

Running with the Enemy?

That was my first question when I learned Danang would host an international marathon. The second question was, why, as a Vietnam vet, would I want to go back?

The last time I ran in Vietnam was 42 years ago, and it wasn't a marathon. It was a midnight sprint to a sandbagged bunker. I was a naval advisor then, and the run was to avoid two incoming mortars on a small riverboat base near Danang. Three days after the attack, I was a civilian standing outside the gates of the Sandpoint Naval station in Seattle. It was a surprisingly sudden ending to my service in Vietnam. President Nixon had made good on his promise to bring the troops home.

Through the following decades, I thought a lot about those last few days in Vietnam. I always felt that I left something behind because I left so quickly. For that reason, I decided to go back and run in Danang.

The race was to be held September 1st when average temperatures were still well into the 90s. I had no delusion that I could run fast under those conditions, so I set modest goals. I wanted to avoid running my slowest marathon or having a heatstroke. At the same time, I decided to play low on my military experience and American citizenship.

The summer went fast; the next thing I knew, I was on a plane headed to Danang. As the airplane got nearer to Vietnam, I began to feel the same anxiety, worry, and fear of the unknown that I had felt when I first flew into Saigon in 1970. I was hoping things would be better this time.

The plane landed late at night, and all of my insecurities surfaced as I exited the main cabin. Standing directly before me, checking the exiting passengers, was a portly soldier my age. My eyes went straight to the red star on his dark olive cap, then to the red shoulder pads covered in gold stars. He was the enemy. We locked eye to eye. His stern, piercing glare intimidated me so much that I quickly shied away as I passed him. All of my doubts about returning to Nam came back.

As the last person to leave immigration that night, it took a while to find a cab, negotiate a fare, and head for the hotel. Along the way to the hotel, I caught the first glimpses of the city I had abandoned 40 years ago. Even in the darkness, the city was vibrantly alive with activity from countless sidewalk cafes and outside beer gardens. Capitalism had survived the war. All it took to start a business was a table, a few chairs, and a piece of ground.

After 24 hours on the road, I finally reached my bed and quickly fell asleep. In the morning, I awoke to the sound of the city coming alive. With the night and long flights behind me, I felt more at ease and set off to visit the expo.

The expo was the smallest I've ever attended, just six tents on a beach. I was the only runner there and felt guilty about not buying anything.

Small expo aside, it was easy to see that this marathon was significant to the government and the people of Vietnam. The city had giant billboards, banners, and signs welcoming "foreign professional athletes from 25 countries." In addition, work groups were all over town, pulling weeds, sweeping sidewalks, and washing walls. They were cleaning up in anticipation of visits by the invited dignitaries, who included army generals, local and national government officials, and consulate generals from the US and Russia.

After walking around town all day, I went to bed my second night in Danang with mixed emotions. I was excited about being in an inaugural international marathon but concerned about the temperature and humidity facing me and uncertain where an American veteran would fit into the whole picture.

The anxiety of being in Vietnam returned when I left my hotel at 4:30 AM to walk to the start line. On every corner, three or four young soldiers were acting as the "volunteers" who would support the race. Although I felt a little uncomfortable walking alone among them, I didn't feel intimidated by them as I did with my contemporaries at the airport. After two days in the country, my view of the Vietnamese was beginning to change.

My 10-minute walk to the start line had me sweating from the humid nighttime temperatures in the 80s. About three hundred runners were in the race, with only

half running the full marathon. I searched the runners for a friendly face but didn't find one. It was a subdued group for an international race.

With the temperature expected to reach well into the 90s with high humidity, the race directors repeatedly announced that we could quit after the first half. It was an option that many would ultimately take.

The start was similar to most marathons where the dignitaries assemble; a few brief speeches are given, and then, to the sound of music and the cheers of spectators, the runners start.

The first notable thing after the start was the large number of photographers who lined the course. Like paparazzi, they were everywhere: at the water stops, intersections, bridges, and beaches. Despite their significant presence, they weren't there to sell you a picture. They just wanted to record a special moment in the city's history.

While appearing a bit orchestrated at the beginning of the race, the crowds were enthusiastic in their support. A friendly shout, "Hal-lo," always with a smile, meant a lot to me as the going got rough. All along the route, shouts rang out from sidewalk cafes, beer gardens, and motorcycle riders. The race course was miles of smiles.

I loved the most hesitant, almost whispered "Hal-lo" from children. In nearly all cases, I could see that the parents were encouraging their children to call out to a foreigner. The parents knew full well what response their children would get. A hearty "Hal-lo" would be the reply, and the children would giggle, smile, and proudly beam toward their admiring parents.

In the race itself, I needed a lot of those smiles. The heat and humidity made the race brutal from start to finish. If I had a pacing plan, it was gone in the first mile. By the 5K mark, I had already gone through 6 bottles of water, and the sun hadn't even come up.

By the time I finished the race, I had gone through 50 bottles of water without going anywhere near a port-a-potty. I drank half the water and poured the other half over me. It was almost as if the water evaporated as it hit my tongue.

Thankfully, the organizers prepared well for the heat and had 29 water stations. More people were handing out water at those stations than marathon runners in the race. In addition, medical cars patrolled the course and handed out water bottles to runners in need.

The full marathon course was simply a two-lap circle that started at China Beach, crossed over the Han River, went directly through the town center, and returned over the river to follow the beach back to the start line. The only hills on the route were the approaches to the bridges.

Spectators on the first lap were primarily organized groups. The race was a fundraiser for hospitals, so their staffs were well represented, along with school children, government workers, and the military. Spectators on the second lap generally were individuals out on the streets to celebrate Independence Day.

My personal race plan started to come apart right out of the gate. At 5K, I was already beginning to slow. At 5 miles, the sun had risen, and I found myself hanging out at the water stands a little longer. The young people operating the stands were incredibly friendly but spoke little English.

By mile 8, I had given up all attempts to project a finish time and took my first of many walking breaks. As I approached the sea near mile 9, trees shaded the road. The trees provided only psychological cooling because there was no wind from the ocean.

At the halfway mark, it was tough not to take the offer to end the race as a half marathon. I was already 30 minutes behind my original goal and fading fast. I saw several runners quit as I moved straight ahead.

The spectators gave me a round of applause as I started that second loop. I guess the crowd thought the old man would give it up. The good feeling from the

applause was fleeting as the temperature rose. A fellow runner told me the heat factor was nearing 100 degrees.

The crowds thinned considerably on the second round as the organized groups and the paparazzi disappeared into the heat. The runners continued to straggle farther apart as they pushed ahead on hot pavement under a burning sun.

By mile 16, I had crossed the first bridge and was back in the city's center. My running was down to alternating long jogs with short walks. The city was now awake, and the sidewalk cafes filled with spectators drinking their morning teas. I realized that most spectators were there to have their teas and not to watch me run. But still, the "Hal-los" and smiles came from all directions and helped to distract me from the struggle.

At mile 18, I was down to short jogs alternating with longer walks. At that point, I was beginning to see a city I had missed on the relatively faster first circle. Much of what I saw were the remnants of the American military presence of the 1960s and 1970s. In many places, I saw crumbling concrete walls topped with barbed wire. I recognized them as the walls that encircled the vast US marine and naval base at the time of my service. It was reminiscent of Berlin and how pieces of its wall now dot that city.

The struggle to push forward became increasingly challenging as I neared mile 20. At that point, I was hot, sunburned, had blisters on my feet, and was exhausted. I was looking for an escape plan and found one. I made the pivotal decision to take the running out of racing.

Before me was an outdoor café with several young men cheering me on. In the midst of them was one empty chair. Maybe it was heat exhaustion, or perhaps it was just the belief that it was my time to perform, but I saw my name on that chair and sat down. Within 30 seconds, I had three beers pushed my way from laughing and smiling customers.

At the table nearest me, two young men about the same age I was while serving in Vietnam asked me where I came from. When I answered "America," they seemed slightly surprised but showed no animosity.

They then hit me with that one question I knew would inevitably arise during the trip. It was a question I expected, but I had prepared no answer for it. I didn't know how I would answer until the moment arose.

"Is this your first trip to Vietnam?"

They asked it in a friendly, innocent way. I looked around at the crowd watching me, thought for a second, and then hesitantly replied, "No.... I was here 43 years ago up on the Cua Dai River." I didn't have to say anything more. The meaning was clear.

The two boys sensed the uneasiness in my answer, and wanting to put me at ease, they cheerfully smiled and replied, "That's okay! Don't worry."

I couldn't leave it with that, though. I responded, "We were young, idealistic, impressionable, and like young men in every country, we listened to older leaders." My two new friends nodded in agreement, and a bond was formed.

For the next 20 minutes, we drank beers, watched marathon runners run by, and talked about what really mattered in the world: beer, food, and women. During that time, many people stopped by to take pictures, smile, and try to speak a little English.

When the time came to wake up my legs and finish the race, it was hard to leave my friends behind. During the twenty minutes at that little roadside café, I learned more about the Vietnamese than during the whole year I spent fighting them. I was a changed man as I headed out to finish the last 6 miles of the race.

The twenty-minute beer break rejuvenated me, but completing the race was still a struggle. I did manage to put it all together enough to run the last half mile and finish not only a great marathon but also an incredible journey.

After receiving my medal and grabbing a last bottle of water, I walked over to the railing to see who else was struggling to finish. Off in the distance, I saw one

Vietnamese runner. As he headed towards me and the finish line, I looked at him, then at the crowd, and finally at the soldiers that lined the finish area. I saw no enemies. All I saw were allies in individual battles to beat the heat, the fatigue, and the distance of the Danang Marathon.

I stayed long enough to applaud the Vietnamese runner and then turned to leave for my hotel. As I turned around, my two unnamed friends from mile 20 were smiling at me. They had ridden their mopeds to congratulate me and give a final goodbye.

The remaining two days of my trip to Vietnam continued to be an extraordinary adventure. People offered me free beers, invited me into their homes, and fed me. I even met up with a North Vietnamese soldier my age who took me on his moped to that beach I last ran on in 1971.

When it was time to leave Vietnam, I had to depart from the airport late at night. I checked in, went through immigration, and proceeded down the ramp to my plane. There at the door once again was the old soldier I found so intimidating upon my arrival. This time, I did not shy away as I passed him. I stopped, looked him in the eye, smiled, and gave him a big "Hal-lo." In return, I believe I saw a slight childish grin cross his face. With that, I knew I could finally leave Vietnam. There were no longer any enemies there.

