I was very pleased this week when Outrigger Hotels and Resorts, Asia announced it had signed an agreement to co-design and manage a luxury resort to be built along the central coast of Vietnam at Vinh Hoi Bay. This is a truly exciting milestone in Outrigger’s expansion into the thriving Asian market.

That news brings back many memories of a time over forty years ago when the first Outrigger Hotel was built in Waikiki. In fact, for a while, Vietnam and the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel shared some historic moments. Let me explain.

John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as President of the United States in 1961, and one of the first things he faced was an escalation of the Communist-led attempt to consolidate Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh. Kennedy pledged, “…we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to insure the survival and the success of liberty.”

With the concurrence of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Kennedy followed up by sending several hundred Green Beret “special advisors” to Vietnam. By November 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became President, the number of “advisors” had grown to over 16,000.

A few weeks later, in December 1963, our company’s founder Roy C. Kelley negotiated the terms of a 35-year lease of the beachfront Waikiki land formerly occupied by the Outrigger Canoe Club. He also made commitments to build two additional hotels now known as the OHANA Waikiki East and OHANA Waikiki West hotels. When the leases were finalized in April 1964, Roy began drawing the plans for all three hotels in a room located in the basement of the Reef Hotel, about where the Housekeeping department now stands.

As Roy and two draftsmen drew the plans and began to build the hotels, the “conflict” in Vietnam grew in intensity. When construction of the Outrigger Waikiki was started in early 1965, the first U.S. combat troops had joined the 23,000 U.S. “advisors” in Vietnam.

Just before Christmas 1966, the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel was still under construction. Workmen were everywhere. Carpet was being installed in the lobby, and I was in the liquor store in the lower lobby stocking the shelves with bottles of gin, whisky, beer, and wine. It was a mess, but we were accommodating guests as soon as a room was completed. We were very much aware of the fact that 389,000 U.S. troops were serving in Vietnam, and over 5,000 had died in combat during the year.

When the hotel officially opened in 1967, rates ranged from $22 to $30 double occupancy and up to $73 per night for an oceanfront suite! The war in Vietnam was red hot. Some 675,000 U.S. troops were either in Vietnam or on their way there. General William Westmoreland, Commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam (1964-1968), requested an additional 200,000 personnel but President Johnson, mindful of the riots and protests against the war nationwide, only agreed to 45,000 more.
How Things Have Changed

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To enable the troops a brief respite, everyone serving in Vietnam was permitted to take a “Rest and Recreation Leave” (R&R) during their one-year (13 months for the Marines) tour of duty there. Leave was organized by the military with locations limited to Hawaii, Sydney, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Singapore, Taipei, Taiwan, and Tokyo. Most leaves were only five days, but those going to Hawaii or Australia were allowed seven days because of the longer travel time.

The single men particularly liked the Asian cities for the availability of female companionship. Hawaii was favored because of the extra days away from the battlefield, its familiar American culture, and the proximity to the continental U.S. To this day, I still run into former servicemen and servicewomen who met their spouses, sweethearts, and families in Waikiki while on R&R during the Vietnam years.

From the day it opened and during its first four or five years of operation, the Outrigger Waikiki was a very popular place for R&R. It quickly became a significant portion of our business, and, on some nights, 30-50 percent of our occupancy was related to service personnel and family members who flew from all over the nation to meet them.

We did everything that we could to accommodate the needs of our R&R servicemen and women and their families.

During the Vietnam years, the Outrigger Waikiki was “entertainment central” with the Society of Seven playing in the Main Showroom, the comical Reycards performing on the lobby stage, a discothèque called the Moon rocking on the top floor, hula dancers swaying at the beachfront luau, and patrons enjoying the views in Davy Jones Locker, an underground bar that featured a large window through which they could watch the underwater activities of swimmers in the beachfront pool.

Our servicemen and women enjoyed every one of these features but were especially attracted to Davy Jones Locker because the Twin Sisters Two, Terrie and Jennie Frankel, were playing music and singing there. The twins had toured Vietnam with Joey Bishop and the USO shows. That experience gave them a real feel and understanding for what these brave men and women endured while stationed in barren, remote firebases far away from Vietnam’s populated and somewhat safer areas. Sensing that comradeship, those on R&R and their families would come by night after night to hear these young ladies perform.

Things have changed significantly during the past four plus decades. Ho Chi Minh, Roy Kelley, Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, William Westmoreland, and Jennie Frankel have all passed on.

Terrie Frankel and I are still around but a lot older and perhaps wiser than we were when she toured the firebases, and I stocked the shelves in the late sixties. The Moon, Davy Jones Locker, and the lobby stage where the Reycards played have all been converted to other (quieter) uses.

Many former members of the armed services who served in Vietnam have worked or are now working at an Outrigger or OHANA hotel. Some Vietnamese who escaped the terrifying re-education camps and traumatic conditions of the post-war Communist rule of their native country by leaky boat or other extremely dangerous means are also part of our ‘ohana.

For each of us who lived through that era, it is so gratifying to know that peace and prosperity have returned to Vietnam and that an Outrigger hotel will soon be there!