

## The DMZ

I stayed a night in Dong Ha near the former border between North and South, many areas are still dangerous due to the huge volume of land mines and unexploded ordnates. Much of the land in the DMZ is now covered with rubber tree plantations and apparently the workers get extra pay for the danger of working there. In fact, as we walked to one of the fire bases on the McNamera line my guide pointed out a hole where an antitank mine had been found two weeks ago about 2 feet from the path we were walking on. I made sure I stepped where he stepped after that. Although because the antitank mines are deeper, they are more difficult to find and also less likely to blow up when your walking over one. Nevertheless, I didn't want to take my chances.

I spent the night at a place with the appropriate enough name the DMZ café & guesthouse. The place is run by an ex South Vietnam army veteran who worked as a translator for the US marines stationed along the DMZ during the war. He has a couple friends who were also translators who act as guides on motorbike tours of the DMZ. It was very interesting to get their very frank thoughts on the Vietnamese government and the war. They were not too happy with the current government to say the least. The building that houses the guesthouse only avoided being confiscated like all of the other property that belonged to South Vietnamese veterans because it was owned by his wife and not him. The property on either side of the guesthouse was once owned by him but now belongs to North Vietnamese. My guide was not as fortunate, and he lost everything and had to move to Chau Doc in the far south delta region after getting out of 3 years in a reeducation camp. The reeducation camps were not described very



**Bomb casings displayed at the Vinh Moc tunnels.**



**Ben Hai River the former border between north and south.**



pleasantly either. Among other tasks they were forced to clear minefields with 2 meter long bamboo sticks. Before the war, he was a university professor. It seems to be a common story, I heard the similar story for a rice farmer I met and sat down to have a drink with outside of Hue. He was a history teacher before the War and then served in the South Vietnamese army and now is a very well educated rice farmer forced to sell 40% of his crop the government at a very cheap price and the living of the sale of the remaining 60%.

While there was not a whole lot left from the war, it was very interesting to hear “war” stories from someone who was in the battles that took place on the ground where I was now walking. Of course his stories were understandably pretty one-sided. My guide was also a translator in the May Lai investigation which he still claims was not done by the US troops and many of the people who died starved in tunnels forced to stay there by VC and then they through the bodies out. It was quite a juxtaposition to have him as my guide giving a very pro American pro South Vietnam view of the war while any “official” information was the complete opposite. He would always say, “We fought to defend our freedom. The north attacked us they were the aggressors.” Of course all the official information calls it the American war of aggression and the victory was the liberation of the south. He also mentioned how the South Vietnamese Army felt betrayed and he was very angry at the US when they pulled out but he added he now understands why the US had to leave. As we walked through the Vinh Moc tunnels where weapons were stored just on the north side of the DMZ in preparation for there journey south on the Ho Chi Minh trail, he would point out how the signs denoting the purposes of the rooms were nonsense. A sign would say cloths washing area, and he would point out look there is no where for the water to drain, “this was for weapons storage,” he said. It was interesting that none of the



**Guide tells a war story at former marine fire base on the DMZ.**



**A dangerous occupation searching for scrap metal around the DMZ.**

rooms were designated as the primary purpose of the tunnels, and that was to store weapons, hiding them from American planes and bombs. I'm sure the truth about the war was somewhere in between the respective biased views of both my guide and the government.



**Me emerging from the Vinh Moc tunnels.**