

50 YEARS LATER —
ARMY VET AND AN ARVN AO'S GRANDCHILD COME FULL CIRCLE,
BY CHARLES WARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, VETS WITH A MISSION

With permission from Catkiller 18/27 Charles W. "Bud" Bruton, Jr., June 1968—June 1969

July 1, 2019

Dear Friend,

We celebrate July 4 this week and the "founding of the greatest country on earth." I'm not saying the United States isn't without its faults, but there is no other form of governance or economic system better than this Republic and Free Enterprise/Capitalism.

America produces some of the finest, kindest and generous people on the planet. I can attest to that because I served with them five decades ago and continue to meet them as volunteers on our mission teams. Sometimes their friendship and interaction with the Vietnamese produce some amazing stories. Here is one to discuss around the grill, when you fire up those hot dogs and hamburgers on the 4th.



Captain Bud Bruton was a Forward Air Controller (FAC) with the Army flying the 01 Birdog in 1968-1969. His unit, the "Catkillers" of the 220th Aviation Company, flew over I Corps and the DMZ, the Area separating North and South Vietnam. In Quang Tri Province, DMZ was the abbreviation for the Demilitarized Zone. But those who flew over it, they called it the "Dead Man Zone."

Bud, like many vets had *unfinished business* to take care of after the war. He went back to Vietnam with the Vietnam Veteran Restoration Project (VVRP) in 2002. They built schools in the same areas Bud used to call-in airstrikes and artillery support. When the organization folded in 2016, he found VWAM and has returned three times with us, the most recent being this past April 13-30 to Nam Dong, Thua Thien Hue Province.

Now stay with me because the story is about to get interesting.

Meet Phan Dinh Lap **Nhan** or "**Tommy**" his English name. A staff member at the Hue Union of Friendship Organizations (HueFO), VWAM's sponsor in Vietnam, he provided administrative support and interpreted for both medical teams and the training team. Nhan or

Tommy was everywhere helping at several stations



including (above) ophthalmology record keeping and data entry; in triage, lab,



and registration (above) processing patient intake forms; and assisted in the pharmacy (below) explaining to patients their prescriptions or running back and forth between patient examiners and pharmacy answering various questions.



One day during the team's lunch break, Tommy and Bud struck up a conversation. It didn't take long to discover an incredible connection. Nhan's Grandfather was in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and flew with the "Catkillers," Bud's unit! Even more amazing was Tommy telling Bud that one- time, Tommy's Father sat in the back-seat on his Father's lap in one of the American planes for a plane ride! Bud realized, at that point, that he could have photos of Nhan's Grandfather, and said as soon as he returned home, he would look for them. Well, Bud did, and he found them. He emailed the pictures to Tommy to share with his Dad. Here is the emotional reply Bud received:

31 May 2019

Dear Mr Bud Bruton

I received all of your pictures and insignias of Catkiller your sent to my family last night. I do not know how to say thank to you. I found my Dad right away (picture 1) My Dad at that time captain Phan Tan Dat. When they [NVA] arrived, we burned all his pictures. Now I will put his picture on his alter and use this for worshipping.

My mom was very excited when saw this picture last night could not sleep when she saw the image and the insignia after 34 years.

Captain Ty, who you attend his [wedding?], married my Mom and I recognized him right away; she and my Dad also were in that wedding. So far, we are still looking for Ty. My Mom also looking for Captain Hue, maybe he is in USA.

I will write to you longer next time. I cannot write longer now, my mom and me cried for the whole night. Today my two sisters who married in different districts will go to my house to see their Dad's picture.

Phan Tuy Thoung



In the Vietnamese culture, where practicing ancestor worship is common, not having any photographs of your ancestors, especially a parent, is a very big deal. It's an embarrassment for the surviving family, particularly a son or daughter. You can read the emotion in the email and understand how significant it was for Tommy's Dad to get this photograph after all these years.

If you didn't pick up this fact in the email, they had to destroy or in this case, "burned," all photographs and documents indicating the Grandfather was in the South Vietnamese Army. And when he said, "When they arrived," it meant the North Vietnamese Army (March 1975). They hoped to avoid repercussions for his association with the Americans, but they didn't.

The family lost their home, all money, any other property was confiscated, lost their right to send the children to school, and no job because all employment was granted by the communist government. There weren't any jobs for the former enemy. The family struggled near poverty. Grandfather spent years in "Re-education Camp," but there was no re-education. It was a hard labor prison camp. He was released in 1987, after twelve years, only to succumb shortly thereafter to his health issues brought on by this prison experience.

This gets to the very essence of freedom, the liberty, we celebrate July 4th.

Freedom is precious. We Americans are so very fortunate, blessed really, to have it. Tommy, his Father, and Grandfather understand what it means to lose it. And Bud has found

a new freedom on his trips to Vietnam with VWAM. It's no longer a war for him. Need proof? Just look at this picture of two former enemies.



All For Him and Them,

Chuck Ward

Vets With a Mission, <http://www.vetswithamission.org> - Chuck Ward

