

Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - PO Box 18631 - Milwaukee, WI 53218

In Service to America



Meeting Notice

15 January, 2020

Elks Lodge 5555 W. Good Hope Rd.

Board Meeting 6:30 p.m.

Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.

Future Meetings 2020:

19 February, 18 March, 15 April, 20 May, 17 June

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National web page: www.vva.org

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Cheap healthcare and a decent standard of living

Americans are retiring to Vietnam

By RALPH JENNINGS, Los Angeles Times, DEC. 25, 2019

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — When John Rockhold drew a low number, No. 12, in the 1971 draft lottery, his adolescence in the San Fernando Valley forever changed. Seeking to avoid the Army, he signed up for the Navy just after graduating from Granada Hills High School. As an enlisted petty officer, he spent months operating boats that dropped off SEALs at night along long and humid Vietnamese shorelines where American troops were trying to stop the communist north from taking over the south.

More than 58,000 U.S. service members died in the war, and since it ended in 1975, innumerable American veterans have returned to Vietnam, seeking understanding, forgiveness or reconciliation. Now some are coming for more mundane reasons: inexpensive housing, cheap healthcare and a rising standard of living.

After his military career, Rockhold worked as a defense contractor, operating mostly in Africa. He first returned to Vietnam in 1992 to work on a program to help economic refugees. He settled in Vietnam in

1995, the same year the United States and Vietnam normalized relations. He married a Vietnamese woman in 2009.

In fact, he liked it so much that he persuaded his mother to move to Vietnam from Santa Maria, Calif., also in 2009.

“She came for the wedding, and decided to stay,” he said with a laugh. She lived in Vietnam until her death in 2015 at 94.

Rockhold, now 66, sits on several boards and is raising two children, 10 and 9, with his wife, Tu Viet Nga. The children were born via caesarean section; the procedure, including a four-day

hospital stay, cost about \$1,200, far less than it would have in the United States. The family lives in a 20th-floor condominium overlooking the Saigon River and the sprawling city beyond. They bought the four-bedroom, 3½-bathroom unit, measuring about 1,840 square feet along with a separate veranda, for about \$250,000 in 2011.

“It didn’t ever pass my mind that 30 years later I was going to own some of Vietnam”

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Rapid growth in Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighbors has created a situation that would have been unthinkable in the past: Aging American boomers are living a lifestyle reminiscent of Florida, Nevada and Arizona, but in Vietnam. Monthly expenses here rarely exceed \$2,000, even to live in a large unit like Rockhold's, including the help of a cook and a cleaner. The neighbors are friendly: A majority of Vietnamese were born well after the war ended in 1975, and Rockhold says he has rarely encountered resentment, even when he talks about his service as a combat veteran.

The vast majority of the owners in his apartment building are members of Vietnam's burgeoning urban middle class; many work in government or in education, and can afford to take vacations abroad. He estimates that no more than 1 in 5 residents in the 25-floor complex are foreigners.

"The Vietnamese were extremely nice to me, especially compared to my own country after I came back from the war," Rockhold said at a coffee shop recently inside a polished, air-conditioned office tower that also houses a restaurant and cinema.

In semi-retirement, Rockhold keeps busy: He helps Vietnam import liquefied natural gas, and is involved with a charity that provides solar energy to low-income households. His wife's family farm is about a 45-minute drive from where he once saw combat. "It didn't ever pass my mind that 30 years later I was going to own some of Vietnam," Rockhold said with a chuckle.

Vietnam has relaxed visa rules to lure American retirees like Rockhold, along with their savings. Geopolitics are a factor; Vietnam has seen spillover benefits from the economic boom in China but also has an ambivalent relationship with its far larger and more powerful neighbor, with which it fought a brief war in 1979. Expatriates tend to consider Vietnam more hospitable than China; Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, retains a cosmopolitan character.

The government won't say precisely how many American retirees live in Vietnam. Interviews with about a dozen such retirees suggest that some are here on one-year tourist visas; others are here just for a season or two; and still others have qualified for long residence by marrying Vietnamese citizens, as Rockhold did.

One Army veteran, Michael Gormalley, a

former platoon sergeant, returned to Vietnam as a volunteer English teacher for rural high schools in 2008. In 2014 he started teaching at a Vietnamese university.

He arrives at school at 7 a.m., before it gets too hot in the classrooms, which are not air-conditioned. He leads groups of blue-uniformed, necktie-wearing, exam-wary teenagers who might have classes six days a week. The 71-year-old former school principal in Pittsfield, Mass., said he had added teaching hours to "show respect for the Americans and Vietnamese people who lost their lives during the Vietnam War."

Frederick R. Burke, a lawyer with the law firm Baker McKenzie who is well-connected in the American expatriate community here, remarked on the number of veterans living in Vietnam. "They want to come back and want to reconcile," he said. "Often they've married a Vietnamese woman, and their Social Security and veteran benefits go a lot further here than they do in Los Angeles."

Vietnam has joined other Southeast Asian countries to lure retirees from wealthier parts of the world.

Cambodia, another nation that struggles with the legacy of United States military intervention, is also attempting to attract American retirees. The country's per capita GDP is about \$1,400, and for that sum, an expatriate can easily pay a month's rent, energy costs and a housekeeper's wages.

Sri Lanka, where a brutal civil war ended in 2009, is issuing renewable two-year visas to retirees 55 and older if they can support themselves and have at least \$15,000 in a local bank account. A typical expatriate cost of living is \$1,000 to \$2,000 per month.

Historically, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia were more common destinations for American retirees. But a higher cost of living, especially in coastal areas like California and New York, has pushed many farther afield.

Rockhold, the Navy veteran, said that healthcare had vastly improved in Vietnam. He added, "This is one of the safest cities in the world; petty pickpocketing is almost unheard of." Remarkably, he said, some of his friends are Americans who never served in Vietnam. "The cost of living is so low," he said. "It's a communist country, but if I blindfolded you and put you in downtown Saigon, you wouldn't know it."

Desert Storm Memorial Design Concept Approved

Richard Sisk, Military.com, December 2, 2019

The effort to build a National Desert Storm Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., passed a significant milestone in late NOV with formal approval of a design concept granted by the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts. Now, the plan is to have the memorial dedicated by Veterans Day 2021, which would mark the 30th anniversary of the 1991 Gulf War, said Scott Stump, CEO and president of the National Desert Storm War Memorial Association.

The design will be unveiled this week. "Our eternal thanks go out to the entire design team, along with the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Park Service for helping us reach this very important milestone," Stump said in a statement.

Fundraising is still underway to meet the projected \$40 million cost of the memorial, at a site off Constitution Avenue near the Vietnam Memorial, to honor those who served in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and liberated Kuwait from the forces of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The initial design called for a semi-circular wall to recall the "left hook" by U.S. ground forces through the Saudi desert to cut off Iraqi troops in Desert Storm. It would include the names of the fallen and the 34 countries that joined the U.S. coalition, according to the association's website.

The effort to establish a Global War on Terrorism Memorial is not as far advanced as the Desert Storm memorial. But it got a boost earlier in November with the introduction of a bill in the House by Reps. Jason Crow (D-CO) and Mike Gallagher (R-WI) that would designate three possible sites

for the GWOT memorial. One proposed site for the memorial, which has yet to get design approval, is



near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; another is near the Korean War Veterans Memorial; and a third is in West Potomac Park near the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. A GWOT memorial would be the first in the nation's capital for a war still underway. The project got past a roadblock in 2017 when Congress agreed to waive the requirement that the construction of war memorials on the Mall had to wait until 10 years after the conflict ended. The Global War on Terrorism Memorial Foundation is now in the process of raising an estimated \$50 million for the project, with a proposed groundbreaking in 2022 and a dedication in 2024.



How a Military Whistleblower Changed American History

Gil Troy, Daily Beast, Jan. 01, 2020

Some whistleblowers work inside the system, informing their bosses that something's amiss.

Others go outside, clueing in reporters, legislators, or regulators. A low moment in American history—the My Lai massacre in Vietnam—produced both kinds of truth-tellers. An army helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson, Jr, along with his crew members Glenn Andreotta and Larry Colburn, saved Vietnamese villagers from American fire during the killings. Thompson then reported the horrors up the chain of command—which tried to cover it up.

If it were not for a man named Ronald Ridenhour, however, the horrors of My Lai may never have come to light—and he deserves the most credit for forcing Americans to confront how some soldiers behaved in Indochina.

Fifty years ago, Ron Ridenhour was a grunt—a bit player in the Vietnam horror show. As a door gunner on an observation helicopter, he heard rumors shortly after March 16, 1968, of Americans shooting unarmed villagers.

Ridenhour started collecting testimonials, informally. In March, 1969, he sent a detailed report to 30 members of Congress, along with President Richard Nixon, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of Defense.

“The question most often put to me,” Ridenhour later recalled, “was not why had they done it, but why had I done it. In a word, justice.” He admitted: “I was younger and more foolish then.”

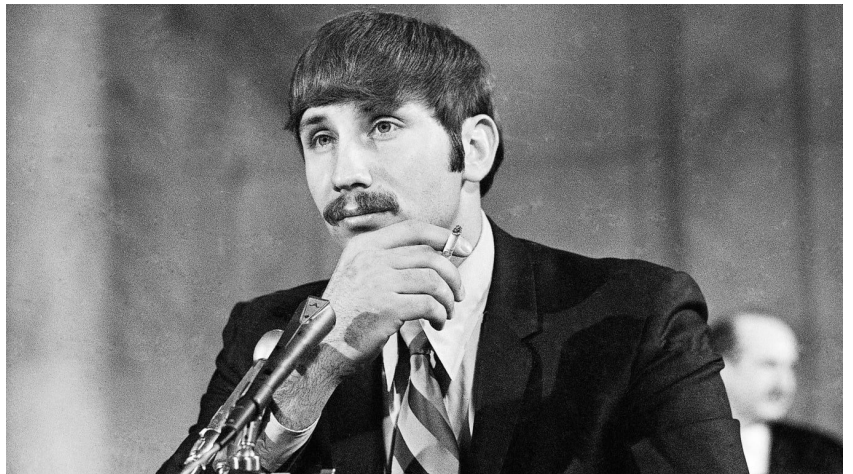
A classic Baby Boomer, born in 1946, he was raised on words like justice and honor. “They lived,” he wrote. “They breathed. They were the flesh and blood of American political tradition, embodied daily” in the nation’s policies.

Unfortunately, like many Boomers, Ridenhour’s romanticized vision of America didn’t survive the Vietnam jungle. Some buddies of his transferred into “C” Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry. In March, 1968 they neutralized a “notorious” area in South Vietnam nicknamed “Pinkville.” These soldiers had suffered heavy casualties in other search-and-destroy missions. Their superiors warned them that the villages were crawling with armed Viet Cong supporters.

Nevertheless, Ridenhour was shocked when his friend “Butch” Gruver described how soldiers mowed down as many as 504 civilians in the hamlet of My Lai, near Son My. Butch recalled “seeing a small boy, about three or four years old, standing by the trail with a gunshot wound in one arm. The boy was clutching his wounded arm with his other hand, while blood trickled between his fingers... Then the captain’s RTO (radio operator) put a burst of 16 (M-16 rifle) fire into him.”

One soldier shot himself in the foot to flee the violence. Gruver singled out one officer, Lieutenant William Calley, who rounded up villagers enthusiastically. He then ordered others to shoot them or machine-gunned them himself.

Ridenhour consulted his closest C Company friend. Mike Terry reported that, after finishing lunch, they shot badly wounded civilians to be merciful. Calley shot them in cold blood.



“Eating must have been difficult,” Ridenhour imagined. “There were dead Vietnamese everywhere.” After all, “the undead in the ditch had begun to cry out... It must have been a terrible sound, all that flopping and slapping of flesh, the crying, all that agony out there polluting a now otherwise peaceful morning.”

As Terry spoke, Ridenhour’s “head felt like it must feel when someone is scalping you alive. Even as it is actually happening, you can’t bring yourself to believe it. But yes, yes, yes, he said on every detail. It was all true.”

It was equally stunning that “so many

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young American men participated in such an act of barbarism,” and “that their officers had ordered it.” Ridenhour felt “an instantaneous spark of anger that soon grew to rage. I decided that I would track down the story. If it was true, then the chips would land where they fell.”

When he sent his letter in March, 1969—after being discharged—Ridenhour approached politicians and not reporters, because, “as a conscientious citizen I have no desire to further besmirch the image of the American soldier.” But the commanders and politicians responded half-heartedly.

Even journalists mostly overlooked it when the Army charged Calley in September, 1969. Seymour Hersh, the freelancer credited with breaking the story in November, would write that My Lai “remained just another statistic until late March, 1969, when an ex-G.I. named Ronald L. Ridenhour wrote letters...”

For the next two years, Calley’s case finally gripped America. Some condemned Calley’s crimes. Others grumbled that he alone was scapegoated. Most resented that a soldier whom they decided was doing his duty, and who claimed he was following orders, was prosecuted by superiors and hounded by reporters.

Ultimately, Calley was the only soldier convicted. Though sentenced to life in prison, he served three days in jail before President Nixon ordered him to be released to house arrest. A jury acquitted his commanding officer, Ernest Medina.

Nevertheless, the whistleblowers on My Lai changed American history.

In the 1960s, such informants were considered “snitches.” Then, the consumer crusader Ralph Nader fought to honor such truth-tellers as “whistleblowers,” evoking old-fashioned police officers who blew whistles while chasing bad guys. Today, various regulations protect those who expose systemic wrongdoing—although one person’s single-minded whistleblower remains another’s double-crossing traitor.

Thompson paid the whistleblower’s price, staying in the army and enduring harassment. Ultimately, he was vindicated, receiving military citations and seeing case studies analyzing his heroism taught broadly.

Ridenhour parlayed the skills he developed uncovering My Lai into an award-winning career as an investigative journalist—until he died suddenly while playing handball in 1998 at the age of

With each telling of his tale, Ridenhour became more bitter. Insisting that it wasn’t just “some lowly second lieutenant who went berserk,” he deemed “the massacre... the logical outgrowth of overall U.S. military policy in Vietnam.” Even “the distressingly enthusiastic” Calley, he believed, “was following orders.”

In 1973, during the “Medusa of Watergate,” Ridenhour mourned “the moral chaos of a people who have too long allowed themselves to be manipulated into accepting the Nixonian sophistry that whatever is expedient is necessary; whatever is necessary for the protection of Richard Nixon is legal; whatever is legal is both moral and ethical.” Nixon, he claimed, “made a bitter porridge of that justice I set out so long ago to find.”

Twenty years later, Ridenhour still complained that “neither the military nor the U.S. government has made any effort to come clean with the American public, the Vietnamese people or the rest of the world regarding the reality of our deplorable conduct in Vietnam.”

Still, most historians agree with Professor Howard Jones that My Lai “galvaniz[ed] the antiwar movement... ultimately helping to end American involvement in Vietnam.” More profoundly, the historian David Greenberg adds, “The disclosure of atrocities not only moved public opinion further against an already unpopular war... it raised fundamental and unsettling questions about who were the good guys and bad guys in Vietnam, and why we were there at all.”

Although such stories muddied the veterans’ homecoming, Greenberg adds that, “as dark deeds often do, the actions of Charlie Company also led eventually to stronger and clearer rules of conduct for American soldiers in wartime and a resolve within the military to resist the pressures toward cruelty that war inevitably brings.”

Undoubtedly, then, as now, whistleblowing took great courage. And sometimes, then, as now, it achieves what Ridenhour hoped it would. Ridenhour’s letter misquoted Winston Churchill to the effect that, “A country without a conscience is a country without a soul, and a country without a soul is a country that cannot survive.”

Ridenhour and others righted wrongs, saved the nation’s soul, and focused Americans on living their values, not violating them, so indeed we could not just survive, but start to heal.



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