

Few Westerners have had the opportunity to get a first-hand look at how Viet Cong guerillas lived during the Vietnam War. They carried out their military campaign against the Allies from deep underground, with great success. A Vietnam vet recently took his kids to see...

The tunnels of Cu Chi

THE tunnels are so narrow, with such small openings, that Westerners have great difficulty in negotiating them.

They are an inter-connecting series of horizontal and sloping shafts, at varying depths, and can total hundreds of kilometres, linking village after village.

Vietnam vets from the United States, New Zealand and Australia know them well. They had the job of finding the tunnels, and clearing them of Viet Cong, during the Vietnam War.

The majority of Aussies who did one or more tours of duty in Vietnam were raw young men, most of them barely out of their teens, and Vietnam was literally a baptism of fire for them.

Many still find it hard to talk about those days, certainly not to family. That's why some veterans, like Mildura's Frank Tierney, decided to make a return trip, as something of a 'show and tell' for his sons Luke, 34, and Ryan, 28.

The boys agreed the Vietnam experience was "a real eye-opener," not just because of its war-time significance, but in watching a different and significant culture, interacting with a loving people amid a new period of growth and opulence, and visiting attractions and enjoying experiences unique in the world.

Both Luke and Ryan also agreed it had brought them a lot closer to their father, understanding now what he and his mates and other Aussies had gone through during the war, and in the aftermath when they returned home.

"We don't know how lucky we are," Ryan said. "Dad spent his 21st birthday wrapped up in a sleeping bag in the jungle, in a strange country, far from family and friends. A lot of vets found it hard to get back into a normal routine back home. We're extra lucky that we have a dad who is a workaholic, not an alcoholic."

Frank Tierney went to Vietnam in 1971 with the Fourth Battalion, the last of the rifle companies from NZ and Australia to serve there. Not all of them survived the second biggest combat experience of the war, code-named Operation Iron Fox by the Allies.

He has been back to Vietnam several times since, but this was the first time he has taken the boys. "It was important that they had a personal and meaningful experience," he said. "I wanted them to see everything for themselves."

Frank described the 'new' Vietnam as an extremely progressive country, catering more and more for the international tourism trade. When he fought in Vietnam, the country had a population of 35 million. The current population is around 85 million, and climbing.

"The country is going through a property boom," he said. "There is also a lot of money flowing back into the country from successful Vietnamese business people overseas. Despite this, there are a lot of poor people, living on a wage of around \$50 a month. Many families work simply to survive."

Frank and the boys are still in awe of the work doctrine in Vietnam. Everyone works...whether you are primary school age, or 80 years old, if you are fit enough, you work. Kids can be seen everywhere in the country's bigger cities, shining shoes, running errands, or encouraging people into eateries.

Frank says he and the boys crammed a lot into their two-week trip, visiting scenic attractions, major shopping centres, war museums and other places of interest. He and Ryan were ill the day they planned a trip to the underground tunnels, but it was the highlight of the trip for Luke.

The tunnels are spread all over Vietnam, with the biggest, starting in the Cu Chi district, just 20 kilometres from the heart of Saigon.



• CALM AFTER THE STORM: The Tierney boys, Ryan and Luke (rear) take a canal tour not far from where their dad Frank fought against the Viet Cong 40 years ago. BOTTOM - Luke in one of the famed Cu Chi tunnels...many have been made bigger to accommodate western visitors.



The first stage was started for the war against the French, but were extended well before the Vietnam War.

With a combined total estimated at 250 kilometres, at one stage these tunnels provided a haven for the bulk of the 16,000 strong Viet Cong guerilla army. They were used by the guerillas as hiding spots during combat, as well as serving as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches and living quarters for the guerrillas.

• Continued Page 52



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Exploring the tunnels of Cu Chi

• From Page 6

Air, food and water were scarce below ground, and the tunnels were infested with ants, poisonous centipedes and snakes, spiders and mosquitoes. Most of the time, guerrillas would spend the day in the tunnels working or resting and come out at night to scavenge for supplies, tend their crops or engage the enemy in battle. Sometimes, during periods of heavy bombing or Allied troop movement, they would be forced to remain underground for many days at a time.

Malaria was rampant. In 1966, dozens of B-52 bombers began a campaign of dropping 30-ton loads of high explosive onto Cu Chi, turning the once lush jungle into a pockmarked moonscape. They were backed up on the ground by 8000 American and Australian troops. Their aim was to destroy the tunnel network, but they were unsuccessful, as was another operation the following year, this time involving 30,000 troops. It has been estimated that the Allies dropped more bombs on Vietnam than for World War Two and the Korean War combined.

The one group that did have limited success in infiltrating the tunnel network was the Aussie specialist engineering troop, 3 Field Troop, under the command of Captain Sandy MacGregor.

Known as 'The Tunnel Rats', they often searched exhaustively for days, finding ammunition, radio equipment, medical supplies and food, as well as signs of considerable Viet Cong activity. MacGregor was awarded a Military Cross for his work.

Throughout the course of the war, the tunnels in and around Cu Chi proved to be a source of frustra-

Training with the Vietnam Swans

THERE'S far more to Vietnam than meets the eye, according to Mildura's Tierney family.

During their recent trip to this exotic, exciting and rapidly-growing country, real estate agent Frank Tierney and his sons Luke and Ryan ran into an Aussie Rules footy team!

"This is no spur-of-the-moment team," Frank said. "The Vietnam Swans have been around for some years, and is made up of ex-pat Aussies who hold some challenging positions in the country.

"Most are senior company executives, one was sent over there to set up a branch of the Commonwealth Bank, and others work in various areas of Government."

Frank said Luke and Ryan both had a training run with the Swans at their home base, the local RMIT campus in Saigon, where they were training for their next

hit-out against a Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) team. They also play against teams from Hong Kong, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

Frank paid tribute to one bloke who helps pull it all together, Aussie Glen Nolan, an ex-Wangaratta footy supporter who runs a classy sports bar, Tommy's Three, in Vung Tau. As well as helping the committee and supporters keep the footy team on the turf, Glen organises Vietnam tours for Aussie visitors.

But, more importantly, he and his committee and their football team members use their considerable talents and financial resources to undertake self-help programs for the Vietnamese people, including helping fund an orphanage, and starting a learn-to-swim program that has the full backing of the Vietnamese Government.



tion for the US military. The Viet Cong had been so well entrenched in the area by 1965 that they were in the unique position of being able to control where and when battles would take place.

By helping to covertly move supplies and house troops, the tunnels allowed guerrilla fighters in their area of South Vietnam to survive and help prolong the war and increase American costs and casualties until their eventual withdrawal

in 1972, and the final defeat of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975.

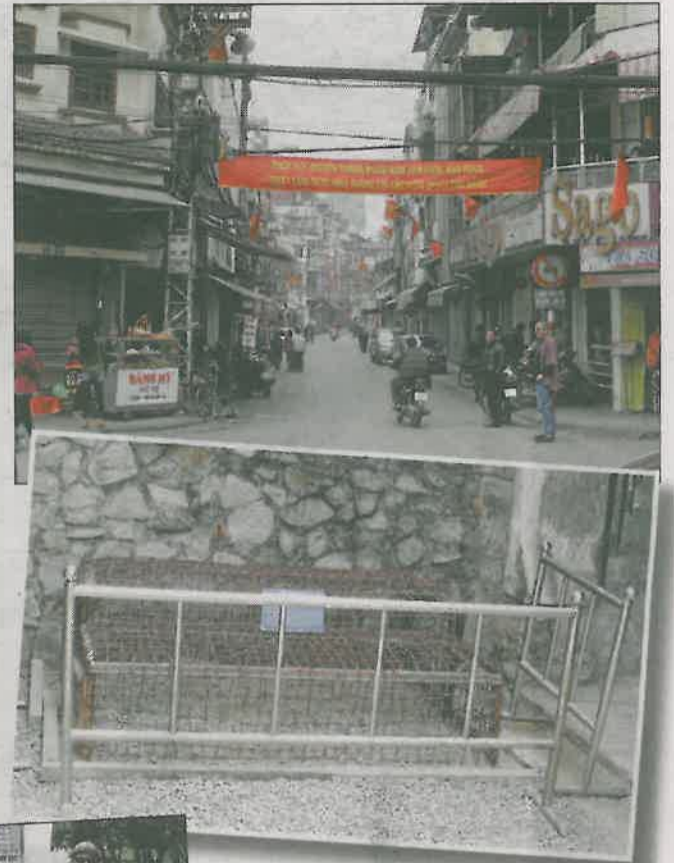
A large section of the tunnels are now a popular tourist attraction, with visitors invited to crawl around in the safer parts. Some tunnels have been made larger to accommodate the size of Western tourists.

Luke Tierney was one of them, and described the experience as "awesome." He found it hard to believe that an entire army lived underground while war raged

above them, with some of the tunnel network located right underneath Allied base camps. He also got to fire the popular weapon of the war, an AK-47.

Both Luke and Ryan said they would definitely be following their Dad's example, and taking their own kids to Vietnam when they were old enough.

"There's not too many places in the world where you can get a feed, washed down by a beer, for about \$3," Ryan said.



• EYE-OPENER: Vietnam was a fascinating experience, according to brothers Luke and Ryan Tierney. TOP - a typical Saigon street scene. ABOVE - One of the cages where POW's were kept for days, sometimes weeks. LEFT - 'Cool Hand Luke' in sight-seeing mode and BELOW - tranquil fields where war raged 40 years ago, FAR LEFT - Luke and Ryan with the Vietnam Swans team.



Enjoying your job is the 'trick,' says Ron

• From Page 21

"I remember Dennis saying to me, 'what are you putting on your time sheet?'"

"I said, '24 hours-a-day until we get home', and we were there for two weeks.

"He said to me, 'what about when you're sleeping?'"

"I said, 'who's sleeping?' I was too frightened to sleep."

Instead of the \$32 per week he normally earned, Ron finished his two-week stint with \$351 in his pocket.

As he looks back on his almost five decades with Council, he said it's a very different job now to what it was when he started.

"Oh, it's changed a lot," he said.

"Back in those days you could say that 90 percent of the work was manual labour."

Ron said that when he started there were 36 outdoor staff working for the City of Mildura, remembering this was well before the Rural and City Councils were

amalgamated in the mid-1990s.

He said there were roughly the same number of outdoor staff now to service the much larger amalgamated Council area.

Ron puts this down, in part, to a much heavier reliance on machinery in the modern era.

He's spent his final years with Council working with Peter Wade

on the Aero Ovals complex and said he has thoroughly enjoyed the company of all his workmates over the years.

But Ron singled out former Council Superintendent Bill Hyder and Glenn McColl for special mention.

Ron's official final day with Council is today.

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