

MARYLAND IN VIETNAM...ALMOST FULL CIRCLE

Joe Arden
July 6, 2020

On December 21, 1998, I sent a short fax from my office at Yokota Air Base to the new Vice Rector of Van Lang University in Saigon. Its key part read: "We here at UMUC remain interested in cooperating with Van Lang University and look forward to future contact with you and your colleagues."

The Vice Rector replied in a polite, non-committal fax that marked the end of a more than two-year UMUC effort, led by Chancellor Ben Massey, to forge a relationship with this Vietnamese university.

UMUC's work to connect with Van Lang began in late 1995. On a private visit to Vietnam, now reopened to Americans, I noticed signs pointing to Van Lang University. It had been established earlier that year as one of the first private universities in Vietnam. This chance encounter led to our efforts to establish a relationship with Van Lang, modeled on UMUC programs at Irkutsk State University and Vladivostok's Far Eastern State University in Russia. The prestige of American higher education and UMUC's ability to provide it anywhere made our programs attractive to certain non-military locations.

Dr. Massey was keenly interested in such possibilities, and he visited Vietnam, first in April 1996 and then again in April 1998, meeting with the Van Lang Rector to further the project. Because of my Army and Maryland experience in Vietnam, Ben asked me to become involved. Working on this project, I journeyed to Saigon in 1997 and 1998 to meet with Van Lang officials.

Unfortunately, however, the developing UMUC-Van Lang partnership was not to be. Tragically, the Rector with whom we worked most closely was killed by a long-time friend who was living with him and his family. The friend suffered a severe mental break, killing the Rector and seriously injuring his wife and their two young children.

The murdered Rector, western educated and our strong advocate, left no one as interested as he in the American connection. His successors had done their graduate work in the USSR or Eastern Europe. Although in some ways attracted to a relationship with UMUC, they understood less well the American system of higher education, were not as easy to work with and lacked the former Rector's enthusiasm for the project.

Another blow to the project came with Ben Massey's retirement in late 1998. The new senior leadership in Adelphi was much less familiar with the Overseas Programs, and they were not greatly interested in international possibilities of the sort represented by a partnership with Van Lang. Things just petered out.

Thus, for the Maryland program that had begun in 1963, when the first classes were offered at U.S. military bases in Vietnam, the "Full Circle" was not to be completed. No Maryland classes would return to an independent Vietnam at the end of the 20th century.

I first encountered Vietnam during 1965-1966 when stationed in Saigon as an Army Intelligence Officer. After joining Maryland's Far East Division faculty in 1967, I was assigned to teach in Vietnam on three different occasions between 1967 and 1970.

Much of what I saw and experienced teaching in Vietnam has been well covered by Sharon Hudgins' history, "Never an Ivory Tower;" David Glaser's writing for the OMA Memoirs Project; and Hugo Keesing's sequence in the UMUC documentary, "Over There." All convey vividly what it was like to teach in an active war zone. I expect others will write about it, too.

Here, I'll mention one incident teaching at Long Binh, then the largest Army base in the world. Upon arrival in 1968, the "housing" officer escorted me to my BOQ room which was in a large tent with 10-15 cots lined up/down both sides of the enclosure. There was literally no space to prepare my classes. So, I contacted the Education Service Officer (ESO), a woman named Maud Burris who had arrived in Japan in 1946 with McArthur's Occupying Forces, and who continued her career as an ESO in Japan, Vietnam, and Korea. I invited her to come and see my billeting. I was hoping, of course, that she might make some suggestion for how/where I could prepare my classes.

She came, viewed the arrangement and said, "Please come with me, young man." So, off we went to her Education Center in a nearby Quonset hut. Staff worked out front, and her office was in a small space at the rear of the hut. She asked whether I would like to live in her office, and I quickly replied, "Yes, Ms. Burris, with pleasure." So, she moved her papers to the outer general area and requisitioned a cot from somewhere. For the ensuing eight-week term, I lived in her office. Worked out fine.

After my 1967-70 teaching experiences, my next Maryland-Vietnam encounter came in the fall of 1975. I had just assumed the role of Director of the Far East Division, and it fell to me, to deal in an equitable manner with the "Incompletes" from the several Maryland courses that were interrupted/cancelled by the April 1975 evacuation of American personnel from Saigon. This presented numerous challenges not normally posed in higher education.

Another contact with Vietnam arrived in 1978 when a postcard found its way to my office at Yokota. It had been mailed from Malaysia and was addressed to "University of Maryland, United States Embassy, Tokyo, Japan." It came from a Vietnamese national who had taught math as an adjunct faculty member in Saigon, and whose course was among those cancelled in April 1975. The card explained that he, his wife and two children were among the "Boat People" escaping the new Vietnam, managing to get as far as Malaysia. He asked: "Can Maryland help us in any way?"

I contacted the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo on his behalf and proceeded, with assistance from Adelphi, to work with various American agencies involved, to help him and his family reach California where he had earlier earned a master's degree at UCLA. The faculty and staff of the Far East Division and our Adelphi offices contributed money to support this effort. For several years, he and I stayed in touch.

My next Maryland-Vietnam experience came in 1996. An Associated Press (AP) article dealing with Maryland's "Foreign Legion Faculty," then teaching in Hungary and several locations in the Balkans, appeared in many newspapers across the US that spring. As Director of the European Division at the time, my name was mentioned. A couple of weeks after the article appeared, a brief letter addressed to me arrived in Heidelberg. It began with these neatly printed words: "It may not have seemed like a big deal to you, but it was to me. THANK YOU!"

The writer was a student (Lynn Jacobson) who in early 1970 had taken a U.S. Diplomatic History course I taught at Bien Hoa, the main US Air Base in Vietnam, when he was on active duty. He had read the AP article and gone to the trouble of obtaining Maryland's APO address in Heidelberg. He wrote: "I mentally survived the 'war' because of the strong dose of reality you communicated to me. You also opened up my mind to critical thinking processes and introduced me to Graham Greene and David Halberstam."

Subsequently, UMUC 's alumni magazine, "The Achiever," carried a lead story about him, an alumnus who had gone on to enjoy successful careers in and out of the military. When I initially read the letter, his name, after twenty-five years, rang no bells. But, upon checking his academic record, I was pleased that the "C" he had earned in my U.S. Diplomatic History course obviously had not left him feeling disappointed with Maryland or me.

This 1996 letter and the 1998 Van Lang University effort mark the end of my decades-long Maryland- Vietnam engagement. But not the end of my personal Vietnam connection. Over the subsequent twenty-two years, I've visited Vietnam from my home in Bangkok ten or twelve times, traveling from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. On several of these visits, I participated in International Argentine Tango Festivals held in various Vietnamese cities. Yes, the tango is quite popular there.

So perhaps, on this level, the personal circle is full. When in Vietnam in the Army and with Maryland, it never occurred to me that there might ever be tango in Vietnam. How glad I am that there is, and sometime soon I hope to dance the tango again in Vietnam.