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Memory continued

When the telephone rang one day last summer and the caller said he was an old Army buddy of his father, Elkins and his wife were a bit skeptical at first.

The man was Vince Acosta, a fellow squad member who bunked alongside Elkins Sr. in Khanh Duong. That first phone call prompted many conversations and opened a new chapter in their lives.

Acosta was working on a project for the Web site set up for members and relatives of U.S. Army Company A, 70th Combat Engineers Battalion. The Elkins sent a photo for the Web site and once that was posted, got a call from another old Army buddy, John Craven of Trenton, Mich.

Craven and his wife Gail came to Sanford last August and spent hours talking with the Elkins. He showed them photographs of the bridge sites that the Army engineering and combat company worked on and of the compound where they lived at Camp Reil-Davis.

“Through pictures and stories it was a way for Wayne to get a flavor of what his father did,” said Craven.

He described the senior Elkins as a man who worked hard and was a team player, someone who was calm, nonchalant and didn’t let much bother him – except that he missed his wife and two young sons.

It turns out Craven is a member of the DOVE Fund, a non-profit group that helps the poor in Vietnam by building schools, water towers and medical facilities. Craven had made his first trip back to Vietnam in 2007, where he placed a plaque honoring his three fallen comrades in the field where the compound once stood. Then he told the Elkins about a second journey set for this year.

“Wayne said he’d like to go there,” said Tracy Elkins. “He needed to go there.”

The pair, along with 17 others, all Vietnam veterans or their family members, left the United States in late February and arrived home in mid-March. They toured many schools in villages throughout Vietnam, where, despite the wrenching poverty, youngsters must pay for their education.



JEFF LAGASSE / Journal Tribune

Wayne Elkins Jr. reflects his recent visit to Vietnam at his home in Sanford.

So far, the DOVE fund has paid for construction of 40 schools. The DOVE fund pays the bulk of construction costs, with local Vietnamese governments picking up the rest. Sponsors pay the cost of scholarships so the youth can attend classes. The Elkins are sponsoring two children.

The schools made them very welcome.

“The kids, they just love you to death,” said Elkins Jr. and, the couple said, despite the dire poverty, the children seem very happy.

Home just a few weeks, the couple still have a hard time believing they’ve been halfway around the world. They have bundles of memories, a cache of 1,300 photographs and tender, caring friendships with their fellow travelers to treasure and nurture.

Next year, if all goes well, the couple plans to return for the dedication of the school built in Elkins Jr.’s father’s memory.

Both Wayne and Tracy, whose home is adorned with mementos of Elkins Sr. and their trip to the country where he spent his last months, said the trip was very emotional. There were many conversations with the group about his father and the work the men did while serving their country.

Elkins Jr. this week said he was told his father was a quiet man.

“They said I act just like him,” he added.

It made him smile.

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