

# **VIET-NAM AND THE UNITED STATES**

## **Signed the treaty ending the war**

### **45 years ago today**

#### **And How I Became the First American officer to Meet with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese after the Ceasefire**

- *By Tyrus W. Cobb*

Forty five years ago today the Paris Peace Accords were signed, signaling the end of a long and frustrating conflict in which victory proved elusive for the United States, and for our allies, principally the Government of South Vietnam (GVN).

I remember that day well, as I was designated to be the first American soldier to meet with the enemy—the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong—after the ceasefire. At the time I was on my 2<sup>nd</sup> tour of duty in “Nam”, this time as an intelligence officer at the headquarters of the American military presence “in-country”, MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam).

Those of us in HQ MACV had followed the tortured course of the Paris Peace talks, seemingly resigned to a continuation of the war as the talks collapsed in December of 1972 and the Viet-Cong (VC) and the North Vietnamese (DRVN) walked out of the negotiations.

One night—I think it was December 19<sup>th</sup> (1972), I was the officer on duty at MACV headquarters. Part of what we routinely did at night was to receive the Pentagon’s planned B-52 bombing targets and ascertain that they did not include friendly populated areas.

Around 3 am, my Sergeant rushed into my office and said, “Sir, you need to check these targets—I can’t believe them!” So I did—instead of the coordinates of the bombing being in rural areas where the VC and NVN units were thought to be located.....**this time the bombing targets were....downtown Hanoi and nearby Haiphong harbor!!**

I did not have a secure communication channel to the Pentagon, so I had to call on an unsecure regular telephone link back to “The Building”. I got on the line with an Air Force Colonel, and speaking elliptically, I asked, “Sir....we just received your plans for today.....**Do you all know what you are doing???**”

The Colonel replied, "Relax, Major....the President (Nixon) has approved this plan". OK, I said.....and the bombing commenced.

That seemed to get the attention of the VC and DRVN delegations in Paris, and they quickly came back to the negotiations. Within a month a "Ceasefire" agreement would be signed, calling for a halt to all hostilities in the two Viet Nams, North and South, on January 26, 1973.

### **The First American to Meet With the Enemy Following the Ceasefire**

The day before the ceasefire was to be signed, then BG (one star) John Wickham (later 4-stars and Chief of Staff of the US Army), and the Deputy Head of MACV under Major General Woodward, called me into his office. GEN Wickham began briefing me on the status of the Paris Peace talks, which included that a Peace Treaty was going to be signed the next morning our time, at 8 am.....And that a delegation of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (NLF) officers would be coming to Saigon, via Bangkok, to start the implementation of the ceasefire. **And the ARVN (South Vietnamese) would furnish a plane and crew to meet them in Bangkok and bring them to Saigon!**

This was all very interesting, but it seemed odd that a General would call a Major in to give him a personal briefing on all this. I still wasn't sure where I fit into all that, until GEN Wickham concluded the brief by saying, "**And the treaty requires an American officer to be in charge of all this....and that be you!**"

So the next morning we assembled at Tan Son Nhut airfield, ready to board the South Vietnamese plane to go to Bangkok to bring North Vietnamese and Viet Cong representatives to Saigon!!

The ARVN were furious with the terms of the peace accords and what they were asked to do. **They were so pissed off they pulled out their worst plane, an old Goony Bird C-47 with NO seats inside, for this mission.** To top things off the VC mortared the airfield an hour before the cease fire went into effect—that made the ARVN crew really happy!

The ARVN barely talked to me on the flight. After landing they parked their C-47 a long way from the main terminal. Very unhappy folks!

My interpreter and I walked some distance to the main terminal at the Bangkok airport just as an Air France 707 came in from Paris carrying the NVN and VC delegations (about 15), with one Polish "diplomat" along. I trekked down the airfield and over to the arrival ceremonies, which were

quite elaborate. The event was presided over by the Thai Foreign Minister, and a military band, as **this was the first meeting of the NVN and VC with their ARVN adversaries following the ceasefire.....and the first meeting with the American military after the signing of the Paris Accords!**

**I was a bit perplexed as I had no idea what the protocol for such an event would be.** There were lots of photographers and media there for the meeting--I wasn't sure what I should do. Should I shake their hands or do a John Foster Dulles (Geneva, 1954), where during those talks on ending another conflict in Southeast Asia, the Secretary of State refused to shake hands with the warring adversary parties.

I walked up to the ceremonies, and was introduced to the VC and North Vietnamese delegates. After the band stopped playing, I informed them that we had to walk down the tarmac a ways to this dinky little plane the South Vietnamese furnished to bring them to Saigon.

Anyway, that initial meeting went smoothly and we commenced to walk down to where the little C-47 was parked. And got in.

### **A Diplomatic First in this dinky C-47**

On the flight back to Saigon, the 4-man RNV crew refused to talk to the VC or NVN, except thru me, which was a bit absurd considering they shared a language and my Vietnamese wasn't all that great.

During the flight, I pointed out some landmarks that we were flying over, including such well known battle areas as the Parrots Beak and Elephant's Foot regions along the Vietnam-Cambodia border. I indicated to a NVN Colonel that the Parrot's Beak area was where the North Vietnamese 101<sup>st</sup> Army Division was fighting. He expressed appreciation and informed his cohorts, **one of whom reminded him of the fiction they were carrying on that the North had no troops down in the South! That was a bit embarrassing for him!**

The pilots came back during the flight and asked me to "tell my friends" (My friends ???) that the crew was going to take the plane up to 11,000 feet as they approached the Vietnam border, explaining that likely some VC units in the field had not yet gotten word of the ceasefire. And since they had the Soviet shoulder-mounted SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles, getting out of the SA-7 range was advisable. I explained this to the VC Colonel sitting next to me, and he looked out the window and said, "I think that would be a very good idea!"

We landed at Ton Son Nhut airbase in Saigon and began getting ready to get off the plane and take the delegations to their barracks.

Alas, the South Vietnamese laid on one of their stunts, as a representative came onto the plane and asked all of us to sign customs cards. That even though Saigon knew very well that the Accords had no such requirement.

And, since the the innocent "disembarkation card" had "Viet Nam Cong Hoa" typed in at the bottom (Republic of Vietnam), signing the card would give credence to the existence of a government that the NVN and VC did not recognize.

Since the VC/NVN refused to sign the "disembarkation" forms that had "Viet Nam Cong Hoa" on them, the RVN wouldn't let them off the plane! I was able to get off and call US headquarters for guidance and reached MG Woodward, who was playing tennis. He just said, "You are doing a great job, Major....stay with them and I will talk to President Thieu".

**We stayed on the plane for more than 24 hours, in searing heat and with no provisions, or bathrooms.** I was able to get off and bring some sandwiches to the VC and DRVN officers, who remained stoic through all this. Finally, GEN Woodward was able to get President Thieu to lift the restriction and we all got off the plane.

### **The VC and North Vietnamese Take Over Billets Occupied a Day Earlier by a US Army Aviation Unit!**

The delegations were taken by U.S. military vehicles to their quarters, which were American Army billets just a day before. MACV had just moved an aviation unit out of the quarters a few hours prior to our arrival. So the new residence for the VC and DRVN officers was typical Army, with metal cots and blankets folded in proper military style.

Later I was walking into one of their barracks and I saw a group of VC and DRVN troops staring at a wall locker, with mouths dropping and eyes wide open. What the hell were they looking at? I went by, peered over their shoulders and saw that one of the US Army Aviation guys had left a big Playboy "Playmate of the Month" foldout on the locker—the full frontal nude of a beautiful blond with enormous mammary glands!

I wasn't sure if it was inadvertent or planned, but it certainly was a great psychological ploy!

And so began the implementation of the Peace Accords! The Treaty required that in addition to bringing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops to Saigon, they would be dispersed to several observation posts throughout the South. The plan was for the VC, the DRV and the ARVN troops to be posted together at these sites to observe that the dictates of the Paris Accords were being followed.

This meant that more observer troops would have to be brought into the South from Hanoi, and that was to be done via USAF transport planes. Again, with an American officer in charge of the operation!

Guess who got that assignment! More on that to come...

■ Ty



That's me with members of the Indonesian delegation to the 4-Country "ICCS", the "International Commission for the Control and Supervision" of the ceasefire, established by the Paris Peace Accords to oversee the implementation of the agreement. The other countries were Poland, Hungary, and Canada.