

# Return to San Juan Hill

My wife Francie and I flew to Vietnam on Feb. 6, 2008 arriving at our hotel 10 minutes before midnight as fire works blazed across the city sky officially ushering in Tet. The Year of the Rat had started and we were starting a 5 week tour of Vietnam and a visit to Ankor Wat in Cambodia. Saigon was incredibly vibrant with all the celebrations and it just about brought tears to my eyes when I marveled at all the happy vacationing families enjoying the event as compared to their plight 40 years before. We soon discovered that most of the inhabitants are younger than 40 and the “American War” is basically a paragraph in their history books. They are a very happy, out going, gentle people and totally welcoming of all tourists.



Year of the Rat 2/7/08

Around the 16th of Feb. we were in Can Tho in the Mekong Delta and hired a former interpreter who served until 1973 and preferred to only take former vets on tours. We hit it off instantly and he ended up taking us on a 175 kilometer motor bike tour of the area around Can Tho. While in Vietnam my designation was a tourist but with Trang I let him know about my army history and also told him that John Kerry was my cousin. Because of this fact he took us to several former

ARVN soldiers living in the delta who were very welcoming and happy to talk to a former American Soldier. We were accorded celebrity status and though I did not seek it, it sure made our tour a lot more interesting. We all had so much fun that Thong stayed with us at an overnight home stay in Vinh Long and then accompanied us back to Saigon by car before returning to his home at Can Tho.



Our guide Thong and a former ARVN SDR crossing a canal on a motor scooter soldier in a remote canal house

Around Feb. 18th we took a night train from Mui Nei (a kiteboarding resort about 4 hours from Saigon) to Duc Pho. We awoke that morning to our first rain and cool weather. When we arrived at 9:30 the mountains were totally enshrouded in fog and mist. Two women took us by motorbike to a hotel on Rt. 1 in Duc Pho. We reassessed our situation and felt we should return in better weather so we jumped on a passing bus and ended up in the sea side tourist town of Hoi An about 30 miles above Mai Lai. We were there for a couple days and I went onto a computer at our hotel and it showed a break in the weather for the next day. So at nine that night I approached the hotel clerk, Phouc, and asked him if he could secure us a private car so we could go to Duc Pho (about 3 hours south) the next morning. Phouc was interested to know why I wanted to go so I showed him my old military map and told him about being stationed at San Juan Hill. He immediately became excited and told me that his father had worked for the 4/3 from 69-70 in Duc Pho and asked if he could go. Needless to say we were delighted to have an english speaking local go with us so at 7:15 on Tuesday, Feb. 26, we three climbed into the hotel car to be driven by the 18 year old hotel driver. To the sounds of a CD playing Vietnamese singing marcarena and Beetles songs we departed in heavy overcast conditions. It was a reasonably calm drive although twice we came to a

complete halt off the road as trucks passed trucks coming toward us on the two lane Rt. 1.



view from the train nearing Duc Pho



First view of SJH looking SE

After passing through rain showers and obscured mountains, we neared Duc Pho and headed west on Rt. 24 to Ba To. The river Song Ve came into sight and we proceeded south to Ba To. The weather was starting to lighten up a little but I could not identify our exact location on the map so we stopped at a house and asked for help. After a conversation a local jumped in with us telling us he would help us. He took us down a dirt road to the river and finally decided to take us to the local governing officials for help. We found them sitting around a table in an old French building. They were interested in our mission and I showed them the map along with a print I had made from Google Earth that showed SJH and the surrounding mountains. The officials were all communists (all the locals were displaced by north vietnamese in 1975) and only one seemed to vaguely recall that a fire base named San Jan Hill had occupied a nearby mountain 40 years ago. I asked them to direct us to a bridge on the military map which ended up being about 2 miles away. So the five of us piled back into the car and we drove to the bridge.

I got out, looked east, and there was San Juan Hill in all her glory about three kilometers away just becoming visible in the clearing skies. The saddle formation and grassy top left no doubt in my mind that I had returned to what had been my home 39 years earlier.

We drove down a muddy road for several hundred meters until it became impassable. We four proceed to a deep ford where our local guide bade us goodbye and headed home. The three of us headed up a trail going through many fords and walking along incredibly beautiful rice paddies and gardens. Once SJH was adjacent to us we started up a clear cut and found a trail into the jungle at the top of it. Years behind the hotel desk caught up to our friend Phouc, and he became very tired but continued with us.



clear cut



cows near the top



Looking NW at landing pad and artillery hill    From TOC looking N at Iron Mt.

As we came out of the jungle growth into the clearing about 700 meters from the peak, the clouds started to break and we could see a patch of blue. I was fully energized but Phouc was lagging and decided to pack it in and wait for us. In about 15 minutes we were on the top of the infantry hill at SJH, the clouds opened up and the sky was blue above. It was amazing to be back after 39 years. A lot of emotions but it felt good. There was Iron Mountain to the north, not so menacing as I

remembered it. The valleys were the same except the river to the south was dammed up and we could see signs of cultivation half way up all the mountains where there had been none 39 years ago. But SJH was the most amazing change of all. Except for a couple depressions and a flat area where the landing pad had been, there was no sign of a fire base having ever been there. The bunkers were all gone, all the conex containers were gone, and the bulldozed perimeter road had disappeared. There were no traces of the miles of razor wire, emplacements were filled in, and even the dump had evaporated. Six cows were now the occupiers and they just chewed their cud as we passed by. We never actually walked on the artillery hill but it was in a similar natural state with a couple trees where the 105's had once been dug in.



Looking SSW from TOC

Looking SSE from TOC

you can see the 4.2 mortar registration hill

What had once been an isolated mountain fortress brimming with soldiers and firepower was now a peaceful mountain top looking over idyllic pastoral valleys.

Francie and I sat up there absorbing the spectacular views, taking pictures and movies, and concluded with a remembrance of those who did not make it back. For my cousin Bing Emerson, we left a 1975 commemorative coin of Concord with an image of the minuteman statue and a quotation by Emerson (ironically “the shot fired round the world”). We placed it under the highest rock on the infantry hill and it is fiercely guarded by a nest of black ants. For Bing, Ronald Dennis, Bob Kettering, and my ranger classmate Bill Graves we opened a container of soil from America and let the wind distribute it. All was peaceful.

We headed back down, clouds replaced the blue skies, and it started to rain. As we approached the jungle line we became concerned when we could not locate Phouc. We shouted for him time and time again but there was no reply so we headed down. When we were back in the stream a farmer let us know through sign

language that Phouc had recently passed by. We found him 45 minutes later at the car all excited because he had decided to go down on his own, had become disoriented, and ended up with some unscheduled slides down a waterfall. It was quite an adventure for him and he told wonderful versions of it that night back at the hotel.

We proceeded north for a mile and then headed east on a tributary of the Song Ve until we came to a dam and the end of the navigable road. The dam, built since 1975 had created a pond around the area we CA'ed into on Dec. 23, 1969. Leaving the others behind I headed upstream until I got to the NDP and found the stream coming in from the north. All had changed. The jungle had been bulldozed for acres and agricultural crops now grew where there had been dense jungle. I feel I located within meters where Sgt. Ronald Dennis was killed Dec. 24 about 9 in the morning as we were pursuing a wounded VC. I buried a small american flag at the site and dropped into the



stream a lucky stone I had brought over from America. I proceeded up the stream and in about 50 yards came upon 3 women washing clothes. We all had a laugh. I must have been quite an unexpected sight walking up the stream in my soggy shoes with a map in hand.

I returned to the others at the dam and after taking pictures of the women who had followed me, we got back in the car and headed north up the valley where I had conducted so many patrols. What had been deserted and uncultivated was now a vibrant agricultural valley filled with houses, farmers, rice paddies, row crops and planted woodlands. The wild plateau the battalion converged upon for Christmas 1969 was now a very productive rice paddy surround by houses. We also passed over the stream where my platoon sergeant, Raymond Slaybaugh, was seriously

wounded by a booby trap when I was running the Recon Platoon the spring of 1970. We followed the Song Ve back to Rt. 1. We passed some orderly grave yards and I asked Phouc who they were for. All the stones were memorials to fallen VC. The ARVN and locals had no such tributes he told me.

I wanted to return to Vietnam because it was a significant part of my past and I remembered it as such a beautiful country. To me it was a natural inclination to find and climb San Juan Hill. I also had a desire to honor my fallen comrades in my own way and it brought wonderful and unexpected closure for something that has been in the back of my mind for a long time. Vietnam is a vibrant, exciting, and



Fishing fleet 6 a.m. Mui Nei    Children looking in train    Hmong children at Sapa

diverse country. Our major tour areas were Saigon, the Mekong Delta, Mui Ne, Delat, Hoi An, Hanoi, Sapa, and Halong Bay (along with Ankor Wat). All were unique and each an adventure in itself. Other than the crazy bus travel, we felt very safe. The inhabitants seem very happy and were welcoming almost to a fault. The food was fresh, safe, and cheap and lodging was a bargain by any standard. Travel plans for us were spontaneous with a basic itinerary. Locals, hotels, The Lonely Planet Guide Book, and word of mouth from other tourists seemed to work perfectly. If you want to read about our trip you can find it on [steveandfrancie.blogspot.com](http://steveandfrancie.blogspot.com). If you are thinking of heading over there and want some names (our two guides) and tips, by all means get hold of me by e-mail at [sriggs007@aol.com](mailto:sriggs007@aol.com).

Steve Riggs 4/3 11 LIB Americal Div. Alpha Co. Recon Delta Co.  
Sept. 1969- Sept. 1970