

Purple Heart Vets Return to Vietnam

VFW sponsored nine veterans on a return trip to Southeast Asia, which included meeting with former enemy soldiers.

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Thanks to VFW's Kahle Fund, nine Vietnam veterans who received Purple Hearts during the war returned to Vietnam in April for an all-expenses-paid excursion. The 10 days in-country included visits to Hanoi, Hue, Danang, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and points in between.

Since 2005, 142 wounded Vietnam vets have returned to their former battlefields courtesy of the Ralph Charles Kahle Jr. Endowment Fund, which was established in 1999 following a \$1.1 million bequest from Kahle's estate.

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Winners of the VFW's return to Vietnam trip in April stand outside a former hidden hospital used by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. Front row: Carl Kaelin (VFW chaperone), Pete Bruhn, John Doherty and Richard Parent. Middle Row: Emmett Smart, Jim Willbanks and Melvin Lovelace. Back row: Dennis Weigl, James Jordan and Jesus Roman.

Here is what the 2017 trip winners had to say about their return to Vietnam:

Peter Bruhn

Dates in Vietnam: 1966-67

Service: Air Force

Unit: 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron

Hometown: Bull Valley, Ill.

I want to thank the VFW and the Kahle Fund for this great trip. The highlight of my return was the ability to experience the sights and sounds with other veterans. Old emotions were put to rest during this 13-day tour with fellow veterans. It felt strange flying into the city of Hanoi. If we had tried this 50 years ago, the sky would have looked like the 4th of July.

John Doherty

Dates in Vietnam: 1966-68

Service: Army

Unit: 55th Military Intelligence Detachment (Corps), 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Advisory Team 3

Hometown: Andover, Mass.

Returning to Vietnam was at the very top of my bucket list. Vietnam has always had a sort of iron-clad grip on my very being. The absolute highlight of the trip was the guys I shared it with. I'd share a foxhole with any of the guys on the trip. I can't tell you eloquently enough how grateful I am to the Kahle Fund and the VFW. You all have given me an experience of a lifetime.

James Jordan

Dates in Vietnam: 1968-69

Service: Marines

Unit: B Sqd., 2nd Plt., Golf Co., 2nd Bn., 1st Marines.

Hometown: Berlin, N.J.

Because of the VFW, I will enjoy memories of the Vietnam that's there now and not just when my boots were on the ground. It seemed funny looking at people sitting on their porches looking at their iPhones or driving by huts with glass windows and TV dishes on top. It meant a lot for a guy like me to go back to a place called Vietnam with nine other veterans who all left the blood, sweat and tears of our youth there.

Carl Kaelin

VFW trip chaperone

Dates in Vietnam: 1968-69

Service: Army

Unit: 244th Aviation Company

Hometown: Leitchfield, Ky.

Going back to Vietnam was something I have been wanting to do for a long time. Being with the nine guys was something I will always remember. They were great guys who all connected like veterans should. At Khe Sanh, we met about six NVA veterans from the war who we fought against. They wanted to shake our hands and take pictures with us. The Vietnamese people really love the American people.

Melvin Lovelace

Dates in Vietnam: 1966-67, 1969-70, 1972-73

Service: Army

Unit: 2nd Bde., 1st Inf. Div.; 46th Security Co.; 1st Cav Div.

Hometown: Tomball, Texas

I could not believe the way Vietnam is today. To me, it was a poor country, and it definitely didn't look like a poor country now. The highlight for me was visiting Hanoi and seeing the lake where John McCain was captured.

Richard Parent

Dates in Vietnam: 1967-68, 1970-71

Service: Army

Unit: MACV Team 22, Area Maintenance Supply Facility (AMSF-North)

Hometown: Rockwell, Texas

Returning to Vietnam for me was an unexpected fulfillment of a lifetime desire. The highlight of my return to Vietnam was meeting and traveling with the other Purple Hearters. I was very pleased to meet so many Vietnamese civilians. It was somewhat disappointing that there were so many cemeteries and monuments to honor the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers but nothing for the South Vietnamese soldiers.

Jesus Roman

Dates in Vietnam: 1968

Service: Army

Unit: 1st Bn., 28th Inf., 1st Inf. Div.

Hometown: Port Hueneme, Calif.

I wasn't traumatized by the war, but I did want to go back and see it. It was enjoyable to be back. I wanted to say a prayer to all of the soldiers and their families who gave so much to the nation. To be there with eight other Purple Heart recipients touring the country and getting such positive feedback from the Vietnamese was really wonderful.

Emmett Smart

Dates in Vietnam: 1967-68

Service: Army

Unit: C Co., 1st Bn., 18th Inf., 1st Inf. Div.

Hometown: Bullard, Texas

We didn't visit any of the areas where I remember serving and that was OK. Our guide informed me that there is no remaining evidence of our base camps. We learned that Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers had to be buried in personal or family plots. Also their families are not allowed to decorate their graves.

Dennis Weigl

Dates in Vietnam: 1968-69

Service: Army

Unit: 1st Air Cav, 2nd Bn., 7th Cav Regt.

Hometown: Lorain, Ohio

The trip itself was far above my expectations, but did bring back a lot of bad memories. The nine men I traveled with were a wonderful group of men. The highlight was in Hue when we were invited to speak with students from South Africa who were there studying the Vietnam War.

James Willbanks

Dates in Vietnam: 1971-72

Service: Army

Unit: Advisor with the 18th ARVN Division

Hometown: Leavenworth, Kan.

I have been back to Vietnam numerous times for research or leading student tours, but this was my first time to go back with fellow veterans. For that reason, this trip was different in so many ways. The highlight of the trip was getting to know the other veterans and having the opportunity to share experiences.

This article is featured in the August 2017 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), associate editor, VFW magazine.