

# Miracle in the Highlands

## Michael C. Little

### 1994

#### Background

In March, 1994, I returned to the site of my Vietnam War year, to Pleiku in the Central Highlands. I hadn't been there since departing in August of 1968. The reason for my return was one of longing, to find the children I knew and loved during the turbulent times of war. This had been my dream for 26 years.

I called them "my children," and in our hearts we adopted each other and became "family." They belonged to the Bahnar tribe of Montagnards and lived about 30 miles east of Pleiku in their jungle village. Montagnards (a French word meaning "mountaineers") are Vietnam's indigenous people, approximately 40 different tribes inhabiting the high plateaus. They became one of America's most loyal and trusted allies during the War, but have since fallen on difficult times under the communist government. There was never much love lost between the Vietnamese and the Montagnards. Peace has not been kind to the tribesmen, as their culture is slowly being assimilated into the Vietnamese way of life.



The boys would hang out at our checkpoint hoping to get a c-ration handout at the end of the day. Prot is 2<sup>nd</sup> from the left; Kenh is 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right.

Back in '68, I was a Roadrunner, a military policeman patrolling the mountain roads in armored gun jeeps. We helped keep the convoys of supplies moving from the coast to the bases in the Highlands. Out there in the middle of nowhere is where I met my "family," and it was where I abandoned them at the end of my tour of duty. I had little hope of finding them, but I owed it to myself and them to at least try.



A typical gun-jeep from 1968, usually manned by 3 soldiers, that's me driving.

I was accompanied on this journey by Joe Devenney, who has been my friend for 27 years, ever since we were Roadrunners together on the dangerous roads of Vietnam. The timing was right, since the Highlands were just being opened to outsiders like us. Joe lives in New York and we've stayed in touch all these years, from coast to coast. His wife passed away not long ago after a very long illness, and his three sons are grown. When I gave him the call and said "let's go," he was ready. I'd been ready for 26 years.

Once we arrived in Pleiku, Joe and I shared a room at the Movie Star Hotel (recently renamed to attract western tourists). It didn't take us long to find our way around; except for some new buildings, the town hadn't changed much. After checking into our room, we were antsy to get

going, to begin our walk into the past...to travel Highway 19 east towards the Mang Yang Pass and north on Highway 14 to Kontum. Our memories were there, our hopes.

## **Saturday Morning, March 26, 1994**

This could be the day I've been looking forward to for 26 years.

Joe Devenney and I wake, not to the old sounds of war, but to a rooster crowing across the alley. We are in Pleiku, Vietnam, again with the feeling that a 26-year interruption hadn't taken place. Joe had left in May, 1968, and returned to upstate New York; while I had departed a few months later and gone home to northern California. It feels strange dressing in shorts, packing camera's, gum and postcards...when we once packed guns, grenades and flak jackets.

We've packed a large bag with gifts for our Bahnar "family," many of which are Montagnard products (like blankets)...from what we've seen so far in Bahnar villages, they are too poor to own the necessities. Yesterday, we bought these things in the Pleiku and Kontum markets...we even purchased bracelets.

I'm wearing a T-shirt that Joe gave me last night. It honors the memory of his deceased wife, Sandy Devenney. I thought it would be very appropriate to wear it today...as we both believe that Sandy is orchestrating this day from her place in heaven.

I am afraid, happy, hopeful, optimistic, pessimistic, numb, tearful, but most of all...thankful. This is a chance of a lifetime and I am at its doorstep.

Our van and driver, Mr. Lam, pulls up to the Movie Star Hotel...my friend Ksor Gat arrives on his motorbike...Joe and I walk downstairs to the restaurant. Breakfast (eggs, bread, coffee) is quick, without the usual laughter. We drive through downtown Pleiku and veer left at the "Y"...this steers us onto Highway 19 at 7:30am, the same time of day that Joe and I and our patrols kicked out back in 1968, armed to the teeth. Tanks cleared the road of mines back then, but this morning, we are on our own, armed only with memories and hopes. We admire the beautiful Highland sky and follow our destiny...

## **Backing Up...Thursday, March 24...The Search**

While on our first evening stroll through Pleiku, Joe met a Vietnamese businessman, Mr. Hien, who offered to rent us a van and driver during our stay in the area. Sounded good to us, and we signed a contract for two days at least (\$50 per day). Now, we had the transportation figured out and were anxious to get started.

My friend, Ksor Gat, was able to take off from work, and was a valued addition to our team (a Montagnard from the Jarai tribe, he also speaks Vietnamese and English). I had befriended Gat back in 1992 while visiting Saigon on behalf of the **Highlands Assistance Project** (a medical effort to assist the highland people). Each morning, he met us at the hotel for breakfast and to discuss the plan for the day. The three of us quickly became quite close.

Joe sat in the back of the van...I took the seat up front next to Mr. Lam. Highway 19...one niner...was calling us back. It's where I have my best and worst memories...I could barely sit

still. We headed east, toward the Mang Yang Pass and the town of An Khe. It was a clear, cool morning, promising to warm up, with not hint of rain.

Although the terrain along the road has changed (with new homes and plantations), we were able to recognize all of the old key checkpoints, dangerous curves, and ambush sites. The exact location of Blackhawk firebase was difficult to pinpoint, but I think we came close...the mountains are still in the same place. We stopped often to photograph the countryside, the rice paddies and distant peaks...and the sky...even the years could not change that sky. We found the old warehouse, now boarded up and abandoned. Click click...the camera's rolled on...we were back home.

We passed some water buffalo, but Joe wouldn't let us stop for a picture. Anxious to continue, he said we'd see a bunch more during our visit. Those were the last we saw.

Highway 19. The French had built it. Two lanes wide, still paved, we took the rhythmic snake-like curves easily in the van, our faces pressed against the windows. Without much trouble, Joe and I could focus on the road, and it was the same old road in our memories. But when we allowed our eyes to wonder left and right, Highway 19 became all new and unrecognizable. There were now telephone poles and road markets and video stores and Vietnamese honcs and plantations where enemy attackers once waited in ambush. American engineers had used special bulldozers to clear the jungle from each side of the road during the war (to discourage attacks)...now those fields are planted with crops.

However, we narrowed our vision, often in silence, and replayed in our minds the old dangers, the prevailing fumes, the constant fears. In 1968, the world could literally explode in front of our faces...mines didn't care who or what applied the pressure. But on this day, the only noise to invade the peaceful countryside was the occasional blast of the van horn, a warning to people on foot. It's different and it's the same. And it just so happens to be the best paved road in Vietnam. So we are told.

The easiest point of reference to find was our old checkpoint 95, which was located at the Ayun River. A new bridge has replaced the one blown up by the enemy in 1967. It was here that I first came in contact with the Bahnar children...and it's where our relationship took hold. Since their village was nearby, we swam in that river together nearly every day and became "family."

Joe and I walked down the sandy banks to the river, feeling like kids again. Immediately removing my shoes, I carefully waded into the fast-moving current. The chilly water brought back a flood of memories...hundreds of Bahnar villagers lined up to be baptized in 1968, John the Baptist style. In my mind, I could hear the wild joyous screams of my children as I tossed them high into the air, and I could see them all splash down into the river Ayun.



**Devenney at the Ayun River**

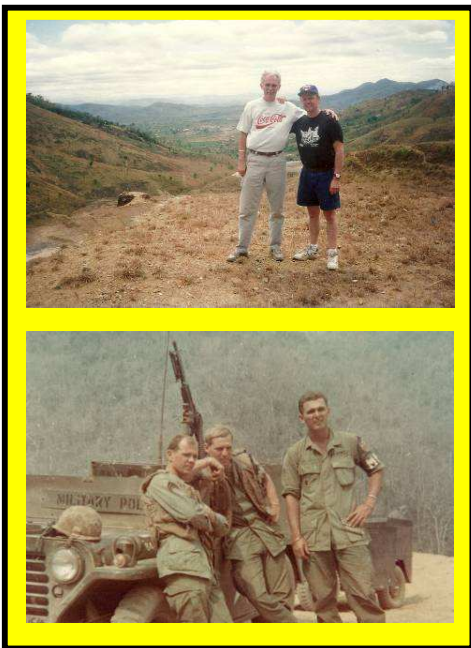
**the destroyed bridge in 1967**

**Little & Devenney**

I stepped into the Ayun today, 26 years later, and was reborn...it was here in my 21<sup>st</sup> year where I was the best human being I could be...feeling that way because I had quit the war and given myself over to the Bahnar children; they became my reason to rise each morning. It was where I was the happiest in my life, despite missing home. And it felt so good...I'm alive again. Joe and I were 21 again, with our lives still ahead of us. But as much as I wanted to relive the past, the river wouldn't allow it...it stopped for no one.

Under the new bridge, Joe found a rusted C-ration can...his smile as I took his picture, was wider than I've seen in many years. He had a strange and unexplainable liking for C-rats...a man of simple tastes. On this day, there are no Montagnard children at the Ayun; they don't come to this spot any longer. Civilized Vietnamese and their government have forced them to move away from the major roads, hiding them deep in the forests. But today, a few brave Vietnamese kids followed the American strangers (the first they've ever seen) down to the banks. Joe took their picture. A nearby tractor made some noises, identical to the unmistakable sound of a Huey...Joe quipped, "we even have sound effects!"

Deadman's curve...still there...but not so deadly. I sat here once, alone with an American body, a dead truck driver. We tossed him into the back of a dump truck. And confiscated the lumber he was hauling to build a house for our Bahnar "family."



The Mang Yang Pass. Now, only a skeleton of its one-time glory. The jungle is gone that once veiled the ominous peaks that shielded snipers and VC ready to ambush. The road to the French graves is restricted, a gate and sign disallowing entrance. We were disappointed...the site of the 1954 French defeat was always a magical place. Goats are all over the Pass, and Cokes are sold at the roadside stands...civilization has come to our most feared memory. The bald mountaintops are no longer menacing...they are sad...they lost the war also. The Pass is a giant scar, a victim of too many wars. Joe and I had our picture taken in the exact location where a photo was taken in '68...there was three of us then, Devenney, Little and Tate (we lost track of Tate, a Georgian, after we all got home from the war).

**The past and the present collide in the middle of the Pass**

The jungle is no longer. The smoke from countless fires cloud the horizon, while ageless trees are driven to the coast for delivery to foreign shores. If one looks carefully, he might see a lone survivor, a single tree silhouetted against the Highland sky...too high on the mountain to be harvested. Everything has been stripped clean.

One wonders what happened to all the animals. More victims. The heart of the Highlands has been cut out...the jungle, the animals, the Montagnards. Joe

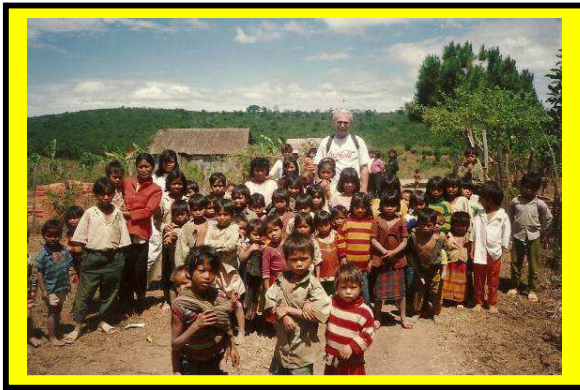


**Dead trees hauled down the road**

and I are at a loss for words as we drive through this “carnage.” How do the mountains hold up under the monsoons?” Surely, they will melt away someday.

We continued to An Khe, the former home of the famous 1<sup>st</sup> Cav. Neatly aligned Montagnard villages could be seen from the road...they seem to be more visible in this area. Many of them walk through town, as they do in Pleiku and Kontum. I guess they are part of the local economy. Pulling over for lunch at a small café, we attracted the usual group of curious onlookers. Joe had his typical lunch of rice, bread and a Coke (he was going to make it out of this trip alive!). Gat was forever teasing my friend, and they quickly became very good friends...like GI's of old, we used humor as a way to deal with all the “shots” taken at our hearts. An emaciated dog brushed up against our legs under the table.

### **...When Miracles Began to Happen...**



**It was always easy to pick me out**

During the morning drive down Highway 19, we had pulled over, and hiked to a Bahnar village not far from the Ayun river. As anticipated, we drew a large crowd, mostly children and women. I used my limited knowledge of Bahnar, but was having a great time, feeling right at home. I've done this before and waited 26 years to do it again. The village chief approached me and we exchanged pleasantries (Gat was a great help)...I took out my small photo album containing the pictures destined to find my children.

The chief and I sat together on a log...he looked hard at the faces in the old pictures, but couldn't recognize anyone. My “family's” old village no longer existed, and he had no idea where those people had relocated. My disappointment showed.

But the chief was so kind, and invited me to share some rice wine. Since Joe doesn't drink, I was on my own. Even the chief couldn't indulge since he had been sick recently...his son took his place. I presented the chief's wife with a plastic gold necklace and crucifix, one given to me 26 years earlier by my children. She was very moved by the gift (many of the Bahnar in this area are Catholics). Reluctantly, we finally departed, having shared a very special experience, but no closer to our goal. I outwardly acted nonchalant, but my pulse told me we were close.

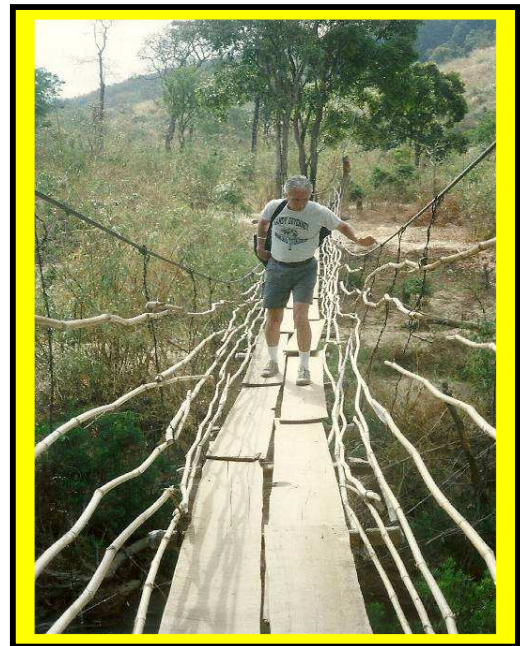
So, after the lunch in An Khe, we headed back...westward...back over the Mang Yang towards Pleiku...and except for a wonderful day of recounting old memories, we were empty-handed in the search for the children. We passed the Bahnar village from the morning visit and approached the old checkpoint 95 at the Ayun. Gat and Mr. Lam exchanged words, and without asking us, pulled the van over in front of the Vietnamese hamlet that is still there. Motioning us to follow, we entered one of the houses, and a crowd gathered. Gat passed my pictures around and explained what we were trying to do.

One thing seemed certain, they remembered the MP's. Not really knowing if this was good or bad, Gat suggested we downplay that part of our story in the future. Then to my utter

astonishment, a few of the elders remembered the children in the photo's! It amazed me that some Vietnamese could actually remember any Montagnards at all, let alone children from over twenty years ago. Their excited chatter followed and soon fingers were pointing to the other side of Highway 19.

My heart literally jumped in my chest...and I began to run across the road, when Gat stopped me...to reach the village, he explained, we had to follow the dirt road that began across the street. Eagerly, we piled back into the van (one of the Vietnamese came with us to show the way), and began our journey into the unknown. At one point, the van bogged down in the sand...and another time, we became lost. Finally, we continued on foot, as the path became narrow and a single file. Wild hopes drove me onward and I secretly whispered the names of my children...Kenh, Prot, Djanh, Bler..."I'm coming back."

We came to a medium-sized stream, made passable by a rickety old bamboo suspension bridge. Adrenalin pumping, I ventured over the antique structure first...pulled along by a longing in my soul. I was no longer in control of my body. I was travelling through a barrier in time, to an impossible destiny. Could Kenh and Prot really be at the end of this trail waiting for me after 26 years? Would they know me? Would they want to see me? After all, they had been so young back then.



**These bridges certainly got our attention, but we survived**

It was now hot and I tired easily under my backpack as we plodded upward along the trail, me on point, Joe in the rear. We came across the remains of a burnt out section of forest...remembering the aftermath of a B-52 bomb strike, less the crater. Black death, slash and burn, the smell of ashes in the dead air. I took a picture and prayed this wasn't an omen. A distant farmer at the far end of the field waved to us, which was all the welcome I needed. We must have been a strange site to behold.



**We didn't know what to expect**

Our small group finally walked through the village gate of Chrong 1, and was greeted by the sounds of barking dogs. Small pigs and scrawny chickens didn't bother to look up from their task of eating. No people in sight. It felt strange, not dangerous, but almost like being an intruder in a ghost town...but nothing was going to alter my resolve. I've written a fictional short story about the first American to die in Vietnam since the War...he steps on an old mine before finding his old friends. I held my breath and waited for the explosion.

After what seemed like a long time, a few inquisitive children appeared and approached us, seeing we meant no harm. The dogs had done their job...adults came on the run.

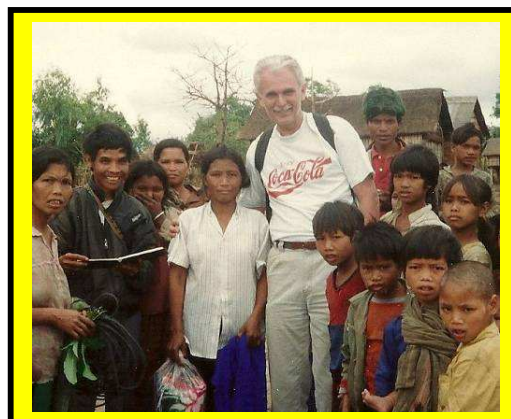
One man seemed to be the spokesman, so I handed him the pictures, while Gat asked the all important question, "do you recognize them?" "Yes!" he beamed. Not only did he know each

child in the pictures, he also remembered the house we built for Kenh's family. Gat interrupted to tell me "Kenh and Prot are alive!" Miracle number one.

I could hardly stay in my skin, probably in a state of shock. "Will someone please wake me from this sinister dream of false hope?" I glanced quickly from face to face, searching for recognition. There were smiles and questions, but no one familiar.

We learned that Kenh and Prot were not nearby...we assumed they were far off working in the forest. Since they would not return until late, we set up a meeting for Saturday morning. I left behind a few photo's to spark their memory and promised to return at the scheduled time. Nothing could stop me.

More and more villagers surrounded us, curious to see the tall Americans. We weren't in any hurry to leave, as they greatly enjoyed passing around the old pictures. One of my pictures showed three young girls, probably about 8-years old at the time, smiling into my camera in 1968. A commotion broke out, loud talk, excitement, and I looked over the top of the Bahnar heads around me. She had recognized herself as a child...and I instantly recognized her as a grown woman. I screamed, "Bler!" She screamed, "Tee!" (Tee was my name in 1968, shortened from Tee Tee, Vietnamese slang for little). We fought through the crowd to each other and held on tight, a moment I will never forget.



**That's Bler with me; her husband is next to her, always a crowd around us**

The feeling was one of pure joy, like flying over the earth in a dream. I was a 21-year old boy again and my life was just beginning. In that split second, Bler gave me the will to go on. We cried. Would there be enough tears in my storage tank over the next few days?

(My son, Sean, was born nearly two years ago...if he had been a girl instead of a boy, the name chosen for the baby was Bler)

Bler's husband promised to show the pictures to Kenh and Prot that night and set the meeting. He seemed to be a good man and I trusted him with this task. I depended on him...my chance was at hand. Back in '68, I never told my Bahnar family how much I loved them (at least not in words)...and I needed to correct that. Why has God been this good to me?

These people are so poor and disease ridden, like ghosts living out the string before they perish. They face a cruel and largely uncaring world. But what limitless inner beauty and strength and goodness! Mankind will suffer when it rubs out the Montagnards. They are God's children...their smiles light up a gloomy and sinister world.

And here I was...once again...stepping out of my world and into their's. What could I possibly do for them? I felt quite helpless and inadequate...but never more resolved.

Returning to the van and a patient Mr. Lam, I walked a bit more carefully over the bridge. A miracle was close at hand and it was no time to break a leg.

## A Day of Waiting...Friday, March 25, 1994

This promised to be a long day. Although Joe and I really wanted to see Kontum and beyond, it would be difficult to concentrate on anything but the impending reunion the next day. But we gathered Gat and Mr. Lam, and after breakfast at the Movie Star, began the drive north on Highway 14.

This became a sad excursion for us. During the War, Joe and I were Red Train and Red Train Alpha, two gun jeeps escorting American convoys from Pleiku to Kontum. It was rugged country, but so beautiful and inspiring. The mountains were covered with triple canopy jungle, full of life. The road has changed so much that neither of us could recognize the 43 kilometers that we once knew so well. Like Highway 19, the jungle-lined roadway has been re-populated by dwellings and crops and brick factories. These new economic zones made it impossible for us to "see" our memories of Highway 14. In fact, the destruction of the jungle was so bad that I saw views of valleys that were not possible during the War.

There is a large and obvious military presence in this area, their drills observable from the road. AK-47's hung from the necks of young SRV soldiers, and left us with an uneasy feeling. We never got over being un-armed ourselves, some habits die hard. Joe and I wondered aloud how much of this military presence was there to keep the Montagnards under control.

Kontum itself remains a relatively clean and attractive town, much like we remembered it. We enjoyed a fine lunch downtown, and a brief walk through the central market. Whenever I'd smile and greet Montagnards, their faces would light up in disbelief and a huge smile was returned. They had trekked many miles from their hidden villages...we saw them on the side of the road, plodding along one step at a time, determined.

This trip was turning into an emotional rollercoaster. I asked Gat to direct our driver to Dakkia leprosy hospital on the outskirts of Kontum. Since the **Highland Assistance Project** has been assisting these people, I wanted to take a look myself and see conditions firsthand. Not far from downtown Kontum, Dakkia is a sprawling compound, it's many buildings spread out under the palm trees. The aging structures are neatly scattered. Built in the 1920's by the French, it is home to a few hundred Bahnar lepers, their families, and a small medical staff.



Upon arrival, one doesn't see the patients. Following protocol, we were invited into the director's office, where we exchanged pleasantries, and given Cokes and tea. The director is a doctor from the North, once a soldier who served with the NVA in this area during the War. He never spoke directly to Joe or myself, directing his remarks to Gat. Knowing Joe and I were once his enemy may have cooled his feelings towards us. But, he was always polite.

After the formalities, we joined up with two Bahnar nurses and began the walking tour of Dakkia. Joe was outwardly uncomfortable, not knowing how he'd react to the horror of leprosy (I already had those answers from my trip in 1992). All the patients were Montagnards in various stages of the disease.



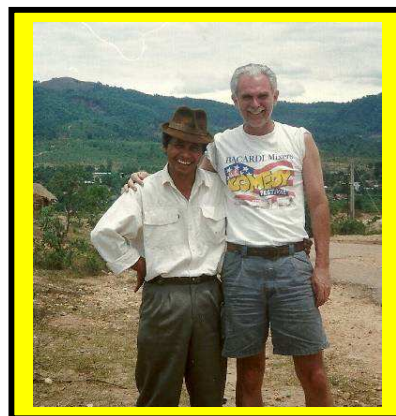
Many were horribly disfigured and missing limbs. All laid on their mats, hopeless. The conditions are barely livable. The central government refuses to allow foreign charitable groups to contribute assistance directly to the hospital, a fact that clearly angered and frustrated the director.

I was asked to photograph one of the most seriously ill patients. I really didn't want to, but they wanted me to take something back to show the outside world. The young man attempted a smile...the camera's auto focus zoomed in...and he was immortalized. Joe and I didn't need a camera.

In the women's ward, we saw a girl being attended to by a nurse. The director made a few comments, correcting the method of treatment. Joe was transfixed by this poor suffering soul, who looked closer to death than life. Her illness had left her a grotesque shadow...boney, hairless and dis-colored. Bloated eyes popped from their sockets and penetrated our souls. We swallowed hard and moved along. Later, Joe explained that the girl had reminded him of his own wife, Sandy, while she was dying slowly over so many painful years. "I saw Sandy lying there..."

The day wore on and we drove further north to Dak To, sight of the famous battle in 1967. It is another smoldering historic battle site, no longer a threat to anyone, except the animals who might still be trying to survive there. In the town, government loudspeakers tell the new Vietnamese citizens how to behave and what to believe. In the mountains, the wind finds a solitary tree and stops only for a second.

I closed my eyes on the return trip to Pleiku, unwilling to view the Highland carnage any longer. It was time for a few beers at the Movie Star...it was time to re-group and prepare for the next day. It was time to hold my breath and wait for the dawn.



With Ksor Gat at Dak To

## The Miracle of Saturday, March 26, 1994

As I leisurely sit outside the Movie Star Hotel in Pleiku...it is Sunday morning, a fine morning...and I will attempt to record on paper the miracles of Saturday. The Highland sun that beats down on me now is no match for the flames that have been ignited in my heart. It isn't just a warm fuzzy feeling...it's as if I was granted a brief, rare look straight into my soul, and what I witnessed will determine the rest of my life.

**Saturday.** Joe, Ksor Gat, and I crossed the same old suspension bridge, swaying in the morning breeze, around 8:30am, burdened with heavy packs and a large supply of gifts. Birds sang. We were warmly greeted in the village, but it was not over-enthusiastic. Right away, I began to have doubts (would I really see my children?). I had hoped to see Kenh and Prot waiting for me along the trail. They weren't.

We were led into Bler's house, where a large group gathered, while we waited patiently for the arrival of Kenh and Prot. Hanging on the wall over the main table was a large photograph of the Last Supper, a thin sheet of plastic protecting it from the dust of time. I thought "how appropriate," and clinched my hands even tighter, waiting, hoping. Joe sat quietly, camera ready, across from me. Unknown to us, our "family" didn't actually live in this village, but in another some distance away...and had a long hike to meet us. The longer the wait got

(about an hour), the more I withdrew...the beats of my heart counted every tick of the clock. I was gearing up for a bitter disappointment.

But then, all of a sudden, the dark, over-crowded room was pierced with a shaft of light...the villagers parted, an opening was created. My "son," Kenh, saw me first and shouted my name "Tee!" ...and we raced to each other in a blind joy. Hugging like lovers, our sobs shook the house, mixing like blood, washing away the pain of 26 years apart. Unashamed, we held on to each other, unaware that anyone else existed. Joe took the pictures. By the time Kenh and I parted, I had spent so much emotion; but then, before me, was my other son, Prot. More hugging, tears, and some English I taught him so long ago. It was like a parade of my past...next, it was Kun (Kenh's younger brother), just a toddler back in '68. And there before me was Koch (Kenh's sister) seemingly unchanged by the years, with a smile. She has one of those remarkable faces that restores one's faith in heaven. Hiding her tears, she immediately thrust bracelets on our wrists in welcoming.

**Kun-Kenh**

**Prot-Kun-Kenh**

**Prot's embrace**

**Kenh's embrace**



### **In that instant, 26 years of separation ended**

As I attempted to regain control of my emotions, I handed the photo album to my "family" so they could enjoy the glimpses of their childhood. These were the only pictures ever taken of them and became as valuable as gold. My God, how they loved the old pictures.

The elder brother, Kil, was killed sometime after 1968. I don't know the details of his death. Sut, the aging mother of these children, faced me at last and warmly shook my hand. She had survived so much, seen so many changes in her life, but it didn't surprise me to see that she was still living. Back in '68, we all knew what a strong woman Sut was.

Soon, it was learned that they all lived in another village (Chrong 2), and were invited to go there. Prot's words to me, "Tee, you drink rice wine?" I nodded affirmative and we gathered all our gear and friends...said goodbye to Bler...and marched single file back over that swinging bridge. Sut wouldn't trust the bridge, and waded through the water...Joe waited for her on the other side, making sure she was ok.

Packed tight in the van, this uncommon happy family bounced and squirmed its way through the maze of jungle trail. Joe and I sat in back, while Prot sat up front acting as the navigator. During our time in 1968, he and I would lead everyone in song (Angels We Have Heard On High was my favorite)...so I yelled over the heads to lead us in a song. Together, we raised our voices as loud as we could: "Happy welcome to you, happy welcome to you, happy welcome happy welcome, happy welcome to you!" Yes, it was.

Prot also gave his rendition of "Row row row your boat." When he sang the line "merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream," Joe and I just looked at each other and shook our heads. He told me then: "I found what I was looking for, this is my new beginning. I began my life 26

years ago, and today I begin it again.” I guess we found our youth...but most of this was too deep for me. Just enjoy the moment.



With the matriarch, Sut, sitting in front of us, we talked about the house that the Roadrunners had built for her and family...and never stopped looking at the old pictures. They remembered everything like it was yesterday. Since they have no photographic record of their existence, I decided to leave my old album with them so they could enjoy it and let their kids take a view into their past. It was their life too.

**Many Roadrunners helped build this house**

The van ride to the village was long and hot, as the dirt trail was barely passable by vehicle. But Mr. Lam stuck with it (I think he felt the emotion too), and we arrived safely. Although Chrong 2 is extremely poor, it is still nicely organized and very typical of Montagnard villages I remembered. The people suffer from a wide range of physical ailments...medical care is non-existent. No schools either. The village children were a bit skeptical of our strangeness, but warmed up to us when they saw how their parents looked at Joe and me, with friendship.

The villagers had been expecting us for nearly two days, since hearing of our arrival in the area from Bler. The welcome mat was definitely out, as we were the first Americans to be in their midst in almost 25 years. For anyone under the age of 20, it was their first ever look at the foreign looking Americans that their fathers and grandfathers recalled in old war stories.

Joe, Gat and I were swiftly led into Prot's longhouse, where we were again surrounded by as many family and friends as could fit into the house. Those who couldn't get in took turns peering through the one window or strained to catch a glimpse through a crack in the entrance. Waiting while Prot prepared the wine jug, I sat close to Kenh, Kun and Koch...speaking quietly so as not to break the spell...constantly touching them to make sure it wasn't all a dream. I also showed them pictures of my family in America, which seemed to please them.

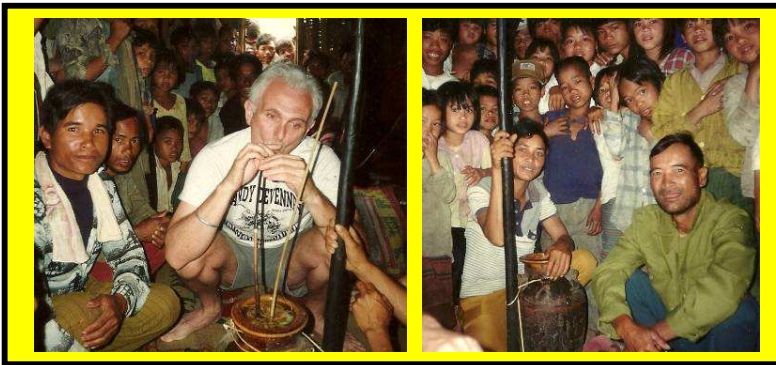


**Family portrait: Prot-Kenh-Little-Kun-Koch**

We were introduced to spouses and children. Kenh, Prot and Kun proudly stood next to their wives and children (they each had from five to six kids). Koch's husband was quite friendly, her children as beautiful as she was. I felt like a grandfather. It was wonderful to witness these extended families, and left me with a sense of hope for their future.

The rice wine ceremony is traditional with all of the Montagnard tribes in Vietnam. However, I had only partaken in two such drinking ordeals during the war...and those were short affairs since there was a war to fight. On this special day of days, I got the full treatment, with my buddy Joe abstaining (his excuse "I'm a good Catholic!"), and many of the Bahnar as well, due to their Catholic faith, it was up to me to pull the weight. Evan Gat had to hold back since

he was fighting a sore throat. Kenh and Kun didn't drink either. I wonder now if it was really religious beliefs or the simple lack of adequate wine.

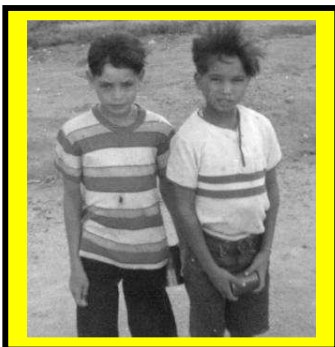


That left Prot and me and the village chief. Although they took a few turns at the jug, it was "Tee" that they wanted to honor. So as I sucked down enough of the liquid to clear the marking stick, the jug was quickly replenished with well-water by each of my children, and then later by their spouses.

It was a distinct honor for each one of them to pour the water, say a few words, and watch me suck the wine through the long bamboo reed. Naturally, I was getting rocky...but enjoying every second. Joe just kept smiling.

Joe had brought 50 packs of cigarettes as a gift...once again, the "good Catholic" syndrome prevented our friends from accepting.

At some point, Prot dug out an old plastic "boom box" and well used battery. Connecting the two, he put in a cassette, and his house soon filled with the Vietnamese version of **La Bamba**. Again, Joe and I stole a glance at each other that said "was this really happening?" I squeezed Kenh's hand...it was.



Prot and Kenh 1968  
As I'd last seen them

At times, I grew very serious, depending on Gat to translate my innermost feelings, words I had been waiting to say for 26 years. I wanted to erase the memory of shaking their small hands in August of 1968, saying a swift goodbye, turning my back, and walking away. As I spoke of loving them and missing them and remembering them every day since that handshake, they answered by revealing the very same feelings. In reality, we had never parted...we were destined to stay as **one** for the rest of our lives. As much as I've unconditionally loved these men and women, it made my heart soar to know that they felt the same about me.

During the rice wine ceremony, there came a time when Prot became quite uncomfortable. Finally, he explained he so badly wanted to offer us something to eat, but was ashamed and apologized, "We have no meat." Joe and I quickly tried to explain it wasn't necessary, but nothing we could say would lessen the disappointment that Prot and the others felt. Later on, we were given banana's while visiting Kun's house. Joe's words spoke the absolute truth, "these are the best fuckin' banana's I ever had!" I would have added, "the best meal we ever had."

Kenh asked about Tate, another American soldier who was their close friend. I'd been looking for Tate also, but couldn't find him anywhere in the U.S. I could sense Kenh's disappointment. They also asked about Jim (Looney Layne)...Kun's friend of 1968. No idea where he was either. Prot wanted to know about Peach (real name Peyton), and I told him he was alive and doing alright. Mostly, I shared the old photo's and talked of the past.

And so, Joe and I had come back to tell them that we did not forget our friends. I pinched Kun...he was real. I stroked Koch's cheek...she was real. Call it a dream, or a miracle...or maybe the will of the Universe. Whatever, I had passed the pearly gates and stole a glimpse of heaven. I almost didn't know how to act.

I was so thankful for Joe's presence, the only man of our war that has stayed in touch with me for all 26 years. We were in this place together...for a reason...and we simply surrendered ourselves. He took the pictures for us, knowing that I was in no shape to do so. He helped capture the moments...but it was our hearts that did most of the filming.

The afternoon sun began to sink behind the increasing cloud cover, so did our spirits as the time to leave was near. By now, Joe and I were wearing four bracelets each, presented to us by the wives of our Bahnar brothers. For people who have so little, it honored all of us...to give and to receive. I stumbled out of Prot's house, Joe right behind me, the shiny bracelets jingling on his wrist. We asked to see Kenh's house, and were guided through the village. I was stalling for time, hoping the day would never end. If asked, I would have stayed the night.

We took many pictures in front of the various houses, each with our friends posing with their families. But Gat kept reminding me that it was time to be going...it was getting late in the day. I continued to walk around bare-footed (Joe says "walking through pig shit...")...I think he was afraid that I'd "gone native." The Bahnar life is so radically different from American life...on the surface, but I truly believe I could live in either one. They taught me a basic truth 26 years ago...that all of us are human, no matter what the physical conditions might be, or what kind of house we dwell in.



**Kenh and his wife, Yoih, were very proud of their house and posed with their kids**



**The elderly woman on the right is Sut, the mother of my kids (the father had died around 1966)**

Our goodbyes were clumsy...we didn't know what to say to each other (not unlike 1968). I promised to return again soon. And Gat promised to deliver the pictures we took (I bought 4 photo albums for that purpose). Gat will be my link to them; I trust him to do the right thing, despite government inference. All of our eyes were watery...the visit had gone too fast. We reluctantly climbed back into the van, while villagers of all ages swarmed around. A path was cleared and we moved slowly, sadly forward and away.

Koch, dearest Koch, pressed her brown hand against the glass window. As hard as possible, I mirrored her hand with mine. For 26 years, I have felt this “piece of glass” that separates her world from mine. It was almost impenetrable, but Joe and I had found a way to push through it. We lived the miracle. Feeling the heat of Koch’s hand on the other side was all the proof I needed. Because there was a “this time,” there is the promise of a “next time.”

A small cloud of red dust rose behind us and obstructed our view out the back window. Soon, our eyes turned back to the front.

This was the best day of my life.



**Koch, with her brothers, had a way of looking right into your heart**

## Postscript



**Circa late 1967, Joe and I stand beside the Virgin Mary statue outside of Kontum. She looked after us,**

I have this old photograph. It’s a picture of a statue of the Virgin Mary, her arms outreached, with an American soldier at each of her hands. Joe and I have jackets on. The sky is cloudy and ominous. It’s all captured in black and white.

During the War, men were badly wounded and shipped away, never to be seen again. We’d ask ourselves, “wonder what ever happened to so-and-so?” Answers never came and time marched onward and the casualties were forgotten.

At long last, Joe and I came back to Vietnam together to look for our “casualties.” And, sadly, we found some. Many of our Bahnar children have perished. Djanh, Blup...I like to visit their graves someday. The jungle also perished. And so did the woman who seemed to hold our lives together back in 1968. She was there for us every day during those violent times, offering her divine, stone hands out to us. For someone who resided in heaven, she saw an awful lot of hell. The mother of Christ didn’t make it either...she died just south of Kontum.

(Not far from where her statue stood, a new Catholic church is operating. I bet she’s found a new home in the highlands)

The dream of finding the children has come true. Yes, I now believe in miracles. The new dream that carries me forward is finding a way to help my Bahnar family, and to visit them as often as possible. But this is just one chapter in a never-ending story. The reunion was one of those turning points in a person’s life from which we are never the same afterwards. Vietnam 1968 was like that, so was Vietnam in 1994. Joe got some answers, and I got my share too. But there is still so much to learn.

I returned to my American home on a Thursday night. Sunday evening, I was resting with my family, still suffering from jet lag and emotional lag. My body was sitting in Texas, but my heart was still in the highlands. The phone rang...my wife, Marion, answered it for me. "Mike, you won't believe this...it's Tate!" I ran to the phone. Out of breath, I told my old buddy all about finding our "children." He got choked up too. "Tee, I want to back with you the next time." We talked and talked, catching up on 26 years of history. In the end, we made some promises to see each other soon, and plan our visit to a small village hidden deep in a Vietnam jungle. Yes, that will make some people on the other side of the world very happy.

When I returned from the war in 1968, I read a line written by George Eliot that spoke to me: "In the old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand, and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction; a hand is put into their's, which leads them forth gently toward a calm, bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's."

He (actually "she") was right.



**Kenh and Prot as I found them in 1994. They were probably in their early 30's, and had large families. A year after this photo was taken, Prot died. And two years after that, Kenh passed away. At least they knew I loved them and had never forgotten them.**