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Library in Vietnam honors Bainbridge Island veteran

By Nancy Bartley
Seattle Times staff reporter

As he stood on the beach near Phu Bai, where he and other Marines splashed to shore in 1965, retired Col. Chuck Meadows thought back to the war, and to the friends who never came home.

For some, coping with the past means never speaking of it. But Meadows believes in the healing power of facing one's memories, and helping to turn what was once a frightening place into something better.

Since the Vietnam War, he's made more than 30 trips back, most often to organize retrieval efforts of unexploded ordnance, sometimes to build kindergartens or libraries. More recently, he's led veterans on tours to places they knew.

"I think he really has an affection for the Vietnamese people," said Blair Burroughs, executive director of PeaceTrees Vietnam, a Seattle-based nonprofit that coordinates the efforts to help Vietnam.

"As with many veterans, he believed he was helping the Vietnamese people back then" and believes he is helping them now, Burroughs said.

Many of Meadows' men have raised money for a library in Quang Tri province to honor him. It's expected to be complete in March and will serve as a community gathering place and education center. It also will offer information to locals about land mines and other ordnance that, even 40 years after the war, still cause deaths and injuries. The usual victims are children who gather scrap metal to sell and farmers plowing their land.

"I helped put some of that stuff in the ground," said Meadows, 71.

More ordnance was dropped in Quang Tri province alone — an area smaller than King County — than during all of



PROVIDED BY CHUCK MEADOWS
Chuck Meadows poses in Vietnam in December, 1967.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
2010: Retired Marine Col. Chuck Meadows, at home on Bainbridge Island, has made 30 trips to Vietnam since the war ended to help remove land mines, aid victims and educate people about the dangers of hidden explosives.



Retired Col. Chuck Meadows stands behind three boys at the Dannan Parry Landmine Education Center, Dong Ha town, Quang Tri province, Vietnam. The boy at right was hurt when a white phosphorous grenade exploded.

World War II, Burroughs said. Vietnam government officials estimate that at the current rate of retrieval it will be 300 years before Vietnam is cleared of the bombs and mines that never exploded.

Meadows has made it his passion to lead efforts to gather the unexploded ordnance.

It's that kind of leadership that has earned him wide-ranging respect among the Vietnamese people, Burroughs said. Some even donated to the library in Meadows' name.

Reconnecting

When Meadows went to Vietnam for the first time in 1965, he was a small-town Oregon kid, a husband and father with a photo of his wife and young daughter in his wallet. He returned in 1967. By the time he came home, he'd won the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and the Navy Achievement Medal.

It was Meadows' second Vietnam tour when his Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, was sent to take control of Hue City. While most of the military's efforts involved fighting in the countryside, Hue was a city with old mansions from the French colonial days, churches, businesses, highways and bridges. Hue offered a number of hiding places and made air surveillance difficult.

Meadows and his men were sent to the old part of the city to escort a South Vietnamese division commander to safety. They took no packs, expecting to return to base by the end of the day. There was no other information and nothing to prepare them for what would become a horrific battle.

Of Meadows' 160 men, seven were killed and 45 were wounded.

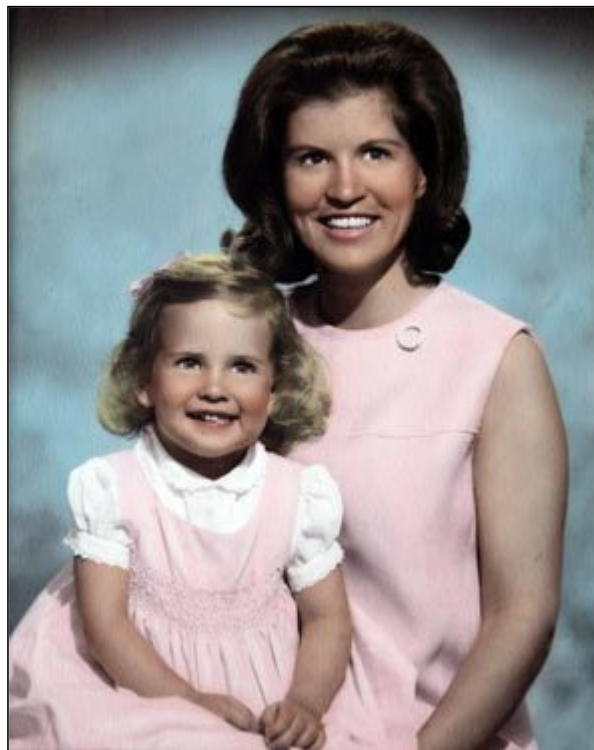
He now leads a quiet life with Missy, his wife of 49 years, on Bainbridge Island. He and many of his men meet annually. They recently met at his home — the men coming from across the country, spending the first day without their spouses, simply reconnecting over one of the most defining experiences of their lives.

Most of the men in his reunion group served only a few months with Meadows. But nothing is as daunting as "the life-threatening situations and moments of sheer terror and having people wounded," Meadows said, especially "if you're the young man out front with a rifle."

They share stories and their concern for each other.

Building up

Meadows retired 11 years ago after a long military career — including years at Marine headquarters in Washington, D.C. — and wanted to do volunteer work that would help others. He heard of PeaceTrees Vietnam.



COURTESY OF CHUCK MEADOWS

While he was in Vietnam, Chuck Meadows carried a photo of his wife, Missy, and daughter Melissa.

PeaceTrees was started 15 years ago by a Bainbridge Island woman, Jerilyn Brusseau, and her late husband. The group funds the construction of libraries, kindergartens, housing for the poor, tree-planting in deforested areas and land-mine retrieval — all in Vietnam.

Meadows, the first Vietnam veteran to join, served six years as PeaceTrees' executive director.

Building schools and libraries and collecting land mines "is a good, humanitarian thing to do," said Barney Barnes, of Georgia, who served with Meadows.

"While some vets hate Vietnam ... well, that was 42 years ago. Those people were just kids back then," he said. "This is a way to mend fences and provide a better way of living and coping with the world's problems."

For the past few years, Meadows' friends have been fundraising on behalf of PeaceTrees, collecting \$23,000 — the amount needed to build the library, to be dedicated in Meadows' honor.

Some of the men with whom he served will return for the library's March dedication. For Barnes, the trip will be his first to Vietnam since the war and a big step, since even talking about it can produce anxiety.

"I want to go back and walk where I walked 42 years ago," Barnes said. "I'll be with him. He was my commanding officer then, and he is now."

When veterans think of returning to Vietnam, they are unsure what they will see, Meadows said. The reality is Vietnam is a country now at peace and prospering with friendly, welcoming people, he said.

Jim Lewis, who served with Meadows, returned several years ago and was astounded at the change. Phu Bai, once the Marine base, now has an airport with a terminal and tram.

No fear

There was nothing there to trigger the frightening memories, Lewis said. No explosions. No helicopters hovering. No landscape dotted with green tents.

Veterans who return are often amazed that "the place they remember as having red dust and war machinery now has trees 50 to 60 feet tall. It's quite moving," Burroughs said.

When Meadows stands on the shore near what had been the Marine base at Phu Bai, he looks out over the water and "tries to think back and imagine all the boats" that once lumbered like sleeping giants offshore, he said.

"Now it's quiet. There are a few grass huts. You get swallowed up in the present. There are no bangs. No shooting. Nothing physically threatening."

There's peace.

For him, what's most important is the inner peace from coming to terms with the past.

"To my view," he said, "peace is not the interval between conflict. It's the peace inside you, knowing that what you're doing is meaningful."

Nancy Bartley: 206-464-8522 or nbartley@seattletimes.com

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