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US vets return to see grim legacy of Vietnam War

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DONG HA, Vietnam -- A piece of shrapnel sliced Jerry Maroney's right leg. A bullet pierced Peter Holt's neck. Les Newell took a shot in the rump.

These old American soldiers recovered from the physical scars of combat long ago. But last week, they visited a place where people still have fresh wounds from the Vietnam War, which ended nearly 35 years ago.

They came to Quang Tri Province, which is still littered with landmines and unexploded ordinance that routinely kill and maim people trying to scratch out a living in the

rice fields. Their visit was organized by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, which built the Washington, D.C., monument that commemorates the lives of the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam.

VVMF sponsors Project RENEW, a non-profit organization that helps Quang Tri residents like Pham Quy Tuan, 41, whose left hand and right arm were blown off by a leftover American projectile he found in a rice paddy four months ago.

"When I realized I'd lost my hands, all I could think about was how much I love my wife and kids, and how I would become a big burden to them," said Tuan, who also suffered severe burns and remains in chronic pain.

The VVMF delegation was led by Barry R. McCaffrey, a retired four-star general who served as President Clinton's drug czar and now appears as a military analyst on NBC news. Also participating were family members of fallen soldiers and Vietnam veterans making their first trip back to Vietnam, several of whom had personal missions.

Thomas J. Whitehouse of Lake Oswego, Oregon, a former U.S. Army captain, wanted to return some medals taken from the body of a Vietnamese soldier four decades ago.

Sam Metters, who has three Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart, hoped to find a school that he and several Army comrades designed for Vietnamese orphans while they were stationed near Saigon.

Judy Campbell of Wilmington, Delaware, planned to visit the spot in Bien Hoa where her brother, Keith Campbell, was killed during a pitched battle on Feb. 8, 1967, three weeks before his 21st birthday. Keith Campbell, a medic, was killed by a sniper just 19 days after he arrived in Vietnam, while saving two injured soldiers during a fierce firefight.

"He was a medic, and medics save lives," said Judy Campbell, who was 17 when her brother died. "That's what Keith did, at the cost of his own."

The delegation began its weeklong tour of Vietnam in Hanoi. They were impressed by the economic boom unleashed by the market reforms the communist country has implemented over the last two decades.

And they were heartened by the warm welcome they received from the people, including those in a Quang Tri district where they dedicated a new elementary school funded by VVMF.

"I feel like a rock star," said Maroney, 62, a former Marine who recently retired from his job as a detective in Long Island, New York. "Look at how well everyone is treating us!"

Maroney was apprehensive before he arrived. "I hated these guys. They killed my friends. We killed them. It was war."

For the Vietnamese in Quang Tri, the war hasn't completely ended.

"It's still a daily part of their lives," said Scruggs, who decided to start Project RENEW during a visit to Vietnam in 2000. "Some of them are missing limbs, some have been blinded. It tears your heart out."

According to VVMF, more than 350,000 tons of landmines and explosives remain scattered across the country, much of them in Quang Tri, near the former Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, which once divided North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The province was the most heavily bombed and shelled during the war, and 92 percent of it remains contaminated with explosives.

Since 1975, when troops from the communist north triumphed, more than 100,000 Vietnamese people have been killed or injured by landmines or unexploded ordinance, more than 7,000 of them in Quang Tri, according to the Vietnamese government.

Project RENEW focuses on three districts in the province, where it educates people about the dangers of landmines and clears the land of explosives. It also assists the injured, providing them with artificial limbs, small loans and job training.

The program operates a hotline and has trained two teams to respond quickly when residents spot explosives.

On Thursday, the delegation watched a team detonate explosives that had been found near two homes in the Cam Lo district, including a cluster bomb and a grenade launcher in the yard of 75-year-old Nguyen Thi Yen Thi. Thi was relieved to see them go.

"You never know when those things might explode," said Thi, who has found a half dozen explosives in her yard over the years.

One of them spontaneously combusted on a hot summer day; another blew up when someone was burning trash in her yard. The others were removed without incident.

Two of Thi's nephews have been injured by landmines, a third was killed.

Many victims are children who play with the explosives, unaware of the danger. But many are adults like Tuan, who, before his injury, made a living collecting scrap metal and selling it to junk dealers.

When he discovered the projectile in the rice paddy, Tuan took it home and decided to remove a piece of copper wrapped around the device.

Copper is twice as valuable as the metals he usually collects, for which he typically receives a dollar or two a day.

When the bomb exploded, his wife was out collecting trash, which she recycles for a living. His 11-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter found him in the backyard.

When his wounds are more fully healed, the Project RENEW staff will see if he can be fitted with a pair of prosthetic limbs.

"Nothing would make me happier than a pair of artificial hands," Tuan said. "I'm helpless."

For more information, see <http://www.landmines.org.vn> or <http://www.vvmf.org>

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