

## RETURN to the PLEIKU AREA

Bob Bruce, e-mail: [friedabobbruce@aol.com](mailto:friedabobbruce@aol.com); ph: 717-243-2135  
Former Battalion S2 and Commander C Btry, 6<sup>th</sup> Bn, 14<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery; Sep 1966- Sep 1967  
Former XO, Pleiku Logistical Support Activity, Jan 1972- June 1972

I decided to return to Vietnam after forty years because my oldest son and his family who live in Beijing, China were going to Vietnam for the second time to spend a week at a beach resort in Qui Nhon. They asked my wife and me to accompany them during our Christmas visit to Beijing. I told my son I had no interest in returning to Vietnam unless I could visit areas in the vicinity of Pleiku, specifically a number of firebases and Special Forces camps, all of which were located west and north of Pleiku and in proximity to the Cambodian and Laotian borders. I provided him the names of the locations and villages and he located someone in Hanoi who specializes in those types of tours and made the necessary arrangements to satisfy my requirements. What follows is my summary of the visit which occurred from January 1-3, 2013.

My wife, son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren (ages two and four) and I flew from Beijing to Hanoi on Vietnam Airlines on December 28<sup>th</sup>, spent the night at the Hanoi Sheraton and flew the next day to Qui Nhon, landing at the former Phu Cat AFB which is now Phu Cat Airport. After duly noting several Vietnamese fighter jets in their protective revetments (probably former USAF) we traveled to the resort which was south of Qui Nhon. My college roommate at UNH, Ken Latour, flew F-4's out of Phu Cat in 1969-70. The trip to the Qui Nhon area resort, through several villages, towns and rice paddy areas, revealed a Vietnam that hadn't changed very much in forty years: extreme poverty, chaotic roads, lots of trash and people dressed in traditional Vietnamese attire. The biggest change appeared to be the increase in the number of vehicles on the roads, especially motor scooters. The city of Qui Nhon appeared to be somewhat prospering as there were numerous modern buildings and much more car and truck traffic as we moved south on National Route 1 through the city to our resort on the South China Sea. We arrived at the resort and stayed there until the morning of January 1<sup>st</sup> when my son and I began our journey to the Pleiku area.

Day 1- January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013.

We were picked up at 0730 by a guide and driver at the resort and after introductions headed north on National Route 1 towards Qui Nhon and eventually headed west on National Route 19 towards Pleiku. We were traveling in a medium sized Toyota SUV that was in good condition and had very good air-conditioning. The driver was a Viet from Qui Nhon who spoke no English and our experienced guide, Cham, was a Montagnard from Pleiku. He worked for a travel agency and was fluent in English. He was an interesting person. He lived in the US from 1972-1974 in Ann Arbor, Michigan and returned to Vietnam in time to be arrested and interred in re-education camps in Saigon and Pleiku for fifteen months starting in 1975. His dad (now deceased) was a

Captain and infantry company commander in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) forces that served with the US Army for much of the war and played a very prominent role in the Central Highlands. His father was wounded in the Ia Drang battle in 1965 and was later featured in a 1968 National Geographic article focusing on the role of the CIDG forces during the Vietnam War. He also spent thirty months in re-education camps after war.

As we started to drive west on NR 19 the traffic was moderate to heavy as January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> were both national holidays in Vietnam. Traffic safety was a nightmare and Cham explained to us that in order to survive Vietnamese roads you needed three things: good brakes, a good horn and lots of Good Luck. His prophecy was proven to be very accurate during the course of the trip. During my two tours in the Central Highlands I had never driven on NR 19 east of Pleiku so this part of the trip was educational. The last and only time I went from Qui Nhon to Pleiku was in January 1972 when my two day stint as Deputy Director of Personnel at the Qui Nhon Support Group was interrupted when the Group Commander informed me that he needed an experienced combat arms officer in Pleiku. He provided me thirty minutes to pack my duffel bag and then had me transported via Huey to Pleiku. That trip was my only glimpse of the eastern portions of NR 19 and the infamous An Khe and Mang Yang passes. What a difference a three plus hour ground ride makes!!

As we moved out of Qui Nhon city into the more rural parts of Bin Dinh province containing rice paddies, the roads and the topography changed dramatically. The road system started to deteriorate from the fairly decent roads in the city. As we entered into the low hills before the An Khe pass, the dominant agricultural crop changed from rice to sugar cane. Rice appeared to be harvested similarly to how it always has been harvested in Vietnam-very labor intensive. Other than the main highway being macadam nothing had changed in the labor intensive rice growing process. It appeared to me that the vast majority of those working the paddies were female and the people working the small shops and restaurants in the villages were equally distributed between male and female. Every village and town had Communist propaganda signs throughout their settlements and the only decent looking structures were the Communist Party headquarters and the schools. The school buildings were very impressive everywhere we went in stark contrast to the very poorly constructed homes and small business structures that lined almost the entire highway. Life in rural Vietnam hasn't changed that much except everyone has electricity, a small TV satellite dish (service is about eighty cents a month) and every home/business is flying a small national flag.

As we moved closer to An Khe we finally saw one of the only large industrial plants I saw on the trip. There was a large sugar cane processing plant east of the pass and it appeared that supply greatly exceeded the plant capacity as we saw literally hundreds of trucks loaded with sugar cane parked in front of houses over the next fifteen to twenty miles. We stopped and visited a large monument celebrating the June 1954 Viet victory over French Mobile Group 100 which was the last major battle of that war. This battle is referred to as either the Battle of An Khe or the Battle of the Mang Yang Pass. It extolled in great detail their significant victory while detailing the value of the

Communist movement in achieving that victory. It was an impressive physical structure. The An Khe pass was as dangerous a drive as I have ever been exposed to. It was probably six to eight miles in length with every possible wheeled conveyance known to man on the road. The rule of “the bigger the better” applied and although we were one of the biggest on the road, motor scooters outnumbered cars/trucks by at least forty to one. The difficulty of driving that pass makes one appreciate the bravery and courage of those supply train soldiers that kept the An Khe and Pleiku areas supplied during the war. It also makes me personally appreciate the members of the 6/14<sup>th</sup> FA Battalion who initially deployed the battalion from Fort Sill to Pleiku. I’m sure that nothing at Sill prepared the drivers for the An Khe pass which can only be described as a very nasty road in 2013. Imagine what it was like in 1965. After we cleared the pass we stopped at the top and took a leak on the side of the road (some things never change for soldiers and there was no other option). I asked the guide about visiting Camp Radcliffe (home of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division) and he said that no western visitors were allowed as it was a major Viet armed forces base. This scenario was the same for all other major former American bases we approached on the trip (Camp Enari [4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division] in Pleiku and Camp Hollaway in Pleiku).

After driving through An Khe City which was moderately sized and clean, we continued through the Mang Yang pass and soon were entering the city of Pleiku. It appeared that there was one continuous village from Mang Yang to Pleiku with a variety of different kinds of agriculture dominating the way (some sugar cane but more vegetables and some light industries). The roads were better as we came closer to Pleiku. Pleiku City is today a large, relatively modern city of 300,000 residents. It is now located in Gia Lai province, which was formerly Pleiku province. Our hotel (the HAGL Hotel) is located at the intersection of NR’s 19 and 14 on a very large traffic circle that probably marks the center of Pleiku. The circle was full of signs, flowers, nice landscaping and smaller monuments but very tastefully arranged. Our hotel was modern, comfortable and clean and also had a nice restaurant. We checked into our eighth floor room and from my balcony I could see the outlines of Artillery Hill to the north and the looming large hills that made up Dragon (forever known as Titty) Mountain to the south. I knew now that I had come to the correct place for the right reason.

After lunch at the hotel we proceed on NR 19 west through the city. A substantial portion of this route within city limits was under major construction with the road being totally rebuilt and a significant percentage of that construction consisted of a concrete road not just the macadam that had dominated the initial part of the trip. We eventually reached the intersection of SR’s 19 and 19C and proceeded southwest toward Plei Me. Our first stop was in the Catecka plantation which appeared unchanged since the 60’s. The 330 hectare plantation was still producing coffee, tea and rubber and appeared sparsely populated but in good condition. We had wanted to stop at the Oasis firebase but were denied permission by the government. I had assumed command of Battery C from Tom Brendle at the Oasis and had road-marched from there to Dak To with my Battery in June 1967. According to the guide, the Oasis was now a large Montagnard village. We continued southwest towards Plei Me. The road was in very poor shape so all the traffic competed for the small strip of macadam that covered the crown of the road. The red dirt

of the area was still everywhere and a poignant reminder of my earlier tours. The area was still rural and dominated by various agricultural crops, the most significant appearing to be peppercorn. We frequently had to stop for various animals in the road, primarily chickens and cattle. Once we had to follow a herd of about twenty cattle down the highway for about 200 meters. The herd was being led by a ten year old boy riding on one of the steers.

We arrived at Plei Me about ninety minutes after leaving Pleiku. Plei Me was significant to me because Battery C had been located there while I was in the battalion and I had visited it several times. It was also located next to the Special Forces camp. Greeting visitors to this area was a large billboard-sized sign celebrating the alleged Vietnamese significant victory over the Americans during October and November 1965 (Battle of Ia Drang Valley). The propaganda claimed over a thousand Americans killed and significant amounts of vehicles and equipment destroyed. The guide, who is very familiar with this area, had flown here with Hal Moore when he met the NVA officer where the Ia Drang battle had occurred. He stated that General Moore had a GPS with him allowing his group to pinpoint the exact location of the battle. Practically all traces of the SF camp are gone and there is nothing recognizable in the area. Some of the area near the camp still has not been cleared of mines. We did pick up several M-16 rounds that were along the road leading to the camp. No cartridges were found which is not surprising because collection of almost anything that we deem as trash appears to be a major industry for those residing in small villages.

From Plei Me we backtracked to NR19 and headed west toward Duc Co. The road conditions were similar to those encountered on the way to Plei Me. NR19 is the major road to Cambodia in this area and there were more towns and villages on this route. Some structures in the villages were new and modern but they were definitely in the minority. Agriculture still dominated the area. Duc Co is no longer a sleepy village but a district within Gia Lai province with several towns. The area has a significant infrastructure and appears to be thriving. A Special Forces camp and Battery B of the battalion were in Duc Co for most of the time during my tour. There is now no sign of any American base ever being there. The main street of the town (probably the district capital) was busy with many commercial activities and unlike smaller towns that tended to have businesses only on the main road it appeared to have businesses that spread several streets off NR 19. We stopped and visited the local market place which had about everything you needed to eat or wear. My son and I attracted many vendors walking through the markets as it appeared that not many Americans visited this area. All the people were friendly, especially the children. One of the elderly female vendors, who was about 4'6", was astounded at my son's size (he's about 6'1") and had to show her amazement by placing her head at his side somewhere between his abdomen and chest.

On the way out of town, we stopped at a local coffee shop about a block from NR 19, near the always new Party facilities, and had three coffees and a can of coke which cost about \$2.50 including tip. We then drove back to the hotel in Pleiku arriving there about 1900. The non-rules of the road still applied after dark and I would strongly urge others who visit to drive only during daylight unless in a major city. The only danger is

the road and driving at night is really, really difficult and different. We had a great meal at the hotel and went to bed wondering what Day 2 would bring.

Day 2- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013

Day 2 started early at breakfast when we met another American soldier who was stationed in Pleiku in 1971-72. He was accompanied by his son and grandson who were both active duty Marines and they were also scheduled to go to Dak To that day and had been in Plei Me the previous day. He had served in the G4 at MACV II Corps Headquarters. At about 0800 we were picked up by another guide and driver who both resided in Kontum. The guide was also a Montagnard and a few years younger than our previous guide. He spoke excellent English and had served in the local village defense forces fighting against the NVA and Viet Cong when he was fourteen and fifteen prior to the end of the war. The driver was a former NVA tank commander who didn't speak or understand (I hope) English but was as skilled driving offensively as the driver from the previous day. We departed the hotel, drove through the city of Pleiku and proceeded north on NR 14 towards Dak To. I had previously made the ground trip to Dak To on June 20, 1967 while moving my 8"/175mm SP firing battery from the Oasis to the site of the first Dak To SF camp airstrip. That ground trip of about 90 miles in a combat zone was by far the longest I had made and I believe that we were the first SP battery during the war to make the trek to Dak To. That trip, though long, was mostly uneventful because of the significant ground (Dusters and Quad-50's) and air (gun-ships) cover provided. Other than driving through the cities of Pleiku and Kontum the trip was mostly through smaller villages and the engineers had done a good job on the bridges. My only significant memory of that day, other than the eight to ten hours on the road march, was the time that a Brigadier General (ADC of the 4<sup>th</sup> ID) flew to a river/stream crossing site and felt we were slowing down the convoy. After showing him that the width of the 175mm SP gun was the same as the bridge deck he acknowledged that the gun section chiefs had been doing a decent job of moving their guns across this particular site.

This trip was not without obstacles but nothing compared to 1967. Road conditions in the cities of Pleiku and Kontum and other district major towns were in very good shape however the roadways between the cities were similar to those on the previous day with many under construction and relatively heavy traffic. January 2<sup>nd</sup> was also a national holiday in Vietnam however we did see a few schools that were open and a new traffic hazard (school kids on bikes) joined those from yesterday. Our first stop was at a war memorial site about twenty kilometers south of Kontum City. The memorial marked the location of a battle in April 1972 where the South Vietnamese stopped the North Vietnamese incursion on NR 14. The central highlands Easter Offensive in 1972 was an NVA assault that included NVA tanks and caused significant loss of men, equipment and territory to the South Vietnamese. Kontum had been breached and the SF camp at Dak To had been overrun. There were two memorials at the site- a large ornate NVA memorial on the hilltop on the western side of the road and a small rather insignificant one to the South Vietnamese on the eastern side of the highway. According to the guide, there was once a larger memorial to the ARVN troops but it had been torn down.

The action around and south of Kontum that April was significant to me because I was assigned as the Executive Officer of the Pleiku Logistical Support Activity which was located about a kilometer north of Artillery Hill on NR14 along the road to Kontum. We provided logistical support to all Army personnel in Pleiku and Kontum provinces. That support included Class 1 (rations), third shop maintenance for vehicles and larger equipment, supplies, transportation, graves registration and other various support. Because of the enemy threat to the Pleiku area and our relatively exposed position the Activity was ordered to relocate to Camp Holloway, the large helicopter base on the eastern side of the city. As an artilleryman, moving your battery quickly and efficiently was a routine activity, however packing up a support activity and moving it was not quite as easy. The Quartermaster Corps, unlike the Field Artillery, does not have as its motto, "Move, Shoot, and Communicate." The move was successfully made, but I will always remember the difficulty of dismantling large refrigeration units and other complex equipment and reestablishing them at a different location without any loss of support to the soldiers. It made my move to Dak To in 1967 seem like a picnic, although I hadn't thought so at the time.

Continuing our trip to Dak To, we stopped in Kontum for coffee. Kontum City now has a population of about 100,000 and at least along NR 14, appears to be thriving by Vietnamese standards. There was significant construction activity and the infrastructure appeared to be modern and functional. Of course, the ever present propaganda signs were everywhere. The highway north of Kontum was under construction in several locations but the rest of the trip toward Dak To proceeded at a moderate pace. The area was more rural with agricultural activity focused on rubber and cassava plants. Herds of water buffalo were increasingly seen. Even though it was a holiday, some schools were open and even in this former desolate area, the schools were new and in excellent shape. As we approached what I remember as the village of Dak To, I was amazed at what I now saw. A former village of a few hundred had now blossomed into a town of around 10,000 (per the guide). It was modern, clean by Vietnamese standards and busy with lots of shops and a bustling marketplace. The first site we stopped at in Dak To was a war memorial commemorating the various battles in the Dak To area. There were two Russian tanks at the site that were meticulously restored on the outside. Both were allegedly used in the 1972 battle at Dak To and one of them had a plaque outside that named the four crewmen who had been killed in that tank during the battle. The inside of the tank had been destroyed, probably by a SABOT round. We met our fellow American tourists at the site and took a few pictures of the groups.

After leaving the war memorial, we drove about three kilometers west on NR 14 and came to the area that was formerly the old Dak To airstrip, the site where my battery had moved to on June 20, 1967 when we left the Oasis. The outline of the small airstrip was recognizable. Portions of the airstrip had large craters that were now used to burn rubbish. Slightly south of the strip where our guns, FDC and battery center were located was a large and rather new graveyard. Nothing in the area other than the airstrip was recognizable and except for the cemetery, there was significant vegetation that had grown up throughout the general area. I had twice brought my battery to this area, the first time

as stated above, was two days prior to the first large scale engagement by troopers of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade. On that day, Company A, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry was decimated by a NVA regiment and suffered around 75 KIA's. We started firing in support of that action and continued firing for about sixty hours as we attempted to seal off any escape routes to Laos. Initially we could only fire our 8" howitzers at Charge 1 high angle due to the proximity of Hill 1338 but later we were able to also engage targets with our 175mm guns. I distinctly remember that the Dak To ASP had no 8" rounds to re-supply us and that we had to be re-supplied from Pleiku by Chinooks that sling-loaded the 200lb projectiles and carried the powder internally. We must have used all the Chinooks in the area as it appeared to us that when one departed another arrived. This was the start of a three month stint when C Btry was attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn, 319<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery commanded by LTC Charles Drake, a fellow UNH graduate, although I didn't know it at the time. We became his D Battery and I was assigned the call sign of Propel 86. Brigadier General Jack Deane, the Brigade Commander, was assigned the call sign of Uncle Jack. He frequently visited our battery while we were at this firebase and another we occupied west of Dak To. At this location my battery was the first in Vietnam to go operational with the FADAC system and although we had a few growing pains with 175mm tube air concussions over the FDC, we were eventually able to utilize the system to its intended capabilities.

After taking some pictures and walking around the area we then drove another two kilometers west to the site of the former new Dak To airstrip and SF camp. Those two facilities had come on-line earlier in 1967 and it was the intelligence obtained and the casualties suffered by the SF soldiers that was the impetus for the movement of significant forces into the Dak To area. The first major battle in June was followed by others in July and August and finally the historic "Battle of Dak To" in November 1967. The SF camp and airstrip was a defining area for thousands of American soldiers and remained so until both were overrun in April 1972. The airstrip looked like it could still handle C-130's. It is still level, currently undamaged, not used for aircraft but now houses a tapioca factory at the east end of the strip. Within the former SF camp, which is adjacent to the airstrip, are some small huts but a significant portion of the former camp is used for the production of the cassava roots. While we were there, we observed dozens of women processing the ground up leftovers from the plant into some type of fertilizer. They accomplished this by continuously walking through six-inch deep powder lying on very large plastic sheets. The tapioca made from the cassava root is by far the largest agriculture product in the area. Vietnam is the world's second largest exporter of tapioca. The process produces a food supplement (high in carbohydrates) and is used extensively throughout Asia. It is the same product used to make tapioca pudding that we enjoy as a dessert and as a thickening agent in food.

After taking some more pictures, we proceeded west towards Ben Het and crossed the Dak Krong River which winds through the Dak To area. A portion of the river runs north and south at the western end of the new Dak To airfield. We soon found ourselves driving through what appeared to be a continuous village as we headed further westward on NR 14 towards Laos. During July 1967, I had moved my firing battery about ten to twelve kilometers west of the Dak To SF base and established a new fire base that

allowed us to provide more support to those troops north and west of the Dak To. At the time, the entire area was devoid of villages and people. We stayed at this firebase for over a month before moving back to the firebase near the old Dak To airstrip sometime in August. I was unable to pinpoint the location of that firebase because of the build-up in the area. The memories of forty-five years ago were somewhat clear but not clear enough to pinpoint a location with no significant defining geographical features. We had done a lot of firing from this location providing support to the Brigade troopers and Special Forces camps, especially the one in Dak Seang. General Deane had awarded me my second Bronze Star at this location so it had some personal significance for me. I was also part of the recon team that flew from this firebase to the Ben Het area as we looked for more western sites to locate artillery units. During one particular phase of this operation, we had expanded our firebase to include a battery of 105mm howitzers from the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Airborne Division. That three to four day co-location created some issues that were problematic to most US-Vietnamese operations. When we were ordered back to Dak To the Dak Krong River was over its banks because of the monsoon rains and the engineers had to construct a bridge for us. For one to two days we were the closest American troops to the Laotian border in this area as all the infantry had withdrawn back to Dak To. I felt our security was good as we had a platoon of Dusters and a CIDG platoon to complement our battery security. My battery had several APC's with 50 cal machine guns and a 81mm mortar that we had somehow obtained (the mortar crew consisted of the first sergeant, my driver, the battery clerk and me). We were occasionally able to provide illumination for some of the Brigade's infantry patrols that were operating within our range.

We continued our journey west as we planned to visit Ben Het and Dak Seang. I had never been to either location but had participated in the reconnaissance of Ben Het. My battery had also been commended for its fire support of the SF camp at Dak Seang during a battle on July 7<sup>th</sup> so I wanted to visit those places. We crossed the Dak Krong River again (this modern bridge, about fifteen kilometers from Dak To, didn't exist in 1967) and soon were in the town of Plei Can, a fairly large town with significant infrastructure in place. The town was located about six to eight kilometers east of Ben Het and about twenty kilometers south of Dak Seang. We stopped for lunch at a local hole-in-the wall. Lunch for four including rice, vegetables, pork chop, soup and coke or tea was \$6.50. After lunch, we started the drive towards Dak Seang. The road which was in excellent shape was part of the recently renovated Ho Chi Minh Highway to Da Nang. Although in the vicinity of the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail, it was not part of that infamous trail that passed through nearby Laos and Cambodia. According to the guide, the trip time to Da Nang had been reduced from three days to six hours by construction of this road. The site of the former SF camp in Dak Seang is now a small village surrounded by a fairly large rubber plantation that appears to be the major industry in the area. Some remnants from the camp's berm could be recognized but not much else. Our guide did point out two white phosphorous artillery projectiles (plugged) laying about 100 meters from the camp. Several former defensive positions were also noted and were conspicuous because of their deteriorating sandbags.



We reversed direction and headed south towards Plei Can and then on to Ben Het, our last stop of the day before heading back to Pleiku. As mentioned earlier, I had never been to Ben Het and was anxious to look at the area. For some reason the guide had been denied access to Ben Het by the government, but that denial was later rescinded when we paid an additional twenty dollar fee to the tour organizer. When we arrived at the site of the former SF camp and American firebase, it was easily recognizable because of the outline of the small airstrip that was visible. The camp's former site was on a hill east of the small village with a very good vantage point of the valley and two sets of mountain ranges, one of which was in Laos. The area was now overgrown with weeds, and it appeared that nothing had been done or was about to be done on this hilltop. It was a significant piece of real estate when occupied by American soldiers forty five years previously, but as with many battlefield locations over the planet, it was now just a piece of ground sacred only to those who fought there. We never did see any local government or Party officials. We finished up our visit to this part of the central highlands area, reversed our direction and headed back toward Dak To. On the way back I still couldn't locate the former site my battery had occupied and after passing through Dak To we proceeded to Kontum. We finally arrived in Pleiku about 1800 without any incidents except for the ever present close calls on the highway. This was the first time I had driven from Dak To to Pleiku. All previous trips in 1967 had been by helicopter including one forced landing in Kontum City necessitated by a bad tail rotor. After cleaning up, my son and I walked around Pleiku for about an hour. Stores and restaurants were open and the section of the city around the hotel appeared to be thriving. We returned to the hotel, ate dinner and prepared for the next day's trip to Artillery Hill and Plei Djerang.

Day 3- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013

We met the guide and driver from Day 1 and headed west through the city toward what previously was a small village named Plei Djereng. It is located about fifty kilometers due west of Pleiku and about twenty kilometers from Cambodia. As we proceeded through the city we passed by a large five acre city plaza which had recently been dedicated to Ho Chi Minh. The entire plaza area was new and the centerpiece of the area was a forty-foot statue of Ho. The guide explained to me that the plaza and statue had just been dedicated in November. Why it had taken this long to erect this statue is a question I can't answer. We stopped and took a few pictures and then resumed our trip. I wanted to visit Plei Djereng because I had spent several weeks there in early 1967 when I was detailed to command a two gun section of 175mm guns taken from Batteries A and B in order to support an ongoing operation. We were located just outside the perimeter of the Special Forces camp and utilized local CIDG forces to complement our security. After several weeks, the section was disbanded, however eventually Battery A occupied the firebase. At that time, the entire civilian population was Montagnard and was very sparse. As we proceeded towards Plei Djereng, it became obvious that the guide was not very familiar with the specific location that I wanted to visit. We stopped several times to ask "where the former camp and airstrip were located" and eventually made our way to the proper location. The guide explained that in all his years guiding people around the highlands, this was only his third trip to Plei Djereng. The road from Pleiku was better than roads from the previous days' trips and I attributed it to the lack of heavy traffic. The

area we traveled through on the way to Plei Djereng was hilly, agricultural and sparsely populated. There was no major thoroughfare like the roads to Duc Co and Dak To.

When we arrived at the location of the former camp and airstrip, we found a fairly decent sized village (now called Jarong) whose main street consisted of a portion of the former airstrip. The villagers were very friendly and we soon had a crowd of people surrounding us. The children were especially curious to see white men in their midst. Village homes were now on concrete slabs rather than huts built on stilts. All had TV satellite dishes and there was little evidence of any work or commerce taking place. All the population was of a particular Montagnard tribe and our guide happened to be fluent in the dialect which they conversed. To ensure that we were at the correct site, he asked one of the villagers if they could bring the eldest male of the village to us. That villager left on his motor scooter and returned about five minutes later with an elderly man appearing to be about eighty years old. The village elder explained that he had grown up in the area and that we were in fact at the correct site. Both he and his driver were given a cigarette by the guide and they were very pleased with that gesture. It appeared that most adults in Vietnam smoked. We took several pictures in the village including one with the village elder and me. We then drove a couple of kilometers west of the village until we reached the nearby river. The river now had a small ferry in place that could transport a couple of cars. Some things actually change. In the 60's you could not have crossed that river at this location without a bridge. After spending about an hour at the village we turned around and started back towards Pleiku. While we were in the car preparing to leave village, a local Party official drove up in his small SUV. As we were getting underway, we waved good bye to him.

I only had one more place to visit before leaving the central highlands-Artillery Hill, so we headed back to it. I had been told previously by the guide that it was not possible to actually get on the hill since it was totally surrounded by local homes and businesses. When I inquired about the statue (we called it Saint Barbara but it was probably another saint) on the top of the hill that had been placed there by the French, he stated that it had been torn down by the Communists after the war, but there was some consideration to building another in the future. I had some very strong memories of Artillery Hill during the year I was with the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 14<sup>th</sup> Artillery. I had worked for two excellent battalion commanders, Andy Mansinne and Bill Wubbena. I met a lot of great soldiers and have maintained a friendship with some over the years. I wanted to pay my respects to the memory of the three soldiers either killed or wounded with me when I was wounded on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967 while we were clearing a minefield. The hill is still a very prominent topographic feature in Pleiku but it has been swept up in the modernization and expansion of the city and according to the guide there is nothing there that anyone would recognize as being a former military base of some significance. We still drove to the hill, stopped in the vicinity and took several pictures from a very busy road that showed the peak of the hill in the background. The area was busy and those former fields that our searchlight had illuminated to detect enemy soldiers were now full of people trying to eke out an existence in better times than 1966-67 and 1972.

My return to the Pleiku area was complete. We drove back to the hotel, dropped off Mr. Cham, our superb guide and headed east on NR 19 back to Qui Nhon. The traffic wasn't quite as bad on the way back since it wasn't a holiday. We arrived safely back at our beach resort and bid goodbye to our driver. I wondered to myself, "Had this trip been worth it for me?" The answer was, "Yes". I also wondered to myself, "Had the two years I spent in Vietnam along with millions of other American soldiers been worth it?" I will leave that debate to historians.