TIME TO PAY THE RENT

Michael Domino

With excerpts from:

"The War Wasn't in Me" *and* **"Tet"**
by Michael Primont

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Preface

If it were not for the dial on my digital camera getting stuck between picture and video, Time to Pay the Rent would never have been written. In 2007, while on a trip to Vietnam, I thought that I was recording a conversation between two former combatants who were sitting on a porch in the village of Rach Kien, discussing battles they had fought 40 years ago in fields near the house where we were quietly sipping tea. But when I got back to my hotel and pushed play, the screen showed eight seconds of a teapot. If I had set the camera properly, a video would have been passed around to friends and then been lost in the vast and expanding universe of You Tube. Instead, I was left with only my memory of the conversation and a strong conviction that it should not be erased.

That night, I tried to write down everything I could remember about the encounter. Then, over the next three years, Time to Pay the Rent expanded and developed, until it became the story which is on these pages.

Michael Domino

This book is dedicated
to all soldiers and civilians
whose lives were changed
by the war in Vietnam.

Foreword

Hindsight is 20-20, but nearly 40 years after the Vietnam War, the author has a birds-eye view crowded with memories. As a member of the Boomer generation, he is not alone.

The last of the Greatest Generation is slipping away as we sit here in 2010; and Boomers are now beginning to find special urgency to tell their stories. Their time is becoming short to reflect, deconstruct, rationalize, understand, or heal old wounds; and, any lessons the Vietnam War had to offer must be learned and shared now, or lost forever.

A treasure of personal remembrance of the Vietnam War, and a glimpse of humanity at its best and worst, Time to Pay the Rent explores all of this and more, delving into the rippling complications of relationships 40 years after the weapons have been laid to rest.

In his books of poetry, Michael Domino meets life's small but mighty miracles and missteps with sensitivity and a dash of humor. In this chronicle he invites us to accompany him on a visit to Vietnam in 2006 with his cousin, a Vietnam War veteran. Domino touches on the horror and revelations of the Vietnam experience of one soldier as the two Boomers have a serendipitous experience of redemption and connection in present-day Vietnam.

Eve Hogard

Introduction

I was born in 1946, and grew-up in working-class Queens, NY. After graduating from high school at the age of 16, I worked at aimless jobs for a year and a half until January 1965, when I drifted into the Army. I hadn't even heard of Vietnam. Long story short, I was sent there from August 1967-1968, and came back as unrecognizable to my family as they and this country had become to me.

I brought back a feeling that we had no good reason to be in Vietnam. After a year as a lieutenant, advisor to the Vietnamese equivalent of a rural county government, I couldn't come up with any reason at all that we were there. During most of the days and all of the nights, the Viet Cong controlled more than ninety-five percent of the territory of our district. Almost every local government official I met was corrupt. The only honest official that I knew was reassigned to one of the most miserable places he could be sent as soon as the Vietnamese province chief realized that he wasn't corruptible. The local militia (equivalent of our National Guard) could barely be coaxed to patrol areas adjacent to their villages. American CIA agents would routinely helicopter into our village, bypass the American advisors, and leave a suitcase full of cash in the hands (and ultimately the pockets) of the Vietnamese major who served as the political leader of the district. My pessimism about our presence in Vietnam was reinforced by what I learned from Americans in other units and regions in the country. It was one big shell game.

My memories of my first days back in America are a little fuzzy. I remember how sweet it felt to experience peace again; and to live in a safe place where people could think about a future. I had no awareness of the political forces that were building in the U.S., and in other countries, and in my own life. I still had almost a year to serve in the Army. After I was discharged, I went to college, studied philosophy,

lived in a French monastery, went to law school, worked as a public defender, lived in China, and then returned to Seattle and the practice of law.

The year I spent in Vietnam, and its aftermath, had the effect of lurching me from one set of assumptions to an entirely different set. Like a planet being hit by a meteor so big that its orbit is altered, I was flung by the impact into new relationships with everyone and everything around me. It took a while to figure out if or how I could ever fit in again.

Something similar happened to the United States. I believe that my generation will someday be seen as having had a far greater effect on history than we now understand. People of my age lived through an era when the population of the U.S. doubled, from a little more than 150 million to 300 million. New forces are stressing and straining everything from the electrical grid, the prison system, health care, you name it. A Christian/Caucasian, male dominated body politic has become more multifaceted. Around the world, the U.S. post-World War II advantage is waning. The economic and political dominance that we gained by the outcome of World War II is fading, and we are forced to recalibrate our relationships with major nations and cultures that we once ignored.

The legacy that my generation leaves will probably be one of shattering a host of American beliefs that accumulated during the country's first 200 years. We can't yet know what the results will be or how vast, but I have a hunch that as a group we'll still be talked about many generations from now. Each of us whose life came apart because of the Vietnam War, and who found a way to rebuild ourselves, has found an individual solution to a generational – even global – problem. Our country is still far away from finding its collective solutions. Alas, while we were changing, the world was changing too.

Michael Primont

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Prologue: "Tet"

In 1968, the year that the Tet Offensive turned American opinion against the Vietnam War, I was an Army lieutenant attached to a six-man advisory team. We lived in an outpost in a town called Rach Kien, an isolated grouping of huts and houses that languished along a dirt road in the Mekong Delta. During the Tet Offensive, we were bombarded every night for a week; and that was followed by sporadic heavy combat for another month. Until Tet, our adversaries had been local Viet Cong guerrillas. After Tet, we were up against disciplined North Vietnamese Army units. I don't know if it was worse for them or for us.

At the time of the Tet Offensive I had completed more than half of my one-year tour of duty and had already logged hundreds of miles on foot patrol in the rice paddies around Rach Kien. At least once a week, I accompanied a collection of rag-tag local troops in an attempt to disrupt the lives of remote villagers who had the bad fortune to live within our range. The only government intervention those villagers knew was tax collection and our destructive patrols. True, they did give aid to the Viet Cong. But what else were they supposed to do? The Viet

Rach Kien Village 1968 with our house

Cong were their neighbors, brothers, sisters, and children. The Viet Cong slept under their roofs. Did we expect them to support armed soldiers who were paid by the tax collectors from Saigon? Did anybody really think that those poor people had a choice? Regretfully, I didn't ask any of these questions back then. Instead, I dutifully lunged into their lives, participated in government-sanctioned mayhem, and then retreated to a slightly less primitive, but no less vulnerable village.

Michael Primont Rach Kien Bridge May 1968

This became a ritual. Our soldiers' vocabulary shielded us from seeing those people ("the gooks") as anything other than collaborators with "the enemy." Later, I understood that we were our own worst enemy in that war. The people of the United States would never sustain a bleeding Army for the decades that it would have taken to conquer Viet Nam. We were a self-defeating Army; fooled into thinking that we were there for some good purpose; not seeing that we were really there to prop up a rotten-to-the core dictatorship that was put in power by our very own government. Our "cause" was doomed from the start. We were just the worst kind of renters. We were making a ruckus while we were there. The neighbors all hated us. Sooner or later we would move out and would leave behind a mess.

Some months after Tet, I contracted hepatitis and was airlifted to an Army hospital in the coastal city of Vung Tao where I lay listless in bed for six weeks. The doctors first thought I would die. There was no treatment for hepatitis in those days. For two weeks I just lay under a mosquito net, unable to lift a hand, or take food, or do anything for myself. Then I started to inch back toward life. While I convalesced, the advisory team in Rach Kien took in a replacement for me. In less than two weeks he was seriously wounded and was sent home. I recovered and was sent back to Rach Kien.

It was eerie to be replacing my replacement. I wasn't at all happy about it but I didn't dwell on it. I was still the 21-year-old version of me – a resilient, optimistic, blue-collar kid out of high school who never entertained an idea that hadn't first been vetted by the crowd. I could sing like a bird and drink like a fish. I was bright, easy going, and had a knack for seeing the humor in almost everything. In other words, I was just what the Army needed.

I had always been a reluctant soldier. The Army served as background music for my life while I glided through two months of basic training, a year in Germany, and six months of officer's candidate school. It wasn't until after I'd been discharged and went to Hofstra University, that I began to find some personal responsibility for the decisions I had made. When I joined the Army I may have been almost six feet tall, but I was still just a child.

I didn't stay long in Rach Kien. With a month to go on my tour of duty I was transferred to provincial headquarters in Long An. This was a big city and was reputed to be a safe place. They assigned me to a desk job with uncertain duties that left more than enough time to get stoned and/or drunk every night. I'd had my fill of war. In Long An, I was introduced to marijuana. We made every night a party – a celebratory escape from Vietnam.

I think the Major who was my boss caught on to me, because, in an unprecedented move, he sent me out on patrol on my last night in Long An. In the Army, you don't refuse orders if you want to go to go home the next day. So I obeyed, and went on the damn patrol, and then we got ambushed.

I did nothing to aid the cause of the war that night. When the shooting started I found a sturdy, rice paddy wall and made myself as small as possible until they stopped shooting and I could go home.

In 2006, I returned to Rach Kien during a trip to Vietnam with my cousin. With the help of a guide, we found the village, which now has another name, and we even got to meet the people who owned the requisitioned house where I had lived. The house and the village were almost exactly as they were in 1968. The person I became after enduring that year in Vietnam is a product of my having survived it. The United States may have lost that war, but it was a victory for me. On that spot in Vietnam, forty years ago, I wrestled with death and death retreated. No doubt it is still gathering strength for a more opportune time and place to meet me; but just not yet.



Our jeep after a mortar attack & our squad eating steaks

Rach Kien Government Administrative Headquarters 1967

Arrival

It was 1968, a torrid day in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. In the first moments of dawn I dropped off the ledge of a Huey helicopter into wet rice paddies along with twenty-five Vietnamese soldiers. There were just two Americans, Sergeant Surbough and me. I was a lieutenant, nominally outranking him, but Sergeant Surbough was almost twice my age. Neither of us knew it then, but in a few years he would become one of the highest-ranking enlisted men in the US Army. He was a professional; I was just a kid.

Rach Kien Village 1968

We were part of a six-man American team of "advisors" living in a remote village that served as headquarters for the district of Rach Kien. It was the deepest the Vietnamese government had penetrated into the heartland. To get to us from the so-called highway, you had to take a dangerous, often mucky and impassable dirt lane that meandered through ten miles of mangroves, rice paddies and tiny hamlets until it reached our village. We were at the end of the road.

My cousin Michael Primont and I touch down in Ho Chi Minh City on Saturday, February 18, at 11:35 a.m., exactly twelve hours ahead of NY time. Including stops in Seattle and Taipei, the trip took thirty hours. Although I only slept a few hours I feel surprisingly well-rested.

The Vietnamese government left standing, a row of American concrete Quonset huts along the main runway. Some of them still hold Vietnam-era, US Army helicopters and small airplanes that hadn't been moved since 1975. The message is clear: "If you come here with your weapons of war, you will leave vanquished and will go home without them."

In spite of our long journey and little sleep, our first day in Ho Chi Minh City is full. We are told it's still acceptable to call it Saigon; and even though the Hanoi government has officially renamed it, the locals still use the old name.

Mr. Hoang Luat is waiting for us at the airport as promised. He has hired a driver and small van to chauffeur us to the Sofitel Hotel in downtown Saigon. We pass the famous US Embassy, which was photographed with helicopters desperately shuttling people off the rooftop as the North Vietnamese closed in on the city's center. After a short rest at our hotel, Mr. Hoang—we call him Luat, which is pronounced "law"—returns to take us on a tour of his office and warehouse in a gritty, industrial part of town.

We meet his staff and look into the walk-in refrigerator packed with cases of ice-cream pops that he imports from Japan and sells to vendors around Saigon. Then he offers to take us for a cup of strong, Vietnamese coffee, known as café sudah.

We navigate a sea of motor scooters to get to the coffee shop. A few times, Luat grabs my hand, as if I were a kindergarten kid, to get me safely across the street. There is a method to this madness, but I have not figured it out yet.

The street life is abundant. There is a tiny business, selling air from a hand pump, next door to a sidewalk-only restaurant where the dishes are washed on the sidewalk next to where the customers are eating. Two feet away a guy is selling hardware neatly piled on a sheet of plastic. Everyone is on the go and making lots of noise.

The coffee gives us energy to walk to an open-air seafood restaurant, where we meet Luat's boss, Mr. Nam, and his entourage. We are told that the restaurant occupies the spot of the US Army headquarters during the war. The original building was torn down many years ago.

My cousin Michael was stationed in Vietnam in a small village about thirty miles from where we are having a wonderful seafood dinner. Michael left Vietnam in 1968, a year before Luat was born. Luat has distinct memories of gunfire and bombs being dropped.

Rach Kien District Headquarters October 1967

Early that morning, twenty-five Vietnamese soldiers and the two of us assembled in darkness in a field beyond the village perimeter. When I received a radio signal from the lead chopper, I popped open three canisters of incendiary smoke grenades to reveal our position. In less than a minute we could hear them.

The noise crescendoed as giant forms appeared in the black above us, battering us with debris and dust. The choppers were over us, never touching land.

We stepped up, pulled up, pushed up, groped for places on canvas benches and corrugated steel floors. The noise of the rotors intensified and we could feel, but not see, the earth recede below us as the dog-heat of night was instantly replaced with a cool rush that filled the crevices and sweaty openings of our clothes and eyes and lungs.

We pounded up and forward, pulsing and blasting noise into black space. We rose and the sky showed some life. Bluer and bluer grew the air. I could see my hand, someone's knee lodged between my legs, a rifle, a radio.

Mr. Nam's father was an NVA soldier, but his mother was from the South. He is seated next to Michael at dinner as we share shrimp and beer and conversation. One of Mr. Nam's brothers was conscripted into the South Vietnamese army at the same time another brother was fighting for the North. We ate shrimp and oysters and laughed and joked and took pictures at the table together. The war seems so long ago to them—almost forty years of memories have interceded. For the two Americans, newly arrived in Vietnam, thoughts of the war are vivid, as if it ended yesterday.

Sign outside house of US Advisory Team

The next day, Luat offers to drive us to Rach Kien, where Michael was stationed during the war. Luat tells us that the government

changed the name of Rach Kien, but like Ho Chi Minh City, which is now called Saigon again, Rach Kien will go back to being called Rach Kien and not its other name, of which he does not appear to approve. I ask him when he thought this would happen. He replies, "As soon as the children of the government officials in Hanoi graduate from colleges in America and push their fathers out of their jobs."

That part of the Mekong Delta looked like a terminal victim of the war. Villages and fields were abandoned. Moon-like pockmarks cratered the fields. B-52 raids, artillery, and mortar fire had splattered, crushed, and reshaped centuries of handwork and sculpting. From the air it looked as if a crazy artist had tried to impose a splotched vision of chaos over a canvas that once had been a timeless, pastoral landscape.

I was in the lead ship. Our trip had been plotted the day before, so the pilot knew our destination. I handed him a map in a clear plastic case that I had marked with grease pencil arrows and X's. I kept an identical map in a large pocket on my thigh. If we got into trouble on the ground, the arrows would keep the choppers away from the artillery fire; they also pointed to our pickup the next day, if all went well.

All did not go well.

“Rach Kien: Then and Now”

An overgrown patch of weeds is the only evidence that a marketplace once thrived in the center of Rach Kien. Upon closer inspection, stones and bricks and concrete footings, which once were the foundations of food and supply shops, stick out of the earth, mostly buried though, after years of decay.

On the other side of the bridge, Rach Kien 1967

It is unusual that such a large patch of land in a village center would be left vacant. Nothing goes to waste here, especially prime real estate. The old market spot splits the main street of Rach Kien in half. About ten meters to the west of the grassy divide is a bridge that leads to what was once the Viet Cong-controlled part of the village. Back in 1968, a US Army soldier could have picked up a stone at the marketplace, and using his best home-plate-to-second-base throw, could have easily reached the other side of the bridge. A soldier would never have crossed the Rach Kien alone back in ’68; a squad maybe, but only if there was an unavoidable reason to do so.

Of course, considering that in the daytime, VC guerrillas blended in with local villagers, a VC sniper could just as easily have trained a bullet on someone buying a chicken in the marketplace. In Rach Kien, the enemy was always close at hand.

The sun rose and the helicopters began their descent. Around me, slightly built soldiers checked their towering M-1 rifles, relics of WWII. The choppers' blades cracked louder as we slowed and lost altitude. About fifty feet above land, the door gunners opened fire with .50-caliber machine guns. The noise level was approaching jackhammer proportions.

Three feet from the ground, the choppers hovered and the co-pilot waved to signal for us to get out. We jumped, splashed, stumbled, and ran away from the airships toward a line of trees. All the while, .50-caliber bullets whined over our heads, aiming for the trees in case there were any Viet Cong waiting for us.

In less than ten seconds, the choppers lifted away and the machine guns quit firing. The racket of the blades was replaced with hushed, breezy sounds as the wind worked through high palm leaves and bristled through thick strands of bamboo.

Behind the trees there was a stream and a village, a scene out of another century. It was our first "objective" of the day.

Leaning back against the relative safety of a paddy dike, I signaled to Lieutenant Ngi, my Vietnamese counterpart, who was sprawled about ten feet to my left. "Let's go into the village." He shook his head and mouthed silently, in English, "No good. Maybe VC there."

Rach Kien is a small village in Long An province, about thirty miles southwest of Saigon. It was supposed to be a model for the improvements that the American occupation of South Vietnam was going to bring to rural areas. Rach Kien was one of the poverty stricken villages that were prime recruiting grounds for the Viet Cong. If the Americans could turn such a village into a safe and productive example of life under the protection of the American-trained South Vietnamese army, then the rest of Vietnam might follow. This was easier said than done.

The Vietnamese will tell you that they have never lost a war, reciting their list of victories—the Chinese more than once, the Japanese in World War II, the French in 1954, and the United States in 1975.

In 1966, before it was safe for American advisors to enter the village, US Marines engaged in several bloody battles to drive VC guerrillas from Rach Kien and the surrounding countryside – or so they thought. In reality, the VC never went away. They just went back to farms and rice paddies. They hid in tunnels in the daytime, emerging at night to launch mortar attacks and ambushes against American advisors and their allies. The enemy controlled the night in Long An province, including Rach Kien.

Such were the conditions in 1967, when my cousin, Michael Primont, was sent to Rach Kien as an "advisor" to South Vietnamese forces in the village. Michael was one of six US Army advisors in Rach Kien. They directed the construction of a school, started a brick factory, the products of which they used for housing construction, and distributed school books, paper, and pencils, etc. They also accompanied local Vietnamese militia on combat operations, and were always on alert for attacks and reprisals. At night, they slept "with one eye open." They took turns at the short-wave radio that served as their link to the outside world.

The Americans never really knew who was who in Rach Kien. The man who spent his days plowing a field with his water buffalo, the shopkeeper at the market, the local butcher, all could be part of the secret nighttime militia. The Marines had pushed the VC out of sight in 1966. They had to deal with an invisible enemy.

Ngi turned to his sergeant. The two conferred for a couple of minutes and then the sergeant crawled away. He and three of his men slithered into the stream, crawled up a slight rise, and spread out about thirty feet. Then, the soldier on the far right rose to a crouch. Water dripped off his nose as he crept to the edge of the village. He disappeared behind a hut. In less than two minutes he came out, grinning. With his left arm raised, he gave the "okay" signal. I immediately lost a little of the tension in my shoulders and neck.

The cluster of seven bamboo and palm leaf huts in the village had not been long abandoned. The men reported that three of the cooking houses still had fires burning, and all of the huts showed signs that people had slept in them that night. Whoever they were they couldn't be very far, and they might be preparing to surprise us.

Lt. Ngi ordered about twenty of his men to form a perimeter around the village. The remaining soldiers ripped apart the huts.

This village was much like every other that I'd seen. It was set on high ground. The fifteen-foot square huts were just frames of bamboo poles covered with palm leaves. Inside each hut was what looked like a flat igloo of dried mud used for shelter from the American artillery shelling that fell randomly many nights and days of the war.

As the soldiers prepared to pound down one of the igloo's roofs, they found a ten-year-old boy hiding inside. He must have slept through our helicopter alarm clock. They dragged him outside and showed him to the lieutenant and to his stern sergeant. I'd been through this before. I knew what was coming and dreaded it.

During the time Michael was in the village there were more than forty nighttime mortar attacks. Some of the mortars made direct hits on the advisors' reinforced roof.

On many days and nights, the soldiers hunted for VC in the surrounding countryside. Their goal was to flush the VC from the safety of their anonymous occupations by sloshing around the rice paddies, by presenting themselves as too-good-to-miss targets. Since the Americans had superior firepower and controlled the skies, they intended to draw fire and then call in long-range artillery or fighter jets. Sometimes it turned into close-fire combat without backup.

The sergeant spoke harshly to the boy, who was clad only in a flimsy pair of shorts and a filthy, frayed T-shirt. The boy responded in monosyllables, shook his head a few times and looked terrified. He had good reason.

Not satisfied with the answers, the sergeant raised his voice a few notches. He glowered at the hapless kid. Then he struck him—a hard slap on the face. The boy began to cry. More yelling. The boy only cried louder.

The sergeant said something to one of the soldiers who came over, jerked the T-shirt over the boy's head, and then used it to tie his hands behind his back. The sergeant yanked him over to one of the huts where a large barrel

brimmed with runoff water from the thatched roof. He looked hard at the kid and waited for a response. When none came, he plunged the boy's head into the barrel, pressing hard on each skinny shoulder.

Fiercely kicking and shifting from side to side, the terrified child managed to tip the barrel, soaking his tormentor and sending both of them sprawling. The sergeant had no visible emotional reaction. He never let go of his grip and dragged the boy over to another barrel.

It is with these memories that Michael and I drive into Rach Kien on February 2006.

Rach Kien Village 1968

The Search

At the entrance to Rach Kien, our driver stops to let us out of the air-conditioned minivan. Michael hesitates at first. In the thirty-eight years since he last saw it, the village has undergone some changes, and he has trouble orienting himself. During the war, the dirt road was level with the doorways of the small houses and shops that hugged the street. Sometime later, the road was raised about two feet. We were told by villagers that during the rainy season, the muddy runoff floods the homes. Michael remembers it as a pockmarked dirt lane with thatched huts and an occasional, concrete structure with a red-tiled roof. Now, the homes are built of cinderblocks and thin electrical wires reach most of them from the road.

I spot some large concrete structures in an open field, and we walk over to investigate. Michael remembers that this is where artillery pieces were located, and the thought helps orient him so that he can lay out the village in his mind's eye.

Back in the minivan, we drive through town searching for further visual clues of the village from years ago. There are so many new structures tumbling onto the road that Michael barely recognizes the Rach Kien he once knew. The main part of town ends at the old marketplace, where a small bridge crosses a narrow river. I ask Michael to stand next to the Rach Kien Village sign at the bridge for a photograph.

As soon as we cross the bridge, we sense we're in a more primitive place. Michael says that Rach Kien in 1968 looked more like this part of the village than the town we had just passed through. Here, huts are stained head-high with red dust from the road. Motorbikes raise clouds of it and rake us with noise as they scream by.

"In 1968," Michael says, "this was a dangerous place. It wasn't exactly safe on our side of the bridge either, but we only came over here armed and in groups."

The sergeant said something, and the soldier went into a hut and emerged with another dirty shirt. He jerked it over the boy's head, covering his face and then tied it around his neck, leaving no slack. The sergeant dragged the boy to the edge of the barrel and barked at him again. The kid was practically hysterical now. I thought he would be incapable of saying anything, even if he wanted to.

The sergeant nodded to the soldier and then the two of them thrust the boy's head and shoulders into the water. This time the kid was overpowered. He tried to kick and jerk, but the combined strength of two adults was too much. They kept him under for fifteen seconds. This cycle was repeated for ten minutes. Each time, they kept him down a few seconds longer.

It was terrible to watch, and I was powerless to stop it. I had tried before, but to no avail. This was a war, they were not taking my advice on any amendments to the rules.

After all that misery, the boy gave up no useful information. He had no rank or serial number for us—only a name, a family, and a future that hung on a slim string. What would happen when the people from his village found him? Would they believe that he'd kept their secrets and told us nothing? Were they as cruel as we?

He was too young to take back as a prisoner. They were going to tie him up, lead him to a safe spot away from the village, stuff a rag in his mouth, and leave him there. Then we would burn down the village, his home.

Michael crosses the narrow bridge several steps ahead of me and our guide/interpreter Luat. As we follow behind Michael, Luat makes a trigger squeezing motion with his index finger, a move they often use in speaking about the war against the Americans. "Rach Kien many VC kill American." Luat motions toward the open field to the right. "VC in the trees. VC was everywhere out here in countryside."

Almost forty years after the war, this side of the village is still a dirt road lined with thatched huts. There are roadside vegetable stalls next to fly-sodden meat hanging from hooks. Some houses, leftover from the French period, are barely standing. In front of every structure there are people squatting in unison, working on some group a project or, chatting and drinking tea. Someone tries to sell us brightly colored lottery tickets for who knows how much — 50,000 Vietnamese dong equals four US dollars. Small, runty dogs with squatty legs and pushed-in faces slink along the sides of the road, keeping away from us. They look as if they are afraid of their own shadows and seem to have little energy.

It's hot on the road. Luat picks the cleanest home/store/garage to buy us Cokes in the familiar shaped glass bottles. They look like 1960's leftovers. We drink them warm, and – on Luat's advice -- refuse the ice offered to us.

"I weighed 130 pounds when I left Vietnam," Michael tells Luat.

"Why too skinny?" Luat asks.

"In 1968, twenty-four hours a day, for an entire year, I was aware of the danger. You see those trees over there? There could have been a VC sniper in there back then. That woman who sold us the Cokes? She could have walked up to me with a pistol and shot me in the back, just like that. It happened."

Three soldiers walked ahead of the group, about five yards apart. The rest of us followed, spreading out even wider to form a fan. I always thought this was a stupid way to move as a group because if there were mines planted anywhere in the field, the chances were good that we would trip one. But I guess that wasn't military strategy because it was the way we always moved through rice paddies. Military strategy was not my strong point.

I had my eyes on one of the lead soldiers, who were about ten yards from a tree line when the world around me suddenly burst open. Chaos and raw terror rushed through me. I dropped straight down and burrowed my nose in wet mud.

We sit in child-sized, plastic molded chairs under the shade of a large tree, and we talk of a war that happened here a very long time ago. Michael can hardly believe that his nerve-wracking, weight-losing, sleepless-night memory of a place has now become so peaceful. As we sip the warm Cokes, three barefoot children study us—two strange-looking Americans. "Hallo!"

"Hello." I give them the thumbs up sign. They blush and smile and return the thumbs up.

"I'll ask if there are any villagers who remember the American house where the advisors lived," says Luat, and he disappears

across the road. Michael and I sit quietly, looking out across a field where two water buffalo graze. I am aware of the nearby tree line. A few minutes later, Luat returns and says that an older man who lives across the street has invited us in for tea. We walk across the road and are greeted by a wiry, tanned farmer, who looks to be about sixty years old.

Luat speaks to him. I presume he's explaining who we are and why we are here. "He says he came to live here in 1966, and he was a VC in the war."

He leads us to a dilapidated porch that by the looks of the wooden bed frame along the wall serves as his outdoor sleeping quarters. Another younger man joins us. He's missing half of his right arm, and the hand of his other arm is badly disfigured.

Luat translates. "I welcome you back to Rach Kien. I was VC. Look here on my head. A bullet hit here but it did not kill me. Many Americans were killed here. In one month we killed fifteen of them." A hint of a smile lightens his face, and his dark eyes glow at this memory.

There is something disturbing in his gaze. He has the look of someone who might be a little crazed. I can tell that Michael senses this too. He says calmly. "We are both very lucky to still be alive." The man twitches nervously.

I suddenly feel witness to a private and profound event to which I do not belong. My focus drifts: the two old soldiers sitting across a small table, the one-armed man perched on a half-wall, Luat, the water buffalos in the field, the VC sniper ghosts in the trees, the stubbly dogs and warm Cokes, the dirt road leading into and out of Rach Kien… I look toward the bridge, from the dangerous side where we sit, toward the safer side.

I lifted my face from the goo and looked for Sergeant Surbough. He was unhurt, fiddling with the radio, and trying to make contact with our base. He didn't look toward me. I raised my head slightly, just enough to see enemy rifles flashing along 100 yards of tree line.

"Damn, there are a lot more of them than there are of us." Shhhuurrrr whompp! Whompp! Shhhuurrrr whompp!

"Shit, they've got mortars or rockets!" I yelled over to Sergeant Surbough. He didn't seem to notice me.

Rach Kien 2006 Former District Headquarters

It was unusual for our teams to be ambushed. Before this, we always out-numbered and out-gunned our shoeless, agrarian adversaries. It wasn't redcoats vs. colonials; it was more like incoming tide vs. beach bathers. To escape our forces, they could only scamper in retreat beyond our reach. That day, something was different. For the first time, we were up against a large group of regulars.

We were pinned down with nowhere to go. This was a typical situation in a battle, but it never lasted. Something new always happened, for better or worse.

The man fought as a VC for ten years. He carries his suffering in his eyes. Today, on his porch, time reverses itself, then stops and jumps forward again. We say our good-byes and walk back up the dirt road toward the narrow bridge that Michael will cross for the last time.

As we walk on through the center of Rach Kien, we pass what appears to be the local men's club. About thirty men of varying ages are crowded into what looks like an extended garage. As we cross in front of them, some of the older men take notice of us, and we all smile and wave.

They seem delighted to have foreign visitors appear out of nowhere. We approach the men and sit down as if we were the newest members of their tea-drinking, storytelling club. They don't speak English, and we don't speak Vietnamese. But luckily, we have Luat to translate.

"This man was an American soldier, and he is looking for the advisors' house where he lived in 1968."

The older men become very animated and point in one direction. "Just go that way." "Over there."

A middle-aged woman approaches. She is mute, but her gestures are specific, and her pointing is purposeful. I try to get Michael's and Luat's attention to show them that she knows where the house is. But no one except me pays any attention to her. She becomes frustrated and storms away, kicking at the dusty road with her bare feet.

From all the pointing, we know the general direction we have to go to find the house. Michael bounds ahead of us. He zigs and zags on the road, pointing and talking excitedly. Luat and I follow, but can't keep up. Just by watching his excitement, we know we are very close.

The first building he recognizes is the former district headquarters. Nothing else in Rach Kien looks like this bunker-like structure. It is clear that it's a former military building, heavily reinforced and imposing.

"We built a fortified machine-gun emplacement on top of this building," Michael says. "And here is where we used to schrrn movies at night. We had a generator and a 16 mm projector and showed movies outdoors on a fold-up plywood screen that we painted white. The children would come and watch. Those were the first movies they had ever seen. Back then, there was no electricity in the village, and we had the

only gas-run generator. This was where the district chief lived, so our house must be right over here."

This place is alive for him, an ember that has never gone out. He had walked in this very spot thirty-eight years ago as a twenty one-year-old soldier; he had made friends and left them, some alive, some dead.

Plywood fold-up movie screen in 1968

Lying out in the open was not recommended in this situation. About twenty feet to my right I saw a large gray tomb standing alone. In rural Vietnam, tombstones are erected in the centers of rice paddies and farmers are buried under them in their fields. The tombs are massive cement structures that stand about four feet high. No need to think: I crawled over to it as fast as I could.

Between the mud and sweat and fear that clouded my sight, I couldn't see a thing. That short crawl was the longest journey of my life. Everywhere around me bullets whistled, rocket and mortar shells exploded. It felt like every gun in the trees was trained on my miserable, sloshing form. They were trying to turn me back to dust, by way of mud.

Finally, I reached the safety of the tomb. With all my strength, I rose up and leaned back against the hot, rough cement. The pinging and whistling bullets were no longer threats; I just had to worry about rockets. Maybe they'd forget I was there and aim at somebody else.

Major Robert W. Black

(Advisory Team Commanding Officer)

On patrol, taking a smoke break in the stifling heat, Sgt. Kune, SFC Surbaugh, Lt. Michael Primont.

Rach Kien Market 1967

Rach Kien 2006 site of former Market

2006 Rach Kien street scene

The House

Our House November 1967

Opposite the district headquarters was the house where Michael lived for one year as a member of a US Army advisory team. Three slender, shirtless men come over to greet us. The early afternoon sun is heating up, and the humidity soaks the backs of our shirts. The Vietnamese men are not sweating. They must sense that the strange commotion in the middle of the street is going to envelop them. Of course, they know the history of the odd building across the street from their traditional home. Before the Americans took their house from their family, it was owned by their father, a Viet Cong hero.

We approach the growing group that has gathered in front of the house. They are polite, cautious, and soft-spoken at first.

Luat introduces us to the head of the family. He wears blue gym shorts, no shoes, and no shirt.

"I was an American soldier," says Michael, as Luat translates.

The man nods in reply.

"I lived in this house for one year in 1968."

Luat translates. "Yes, he knows about this. He was a boy during the war and he remembers the Americans. Yes, he welcomes you and is happy to see you here."

We all laugh and shake hands. Some of the Vietnamese light up cigarettes, and we feel welcomed.

"Could we go inside?" Michael motions toward the door.

"Yes, of course."

Michael leads the way, and behind him the large extended family follows. As our eyes adjust to the dark interior of the house, certain things come into focus. Michael is very animated. He calls out all the features he recognizes. "Over there by that window is where the radio room was. Over there we had a table and chairs. The radio was always on. It was our lifeline."

I focus on a framed, antique-looking diploma. Upon closer inspection, I realize it's some sort of war commendation. We are told that it was given to the now-deceased father of the family. He was the owner of the house when Michael lived in it. Because he was a known Viet Cong guerilla, the US backed South Vietnamese government confiscated the house from his wife after he disappeared. His photograph was inserted into the lower left-hand corner of the frame. He was about twenty-five years old and smiling, dressed in a suit with a smart tie, and his hair was neatly combed, as if he had prepared for his yearbook

photo. The current head of the family, his son, was now twenty years older than his father was when he sat for that picture.

Vietcong Certificate hanging proudly on a wall of the house in 2006

Translation:

Vietnam Socialist, Republic.
Government Advisory Council
Temporary Government of South of Vietnam Socialist.
Award for Revolutionary Achievement
NGUYEN VAN LUYEN.
- Excellent achievement for fighting against the US Army, and for saving the nation.
signed by
President of National Advising council

I took a few deep breaths and tried to focus. "What should I do now?" Sergeant Surbough and the radio were out of my line of sight. I figured I had a responsibility to make some contribution to the war effort. So, contrary to all common sense, but probably in line with military strategy for once, I peered out from the safety of my mini Maginot Line to see if there were any targets.

The volleys had let up a little. I could see small puffs of smoke as each of the enemy soldiers fired off a round. There were my targets.

I scrunched as low as I could behind the tomb, hiding all but half of my head, right shoulder, and arm. I raised the rifle and aimed at one of the puffs of smoke, squeezed a couple of rounds, and watched to see where they'd hit. Way low. I readjusted my aiming point and prepared to squeeze the trigger again when something happened.

Paying the Rent

We file through a doorway leading from the front room into the kitchen and eating area. The furniture in this square room is crude and functional. A long wooden table serves as a chopping block for meat and vegetables.

Not much is said as we pass through the kitchen. Michael points out shrapnel holes in the corrugated tin walls that date from when he used to eat there. A rough wooden staircase leads to a loft above the kitchen, which is used as an open sleeping area for the children. There seems to be no privacy, and I wonder where the adults retire for the night. There are a few small openings to the outside, all uncovered by glass or screens. The rooms in the house are dark, even at midday.

The rear door leads directly to a backyard. Michael continues his narrative. "There are more trees now, but I remember this. The army took all the trees down so nobody could sneak up on us. There were extended rolls of barbed wire out here."

A small, red-brick shack catches his eye. It's about fifty feet from where we are standing. Clothes are hanging out to dry. The ground under our feet is marshy, and we stand on a makeshift wooden walkway laid over the mud. Stray cats weave casually in and out of the yard and around our legs.

"There's our latrine!" Michael exclaims. "I can't believe that forty years later, I'm standing right in front of the same latrine!" Then he starts to laugh.

Luat translates, and everyone else starts laughing, too. It's hard to take a latrine seriously, even during wartime, so it's another great equalizer.

"Well, this is so incredible, and I thank you so much for letting us come into your house. It's nice to be here when it's peaceful and to see you and your family living here."

The family listens as Luat translates Michael's words.

Michael Primont Paying the Rent

"We are also very happy to welcome you to our house and back to our country in more happy times. I was a little boy during the war when you lived here in my father's house. I did not live here; I was not allowed to come into this house when the American soldiers were here. I stood outside."

"I lived in your house for one year," Michael said. "How strange. I feel like…I feel like I should pay you rent for the time I lived in your house."

There is no response. I expect a laugh and a smile. I know that Michael meant it as a joke. It isn't taken as a joke. We can see from the man's face that he's making some calculations. What is a year in my house worth?

Luat looks at Michael and says, "I think you should give him a twenty-dollar bill as a souvenir. Yes, like a souvenir."

"Is that enough?" Michael asks.

"Yes, he will be happy."

Michael hands the man a crisp US twenty-dollar bill.

"Here. Now I have paid you the rent I owe for living in your house for a year."

Everyone is all smiles. We celebrate with handshakes and pose for pictures.

We walk back through the house and the men gather again in front of the house. We exchange pleasantries, shake hands again and snap a few more pictures, then walk to our van for the drive back to Saigon.

The narrow road out to the highway has been improved since 1968. Back then, the road was one lane, dirt, and dangerous. Michael drove it in an open-topped army Jeep with a rifle in his lap, looking for snipers, landmines, and signs of an ambush. Today's ride is his last. He's paid his rent, and the trees look beautiful from the car window, the rice fields serene. The Rach Kien of Michael's memory is a world away from here.

I had a vision:

I rose high above the field, looking down. I saw the line of trees and could tell how terribly close it was to the tomb where I huddled. I could see myself leaning back on the tomb, looking away from the battle.

In the distance of the vision there was only silence and images. I kept rising. I could see the Mekong Delta, all of Vietnam, then vast oceans, then America. The world was green and blue-black and white.

Below, all was beautiful, peaceful. It was just the earth—wind, tide, cold, light, heat, dark, spin, tilt. I could feel it all moving within me.

The field where we fought was so small and insignificant in proportion to everything. It had no name and no time. It was nothing. It was green like all other green. It was wind and heat and spin. It was changing with the all-changing earth.

We were young boys together on opposite sides of a field. We were so close. No other humans were closer to us than we were to each other. I could have been teaching them to play baseball or learning to play soccer from them.

We had not even seen each others' faces. If we were to meet later, we would never know that we once had tried to kill each other. I had nothing against any of them. The war wasn't in me.

Why didn't we just turn around and walk away? Why were we doing this to each other? Why not stop it now?

Return

Since my return from Vietnam, I have shared our experience with other Vietnam veterans. Their first reaction is usually to say they have no desire to return to a place that holds such painful memories, some of which are locked so tightly inside that they've never even shared them with their closest friends or families. In essence, they have learned to forget, and who could blame them?

Michael Primont Rach Kien Bridge 2006

After one of my friends started flipping through the many pictures we brought back from Saigon and Rach Kien, showing a vibrant, growing city and peaceful countryside, his ideas against ever returning began to relax, and he saw how a return trip might help soften the memories of Vietnam that he still carries. John Thorburn's helicopter gunship was shot down in Cambodia, seriously wounding him during the War. He may go back one day, or he may not. Maybe seeing the pictures and hearing the stories was enough?

Forests, once defoliated, are as lush as they had ever been before. Relics have been

catalogued in museums and recorded in history books. At the concierge desk of the Sofitel in Saigon one of the most popular day-trips is a guided tour of the Chu Chi tunnel complex two hours from Saigon. Once a haven for the Viet Cong, the tunnels have been reinforced and enlarged to make them tourist-friendly.

In the 15 days traveling throughout Vietnam we saw little evidence of wartime destruction. Most of the surface evidence of the war has been buried. The only question is how deeply it is buried. Even 40 years later, in the minds of some Americans and some Vietnamese it can rise close to the surface.

I came out of the dream or went back to a dream; I do not know which. My consciousness returned to my drenched, exhausted body still leaning on a tomb in a field. The firing had stopped. Did everybody have the same vision? Was the war over?

They were gone. We collected our wounded, the helicopters pulled us out, and our artillery pounded the surrounding countryside for a week.

After that day, I never aimed at anyone again. I always shot low or high or didn't shoot at all if nobody was looking. My war was over. I never went back to Queens.

Officer Candidate

Michael Primont

Ft. Benning, Georgia, 1967

I was a Child Sent to War

by

Michael Primont

I

I am a dying boy among dying boys and dying men.

II

I lay in a ditch. Listen.
I am unable to stop my own death.
Mortars walk up to me –
four blasts, five, they miss me, they walk away, indifferent.

III

I breathe the odor of dead bodies;
see their vacant flat eyes; lift their heavy dull weight.

IV

A whore myself; I rub my flesh with whores.

V

I learn to function without sleep,
I struggle to resist death, drink to be drunk,
discover the sweet knowledge that comes from marijuana.
I learn the importance of details.
I learn not to fear most things that people fear.

VI

I stand under a torrent and look to the sky and dream of home.

VII

When I go home I dream that I am back:
blasts of fire, blood, screams,
blistering wood as bullets hit – zip zip.
There is no exit.

VIII

Those dreams stopped long ago.
Now, asleep, I inhabit the usual assortment of dreams:
flying, fleeing, falling, dying, being loved, hiding from love.

IX

I was a child sent to war.

Michael Domino and Michael Primont
sitting at Luat's ice cream shop in Ho Chi Minh City

Michael Primont served a US Army lieutenant in Vietnam from 1967-1968.
He practices law in Seattle, Washington.

Michael Domino is a poet , short story writer and businessman.
His other books include:

Cadillac on the Bowery
Loud Whispers
and
Wandering Mind

Michael resides with his family on Long Island, N.Y., and spends time in Manhattan.
He and Michael Primont have been life long, close friends.