

## VA-75 Returning to Vietnam

We became Captains and Admirals. We became CEO's and Vice Presidents of corporations. We became PhD researchers, attorneys, small business owners and airline pilots. But when we are no more, we will want to be remembered as Sunday Punchers.

There's something unique about the bonds that form between young men who are unexpectedly sent to war, facing dangers that few will ever know. In April 1972, VA-75 and CVW-3 had just completed workups on the USS Saratoga for yet another deployment to the Mediterranean. At the same time, President Nixon needed to convince Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho to negotiate an end to the war. "Peace with Honor" was his goal. Central to his strategy was Operation Linebacker and ultimately Linebacker II, dramatically increasing the bombing of targets in North Vietnam and the mining of Haiphong Harbor.

Saratoga and the USS America with VA-35 were emergency deployed from the East Coast to the Gulf of Tonkin to join the four carriers already engaged in the bombing. Six carriers, with six A-6 squadrons, each with 10-12 A-6A's carrying a typical load of fourteen 500-pound Mk 82's: that's a lot of firepower. We did our part, and on February 12, 1973 we flew into NAS Oceana with a feeling that we had "ended the war." That very same day our lone POW, LT Roger Lerseth left the Hanoi Hilton with the first group of POWs to return to the U.S. The Sunday Punchers' accomplishments in the war were honored by receiving the 1973 C. Wade McClusky Award as the best attack squadron in the Navy. *Launch the Intruders*, by Penn State history professor Carol Reardon, documented our story in detail; it is one of the few authentic histories of a Navy squadron's contribution to the air war in Vietnam.

With this as background, the idea didn't seem outlandish: we should have a special squadron reunion in Vietnam, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of dropping our last bombs over North Vietnam. We floated the idea with the 26 remaining officers of the 1972-73 Westpac deployment. (Of the 42 officers who were assigned to the squadron for all or part of the Westpac deployment, 16 had already died, including four that we left behind in Vietnam.) A few Punchers were skeptical: "The only way I'd go back to Vietnam is with a full load of Mk 82's!" Enough of the others were open to the adventure, so we forged ahead. Working with a travel agency specializing in customized group tours, we fashioned a two-week itinerary that made our idea come to life. Our primary focus was to visit many of the locations that we had bombed or mined, even if it meant long bus rides to reach some that are not included in published tour guides, such as Vinh and Thanh Hoa.

By the time the plans took shape, COVID-19 was wreaking havoc with travel of any kind, much less to a developing country like Vietnam. We put our plans on hold until the world began to relax and we discovered that Vietnam was experiencing a lower-than-average infection rate compared to many other countries. In the end, we became a group of three pilots, three B/N's and six wives fully committed to launch in April 2023.

Each of us had our own set of reasons for wanting to experience Vietnam 50 years after cratering the landscape with our bombs. Some reasons may seem superficial: Meet the Vietnamese people and hear their stories? Enjoy the country's natural beauty and unique topography? Witness the modernization and prosperity that capitalism has brought? Add to a list of adventure vacations? Sample food with unpronounceable names and mysterious origins? Other reasons were quite substantive: Update faded war stories with ground-level details? Renew and deepen 50-year-old Navy relationships? Reconcile

feelings that Communism prevailed in the end? Regardless of what motivated us, we went and we're happy that we did.

Our tour of Vietnam exceeded our expectations in some ways and disappointed us in others. We had lots of fun: riding mopeds and cyclos (like bicycle-powered rickshaws), swimming and kayaking in Halong Bay, trying to row a bamboo basket boat and casting fishing nets. We expanded our palates to include Bun Cha and some rather questionable street food. We visited war-related sites such as the infamous Hanoi Hilton, where our guide was an SA-2 battalion veteran. We also checked out the Thanh Hoa bridge and AAA batteries that defended it. The accommodations were adequate to first-class. The people were gracious, welcoming and engaging. Our only disappointments were that the heat index on several days was stifling, and traveling a cumulative 500+ miles by bus from Hanoi, ending in Hoi An/Danang was a bit wearing on our aging bodies.

Now that we've returned, when friends and family ask us about the trip, where do we start? There are so many dimensions of the story that are difficult to describe, like the karst islands east of Haiphong Harbor, or the mountainous terrain as we rode south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or the exhilaration of doing near-combat with Hanoi traffic on a moped, or the impact of an SA-2 veteran reassuring us, "But we're all here now."

At some point, we began to consider ways to document our trip on film, to share it with others. Many in the squadron, including over 300 vitally important non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, were unable to physically join us. Others who flew and maintained the A-6 during its 34 years of active service may be interested in our story, not to mention thousands of others who were part of the Linebacker operations.

We are fortunate to have found a volunteer who will produce a full-length documentary film to tell our story. He filmed pre-trip interviews with us and is now filming post-trip interviews to capture our expectations and conclusions. He will combine these interviews with actual mission footage and numerous videos and photos that we took during the two weeks that we were in Vietnam. We are excited to see the complete story when it emerges in the final product.

We were about 25 years old when we fought the air war against North Vietnam, and now we are about 75. Maybe the documentary will be a "coming of age movie." Whatever the outcome, it will be clear that we are "Punchers Forever."