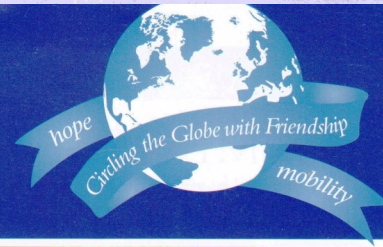


# VIET NAM VETERANS go... BACK TO VIETNAM

## Changing THE WORLD



SUMMER 2020

# with the WHEELCHAIR FOUNDATION

# BACK TO VIETNAM

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Last October, a group of Wheelchair Foundation supporters traveled to Vietnam to distribute 500 wheelchairs across the country. This trip was the result of years of planning and fundraising. Among those traveling, seven Vietnam War Veterans from the *Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley*, returning to Vietnam for the first time since their tours of duty nearly 50 years ago.

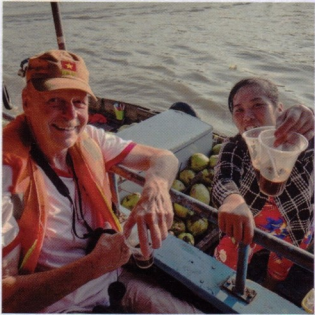
We arrived in Saigon and hopped on a bus to our hotel. After some brief acclimation, our group traveled south to our first wheelchair distribution, in Vinh Long, in the center of the Mekong Delta. *VNHelp* organized our distributions in country with local partners. Thirty wheelchairs were allocated to local hospitals (*Vinh Long General Hospital, Vinh Long Medical Center* and others) for use as patient transport chairs. *Thien Tam Red Cross Association* of Saigon, along with *Disabled People Association* and the *Association for Orphans and Poor Patients* in Vinh Long, helped with recipient identification and transport.

*VNHelp* and *Light Dream Foundation* provided travel stipends to recipients and their family member, guardian or caretaker. Many recipients arrived by taxi, motorcycle, tricycle and hospital vehicle. Lunch and beverages were provided to all. *Thien Tam Red Cross Association* offered a carton of instant noodles and goodies to each attendee. Thirty student volunteers from *Vinh Long University of Technology Education* assembled and staged wheelchairs for our distribution.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: >>> Helen Duong, Joe Callaway, and Wheelchair Foundation President, David Behring, in Vinh Long, Vietnam with a NVA Veteran who had spent his entire life in the military. >>> A mother carries her daughter to receive a wheelchair in Vinh Long, Vietnam. >>> Recipients and their caregivers and families arrive on the morning of the wheelchair distribution. Many had traveled from far away to get a wheelchair. >>> Volunteer and longtime supporter, Jane Behring, with returning Veteran, Dennis Giacovelli, Vice President of the *Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley*, greet a young wheelchair recipient. >>> Among the 500 wheelchairs included in this distribution, *Kanga* seating and positioning systems were also distributed for kids with more involved seating needs. Wheelchair Foundation has delivered nearly 15,000 in Vietnam. >>>

We visited the Cai Rang floating market, took a boat ride on the Mekong River to see Cai Be floating fish market and the fruit market on An Binh Island. The following day we were back in Saigon, touring the museums and famous sites, Reunification Palace, The Opera House, and the Notre Dame Cathedral.

From Saigon, the group flew to Da Nang and toured the sites and spent the night. The next day we drove to Hoi An, an elegant former sea port town, known for a blend of Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese architecture. We drove onward to Hue, where we would have dinner and spend the night.



Joseph Callaway entered the army as a private in 1965 and, after being commissioned as an officer through Infantry OCS (Officer Candidate School), served in Vietnam from December 1966 until July 1968 as an infantry platoon leader with the 9th Division, a combat advisor to the first Thai regiment deployed to Vietnam, and as a staff officer with the 5th Special Forces. Joe is also a member of the *Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley*, and his peers supported him in his decision to return to Vietnam 54 years later.

Joe recalls his evening in Hue,

“Particular noteworthy was the fabulously memorable dinner we had with about 20 former NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldiers that started solemn and stiff, but evolved (after voluminous beer consumption) into riotous revelry! Singing, beer can crushing, handshaking and hugging between soldiers who once wanted to kill one another. Most poignant, but memorable, was when one former NVA soldier told one of our group, ‘I’m glad I didn’t kill you.’ Our member responded, ‘I’m also glad you didn’t kill me.’”

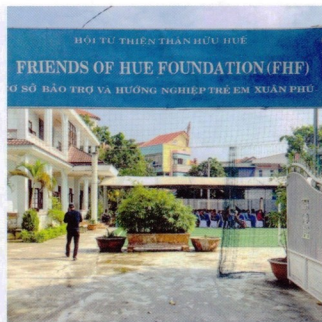


The following day we visited the DMZ near Quang Tri and the town of Dong Ha. Then we headed to the Vinh Moc Tunnel complex to see the underground village created as a bomb shelter. Hue City was the site of another wheelchair distribution. We provided 160 wheelchairs to individuals and institutions.

We visited the Hue City Children’s Shelter. Many of the children here had been abandoned or sold to human trafficking. The 30-50 children located at the children’s shelter receive training to enable them to achieve self-sufficiency. The shelter receives no government funding and is supported by the *Friends of Hue Foundation*, based in San Jose, California.



CLOCKWISE FROM FROM LEFT: >>> Cai Rang floating market on the Mekong River provides fresh fruits and vegetables to the surrounding cities and villages. >>> Famous for fresh cut pineapple-on-a-stick, there is even a vessel waiting to fulfill your every drink desire. Weasel-poop coffee, anyone? >>> A chance for opposing sides to sit down years later and share a meal goes a long way toward healing old wounds. Respect is understood, regardless of language barriers. >>> Dennis Giacobelli represents *Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley* at our wheelchair distribution in Hue, Vietnam. >>> Antoine Duong with two elderly recipients whose families and caregivers will also benefit from the receipt of a brand new red wheelchair. >>> “Beer can crushing!” and “Yool!” singing make for a memorable night for all involved as former war fighters reunited and embraced as friends. >>>



We flew from Hue to Hanoi, and took in the nightlife in the Old Quarter, which is where families go for fun in the late evening. Here we worked with the *Hanoi Red Cross* to distribute wheelchairs in Hanoi.

Gary Pforr, another VNVDV member traveling with the group observed,

“Participation in the distribution of wheelchairs by the Wheelchair Foundation was the most emotionally moving experience of our journey. Despite Vietnam’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. Some middle-aged parents transported their adult children to the distribution events literally on their backs. The appreciation and gratefulness they expressed after receiving their wheelchairs was emotionally heart wrenching.”

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: >>> New shoes! A welcome gift, among the candy, school supplies, clothing and toys donated during our visit. >>> Friends of Hue Foundation is a San Jose, California, based not-for-profit serving the children at *Ha Cau Orphanage*. >>> Josh Routh poses with the kids from *Ha Cau Orphanage*. >>> Dennis Giacovelli, Helen Duong and Joe Callaway with a wheelchair recipient loaded up with dry goods and supplies, follow our wheelchair distribution in Hanoi. >>> Recipients receiving wheelchairs in Hanoi. >>> Joe Callaway standing with a former member of the North Vietnamese Army whose son was born with a disability attributed to Agent Orange. There are very high rates of birth defects and cancer in Vietnam. >>>

We capped our afternoon with a visit to *Ha Cau Orphanage Center* in Ha Dong, outside Hanoi. Approximately 30-40 abandoned children live at the orphanage and attend public school during the day and are nurtured by 74-year-old Mrs. Tran Thuc Ninh, who is assisted by four, dedicated, caregivers. The operation survives on local private donations.





We spent time in the morning at the U.S. Embassy and the very active American Recovery Excavation Operation where 1,271 of our soldiers still remain missing in action (MIA). We saw the infamous POW Hanoi Hilton and visited the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

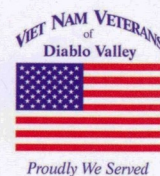
Joe Callaway -

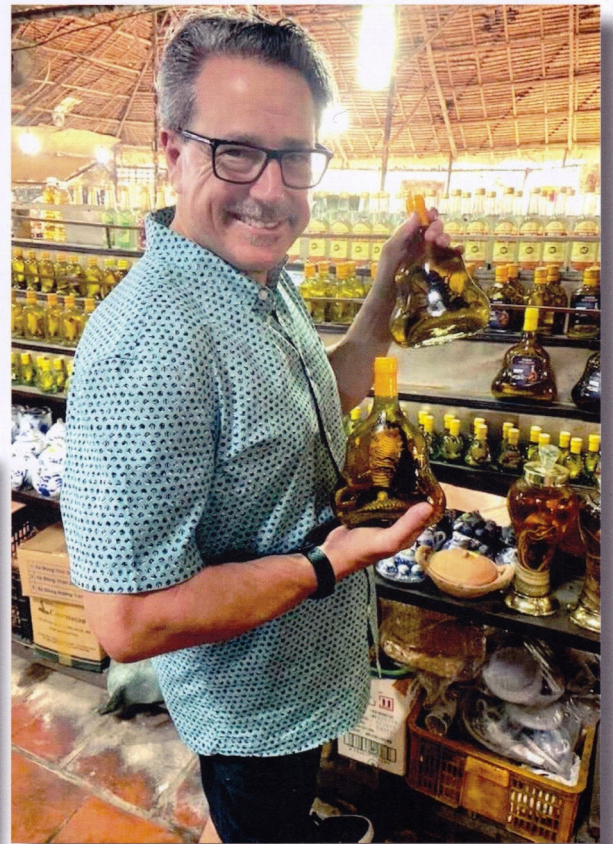
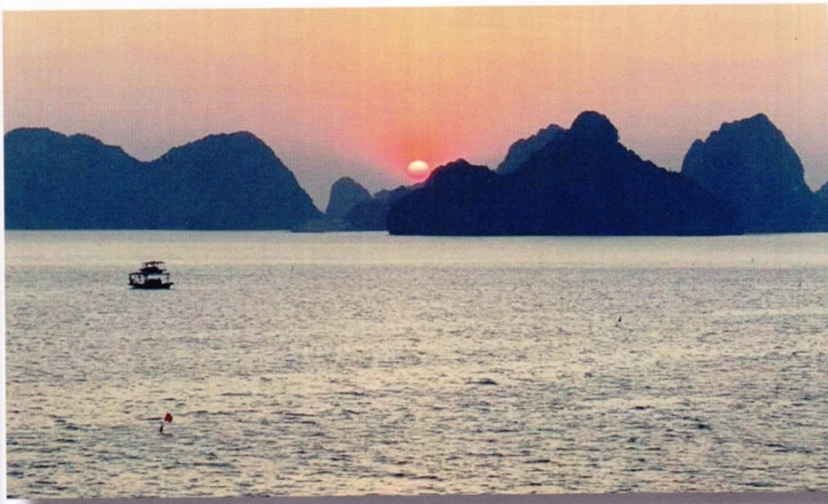
“Despite all of the incredible evidence of Vietnam’s recovery from war rubble, its striking geologic features, the fantastic trip planning and management, the ebullient attitude and kind and engaging behavior of the Vietnamese - one element of this trip superseded all else; the personable, inspirational leadership and bonding friendship provided by Josh Routh. Josh has been a wheelchair user his entire life and was making his 34th worldwide, physically demanding, wheelchair distribution trip.



Josh’s unwavering personal strength, kind gentle spirit, perseverance and positive attitude made us all better, more thoughtful and tolerant travelers. We started looking for the better angels within ourselves, and elevated our trip with a sense of harmony and good will. We were all humbled and proud to be called Josh’s Friend.”

Our final, and northernmost destination was majestic Ha Long Bay, where we spent the night aboard a yacht. The next day we returned to Hanoi and then home to the States. Special thanks to Helen Duong and everyone involved in making this experience possible!





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