

VIETNAM: BBR resident was combat pilot in Vietnam

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together the trip after meeting a MiG-21 pilot (Retired Lt. General Nguyen Duc Soat) in the airline industry in Vietnam."

Hartnack points out that, "Meetings like this have happened at some point after every war. In fact, for decades (after World War II) a German ace attended air shows in the United States in full German uniform, and enjoyed very warm receptions wherever he went."

The formal reception dinner among pilots was held on April 13, at the Intercontinental Hotel, in Hanoi. The Vietnamese were represented by 16 former MiG-21 and MiG-17 pilots. The Americans were represented by 12 aviators from various branches, and by former pilot, POW, and first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Pete Peterson. It was the largest meeting ever between fighter pilots from both sides of the war.

The dinner was not guaranteed to be a success.

"When Rear Admiral John Kerr came to my room to help me carry our carefully assembled gift exchange bags to the event, neither of us really had any idea how the evening, a very long evening, would proceed. It would turn out to be one of the most extraordinary events I have witnessed in a long and busy life," Hartnack said.

The first 30 minutes of the event proved awkward, principally due to language difficulties, and despite the presence of interpreters.

"It was very difficult to establish the instant connections," Richard said, "but it was pretty obvious that everyone involved wanted to find common ground, friendship, mutual respect, and the ability to tell our stories to each other."

After short opening speeches by Retired USMC Colonel Charlie Tutt, and Lt.

General Soat (Soat retired after serving in a position equivalent to Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Hartnack said, "The meeting got real interesting real fast."

A representative of the Vietnamese Air Defense and Air Force Command briefed the attendees on the Vietnamese Order of Battle during the war, and explained that the Vietnamese Air Force was founded in 1964 with only 32 MiG-17s. He further explained that the typical Vietnamese fighter pilot was trained in Russia, and had accumulated about 200 hours of flight time before his first combat mission.

Said Hartnack, "That was about half the flying experience of a 'nugget' American pilot and a fraction of the experience of many World War II and Korean War veterans flying for the U.S."

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— Richard Hartnack

Overall, the Vietnamese Air Force flew 10,000 combat sorties.

"My own squadron," Richard said, "one of many, many U.S. fighter squadrons, flew over 25,000 sorties during the war."

Hartnack told *The Nugget* that the flying ratios of Vietnamese pilots meant that they "flew an aerial-engagement dogfight about every fifth time they went flying. For the U.S. side, most of us never had an aerial engagement, and those that did, maybe only 10 percent had more than one."

The Vietnam Air Force representative then briefed the audience on four aerial engagements, including detailed, large-scale maps. After the technical explanation and debrief of each

battle, the microphone was turned over to the American pilot who was in the fight, and one of the Vietnamese pilots who was also in the battle.

Each side had the opportunity to tell their part of the engagement — "what they saw, what they experienced," Hartnack said, "In the end, we learned that it is hard after 45 years or more to remember everything and clearly the experience was somewhat different when viewed from different perspectives."

One of the battles discussed took place in 1965, when Clint Johnson shot down a MiG-17 with a propeller driven A-1D "Spad" for one of the first aerial victories of the war — a very rare instance of a propeller vs. jet aircraft battle resulting in a victory for the old technology.

"It was a head-on attack," Hartnack said. "He simply had more guns to shoot, and with good aim and good luck, he was the victor."

Another battle discussed at the meeting involved Curt Dose — call-sign "Dozo" — who, in 1972, at Kep Airfield, was flying a mission to protect U.S. bombers from Vietnamese fighter jets, when he observed MiG-21s about to take off. On his attack run he saw that two other planes were already accelerating for take off.

"Changing targets, he dove down to a very low level in order to position his plane behind the MiGs, with the intention of launching a heat-seeking missile as soon as they left the ground."

In the event, Dose launched two missiles, hitting one of the aircraft "which exploded and crashed almost immediately."

Many of the pilots in attendance at the dinner had personally witnessed this event, and in keeping with the spirit of reconciliation, Curt Dose also had the opportunity to meet with the sister of the Vietnamese pilot who was killed in the engagement.

American pilots Pete Pettigrew, who retired from

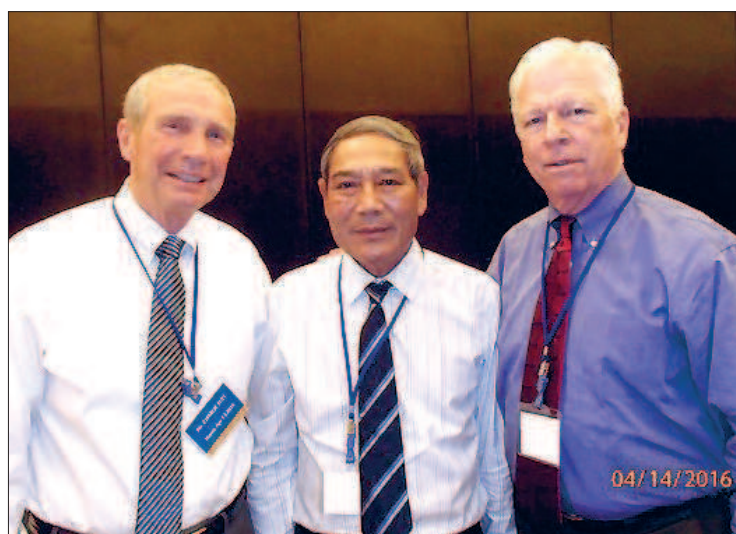


PHOTO COURTESY RICHARD HARTNACK

Charlie Tutt and Rick Hartnack, both from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 in 1969-1970 pictured with Lt. General Nguyen Duc Soat at the reconciliation dinner.

the Navy as a Rear Admiral, and Jack Enschede, who scored two aerial victories during the war, then recounted their experiences. Later in the war, Enschede would be shot down by a surface-to-air missile and held as a POW.

Following the presentations, the Americans and Vietnamese, once bitter enemies, exchanged gift packages. The Americans presented the Vietnamese pilots original artwork of a F-4 Phantom and MiG, challenge coins; artwork of F-4 and MiG 17 engagements; and other memorabilia. The Vietnamese presented the Americans with a

book detailing every aerial engagement, that was published by the Vietnamese; a model of their current front-line fighter jet; and a set of airman's wings traditionally worn by Vietnamese pilots.

The pilots then adjourned to dinner, where Hartnack says, "The conversations and war stories continued unabated for hours. The Vietnamese all trained in Russia, so their 'party protocols' are based on their Russian experience. That explained the many toasts with shots of vodka. One had to be careful not to become a casualty."

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