

# Our Journey Forward

By Henry Inabnett

## Our journey

The ball started rolling in 2020 when six Vietnam Swift Boat veterans declared they wanted to join Terry Boone on a return trip to Vietnam. Jim Kolbe, Jack Cook, Doug Martin, Tom Terfehr, Dave Bradley, and myself responded. Others intending on coming were Michelle Boone, Marilyn Cook, Terre Martin, Helen Carson, and Pat Lovaas.



Front Row: Helen Carson, Dave Bradley, Henry Inabnett, Jack Cook, Marilyn Cook, Terre Martin, Pat Lovaas  
Back Row: Tom Terfehr, Terry Boone, Michelle Boone, and Doug Martin

The twelve, including Terry, began preparations to take the tour arranged by Global Base Camps. After ensuring their spouses were in for the tour, they paid their deposits and made flight reservations. Spouses, for most, were an integral part of approving the family funds and time away from home. But they were more than that. They were a vital support mechanism on which the seven depended heavily. Some more so than others. For some it became apparent that without their wives they couldn't have made it, this author included. I depended and leaned heavily on Pat throughout our 17-day trip (we stayed and extra 3 days).

By August of 2020, it was apparent that the COVID shut down would deny us the ability to make the return trip, at least for a time. The shutdown became worldwide. Vietnam was closed, preventing all foreign visitors from entering. We began unwinding our arrangements and finished 2020 at home.

Vaccines became available in early 2021 in the states, but Vietnam stayed closed throughout 2021. The waiting continued. The world started to open again in 2022, however Vietnam remained

closed to visitors. May 2022 came and finally, Terry got clearance for the tour to take place in December. Jack Cook was the first to respond, "The Cooks are in." In fact, we all came to the realization that the Vietnam trip was on again, and one by one we finalized plans for the trip. Before leaving, Jim Kolbe notified us that he would have to cancel due to heart problems. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, we heard that he passed away from a massive heart attack.



Many know Terry Boone who organized the trip and was our unofficial leader. He visited Vietnam 20 years earlier with a Vietnamese advisor that had served on Swift Boats. Terry was a Radarman and served in Qui Nhon. A natural trailblazer related to Daniel Boone. Terry took the responsibility identifying all of the men killed on Swift Boats in Vietnam and locating their families and final resting place.



Tom Terfehr, a Quartermaster, first arrived in country at Cam Ranh Bay and spent a short time there on coastal patrol. He then transferred to An Thoi and Seafloat on the Cua Lon at Nam Can. He was the helmsman on PCF 50 when it was hit. Martin Doherty, Radarman 3<sup>rd</sup>, was killed. After recovering his wounds, Tom returned to the Fleet. He later went on with his life to obtain college degrees in Engineering and Business Administration. He enjoyed a successful corporate career. Later, he helped build a global Reliability Engineering Consulting company where he spent considerable time in Asia. Before joining us in Saigon, Tom spent three days in the Cam Ranh Bay area learning about what had happened after the war in his former patrol areas.



Jack Cook and his wife Marilyn are from Indiana. He served in Cat Lo, mostly on PCF 102. After Vietnam, he served in many capacities in the American Legion and had a successful career in Industrial Rubber Goods. In the American Legion he held various offices at the local Post210, District, Indiana State, and National levels. He was Commander of his Post, and also as District and State Membership Chairman. He formed several Posts in Northern Indiana. He also served the Hoosier Boys State on the Board of Directors as well as in other capacities.



Dave Bradley travelled with Helen Carson. Dave is USN Retired. He served in Cat Lo and An Thoi as Quartermaster. He currently assists the Maritime Museum of San Diego in operating and maintenance of PCF 816, and pilots weekend harbor tours.



Douglas Martin traveled with Terre, his wife of over 50 years. Doug served as Officer in Charge (OinC) in Cat Lo on PCF 98. They now live in New Jersey. After returning from Vietnam, he served as a Navy Recruiting Officer in St. Louis, visiting college campuses in southern Illinois and Missouri. After retiring in 1971, his career settled into Financial Planning. The couple now live in New Jersey.



Henry Inabnett (author) and Pat are from Eastern Montana. Henry served as Radarman aboard various Swifts out of Cat Lo on John Roland's crew. Henry completed college at Louisiana Tech after leaving Vietnam and spent 40 years in Credit Union management and consulting.



Trang Nguyen, our tour guide, was born in Quang Nga just south of Da Nang during the Tet Offensive in 1968. He served in the armed forces of Vietnam in the Ca Mau peninsula. He was in Nam Cam when he left the army and made his way to Phu Quoc Island in the Gulf of Thailand. From there he eventually made his way back home, finished college and became a tour guide with an enormous amount of Vietnam knowledge.

Not to be forgotten is our bus driver Ha Son Lam, an expert driver who was able to avoid thousands of motorcycles and cars that seemed to go wherever they wanted. Several times he made a U-turn with our 40-foot bus in the middle of the street with no casualties!

## Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

Our point of entry was Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). By the end of the day on December 1, almost everyone had arrived. Terry arrived late because of lost luggage. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day was spent getting settled in and site seeing around the hotel, the Eden Star Saigon Hotel. Terry and Michelle made their way to a local market to buy some clothes, since they only had the clothes on their back. Another traumatic event was that Helen lost her passport. With the help of Trang, she went to the American Consulate and began the process of getting a replacement. She did not get it until Thursday of the following week.

Although the new name of Saigon is HCMC, it is widely known and referred to as Saigon. Some of the street names around the city had been changed to reflect the revolution from the north. As far as could be seen, many things had not changed in 50-plus years, except for the addition of many more people. Fifty years ago, motorcycles were the main means of transportation, which now took on a whole new meaning. There were thousands and thousands of mopeds and motorcycles on the roads. At one point Trang made the comment, "In Saigon there are 10 million people and 9 million motor bikes" I thought this was both funny and insightful. Trang explained that the cost of cars was exorbitant and a high tax was charged for purchasing and operating a car. The tax was as much as 100% of the cost

of the car if it was assembled outside of Vietnam. That has improved somewhat recently, since more cars are assembled in Vietnam. By comparison, the cost of a motorcycle with an automatic transmission was much more reasonable at approximately 34,640,000 Vietnamese Dong (VND). Of course, that is only \$1,600 USD.

Upon arrival in Vietnam, I exchanged \$400 at the airport and received 9,840,000 VND. I was a millionaire in Vietnam. A bottle of water normally about a \$1, was 23,500 VND. Trying to be respectful of those that helped us, I might give a tip of \$10, so 200,000 VND was not outrageous, although that was only a little over \$8 USD. 200,000 VND was a normal bill in Vietnam.

The next day in Saigon, December 3, we took a tour through the flower market where millions of flowers ready for budding and flower arranging were available. This was a wholesale market where retailers and specialty services would come to purchase flowers to be resold or made up for customers. We ate lunch at a restaurant that was a former Opium production location sanctioned in previous years. It was now split up into small shops and restaurants. All the food was distinctly Vietnamese. It was enjoyed by most, but some were disappointed at the diluted nuoc mam. That was one smell of the old times that was distinctive as well as repulsive to some. The afternoon was a rest period after our walk and a big lunch. A craft beer tour was scheduled for the evening. Everyone would ride on Vespas! I declined because I had the first of my problems with the food, but Pat enjoyed riding through the streets of Saigon on the back of a motorcycle. The drivers of the Vespas wore distinctive orange shirts as they carried the group between breweries and bars across the city. Five locations were to be visited, however by the time they were to go to the fifth, they had been caught in a rain downpour, and almost everyone had their fill of appetizers and craft beers. (Read into that what you will) They were ready to head back to the hotel.



## Chu Chi Tunnels

Leaving early the next day, our bus wove through the city streets of Saigon heading generally northwest to the Chu Chi Tunnels adjacent to the Saigon River. Along the way we saw farmers in their rice fields and stopped to see magnificent Buddhist and Taoist temples. We stopped at a local restaurant for lunch.



The tunnels were dug by hand mostly by the Vietnamese women. We were shown the entrances and how they were camouflaged. We were allowed to go down into the tunnels, but for some of us it was too confining. Those that did venture in had to crouch down low and often got scraped limbs. They were obviously made for much smaller bodies. We were given a demonstration of how the Viet Cong could appear from under the leaf covered floor of the jungle and attack military personnel above.

## Vung Tau (Cat Lo)

A 3-hour bus ride southeast along the outskirts of Saigon and along the Saigon River brought us to Vung Tau, the in-country R&R center for the Americans and Vietnamese. We arrived late and stayed at the Grand Hotel in Vung Tau, which may be familiar to those who were stationed at Cat Lo. The older



part (on the right) is still much like it was 50 years ago, but the hotel was expanded, and a new entrance (on the left) added. It was among many new and luxurious resort hotels in the area just off the “front” beach. That was where the old docks of Vung Tau were located. The “back” beach was the R&R beach in

the 60s and 70s. The city limits of Vung Tau now encompass old Cat Lo, and there are no open lands for the 10-kilometer ride between Cat Lo and downtown Vung Tau.

The next day, December 5<sup>th</sup>, we headed toward Cat Lo, choosing to spend time there rather than at scheduled stops. I have included an old picture of Cat Lo and the base as it looked in 1969 as a point of reference. We could not get to the entrance of the base due to the growth of businesses and security around the base. It is now occupied by the Vietnamese Coast Guard. Understanding our disappointment at not seeing the base, our resourceful guide, Trang, found a fisherman who, for a fee,



was willing to take us out on the river.

We un-glamorously boarded a Vietnamese boat, some being physically picked up and put over the gunnel, as there was no easy way to board. (It was easier to get off because the skipper was able to go alongside a narrow double log pier.) After boarding we made our way out of the inlet into the river. That is when I realized that we would never see the old Cat Lo base. The Vung Tau port operations had been moved to Cat Lo further inland.

Along the shore, there was no sight of the old base. Instead, there were many new and modern buildings. Out in the river there were many large boats anchored, waiting for cargo or servicing. The river obviously had been dredged to accept deeper drafted boats.



I guess many who had been in Cat Lo realized that the old base was no longer there. The old times had vanished. Terry Boone indicated that the change had taken place in the last 20 years, because he had visited the entrance of the base then and recognized it easily.



Overall, Vung Tau was easily the cleanest and most modern city we visited in Vietnam, although it still had its numerous small shops along the road. Trang explained that inflation was such a problem that many people, even doctors and lawyers, had to have a second income to make ends meet. Also, the secondary roads and side roads were filthy with trash and plastic containers.

After our attempt to see Cat Lo, we headed back to Saigon to see more sites and rested that evening.

### Mekong River Cruise

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, after a two-hour bus trip south toward My Tho, we pulled up at Cai Be. We boarded a medium size covered boat, along with all our luggage, for a short trip out to the Mekong Eye for our cruise along the Mekong. For those that have been there, we cruised the Co Chien and through



*Trip out to the Mekong Eye*

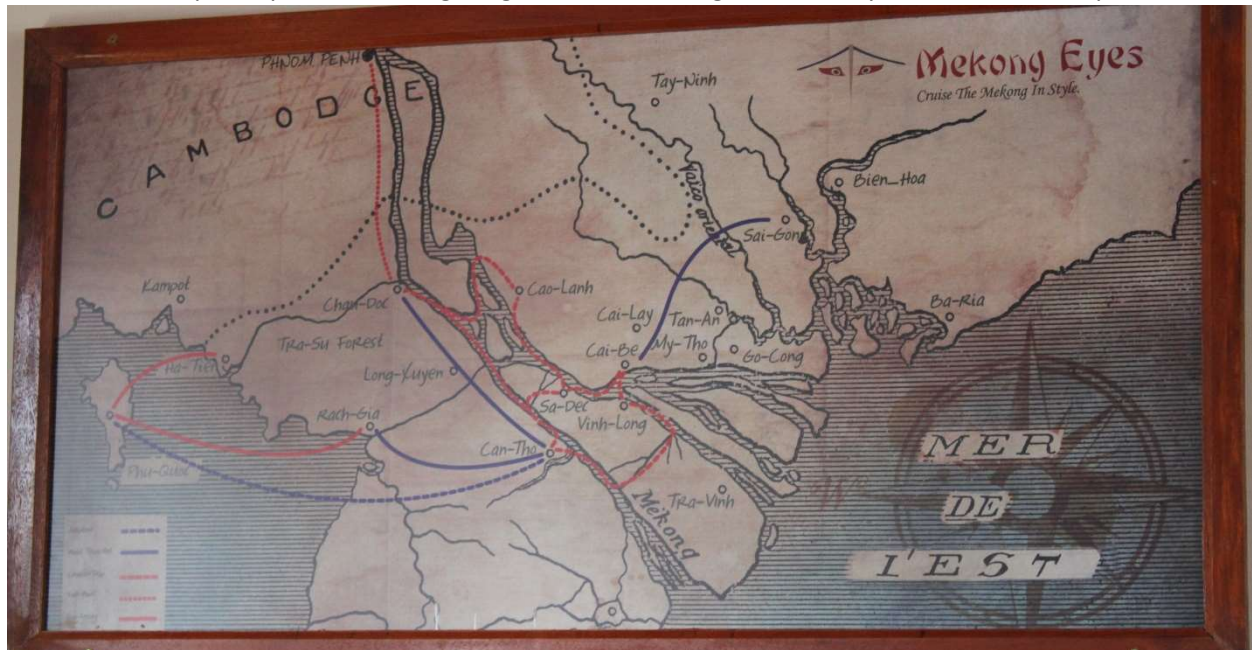


*The Mekong Eye*

a small canal to the Bassac, or as it is known now as the Hau Giang, and then up to near Can Tho. We were joined by a young Italian man, Leon, taking a tour of Vietnam from Hanoi to the south. Terre Martin was of Italian descent and practiced her language skills with Leon. She shared the story of her

grandson's bar mitzvah in a Jewish Temple in the Calabria region in southern Italy. It was a very exciting event that the entire town's population, both Catholic and Jewish, took pleasure in attending.

The cruise along the rivers and canals was quite leisurely, allowing us time to reflect on our time here and what it all meant. I casually thought out loud that a fiction book could be made of the journey called "Murder on the Mekong" (Sorry Agatha Christie.) about a Vietnamese man exacting revenge on one of the tour participants for killing his grandfather during the war 50 years before. We spent a while



on this fantasy before getting on to more serious subjects. Jack Cook shared his fears about coming to Vietnam and the sleepless nights prior to the trip dreading what he would find. "Would he find resentment or even animosity of the people?" Terry Boone shared that people who traveled to Vietnam before 2000, "saw more and more animosity from the people as they traveled south from Hanoi."

Conversations turned to experiences as the women wanted to know more about what the "guys" had experienced. Stories were told. The day was peaceful and very pleasant. Soon the boat slowed and neared the bank of the canal.





We were led off the boat by a plank. Most probably not to OSHA standards. When the “gangplank” was lowered Tom mentioned to the ladies, “we are going to walk the plank.” A guide led us down a narrow path away from the river through an orchard and beautiful flowering bushes. We passed bread fruit plants, coconut trees, Dragon Fruit plants, and other exotic and strange plants and flowers.



We ended up on a patio next to a tomb of an ancestor and a garden that was luxurious and handsomely decorated. A treat awaited us of sweets and sliced pineapple and mango. We could also order beer or other refreshments. There was time to walk around the garden and admire the orchids and other flowers adorning the garden.

We had a lot to talk about that evening as the Mekong Eye slipped down the quiet river. Along the way we saw many of the same type of sampans, boats, and barges carrying their cargo up or down the river as we did 50-plus years before. The banks of the river were lined with houses and businesses. More than we saw when we had been here previously.



Night slipped up on us as we talked of old times on the top deck. We sat for some time talking in the dark as some went to their cabin to sleep. The boat eventually anchored in the river for the night.

The cabins were nice; however, we found the air conditioning not quite up to the hotel standards. It was bearable after a quick shower and being sparsely covered. The next morning, we found that not all rooms were the same. Evidently, the air conditioners were shared and those rooms closest to the units were cooler than those further away.

## Can Tho

The next morning a boat came alongside the Mekong Eye, and our luggage was transferred. We loaded into another boat and headed toward Can Tho, a short distance away. We turned to the left into a large river that ran alongside Can Tho but continued past to the Floating Market of Cai Rang. This is one of the largest and best floating markets in the Delta. Trang pointed out local houses, orchards, and other amazing sights along the river and in Can Tho. This included a new bridge that spanned the Bassac River, in fact, we saw many bridges over all the rivers where previously they could only be crossed by water taxis.

Lunch was served at a local restaurant along the river with distinctive Vietnamese cuisine and smells. The Nuoc Mam was still not up to the standards of the old hands. That night was spent at a four-star hotel, the TTC, along the river. At dusk, Trang helped us into a boat for an evening cruise on the river, under a full moon. Heading into a dark cove, candles on paper lotus blossoms were lit for prayers to a safe and satisfying tour and to commemorate Pearl Harbor Day. Jack Cook explained later, "This (the dark of night on the river) gave him the most concern during the tour. "It reminds me of lying in ambush on the river where he had to watch for activity along the river."



## Ca Mau (City and National Park)

The next stop was the city of Ca Mau in the center of the peninsula named after it. Along the way we stopped at the “Bat Pagoda” renowned for its Khmer Arts and beautiful architecture. Trang explained, “The Khmer migrated down the Mekong from Cambodia and Thailand. They called the Delta the land of the “nine dragons” for the tributaries of the Mekong.



## Nam Can (Sea Float)

On December 9<sup>th</sup>, the bus took us down to the town of Nam Can, the location of Sea Float on the Cua Lon River. This was an area that Tom knew well as he pointed out where the twelve barges were anchored, making up Sea Float. It was the base he was attached to when his boat, PCF 50, on 4 December 1969, was hit.



At Nam Cam we boarded a fast, modern, boat that comfortably held all eleven of us. First, we cruised down the Cua Lon in the direction of where Sea Float would have been located and down some of the canals on the south side of the river to explore the unique area along the river. As we headed back toward Nam Cam, we suddenly turned into one of the canals passing through a small town and into the Mangrove Forest. Trang explained that the Mangrove Forest north of Nam Can had been harvested for lumber after the war by the North Vietnamese. But we were now in the thick of it. Jack Cook indicated this was another spot he had nightmares about. Tom also had memories of possible ambush spots pointed out to Pat.

As we neared the southern tip of Vietnam, we came to a wooden bridge above us. We had to explore, naturally. Michelle and Pat led the way out of the boat onto the rickety log walkway leading to the bridge. After exploring and picture taking, the boat continued down the narrow waterway to the tip of Vietnam. Many Swifts Boats had tried to make their way into this area, from the sea, but they couldn't do it. Our boat was almost too small. The way widened, we approached the Mui Ca Mau, the southernmost location of Vietnam. We stopped to explore a Biosphere Reserve where we saw a monument of a ship rushing to the sea. Lunch was at a local place with a most unusual menu that



included fried amphibious mudskippers with wicked teeth. Those that liked nuoc mam said it was much better. After lunch we return to Nam Can and headed back to Ca Mau and our hotel.



## Rach Gia – Ha Tien

The final part of the trip took us through beautiful countryside northwest from Ca Mau to Rach Gia. It is on the west coast of the tip of Vietnam at the elbow where it turns west. Swift boats had a base there, which was no more than an LST anchored outside the harbor to shorten the ride from An Thoi to the coast. It also allowed more time to patrol the rivers. Along the 3-hour bus ride we passed rice fields, of course, and pineapple farms. As a special treat, we stopped at a small shop along the way that had stacks and stacks of freshly picked pineapple. The husband expertly cut up the fruit and sliced long strips for us to devour. The wife put out dishes of salt and pepper for us to dip the pineapple in. That concoction was fine for some, but the pepper made it too hot for others.



In the rice field, there were machines in the water churning up the fields. Trang indicated



that the Vietnamese called these machines “Japanese Buffalo,” because they had completely replaced the water buffalo that was used in the past. The water buffalo is only used as a source of beef now, and they are not as prevalent as they were 50 years ago. Of course, we only saw skin deep into Vietnam, which is what existed along the roads.

Tom Terfehr on the other hand made the most of the trip. He would spend many evenings in town, eating at local establishments. “I’ve had my fill of hotel food.” On more than one occasion he connected with former ARVN soldiers and spent the evening talking about Vietnam after the ‘American War.’

We spent the night at another four-star hotel in Rach Gia. It was a night of despair for me. My night found me indisposed with no sleep.

We continued west, the next day, along the coast of the Gulf of Thailand heading to Ha Tien, another important stop for Swift Boat Vets. Mike Bernique’s trip up the Rach Gian Thanh along the Cambodian border looking for Viet Cong tax collectors, made it a required stop. The river ran from inland south to Ha Tien where it entered the Gulf of Thailand. On 14 October 1968, Mike found the tax collectors alongside the river, which became known to Swift Boat Vets as Bernique’s Creek. His trip changed the war for Swift Boats. The boats afterward were encouraged to be more aggressive in the rivers. The complete story can be found in Weymouth Symmes’s book “This is Latch.”

Our digestive systems handled Vietnam’s culinary delights on the tour relatively well. There were, however, a couple gastronomic adventures best left with no further details. For me, the trip from Ca Mau was the worst part of our time in Vietnam. Jack Cook had some of the same problems with the food on the trip and was taken to a doctor in Ha Tien.

## Phu Quoc Island

On 12 December, we left the bus behind and boarded a fast ferry to make the 90-minute trip south to Phu Quoc. It is a vacation island off the coast of Vietnam in the Gulf of Thailand. It was meant to help everyone decompress after such an intense tour. Of course, getting to the island was another Vietnamese treat. If you've ever seen movies of people crowded on a bus in a third world country (you know, with animals, chickens, etc.) you will know what this boat ride was like. In typical Vietnamese fashion, the boat was packed - old, young, motor bikes, crates, luggage, etc. On the wall in front of us was a TV screen with Vietnamese singers and dancers performing with no sound! Terre noticed that the only person in rapt attention was a preteen boy who couldn't take his eyes off the scantily clad dancers!

While the rest of us rested around the pool on Phu Quoc Island, Tom took a tour around the island. He connected with an ARVN officer and had an evening meal with him and his family. To me he was seeing the real Vietnam, while we saw the beautiful resorts and what was by the side of the road.

The rest of us took in the pleasures of the hotel, some getting spa treatments and others swimming in the large pool or the Gulf of Thailand. The weather was a pleasant 80 or 90 degrees with a slight breeze off the gulf. For the last five- or six-days Pat and I spent in Vietnam, I was unable to eat or even smell the food. I lived on strong black coffee and Cola. I was able to get around, but the poolside lounges were well used.



## Ben Tre

Pat and I had an extra three days in Vietnam after the tour ended on the 15<sup>th</sup>. After traveling from Saigon to Ben Tre by car, we rented a boat with Trang's help, from Tung Moc Dang. He took us to the Ham Lounge River. It was where my Swift Boat crew did many patrols and where it was hit in a small canal just off the river. I had hoped to go down river from Ben Tre to the small canal, but it was too far for the time we had available.



Tung Moc Dang's boat took us along the river to see the progress that had been made since the war. The fishermen were still there along the banks. The large boats still travelled the river with almost an overload of produce, sand, and other cargo. The area is a coconut producer. Besides the meat and juice of the coconut, the Vietnamese process the husk and shells of the coconut into charcoal that is used in household cooking as well in the manufacturing facilities along the river. We were treated to fresh coconut milk

directly from a coconut cut right in front of us. Later, Trang took me to a bridge that gave me a look at the Dong Tam, Army HQ for the 9th Army. I realized it was the base where our boat tied up overnight after being hit in January 1969. LT,jg, Roland and some of the enlisted aboard PCF 100 made a fast trip to the hospital in Ben Tre (just down the road) to check on the wounded from the PCF 100, LT,jg, Jeff O'Grady and RD3 Lloyd.

### The Journey

Vietnam has progressed since our time there, moving forward from re-education camps where many South Vietnamese were killed or just died. It prospered mostly after the lifting of the U.S. embargo in 1986, and with a greatly improved economy after 1996.

There are many Vietnam Veterans that suffered mental and physical problems after their time in the war, but many more moved past their time in Vietnam. Tom Terfehr commented, what many in our group thought, "I am proud of our service to the Vietnamese people. Every Vietnamese I met, and there were many, welcomed me and was grateful for what America did and now is doing to help the country. The South Vietnamese are freedom loving people and they are not happy that America quit fighting the war. Nonetheless, they moved on and welcome every opportunity to experience freedom." In our group, we had all moved forward with life, raising families, finishing education plans, and having successful careers. If any had arrived with reservations, they left with a better understanding of today's Vietnam. It has moved forward past war.

We all arrived home before Christmas safe and much wiser. I think we learned that some memories are best left behind. Yes, we will always be what we are and what we went through. You do not have to forget where you came from, but you must also move forward without looking over your shoulder at the past.