

Veterans join hands for strategic partnership

In a morning of May 5th this year, the family of General Vo Nguyen Giap stood side by side with the Vice President of Boeing, Mr John Wojick, to open new school buildings less than a runway away from where General Giap planned the Dien Bien Phu victory in 1954. The new school was constructed in Muongphang commune, Dien Bien. The 'centurial' General Giap was not there in person due to his illness, but he had given his blessing to cooperating with Boeing in this project. While Boeing paid for the renovation and construction of new classrooms, General Giap's family fitted out a room of computers with Internet connectivity. Anyone who attended the moving ceremony felt the significance of such a meaningful partnership for building the school for ethnic minority students in Dien Bien. So far Boeing Company has funded 17 schools in 12 provinces in Vietnam.

The idea that Boeing support renovation and construction of the Muongphang commune school came from the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA), who is following in the footsteps of VVAFA respected president, Mr Bobby Muller, by utilizing humanitarian work in Vietnam to further US-Vietnam relations. Mr. Bobby Muller is also the co-founder of the International Campaign to ban landmines which was awarded with the Nobel Peace in 1997.

To understand why VVAFA could broker a valuable community project involving General Giap's family and Boeing in such a significant site as Dien Bien Phu

requires a quick revisit to VVAFA's original relations with Vietnam. VVAFA leaders Bobby Muller and John Terzano first returned to Vietnam in 1981 when the first of many delegations arrived to engage discussions with the government on issues of common concern. It was a highly controversial visit in the United States at the time. As veterans, Mr Terzano and Mr Muller understood that the road to healing and reconciliation between the two countries would be long, bumpy and dotted with inevitable stop signs.

However, it must be recognized that VVAFA was able to build trust with Vietnam at a time when their movement was partially restricted in the United States, with VVAFA's office in Washington DC often serving as a de facto 'Vietnam embassy' before the United States and Vietnam established diplomatic relations in 1995.

When the United States lifted the trade embargo in 1994, VVAFA quickly established a representative office in Hanoi. By that stage Mr Muller had been instrumental in launching the International Campaign to ban landmines. So it was only a matter of time that removal of landmines and other unexploded ordnances would become a common goal shared by Vietnamese and VVAFA leaders. This has allowed VVAFA to play a role quite a unique amongst international NGOs active in Vietnam.

But it was victims of landmines that inspired VVAFA's first work in Vietnam. Mr Muller, a Vietnam



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Vietnam. Mr Muller, a Vietnam veteran who lost the use of his legs from battle wounds, set up a prosthetics and rehabilitation program in Cambodia in 1992 and another in Vietnam in 1994. The first was with two major hospitals in Hanoi – the National Hospital of Paediatrics and Bach Mai Hospital – and later on in provincial hospitals of Ha Giang, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, Ha Nam and Hoa Binh. The program was supported by Vietnam's Ministry of Health and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Since 2001, VVAF has worked with the Ministry of Defence to coordinate a Vietnam Unexploded Ordnance/Landmine Impact Assessment and Rapid Technical Response Project. The project has mapped more than 3,000 bombs- and mine- infected areas, and cleared 1,354 hectares of land and disposed off more than 25,000 of unexploded ordnance items that severely threatened and blocked accessibility to daily socio-economic lives of the local people living in the contaminated land in six provinces in central Vietnam.

This partnership between units of the Ministry of Defence and VVAF is the first such collaboration of Vietnam's Ministry of Defence with an American non-governmental organization. A level of trust and mutual respect emerged which set the foundation for perhaps the most ambitious phase of post-war reconciliation cooperation, the Agent Orange.

Then Ford Foundation Country Director, Dr Charles Bailey, wanted to build US government support for a cooperative approach to dioxin remediation. He selected VVAF to receive funding to bring both sides together, starting with an aptly named project DRIVE (Dioxin Resolution Initiative in Vietnam). The project started in 2006. It seeks to ensure that residents in areas of high

contamination, such as the former Da Nang US Airforce base, receive medical and social services and information that they need to protect their health. It also works in 10 other provinces where people with disability associated with Agent Orange are concentrated.

Through VVAF advocacy, in 2007 the US Congress agreed to commit \$3 million toward dioxin clean-up. Since then a total of more than \$10 million has been committed by the US government for the remediation of dioxin contaminated sites in Vietnam, and to support health programs in communities near those sites. It was also considered as an important milestone in US-Vietnam relations.

One of the world's most generous philanthropists is Mr Chuck Feeney, whose Atlantic Philanthropies selected VVAF to engage in another difficult space, mental health in Vietnam.

Commencing January 2006, VVAF and partners developed a survey tool to collect information about the number of people who are affected by mental health problems, individuals and their families, as well as community services. In addition, community health promotion and capacity building peer group programs have been established. VVAF is currently training mental health professionals and community health workers, upgrading mental health facilities and giving social and vocational training to individuals suffering from mental disorders.

So in many dimensions, VVAF continues to play a highly unique role. By working at the grassroots level on post-war development issues, step by step it helps alter the mood, atmosphere and sense of growing friendship between the United States and Vietnam.

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