



**Lucky Star Library and Learning Center
2017 - Vietnam Revisited
13 thru 23 July 2017**



The Embers's Report

By Ken Embers

Edited by Gordon Wax

Editor's note: Mr. Kenneth Embers served in the 61st Assault Helicopter as a pilot and officer. He rose to the rank of Captain during his Army service. He took command of the 3rd Platoon - Armed Gun Ships, the Starblazers, 22 March 1969 after the crash of UH-1C 66-15130 that took the life of Captain Richard C. Benicewicz, copilot-Lt. Robert A. Dalton, and Specialists Stock and Santos. Captain Embers's leadership and personal skills helped to restore the moral of the platoon and company in the months that followed. After discharge from the Army, Ken continued a career in education. His interest in people and loving kindness is seen in this story of bringing something special to the children and people of Bong Son, Vietnam, and Korea. May you enjoy reading of his adventures and actions that are a lasting tribute to all the men who served in the 61st AHC. Thank you Ken! GW

I landed at the Saigon airport (SGN) around midnight on July 13 after a two-week stay in South Korea where I taught an English class. It was a summer session class with sophomore students attending the Hyejeon College English Baking Camp. My ESL English session was part of the Baking Science, and Hotel and Restaurant Management course. As always when arriving in Vietnam, this land of enchantment swallowed me up in mystery. Would the hotel have my reservations correct? Did my luggage arrive? Will I get through customs and immigration without delay? All went well!

The next day, my translator whose nickname is Saigon Ken (SK), (his given name is Nguyen Le Khanh, and he is Le Thi Hoa's nephew), knocked on my door at the LeLe Hotel and from there we planned our trip to visit several ESL schools, the Bong Son Lucky Star/Starblazers Library Learning Center, and the Phu Hoa Orphanage in Quang Ngai. The entire schedule had been set up and prearranged through the efforts and capable hands of Chuck Theusch, founder of Libraries of Vietnam Project/Children Library International (LOVP/CLI), and his Vietnamese wife, Khoi. The trip would not have been possible without their knowledge, understanding, experience and contacts in Vietnam. ESL is an English teaching program presented by a company that offers English learning

course as found at the website ESL.com. The program includes a proven method of teaching the English language to students from all over the world. The company has online courses, classroom-support materials, and programs for teachers. On this trip, I would start by meeting a woman named Thuy.

We traveled to Thuy's home, which is between Saigon and Vung Tau, in a mini-SUV owned by SK's uncle. We followed her directions to arrive at a meeting point then we waited until she got off work. We waited near a Buddhist temple, replete with statues of saints, while there was a host of bodhisattvas (persons desiring Buddhahood) flying beside us on bikes, motorbikes, and such. After Thuy arrived in a cloud of dust on her 125 cc motorbike, we followed her down a twisting road to her rather large secluded home near the Ross Worley English School. Ross Worley, a former Special Forces SGM, has supported the LOVP since the beginning. He sponsored Thuy's education and her career development for many years. In fact, he has supported education for numerous other children and education projects in Vietnam.

We had a great time with twelve kids who spoke English because of Thuy. She developed a special ESL methodology when she majored in English at Quy Nhon University. She refined her teaching technique when she taught at Vabis Hong Lam Technical College. She creates role-playing scenarios for the kids to take part in, such as buying something at a store, or going to visit someone. Of course, the kids laugh a lot, and imagine they are different people. This makes learning new words and phrases much easier and lots of fun. Role playing eases their natural self-consciousness when they are trying to speak a second language.



Worley English School near Vung Tau, Ms. Thuy, Teacher (center rear), Saigon Ken, my translator is next to her, and the students.

Thuy's five year old son joined us near the end the of the day as lessons were ending. She speaks English with him all the time. She says he prefers to speak English and now she has to teach him Vietnamese! Not shy at all he added a bouncy element to the goings-on. After class some of the parents took us to a covered open-air seafood restaurant where we met the families and sampled the local cuisine and beer. It was Vietnamese hospitality at its impromptu best!

We flew to Quy Nhon via an early morning Vietnam Airlines flight that landed at the Phu Cat airfield. From there we took a taxi to Hoang Yen Hotel #2 down by the harbor docks and the Quy Nhon bay area. The hotel was comfortable and within walking distance of the beach. The beach was crowded with students and families taking advantage of the late evening breezes coming ashore from the bay.

The next morning our meeting with Mr. Nguyen Tan, the Binh Dinh Peoples Committee Province Director, was very cordial and enthusiastic. He has been associated with the Lucky Star Bong Son Library project since the first trip Mike Zogleman, Larry Cooperider and I made in 2009. We had given his contact information to Chuck, who then opened the doors for the 61st AHC crew members and supporters. After a lot of effort we sponsored and built the Lucky Star Bong Son Library! Thanks to Mr. Tan.

We arrived at the Library the following day and were greeted by Mrs. Hoai Anh, the District Educational Director, and Mr. Hoa, the Elementary School principal, and Mrs. Van, the Librarian. The elementary school is adjacent to the Lucky Star Library. There were no school classes on this summer day, but on their day off they kindly opened the library to show us around. I got to see the ten computers network in the upstairs ESL room. They told how the teachers like to come to research for their classes.



Ken Embers, Mrs. Hoai Anh, Mrs. Van, and Mr. Hoa

Near mid-day the staff took SK, our driver who served seventeen years in the Vietnamese Army, and me to lunch at a restaurant near the Bong Son bridges. Purportedly, the restaurant was there since we were there during 1968 and 1969. A very tasty baked fish with many side dishes was served and consumed by us.

After lunch a monsoon rain began sprinkling on us, so our hosts departed on their motorbikes, and we jumped into the mini-SUV . We drove to a new hotel recommended by Mrs. Hoai Anh as the “best value” in town. It was a good hotel and most things worked except the water wasn’t hot! The weather was really hot though. It wasn’t long until a great monsoon rainstorm encompassed our party. We retreated to the 2nd floor balcony so we could view the city of Bong Son and the surrounding mountains that was now being pummeled by wind and rain. The “hotel bird,” in the cage near the office, continued to whistle and make calls like a Macaw. It called out all the time as the storm raged mightily for the next couple of hours. The storm passed and cleared up most beautifully.

One of the hotel receptionists looked remarkably American. She had white skin, an Iowa-farm-girl blush in her cheeks, big brown eyes, full bodied, and a long-black-hair pony tail. She was wearing a white-jean-jacket and red blouse. She was very pretty! I was surprised though, because I soon discovered she couldn’t speak English!

Of course we had to visit LZ English. We found our way to the airstrip as this is the only thing remaining from our time there as soldiers and airmen. Women were drying rice on the asphalt which was in perfect condition and well suited for this use.



Ken with Bong Son farmers drying rice on the LZ English runway

I recalled stories about 61st pilots making emergency landings on it when the hydraulic systems failed, or flying a hot final, then flaring nose-high, with wound soldiers being medevac'ed to the Med Evac Team and Hospital that was there. Bernie Busby, our maintenance pilot, told me that after a pilot made an emergency landing that Red-X'ed the chopper, he would have to make a one-time-only flight in that same helicopter to where it could be repaired. Thanks Bernie!

The Vietnamese ladies were very busy drying rice and didn't have much to say until I noticed one of them wearing a shirt with a University of California logo and USA printed on it. SK started a conversation with them; he was a major help and always knew what to say to involve people and encourage them to tell their stories. A short while later, a young Vietnamese man rode up on a bicycle, he got off his bike, and hugged me? He said he remembered me from when he was a little boy years before. He said I had been a friend of his Dad. I didn't remember the connection but was glad to meet a new friend.



Industrial Park Development as looking toward the Crap Table

The next day, we journeyed east of Bong Son and discovered a restored Buddhist temple. I remembered flying over that bombed out temple and had wondered what was inside. We climbed the many stone steps to the temple entry and went inside, and visited the grave of the monk who had started it. He was known as a "healer" and is remembered with reverence. An elderly lady takes care of the temple and she told us of quarterly community meetings and meals that take place there. She had a good sense of humor, and remembered the Vietnam/American War; but didn't remember which side she had supported. Possibly a diplomatic lapse of memory, or the fact she was on both sides depending on who was in town that day or night just to save their own lives. There was a

plaque on the wall that said in Vietnamese, “Don’t worry, don’t get angry, keep your cool, and don’t be a fool,” or words to that effect as translated by S K. There was something about singing, also.



A Restored and Very Beautiful Buddhist Temple east of Bong Son

We visited the ESL school and learning center finding Mrs. TNT, her 300 students, three teachers, and one receptionist who were at the school. Mrs. TNT is a teacher at the elementary school just next to our library. She was recently selected one of the twelve best teachers in Vietnam! Last March the Vietnamese government sponsored her to take a month-long ESL methodology course presented at the Niagara University in upstate New York. She has started a four-room private school in response to requests of a few Vietnamese parents. These parents want high standards for their children when learning English and preparing for better jobs.

It was heartening for me seeing the mothers and fathers bringing their kids to class on a motorbike, through a heavy rainstorm. The kids were on the back covered with a large poncho draped over the whole motorbike! They arrived at school and the kids hopped off while carefully guarding the books from the rain. They waded gracefully through rain water in their flip flops and got ready to study. These were wonderful moments for me. I hope you can imagined the sight of this beautiful land and it’s wonderful people!

I watched her teach a class, and I participated by talking with the kids. She uses the latest computer assisted techniques and methodologies. She had a wonderful teacher's demeanor encouraging students to participate and learn. I learned a great deal from this experience! After class, all the kids asked me sign their notebooks with "Good Luck," and my name. I felt like a rock star! They had probably never seen an American up close or ever had one teaching ESL to them.

We traveled north of Bong Son for an hour and a half to Quang Ngai. The Phu Hoa Orphanage is located next to the Song Tra Bong river. It is operated by Vietnamese Catholic nuns. Unfortunately for me, Khanh, one of our sponsored little girls, who is now ten years old, was not there. She was very fortunate to be in Saigon attending a month-long singing and music seminar. She was selected for her talents in those areas, and she is also an excellent student. She is very attractive, even beautiful, and could do well in the performing arts. I was very happy for her but missed her a great deal.



***Children at the Phu Hoa Orphanage having supper.
We are helping the girl in the red dress with special ESL classes.***

We were planning to take the kids a few miles east to the beach, but Sister Huong determined the blazing sun was just too hot for the little ones. Instead, only the adults went to the beach and returned later with a nice to-go-dinner that we brought for the sisters and kids.

Nearing the conclusion of my trip, we visited Le Thi Hoa's restaurant and inn. It is managed by S. Ken, and his two aunts. He introduced them to me as just "Auntie #5" and "Auntie #7!" This location is one of the early LOVP libraries that Chuck Theusch sponsored; it even included a memorial to an American volunteer. I was presented a

delicious meal prepared by the aunts and was offered a room for an after dinner nap. I accepted this hospitality and felt refreshed after my “nap” where I’d stretched out for an hour and a half.

I came back to the land of the big PX the next day, and was happy to be home again. I was reassured our efforts in Vietnam are helping to establish good relationships and communications between American and Vietnamese people.