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*Dear Family, Friends and Supporters of ASK@VSO,*

*My Son Michael and I have just returned from our latest journey to Vietnam. We flew out on 17 January and arrived back in Australia on 8 February 2020. As always it was another productive mission with our main goal being to officially open our sixth (6<sup>th</sup>) village well. Accompanying us was John Wright from Atherton Tablelands. John and his wife Jenny have been long time supporters of ASK&VSO so it was good to have him along and show him around.*

*We began in Ho Chi Minh City which was buzzing as it was TET – the Luna New Year. The day we arrived we were able to meet up with Dave Chaix and a group of FVSO members (Friends of Vinh Son Orphanages), the United States charity that supports the Vinh Son orphanages and who we have joined with in a number of projects in Kon Tum. It was great to finally put faces to names and spend some time with these wonderful folk. That evening we had dinner with Coi (our sponsored young man who our family has known since he was 9. He is about to turn 21). With him was the girl Chong who is sponsored by the Townsville Soroptimist Club. For the next couple of days we were able to show John around HCMC.*

*On 21 January we caught the ferry down to Vung Tau where we caught up with an old 32 Small Ship Squadron mate, Alan White who lives there. We enjoyed a good meal at a French restaurant. Next day we did a tour of Nui Dat and the Long Tan Cross. The original Cross is now in the Australian War Memorial thanks to the generosity of the Vietnamese Government. While at Nui Dat we visited my old concrete slab which my tent mate and I built at the entrance to our tent in 1971. It is still there – a WOW moment every time I visit it. We then travelled back to HCMC which was an amazingly quick trip and took us through the tunnel under the Saigon River.*



***L to R – Dave and Derek, Vung Tau TET decorations. It is the Year of the Rat. Didn't know Mickey and Minnie were RATS. Derek and friend at his slab, Nui Dat, Derek, Michael and John at Long Tan. Derek's slab as it was in 1994.***

*We flew up to Pleiku on 23 January. The airport was jam packed. I have never seen such crowds. Obviously all were heading to their homes for TET. The New Year Eve was 24 January. Flight was on time and we were in Kon Tum by about 10AM. The main event for us was the opening of the well at Plei Klau village which, as with previous such occasions, was a memorable one. The well was drilled to 110 metres, about half being rock. It has a reverse osmosis filter system and 2000 litre storage tank. We were welcomed by the village Chief Mr. Trum and with beating of gongs by the men and dancing by the ladies. After the formalities it followed the usual sharing of jar wine – always a challenge.*

Mr. Trum made a speech sincerely thanking our principal donors for this project being Townsville Sunrise Rotary Club, the Rotary Club of Ross River, Townsville and the Rotary Club of West Perth. He also thanked our individual donors. **It was because of Rotary and our individual donors that the well was made possible.**

While at the village we met Sr. Juliana who, at her and village expense, cares for fifteen (15) orphan/abandoned children. There are 12 boys and 3 girls. The boys sleep in a room with dirt floor and share four (4) beds. Sr. Juliana asked if we could help. To cement the floor and tile it, render the walls and buy beds and bedding so each has their own bed, would cost VND 30,200,000.00. That is about AUD \$2000. Those funds have now been sent and that issue now resolved. So now there are about 2000 Jarai (ethnic minority) villagers drinking clean, filtered water and some poor lads now with a decent bed. Great outcomes.

The other task we undertook was to place a new sign on the bridge/culverts we did under the MiVAC (Mines Victims and Clearance Trust) in 2009/10. The old sign had faded. We took the liberty of actually naming the crossing – Sappers Crossing. Being an old Royal Australian Engineer (Sapper) I could not resist. So all can now see, and of course MiVAC started with RAE veterans. We caught up with many old friends while in Kon Tum enjoying a meal with Sr. Imelda who did run Vinh Son 1 and is now retired, Sr. Bernadine of VS1 and Sr. Mary Khan of VSS. We always appreciate their hospitality.

Fellow Vietnam Veteran and Magnetic Island resident Peter (Jack) Trease gave us some wool hats and small blankets that were knitted by ladies from Magnetic Island. We gave those to Vinh Son 1 for the babies there. It can get very cold up in the highlands so this was a much appreciated gift. Our travelling mate John brought over some footballs which he gave to the kids at VSI who had great fun throwing and kicking the balls around. It is so good to see children having simple fun.



**L to R Gongs and Dancers, Inspecting the well with Mr. Hau and Mr. Ho, The Well Sign, Drinking jar wine, and a little chap says thanks for the clean water.**



**L to R With Sr. Juliana, Four beds 12 boys, Lunch with Sr. Imelda, With son Michael at Sappers Crossing and the Sign.**



**L to R Some of the abandoned kids. And now their new room and beds and final pic shows floor, windows, door. All good.**

The next leg of our journey saw us in Hanoi where again TET celebrations were in full swing. I had been there before but for my son Michael and our companion John, it was their first visit so we played tourist. From there we headed north west to Dien Bien Phu which was the location of a famous battle that saw the French garrison defeated by the Viet Minh in 1954. I had never been there so it was a real history lesson for us all.



**L to R Derek at DBP, a US 155 gun DBP, view from Eliane 2 (Hill A1), sharing a Tay meal and with local kids DBP**

The first picture is taken at the Viet Minh HQ of the battle. The gun was used by the French but supplied by the US. The third picture is taken from the French fortress Eliane 2 (named Hill A1 by Viet Minh) which was French commander de Castries HQ. It overlooks the airport at Dien Bien Phu. The French surrendered on 7 May 1954.

I have added a rather poignant story from this part of our journey which I reckon is worth sharing. I hope you will agree.



### **A WARRIOR HAS PASSED. HIS DUTY IS DONE**

16956 Neville William Tickner born 28 June 1945 at Mount Morgan, Queensland and served in 4<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, Vietnam, from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1967 to 5<sup>th</sup> March 1968, passed away in January 2020. May he rest in peace.

I was first connected to Nev via a mutual mate and old Artillery man, as I was planning to visit Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam. Nev had been living in Dien Bien Phu for 10 or so years, hence the link. It also happened that he lived in the same hotel that I was booked into – the Phadin Hotel. I had received a few emails from Nev who assured me that he would ensure our stay in DBP was going to be a good one and we would see lots of good things and meet some wonderful people including his partner, Heather and his well trusted guide Thanh Binh Ca Thi – we called her Bing. The next message I got was from our mutual mate, telling me Nev had passed away.

We (myself, my Son Michael and a mate, John) decided to push on to DBP and figured we could select stuff to do and visit during our 3 night stay. We were at the airport in Hanoi waiting for our flight to DBP when a lady approached me and asked if I was Derek. That was surreal. It was Heather, Nev's partner. She had just completed all that was required to have Nev's ashes returned to Australia. I could not imagine the grief she was enduring. Yet here she was still wanting to follow through on Nev's wishes to ensure we had a great time in Dien Bien Phu. A truly amazing lady.

And so we did. We were so well looked after in DBP by both Heather and Bing. Everywhere we went we encountered people who identified us as being friends of Nev or as he was so well known there, Ong Tay – Grandfather. We continued to hear of the wonderful support he had given to the ethnic minority Tay people of the region. He was a much respected man. We were invited to a dinner at a Tay home where a place was set for Nev and a drink placed where he would have sat had he been there. We raised a glass to absent comrades.

Our visit to DBP will live in our memories. We cannot express enough, our thanks to Heather and Bing for their caring and assistance during our visit. I am so sorry we never got to meet Ong Tay. I am confident his memory will live on in DBP for many years to come. My sincere thanks to Heather and Bing and our sincere sympathy for your loss of such an amazing man.

Derek Smith OAM (Major RAE ret'd) 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020

#### **In Conclusion:**

I am so grateful to all those who help fund our projects. Without your support it would not be possible to undertake such work. Sincere thanks to the three Rotary Clubs – Sunrise, Ross River and West Perth for their generous donation towards the well. . There are some people who make very regular donations. I do not need to name them. They know who they are. This continued monitory support is amazing. Special thanks to them. A special thanks to our Kon Tum contacts Mr. Hau and Mr. Ho. They are our 'go to' guys who really do make things happen with our projects. All proceeds from the sale of my book, A Twist In The POGO's Tale, go to the projects. All contributions go to our work - 100%. We fund our own expenses. The benefits to the children of the Vinh Son orphanages is immeasurable and the value of the wells - clean drinking water for thousands of village people and their children. It is so vital. This is just not possible without your support. THANK YOU ALL.

My kindest regards

[Derek Smith OAM](#)

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