

'POWERFUL EXPERIENCE'

KNUDSON '67 ENLIGHTENED IN VIETNAM RETURN

Tom Knudson '67 returned to Vietnam on a very different mission nearly a quarter-century after serving as an A-7 Corsair pilot during the Vietnam War.

In December 1993, Knudson was Conoco's general manager of Exploration & Production Business Development. At the time, Vietnam was beginning to open up offshore development. Knudson was sent to meet with Petrovietnam to request a drilling concession agreement to do offshore oil exploration in the South China Sea in Vietnamese territorial waters.

Initially wary of how an American might be received, Knudson said he was humbled and overwhelmed by his hosts' response. He didn't know what to expect upon returning to a country where he bombed bridges and attacked anti-aircraft artillery sites during his 130 combat missions.

During his three-day business trip to Hanoi, he met with several senior government officials, all of whom were former North Vietnamese generals.

"They all knew I was a pilot," Knudson said. "They all knew I'd flown missions against North Vietnam. They hugged me like a long-lost comrade in arms. They were incredibly welcoming."

While at a dinner the final night of his trip, Knudson's hosts offered a historical perspective on international relations.

"They said, 'what you don't understand about us is war is like our relationship with China. It's been going on for 2,000 years. The relationship with the French for 150 years, that was kind of a misunderstanding. We have no word for what happened with the United States,'" Knudson said.

Knudson said understanding the Vietnamese's view was impactful. One night, he had dinner with a man who was headmaster of a Vietnamese school. He learned the headmaster would take his students out into the countryside during the week and teach classes in a little village.

The headmaster knew the U.S. wouldn't bomb on Sundays. So, on Sundays, they'd come back into town and check on their families.

"We exchanged gifts, we wept and we hugged," Knudson said. "It was a very sweet experience."

Outside of the industry connections, Knudson said his most memorable event during his return to Vietnam was visiting the Hanoi Hilton. The notorious prison, which housed American prisoners of war (POWs), was the site of habitual abuse and torture for many downed U.S. aviators during the Vietnam War.

It was still operating as a civilian prison at that time and Knudson was dropped off by his driver about 10 blocks away. Knudson said he saw a grim facility, which the local authorities didn't want foreign visitors to see. His walk took him past the notorious prison and to an example of unexpected change.

"The guards kept shooing me away," he said. "I didn't know where I was going so I took a left and I started walking back toward downtown Hanoi. All of a sudden, I entered a plaza and it was an old French cathedral. It had just been allowed to reopen by the government. It was full of all these young Vietnamese priests and they had a school next door."

"I looked through the chain link fence and the kids are playing soccer. Two or three of them have Mickey Mouse sweatshirts on. I'm thinking, the Vietnamese were tough adversaries and subjected our POWs to brutal treatment, but I think the ensuing 50 years have proved that we can be friends with the Vietnamese."

"I think they can be allies. I think they can help us in terms of what we're trying to accomplish in the Western Pacific. Not everybody's going to be like us, and we just need to get used to that. It was probably one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had." 🚢



Far left: Tom Knudson '67, right, with Conoco Exploration & Production Services Group Vice President Mike Stinson in December 1993 outside the infamous Hanoi Hilton, which housed American prisoners of war during the Vietnam War. Knudson flew combat missions over North Vietnam during the war and returned nearly 25 years later as part of a team from Conoco looking to secure rights to conduct offshore oil exploration in Vietnam territorial waters.

Left: Tom Knudson '67 flew combat mission into North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. One of his targets was the Doumer Bridge (now known as the Long Bien Bridge), seen behind him during a 1993 business trip to Hanoi.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM KNUDSON '67