

# Newsletter for Friends of TOP (Tours Of Peace) Vietnam Veterans



TOP Voices

Fall 2010

**From the desk of TOP (Tours Of Peace) Vietnam Veteran's President, Jess DeVaney:**

Please join us in this issue for a glimpse of a Tour Of Peace as seen through the eyes of a trip participant: Michele Belanger-McNair, who comes from a family steeped in the military, is an attorney and published writer. Michele graciously shares her TOP process—from application to saying “Goodbye.” Here is what our trips are really like—first-hand—from a participant perspective. Importantly, we invite you to meet some amazing participants on this special Tour Of Peace:

## **A Life Changing Experience**

By Michele Belanger-McNair

In America, we call it the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, it is the American War.

Many of us think of Vietnam as jungles and rice paddies. It is very rural, yet very urban and yes there are jungles and rice paddies. But Ho Chi Minh City, aka Saigon, is a very smart, hip, busy metropolis that is rapidly returning to the “Paris of Southeast Asia”. Highway One, the national highway, is a seemingly non-stop thoroughfare of large and smaller cities with intermittent rice paddies and ox carts.

How do you get there with TOP? This is not a plunk your money down, buy a ticket and go tour. You must go through a rigorous screening and acceptance process. I happen to think it is worth every moment spent.

The group who accompanied Jess DeVaney and Bruce Logan to Vietnam, became a family. After two weeks, though we missed our loved ones back home, we weren't always ready to give up our adventure.

What made our trip special? All of the experiences, projects and the participants combined.

First, I cannot debunk the rumor that it is a long flight from San Francisco to Saigon. When you are almost to Japan, it is a long flight and you still aren't to Hong Kong yet. The hotel rooms Jess scouts out and restaurants are first class.



*A rice paddy along Highway 1*

When you arrive at the old American air base of Tan Son Nhat, now the international air terminal in Saigon, you are greeted like a rock star on the Red Carpet just outside the terminal. At 11 pm there were hundreds and hundreds of Vietnamese greeting each arriving flight for loved ones.

We fell into our beds at a lovely downtown hotel, eagerly awaiting our first daylight views of Vietnam.

Our mission, you might say, was built around two participants with strong ties to Vietnam. Sallie Fredericks wished to find the site where her father, Lt. Col. Frederick Van Deusen, was killed in action when his helicopter was shot down in the Mekong Delta on July 3, 1968.

The other person of interest was Stevie Westmoreland, eldest child of General and Mrs. William Westmoreland. Stevie lived in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 as a teenager.

With the help of our guide, Army Ordnance maps, Bruce Logan’s Army intel and finding a local citizen who saw the chopper go down, we were able to go to the actual site for the planned memorial.



*Sallie is comforted during her father’s memorial service*

Accompanied by her cousin Stevie, Sallie was able to voice many things about her father and the life that followed in his wake. Today, Sallie is the sole survivor of her immediate family and coming to terms with his death, at the place of his death, was a profound healing experience.

Everyone was touched, including our local resident who lost most of his family during the war as well.

Together, Sallie and Stevie talked of what it meant to lose their father and uncle; The impact felt forever with their families. When Sallie’s father left for Vietnam he promised “I’ll see you again when the Dogwoods bloom”. Sallie placed dried Dogwood blossoms in the river for each member of her family, as did Stevie.



*Sallie and local resident share their losses*



*Leprosy victim and veteran*

Woven into our itinerary were the Mekong, places in Saigon of interest to Stevie, and a tour that wove us through the southern half of Vietnam from Da Lat to Nha Trang, to My Lai and finally to Hue.

On our way to the mountain highlands we stopped outside Da Lat at a Leprosy Village and hospital. There, we were joined by our guide’s mother and her good hearted friends. Between us we had almost two busloads of goods to distribute to the many needy families. During the speeches, a man who walked up with the use of one stick, on two prosthetic feet, began to

speak. His was a heartfelt thanks not just for the bounty that was brought to his village by TOP, but for support through the years by TOP.

This same leprosy village was one visited by General and Mrs. Westmoreland on numerous occasions according to Stevie. It was clear, as Stevie and Sallie both mingled among the villagers, this trip would be special. Sallie with her Registered Nurse and minister's wife easy and caring manner; and Stevie with her warm, open heart drew people to her with a natural honey. No one knew either's roots.

We left with full hearts for Da Lat for a two night stay. No one contracted leprosy.

Our itinerary took us to a highland ethnic tribe, Montagnard as they are called for another food project. Here, we abandoned our bus and arrived via a tractor pulled trailer over a muddy road.



*Children in the Montagnard village*

In the village we were first greeted by children literally coming out of the bushes and climbing, barefoot and bravely, onto our moving tractor. They were anxious to receive the toys and other items we'd brought to put smiles on children's faces. The Dollar Store goes a long way in a village of children.

There were few speeches here and we handed out food items to the villagers. We toured the village and saw firsthand the Longhouse where they hold meetings, church and school.

We toured the homes and met the Village Elder, whose wife was busy weaving traditional materials. After greetings, a toast, and an exchange of gifts, we saw firsthand how the ethnic tribes live today. It was an amazing experience to enter a home with a fire pit, a chicken living in a basket, water brought up from the village well, and seeing the pigs and chickens sleeping outside the door.

All too soon, it was time to reload the tractor and depart for a silk factory tour. As we arrived at the factory, sweaty, a little muddy and filled with thoughts and chatter about the village, we met other tourists in their clean clothes and shiny white sneakers. Suddenly, we felt separate, different. We had seen a side of Vietnam the typical tourist would never see.



*Stevie & wife of Village Elder*



*TOP prepares to distribute necessities in the Montagnard village*



TOP dances with Lat Village dancers

As we left Da Lat we stopped at a school for emotionally and developmentally disabled children of the region. These are Down Syndrome Children, Agent Orange Children, Autistic, Cerebral Palsy and other birth defect children living together in most cases, and attending a caring and loving school. After a tour and play time we exchanged songs. Natalie Greenleaf, our emotional support member, and experienced grandmother, skipped, jumped rope and played catch with the children. It was here we found our trip's theme song: "Happy Trails."

Stevie though, had some of the most profound experiences, which was not surprising.

In speaking with the school's head teacher the two women found that their fathers fought on opposite sides of the war. Stevie related that as she held the other woman's hand the teacher said "That was then; this is now." They looked into each other's eyes and cried. Two daughters from both sides of the war, daughters of enemies, transformed into an intimate moment where there were no boundaries, just raw humanity. This is the healing TOP does for all it touches.

As we discussed that night in our very important group meeting, one of our trip's themes emerged: "within the contradiction, lies the hope".



We left Da Lat and proceeded over the relatively new highway over the highlands to the seaside town of Nha Trang. Now a thriving seaside tourism town, the vestiges of the war are rapidly disappearing if not gone in places.

We did a project though that is still important: unwed mothers. We delivered diapers and milk, as well as baby toys and clothes to a private home where many children whose mothers cannot care for their babies full time have entrusted them. Some mothers remain with their children and help raise the others. It is a busy and vibrant place with infants and toddlers climbing and crawling over each of us, looking for of affection. We left, baby urine saturated clothes and all, and later enjoyed a magnificent dinner on the water near our hotel. It was quite a change of pace.

**Nha Trang Infant Home Success Story**



This is where some turn to when families turn away or cannot help. A few babies have severe disabilities and could not be cared for by mother or family. Such is the case of "Lil' Vinh," pictured left in 2006, with congenital birth problems, infection and a bleak prognosis. After multiple surgeries, love of the Home's caretakers and a little help from TOP, his updated picture suggests a story with a happier ending.



From Nha Trang we moved up Highway One, with a Memorial Day destination of My Lai, site of the controversial shooting of hundreds of villagers by US Army troops. It was a sobering reminder on Memorial Day. The story of the My Lai Vestige Site is a story in itself, and these few words can only prepare you for the more in depth reporting it requires. Memorial Day stretched over two days as we lived on Vietnam time, but thought in US time



*Left: My Lai makes one reflect*

Along the way we stopped at Marble Mountain near Da Nang. Here, in close proximity to each other opposing armies took shelter in the mountain and R&R on China Beach. Though the climb was steep, the reward in the reaching the various temples within the mountain was worth each step. We paid honor to our families and those who served in Vietnam during this two day Memorial Day tribute by the burning of incense. After the deeply moving experiences of My Lai, we soberly climbed into our bus and departed for the ancient city of Hoi An.



*Stevie Westmoreland with village elder*

Along the way on Highway One was the "Mystery Village" which our guide picked out. It can best be described as a goodwill hit and run. Here, since we had been gathering hotel room amenities and many things we brought with us in anticipation, we distributed tooth brushes, combs, tooth paste, razors, and so forth, as well as toys for the children to enjoy. It is a surprise, joyous occasion that is rewarding for both us, and the village residents.



*Guide and young Jess throw tennis balls to Villagers*

**"303" With Village Emphasis**  
Announcing an advanced Tour Of Peace for TOP past-participants; including home stays, village sleep-overs and life "off the beaten path." Past-participants may apply at [www.topvietnamveterans.org](http://www.topvietnamveterans.org).

Hoi An is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a city that should not be missed. It is an old port, where the historic city center is preserved and no cars are admitted. The respite of Hoi An after My Lai was heaven. In Hoi An is a senior citizens, assisted living facility. It is populated with young adults that are totally incapable of taking care of themselves due to crippling birth defects and injuries; there are the senior citizens who have no way to care for themselves anymore and then there were the ladies who have lost all, including their limbs, from the war.

*Sallie with a Hoi An Assisted Living resident*



World War II WAVE medic and then terminally ill, was pleased to learn she gave someone sight as her parting act.

This was a touching and poignant place. I had brought my mother's many cataract lens glasses and distributed them on fit and results. From the crowd someone shouted he "could see"! The man had not seen in years and Mom's glasses, with their big feminine lenses enabled him to have a level of sight again. My mother, a



*Hoi An Senior enjoys vision courtesy of Dora Belanger*

A woman resident asked Jess to find the daughter she gave up for adoption years before to an American family and gave him her few mementos to help TOP find her child.

After much human touch, we left the home and continued on with our adventure.

**Moving?** When changing e-mail addresses, please let TOP know.



*Entertaining Duc Son Orphanage*

Next up was the ancient capital of Hue. There, we had several agenda items, including a visit to a historic Buddhist temple, dog tag recovery, and the Duc Son Orphanage.

Duc Son was a powerful place. The children are not put up for adoption as the nuns imbue a traditional sense of family. They are brothers and sisters all. TOP served them a meal of protein, delivered milk, rice and needed materials. The nuns served us a vegetarian meal that was surprising in its variety and flavors. The "play time" we had with the children was wild. Balloons, cloth Frisbees, bubbles and tennis balls were flying; tattoos and decals were popular "collector" items. Amid the chaos, children, with smaller children in tow, made sure the younger child got something meaningful.



*Above: The children of Duc Son "Don't go!"*



We visited Tu Hieu Temple, the monastery where Thich Nhat Hanh, a prolific writer and Buddhist monk, first trained. Again we paid tribute

with the burning of incense. We gathered at Phuoc Hue Temple for our group picture, lit more incense and witnessed the car in which the first monk to self-immolate himself on the streets of Saigon, rode on his last journey.



Our last humanitarian effort was near Hue where TOP delivered sixty-six scholarships to needy and worthy students to finish their educations. This was where Jess, who was always our greatest star, shined the brightest.

Jess spoke to the students in near perfect Vietnamese and was given a loud ovation as well as a large and beautifully framed document signifying high recognition from the government. Jess was touched and we were all very proud of him. This was TOP's eleventh year of support here. When we arrived there was a huge banner welcoming TOP and it was a moving experience.

**Fast-fact: The TOP Scholarship**  
TOP offers hope with a long-term solution for disadvantaged children with intellectual potential. Please help us to continue this worthy cause with scholarship gifts to TOP.

We flew back to Saigon with our trip winding down. But there was more to do in Saigon. We once again looked for dog

tags in the shops. It was the last opportunity to search in the effort to return tags to original owners. We shopped in a city center that rivals Paris for high end shops and avoided being run over by scooters.

**Latest Updated Personal Effects List--[Our latest updated list](http://www.topvietnamveterans.org/dog-tags/Tags.pdf) includes **51 pages** of soldier names associated with personal effects retrieved by Tours Of Peace. Many items have been returned to families and veterans. However, numerous effects remain unclaimed. Please see if there is someone you know: <http://www.topvietnamveterans.org/dog-tags/Tags.pdf>**

Stevie had one more request, and that was to find the villa her family lived in while in Saigon. Her mother was sure the War Museum now sat on the site. Bruce was positive it was not the same and marched us up the street to where he thought the villa had been. The white walls of the gates were emblazoned with "Peace Tours" and as Stevie stepped into the drive, it was clear she had found the home she once shared with her family.



*Stevie first sees her family's Saigon home with Sallie*

We were privileged to be allowed into the Peace Tours offices, and given a guided tour by the proprietor, a woman who has grown Peace Tours into one of Vietnam's largest and most successful businesses. The roots of this business started in helping women after the war get

back on their feet. A fitting end, when all was said and done, in Stevie's return to Vietnam.

When introduced, the two women embraced as our hostess said "You are Westmoreland?" and clearly bode Stevie no ill will.



We spent our last night in Vietnam in the home of our guide's mother who, with his wife, cooked us a remarkable homemade feast. And we discovered Mangosteen's.

For two weeks we traveled in style and experienced a life changing event every day. We forged bonds between everyone, including our bus driver that will never be forgotten or easily lost.

For those who dream of experiencing a shared part of a loved one's past and those veteran's who need to come back and give back; I encourage you to consider TOP as the vehicle for this experience. For those that eschew that which is history, I encourage you to open your mind to change.

If you cannot go, or maybe return, then I encourage you to support TOP's efforts with donations. As we all learned this trip, "within the contradiction, lies the hope".



### Experience The Amazing TOP Experience--Grab A Slot For A Tour Of Peace

Tours Of Peace are being scheduled as we print this newsletter. Trips are customized for a limited number of participants. Smaller, intimate groups are personalized and ensure one-on-one quality. Secure your place in the next available Tour Of Peace by beginning the application process with the General Trip Application available at [www.topvietnamveterans.org](http://www.topvietnamveterans.org)

### [Blog](#) source of many things TOP

☞ Updates with ongoing stories:

- ☞ [TOP's return of Medal of Honor winner, David F. Winder's effect to family.](#)
- ☞ [TOP's tag return to Germany of killed-in-action soldier, Russell Fordham.](#)
- ☞ [Captain W. D. Marshall, KIA, 1999 Effect Return Update.](#)

☞ Frequently asked questions, "[FAQ's](#)".

☞ Recent events and breaking news.

☞ In-depth information about TOP. Greater detail about TOP's programs.

There's more! Please check it out our blog at [www.topvets.blogspot.com](http://www.topvets.blogspot.com)

## A Special Vietnam Veteran



TOP salutes an inspirational face of Vietnam service. Here we are reminded of America's historic foundation and roots. This is a story which also underscores the phenomenon of daughters of Vietnam veterans who love and support their fathers. Clara Rosas, daughter of Vietnam veteran, Salvatore Sciarpa, shares her Father's story in her own words:

"Our Father, Salvatore Sciarpa, was born in Piazza Armerina, Sicily/Italy. In his 20's, to become a United States Citizen, he enlisted for four years, with two years of active duty in the Vietnam War, in the United States Army.

From a young age, my Father embraced a brilliant life of service. At age seven, his family moved to Belgium, where he spent his youth and began his apprenticeship as a Master Mechanic. In his adolescent years he has lived in Canada and in the years following, has traveled the world with his trade and with the military. After returning from Vietnam, completing his service in the military Honorably; then reunited with his family, who previously immigrated to the U.S. and married in 1968. He has remained a United States Citizen for 42 years. He is a proud Father of five children and five grandchildren. He is still a practicing mechanic for over fifty years. Our Father loves the outdoors, travel, family, good food, sports and an honest day's work." Clara Sciarpa Rosas, BSN, RN.

Salvatore Sciarpa's continuing life of service, generosity, as well as his Vietnam service while becoming an American Citizen, makes him a real American hero. TOP & his family honors him. When remembering Vietnam veterans and their service, please add Salvatore Sciarpa's image to your thoughts and hearts; always remember his story--a story that inspires pride to be an American and a Vietnam veteran. Welcome home, Salvatore!

## Personal Effects Recipients Appreciate TOP's Work

*"I have no words to explain how much it means to me & my family what you have done for us by returning my dog tag. I know it's only a piece of metal but it is & was close to my heart & everyone else's who served over there. It is hard to explain. I hope & I know you understand and to think there are people like you & yours will do what you do for Viet Vets or any vet is fantastic. Please accept my eternal gratitude. My daughters were so emotional. If that dog tag could only talk. It even had Viet mud on it. I will cherish it till I'm gone. Thank you, John J. 'Semper Fi'"*

*"Words cannot describe my appreciation of your efforts to bring closure to our Vietnam experience, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU for the return of my lost Tag." -- Samuel B., Veteran/Recipient of returned dog tag.*

*"Today I was honored to receive in the mail my dog tag which was lost in the Republic of Vietnam in 1970. I am extremely grateful to be reunited with this precious piece of my history. I have reconstructed in my memory the last time I saw this tag and it must ofbeen the evening in 1970 when our patrol of about 15 men walked into an ambush. Thank you so very much for this gift of my dog tag, I really treasure it, even more than the decorations I was awarded." -- Steven S., Veteran/Recipient*

*"I received my dog tag today. Thank you so very much. It gave me chills when I opened it. It means alot to me and my family. again thank you."--James G., Veteran/Recipient.*

...and, "Thank you" from TOP to Vietnam veteran Richard Ostrowski who donated 20 Vietnam tags.

**Until next time...**

TOP thanks all who have given and volunteered—we look forward to working with you in the future. Those of you on the sidelines are invited to join us in helping provide new opportunities, healing and closure for all those who need our unique programs. Please become part of our team—whether giving, volunteering, or participating -- you make a difference in this world.

☞ **Yes!** I want to provide opportunity and support TOP projects & programs. Enclosed is my tax deductible\* contribution to be used as specified:

\$ \_\_\_ **Veterans:** Support veterans Tours Of Peace

\$ \_\_\_ **Families:** Support family Tours Of Peace

\$ \_\_\_ **Humanitarian:** Aids challenged Vietnamese with long & short-term support needs. (TOP oversees projects--ensures goods & services are delivered and administered whom they are intended for.)

\$ \_\_\_ **TOP Scholarships:** Long-term educational solution for disadvantaged Vietnamese children.

\$ \_\_\_ **Personal Effects:** Reunite family or veterans with personal belongings from Vietnam

\$ \_\_\_ **Discretionary Fund:** Funds greatest needs

\$ \_\_\_ **Endowment:** Building TOP's future.

\$ \_\_\_ **In Honor Of:** Gift for someone living

\$ \_\_\_ **In Memoriam:** Gift in remembrance

\$ \_\_\_ **Birthday, Holiday, In Honor of Gift (w/card):** (\$50+ gifts include card name & address)

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(Newsletter Business Card)

\*Your contribution may be tax deductible; please consult your tax advisor.

**In the name of James Fleming**

TOP remembers rancher and cowboy James Fleming, who served his country honorably as a member of the U.S. Navy during the Viet Nam War. Remembrances in Jim's memory were made to TOP Vietnam Veterans. TOP received an outpouring of support from peers, friends and family across the United States – from California, Kansas, Tennessee and including his hometown's Bear Country Riders. TOP is privileged to apply these heartfelt generous gestures in James Fleming's name to our programs, with him in mind. We are both grateful to all those who have contributed in his name; as well as thankful for Jame's Vietnam service.

