

# “We’ve All Been There”

Jeff Loeb

**A** glorious blue sky surprised us on our last morning. The monsoon had blown itself out overnight, leaving only a few grey wisps racing seaward. To the west the mountains lifted clear and green above the plains of Dai Loc.

Still possessed by sleep, Carolyn and I talked softly about our tour with Vien—the medieval villages; the old women in black balancing enormous baskets; the water buffalo with egrets perched on their backs; and the ramshackle groups of corrugated huts we’d generically (and ignorantly) called Dogpatch back then.

A picture entered my mind’s eye of teenage Marines, tromping across the watery flats at places we’d named for geological features, or imagined ideals, or simply disillusioned irony. We died a lot out there, but not as much as the villagers, or their forbears. Yet here they were, outlasting God-knew-how-many regimes and ideologies and tin-pot dictators.

Over elaborate egg coffees in the open-air lobby, we watched the morning’s commerce unfold on Truong Hua: oldsters with deep-etched expressions selling mangos from baskets; Asian tourists—mostly the day’s first happy brides—posing in front of the bougainvillea across the way, their brand-new, sheer white ao dais floating in daylight’s warming breezes; the brisk cyclo traffic. Hoi An rawly waking, as Joyce might have it.

We quietly discussed the previous night’s drama—Vien’s farcical plight, his antic infidelities, his hasty entreaties with us to cover for him after we’d accidentally found out. Marital dissembling, I realized, it’s everywhere, even among tour guides *cum* erstwhile bar owners. In a different world, he would have been a scholar, we agreed, a mandarin perhaps, with his gifts for

language and history, his willing energies. Our covering lies, we decided, were of no real consequence.

And so we set about our final errands—picking up purchases, packing, heading to the ATM for tip money: another comic absurdity, leaving five-figure gratuities that amounted to less than a few dollars. It was communism’s fault, we decided. One of our little jokes.

Later, our plane lifted into the gorgeous blue and banked East, out over Monkey Mountain, into the high, bright sunlight. What might have been my final sight of Marble Mountain was on the wrong side. Instead, I saw only the sad, aging, concrete military control tower, overtaken by vines, jutting alone and useless fifty years after the close of the American War. It looked absurd dwarfed by the modern white terminals behind.



*Airport Tower and terminal  
(author photo)*

Then there were only clouds billowing up over the vast Asian sky.



*Marble Mountain and Da Nang (stock photo)*

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Dodge City, Arizona Territory, The Riviera: There were more names, but all suggested violence or bitter irony, and all referred to bloody places situated in the hot, flat coastal lowlands south of Da Nang. Marines patrolled the sandy, tree-laden stretches, along with some army special units and the dreaded Korean marines. These last were assigned to the rivers and beaches of Hoi An, an ancient and quite beautiful coastal city, and their brutality was legend back then; supposedly they regarded the Vietnamese as ignorant and uncultured—at least that’s what we were told in 1968, when I first arrived. I was never that close to the ROKs, but I’m willing to take the word of whomever pegged them as barbarous because that’s what we certainly were.

It’s ground you can’t get purchase in—and I mean that literally and figuratively. The white dunes shift beneath your feet, the vegetation baffles sight, and water reigns everywhere—from the summer paddies to the winter monsoons to the wide, meandering rivers. The French died there in droves and never owned it, and I’m sure the Chinese did before that. I can tell you firsthand that we did too—of mines, booby traps, sudden enfilading fire, and tragically accurate mortar rounds. The water buffalo ran away (or didn’t, to their misfortune if some bright, motivated USMC grenadier popped off a round for fun); villagers stared back with empty looks or went about their business—and who can blame them? Our interrogations were swift and brutal, not exactly likely to produce any useable intel about the guerrillas dwelling among them.

Viet Cong, we called these soldiers, a derogatory name meaning Vietnamese Communists and suggesting inbred sneakiness and treachery. They referred to themselves as soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army of Viet Nam, and this is pretty much who they remain to me: trained irregulars protecting their villages and hamlets from outside interlopers with obscure motives. Whatever the case, they had guts and the weight of history on their side. Our

own courage, which was considerable at times, became ensnarled in frustration, anger, and outright cruelty. But then what do you really expect from teenagers asked to fight for “freedom” and “liberty” who’ve just watched their buddies’ remains choppered out?

So, as I say, it was bloody land down there below Da Nang. Today, it’s still dotted with plaques and monuments commemorating both Vietnamese resistance and resilience. The resistance tends to show up in red-and-yellow placards (the colors reserved for official pronouncements) or in bright-gold, trumpeted victory declarations. The resilience, on the other hand, is just there—in the tough, hardworking villagers as it always was, and in the townspeople’s hustle and verve. Neither group seems to pay much attention to Hanoi’s stern gaze.

Sitting with Vien in his alleyway cafe, we’d sketched out a tour of places I’d be able to recognize from half a century before. I knew that any signs in these areas, even if I could have read them (try converting Hanoi officialese into Defense Language Institute, Saigon-dialect Vietnamese five decades after the fact), would have announced courageous People’s Army victories over foreign interlopers. On the other hand, searching American internet sites was only likely to deliver up troop movements, “VC” body counts, and tales of endless travail. The names Vien threw out helped jog my memory, many we’d employed back then—Hill 55, Liberty Bridge, the eponymous Marble Mountain—and others belonging to the towns or rivers we’d fought over: An Hoa, Go Noi Island.

Scion of an old Hoi An family, Vien was both a student of Vietnamese history and a rather brilliant linguist—his English syntax was nearly flawless, and he told us his French and Mandarin were better—so even though he hurriedly deflected all my queries about Korean barbarity

(they're big tourists too), he easily put together driving tours of all the places I named and more, even Da Nang's Red Beach, where in 1965 the first Marines had waded ashore—against no opposition, mind you, much like MacArthur's much-rehearsed Luzon press-shoot in 1944. It was a terrific beach for sure, with great background views of the towering Hai Van Pass, but the event itself had come a little before my time, back when it was still possible to talk about American innocence.

On the other hand, Vien vociferously argued Carolyn and me out of a My Lai trip, not because it was out of our way—the hamlet, in fact, lies just a few clicks south of the First Marine Division's former TAOR and in similar terrain—but rather he didn't want us to waste our time reading the "propaganda" marking the site of the war's bloodiest massacre. I took his term to mean the story we Americans have long accepted as truth, but I wasn't about to argue with him; after all, we'd grown rather fond of the splendid Vietnamese craft beers he served.



*Carolyn and Jeff in Vien's restaurant  
(author photo)*



*Quang and Vien at Da Nang restaurant  
(author photo)*

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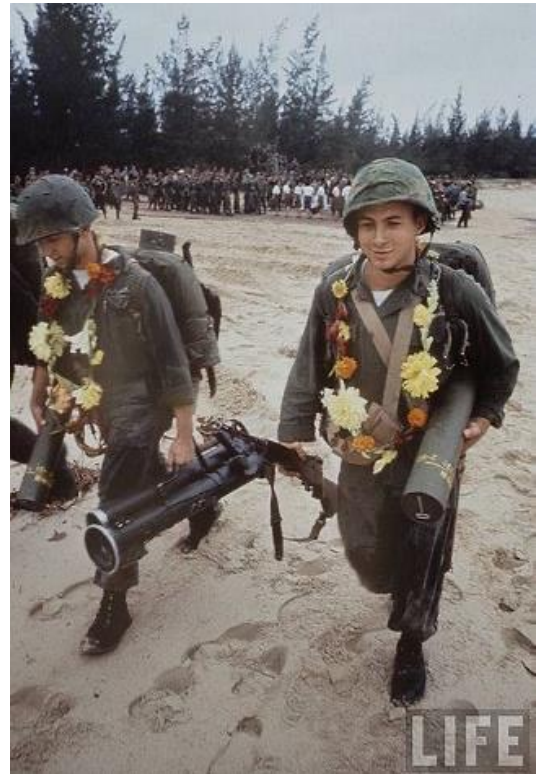
So we began by swinging north, up to Red Beach. On a group tour to Hue a couple of days prior, we'd actually driven by this, so on the present trip, after taking a couple of pictures and otherwise paying suitable homage to the spirit of America's Last Great Marine Amphibious Landing, we cut back down into old Da Nang for a delectable lunch at a small noodle place. This part of the city proved far different than the famous China Beach strip we'd passed through on the way up, where enormous Vegas-style hotels (and sites of more visceral pleasures) now reign supreme. Sitting in the restaurant, I was compelled to think that in 1968 and '69, I'd never once sampled the local fare, C-rations and mess-tent creations instead sustaining me throughout.

I also realized that only twice had I actually ventured into Da Nang itself—once to be awarded a medal by the ARVN command for “heroic translating under vicious fire from dastardly communist traitors” or some such hyperbole, and the other, shortly before I left the country, on what I think was to be a pleasure jaunt but which ended badly. Of the ceremony, I recall only standing at attention within the shockingly yellow concrete walls of a compound, while a South Vietnamese colonel pinned their country's Cross of Gallantry to my uniform. That and the coarse complaints of the staff sergeant tasked with chauffeuring me.

The other trip had begun as a carefree jeep ride, the bright idea of our unit's supply sergeant—perpetually stoned, an undoubted lifer, though I doubt he yet realized this—and I'd gone because I was up for anything that got me off the Riviera's hot sands. We'd driven through Marble Mountain, past the NSA hospital where I'd recently visited a buddy who'd been hit, and by the Green Beret compound, where we'd sneak off to drink whiskey since the Corps stuck firmly to the Navy's grog rule limiting us to two ghastly, hot Ballentines per day—when we could

get them.

Things seem to have gone fine in the city that day—meaning we were drunk and otherwise sated—until we crossed the I-Corps Bridge back out of the city. This was a two-lane steel structure that also carried a good deal of bicycle traffic, and the sergeant, for reasons known only to himself, had suddenly swerved and put one of the cyclists through its outer girders. I recall looking back, horrified to see man and cycle toppling down into the Song Han (“Song” is Vietnamese for river, though here and below I’ve left out the tonal diacritics), a good fifty feet below. That was it; we’d sped away to the sounds of the driver’s laughter and returned to our compound. I never spoke to anyone about the deadly event.



*Marines landing at Red Beach  
1965 (Life)*



*My personal landing at Red Beach 2019  
(author photo)*

Our next stop was Hill 55. When we pulled up there with Vien, my shock must have been palpable. What had been an embattled, red-dirt hill now featured beautifully manicured greenery through which one could drive, rather than hump, to the top. Fifty-five meters doesn't sound all that high, but I remembered when you're astride the only elevation for miles around, it can feel pretty exposed. Now, it was crowned by another Hanoi Special—a towering, golden North Vietnamese (pardon the anachronism) soldier, fist thrust skyward in victory, and strangely appearing to sport wings—all backed by a concrete abutment rising even higher. Surrounding this was a brass diorama displaying other soldiers struggling onward and upward toward victory.

I can assure you this monument wasn't present last time I'd been there, in 1969, just a few short years before we Americans were unceremoniously ushered out of the country by just such troops. However, when I looked closer, the legend on its base created yet another puzzle: it appeared to advertise the Vietnamese words for toughness or strength ("Tuong Dai"), followed by a reference to the ancient dragon of victory ("Chien Tang"), and the real name of the hill ("Bo Bo"). All these seemed natural enough under the circumstances, but then I spotted a curious date—July 19, 1954—one clearly antedating any exits we Americans had made. I frowned in puzzlement for a moment before it struck me: It's the date Viet Nam, or at least the northern half of it, was finally freed of colonialism following the French's ignominious disaster at Dien Bien Phu.

My first impulse was that something was missing—something on the order of, "Whaaa? How 'bout us Muricans? Don't we get no show?" Then it suddenly became clear: Our whole "effort" in Viet Nam had effectively been dust in the wind, at least in the Vietnamese view of history, one in which they'd kicked out the Chinese 1000 years before in a massive campaign led, according to legend, by two royal sisters—the Trungs—and then later endured the French



for two more centuries. Our measly twelve years must not have seemed like much after all. Somewhat chastened by the reality of victors' writing history, I duly posed for Vien in front of the monument in my yellow-starred Viet Nam hat, then we moved on.



*Me at Hill 55 – 1969  
(author photo)*



*Me at Hill 55 – 2019  
(author photo)*

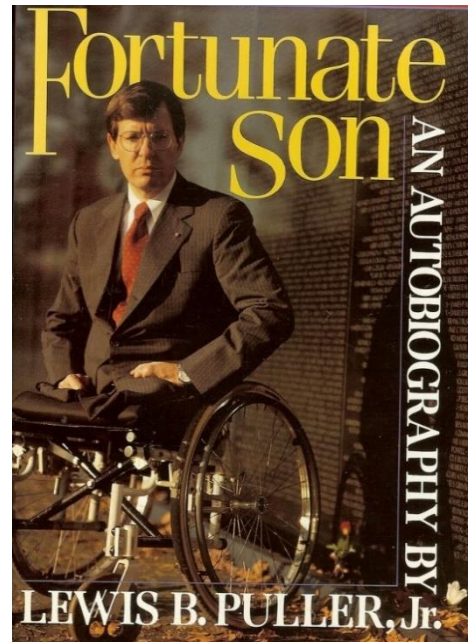
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To assist readers with the account of our next stop, a grim area where I'd spent the last six months of my tour, I feel the need to provide some background information. It's this: The most decorated Marine in history (and, believe me, the Corps keeps track) was a man named Lewis "Chesty" Puller, who over 37 years in at least three campaigns was awarded five Navy Crosses (USMC's second-highest, behind only the Medal of Honor); achieved the rank of Lt. General; and served as Commandant. In boot camp, his name is revered by drill instructors anxious to present recruits a true history of the world. Chesty Puller had a son, named Lewis after him, who also entered the Marine Corps.

On October 11, 1968, a grisly event occurred on the so-called Riviera, the bitterly ironic name lent to a treacherous few square miles just south of Marble Mountain. Whether the tag was contrived by some smartass American or went back to the French (making it doubly mocking, if so), I haven't been able to determine, but I do know from hard experience that controlling its rugged expanse was a lifetaker for the Marines of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. The Riviera's stunning shoreline (actually part of China Beach, though no one sane would have trekked that far south) gave lie to its shifting dunes and wild tangles of bamboo and elephant grass. Mines and homemade booby traps—some implanted to stop Japanese invaders 30 years before—made for deadly passage. Somehow the villagers pretty much managed to avoid these, a fact that called down American suspicions, not to mention violence. The grunts of 2/1 hated patrolling there and detested doubly encamping in it because nights brought their own heartbreak. As an artillery spotter, mostly I'd been spared the nights—ensconced instead atop a 40-foot tower within the compound—but days demanded my interpreter skills (not that my infantile vocabulary resulted in much intel), so I'd mostly heard rather than felt the heat of those deadly blasts.

That October day was different though. My 21<sup>st</sup> birthday was only days away, and I remember looking forward to putting my maiden X next to Richard Nixon's name since he had "a secret plan to end the war." A patrol had quietly slipped out through the wire the night before, its purpose to backstop the next day's sweep. It was led by Second Lieutenant Lewis Puller Jr., in-country less than three months, just missing the battalion's desperate fights up north at Khe Sanh and Con Thien. Somehow on this morning, before the main force could saddle up, things went wrong for Puller and his men out on the Riviera. Instead of themselves being part of the ambush, they were surprised by North Vietnamese troops and sent fleeing

over the unforgiving dunes. Puller hit a trip wire affixed to an unexploded 155mm artillery round, and had both legs blown off among many other injuries. To me, there was the sound of a ferocious blast, rising black smoke, and a descending medevac chopper from Marble Mountain, one swift enough to deliver Puller to the Navy hospital ship floating offshore. His life, such as it would be, had been saved. Two decades later, he published the moving, Pulitzer-Prize-winning memoir *Fortunate Son*. Three years after that he was dead by his own hand.



*Cover Photo Lewis Puller Jr.  
Memoir (stock photo)*



*The Riviera Today  
(Maps photo)*

These were the memories that occupied me as Vien guided us through the southward sprawl of Da Nang. Nowhere along the wide boulevard, which in 1968 had been a rut-filled horror requiring daily minesweeping, was there any trace of the pale, deadly dunes. I soon discovered why: They'd been leveled and replaced by opulent tourist hotels and sweet, unobstructed views of the inviting surf, leaving the once-dreaded Riviera anchored now by not one, but two internationally renowned golf courses, its sandy verdancy having proven ideal for the game.

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Several clicks off to the west of Hoi An lies Go Noi Island, which is not easy to reach from any direction. Though its dreaded trip wires are now long gone, the terrain is still forbidding—a green sameness, as much water as land, disorienting on foot and defying all particularity from the air. The Everglades comes to mind. Ultimately, I remembered, it took Navy skiffs to patrol it effectively. It was tough stuff then and remains so now.

On this afternoon, trying to reach the island, we found ourselves blocked from the only bridge by a flooded road. Vien and our driver, Quang, who had grown up in Xa Dien Quang, a



*Quang and Vien searching for a way to Go Noi Island (author photo)*

nearby village (“ville” had been our shorthand for the rambling assemblages of tin-and-plywood huts, cow pastures, rice paddies, and palm trees that sometimes stretched for miles), quickly engaged in a rapid-fire confab—of which, by the way, I could understand not one, single, solitary word—before

deciding we should seek a way around. On foot. Quang would meet us somewhere known only to the two of them.

This jaunt proved tricky as anything we’d undertake. Carolyn and I trailed Vien up a concrete “street” past some tethered cows, which seemed folksy enough, and then onto a dike. He tried hailing one of the fishing skiffs tied up on the other side of the Song Cau Chiem, probably 50 meters away, but no one seemed at home. So



*Carolyn and Vien in Xa Dien Quang (author photo)*

we trudged down a long embankment toward a distant railroad bridge. We'd use that to cross one of the river's many tributaries, he said.

Well and good, we thought—its steel seemed sturdy enough—and the three of us set out baby-stepping over a plate holding the ties together. Carolyn had on sandals and a long skirt and kept tripping over the large retaining bolts, so the two of us fell behind. At exactly the

halfway point, we heard a distant whistle from behind. A train was just curving into sight, headed our way. Vien, already across, urged us to hurry; there were no step-outs, and we couldn't risk going back. The two of us tap-danced forward, gripping hands, with what seemed a turtle's progress, leaping sideways onto the welcoming cinders perhaps five seconds before the massive engine—whistle blaring—rocketed past, followed by dozens of cars. I heard Carolyn's shrieks off to my right and spun around to see her hiding her face in her



*Fast-approaching train  
(author photo)*

hands. Vien, stoic and confident throughout, pointed to the next bridge, 400 or so meters ahead, and assured us it had a safety walk. We'd meet up with Quang on the other side.

When we'd crossed the second trestle, we were standing on Go Noi, which is actually several islands, many of them small sandbars used for fishing. Along with the multiple sinuous rivers that define the place is a good deal of permanently wet ground, making it a great rice-growing area and, I should note, nearly perfect for mulberry trees, necessary for the silk-worm

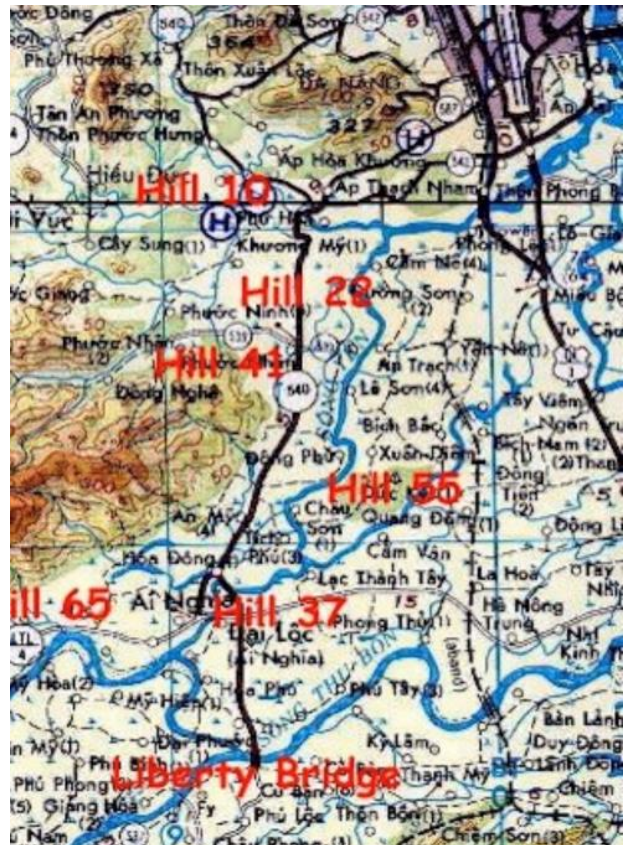
production feeding into the Hoi An markets just a few clicks East. Maps tend to identify the island's interior by one of its three villages, but Vien told us the residents all think of themselves as Go Noi-ers. Running right next to us was the highway we hadn't been able to use. While we awaited Quang's call, we walked up an unprepossessing dirt road and were unexpectedly greeted by a splendid temple with burial shrines. No one seemed to be around, so we explored



*Me pointing out pilings of Liberty Bridge (author photo)*

The call soon came—with its rat-a-tat conversation—and Vien said we'd have to walk over the next bridge to meet up. He seemed excited because when we got there, we'd be in Dodge City, where the skeleton of the old Liberty Bridge lay partly submerged: the site of my last operation, in late spring of 1969. We walked across the modern concrete reincarnation of this bridge and off to the southeast, toward the ocean, loomed the flat,

this at our leisure, Vien reading the legends and identifying their significance. They honored Quang's family, he informed us, and dated back centuries.



*Military map of Liberty Bridge area (stock photo)*

featureless expanse of the dreaded Arizona Territory. I closed my eyes and opened them again. Vien was pointing out the rotting bridge piles, and I remembered that on that other day, it had been impassable—rocketed out of service by the NVA—and we'd had to ferry across the southern fork of the Song Tru Bon.

The op, though ambitious in scope, had taken me no farther than Dodge City. It was part of a much larger Marine offensive that included Koreans and units of the ARVN, all spread across a front stretching from highlands to ocean. I'd been assigned as an interpreter with Vietnamese troops, paired up with a lieutenant training to adjust artillery fire. Crossing from Go Noi, we'd walked into chaos and unfolding carnage, rounds cracking, green and red tracers criss-crossing in the fraught, steaming air. I recall huddling over our spread-out maps, poking our heads up, desperately trying to fix on a target in the featureless sands. The ARVN company commander's voice had come up on our radio, frantic-sounding, demanding artillery fire. We could hear cries on the other end. It was impossible to tell whose.

We settled on a set of coordinates, and the lieutenant's radio operator conveyed them to the ARVN battery, miles behind us at Hill 55. I remember hunkering down, waiting for the spotting rounds. Then a roar and sudden flash, and I found myself staring at the bloodied pants leg of my jungle utilities. My first thought was it was a short round, ours. Someone had screwed up. Then twin sandy geysers erupted out front, our own marking rounds. Something else had gotten me. I remember seeing the lieutenant pawing frantically at the maps. I saw him grab the radio's handset and heard his voice. I remember him saying "vulva," over and over. It made no sense. Then I recognized it, the Vietnamese for mortar, *vo vua*. We'd been hit by mortar fire, he was saying. Sharp pain stung my knee. I was of absolutely no use to him as he adjusted fire,

trying to hit the concealed tube. At some point, a corpsman appeared and shot me up, and all was lovely for a time.

And so had ended my ignominious combat career, being hauled out of Dodge City by skiff and then six-by, back to Hill 55. I remember the vertigo of the trip, that and the muddy, lumped-up ponchos bouncing in the truck bed with every rut. My own wounds proved minor, and my thirteen months were just days from being up. In fact, thinking only of The World, I had to argue our battery's corpsman out of putting me on medical hold. He'd always seemed friendly but suddenly grew officious, informing me if I didn't stay in country until he, as representative of the Corps and Naval Services, could sign off on the soundness of my condition – perhaps two weeks or so – he couldn't put me in for a Purple Heart. Even in my weakened condition, it sounded like something out of *Catch-22*. I declined the bargain, and my DD-214 has ever since reflected that noted absence. For months afterward, as a civilian, I'd plucked tiny steel shards from my knee.

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Carolyn and I left the next morning, fifty years and change after that first time. Flying out, I realized I felt something like love for Viet Nam. Carolyn too. Vien? Well, he emailed me over the holidays and said he couldn't wait to see us again; things were all patched up with his wife.

I always was a heavy tipper.



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