate of Authenticity. It is a book collector's dream. A limited number of 100,000 Brian Wizard's 20th Century Anthology will be printed over time.

Be sure to be one of the lucky people in the world to own this unique collection of books, video and music by ordering now. Please peruse Brian Wizard's home page for further details and ordering instructions, and tell a friend.

Viet Nam 1999
"Make Friends, Not War"