

## Emails from Vietnam, March 2015

Date: Sat, Feb 28, 2015 at 3:54 PM

Subject: Rolling Thunder in a gentle land: profound and extraordinary lightness of being in Vietnam

An hour by air to the north west of Ho Chi Minh City gets you to Pleiku (“play-koo”) in the coffee growing Central Highlands. Untouristed and unloved, it has to be a contender for ugliest city in Vietnam. Razed by bomb and mortar in the American War, it was rebuilt with an eighties brutalism singularly graceless. I flew in yesterday, hours after landing at HCMC. For the next four weeks my intent is to replace some of my customary serendipity with a focus on a war that loomed large on not only my own adolescence, but that of disaffected western youth in general. For baby boomer rebel in search of cause, Vietnam was a gift. Causes seldom come any bigger.

In my next email I’ll sketch out timeline and context to that war but for a moment will jump on in. It’s hard to overestimate the Central Highlands’ strategic significance; indeed, it was a North Vietnam Army attack on Pleiku in 1965 that triggered Rolling Thunder. I refer not to the eighties tour that saw Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison and George Harrison hit the road prior to Orbison’s all too premature death, but a US military campaign comparable in scale and hubris to Napoleon’s and Hitler’s invasions of Russia. Rolling Thunder was intended to flag to the world the determination of that most reluctant of cold warriors, LBJ, to crush once and for all the Viet Cong and their comrades from Hanoi, while sticking it to Ivan good and proper.

(In *Chronicles*, his marvellously **non**-chronological autobiography, Dylan had this to say: “*Looks like trouble down there in Vietnam. Might have to send in some Americans to sort things out.*”)

I woke in the early hours of this, my first morning, to a sense of profound desolation. There’s always one or two such experiences on every trip and seasoned travellers take them in their stride. Though distressing and alienating – an existential doubting of rhyme or reason we persist in making ridiculously personal – there’s usually a simple cause. I didn’t have far to look. Having spent the past fifty hours in transit across eight time zones, and waited in line for bureaucrats from Heathrow to Saigon via that bustling and smog choked monument to neoliberalism, the People’s Republic of China, my body clock was slammed for six by the kind of jet-lagged fatigue that can find despair and futility in the smallest setback: a venal cabbie, unsmiling street vendor or drab hotel at the end of the road ...

A modicum of self knowledge grounded in experience wins half the battle. For the other half I did a thing I once practiced never less than two hours a day but now do rarely. I meditated, using a method taught by a brilliant man who looked deep into Life before power corrupted him: a man capable of immersing at snap of fingers those who came to him as – I detest the term but am lost for a simple alternative – *spiritual seekers*; plunging them into that state of heightened realisation (or deepened delusion) zen buddhists call the roaring silence.

There’s no special technique; no gimmick, mantra or particular way of carrying the body. (As far as I’m aware the only point of emphasising posture is to prevent somnolence and, trust me, this was not a problem I faced last night.) I didn’t even sit up; just lay there and let it all go. That’s the liberation gospel. The baggage doesn’t have to disappear; you simply put it down. Let it be.

The aim is neither to think in a particular way nor stop thinking; rather, to cease *engaging* with thought (no distinction is drawn here between intellectual and emotional activity). Why? Well here’s where it gets interesting and disappointing in equal measure. Everyone I’ve met has to

greater or lesser degree a superstitious relationship with their own mind. We act as though we *are* our minds, and our minds us. If that were true there could be no self awareness – no Knowing that we Know – and the way of meditating I’m describing would not be possible.

The discipline of allowing thoughts and feelings to rise and fall, as with a conversation in the next room we choose not to plug into, may indeed invoke that non-dual consciousness, *All is One*. Whatever this state means, if anything at all – and I’ve learned through bitter experience to be wary of anyone who claims to know – there’s a remarkable consistency to the way reports of it ring down the ages. From Buddha to Osho, all speak of profound and extraordinary lightness of being in which there is not and never was any problem. Meditation is not the only route to such states. My first acid trip took me there, just the once, while some experience non dual awareness spontaneously. It “visits” them. (On this last, check out Morning Glory on Leonard Cohen’s remarkable album, Dear Heather.)

My teacher was emphatic that this is the space where there never *could* be a problem because Nothing Ever Happened. We are, he claimed, in the non-moment before the infamous Singular Event kicked off in a gigantically expanding maelstrom of time and space, joy and suffering; a cosmically reverberating orgasm of Creation; The Coming of the Lord with a Very Big Bang. Search me for how he knew this but, credit where it’s due, he had the magic touch when it came to inducing “non dualistic consciousness”. And I never yet met anyone who, having experienced the same, found it overrated.

But this man, wise and tragically flawed, saw non dual awareness as means rather than end. What is Point, he would ask with wit, sorrowful irony or terrifying fury, in experiencing such states if we revert to type the minute we rise from the meditation cushion? He demanded that non-dual awareness have significance in the world of time, space and difference; specifically, that the experience of *no* relation to thought (vastly more important in his book than epiphany or transcendence) led to *right* relation to thought (more important still) in which we drop that superstitious identification with mind to take up our human birthright and operate – in the world of time and space, cause and effect, division and difference – as fully aware beings: victors not victims; carrying – in a world of deluded folly (and I’ll say Amen to *that*, if nothing else) – the torch for a better way of being in the world.

(If you’re in a good mood it’s funny the way we insist in the face of all evidence to the contrary on seeing low intelligence as the main driver of stupid acts. Every day brings fresh instances of daft doings prompted by: (a) rage, fear, lust etc; (b) cynicism and arrogant insecurity; (c) idle incuriosity; (d) a vested interest, not always conscious, in seeing things a certain way. Each can wreak havoc by itself but you have to gather them all up in the same room for the kind of award winning idiocy that dreamed up and went ahead with Rolling Thunder.)

So much for the interesting bit. The disappointing part is that my teacher – at his best quite the most brilliant man I ever met – failed to display in his own actions a consistently right relation to thought and feeling. Ditto those for whom similar claims are made but, due to the heroes and saviours in question being all conveniently dead, cannot be scrutinised. Ego and stubborn dualism inspire us all, without exception and by way of a constant drive to locate ourselves in difference – *me versus not-me* – to malice and folly. But an obsessive focus on difference’s close relatives, deficiency and need, also inspires our greatest achievements. That French cat was wide of the mark. What he surely meant was, “I *have a problem*, therefore I am”.

Then again, my French is lousy. Maybe he did say that but it got lost in the translation.

Whatever ... I practiced no relationship to mind till sunrise, long after my wretched feelings had fallen away. (You can't count on this but, often as not, when we cease to torture ourselves with the desire to feel better, the upshot is we *do* feel better.) Then I drifted off. Next thing I knew, a smiling cleaner was tapping at the door and my phone said ten past eleven. *Stuff to do ...* like shower, factor fifty and hit the street for coffee and whatever this beautiful, beautiful land has to offer today. It's a good life if you don't weaken – and not entirely without merit if you do.

**Subject: America's war with Vietnam: timeline and context**  
**To: "me at philiproddis.com" <philip@philiproddis.com>**

Not every email this trip will be on the war. I'll write a good few, shorter, of the kind I've been sending for years to convey some of the colour of where I am and what befalls. But my infatuation with Vietnam, which began decades before I ever thought to set foot here, owes much to that war. I was fifteen in spring '68, when Lyndon Baines Johnson – low on charisma, fundamentally decent and aware he owed his job to a man who'd lain patiently in wait on a November afternoon in Dallas – leaned into the world's screens to come as close as senior politicians ever do to voicing despair. With regard to Vietnam, he personally, and America at large, had run out of ideas. I recall verbatim his opening words that day because for the next week I tormented my brothers with execrable renditions of his accent: "*I now call on the United Nations and Soviet Union to ... blah de blah ...*" Did I understand any of it? No, but a seed was planted and this is one of its fruits ...

### **Ancient history.**

With cavalier if not philistine disregard for the complexities I'll focus on one fact alone. For millennia, Vietnam has fended off, on the whole with surprising success though with a century or two every now and then of darker days, the expansionism of her more powerful northern neighbour. According to the needs of the hour she stood up to China and Mongolia – every city has streets named after such heroes of old as the Trung sisters and Tran Hung Dao – or, eastern style, bent into the wind to avoid being broken by the whirlwind.

*This sheds light on an embedded trait I've come to love and admire in a people for the most part born decades after America's defeat: an appealing amalgam of gentleness and steel.*

### **Late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

France, having long succeeded Portugal as dominant European power, formalises the fact (1868) and combines (1888) Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in "Indochina". French rule is grim and summarily repressive of resistance.

### **1930**

Ho Chi Minh, back from Moscow, forms the Viet Communist Party and is soon de facto leader of a broader nationalist movement, the Viet Minh.

*A striking aspect of 20th century resistance to colonialism (and to a lesser degree nazi rule in Europe) is the leading role of marx-leninist parties. The 'vanguard' model **does** beget ruthlessness but to see this as sufficient explanation misses the mark – witness the ferocity of the wrong-side-of-history Kuomintang in China – and usually reflects vested interests. We should bear this in mind when asking why America, against its better judgment and having learned nothing in Korea, could have sleep-walked into its most traumatising war ever. In my last email I spoke of idiocy. I stand by the remark but it's not the full picture. In a real sense, America's involvement was choiceless.*

### **1940**

"*You wore blue, they wore grey*", says Humph to Ingrid. Germany takes France; its ally takes Indochina. Echoing Vichy France, it suits Japan to keep the old administration in place as junior partner. "We suffer a double yoke of imperialism", says Ho Chi Minh.

### **WW2 in general**

Seeing the Viet Minh as the best local bet, Washington backs Ho ("my enemy's enemy ...") with small arms and limited financing against Japan.

## 1946

Post Hiroshima, and Japan's surrender, Britain, France and Holland think to walk back into their old colonies for business as usual. Initially the US is hostile – though Truman ignores Ho's appeals for help – but Stalinist expansion in Europe, plus Britain's experiences against Malayan communist insurgents, make Washington increasingly sceptical of Ho's nationalist colours.

## 1949

Three things harden this emerging view in Washington. One, Stalin gets the Bomb. (Somebody has to pay, and strapping the Rosenbergs to the chair at Sing Sing could never be more than small change in the reckoning.) Two, with the Kuomintang driven off the mainland to Formosa (Taiwan), Mao's communists take over China. Three, NATO is formed, making France a key ally against Moscow: again, "my enemy's enemy". Uncle Sam holds nose and swallows Enlightenment principles. He'll be doing plenty more of that in the decades to come.

## 1950-53

The following year sees America facing – and realising how badly it has underestimated – battle hardened Chinese troops in Korea. Taking up the presidency in 1953, Truman finds it expeditious to discover that "*the French soldier killed in Indo-China, the British soldier in Malaya, the American life given in Korea*" are all sacrifices in a struggle of "*freedom pitted against slavery; lightness against dark.*"

## 1950-1956

Logistical support to France does not, however, extend to military support; not even when France requests US airstrikes to aid troops beleaguered by a foe she too has badly underestimated. Several things undermine France's ability to crush the Viet Minh. One is arms and cash from Moscow and, just as important, advice from Chinese veterans of conflicts in similar terrain and political circumstances. Another is France's 'fifth column' in the shape of Western Europe's strongest communist party. A third is that, unlike Britain in Malaya, France was unprepared – Algeria being too different in too many ways to offer lessons for Indochina – for the war she was now fighting. Most crucial, though, is the fact – and America really should have been taking notes – that she was up against an enemy whose less individualistic culture, coupled with millennia of holding China at bay, engendered both national pride and a preparedness to absorb high casualties.

A string of spectacular Viet Minh victories – culminating in 3,000 French troops killed and 10,000 taken prisoner at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 – leads two months later to the Geneva Conference that partitions Vietnam. Ho's communists in Hanoi rule north of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel while first the French, then a corrupt US puppet, rule the south. The official story? This is a holding arrangement pending a 1956 referendum. The truth? Nobody believes it will happen. Both sides prepare for civil war.

One aspect of the north's preparations is the infiltration of cadres south of the 17<sup>th</sup> - underground activists priming the Viet Cong to fight South Vietnam then America from within. Another is the establishment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, whereby arms and personnel are smuggled south. As much *midnight express* style metaphor as fixed physical entity, the Trail – destined to drag Laos and, with horrific consequences, Cambodia into the war – needs its own dedicated email.

## Mid 50s to early 60s

Truman passes the ball to Eisenhower, Eisenhower to JFK. America, gripped by McCarthyism and the "domino theory", watches with mounting unease as its kleptocratic client in Saigon leaves the South receptive to Ho. Nor is it just a war of ideas. Depending on how you view this, the north's soldiers are *either* waging low level war against a sovereign neighbour *or* heroically seeking to restore a territorial integrity severed at Geneva by, yet again, distant powers.

Military advisors pile into Saigon under Kennedy but, with an American public still recovering from Korea, boots on the ground are not yet an option. (As with Shock and Awe and dodgy dossier, forty years on, a *casus belli* will, when the time comes, be fabricated in the shape of the Tonkin Incident.) But the die is cast. Washington's mannichaen view of a global red threat means that, come what may, America is tied to Vietnam and cannot walk away. It will fall to Johnson to do the deed and ensure he is remembered neither for a modest but hard won shift of wealth toward the poor, nor the first steps to dismantle American apartheid. Instead he'll be remembered for the campus ditty: *L-B, L-B-J; how many kids did you bomb today?*

Date: Tue, Mar 3, 2015 at 10:11 AM  
Subject: Motorbiking II

Motorbiking,  
Motorbiking,  
Motorbiking;  
Motorcycling.

(Chris Spedding, Motorbiking)

In my highly acclaimed Motorbiking I – released last year while I was also in Vietnam – I told of fishing boats and traffic chaos, towering Buddhas and downing beers, curving alleyways and writhing sea snakes. I'll return to snakes in a another email; this one is new terrain.

It's understood by one and all here, on pain of an early exit from this Vale of Tears, that in lieu of any recognisable highway code, Might is Right. To quote from Motorbiking I, "four wheels (quite rare) trump two and sixteen (rarer still) do the same in quadruplicate". But while the "right of way" message has yet to reach Vietnam, there *is* a rudimentary understanding that **if** it's not too inconvenient and **if** there's no reason (such as lopping a few seconds off a journey) for doing otherwise, it's quite polite to drive on the right. Naturally, nobody wants to get too boringly teutonic about this; I speak less of rules than guidelines.

So when hiring a chopper for the first time, the farang dutifully following said guideline should expect on a frequent basis to encounter a fellow road user doing the opposite. As indicated, there may be many reasons and we can't rule out anglophilia taken to the point of expressing his love of Blighty by Keeping Left. But if that were all, where would be the fun? To this entry level scenario – and in case you haven't grasped this yet, he's coming straight at you on an inside bend – we can add a few touches. He'll be conducting an animated cell phone argument; that goes without saying. More unusual, however, is the fact this hypothetical dude is not on two wheels but at the bridge of a substantial 4WD. There's neither malice nor arrogance at play here; simply custom and practice. Left or right of the road, it would no more occur to him to adjust speed or vector for you, a biker, than you'd think to choose a route to the pub on the basis of minimising body count of crushed insects.

There's more of course. It's pitch black but, as his personal contribution to combating climate change and light pollution, the fucker has his headlights switched off. Welcome to Vietnam!

As a kid my fave read was Victor but once in a while I'd catch the Valiant. Along with Eagle, these comics were to Beano and Dandy what Grauniad etc are to Sun and Mirror. Where Beano made you laugh (assuming your working class aspirational folks allowed you near it) Victor thrilled, inspired and prepared you for virile and worthy manhood. Valiant went one better, imparting top tactics for top tacticians of survival. Circa 1962 its front page was headed, What Would You Do? Below, in word and image, would be set out such likely scenarios as being trapped by a forest blaze, attacked by a rabid dog or chased by Chinese triads on a building site. Your task was to figure a winning strategy before going to the expert view on page 8. (Naturally you'd have to hold page 8 to a mirror to decode the answer: couldn't have every Tom, Dick and Harry knowing such things.)

In the spirit of Valiant, then, what would *you* do in this situation ...?

Returning from culturally uplifting visit to 7<sup>th</sup> Century Cham ruins, you're tootling along at a steady 35 kph on a hired yammerhammer. Either side of the road is a two metre deep dry ditch. This is a major highway, indicated not just by the fact it's actually metalled but by its width. You could – at a push – have two trucks pass one another so long as nothing else was on the same stretch at the same time. Which as luck would have it, is about to happen now; except that there *is* something else on the same stretch at the same time. **You.**

Using all information supplied, send your answer to The Editor, [philip@philproddis.com](mailto:philip@philproddis.com)

Date: Thu, Mar 5, 2015 at 4:31 AM  
Subject: Graceful gestures

I see friends shaking hands, saying 'how do you do?'  
They're really saying, 'I love you'.

I don't suppose I'll live to be a thousand but it's scarcely less likely that, if I did, I'd see anything more beautiful than a pretty Thai girl performing a *wei*; wrists at right angles to palms pressed together; finger tips to forehead like the Hindu *namaste*, eyes demurely lowered as she folds an impossibly nubile waist – the deeper she goes, the greater the respect – before straightening to make full eye contact and blow you away with the invincible smile of Old Siam.

But while the *wei* is for me the Mahatma Ghandi, the Napoleon Brandy of respectful signals, other cultures come close. And guess what; they're all in the 'developing world'.

This should come as no surprise. Observe in our own cities how men of African or Asian descent – third and fourth generations not (entirely) excepted – greet one another in the street. It may 'only' be a handshake but see the warmth in their faces; the way palm contact is allowed to linger. No one doubts the universality of Satchmo's anthem to humanity but do you suppose he saw *white* hands? OK, maybe his vision *was* colour blind – we all want to think so – but wouldn't that be more hope than observation?

Ethiopians do the shoulder to shoulder thing, halfway between hand-shake and embrace, that always puts me in mind – you have to imagine yourself watching from above – of the yin-yang interlock. Here in Vietnam you'll notice two things in any transaction. One is that when you hand over a currency note (there are no coins) the recipient – waiter, shop keeper etc – will accept it with *both* hands in a way clearly designed to convey the preciousness to her of your 'gift'. The other is that, should change be called for, she'll hand it to you with her right and, as she does so, her left palm will rest high up the right forearm. This respectful gesture also allows for calibration: palm on bicep for everyday use, on shoulder for extra emphasis.

If you detect in any of this a whiff of servility then I'd suggest – respectfully – you change the company you've been keeping. This is no more about obsequy than humility is about humiliation. It's a mark of the fine pass we in the west have come to that we could ever confuse the two.

Date: Fri, Mar 6, 2015 at 5:34 AM  
Subject: glimpses

On a bicycle with "*up yours Germaine!*" emblazoned on its belly, it could not look more incongruous. Insinuating its *all-things-considered* remarkably graceful path across the tarmac to my feet, the eighteen inch Mekong Catfish dodges tyre and sandaled foot alike in a futile and ill advised – there are worse ways to go than being skull-whacked by a fishwife – bid for freedom.

Terrible pronunciation for once works in my favour. Amid the cacophony of mid morning Kon Tum Market, from who else could so butchered a version of "*xin xiao*" have come but the ageing

farang? As the woman meets my eye I finger the piscine Houdini. My conscience is clear. Its choices were few and the Buddha himself would applaud my tough, Middle Path call.

Taking her time about it, she strolls into the street to grasp and return the fish to its crowded and watery cell: a large plastic bowl; blue, as distinct from red for carp and green for eels. There's also frog beige (no water for them) and, for large goldfish, off-white. Depending on oxygen needs of the species, an aerating tube is or is not bubbling up the water. I wait till a customer arrives. Warm courtesies are exchanged, carp of choice indicated. In seconds it's dead and bagged: fresh fish in a hot country low on refrigeration.

\* \* \*

On a street corner away from the market, a tailor operates an ancient, foot-treadle Singer in the now blazing sun. Only her eyes show. Her entire face and head are otherwise encased in fabric. I swear an ISIS bride would consider it over the top but this woman's dream, vain in both senses of the word, is not of giving her life to Allah but of having a skin as pale as mine. To my Sheffield Hallam friends, here's a research project for your undecided students come undergrad dissertation season: *quantify and explain the vast sums South East Asia expends on skin-whitening products.*

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By the river at sunset she runs for joy, kingfisher blue. Her small bare feet devour the dusty track and I wonder what I could possibly have done to deserve such a sight.



**Date: Sat, Mar 7, 2015 at 9:24 AM**  
**Subject: glimpses**

My mission takes me deep into the covered market. I pass through its outer quadrangular layer of dried fish – pungent but not unpleasantly so – and lethal ironmongery, into the penumbral heart where more banal items are sold by men and women far from banal. I nod and smile my way down narrow aisles, lit by naked bulbs, of T-shirts and bleach, tin buddhas and carbolic soap. *Ab, this looks promising!*

Catching the lady's eye I stretch my left hand across washing powder, baby clothes and underarm deodorants. With my right I mime the clipping of nails manifestly too long. Her assuring nod of recognition makes clear I could not have chosen more wisely. Her stall, I am given to understand, is the Colosseum; the Louvre Museum of cuticle containment.

Surveying several models, spanning three different philosophical approaches, I reject clippers of the kind I'd left at home and whose design renders their edges irredeemable once dulled. I reject too the scissors; no good, in my clumsy left hand,

for dealing with the right. Settling on a hybrid solution – scissors in operation, cutters in execution – I part with 50,000 dong. I don't bargain. There are too few farangs in Kon Tum for the kind of monkey business routine to Saigon, Hoi Anh or the larger Mekong towns. I've had overpayments returned too often here to worry about such things. Least of all with so fine-looking an item as this; its dull steel not flashy but soberly suggestive of dependable precision. And all for thirty bob!

The deal done, she detains me with restraining hand, her other producing – what else? – a pair of ice-blue speedos, the critical bit adorned with the word, “Star” in sexy black lettering. I didn't fall off the crimbo tree. The glint in her eye hasn't escaped me, nor the three neighbouring stall-holders, all female, zeroing in. Viets are big on poker humour but we Sheffielders are no slouches either. Fixing each lady in turn I pull both hands apart to stretch the item, then, with rueful head shake and lewdly southward gesture, flag my sorrowful resignation – *what can a chap do?* – at its hopeless inadequacy for the scale of wedding kit it would have to house. They shriek with laughter. One slaps my forearm. The principal actor jabs me in the shoulder, Dick Emery style. I am awful – but they like me.

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1930: British lady takes morning air on deck of houseboat on lovely Dal Lake in Srinagar, Kashmir. Boy glides *shikara* alongside, climbs aboard to place pretty string of beads round milk-white neck. “*Kitna*”, she snaps: *how much?* With a figure required, and not wishing to disappoint, boy plucks one from thin air.

“*Ten rupees!*”

Minutes later he rows away with two rupees. She turns to servant.

“*Did I not bargain well, Abdul?*”

“*Indeed memsahib – but he wanted to **give** you the beads.*”

I read this decades ago in Jan and Rumer Goddens' wonderful and long out of print *Shiva's Pigeons*. Whatever its literal truth, I vouch for its accuracy of sentiment. When it comes to Asia at large, and India in particular, don't ever assume you Already Know.

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Frankly the guy was beginning to piss me off. I'd chosen this restaurant, pricier than my usual pavement *pho* joints, because I wanted to reflect. When he approached my table I'd been more than glad to snap him with young boy in arms. (He wasn't the father, I now knew.) But within minutes it had become clear – from the way he leaned on the low rickety table to tilt it alarmingly, and from his dogmatically gesticulated assertions that my Saigon beer was number 10, his Tiger beer number 1 – the guy was juiced.

Under cover of retrieving specs to study Tiger label, I pulled the bag housing camera, flash gun, radio transmitter and wide angle lens – a cool £2.5k's worth – from under table to seat beside me. I knew he had no larcenous intent but when his *beers* (trust



me: a man with three on the go is already four sheets to the wind) plus my own tipped over, I wanted my kit high and I wanted it dry.

It was getting worse. “*Money*”, he kept saying. “*Munn-ee*”. I didn’t like the slyly knowing tone. I’ve heard it once or twice in the more spoiled parts of Vietnam, and in India more times than I’ve had hot roti. I signalled an incomprehension not entirely faked since I couldn’t for the life of me figure what he meant by his repeated circular gestures above my half eaten supper. Did he want my food as well as wallet? Apparently not, since my gestured invite to have himself a trio of skewered prawns only evoked vigorous head shaking and fresh round of the food wave and *munnee* thing. Finally, in that form of frustration peculiar to drunks, he staggered to his feet, arms outstretched for farewell embrace. Man, was I ready to oblige!

Beer in hand, I watched him fasten a skid lid. *Oh no! He surely isn’t driving home!?! Phew:* he climbs onto a Suzuki, behind a steadier looking dude who pulls away in a reassuringly straight line.

I nurse a beer. Then another. I signal for the bill but there seems to be some problem. My waiter, out of his depth, calls his boss over. Her English is only marginally better but she finally gets through to me.

*You no pay! The man ...*

She gestures to the seat my self invited guest had occupied.

*The man – he already pay ...*

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Much as I’d like to leave things there, the tale has a sequel. At a table a few yards away, a large group of lads in late teens have finished eating and are putting beers away with gusto. They’re boisterous but happy and it hits me belatedly – duh! – that it’s Friday; *le weekend*. K-lined is king; this is what normal people *do* on Friday night. It’s me that’s out of joint, skulking over a few solitary beers to *reflect!*

One boy comes over. Normally he’d be shyly respectful. Now he’s cheerfully expansive. He wants me – I look over his shoulder to see his pals nod and beckon vigorously – to join them. Can you in your wildest dreams imagine, in Blighty, a bunch of teenage lads wanting a sixty-something to drink with them? Fuck it! I haven’t come to Vietnam to *reflect* but to *experience*.

So there’s me, early hours of Saturday, surrounded by boys a third my age and loving every minute. We haven’t a word in common so, for the umpteenth time in this beautiful country, my camera and kit, far from demarking difference, open doors.

The lads show off; I snap. They roar over the results; I clink glasses every ten seconds and beam like a man in second childhood, eighty today, surrounded by his favourite grandsons.



Date: Sun, Mar 8, 2015 at 12:23 PM  
Subject: Satisfaction

The road to a good time is paved with good intentions. I'm pissed. Again. May Allah strike me down, I'd every intention today of settling in a quite coffee house, cool and airy, to pass a few hours perusing my superb collection of Vietnam War essays, *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land*. (That's me busted: the title of my first missive this trip was filched.) But striding a Kon Tum side-street with said goal in mind, I was hijacked by extended family taking Sunday Lunch on the pavement: **"Hello!"**

It always begins innocently.



I take the offered seat. Beers are sunk, delectable home cooking sampled: fried fish dunked in tamari and chilli; green mango salad with dried minnow chopsticked from communal bowl to private gob via (less fiery) dunking sauce no 2. The *bonbomie* is off the scale positive. Other than Binh, a junior member of the family whose High

School education and tourist guide aspirations have equipped with passable English, no one speaks my mother tongue. But what care I when the food's so good, the alcohol flowing free, the company so congenial and the shade of a mango tree – source of the very fruit I'm eating – to moderate a blistering sun? I'm in a state of advanced conductivity before I've even touched a drop.

"Is this every Sunday?" I ask Binh, to my right. Not exactly. You'd never in a thousand years guess it, but his is a celebration of Vietnam Women's Day. I've already picked up from this morning's Google graphic that it's *International Women's Day*, so it looks a tad odd that everyone round the table – Binh's father,

uncle and many cousins – are manifestly not of the honoured gender. The latter, two metres away, stoke fires, ferry beers and swap remarks even I can see – some things are universal – are ribaldry derogatory references to the all-talk-and-no-trousers menfolk.



Prompted by his engineer father, Binh wants to know if I'm married. Sisters, forgive me. I've now sunk four cans that never touched the sides, and in my experience a bit of male bonding works wonders for international relations. *Yes*, I say; but I've come alone – for peace and quiet. This, with mimed ear-bending and its hand-signalled negation, are translated. Uproar ensues, glasses are clinked. The women – once my comments are relayed – pull good-naturedly *up yours!* faces.

Having assured one and all for the third time – and I bloody well mean it – that Viet food is the National Gallery, the Garbo's salary of world cuisine, things seem to be winding up and I make ready with the farewells. (I've already secured Binh's email address for the many pictures I've shot.) But no, there's more. They – the menfolk, by way of celebrating Women's Day you understand – want me to join them on a Karaoki visit.

Boys only.

All things must pass. Binh, too young to drink, taps my knee. He has to be somewhere else. I can stay if I like, or ride pillion back to my hotel. (My offer to pick up a tab has been thrice rejected.) My sluiced brain – *hope the pix come out!* – tells me to quit while I'm ahead. So here I am, back in my room. *Kind of Blue* plays on the tinny iPod speakers bought for a song last night. I'll crash in a mo but must sluice a gallon or two of water or my head will throb like billy ho when I wake up. In any case, I doubt I'll be up for reading essays on the war.



Skid lid procured, I mount behind Binh as we take off in convoy to outer suburbs for Another Side of Kon Tum. At first venue we're ushered not, as I'd expected, to a crowded bar but to a side room with central display screen and fruit laid out on low tables. It's almost clinically clean, and puts me in mind of a UK university seminar room. Clearly, for the Viet middle classes, Karaoki is a serious business.

But there's a problem. This joint has no English songs. *No problem*, I assure Binh. I'll relax and take pictures. They're having none of it: *we want to hear you sing!* Skid lids are donned again and it's *vroom vroom* to the next joint, where a few words establish that, yes, if English is called for, they can oblige.

So there I am, pissed again and by far the oldest man present – Binh's uncles not excepted – hunched with inebriated passion over the mike to deliver: *My Way* (now that *has* grown on me with age), *Satisfaction* (as in can't get no), *Blowing in the Wind* (not, alas, Dylan's rasping original but an insipidly saccharine variant) and *Let it Be*.

Call me big-headed – or just drunk – but it where my new pals rate scores (displayed after each song) in the eighties, I get 100 every time. When it comes to crooning I'm Inferno's Dante. The Great Durante.

This is nothing so daring as an attempt at summary; just my quirky take on what the Ho Chi Minh Trail signified. Its logistical complexities could fill a dozen books, as could the attendant internal shenanigans of US generals with egos the sizes of small planets. So too could the byzantine domestic politics of the two nations, Laos and Cambodia, dragged into a vortex at once civil war, anti-colonial struggle and the proxy conflict of superpowers deterred from direct engagement by thermonuclear realities.

Grasping the Trail's strategic significance is simpler. Vietnam is a striking snake. Its head butts China to the north and north-east; its truncated tail tucks below Cambodia to the south-west. For its entire length, slender and rearing, the South China Sea forms an eastern border. On the other side, spinal mountain ranges separate it from Laos in the north-west and west, Cambodia in the south-west. To the south is the eastern rim of the Gulf of Thailand.

Here's a [simple map](#).

The 1954 Geneva Conference imposed a demilitarised zone at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, cutting Vietnam in two. Brainchild of senior generals determined to reunite the country and frequently briefing Ho in person on its progress, the Trail began as a smugglers' route a metre wide or less. Through it, South Vietnam's guerrilla resistance to Saigon and Washington would receive small arms and direction from the north (though in truth the Viet Cong did as much nagging and stop-throwing as obeying). It ended as a "three lane black top highway" on which tanks, troop carriers and petrol tankers – in short the accoutrements of modern conventional warfare – rolled victorious into Saigon on April 30, 1975 as the world watched from its armchair.

The first cadres and arms supplies reached the south in the summer of 1959. These early trips, on foot and bicycle by way of intricate networks of jungle path and mountain pass, took up to six months and were arduous beyond belief. Many succumbed to hunger, exposure, snakebite and even tiger attack. Most contracted malaria. And then, despite measures to escape detection – smoking bans, camouflage, and mats unfurled to leave no footprints when roads were crossed – there was the enemy.

It was a key tenet of Kennedy's advisors – the guys who'd assured him that, since Castro enjoyed no popular support on Cuba, the Bay of Pigs would be a kick-in – that you defeat insurgents by isolating the battle arena to throttle external support. Given the ease with which the American fleet could choke off significant traffic down the Gulf of Tonkin and South China Sea, and given Hanoi's lack of air power, this doctrine made the Trail's eradication a priority for US military advisors up to 1965 and, following LBJ's commitment of air and ground forces that year, the mother of all headaches (or glory prospect and strategic divide) for every admiral and starred general charged with bringing Rolling Thunder to a conclusion satisfactory to Washington.

Just as serpentine as the country was the trail itself: not just in contour but, like a snake dodging an eagle, in motion too. There was no one trail; rather, an intricate and constantly changing mesh of routes. Inbuilt redundancy was such a key feature of vulnerable points and bottlenecks that their repair and Plan-B substitutions can be likened to the packet-switched disaggregation of emails for separate routing prior to reassembly down the line. Inevitably –again see the [map](#) – Laos was dragged in as North Vietnam, aided by a communist Pathet Lao waging its own war on the Royal Lao Government, routed parts of the Trail over the border. Early diversions seldom went in more than twenty miles but America's overt entry in 1965 and consequent B52 bombing sorties forced them deeper: into the Laotian Panhandle and Plain of Jars.

Concomitant political manoeuvrings involved four capitals (plus a private war between C-in-C General Westmoreland and US Ambassador Sullivan in Vientiane) and are about as easy to follow as Hegel's Logic. I'm not going to try but, for light relief, offer this small indicator of the *couldn't-make-it-up* skullduggery in play. Westmoreland – caught between a big fat Congressional no to GIs on Laotian soil and, from across the Pacific Basin, an Admiral Ulysses Grant-Sharp who outranked him and wanted Charlie hit wherever he roamed – urged President Diem to commit South Vietnamese troops in the Panhandle. Naturally, Diem consulted his astrologer, whose charts bespoke zero heavenly fortuity. Undeterred, and unbeknownst to Diem, the CIA then had the star-gazer (God only knows what they threatened or promised) rethink what the zodiac had actually said. Diem ran with the new, Westmoreland-friendly reading: but history suggests the charts had called it right first time ...

Phnom Penh's involvement is trickier, though the consequences are better known. Where a glance at the map shows Laotian neutrality to be a lost cause from the outset, it's less cartographically obvious what Cambodia had to do with things. A couple of likely answers are that (a) B52 bombings and GI-directed Montagnard harassment in the Central Highlands forced Charlie into wider diversions; (b) the importance of a second trail, from Sihanoukville in Eastern Cambodia down to the Mekong Delta south of Saigon, was overestimated by CIA and Pentagon. Whatever the truth, the covert bombing of Cambodia – one more product of Nixon's divine right belief, famously voiced in *that* interview with David Frost, that US law was what the President said it to be – dropped more tonnage than in all WW2 theatres combined: creating the conditions of mass hysteria in which a tiny, lunatic sect could seize power with unforgettable consequences.

**No, not Islamic State!** That's a later chapter in the ongoing saga of overwhelming force in bed with self-serving stupidity ...

Bottom line? For all the tactical intricacy, conspiratorial nuance and endless political ramification, the Ho Chi Minh Trail has at its heart a bold simplicity of import. It was the umbilical cord of resistance, maintained more by rice farmers than Moscow trained engineers, the mighty United States could neither sever nor choke. It was the nemesis of two governments themselves not long shot of French rule. It was the two steps removed antecedent of Pol Pot's genocide. And like the tunnels of Cu Chi, of which I've written before and may do again, it bears witness to the human spirit by way of the ingenuity, determination, ruthlessness and sacrifice embedded in every mile of its snaking paths.

At this point, though I still had two weeks before flying home, I stopped writing wordy emails and began attaching photo essays instead ...