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THE VIETNAM VETERANS ADVISER

“You come in for the landing, you see bomb craters full of water, and as the plane taxis you see all these old American planes off on the side rotting. Then there's all these soldiers with red stars. I didn't know what they were gonna do, you know, maybe pull me off the plane and blow me away on the tarmac!” When Dave Cline was medivac'd out of Vietnam in 1967, never in his wildest dreams did he think he'd return. But not only did he go back to Vietnam and visit places where he'd pulled ambulances, he also found himself having lunch with a group of ex-N.V.A. soldiers, one of whom had been a field commander in the same area where his infantry platoon saw combat. Of this unusual meeting Cline recalls, “We were going back and forth, rapp­ping, trying to seek friendship. It was quite moving to sit down and come to terms with the same people you may have been pointing a rifle at once.”

Cline and three other vets returned last December as representatives of the New York-New Jersey chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (V.V.A.W.). They wanted to get firsthand information about Agent Orange, MIAs, POWs, Cambodia, and the Amer­ican children. And in the process, they also wanted to confront some of their own nightmares.

The compelling phenomenon of vets returning to Vietnam has been in the news lately, and almost without exception the reports have lauded the men for their courage in trying to transform old, violent memories into new and healthier ones. But going back to Vietnam was not always this acceptable. When Bobby Muller, the founder and former president of Vietnam Veterans of America (V.V.A.), went back in 1981 with three other vets, they were the first group of ex-servicemen to do so. But they were viciously red-baited when they got home and reviled in newspaper editorials around the country. Eventually, after a second trip to Cambodia, the V.V.A. had to back off from sending any more delega­tions. But Muller himself harbors no regrets about those ground-breaking trips. "I know this is pitifully obvious, but to relate to the Vietnamese as human beings was the biggest emotional adjustment I had to make," he says. "And if you weren't part of it, I don't think you could really understand the feelings that were behind the craziness of that war."

For Greg Payton, one of the Army vets who returned with Dave Cline on the V.V.A.W. trip, going back after 20 years forced him to take a look at the darker side of himself. "I was a recovering addict having come to the point where I said I don't want to use drugs again. But I'm away in Vietnam, in that golden triangle where I could get hold of just about anything I wanted. In Saigon, I was riding around in a pedicab, looking up at the stars, and everything was real clear— and I was confronting it." After vis­iting some of Vietnam's overwhelmingly inadequate health-care facilities, Payton discovered a sympathy for the suffering Vietnamese as well. "I was getting a feeling for the depths of this war," he recalls. "I mean, Harlem Hospital looks like the Mayo Clinic next to these places."

The V.V.A.W. trip was more than a fact-finding mission. It was an attempt at reconciliation, to see if there's a possibility of an open dialogue between Americans and Vietnamese. "You know," muses Dave Cline, "a lot of vets wear this shirt that says, 'When I die I'm goin' to heaven, 'cause I served my time in hell.' But we sort of feel like a lot of the hell came with us. You have to question where you can blow the shit out of a country and then just move on and say, 'Well, forget them f$&kers.'"

A ground swell of groups and individuals are choosing to go back to Vietnam. For many veterans, especially those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, physically returning may prove to be the most effective treat­ment they've ever had. A few P.T.S.D. groups are going back under the auspices of certain V.A. hospitals, but perhaps one of the most extraordinary efforts is that of the Veterans Vietnam Restoration Project out of Garberville, California. An attempt at combining self-help with aid to the Vietnamese, the project is the brainchild of infantry veteran Fredy Champagne. Its goal is to build health clinics and contribute to various other reconstruction efforts. Champagne says that after he saw the work of the Veterans Peace Action Team in Nicaragua and heard about veterans returning to Vietnam to look for Amerasian kids, he realized he needed to do something.

Robert Shippen, a veterans counselor and ex-Special Forces medic, has organized a P.T.S.D. study around Restoration Project members. He hopes it will demonstrate that there are beneficial effects for veterans who return to Vietnam. "Twenty years ago," says Shippen, "most of these guys went over to help the Vietnamese with rifles. Now they're going back with tools. They want to replace the dark, black hole of horror that war is with something real and alive and concrete—to finally fill that void in their lives."

Shippen remained state­side for the first trip, which took place last February, and helped run a workshop designed to acquaint the vets with one another and their expectations. If all goes well with the building of the first clinic near Vung Tau, and if they are able to raise enough money, he will accompany the second team, slated to begin work on another clinic in Hanoi. "I still have a void in my life," he says. "I left a large piece of my heart in Vietnam. That's why I want to go back."

For information about the Vietnam Veterans Restoration Project, call (707) 923-3357. Information about Vietnam Veterans Against the War and their plans for future trips can be obtained by calling (201) 963-3380. —Betina Morse