

GROCERS AND GUNNERS RETURN TO VIETNAM

A group of twenty eight formed the third *Grocers and Gunners* tour of Vietnam in November. The group comprised Vietnam Veterans, partners, relatives and friends.

Visits to Vung Tau, Nui Dat, Long Tan and the Long Hai's were highlights of the 23 day tour led by our Queensland member, Phil Brookes (ex HQ AFV). Those who joined the tour served in 35 Sqn RAAF (Wallaby Airlines), 9RAR, 4 Fd Regt, RAA, 12 Fd Regt, RAA, 86 Tpt Pl, 52 Sup Pl, 86 Tpt Pl, 6RAR and 85 Tpt Pl.

Our first stop was Ho Chi Minh City – still Saigon to the locals – and a great stay at the famous Caravelle Hotel, with many a beer sunk and lies told at the rooftop Saigon Saigon bar. The Saigon warriors will be pleased to know that the Canberra Hotel in Cholon is doing a booming trade as the Truong Thanh Hotel. Visits to the Cu Chi tunnels and the Mekong Delta concluded our stay in Saigon. We then travelled by bus to Vung Tau and stayed at the Imperial Hotel, Back Beach, built on the site of the Badcoe Club. A couple of the old 55 Engr Wksp sheds are still standing behind the hotel. Our RAAF contingent was very disappointed they couldn't find their usual bars from the 60's, but were pleased that canned beer could still be bought for around fifty Australian cents. The RAAF officers quarters and mess – Villa Anna – an old French villa, is still standing.

11 November was an emotional day at Nui Dat and Long Tan, where we remembered the fallen. Those who were based at Nui Dat were able to identify their lines. The rocks that mark the entrance to 52 Sup Pl and the 85 Tpt Pl boozier are still in place. A trip to the infamous Long Hai's, now a national park, concluded the day.



Grocers and Gunners at Long Tan – 11 November 2012

Historic Hoi An, on the central coast, was the perfect location for some well-earned R&C. Our hotel, the Vinpearl, is located on China Beach and we were treated like VIPs. Most of the group joined the optional cooking workshop, which was a real hit. We all enjoyed great food in cosy restaurants.

From Hoi An, we drove across the spectacular Hoi Van Pass to Hue, the old Imperial capital. We visited the Imperial City and Ancient Citadel, the scene of bitter house-to-house fighting during the 1968 Tet offensive. Hue is famous for its regional cuisine and we weren't disappointed.



Bride and Groom in Hoi An

We then travelled to Hanoi with its gracious tree lined boulevards, old French villas and historic old quarter. Our base was the Intercontinental Hotel at West Lake. This area is an eclectic mix of European style cafes and bars and traditional Vietnamese eateries. The Australian Defence Attaché, Group Captain Matt Dudley, joined our group for dinner at our hotel. His visit was particularly appreciated by our RAAF contingent. While in Hanoi we visited the Hanoi Blind School and a centre for people affected by Agent Orange, where we donated some funds raised during the tour.

A change of pace was the overnight train from Hanoi to Lao Cai and Sapa, near the Chinese border. Sapa lies at the base of the Tonkin Alps, the eastern extremity of the Himalayas. The weather and spectacular scenery didn't disappoint. This is an area of hill tribes, mostly H'mong, traditional villages and terraced rice paddy fields. We visited two H'mong village schools and provided a donation to help the kids.

Returning by train to Hanoi, we later travelled to Ha long Bay for our overnight trip on a cruise boat for our exclusive use. A mess style formal dinner was organised for us; lots of laughs, lies told and cordial consumed. The food - including Australian steak - and service were brilliant, a great finale to our tour.

Once again it was back to Hanoi. Our final dinner at the French/Vietnamese restaurant, La Badiane was the night for farewells before our return to Australia and planning for the next Grocers and Gunners tour in September/October 2013.