

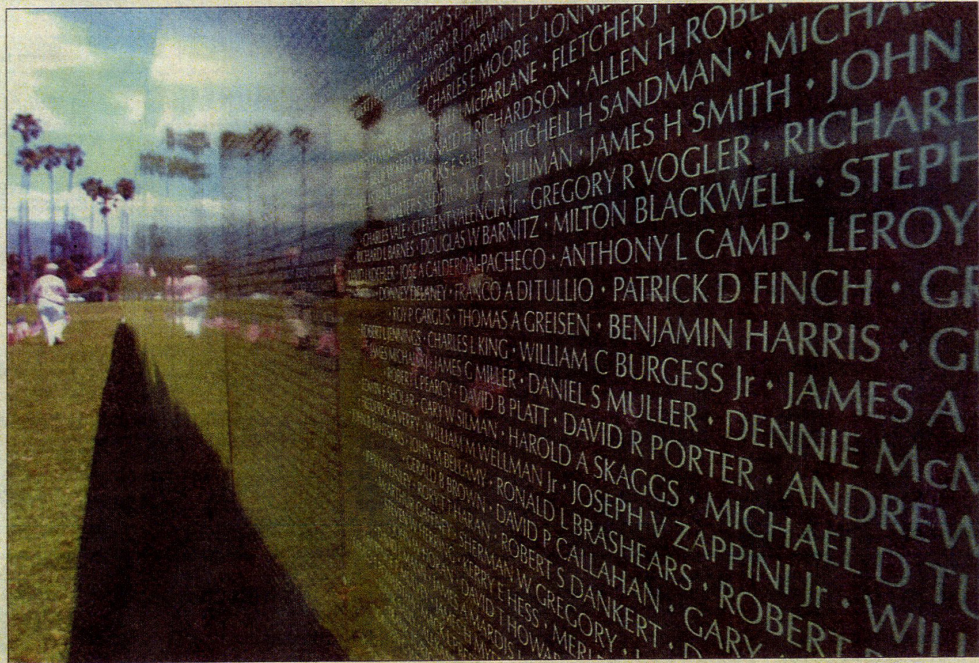
Students witness Vietnam War's lasting effect - Rob Kuznia, Santa Barbara News-Press 4/30/2005

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MOVING REMINDER

A half-scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., will be on display today through Friday at the Chase Palm Park soccer fields. The exhibit begins with an 11 a.m. ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the U.S. exit from Vietnam. The local Vietnam Veterans of America are sponsoring the free exhibit, as they did in November 2001. The replica stands 6 feet tall with a mirrorlike finish made of aluminum panels. The names of the 58,219 Americans killed in the conflict are etched into the wall so visitors can create 'rubblings' of the names as they do on the national memorial. For more information on the wall and the local VVA chapter, go to www.vvachapter218.org.



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Students witness Vietnam War's lasting effect

By ROB KUZNIA
 NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Thirty years after the fall of Saigon, students from Laguna Blanca High School have a Vietnam story of their own, one that underscores a lesson imparted by their history teacher: "The legacy of war doesn't end with the last shot fired."

Earlier this month, teacher Alethea Tyner and 14 students returned to Santa Barbara from a two-week stay in Vietnam, where they spent three days at an orphanage-like village catering to adults and children stricken by Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide used by the U.S. to clear foliage that might conceal enemy soldiers.

"I can't really think of the adjectives to describe it," said Alex Depaoli, a sophomore. "It was enlightening."

The students tended an organic garden and spent time playing with some of the 40 children at the Friendship Village, a housing cooperative in Hanoi that provides free health care and education to victims of Agent Orange. It was founded by two veterans, one American and one Vietnamese, whose units fought each other in the war.

Among the children the Laguna Blanca students played with was a mentally disabled teenager named Tung who delighted in singing songs and taking bows. They met Lin, a 19-year-old woman who appears to be 9 — the age at which she stopped developing. There was a teenage girl with bald spots because she pulled

her hair out and ate it, and a 20-year-old woman whose bulging eyes resemble an insect's.

Despite their maladies, the children were playful.

"Even though they couldn't speak English, they taught us songs," said junior Angelika Mueller-Galbraith. While eating lunch in Ms. Tyner's classroom with a handful of other students, she led the group in a giggly rendition of a Vietnamese folk song.

Although the school was supportive, it did not sponsor the trip because of liability concerns.

During the trip, the crew — which included three other adults — traversed the tropical country via air-conditioned bus. Their driver weaved through swarms of electric scooters on roads without rules.

"The red light means, 'Honk your horn when you go through,'" joked junior Graham Harbison.

Their stops offered a perspective that could never be gleaned from a textbook half a world away in the tony Hope Ranch neighborhood.

The group toured the Cu Chi tunnels, which, decades after being dug to enable the Viet Cong soldiers to corner and kill Americans, had been revamped into a sort of macabre amusement park where people pay \$1.30 to fire a round from an AK-47.

The students saw booby traps — waist-deep holes lined with spikes. They saw a group of electronic mannequins sawing into undetonated American bombs — duds that the Viet

Cong converted into land mines in real life.

"It was really a testament to the tenacity of those fighters," Ms. Tyner said. "They were fighting for their homeland. It wasn't an abstract concept."

For a keepsake, Ms. Tyner purchased some communist propaganda posters, one from as late as 1994. The group saw one poster that depicted then-President Richard Nixon's face on a bomb.

In Hanoi, they observed the encased corpse of former President Ho Chi Minh, who died in 1969. Guards warned people to be respectful, even solemn.

"One girl had a lip ring and they made her get out of line," said junior Devin Thomas.

The group also visited Ho Chi Minh City — known as Saigon until South Vietnam surrendered to the communist north on April 30, 1975. The divisiveness over the name of the city remains today.

"You could tell what people's political proclivities were by the name they used," Ms. Tyner said.

"If they called it Saigon, they were more sympathetic to the West."
 For all the anti-American emblems and rhetoric the students encountered, they found the Vietnamese surprisingly hospitable.

Ms. Tyner asked a street merchant why this was, given the ravages incurred.

"He shrugged and said, 'Because we won.'"

[e-mail: rkuznia@newspress.com](mailto:rkuznia@newspress.com)



Angelika Mueller-Galbraith, a Laguna Blanca junior who visited Vietnam earlier this month, listens to a Vietnam veteran discuss his experiences during the war.