

Going back in-country to remember a long-past war

By Craig Rullman
Correspondent

Richard Hartnack's return to Vietnam included more than a reconciliation dinner with former opponents in the Vietnam Air Force to exchange gifts, discuss battles, and build new relationships (see story, page 1).

On April 14, Americans and Vietnamese assembled at the Vietnam Airman's Memorial at Noi Bai military airfield.

At Noi Bai, the pilots were greeted by present-day Vietnam Air Force leaders in crisp summer uniform. After introductory comments, each of the Vietnamese pilots, followed by an American pilot, then ascended a long, steep staircase to offer incense at the memorial, where the names of deceased Vietnamese pilots are recorded on a wall.

Hartnack told *The Nugget*: "It was a unique moment for some of our American aviators because their combat skills had caused the deaths of some on the wall. But we also knew that in the skies over Hanoi in 1972 one could easily end up on our wall in Washington, DC if one were careless, or didn't quite have the skill or the luck to stay alive on a particular day."

Following the ceremony and closing comments, the pilots proceeded to Kep Airfield, 40 miles north of Hanoi, where Curt "Dozo" Dose scored his first victory over a MiG-21. "We went right to the site at the end of the runway where the MiG-21, desperately fighting for speed and altitude, had punched off his wing tanks. We could see the terrain over which the short fight took place and could easily imagine the pilot turning hard to

the left and Curt getting the sidewinder tone in his headset and launching his fatal missile."

For dinner, the pilots returned to a Vietnamese restaurant near the Air Force headquarters.

"We closed out with some good-bye talks, lots of warm handshakes and a desire on both sides to keep these type of meetings going on," said Hartnack.

For Hartnack, the return to Vietnam was not over. Over the next several days he travelled to sites important in the history of the Vietnam War: the Bridge at Thanh Hoa, a vital link for moving men and material to the passes of Laos and the Ho Chi Minh trail, and site of repeated U.S. bombing runs; as well as Dong Hoi, just north of the former DMZ, for a trip to a place known to pilots as "The Disappearing River," a large river that emerges from a massive limestone cave. The site served as a supply and staging area during the war, and as Hartnack and others took a boat into the cave mouth, they "made notice of the rocket, gun and bomb scars on the face of the cave," as well as "bomb craters still in evidence in the surrounding farm land."

Travels included a visit to Vinh Muc, a city famous for surviving the war by having its entire population live underground, accomplished by virtue of 41 kilometers of underground tunnels on three levels. Hartnack and his companions then traveled on to other famous sites: Dong Ha, site of an epic battle for the bridge, the Rock Pile, the former Marine base at Camp Carroll — now becoming a rubber plantation, Route 9, and Khe Sanh, site of an epic



PHOTO COURTESY RICHARD HARTNACK

The American pilots paid their respects at a war memorial for deceased pilots from the Vietnam War.

seven-month battle and siege, where Hartnack and his companions stayed in a hotel.

"How weird is that?" Richard said.

Finally, Hartnack travelled to Tchepone, Laos. Hartnack told the *The Nugget*, "This was important to (fellow pilot) Charlie Tutt and

I because it was one of the more 'interesting' places we flew to during the war. Any attack on Tchepone or the Ho Chi Minh trail in the area was a 'strike flight,' meaning you got shot at — a lot. We usually saw 37 and 57mm anti-aircraft fire in significant amounts. It looked like

I imagined Berlin looked like to a B-17 pilot."

Hartnack finished up his trip with visits to A Shau Valley, where he regularly flew missions during the war, the City of Hue, where he saw the sites of ferocious Marine battles during Tet in 1968, and DaNang.

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