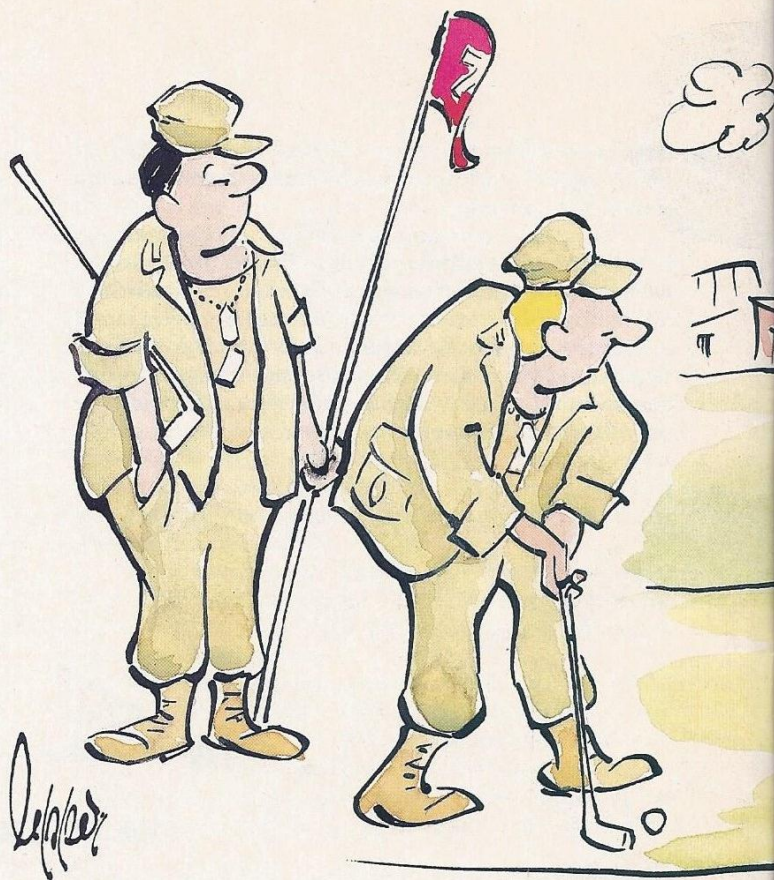


# Memories of Golf and War



*The Saigon Country Club in 1966 was oddly out of place amid the ravages of war, making unreality routine for one American.*

by HENRY BILLINGS

**I**T HAS BEEN 10 years since the four-party Vietnam peace pact was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973, and less than two months later the last American troops were shipped home. Thousands, of course, didn't come home, and others who did still carry the physical and psychological scars of war.

Perhaps it is knowing these things and having the benefit of hindsight that the irony of my own experiences in Vietnam hangs in my memory. Few would argue, I'm sure, that Vietnam of the mid-1960s was an extraordinary place in which to play golf. Perhaps bizarre is a better word.

Although my game has always been somewhere south of mediocre, golf has not been just another game to me. To some it is a religious experience; to others, it is just

another form of exercise. For me, it has always been a befuddling mixture of frustration, fun, and sober reflection. Most players will be able to identify with the frustration and fun; the reflective side of golf, for me, may be traced to Saigon. I can't play 18 holes without something reminding me of that country club in Saigon. Indeed, when I passed my 40th birthday not long ago, I made myself a birthday gift of 36 holes of play to reaffirm that my game was most definitely like old wine in the cellar.

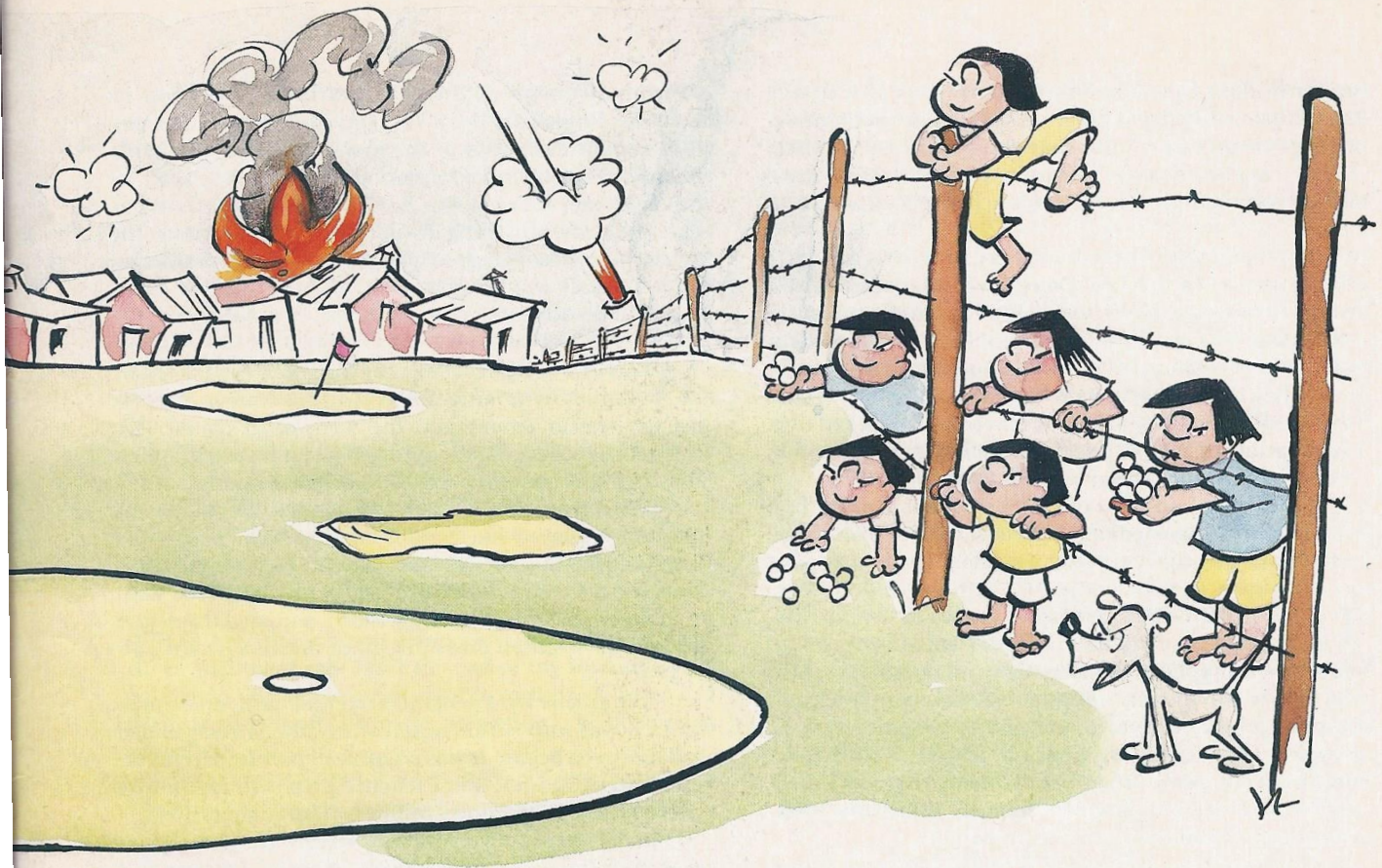
Perhaps I lack the requisite concentration, but during those two rounds my mind kept flitting back to 1966, the war, and how truly capricious life can be.

Slicing a drive out of bounds, I did not see it bounce merrily down the highway; instead, I would envision it skipping off the roof of a Vietnamese hut. I then caught myself wondering whether the Saigon Country Club may have been transformed into an agricultural commune by now, or into a re-education center for those who failed to escape. Was the barbed wire still in place around the course, the post-war regime perhaps fearing

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infiltration by either the CIA or the PGA? I also wondered whether that fabulous Chinese soup was still served in the clubhouse.

Finally, I still wonder often why playing golf in Saigon remains one of my most poignant memories from Vietnam. Golf and Monopoly (perhaps more philosophically understandable) were two Western inventions that, from the new regime's view, foster such dubious capitalistic traits as individualism and laughter — heresies most assuredly. It might be recalled that upon Fidel Castro's take-over of Cuba, in 1960, he had all Monopoly sets still in shops quickly destroyed and all private sets confiscated. Those who enjoy political generalities may safely contend that life without golf or Monopoly aptly describes a Marxist paradise.

Be that as it may, I still have my bittersweet recollections of a time when golf was played in South Vietnam.

**I** WASN'T SENT to Vietnam to play golf, of course. It just happened to work out that way. I had no heroic visions of being the reincarnation of Sergeant Alvin York. I was in Southeast Asia because my government sent me there, and I had fully expected to be sleeping in the puckerbrush and burning leeches off my forearm with a cigarette, not burning up the fairways.

Fate smiled on me, however, and I was given a desk job as a research and analysis officer for Army Intelligence,

trying to prove that those terms were not mutually exclusive.

My office was a mile or so from the Saigon Country Club; like Colonel Henry Blake of the M\*A\*S\*H television reruns, I was thus able to squeeze in quite a few rounds when I wasn't briefing some VIP on enemy morale or the effectiveness of the B-52.

I worked the night shift for six months at the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, headquarters, located on Tan Son Nhut Air Base. While we worked, the day-shift crowd toured the bars; while they worked, we toured the fairways.

(Apparently, the Saigon Country Club also caught the attention of the Viet Cong; they used the textile mill directly behind the seventh green as their main command post during the Tet offensive in 1968.)

Golf in Vietnam during a war wasn't quite like golf in Pinehurst, North Carolina. Nor was it even faintly similar to playing at the posh Royal Selangor Golf Club, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I took my R&R (Rest and Recreation, for those unfamiliar with that blessed institution).

Vietnamese golf was in a class by itself. You were never sure that you would finish your round, and while Saigon wasn't the Central Highlands or Khe Sanh, it was at least as dangerous as Central Park in New York City. For example, there was the constant possibility that a



sniper might zap you as you lined up your putt. It did not happen while I was playing, but that did not remove the fear or the possibility that you would be the first. There was also the clear and present chance that a stray mortar round might give you a much larger cup as your target.

For that matter, the ball washer could be rigged with plastique — and the Viet Cong loved plastique. They used it to blow up the Victoria Hotel in Saigon on April Fool's Day — a cruel excuse for a joke. Local terrorists were fond of restaurants and bus stops as targets; thankfully, they did not regard the country club as an object worthy of their explosives. Perhaps they lacked the imagination to realize the morale-shattering potential of destroying a few rounds of golf.

I thought about that often when I first arrived, but after a while, I worried more about my short-iron game (which was awful) than about a random terrorist attack.

**L**IFE, LIKE GOLF, is often a matter of timing. My best friend during basic officer's infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia, shared my fundamental ideals and hopes for the future, and he, too, enjoyed golf. Despite his best efforts to enter Army Intelligence, he was assigned as an infantry platoon leader. Within one month, every other officer in his company was killed and he became company commander. While my R&R was in exotic Malaysia, his was in Saigon.

I suppose that everything is relative after all. Considering what he had experienced, the Saigon Country Club was indeed as peaceful as Pinehurst for him. In the five days we spent together, I became acquainted with the real war. Then he returned to his unit and I never heard from him again.

I don't have the nerve to find out why.

**T**HE SAIGON COUNTRY Club had a nine-hole course that somehow was transformed into an 18-hole course. The extremely narrow fairways were stacked side by side like a collection of swizzle sticks. You were able to stand on the eighth green and see 17 other flagsticks. With my natural slice, I stroked plenty of balls into neighboring yards.

A lost ball did not remain lost for long. A veritable army of Vietnamese youngsters would collect the balls and resell them to the players. I can still see those tiny unwashed hands sticking through the wire fences, offering fresh collections of balls — including, perhaps, one of your own. For these children, life was first a hassle, then a hustle.

Generally, we didn't mind buying back our errant shots because decent golf balls were scarce. I received a CARE package of golf balls now and then from my mother in the States.

Sometimes the youngsters were not satisfied with honest labor. They would hide in the bushes about 200 yards down range and pounce on the ball when it landed. On a par-5, I spanked a sweet 3-wood that came down

in front of the green and rolled to within three feet of the hole. Eagle city. Before I could shout my joy, a bare-foot urchin dashed onto the green and made off with my ball. My playing companion, standing less than 10 feet from me, claimed that he had not seen the shot and that the only fair thing to do would be for me to hit again — and he generously agreed to assess no penalty for a lost ball.

I holed out in 8.

**W**HEN I WRITE about the Saigon Country Club, I'm really talking about two different courses — the dry-season course and the wet-season course. We needed a separate handicapping system for each, much as you might handicap mudders in horse racing.

When the weather was dry, it was dry; the course was flat and it played like a pool table. A low, hard drive would strike the fairway and take off as though it had landed on an interstate highway. On the greens (call them browns during the dry season), a missed three-foot putt on the slightest downhill grade meant a return putt of 10 feet.

The greens were generally flat and hard, and sometimes it was impossible to tell where the fairway ended and the green began. It was possible to putt from remarkable distances; I felt that I reached greens in regulation often, although the holes might be wedge shots away.

In the wet season, every shot was a water shot. It was wise to bring along an extra pair of socks. Fairway roll was unheard of, and the greens held like a swamp. In that dense, humid atmosphere, well-stroked shots fizzled and died like a child's emptying balloon.

Often my golfing buddies and I would have the course to ourselves. The Vietnamese did not play golf, and I don't think the enlisted personnel gave the game much thought. And, perhaps, it was due to the poor maintenance of the course. The bunkers resembled refugees from an abandoned inner-city playground. Drainage trenches crisscrossed the fairways. Tee areas were selected by general consensus among the golfers, not by management.

There were caddies, but I never used them. The Vietnamese did my laundry, provided my transportation, served my meals, and polished my boots. I figured I could carry my own golf clubs. Besides, I'd always thought that that was part of the exercise, and most caddies weren't even out of bed at 7 o'clock in the morning, the time when we teed off.

**B**Y THE TIME I was ready to leave after my year in Vietnam, I was rather blasé about the fighting that raged around me. It was absolutely freakish how one might be dining on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon and watching mortars and flares go off just across the Saigon River.

When I could eat river lobster and drink champagne while other men were trying to kill each other less than two miles away, the war ceased to be real.



The nail of irony was pounded home further when, after an inspection tour of the Mekong Delta, south of Saigon, I was able to hitch a ride with an American businessman at the Can Tho Air Base aboard one of those plush corporate aircraft. I was served bourbon on ice and a two-inch steak at 10,000 feet while out of the right window I could see five American jet fighters unloading tons of napalm on the lush green jungle. I had no way of knowing who or what was being incinerated, of course, but even after 15 years it strikes me how strange it is that even the most bizarre juxtaposition of circumstances can become routine and how cruelly unfair life can be.

I had simply lucked out. Through no doing of my own, I came home carrying a golf bag over my right shoulder. Others returned quietly in body bags, unloaded from a 707 in an obscure corner of an obscure military airfield. Still others came home with mental baggage that only now we're beginning to understand.

**F**OR ME, the war was always just around the corner, or just overhead. Near the end of my tour, I played golf often. My replacement had been trained and I had the last few days off. Then, on November 1, 1966, I almost joined the real war.

I was about to tee off when the Viet Cong launched a rifle attack on Saigon, hitting the bus station, the market-

place, and the twin-steeped Basilica of Our Lady. It was National Day and the Communists were delivering their present to Nguyen Cao Ky and his government. It got my blood pumping.

For a moment, I thought I was going into battle armed with nothing but a 2-iron and spiked shoes.

But before you could say Francis Ouimet, the cavalry came to the rescue in the form of armed helicopters out of Tan Son Nhut. Their presence blackened the air but assured me that I would make my flight home. The choppers flew so low I could almost read the name tags on the flak jackets of the gunners.

As a result of the Viet Cong attack that day, about 20 civilians were killed in Saigon.

Three days later, I was in New Jersey.

**E**VEN NOW, nearly 17 years later, my memory is still sharp when I think about those times and the odd juxtaposition of pars and bogeys in a land that was filled with violence and misery. Every impression is still there, just below the black surface.

Golf can never be just another game to me; it remains a powerful and ironic symbol of those times, and it adds a peculiar twist to Charles Price's line from his book *The World of Golf*:

"No other game so closely imitates the realities of life rather than the rules of war."

