



Bridging past and present

Stories by **Sean Rose** ♦ Photos by **Kasha Stevenson**

As a soldier in Vietnam, Peter Berres witnessed brutality he didn't think Americans were capable of. Before his tour was over, he would unwillingly have a part in the darker side of the American occupation.

After returning to America, Berres went into teaching, fueled by a passion born from an unjust war. That passion would take him back to Vietnam with UK students, educating a generation living during a new American conflict about the true toll of war — and what it means to forgive.





It was quick.

The young private sat in the back of a helicopter and watched as fellow soldiers pulled a captured Viet Cong to his feet, shouting at him. Then, as if he were trash, the soldiers flung the young Vietnamese out into the jungle hundreds of feet below.

Peter Berres, having only been in country for a few weeks, stood and watched as his comrades pulled a second prisoner to the doors of the helicopter.

"We can't do this," Berres told them — then something heavy pressed against his head: a .45-caliber pistol in the firm grip of another American.

"Back off, new guy," the soldier said to Berres. "Either that, or you go out the door."

Berres sat. The second prisoner started talking, and the soldiers kept him in the helicopter before returning to their firebase in Southern Vietnam.

At a time when many of America's youth were doing all they could to stay out of Vietnam, Berres volunteered and signed his commitment papers at age 17 as a senior in high school. The oldest son of a military family felt a sense of duty to his country and a call of adventure in his mind.

But this was not the war Berres planned on fighting.

Nearly 40 years after Berres stepped off a troop cargo plane to start his tour of duty, the former soldier knelt at a pew in a Catholic church in Hanoi, Vietnamese choirs echoed through the packed Christmas night service with a familiar melody of "O Come All Ye Faithful."

This December 2007 visit was Berres' second time returning to the formerly embattled country since his service — and his first time bringing UK students.

Berres, 58, now an assistant dean for admissions and student affairs in the College of Health Sciences and a political science instructor, started teaching a Vietnam War history class as part of the Discovery Seminar Program a year ago with hopes of bringing students to Vietnam — a place more often thought of as a war rather than a country.

The United States did not learn lessons from the war, Berres said. Questions that should have been examined at the war's end were stepped over in America's rush to distance itself from the conflict.

The result, Berres said, is another preemptive war based on false information, this time in Iraq.

Berres gained a tragic perspective from witnessing the brutality of combat in Viet-

nam. The majority of the country — including the current White House administration and much of Congress — did not.

The lessons overlooked by politicians and citizens of the Vietnam era are what Berres hoped students would take to heart by visiting the country.

So many matters of foreign policy are essentially human decisions, Berres said, and so many Americans are unaware of the total cost of war.

The Christmas service was spoken in Vietnamese, but Berres told students the language barrier made no difference. Growing up in a Catholic home, Berres considered being a priest. The same motivations drove him to join the Army; it was a chance to serve not only his country, but all of mankind.

Two students joined the professor on the wooden pew, sitting at his left. An older Vietnamese woman sat on his right. Thirty-five years earlier U.S. bombs rained down on Hanoi for 11 straight days and nights, including Christmas, as part of one of the last major American bombing campaigns of the war. Berres could not help but wonder about the woman's story — the hardships she might have faced, whom she lost at the

hands of Americans.

"I think I spent almost the entire time looking at those beautiful women and children and thinking to myself, how could we have bombed the hell out of these people 35 years ago almost to the day?" Berres said. "Just looking at them — how innocent and sweet, gracious, beautiful they are — and wondering how we could have rained all those bombs down on them and found some way to justify it."

A new soldier on an old battlefield

Nothing in the Vietnam of 1968 was as it seemed.

Berres was trained on how to stay alive in combat, told of America's local allies in the Army of South Vietnam and indoctrinated on the evils of communism, as he had been since childhood. Helping South Vietnam fend off the communist North was the reason for the war, soldiers and the nation were told.

What the young soldier found in the country was strikingly different.

Combat was chaos, where luck was

"I think I spent almost the entire time ... just looking at them — how innocent and sweet, gracious, beautiful they are — and wondering how we could have rained all those bombs down on them and found some way to justify it."

PETER BERRES
UK instructor

Continued on next page



Top: Peter Berres looks at photographs taken by combat photojournalists during the Vietnam War. These pictures were part of a special exhibit at the American War Remnants Museum.

Right: In a Catholic church in the center of Hanoi, Vietnam, on Christmas night, Peter Berres reflects on Operation Linebacker II, an 11-day bombing raid on Hanoi in late December 1972.



Peter Berres, top right, and students Jeff Keith, bottom right, Amanda Tate, bottom left, and Kelly Arnett settle into their cabin on an overnight train from Hanoi to Sapa, Vietnam.

often more valuable than training. The South Vietnamese had no cause to believe in — like the United States, their soldiers were drafted. To many Vietnamese, communism was simply a word.

The difference between Northern and Southern Vietnam was largely artificial. Until 1954, Vietnam was a unified country that had been fighting against foreign invaders nearly its whole existence: thousands of years against the Chinese and nearly a hundred years against the French. The recent decades since America's withdrawal represent the longest period of peace Vietnam has ever experienced.

Given the choice of joining the national army, going to jail or joining the Viet Cong and putting their families at risk, the South Vietnamese were simply "on the wrong side of their own history." "I thought it was a clean divide," Berres said, laughing. "The good guys and the bad guys, the communists and the non-communists. Nothing is that clean."

"They are victims of circumstances, and the fact that they wore that uniform and worked with the United States does not suggest to me for a second that they were all about democracy or the Americans supporting government or us winning or anything like that," Berres said. "They were simply trying to survive."

The peak of this mountain of contradictions was the Tet Offensive. Berres arrived in the country at the beginning of the sweeping, organized communist attack in South Vietnam. Similar to the insurgency of Iraq today, the enemy could be anywhere and could be undistinguishable from civilians.

But Berres was a new soldier. He was still approaching his radicalization.

He still believed in the cause and had even opted to skip a year of language training to speed his arrival, not wanting to risk that the war might end before he experienced it.

One immediate contradiction was apparent to him, however: Leaving America, Berres was a fully trained Army interrogator. To soldiers already in the field, he was just an FNG, a "f---ing new guy," a soldier whose life was worth the least of anyone's, given more dangerous assignments and the "s--- jobs."

But of all the realizations Berres



Peter Berres, left, shown here at an outpost near Gha Dinh, Vietnam, in 1968, volunteered for the Army as a senior in high school. Initially, he was so eager to serve in the war that he skipped language training to speed his arrival.

would have over the next year, the most lasting would be that much of the war toll is made up of victims of circumstance.

Casualties of war

One morning, three or four weeks after watching the Viet Cong soldier thrown to his death, Berres received an assignment. He was to escort a courier with information to headquarters in Saigon, a 45-minute drive from where he was stationed in the village of Gha Dinh.

Berres met the courier, a gruff sergeant with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist and a pistol strapped to his hip. They climbed into a three-quarter-ton truck, Berres at the wheel, and drove off.

Traffic in Saigon flows more like water than on American streets. A sea of hundreds of scooters free of most traffic laws, looking for the path of least resistance — around cars, against traffic, on the sidewalk. In 1968 it was worse, Berres said, with many more bicycles and pedestrians.

It was his first time driving in Viet-

nam, Berres said, and probably the first time driving a truck that size.

As Berres weaved through the currents of people, the sergeant — who was on his second or third tour of duty — urged him to drive faster. American lives depended on these documents, and, besides, he said, the people outside the truck were just "gooks."

An old man carrying a basket in one arm and an infant in the other walked out into the busy Saigon street. There was no time to stop.

People screamed and massed around the truck. Berres started to get out to help. The sergeant unholstered his pistol, pointed it at Berres and told him to drive. He obeyed.

A few weeks later, Berres volunteered to drive with three other soldiers down to a mechanics pool that had come under attack. Several wounded soldiers lay at the other end of the short drive from his firebase.

The soldiers were driving when enemy fire came from the right. Soldiers yelled, rifles blasted, and Berres crouched down to protect himself.

The jeep sped around the bend —

something was in the road. Two small children were running from the gunfire. The jeep hit them head on. Still under fire, there was no time to stop. The soldiers drove on.

Later that day, Berres thought of his younger brothers and sisters safe in America, some no more than 5 years old. Killing civilians was painful enough; not being able to come to their aid added to his guilt.

"You don't know who they left, what the rest of their family was like," Berres said. "And you just don't know the pain that other people around them had."

Seeing the carnage America brought to Vietnam and watching war morph young Americans like him into killers made Berres start to question and decry the war he volunteered to fight.

"I couldn't figure out how these people were better off, doing what we were doing," Berres said. "And my defense was anybody is better off in any political system no matter how oppressive it is, than to have tons and tons and tons and tons of Agent Orange, and GIs that shoot you just 'cause they're looking for entertainment."

He found a few like-minded soldiers, and in their free time they would sit and listen to anti-war music. If they could, they would play 'The Animals' "Sky Pilot" 30 times in a row, Berres said. And if they were alive the next night and had the chance, they would listen to it 30 more times.

Many soldiers refused to engage in the battle of conscience. Combat was the worst place to change your mind on the war because soldiers still had to survive, Berres said, and most GIs probably waited until returning to the States before asking questions.

Berres thought about the children and the old man with the infant every day. The children's bodies were gone from the road when he returned to base from the firefight. For a short time, he held out hope that they might be alive. Eventually, the only comfort he allowed himself was that their deaths must have been quick.

Continued on next page

ON THE WEB

View Kasha Stevenson's multimedia slideshow on the journey to Vietnam Peter Berres took with five students.

kernelmixedmedia.com



WHERE THE STUDENTS WENT

1 Hanoi

Toured the war prison known as the "Hanoi Hilton," the Ho Chi Minh shrine and mausoleum, and museums.

2 Sapa

Went hiking and sightseeing in this town near the Chinese border.

3 Ha Long Bay

On Christmas Eve, took an overnight cruise.

4 Hue

Toured tombs of past kings, major battle sites such as Khe Sanh and the Battle of Hue, and toured the former Demilitarized Zone.

5 Hoi An

Traveled to nearby My Lai, site of the 1968 massacre of more than 500 civilians.

6 Ho Chi Minh City

Visited the American War Remnants Museum and the nearby Cu Chi tunnels, a massive underground complex the Viet Cong used during the war.

7 Can Tho

Toured the Mekong Delta and visited the floating markets.

MAP SOURCE: PLANNINGLOBBE, CIA WORLD FACTBOOK



At the Army Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam, Peter Berres and Do Van Mahn, one of the group's guides, discuss the size of U.S. Army tanks.

CONFLICT IN VIETNAM

1946 — 1954

Vietnam fights for independence from France. The war ends with the French Army's staggering defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

July 1954 Vietnam is divided into two countries along the 17th parallel as a peacekeeping measure until the elections scheduled for 1956. They never happen.

1959 — 1964

1959 The war officially starts with increasing American support of South Vietnam, fighting against the communist North Vietnam, which wants to reunify the country.

1961 President John F. Kennedy begins sending military equipment and advisers to Vietnam.

Nov. 22, 1963 President Kennedy is assassinated. Lyndon B. Johnson assumes office.

Aug. 2, 1964 Matters escalate when North Vietnam launches an attack against two U.S. ships on call in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to allow expanding the war effort.

1965

March 2 U.S. starts bombing targets in North Vietnam as part of Operation Rolling Thunder, which would continue for almost four years and drop an average of 630 tons of bombs each day.

March 8 America sends its first combat troops to Vietnam: 3,500 Marines.

May 3 The first Army combat troops arrive: 3,500 soldiers.

184,300 American combat troops in Vietnam, 1,863 declared dead in 1965

1966

389,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 6,143 declared dead in 1966

1967

April Peter Berres signs his commitment papers to join the Army at 17.

May 18 For the first time, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops enter the Demilitarized Zone that divides North and South Vietnam. Both sides suffer heavy losses during a series of firefights with the North Vietnamese Army.

August Berres begins Army training soon after graduating high school.

463,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 11,153 declared dead in 1967

1968

January Berres arrives in Vietnam.

Jan. 21 Siege of Khe Sanh begins. In its 77 days, it would become the longest, bloodiest battle of the war for Americans.

Jan. 31 The North and the Viet Cong launch the Tet Offensive, a highly organized attack on major cities in the South. The offensive, meant to incite an uprising in the South, would last months but ultimately fail. The offensive surprised Americans who doubted the Viet Cong were capable of such organization.

February Berres watches as a Vietnamese prisoner is thrown from a helicopter to persuade another prisoner to start talking.

March While driving a truck in Saigon, Berres accidentally hits a man carrying a child. A few weeks later he was driving a Jeep during a fire fight and hit two escaping children.

March 16 More than 500 Vietnamese civilians are killed by U.S. soldiers in My Lai and nearby villages. News of the killings would not become public for another year and a half.

March 31 President Johnson announces he would not seek re-election.

April Berres is transferred to an intelligence center after being wounded in a mortar attack on his base in Gha Dinh. He would work as a censor and analyst for the rest of his time in Vietnam.

Nov. 5 Republican Richard Nixon narrowly defeats Democrat Hubert Humphrey for the presidency.

495,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 16,592 declared dead in 1968

1969

January Berres leaves Vietnam after his one-year tour.

Jan. 25 Paris peace talks open with the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

March Vietnam veteran Ron Ridenhour sends letters detailing the My Lai massacre to lawmakers and military officials, resulting in an Army investigation of the incident.

March 18 The U.S. Air Force begins Operation Menu, the secret bombing of Cambodia meant to destroy North Vietnamese supply sites.

April 30 U.S. troop levels peak at 543,400.

May 10-20 Forty-six soldiers die during a 10-day battle at "Hamburger Hill" near Hue, and the troops are told to abandon the hill soon after, allowing the North Vietnamese to retake it. News of the battle creates uproar in the U.S.

July 8 Eight hundred men from the 9th Infantry Division are sent home as part of the first U.S. troop withdrawal. The 14-stage withdrawal is scheduled to last through November 1972.

Sept. 2 North Vietnam President Ho Chi Minh dies of a heart attack at age 79 and is succeeded by Le Duan.

Nov. 16 U.S. Army publicly discusses the My Lai massacre for the first time.

Dec. 1 The first draft lottery since World War II is held in New York.

380,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 11,616 declared dead in 1969



Ashamed of his country

Pictures of suffering from decades before hung on the walls, and Berres followed his students, carefully walking up to exhibits at the American War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City — the former Saigon.

One photo showed an American soldier picking up the remains of what was a young Vietnamese, nothing but a bundle of ripped flesh and torn clothing. An M-16 pressed against the temple of an elderly Vietnamese woman sat in another frame. An exhibit dedicated to America's use of Agent Orange held jars of deformed fetuses — miscarriages, killed by the poison before they had taken their first breath.

The talkative UK students, usually laughing and reaching for all the foreignness surrounding them, were quiet leaving the museum. Berres sat on concrete steps, looking down as he fiddled with his camera strap, waiting for their driver to pick them up.

Once in the van, he slumped in the bench seat, staring straight ahead, responding to questions with simple, one-word answers.

"You wonder what all the Europeans think in there," he said, looking away from the van window. "You almost don't want to say anything. You don't want to be recognized as an American."

This was the truth of the war Berres wished more Americans knew. The upwards of 3 million Vietnamese dead. Civilian deaths excused because they became so common. The young boy at an old battle site leaning almost horizontally on a walker, pushing himself with frail, twisted legs — Agent Orange's lasting legacy. Entire villages leveled by tons of bombs. Billboards next to busy highways warning children not to pick up anything metal found in the ground because it could be an unexploded mine or bomb.

Vietnamese casualties from the American War continue to this day. The U.S. dropped 8 million tons of bombs during the war — four times as much as used in World War II — and sprayed an estimated 19 million gallons of Agent Orange. A 2005 release by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated that 4.8 million people are victims of Agent Orange. The American government has never made any attempt to compensate or help Vietnam with the clusters of death left behind.

So many people are ignorant of America's destructive history, Berres said. So much truth was overlooked or covered up, and like the land and people of Vietnam itself, much of it was destroyed.

Putting truth in the incinerator

Garbage bags. Three or four stuffed with reports of rape, murder or illegal bombing runs committed by the U.S.

military. At the end of a 10-hour day, Berres and other Army censors would throw the bags of anything "compromising" to the American war effort — a truthful account of the war — into an incinerator. They would stand until each scrap of paper was burned to ash before retiring for the day or returning to a locked, guarded room to censor more reports.

After three months in Vietnam, Berres was wounded in a mortar attack. The blast threw him more than 20 feet and tore his sciatic nerve. He was transferred to a desk job in an intelligence center and decided he could live with the pain of his injury. After a violent allergic reaction to getting drunk when he could to fall asleep for his remaining seven months in the country. When he didn't drink, he would bite down on a stick of bamboo at night to help deal with shooting pains.

He spent his first month behind a desk reading, burning and censoring reports. He had seen the violence of the field but never knew it was so systematic and widespread across an entire country.

"Being raised, being told in fact, that the difference between communists and free countries is that communists write their own history, tell the people what they want, hide the truth when they want to hide it and manipulate people's minds and hearts that way — to find out that we did the exact same thing was very disconcerting, very disillusioning," Berres said.

"What percentage of truth was destroyed. I would have no idea at all. But none the less that's the official history, and it's not anywhere close to being the truth," he said.

The patriotic young son of a lieutenant colonel had changed his mind about his country's war.

After his month as a censor, Berres was assigned to collect war statistics for the Paris Peace Talks. His injury was now a godsend, and in his mind he was working to end the war.

"I kind of convinced myself that I could stay here and I could do good, positive things with my time and effort and I might even contribute ... to ending the war by actually being here," Berres said.

"I look back now, and it was all bulls---." Berres can't imagine the data he compiled played a role in the peace talks — especially when so much truth ended as piles of ash in the incinerator. But the work did get him through the last leg of his tour, and he came home alive.

He returned unsure of who he was and hating his country. With no intent to follow through, Berres used to spend time fantasizing about shooting then-President Richard Nixon in the head.

Once home, Berres tried to re-establish what was true in his world. For five months he rarely left the attic of



Above: Peter Berres talks to members of a Hmong tribe, an ethnic minority in the northern mountains, near Sapa, Vietnam.

Top: Berres and his students stand on Cua Dai Beach near Hoi An, Vietnam, waiting for the sun to rise. The group got up before dawn to experience the time of day American troops landed at My Lai the morning soldiers killed more than 500 civilians there. They visited the village later that day.



Above: Peter Berres writes while relaxing on a junk — a large wooden boat — cruising Ha Long Bay.

Left: UK student Neil Esser takes a picture of a display at the Cu Chi tunnels south of Saigon, Vietnam. The display demonstrates traps made by the Viet Cong that were hidden in the jungle, and the backdrop shows drawings of American soldiers who have come across them.



Left: Nguyen Tuan Huy, the group's guide in Central Vietnam, translates part of a tombstone in Trung Son Cemetery, the largest one in Vietnam.

Below: A woman sits on a busy street in Hanoi, Vietnam.



August Berres is officially honorably discharged from the Army.

August to December Berres stays with his father in Fort Knox, spending most of his time reading in the attic, educating himself after Vietnam challenged his worldview.

Nov. 12 The military trial concerning Lt. William Calley's role in the My Lai massacre begins.

280,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 6,061 declared dead in 1970

1970

May 4 At Kent State University in Ohio, National Guardsmen shoot and kill four students protesting the Vietnam War and wound nine others. More than 400 colleges across America shut down in response to the killings.

May 6 At UK, hundreds of students protesting the Kent State University shootings force their way into a Board of Trustees meeting before marching around campus and the community. Later that night the students face off with law enforcement. The Air Force ROTC building burns down during the demonstration, but the cause is never determined.

August Berres is officially honorably discharged from the Army.

August to December Berres stays with his father in Fort Knox, spending most of his time reading in the attic, educating himself after Vietnam challenged his worldview.

Nov. 12 The military trial concerning Lt. William Calley's role in the My Lai massacre begins.

280,000 American combat troops in Vietnam, 6,061 declared dead in 1970

1971

January Berres starts going to school at Elizabethtown Community College.

March 29 Lt. William Calley is found guilty of the murder of 22 My Lai civilians, but his life sentence is later reduced to 10 years. Sixteen military personnel were charged after the My Lai massacre, but only five were actually court-martialed, and only Calley was ever found guilty.

April 30 The last U.S. Marine combat units leave Vietnam.

August Berres enrolls at UK.

156,800 American combat troops in Vietnam, 2,357 declared dead in 1971

1972

March to October North Vietnamese launch the Easterleite Offensive as 200,000 soldiers wage an all-out attempt to conquer South Vietnam. The offensive is a tremendous gamble but is attempted because retaliation seems unlikely given the U.S. troop withdrawal and the strength of the anti-war movement in America.

Aug. 23 The last U.S. combat troops depart Vietnam.

Nov. 30 U.S. troop withdrawal from Vietnam is completed, although 16,000 Army advisers and administrators remain to assist South Vietnam's military.

Dec. 18 The so-called "Christmas bombings," or Operation Linebacker II, begin. American politicians, the media and various world leaders denounce the 11-day bombing campaign of Hanoi.

No American combat troops in Vietnam, 641 declared dead in 1972

1973

January The Paris Peace Accords are signed by the U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

The U.S. agrees to immediately halt all military activities and withdraw all remaining troops within 60 days.

The North Vietnamese agree to an immediate cease-fire and the release of all American POWs within 60 days.

An estimated 150,000 North Vietnamese soldiers already in South Vietnam are allowed to remain. Vietnam is still divided; South Vietnam is considered to be one country with two governments, pending future reconciliation.

Jan. 27 Lt. Col. William B. Nolde is the last American soldier to die in combat in Vietnam.

Jan. 27 Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announces the end of the draft.

March 29 The last remaining U.S. troops withdraw from Vietnam. It marks the end of America's longest war and first defeat. About 2.5 million Americans served in Vietnam over 15 years.

No American combat troops in Vietnam, 168 declared dead in 1973

1974

Aug. 9 President Nixon resigns as a result of the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford is sworn in as the 38th U.S. President.

Nov. 19 William Calley is freed after serving 3 1/2 years under house arrest for the murder of 22 My Lai civilians.

No American combat troops in Vietnam, 178 declared dead in 1974

1975

April 23 President Ford declares in a speech that the conflict in Vietnam is "a war that is finished as far as America is concerned." On the same day, 100,000 North Vietnamese soldiers advance on Saigon, which is now overflowing with refugees.

April 29 Two U.S. Marines die when the North Vietnamese shells Tan Son Nhut air base in Saigon. South Vietnamese civilians begin looting the air base, and President Ford orders Operation Frequent Wind, the helicopter evacuation of 7,000 Americans and South Vietnamese from the city. As helicopters start to fill the three U.S. aircraft carriers off the coast of Vietnam, many of the aircraft are pushed overboard to make room for more to land. Footage of the choppers being sacrificed has become iconic of the war's end.

April 30 The U.S. presence in Vietnam officially ends at 8:35 a.m. when the last Americans — 10 Marines from the embassy — leave Saigon. North Vietnamese troops encounter little resistance as they pour into Saigon. The Viet Cong flag is flying from the presidential palace by 11:30 a.m.

No American combat troops in Vietnam, 161 declared dead in 1975

SOURCE: VIETNAMWAR.COM, THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Students confront their country's darker history

There were many days in Vietnam when students on the trip laughed as they toured old palaces, swam in a sea still warm in December and explored city street life. But their main purpose was to learn about Vietnam's and America's shared past in warfare.

Walking through the American War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, looking past pictures of dying civilians, visiting sites of battle and massacre forced internal reflection among the group. The students each reacted differently, but everyone — whether they were a graduate student studying the Vietnam War, an American who had never been out of the country or a veteran of Iraq — returned to the United States deeply moved.



UK students Amanda Tate, left, Jeff Keith and Kelly Arnett read log books at a museum in My Lai, Vietnam, where in 1968 U.S. soldiers killed more than 500 civilians in four hours.

Jeff Keith, graduate student

"I looked at this wreckage, and all I could think was that for every piece, for every plane, there was probably a dead American or a whole crew of dead Americans that came down with that plane."



At the Army Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam, Jeff Keith stands in front of a small tower of rubble built from pieces of U.S. planes shot down during the war.

Amanda Tate, architecture senior

"It's the combination of several different emotions that adds up to one giant feeling that I'm not sure has a name."

Amanda Tate had never been out of the United States before traveling to Vietnam. All the architecture senior knew of the country was the war. What little information she knew about it came from her high school, a place that might not have taught students that America won, but did not teach that "we lost" either.

Most students on the trip said their strongest connection to Vietnam as a country was the war. Few had ever discussed its existence outside the context of the American conflict, and few knew of the development the country had made since Saigon's fall. Fewer knew how the American War — decades gone — claims young victims to this day.

Tate, 21, looked over an exhibit in the American War Remnants Museum. Jars of deformed fetuses sat before her — victims of Agent Orange, a chemical Americans sprayed over miles and miles as a defoliant to destroy jungle cover for the Viet Cong. Tate, who said she used to be somewhat of a "war hawk," had never seen victims of war up close. The casualties in front of her — so innocent they never had the chance to know guilt — made her question her country.

"It's just... I'm still trying to put the words together for it," Tate said. "I knew they

used it, and I knew that it did a significant amount of damage to the landscape, and I knew it killed a lot of people, but I didn't realize it was still killing people."

With the war in Iraq stretching indefinitely into the future, education about Vietnam is needed now more than ever, she said. Visiting the country sparked this realization more than any classroom session could.

"It evokes feelings in you that you probably otherwise wouldn't have known you could feel," Tate said. "It's the combination of several different emotions that adds up to one giant feeling that I'm not sure has a name."

Tate wished she had learned more in high school, not only about the war and America's foreign policy decisions but about the total costs of warfare. For the Vietnamese, this included upwards of 3 million soldiers and civilians dead, an economy in shambles, a culture violated and corrupted. Casualties continue to mount from unexploded ordnance still buried in the ground. Agent Orange still poisons generations decades from when it was used.

"It needs to be part of the education of Americans," Tate said. "... People over here are just like, 'Whatever, it was a war, we were in so many of them.' I think we've been really desensitized to the consequences of war."

Looking over the wreckage from a downed B-52s, Jeff Keith did not know how to feel.

As a UK graduate student studying the Vietnam War, Keith was ecstatic to be in the country for the first time and was sensitive to the struggles of the Vietnamese fighting the Americans. He hopes to move to Vietnam eventually to study in Ho Chi Minh City and write a history of the city that was the center of the French and U.S. occupation. His goal is to link the American and Vietnamese experiences, hopefully aiding Americans in understanding the tolls of war and what can be dangerous consequences of a country's power.

He is a student with a great appreciation for what the Vietnamese accomplished in all their history, including the war with America, which had the best-equipped military in the world.

But Keith did not know how to react to the sculpture celebrating the deaths of American air crews.

"I looked at this wreckage, and all I could think was that for every piece, for every plane, there was probably a dead American or a whole crew of dead Americans that came down with that plane," Keith said.

In the center of the pile of wreckage was a picture of a young Vietnamese woman, a rifle thrown across her back, dragging a severed wing from an American plane. Keith, 29, a novice speaker of Vietnamese, told his guide that seeing the picture was hard for him. His guide, Do Van Mahn, whose father was wounded on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during a bombing run while fighting for North Vietnam, asked why.

"Because Americans died, Keith told him.

"And he kind of gave me this look like 'Of course they died; they were flying over North Vietnam,'" Keith said. "His sympathy was not there, and if you want to really step back, you can almost understand why — you can understand why."

If the situation was reversed and the North Vietnamese were dropping bombs on America, the United States would never feel sympathy for them, Keith said.

Later in the trip, Keith stood in Trung Son Cemetery, the largest one in Vietnam, holding more than 10,000 North Vietnamese soldiers killed during the American War — the Vietnamese name for the conflict. A swarm of simple headstones as high as his knee surrounded him, standing in perfect lines like those in Arlington National Cemetery. Next to Keith was the group's guide during its time in Central Vietnam, Nguyen Tuan Huy.

Nguyen's family split between the North and South during the war. His grandfather fought with the North Vietnamese Army while most everyone else sided with the South. His grandfather never returned from war, and his remains are still missing.

Nguyen translated a headstone for Keith. It said "martyr, name not known." Keith looked around him and noticed there were many headstones with the same inscription — a mark for soldiers like Nguyen's grandfather who never returned or whose departure is a mystery.

Surrounded by the remains and memories of victims of the American occupation, Keith apologized. He told Nguyen as much as his limited Vietnamese would allow him: He was sorry so many people died. He didn't like war, he told him, and he was sorry their two countries ever fought each other.



Amanda Tate, right, listens to a cooking instructor talk about buying foods from the local market in Hoi An, Vietnam. Before this trip, Tate had never traveled outside of the United States.

UK scholars filling void in Vietnamese history

The Vietnam War has been under historians' microscope since its beginnings. Even so, a full accounting of the war is lacking, said Lien-Hang Nguyen, assistant history professor.

There are many detailed histories written on the war from Americans' perspective but there are few examining the Vietnamese experience.

It's a void Nguyen is trying to fill with her own scholarship.

Much of the scholarship on Vietnam to come out of UK is thanks to George C. Herring, Nguyen said.

Herring, a renowned scholar of the Vietnam War, focused on U.S. foreign relations during his time at UK, where he taught from 1969 until retiring two years ago. He has published a critically acclaimed history of the war, "America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam,

1950-1975."

"George Herring has trained I don't know how many Vietnam scholars," Nguyen said.

After Herring retired, Nguyen filled his role in the history department with her focus on the Vietnam War. There is no program designated to Vietnamese studies at UK. At one time, the school was, along with Cornell University, a center for Southeast Asian studies, Herring said in a speech last year.

UK also has graduated many distinguished Vietnam scholars like

Robert K. Brigham, a history professor at Vassar College; Robert J. Topmiller, a history professor at Eastern Kentucky University; and Clarence R. Wyatt, history professor, chief planning officer and special assistant to the president at Centre College.

Nguyen has very personal reasons for wanting to improve the record of Vietnamese experience during the war. When she was 5 months old, Nguyen's family fled Saigon on April 29, 1975 — one day before the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong captured the city, ending the war.

Her father fought for the South

Vietnam during the 1960s and, if he stayed in the country, would likely have been sent to a re-education camp. But her parents never wanted to leave their home and waited as long as they could.

"They just loved their country," Nguyen said. "That's all they knew."

Her family eventually settled in a suburb outside of Philadelphia after being sponsored by a Methodist Church. Life was difficult for her parents, trying to provide for nine children in a new country. Some of Nguyen's neighbors lost sons and brothers during the war and her family had to deal with racism on top of everything else.

But all Nguyen's siblings attended college. She went on to graduate school where she decided to dedicate her studies to the war her family fled.

Education about Vietnam and improved histories are needed now as much as ever, Nguyen said, especially given the parallels drawn to the Iraq War.

The Vietnam War is the only connection most students have to Vietnam, Nguyen said, and most learn about the war through popular movies and connections to Iraq, but neither of these sources can really teach the war.

An interest in the Vietnam War in younger generations shows how it "still lingers in our collective memory," Nguyen said. But she said there is much more to learn from the Vietnam War experience than how it compares to Iraq.

"That's not the only historical lesson I would hope a young person would take away," Nguyen said.

Student reactions, continued



Will Stull and Do Van Mahn, one of the group's guides, patch up a bamboo pipe with a melted straw while boating in Ha Long Bay on Christmas Eve.

Will Stull, political science senior

"It's a different form of insurgency (in Iraq) than the one we were facing in Vietnam, lucky for us ... But we're handling it just as sloppily."

Will Stull stared at the photograph. He knew it was taken during another time, decades earlier, during another war.

But looking at the image of a medic trying to resuscitate a dead soldier in Vietnam, he did not expect how much the captured scene in the jungle would remind him of a moment he experienced in the deserts of Iraq. One of his team leaders was trying to resuscitate a Humvee driver who had been shot.

"He was dead," Stull said. "He had been dead for a while. But watching him trying to pump life back into him — I wasn't prepared for how much that image was going to bring me back to that time."

Stull, a 27-year-old veteran of Iraq, worked on a Humvee team for convoy escorts during much of his time before becoming a prison guard at Abu Ghraib two years after it was the center of a prisoner-abuse scandal.

Like Peter Berres, Stull comes from a military family. His father served in Vietnam as a Marine. Sharing the bond of combat veterans, Stull was able to connect with his father on another level after his return from the Middle East.

The war in Iraq is often compared to Vietnam. Some comparisons are valid, Stull said, others are not. The simplest similarity is that in both wars, America was fighting an insurgency and doing it poorly, Stull said.

"It's a different form of insurgency than the one we were facing in Vietnam, lucky for us," Stull said, "because it's disunified, it doesn't have a fundamental leader and it has a very fragile ideology driving it, whereas in Vietnam there

Neil Esser, architecture senior

"I had no guilt. But I did think many times how stupid Americans were or still are. ... I don't know if it's because we're a young nation and we're kind of stupid or we just have power."

Kelly Arnett, biology sophomore

"The way that they're (U.S. leaders) making decisions today, they really should be paying more attention to what happened back then so they can avoid making any similar mistakes."

ABOUT THIS STORY

Kernel reporter Sean Rose and photographer Kasha Stevenson spent 16 days in Vietnam over the Winter Break reporting this story about Peter Berres and his class of five UK students.



Sean Rose is a journalism and English senior. He was in South Korea and Japan in the summer of 2007 as part of a trip awarded by the Scripps Howard Foundation and was a reporting intern at the Lexington Herald-Leader last summer as well. He will work at The Seattle Times as a reporting intern this summer.



Kasha Stevenson is a journalism junior. The trip with UK was her third time in Vietnam. She is currently looking into multimedia internships on the West coast.

"People, they don't have a job, and they want to volunteer to the army to get the money. They don't have an idea for to fighting with the communists or fighting with someone else. It's just only they join to the army for to take care of their family."

— Nguyen Thanh Nam, former officer in the South Vietnamese Army

Signs of war persist for Vietnamese man

The 58-year-old guide sat in the back of the thin boat and shook raspy, staccato laughter from his lungs.

It was an "infectious laugh," said Peter Berres, a Vietnam veteran and an assistant dean for admissions and student affairs in the College of Health Science leading UK students on a trip examining the United States' and Vietnam's tangled histories.

Nguyen Thanh Nam had been guiding the group of UK students in Southern Vietnam for two days. He sat in the rear of a boat, crisscrossing the tangled channels of the Mekong Delta with Jeff Keith, a graduate student, and Will Stull, a political science senior.

Knowing some of Nguyen's personal history along with Vietnam's, Keith asked him why he was so cheerful.

The man, a father, husband and former officer in the South Vietnamese Army, gave a long answer.

He was imprisoned after the South's defeat. One day, guards took him to a giant boulder and gave simple orders: Bring this back to the camp.

They were testing him. Nguyen said. They were testing him to see how badly he wanted to stay alive. He couldn't pity himself, he couldn't question the unfairness of his condition — he had to be grateful for being alive.

Nguyen pushed the boulder for two days until it finally rolled into camp.

"I have a lot of painful memories like that," Nguyen said. People call him "steel-brained," he told Keith, because he has to lock those memories away and force himself to focus on the present, the basic luxury of being alive, no matter what the conditions.

"And that's what made me want to move that boulder," he said.

So the veteran was quick to laugh and smile, wrinkling his eyes — dark brown with a thin halo of blue around the iris. But he also was quick to recede into himself at times when discussing the past.

In many ways, Vietnam is a country pulled taut by the past and the future. Citizens leave the past in the past, particularly when foreign businesses and tourist dollars aid the economy. But the same people also are raised to take pride in their history of defending against foreign invaders.

Large national cemeteries line the highways in Central Vietnam, honoring those who were "born in the North and died in the South," with shrines in their center and short, simple headstones standing in perfect lines, similar to those at America's Arlington National Cemetery. And of course, there is the tension created between the government and those who served South Vietnam.

Living in the dark

Shortly after North Vietnam overran the South, reunifying the country and ending the American War, Nguyen received orders to report to training from the new Communist government. The training, some sort of orientation for old enemies about their new government, would only be a few days, the orders said.

Nguyen packed, said goodbye to his wife of just two months and his first son, still growing in her belly, and left home.

He did not see or speak to his family again for more than four years.

Nguyen — along with nearly all officers of the former South Vietnamese Army — was loaded onto a truck, taken to a train and transported to a re-education camp in rural Northern Vietnam.

For four years Nguyen lived in primitive conditions, clearing jungle, building schools, moving rocks — tasks of rebuilding a country — and performing whatever labor his guards demanded during the day while learning about the communist system by night. He had no contact outside his camp. His only hope was that he would work hard enough and retain his studies well enough to please his masters and be released.

There was little method for prisoners' release inside Nguyen's re-education camp. Some people remained for a year, some for 10. Some never returned to the south. Others only returned physically. Sitting in a Can Tho hotel room speaking limited English, Nguyen told how many freed officers returned home to discover the life they left had disappeared. They went crazy, Nguyen

said, unable to cope.

"We didn't know any information or news from our families. Nothing," Nguyen said. "We don't understand why we go there."

"You're living in the dark."

One day, after four years of moving boulders, chopping through jungles and studying communism, prison staff simply told Nguyen his time was finished and he could leave. He moved back to Saigon — officially Ho Chi Minh City since the end of the war — and found his wife and his son, who, having never seen his father, did not recognize him.

Life is easier now, but the consequences of the war are still evident. Before interviews for this article, Nguyen was hesitant to speak. Vietnamese who openly criticize their government can sometimes expect retribution. Nguyen only spoke after being assured that this article was historically and not politically motivated.

Forgiveness was something Berres found in overwhelming supply on his first visit to Vietnam the previous winter — forgiveness of Americans for the war and a willingness and need to move forward. Nguyen is no different.

Nguyen said he is not angry at his gov-



Nguyen Thanh Nam, the group's guide in Southern Vietnam and a former officer in the South Vietnamese Army, laughs as he talks to Peter Berres while riding in a van. Nguyen received military training while Berres was stationed close to Saigon, Nguyen's home city.

ernment for what it did to him. Nor is he angry at Americans for the war. There were times when many soldiers didn't know when they would return home, Nguyen said, and other times when "it's a very hard life." Some dwell on these difficulties, asking questions that can't be answered: Why did the government take the former officers? Why did America leave South Vietnam, abandoning its southern allies, not taking care of them?

"We don't say that," Nguyen said. "We, OK, say that's finished, it's the periods and it's finished and we can try to do something different."

Moving forward is part of their culture, he said. Vietnam has a long history of warfare, fighting China, France and the United States. The country must progress from war to survive. Some people still harbor hostility, but it's of no use, Nguyen explained. "Vietnamese has many areas for war, like with the China and the French and the Americans," he said. "If you're angry every time, you cannot do anything."

He keeps the painful memories of the camp, the war and poverty far back in his mind, not allowing himself to dwell.

On a previous trip, Berres experienced what he felt was true forgiveness and, as in America, he thinks younger generations are quicker to move on than older ones. Still, the standard Communist Party line may be progressive, but Berres can't believe everyone can simply move from the past.

"There's no way in the world for some of the people we've talked about ... the older people, who lost children, parents, aunts, uncles and so forth," Berres said, "there's no way in the world — no way in the world — they can simply forget it, as if it didn't happen."



"I certainly remember more discussion in classwork and classes and just generally around campus about the war then than you hear now. ... You damn well better be paying attention unless they want to sacrifice their kids and their grandkids for no reason."

PETER BERRES
UK instructor

Left: Off the Mekong River in a remote village near Can Tho, Berres buys post-cards from a Vietnamese girl.

Continued from page A5

Holding on to guilt

Berres woke up with a disorienting thought: He never fought in Vietnam.

The same thought had struck him several other times at night over the decades since his return. He rose from bed and walked into his home office. A picture of a baby-faced soldier with an assault rifle in hand and two grenades strapped to his chest stared back at a bearded, aging Berres. Proof.

Berres does not know where the anxiety over never going to war came from. Perhaps it's that the event much of his life hinges on would be fiction if he had not gone to Vietnam.

Other proof lingers as well. When his daughters were born, Berres stayed at home with them while his wife worked. He spent eight years focusing on his family instead of his career.

In a significant but secret way, raising his girls helped make amends in his mind for the children and old man he accidentally killed in Vietnam. The memory of these strangers was another wound from Vietnam that took decades to heal — if it ever fully can.

Berres and his only wife divorced in 2001 after 29 years of marriage. Vietnam had nothing to do with the end of their relationship, he said, but one of the reasons she gave for their divorce was that she missed out on her parental opportunities when Berres stayed home with the girls.

It was only after the divorce in 2001 that Berres told his wife about the children's deaths in Vietnam. She was the first person outside of the Army to know.

Before the publication of this story, Berres had told only three people outside of the service, including his wife.

Sitting in his Lexington living room, Berres recalled those days, voice shaking. He said he could not recount them out loud for fear of breaking down, preferring to write them in an e-mail instead.

"I still have guilt," Berres said in his home.

"I don't hold myself personally responsible for what happened. That's a fine technicality that's comforting, but it doesn't erase the guilt or the remorse or anything. ... It was an accident and not an intentional act. But like I say, that's something to hold onto, but it doesn't really change a whole lot of it."

Idealism wounded and abandoned

Light rain fell softly on the old village of My Lai in Central Vietnam. Next to a brick walkway, water puddled in long, deep ditches. Ditches that 40 years ago were flooded with the blood and bodies of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians who were shot and killed by U.S. soldiers in March 1968.

Berres and one of his students lit an empty pack of Marlboro Reds on fire and held the flame to sticks of incense — a traditional offering to the dead.

Berres walked up to a statue and altar, raised the incense in acknowledgment of those killed and stood the burning sticks in a large vase.

The massacre lasted just four hours, and by its end, more than 500 people were slain, including many children and elderly, and 27 entire families.

On his first return to Vietnam in 2006, Berres said his "singular therapeutic day" was visiting My Lai. As he and others in his traveling group struggled to light incense, an old woman approached them to help. She was a survivor of the attacks.

Berres told her he was a soldier in Vietnam at the time the massacre happened. He apologized on his country's behalf, but the woman told him it was in the past, that she had tried to let go of that time and forgive it.

He had never seen such capacity for forgiveness in a human being.

"I thought, if she can do this, suffering what she suffered, experiencing what she experienced, then I need to let a couple things go," Berres said.

Berres returned to the United States less angry at himself for ever supporting the war and less angry at his country.

Like the Vietnamese, he remembered the



At the Forbidden Citadel in Hue, Vietnam, the group looks into a large crucible. The guide told the group that the old kings of Vietnam used to boil people to death inside it.

past but used it to move forward with his students.

Inside a museum at My Lai, the students sat on tile steps and flipped through several books placed on a small glass counter for visitors to sign.

One message, a black ink scrawl from December 2006, told a story common to many American GIs, both volunteers and draftees.

"I came here as an idealistic 18-year-old in 1968," it read. "That idealism was mortally wounded and left here."

It was signed, "Peter Berres, Lexington, KY."

In the body of his note, Berres wrote that his 30 years of teaching were "fueled with the passion of an unjust war."

The forgiveness he found in Vietnam refueled his teaching, he wrote, especially about the need for forgiveness. Besides discovering the

ugly reality of America's role in Vietnam, Berres also hoped his students would learn about shared humanity and forgiveness in his course.

Sparking a major change in the way America's youth views war would be ideal, but, as the log in My Lai reminds, much of Berres' idealism never returned from Vietnam.

"I don't know that I have any grandiose hopes anymore about it," Berres said. "I see it as a way of maybe helping people make individual decisions. I'd really like to say 'yeah,' and all these individual decisions will morph into a collective intelligent decision. But I'm not nearly that naïve. ... It's just a one person at a time kind of thing."

Still, he challenges individuals' thinking, provoking them to decide — as he did in 1968 — who they are as Americans. And as human beings.



Berres, center, walks with a guide and members of a Hmong tribe near Sapa in the northern mountains of Vietnam.

