

## A Salute to the Old Soldiers | Hanoi, Vietnam

By Helena Trifillis

I had freshly stepped out of a restaurant and was immediately swept into a circle of old army vets celebrating their friend's 66th birthday. They welcomed me with broad grins and open arms. They sat on plastic chairs in a circle on the street surrounding a platter of picked over roast pig and veggies.

They fed me whiskey and clams.

One man played the sax and another the guitar and I clapped the empty clam shells to the beat like castanets. We took many shots, each of them leaning way over and insisting on clinking glasses with me. They showed me a photo of all them from the army days, a line of smiling men in starched green uniforms. The photo was passed around and each man pointed to a young man in the photo and then to himself.

The sax player would finish a song then look at me and exclaim, "Hello! California! Florida!" because I told him I was American. He told me some of his family members live in the U.S. and their job is "computer."

The birthday boy tried to feed me a pickle with chopsticks. He was wearing a camo U.S. army uniform and after no prompting on my end, attempted to explain to me the relations between Vietnam, China, and the United States. Or at least that's what I gathered, between his broken English and the other men shouting over him across the circle, I understood essentially nothing aside from the phrases "Vietnam and China," "Holding hands," and, "But U.S. number one!"

Between pauses he would nod and look at me expectantly and I would smile and give him a thumbs up despite neither hearing nor understanding a word he said. It started to rain and I began prepping my exit as the men started shifting the table and chairs under a nearby awning.

The guitar player caught on to my intended departure and grabbed my bag, holding it hostage under the awning, declaring I could not leave. I laughed and grabbed it back after some jostling. Then I bowed and saluted the old soldiers and went on my way.