

**Day 27 (Thursday 10/16/08) Phu My, Cu Chi Tunnels**

We were awakened by a thunder and lightning storm this morning just before the ship entered the Mekong River Delta in Vietnam. The seas were calm and the temperature was about 80F with high humidity. We were near the port of Phu My in Vietnam where the ship was going to tie up for the day. The following map shows where Phu My is located on the globe as well as Ho Chi Minh City and our target for today - the Tunnels of Cu Chi village. The second map shows a more detailed view of points of interest on the Mekong Delta.



The Amsterdam worked its way up one of the many arms of the Mekong River in the Mekong

Delta. There was industry development obvious all along the way. The Mekong Delta is a maze of connected channels. As we passed by we got an



interesting photo, shown on the left, of the top masts of a ship parked in another tributary.

The individual fishing boats which probably serve as homes for the families were anchored and they decorated the shallow parts of the river



It was slow going through the twists and turns of the river and we arrived about an hour late at the Phu My dock. There is nothing of tourist interest in Phu My so most of the passengers had signed up for tours away from Phu My. Consequently the line-up of busses on the pier may have set a record for this sort of thing.



Everyone wanted to get going on their tours to places like Ho Chi Minh City or the Tunnels of Cu Chi where we were headed. We all gathered in the Queen's Lounge and waited to be called to board our tour bus.

The tour to the Tunnels of Cu Chi is a long one because 6 hours are spent in the bus driving in the slow traffic to and from Cu Chi. Finally we were called away and our bus started rolling.



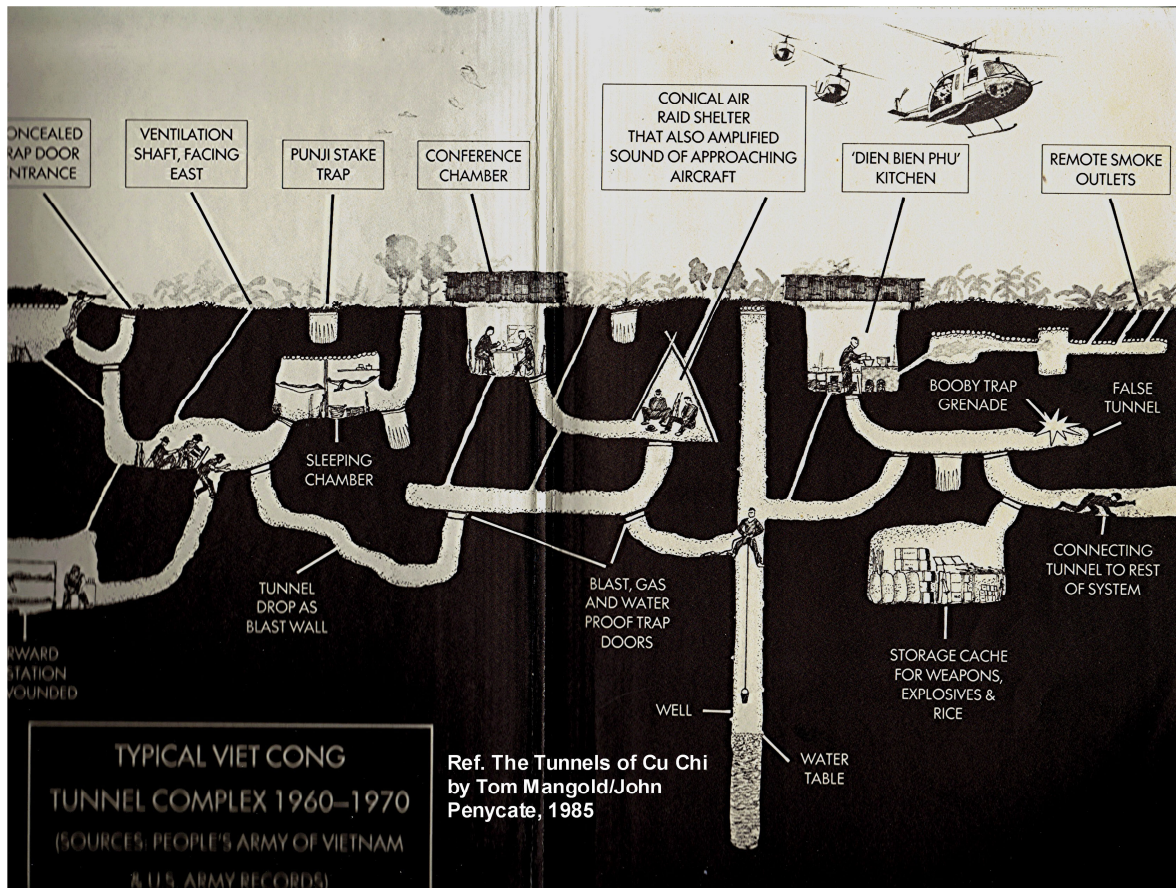
The first thing we noticed on the bus was a dashboard statue of the female Buddha. There were a series of brightly colored lights that flashed in the arc over the goddess. Apparently the bus driver was a Buddhist and was looking for all the help he could get in negotiating the highways of Vietnam crowded with trucks, cars, busses and lots of motorcycles.



Our guides name was Johny Duc. He spoke good English and spent the time between the pier and Cu Chi filling us in on information about Vietnam. He said Vietnam had some form of public health care that covered children and old people. Apparently the middle aged folks are on their own. The children go to public schools which have half day shifts in order to fit in all the children. The population of Vietnam has nearly doubled since the Vietnam War and the agony of the political reunification process that followed. The population now stands at about 82 million people and apparently a sizeable fraction of those people are children. Johny mentioned that it was not possible to get a civilian government job if your parents worked for the US or the South Vietnam government during the Vietnam War. In fact, the ban runs for three generations. Johny's father had worked for the US so even Johny's children will not be able to work for the government as a civil servant. His grandchildren will qualify for one of these jobs. The rule does not apply to the military and all Vietnamese males are expected to serve at least two years in the military. However, with a shortage of enemies nowadays and a poor economy, a large military doesn't make much sense and the compulsory military service requirement is being relaxed.

We finally arrived at our destination, just outside the village of Cu Chi. The claim is that Tunnels of Cu Chi (pronounced Koo Chee) were about 250km (150 miles) long at the peak condition. They were constructed on three depth levels so one mile on the surface might account for 3 miles of tunnels underneath. Before going on the cruise our friends Doug and Jean had recommended reading the book "The Tunnels of Cu Chi, the Untold Story of Vietnam", by the British journalists Tom Mangold and John Penycate (1985). The authors report the interviews they conducted after the war with Viet Cong fighters and American soldiers, known as tunnel rats, who fought in the tunnels of Cu Chi. The 150 miles of Vietnam tunnels, often dug just beneath the feet of the Americans, became the Viet Cong's sanctuaries, barracks, arms factories,

theaters, and hospitals, all built into a triple-level maze of passageways with hidden trapdoors deep within the earth. Here is a schematic picture from the book that portrays what a cross section of the tunnels might look like.



The small group of heroic GI's, known as tunnel rats, volunteered to fight hand to hand, armed only with knives and pistols against an ingenious and brave enemy inside the dark booby-trapped tunnels.

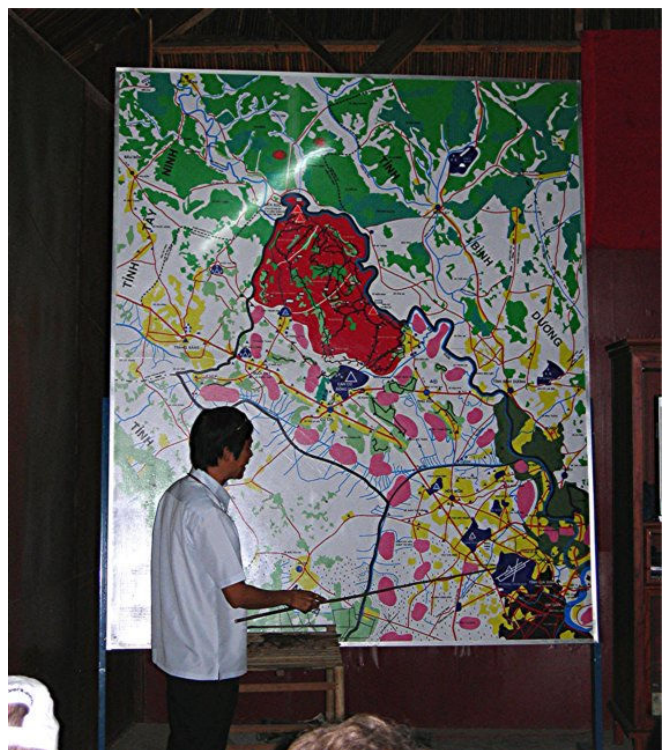
After reading the book by Mangold and Penycate we would also recommend it to anyone taking the Tunnels of Cu Chi tour or anyone just interested in that part of the Vietnam War history. In fact, if you are not a real "hands on" type of person you might be better off just reading the book and skipping the rather arduous 6 hour bus ride to see the tunnels.

At least part of the Tunnels of Cu Chi have been preserved like a national park in the US and are available to the public for an admission fee. The tunnel site is part of a Vietnamese military base and the uniformed men we saw were army personnel.

The approach to the site is appropriately by way of a tunnel that goes under a busy highway separating the bus parking lot from the exhibits. Our bus load of passengers filed into the tunnel and Johnny took care of getting us through the ticket taking part of the operation which is located in the tunnel beneath the highway.



We were ushered into a room where we could all sit down while Johnny gave us a briefing with some of the props provided to describe the strategic significance of the tunnels and how they were dug. The red area on the map shown on the right outlines the area that contained the Cu Chi tunnels. The tunnels were important to the Communist Viet Cong (VC) fighters and North Vietnam because they provided cover for the transport of supplies and the fighters carrying on and battle against the South Vietnamese government and the US forces. The location of the tunnel complex between Saigon and the VC support bases in the western highlands of Vietnam made them good launching sites for raids on Saigon and US bases around the area. In the photo Johnny is pointing to an airbase near Saigon



that was run by the US and was a frequent target of VC attacks. The digging of the tunnels was all by hand with very simple tools readily available in the countryside. The tools consisted of a short handled hoe like implement and a woven bamboo basket to carry a bucket load of dirt to the surface. The soil in the area is a mixture of sand and clay and apparently is ideal for relatively easy digging and stability once the tunnel shafts are dug out. The picture on the right shows the digging tools.



Here is a picture showing a tunnel vertical shaft leading down to a horizontal shaft. Partially hidden by the horizontal shaft, a manikin representing a Vietnamese tunnel worker is placing a basket of dirt in position for lifting out of the pit by means of a pole with a hook on it.



The construction of the tunnels started during resistance to the French occupation and continued for over 21 years through the Vietnam War. This laborious technique took extreme patience and dedication as the various conflicts raged in Vietnam. The extremely small amount of tunnel volume cleared by each basket of

dirt made the 150 miles of tunnels a truly amazing human accomplishment. By coincidence, about this time we happened upon some patient ants digging a hole one grain of sand at a time. Sensing what seemed like an appropriate metaphor for the Vietnamese tunnel diggers we took this picture on the right.



The VC fighters did not have the sophisticated weapons used by the South Vietnamese Army and US troops. They improvised with crude but effective traps that could injure and kill soldiers who might stumble into them. There was a display of the "Self Made Weapons" that employed sharp metal or bamboo shafts arranged in various ways to do harm.



This table shown below held a variety of spiked items that would impale an unsuspecting soldier.



A device we had heard of before was a trap door made to look like the jungle floor which would drop a person down onto sharpened bamboo shafts covered with human feces to cause infection. They had a display of such a trap. The trap door was about 3 feet wide and 5 feet long and about 4 inches thick. Each side was covered with thatched bamboo with jungle leaves woven into the bamboo. The device pivoted on a shaft through the middle so if a person stepped on either end of the trap door it would pivot and drop the person onto the sharp bamboo spikes. These photos

give some idea of what it looked like before and after being stepped on.



As we tramped through the jungle growth between exhibits we could hear gunfire from a not very distant location. We had assumed that they were using some artificial sound

effects to give us the feel of what it might have been like during the war.



We soon found that they had constructed a "Firing Range" as one of the military base



functions. There was a counter featuring an array of military rifles and automatic weapons along with the appropriated live ammunition. For about \$15 US they would let you fire a few rounds from an AK-47 automatic rifle or whatever other rifle you cared to use. They had some customers for this service and it was the shooting by these people that had provided the sound effects we had heard earlier. Thus the tourists were providing the realistic sound effects of battle. This was one of the cleverest uses of tourist money that we have seen. This fellow in the photo on the right would take your money and let you chose from his collection of rifles and ammunition.



They had a curio/gift shop associated with this part of the park and one of the more unusual things they had for sale was a bottle of liquor containing a snake, a scorpion and other interesting animal and insect bodies. We suppressed the urge to buy.

Part of the tunnel exhibit was a US M41 tank that had been destroyed by a land mine made in the Tunnels of Cu Chi.

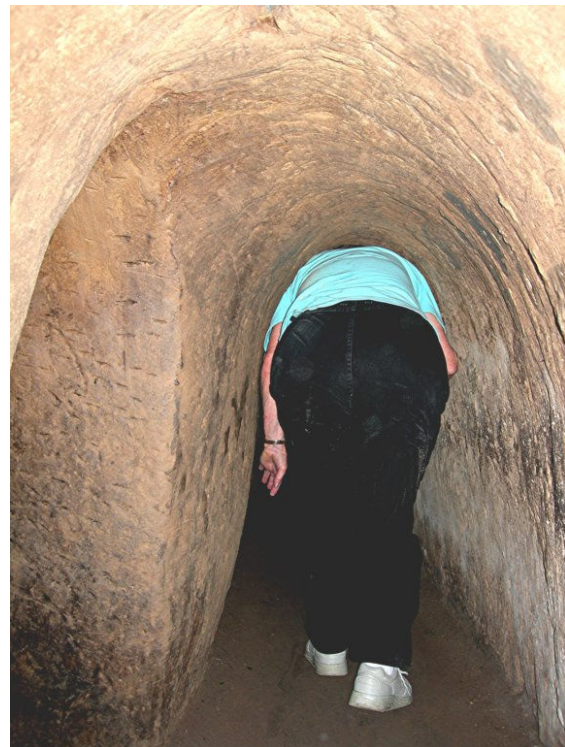


Finally we came to the highlight of the tour which was an opportunity to crawl through one of the tunnels. Barbara couldn't wait as she went down the ladder to a depth of about 10 feet.



The tunnels had a couple 3 foot drops, one of which is barely visible here on the left. That sudden drop was a bit of a test for our agility. Barbara is nimbly working her way ahead through the tunnel in this photo on the left.

The tunnel space was about what we had expected. The larger people had to rub on



the sides but we fit in pretty well without too much trouble. When you did rub the sides it felt like sandstone but your clothes picked up some sand in the process. It was actually possible to turn around but Barbara was so intent on getting through this exercise that she just proceeded on. It was up to Orlin, bringing up the rear, to get the obligatory picture on the right to record the occasion.



An obliging fellow passenger in a side passageway was finally able to get a fuzzy front view of the intrepid tunnel crawler.

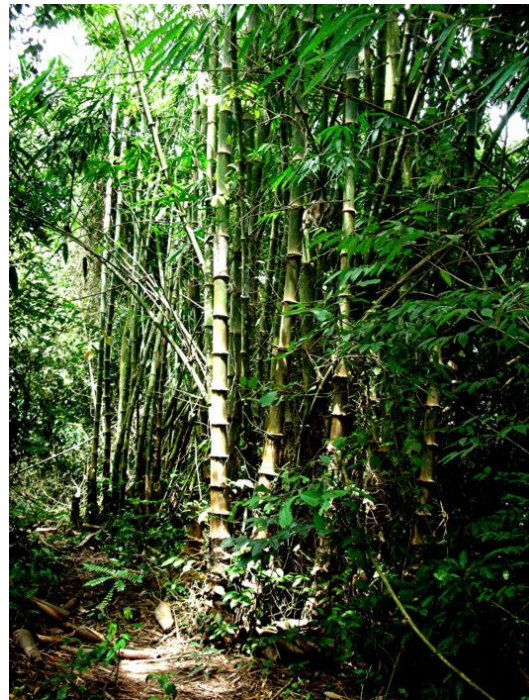
We came to the exit and gladly climbed the ladder to the surface.



It seems that the tunnels would have been cooler than the warm humid jungle around us. However, they were at least as hot as the jungle and during the 10 minute crawl for about 200 feet we worked up a good sweat.

After the tunnel crawl the tour was pretty much over. We walked back through a bamboo thicket with some large bamboo clumps growing in what were called the craters left from bombs dropped from the US B52s.

The tour included a nice Vietnamese style lunch at the Ben Nay Restaurant. We were hot a sweaty but enjoyed the meal. Note the dry spot in the front of Orlin's shirt is where a pouch for his ID papers hangs.



We were glad to return to the air conditioned bus for the 3 hour ride back to the ship at Phu My. The ride back was not wasted time as the passing scenery gave a glimpse of the Vietnamese scene which is mostly urban along the route we took. We saw well dressed ladies riding bicycles and driving motor bikes. Many women were wearing masks and gloves. The guide explained that the masks and gloves protect from the sun and keep the skin of the ladies as light as possible.



We had been on a bus to Ho Chi Minh City from Phu My in 2007 and we recognized some of the sights along the road. We made one rest stop that was the same place that Barbara had gone crazy and haggled with a street vendor through the open bus window until she got the silk robe she wanted. The fellow bus travelers had watched closely and cheered when she was successful. The street vendors were there today but the bargaining was more sedate. One reason may be that the bus we had today incorporated a design improvement where the bus side windows could not be opened.



The houses and businesses along the

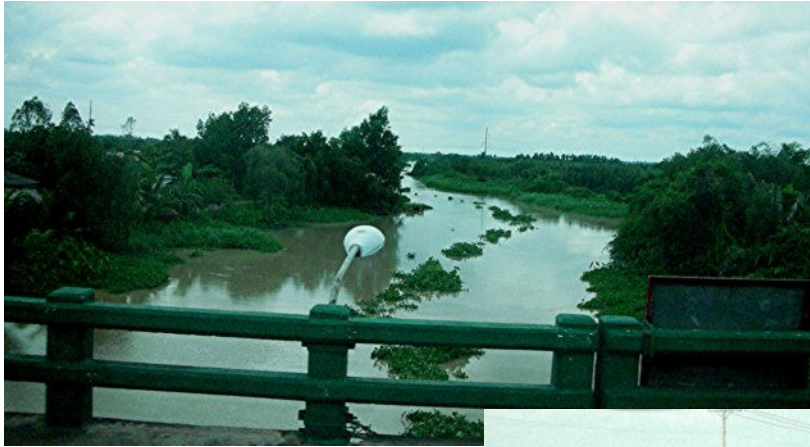


highway present an almost uninterrupted scene of all kinds of structures. Often a very nice house would be next to a broken down building. Here are some random scenes from our trip back to the ship.

Johny told us that the German Shepherd dogs on the gateposts of this house are very popular among Vietnamese now.



Water hyacinths floating in the rivers look nice but they present a problem in that they can completely choke a river channel and the Vietnamese have to work to clean them out on a continuous basis.



Suddenly our bus stopped and then we saw the reason. There was a photo opportunity with a water buffalo in an adjacent pasture. We clicked the picture shown below, along with everyone else, and then were

on our way.

We made it back to ship, soggy but glad we had reached our goal of the Cu Chi Tunnels.

We just had time to shower and get ready for the early dinner seating. Tomorrow is a sea day so we can rest up and get ready for Bangkok.

