



PHOTO BY DOUG YOUNG

A woman herds ducklings from her boat in Vietnam.

VETERANS

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he wasn't quite sure what he should teach. Cindy suggested he teach a course about the Vietnam War.

After burying himself in research, attending reunions and hearing about other vets visiting Vietnam, Doug decided he wanted to visit, too. Seven years later, he did.

GOING BACK

Cindy couldn't understand why Doug would want to go back to a country which held mostly unpleasant memories for both of them. She didn't get the chance then to see the beauty of Vietnam.

"I was never allowed to leave my post," she said. "The Vietnamese I had seen outside of the gates were scrounging for a place to live and a way to subsist."

Although the trip back to Vietnam wasn't about reconciling their actions in the '60s, the couple was still a bit hesitant about returning.

"We weren't trying to heal anything," Doug said. "We were just curious. (Cindy) needed a lot more talking-into than I did."

A few phone conversations with other vets who had visited present-day Vietnam assured Cindy she wouldn't be the aim of any enemy fire and she wouldn't be eating dinner from a mess kit. She was convinced.

Finally, the Youngs boarded a plane and flew nearly 24 hours to Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon.

"What an experience!" Doug said. "We just had a ball."

They stayed at a five-star resort on China Beach, ate authentic Vietnamese food and found the loveliness of the country.

Doug and Cindy somewhat expected to find pieces of the past scattered about the country. Instead, the vets had a hard time finding the remnants of the Vietnam War.

Of course, museums house relics of the past, such as medicine cabinets from old evac hospitals, Hueys and Chinook helicopters. When they looked a bit deeper and beyond the modern skyline, they found unlikely reminders of their time in the war.

External fuel tanks from American fighter planes had been salvaged by the Vietnamese people and then transformed into small boats. The tanks were cut in half, the jagged edges covered with wood and the boats are piloted up and down the Perfume River in the city of Hue.

At the Mandarin Café, which serves more Ameri-

can fare, chopsticks have been replaced with forks — forks which were once used in U.S. Army mess halls.

LIVING THERE

Doug and Cindy vacationed in Vietnam a handful of times before they finally decided to return to the country to live and work as English language teachers at a university in Hue.

While there, a girl named Phan Thuy Trang who was working on what was essentially her thesis asked Doug to be her academic adviser, and he accepted.

"To the best of my knowledge, I was the first foreigner ever assigned as a faculty adviser to somebody," he said.

Trang visited the Youngs at their house often, and Doug remembered thinking he didn't want to see a young, sharp mind go to waste. Trang's family didn't have enough money to send her overseas for an education.

Soon Trang graduated and moved to Ho Chi Minh City for work. Doug and Cindy had dinner with her before returning to the United States.

"Our proposal was: if she worked as a graduate assistant here, she would get in-state tuition, she would make enough money to support herself and we would pay for her tuition and books," Doug said.

The only thing Doug and Cindy asked for in exchange was for Trang to finish her education in the U.S., and then return to Vietnam, where she was needed, Doug said.

The Youngs hosted two more students from Vietnam, and all three have become as close to them as if they were their children.

Doug and Cindy found beauty in more than the beaches and lush vegetation of Vietnam. They finally saw Vietnam as a country rather than a war.

"When I talk to Vietnam vets, very few of them want to go back," Doug said. "(Vietnam) froze in time for them. ... You can ask any veteran, he can spot it without even looking at it, the sound of a Huey helicopter going overhead... so for them to understand what Vietnam is like today, it's almost beyond their ability to do."

So when you go there and you see for yourself how drastically it has changed, it firmly embeds in your mind that the war really is over. ... The war is really, truly, honestly over."

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