

VNVDV in the News...

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VIETNAM VETERANS OF DIABLO VALLEY: GOING BACK - GIVING BACK



The following story was written by Jody Morgan of *Alamo Today & Danville Today News*.
The original article can be found [here](#).

The **Wheelchair Foundation** recently completed a third distribution trip to Vietnam with several members of the **Viet Nam Veterans of Diablo Valley (VNVDV)** taking the opportunity to return for the first time to places where they served during the Vietnam War. The mission brought the gift of mobility to 500 individuals of all ages and renewed hope to their caregivers and families. The journey enabled veterans to deliver tangible measures of good to a country where they once were tasked with disseminating destruction.

Dennis Giacobelli served in the Mekong Delta region in 1970 on Navy gunboats called PBR and STABs. During a reunion with his boat group, he described his plans to go back to Vietnam with the Wheelchair Foundation. He reports, "Their reaction was of surprise, shock, and disbelief that I would even consider returning." Their response dampened his enthusiasm, but prior to embarking he says, "Hopefully, I will see this as a wonderful vacation with a heavy dose of giving back to those in need. I am sure the idea that we were the ones who caused these ailments and that the wheelchairs are a 'drop in the bucket' will be ever-present."

Gary Pforr served in the Northern I Corps 1969, 1970, and 1971. Before leaving on the Wheelchair Foundation trip, he comments, "Despite my apprehension about seeing old places, it's kind of a compulsive desire. Veterans' and civilians' memories of those times and places and events are not healed or closed – they're managed."

Joe Calloway's 2004 book *Mekong First Light* describes coming of age in the process of going from Private to Captain in three years and serving as an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam, Queens Cobra advisor to two Thai Infantry companies, and in the 5th Special Forces Base Camp Defense and Special Projects. Asked what motivated him to travel back with the Wheelchair Foundation, he writes, "Doing something constructive and helpful for a country where we did so much damage is why I'm going. Healing and closure is a myth... going there is not going to eliminate the horrible experiences and memories."



David Behring talks with Vietnamese orphanage teacher fluent in English. She was disabled as a child - Photo courtesy of Wheelchair Foundation.

Enthusiastic accounts by VNVDV members who traveled on previous Wheelchair Foundation Vietnam tours encouraged members to overcome their misgivings. **Jerry Yahiro**, VNVDV Past-President, spoke in a 2015 the positive effect of going back twice on wheelchair distribution trips. "Prior to 2006 and 2012, about every day something would remind me of Vietnam. Now, I can go days without thinking about Vietnam, however, it is still there." He noted, "The Vietnamese have accommodated better. To them, it was a war of independence. They differentiate individuals from politics."

Wheelchair Foundation President David Behring orchestrated the trip to alternate wheelchair distributions with orphanage visits, provide time to revisit historic sites, and leave free time for relaxation. The itinerary included a dinner that brought veterans from opposing sides together in an evening of harmonious exchanges of times remembered and events graciously dismissed. Although some of the 500 wheelchairs went to remote locations, the impact of giving 160 wheelchairs a day to grateful recipients unable to afford the means of moving about independently proved to be one of the most rewarding aspects of the journey for returning veterans as well as others in the group who did not serve in Vietnam.

Jon Robbins, who served in Vietnam in the Northern II Corps from August 1968-August 1969, was interested in seeing the country's development in the last 50 years. He remarks, "You never learn unless you get into the people and their lives today." The trip gave him a chance to learn directly from the staff at the orphanages visited their tremendous dedication and witness the lifestyle of the children they serve. He was greatly moved by the genuine gratitude expressed by wheelchair recipients as well as residents and staff at the orphanages.



Jon Robbins with orphans in Hue City - *Photo courtesy of Jon Robbins.*

Jon writes, “In the City of Hue, at the Chuong Trinh orphanage, wheelchairs were distributed. On arrival, I met some young children who greeted me with their wonderful smiles. They sang and danced in a simple performance that was so rewarding to me. Later their stories were told. These children have received a new direction in life, and they show their gratitude without saying a word.”

The orphanages visited are all privately funded with no government support. Gary explains, “The 30-50 children located at the Children’s Shelter in Hue receive training to enable them to achieve self-sufficiency. The shelter is supported by the Friends of Hue Foundation, based in San Jose. Approximately 30-40 abandoned children living in the Ha Cau Orphanage in Hanoi attend public schooling during the day and are nurtured by 74-year-old Mrs. Tran Thuc Ninh, who is assisted by four dedicated caregivers.”

To the query on what he found most rewarding about the journey, Pforr responds, “Seeing the positive changes in a country that was once devastated by war was most rewarding to me as a Vietnam vet. Where undernourished grim-faced peasants in black pajamas once tilled their fields with water buffalo, healthy and vibrant hard-working people dressed in western attire are now engaged in mechanized agriculture as well as in a variety of commercial and industrial livelihoods. Red soil moonscape areas near the DMZ that were once pock-marked with shell holes are now under heavy agriculture.”

Calloway sees Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City, as “a vibrant dynamic society teeming with vigor and resourcefulness.” The people are youthful. Seventy percent of the country’s population was born after the war. Perhaps that accounts for their willingness to welcome the group of Americans. Joe explains, “It is incredible how these people have forgiven us for killing three million of its citizens, poisoning millions more, and then they just moved on with life. They seem to harbor no ill will or animosity whatsoever.” Joe, however, finds photographs of deformed infants with birth defects caused by the Agent Orange defoliant disbursed by American combatants an unforgettable reminder that damage done to the landscape continued to impact the people of Vietnam long after the war ended.

“It was a very sad and humbling experience. Many of these children are disabled they believe due to Agent Orange still left in the ground,” Calloway concludes concerning the first wheelchair distribution.

Mothers brought children from remote locations. He estimates 500 people gathered to clap and cheer. The American contingent pushed each of the 160 wheelchair recipients individually out of the building. Pforr adds, “Despite Viet Nam’s widespread economic development and improved standard of living for most, it’s evident that many physically and mentally disabled persons, along with their parental caregivers, have been left behind and live in poverty.”



Josh Routh (center) at Ha Cau Orphanage in Hanoi. - *Photo courtesy of Gary Pforr.*

Veteran Wheelchair Foundation travelers **Don and Josh Routh** had never been to Vietnam. Born with Cerebral Palsy, Josh enjoys demonstrating how empowering a wheelchair can be. His father Don encourages parents of differentially-abled children, recounting how his perseverance enabled Josh to become an independent, highly productive adult rather than the quadriplegic incapable of speech his doctors originally envisioned. Impressed by reactions of Vietnam veterans to their first wheelchair distributions and orphanage visits, Don especially enjoyed witnessing their encounter with former enemies in Hue where some of the bloodiest fighting occurred during the 1968 Tet Offensive. “The dinner with Viet Cong Veterans was a surreal experience. It didn’t take long for barriers to break down and veterans from both sides to embrace a common theme of peace and fellowship.”

Calloway admits boundless beer consumption helped cement “deep-seated camaraderie and mutual respect” as the evening progressed. “It was indeed an inspirational and truly bonding experience for guys who were some 50 years ago trying to kill one another. There were no harbored grievances, angst, or hostility.” He continues, “I watched, engulfed in an event of overwhelming goodwill. Who would have thought this would evolve into such a raucous gathering of former enemies?”

Summing up the benefits of the journey, Joe writes, “Returning to a place where I brought so much destruction, structural and human damage, and then being able to participate 50 plus years later in events so positive with a group of admirable people so deep in compassion and character was truly inspirational and emotionally rewarding. A true field soldier will never find closure as combat life is too brutally mean-spirited and tragic, but one can find some relief in this mission as I did.”

For information about the **Wheelchair Foundation**, visit www.wheelchairfoundation.org. To learn more about the **Viet Nam Veterans of Diablo Valley**, visit www.vnvdv.org.

The Viet Nam Veterans of Diablo Valley **THANK** the *Wheelchair Foundation* & Alamo Today & Danville Today News for publication & article of the VNVDV’s fourth trip – Returning to VietNam... to give back.