February 9, 2012

Dear Guy,

My wife and I just returned from a two week Viking River Cruises tour of Vietnam and Cambodia. For a long time I just didn’t think I would want to go back to Vietnam but I’m glad that I did. We spent seven nights on a sixty passenger vessel mostly cruising down the Mekong River. We started the river portion in Cambodia and then down into the Mekong delta. We stopped most days a couple of times to see the locals and their way of life. It is a simple life for most of them of growing rice and making ends meet.

Vietnam for me was a study in contrasts. We started our trip flying into Hanoi and only spent two short days there. What we saw was an overcrowded, rather dirty big city. I guess I am prejudiced but I felt the oppression of a communist state. We made what I will call the obligatory visit to the Hoa Lo Prison a.k.a. the Hanoi Hilton. This of course is an old prison dating back to the French days and most of the museum points to that time. However, there are a couple of rooms dedicated to the “American War”. The pictures on the wall depict our POWs playing volleyball and decorating Christmas trees. Also the verbiage tells of the “excellent” medical treatment the prisoners received. Well, I guess that is their version but I wanted to vomit.

In Cambodia there are not a lot of people in their 60’s and 70’s due to the time of the Khmer Rouge. The people are delightful and of course the temples are amazing. There was little mention of the “American War” as the main part of their history of that time frame is the “killing fields”. Pol Pot the leader of the Khmer Rouge wanted to emulate what Mao was doing in China and return the people to the countryside and an agrarian society. In the process his Communist régime starved millions and murdered thousands more. Apparently there are nearly 300 “killing fields” in Cambodia and we did visit the one that is a memorial of that terrible time.

We ended our tour in Saigon a.k.a. Ho Chi Minh City. Saigon is a marked contrast to Hanoi in the North of Vietnam. Saigon, as most refer to it, is bustling and clean. You can feel the capitalistic energy of this city and the occupants. After three decades of oppression from the victorious North, the South has awakened to a progressive business based economy. Modern buildings are prevalent and industry is visible as the communist yoke has been eased and capitalism has been given a chance.

In Saigon, the tourist visits the War Remnants Museum. This museum is dedicated to the “American War” and highlights the atrocities of war. War is not a pretty thing and napalm and Agent Orange made it uglier. Of course the exhibits are extremely one-sided and one has to swallow hard to tour the museum. The grounds around the museum are populated by equipment and aircraft provided to the South Vietnam forces by the good old USA.

In the museum courtyard there is a re-creation of parts of the prison that was on Con Son Island. The exhibit highlights the “tiger cages” cells and the horrid conditions of the prisoners. This was of interest to me since I flew out of Con Son Island on and off for six months in 1965. I personally never went ashore but I know some of the VP-40 folks did. I can still picture the seadrome we set up the shelter of that island. Our mission of patrolling the Mekong Delta on ten hour patrols in the heat and humidity is a vivid memory.

I left the squadron in September of 1965 and went back to graduate school at the University of Illinois where I had been on a NROTC scholarship leading to my commission. If memory serves me correctly, those who were scheduled to get released in October of 1965 were extended a year as the war heated up. Back at school I was approached by a professor who was the Commanding Officer of a P2V reserve squadron at Glenview Illinois. He needed pilots and asked if I would “fly for him”. I did and that started my 23 years in the reserves.

Thanks to a couple of fortunate events the Navy became an integral part of my life. I retired from the Navy in 1989 with a debt of gratitude for my Naval Career.

Best regards,

Jim Staes

VP-40 1962-1965