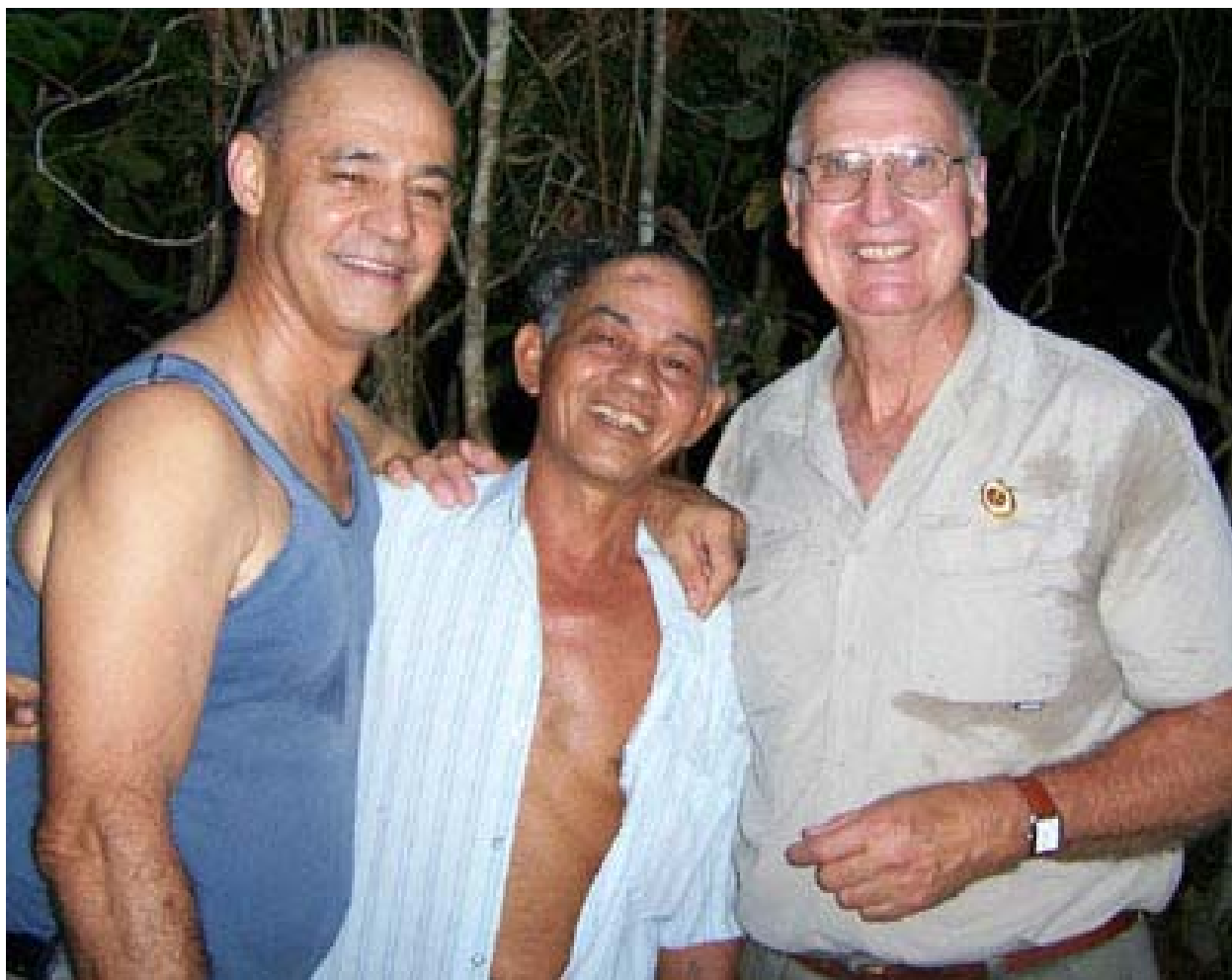


# FROM WARFARE (1970-71) TO WELFARE (2008)



*Roy Zegers and Bob Stephens with Hum Bup who shot down the chopper which trapped and killed L/Cpl John Gillespie, the most recent Australian MIA returned to Australia.*

**T**o introduce myself, I am Captain Bob Stephens, a retired Salvation Army Officer. When I say 'retired', I was forced to relinquish my ministry in NOV 2006 and was accepted as TPI in FEB 07.

In 2006, I was the Chief Commissioner for The Salvation Army Red Shield Defence Services. For those from an ARA background, I was the chief 'Sallyman', responsible for our philanthropic representatives in support of the ADF, in particular Army Units.

During 1970-71 I was a helicopter crewman with 9 Sqn RAAF Iroquois based in Vung Tau and operating out of Nui Dat.

On 17 APR 71 whilst on a medevac mission, the chopper was shot down on the Long Hai hills, resulting in the army medic in the chopper being killed, along with others assisting on the ground.

It was during 2006 through a particular set of circumstances, that I finally made contact again with the door gunner Roy Zegers, of whom I had not seen since I was repatriated to Australia in MAY 71. Later in that year I met with him face-to-face in Brisbane, along with other fellow aircrew mates Peter

Johnson and Charlie Brown. Pete and Charlie was the crewman and door gunner respectively, on one of the Bushranger gunships that assisted in giving us covering fire on that fateful day.

Whilst meeting with my friends over coffee and lunch, Pete and Charlie revealed to me that they intended to visit Vung Tau and in particular the Long Hais and asked if I would be interested in accompanying them. I had to decline, as I was having serious PTSD issues that had resurfaced and I was also seeing doctors at the time and I would not have felt comfortable going at that point in time.

They later informed me that they would be going again in twelve months time during FEB 08, so I indicated I would consider joining them then.

After 1971, Roy Zegers did not return to Vung Tau until the 1990's and has had numerous visits since. I now know that his return trips were in connection with the medic who lost his life on operations. ....L/Cpl John Gillespie, from 8 Fd Amb.

Roy, Pete and Charlie did go in FEB 07 and relayed all their stories to me and stated how good the trip was and how beneficial it was for them in regards to their healing process, as all three are TPI. As 2007 progressed, I started to feel more comfortable with the idea of joining them with their proposed visit in FEB 08, so I indicated I would consider joining them then.

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Let me share some of their experiences with you;

Roy introduced Pete and Charlie to a former VC, a Lt. from D445 Bn by the name of Hi Nung. For many, many years, the Peoples' Party from Hanoi had appointed him as the 'caretaker' of the Long Hais, now known as Mihn Dahm in the old Province of Phuoc Tuy, now known as Baria/Vung Tau Province.

Nung lived with his family in a typical 'shanty' with a thatched roof which leaked badly in the wet, so Pete and Charlie paid \$800:00 US to have installed a galvanised corrugated iron roof and it is my understanding that some ex-Viet Vets living in VT gave a hand to install the new roof.

Nung had some blood /heart issues and as a result of a medical examination, Roy paid \$5,000:00 US for a remedy to the situation. You see, in Vietnam, if one does not have the money up front, you don't get treated!

During Roy's many visits, he has met some interesting people, of whom Pete and Charlie met also. ....Sau Thu for example. This man was a VC Colonel with D445 and led the attack against the Australians at Long Tan (18 AUG 66) and during the battle was shot in the head, with the round entering his right cheek and exiting through the left side of his head. With that together with being on the receiving end of the artillery has resulted in him being profoundly deaf in his left ear. The man is also battle scarred from other encounters with the ATF.



*VVFACT member Bob Stephens with Hi Nung and Babysan with new dentures.*

Roy paid \$1,600:00 US to have a hearing implant for this man and for the first time in a long time, he can now hear again. He hugged Roy like a long-lost brother and I believe he sobbed a little also.

Roy introduced the guys to ....Hi Quan, who was a former VC General and also a much battle scarred veteran of many years.

Roy also introduced the guys to Ba Khue, another former VC General, battle scarred as well, with an obvious eye damage, with the shrapnel still in his forehead.

FEB 08. ....For about three weeks, I was in Vung Tau with Roy and Peter. Charlie unfortunately was not able to make the visit due to another commitment.

During the course of our visit, I was able to meet the four persons named above on more than one occasion. Hi Nung, (the caretaker of the Long Hais), Sau Thu, (the VC Colonel), and the two former VC Generals Hi Quan and Bah Khue and we were invited into their homes to have meals with them. I felt quite honoured and privilege to be able to do so.



*Nui Dat rubber minus the ATF.*

Incidentally, the former VC Colonel at Long Tan lives in a house on the edge of the rubber plantation at Nui Dat and alongside the water reserves that the ATF used for their drinking water. He is also very close to the only remaining permanent structure at the Dat,

namely the 1 ALSG buildings, which is now used as the D445 Bn. HQ....quite ironic, eh?

Through Roy I also had the privilege of meeting Miss Ahn, who by the way is the owner of the Ned Kelly Bar in Vung Tau, across the road from the ferry terminal. Ahn is very popular with the Australian ex-Viet community.

Ahn was raised in a VC family during the war and she is a valuable contact and help for anyone who may wish to visit. She also conducts tours to Nui Dat, Long Tan, etc. She also has the right contacts with all the former VC senior people that I previously mentioned.

Ahn's mother was captured during the war by the South Vietnamese soldiers (ARVN) and they deliberately shot her in both upper arms, resulting in her having lack of movement in both arms. The tragedy of war!

Miss Ahn took the three of us to Long Phuoc to visit a Vietnamese temple and at the back of this temple is a lengthy VC tunnel system. During the war the Australians knew that there was a tunnel system around there somewhere, but were never actually able to locate it. A Mr. Tan who was a former NVA regular soldier is the caretaker of the tunnel system and there is also a small museum at the site. The tunnel and the museum were both very interesting to look through.

During my first visit to Hi Nung's home at the Long Hais, I met a security officer who was a former enemy and the first VC to the helicopter crash site a week after the AATV and ARVN had left the area. His name is Nguen van Hung and he is a really nice guy.

Unfortunately, none of the former foe speaks any English, so this is where Miss Ahn comes in very handy as an interpreter.

On this day I met the VC chap who shot the chopper down....Hung Bup. At the time he was a seventeen year old and he emptied two magazines into the chopper with an AK 47 assault rifle. He apparently got a bit too cocky and raised his head above the rock to check things out and collected some shrapnel, (probably from a rocket fired by one of the helicopter gunships), which impacted on his forehead, resulting in him being unconscious for about thirty days and he was looked after in a VC hospital cave close to the incident.



*The 4 Fd Regt 'Rock'.*



*Water used for drinking by the ATF and built by the engineers. The buildings in the background are the old 1 ALSG buildings. They are now used as D445 Bn HQ.*

This was the first time that he had been back to the area since that fateful day and I have no doubt that he is fighting his demons as well. Again, it was through Roy's trust and the friendship that he had built up with the former VC that they were able to track down Hum Bup, who is also far from well these days.

Incidentally, it was the former VC General Hi Quan, who gave the order to fire on the 'chopper'. When Roy informed Hi Quan that we were on a 'mission of mercy', he sobbed and replied that they thought we were doing a resupply mission and had he known otherwise, would not have given that order.

I would also like to point out here the fact that we elected to have 'armed' dust-off choppers in lieu of 'red crosses', believing that the VC would probably shoot us down anyway.

Roy took Pete and me to meet another high-ranking VC person by the name of Nam Kiem. I also met his wife and it was established that during 1971, my helicopter was tasked with transporting a wounded VC female to a South Vietnamese P.O.W. camp up in the north of the province somewhere and it turned out to be this same woman.

The Australians had set up a night ambush position and mines were initiated, wounding and possibly killing some of the VC doing a night resupply mission. The VC retreated taking their wounded and maybe dead also, but this woman of twenty seven years of age at the time and seriously wounded in the stomach and right elbow, was apparently not found by her VC friends at the time.

The Australians carried out an early morning search and came across her. They took her away for the Australian surgeons to carry out numerous operations and it was about twelve months later that her husband, (who was directing D445 operations from the Long Hais hills), had word filtered back to him, that his wife was still alive.

Nam Kiem is far from well, so the three of us chipped in to send him and his wife on a holiday, as they had not been in a position to do so for many years. I understand that they flew to the north of Vietnam somewhere and had a great time away.

I met another person on my first visit in February and I do not know his Vietnamese name, but he is known as 'Babysan'. He is a close friend of Hi Nung and Babysan lives at the bottom of the Long Hais in a fishing village called Lon Phuoc Hai.

When I saw these two guys I took pity on them as their teeth were in very bad shape, in that they only had about three teeth on the upper jaw. Again, no money....no treatment!

After getting their approval I paid \$2,000:00 US and we arranged for them to have some dental treatment and was present when they both had the first couple of teeth extracted.

On my return in MAY 08, to see the transformation with complete new dentures and great smiles was really something to behold, and that after the initial experience, the long term benefits were well worth the pain and suffering.

Roy, Pete, Charlie and myself have visited the crash site a few times now and on each occasion Hai Nung, van Hung and Babysan accompany us up the hill and each time they pay their respects along with us, to the spirits of those killed at that location on 17 APR 71.....L/Cpl John Gillespie 8 Fd Amb/9 Sqn., Cpl Tom Blackhurst AATT and Capt. Bernard Albertson, US Army.

On our last visit to the site, we were delightfully surprised to see a concrete base and cross and this had been erected by Mr Hung, the security guy who was a VC operative on the Long Hais during 1971.



*The Gillespie chopper crash site with Mr. Hung.*

No names or references are on the cross at all as it was mutually agreed by all concerned, that it be in recognition of all Australians and Vietnamese who lost their lives on the Long Hais during the Vietnam War. Very soon after my return to Australia from my last visit, Roy informed me that the Peoples' Party in Hanoi had officially recognised it as a memorial, 2<sup>nd</sup> to the Long Tan Memorial.

The reason that Roy, Pete, Charlie and myself returned to Vietnam in May, was after a formal invitation was given to us by former VC General Hi Quan, to attend the VC Veterans' Day on the 15<sup>th</sup>. This we felt was quite an honour and a privilege, as foreigners are never invited to these events.

The day commemorated both 40 years of D445 being formed and also to celebrate 40 years of the TET Offensive 1968.

The VC vets do not get any official funding for this so the four of us contributed to provide the luncheon and 'refreshments'.

I think that there were only about eighty members present, given that a lot of them have passed on and some that were too ill, etc., to attend. They weren't too sure of our presence, as they were not informed beforehand of us being invited. However, when they saw us sitting at a table with a couple of their senior people, I guess they thought that it must have been alright and felt a bit more 'at ease'.

During the course of the luncheon and into the afternoon, we got to circulate and mix and chat with the Vets and had a lot of interaction and at times some humour, etc.



*Nam Kiem and his wife, who as a wounded VC female was held in a South Vietnamese P.O.W. camp*

It was obvious that a lot of them carried injuries from many, many years of conflict, keeping in mind that a lot of them started at around sixteen years of age. A few openly displayed their wounds to us and some of them seemed proud of the fact that it was the Australians who did it to them.

We were introduced to the Party Member from Hanoi who spoke English reasonably well and we also met the current CO of D445 Bn.

For ex-Vietnam Vets and others, it may not sit well with some of them re our recent visits to Vietnam and our close association and friendship gained with the former enemy. The VC that shot our chopper down said to Roy, “Are you mad at me for what I did?” Roy replied, “You had to do what you had to do and we had to do what we had to do, and now we can put the past behind us and try and treat each other with respect as former warriors.”

Some people may even say, “Why would you even want to go back **there**?” My reply is that it may work for some, but not others. I might add though, that it has given some closure for me, (and also my friends mentioned), and I have met some lovely Vietnamese people.

I have been fortunate though to be able to visit Vung Tau where someone else, namely Roy, has



*Sau Thu, the VC Colonel who led the attack at Long Tan. Below is his house at Nui Dat.*



done all the foundation work in establishing contacts and building up a rapport with these people who will quickly have you as a friend, provided you are fair dinkum with your intentions.

We also help out on our visits with the children's orphanage at Baria and supply food, clothes and toys and some TLC, which always puts a smile on those kids' faces.

Miss Ahn took the four of us to a house in Long Phuoc which during the war was the heartland of the VC. After the ATF vacated Nui Dat, a VC chap relocated a large rock, (as a war trophy I guess), and placed it in his front yard. No mean feat I might add! The rock is not readily visible from the street as it is hidden by a frangipani tree. We had a closer look at the rock and it has names stencilled on it in paint, and after many years is showing the affects of time and weather. It has the names of 4 Fd Regt members, included NZ artillery personnel, who served during 1970-71. It is not normally available to sightseers.



*Kids' orphanage with food, toys and clothes.*

The same owner of this house also gave to Roy some dog tags belonging to a 3 RAR soldier who was badly wounded on operations. The tags were apparently shot from his body when he was wounded. Roy has located the soldier, who is looking forward to having his tags returned, as he was repatriated home in a serious condition without any personal belongings at all. He now feels that he has his 'identity' back once again.

For me, it has been a great journey and one that I do not mind sharing with others.

Regards, blessings and peace to you all.

Bob Stephens

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