

“Dad, do you want to go back to ‘Nam?”  
An interview by Randall Cottrell of his dad Harry Cottrell

I asked me dad, an Air Force veteran, if he would like to go back to Vietnam – as a tourist. He replied, “Not sure”. I followed up with why he was not sure and he reminded me of the night last year when we were on Google Earth. We were looking at different places I had lived; we moved a lot when I was younger. My dad wanted to see his old base in Vietnam; I remembered his disappointment. Tan Son Nhut Air Base, where he spent his year in Vietnam, has been leveled; there are now just empty fields on his side of the base. My dad said that he had always wanted to return to Vietnam, but this discovery was devastating; his memories had been bulldozed.

“The Vietnamese could have housed over 50,000 people on the base; housing with running water, sewers, electricity, paved streets, and lots of solid buildings; what a waste”, my dad exclaimed. He told me of the Vietnamese refugees living next to the base in houses constructed of packing crates and cardboard; poor housing by any standard but really bad during the monsoon rains. He was disappointed that out of spite the Vietnamese would destroy the base when it could have provided a nice community for tens of thousands of people; definitely a big improvement over the refugee housing he witnessed.

My dad told me, “It would be nice to visit Saigon and travel to the highlands where I never have been and see the DMZ; Vietnam was so green and lush. Saigon was a lovely city and I would like to see it again.”

I have seen an aerial photograph of Saigon in my dad’s bedroom, it is a beautiful city. The view is of downtown Saigon where the Saigon River flows into the Mekong River; there are many magnificent buildings. (My dad will not call it Ho Chi Minh City.)

As I thought about what my dad had said, I could understand why he was not sure about going back. Returning to a place that is now a dirt field would be like going back to one’s hometown and discovering your neighborhood is a parking lot for a mall. The adventure of seeing the ‘hood would be destroyed.

I truly believe my dad would like to return. He explained to me, “Vietnam was the defining experience of my life; that experience shaped who I am – good or bad.” I think that many Vietnam Veterans share my dad’s mixed feelings about going back. For many it was the defining time of their life, but for many the experience was not good.

Maybe if the Vietnam Vets, along with the former Vietnamese allies and adversaries, could meet and swim in the Mekong they would cleanse their memories of the war and be at peace with their shared experience.

Randall is a graduate of Hermantown High School and completed his first year at Lake Superior College. He is the son of Harry and Claudia Cottrell. Harry served in the Air Force from November 1964 to September 1968. Randall plans to complete his Associate degree and transfer to a 4 year college to complete his education..