

# To my friends of "promo 64"

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Soon after I stumbled on the AEJJR site some three weeks ago and started to contact some of my long lost *copains*, the hard disk on my computer died, right in the middle of tax season (over here, we have to render to Caesar what we owe Caesar by the 15th of April.) Needless to say, I was in a panic since all my documentations were on that disk, and have not been able, consequently, to respond. I have now recovered from the crash and have received, in the meantime, the *Annuaire de l'AEJJR 2000*, which helps a lot.

First, let's be frank: after almost 40 years of disuse, I can hardly write in either French or Vietnamese (certainly not with my vaunted eloquence) even though reading does not pose any problem. Besides, I am not familiar with the various combinations of keystrokes required to render the appropriate accents and diacritical marks necessary to both languages. On top of that, I am, like most of our generation and background, a hunt-and-peck typist who only uses three fingers AND looks at the keyboard while typing, so it would take me days to write this letter... Sorry then, I'll have to write in English, but you may respond in any language (an unforeseen consequence of our diaspora.)

Second, the mailing list that I have created was cobbled together from a query I made at the AEJJR site looking for the Promo '64, a list that came from N. P. Vinh Tung (our de facto class secretary), and some added by hand from the *Annuaire*. There are names that I do not recognize, but again, I have always been bad with names - I was calling everybody "machin" for my first three years at JJR. So please accept my apologies if you have received this letter by mistake.

Let's now begin....

It seems that the two questions on everyone's mind when they responded to my original e-mail were where the hell have you been and what have you been up to? So,

let me bring you guys up to speed, and for those of you, who do not remember me from the "Moi en 64" picture, let me start by telling you how I got to JJR. It may help you remember how we've crossed paths.

I first came to the *Petit Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat* in '54 by way of the *Lycée Français de Huê*, and was transferred the next year to Saint-Exupéry (ex Jauréguiberry) where I spent one year with Mme Tissier before returning to JJR for the 6e, where I met most of you guys, at least those of us who started in *Classique*: N.T. Vinh, Albert Thai, T.D. Hy, Jean-Paul Hua, Gilbert Tissier etc. In 4e, we started to split up in smaller groups, and I chose German as a second foreign language, and was put together with other *Modernes* like V.T. Dac, D.D. Cung, etc. while Albert and Vinh took Greek (yuk!) or Spanish (T.V. Thanh, N.N. Long.) Starting in 2nde, except for the Latin class, we were together with the *Modernes*. My last year at JJR was spent in MathElem I.

Of school life I remember little, especially during the years of raging hormones, although I can, on occasions, bring up visions of Mme Breand's tight skirts. I don't know how I could pay any attention during English classes! I don't recall spending much time fraternizing with anyone: our recesses (*récréation*) were quite short and I had barely time to line-up and buy a *baguette* from the cantina, and my over-protective mother had me dropped off and picked up at school just before or immediately after school, and anywhere I went, I had to drag along the chauffeur, which was a terrible blow to my ego. I remember being ashamed because everyone had a bike and I had a chauffeur! Later, while I was allowed to go places on my own, I still did not have a bike or *motocyclette* and had to confine myself to the places that I could walk to, e.g. *Cercle Sportif*, Albert's or Stefane Perry's houses which are close to my home on *Công Ly*, next to *L'Ecole des Oiseaux*. So if you remember me as snobbish or standoffish, now you know the reason why. Finally, if none of this sounds familiar, I went by various sobriquets given to me by peers and teachers: P'tit Poucet, Moustique or Zug. To jog your memory further, refer to the photograph of the 64 Math I class.



I'm the one standing right behind M. Comte, with Vu Thien Dac to my immediate left and Pham Minh Chi to my right. The quality of the scan is so poor that I recognize no one else, except for Christiane (I don't remember the rest of her name) and only because of her white *bandeau*.

I must confess that I recognized no one from the photographs that I saw on the AEJJR site. When I received the Annuaire and got to examine some of the pictures more closely, I was able to discern the resemblance to some of my old *copains*. N. Ngoc Long has not changed much and seeing his face reminded me of his bicycle tricks that he would show off in front of school: pushing his bike in front of him and running behind to catch up and hop on the saddle like a cowboy on his horse. And I can recognize T. Dinh Hy, even though he left in '61 with his sidekick V. V. Hien. V. Thien Dac, too, is familiar, but I got to see him again at his wedding in Saigon. I did not recognize N. Ba Dam at all, the Ba Dam that I have in mind is a youth with hair cut *en brosse*, and round cheeks. D. Dinh Cung is vaguely familiar, but like most of us he has gained some weight and did not carry his pointy boy-scout hat. Vinh Tung is a complete stranger, but in the back of my mind I remember Tissier calling him "Prince", and my being impressed with *Ông Tây* for being aware of the naming conventions set forth by Minh Mang to his descendants.



Enough maudlin memories! Let's get back to what I've done since you last saw me. Unlike most of you, I came to the US and attended Columbia University in New York. Only three of us came over here. Truong Dinh Hung, son of Dzu, went to Stanford in California (but he really was of *promo* 63) and Stefane Perry went to Yale. Yale was only two hours by train from NY, and Stefane had a sister who lives in the city, so he and I got to see each other about once a month for about two years. In case you haven't heard, Stefane was the first one in our *promo* to die! At the end of his second year at Yale he applied to spend the next year at the Sorbonne, and since class did not start until late October (over here school starts in September), he decided to go visit his father (USAID) who was then stationed in Vientiane. Because of his job, his father gets invited to many official types of functions, this particular one was the dedication of a strategic village. M. Perry did not want to go, but Stefane and his younger brother Alain went. Unfortunately, some relative of the village chief, jealous of his relation's good standing with the Americans, decided to sabotage the ceremony and had some of his men shoot at the helicopter that was carrying the American guests. Stefane died on the spot and Alain was shot in the stomach but survived. As to Hung, I ran into him in '75 or '76, on a NY City bus. By then he spoke Vietnamese (before, the only thing he could spell was his own name) and insisted on it. I lost contact when he was arrested a few months later on charges of espionage for the other side!

As for me, I graduated from Columbia in '67 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Bio-engineering (even then, I was ahead of my time) and started medical school in '68. I notice that something like one out of three of our *promo* is a doctor! What a class! But unlike you guys, I lasted only three weeks in school. One day during that third week, they took the first year students to watch an open-heart surgery procedure. I remember going into the operating room and looking at this machine with huge fingers being inserted into the patient's chest and hearing (maybe my imagination?) ribs crack. According to eyewitnesses, I turned green and walked out of the OR, never to be seen again on campus. This was 1968, the year of student rebellions, both over here and in Paris, the heyday of the hippie culture, so, I, *mes chers copains*, turned on and dropped out. I became a hippie, living in communes and traveling around the US for the next two years. I looked great with a *queue-de-cheval*! But in order to have my passport renewed I had to go back to school, so I became a doctoral candidate in History at Columbia University. My thesis was going to be on the Vietnamese Scholar Movement (1864-1904).

I went back to Saigon to do research in the summer of '71, that was how I got to attend Dac's wedding. I returned to NY that fall, convinced by what I saw in VN that our side had very little chance of making it. When the Watergate story broke out, and given the current sentiment of the American public toward the war, I knew that if anything happened, Nixon would never send back the US troops. By late '73, early '74, I realized that a doctorate in Vietnamese History was absolutely meaningless. My friends who had PhD's in Nuclear Physics or Economics were driving taxicabs in NY, so bad was the economy at that time. I once again dropped out of school, and, with the help of friends who were computer geeks, taught myself to programming.

The rest, as they say, is history. I founded my first software company in '74, and a second one in '77, both of which were sold in '82. Since then, I've become a semi-retired consultant, giving myself a chance to watch the children grow up. I cannot totally retire because in the software business, especially in this day and age, if one stays out more than 6 months it would be most difficult to get back in. Besides, programming is like doing crossword puzzles. It's fun!

So, yes, I'm married with three children (girl '79, boy '81 and girl '87.) The oldest is finishing her Masters degree in Accounting at Wake-Forest University (North Carolina) and will be working for Ernst & Young in Dallas. The second one is in his third year at New York University, the youngest is still at home keeping her mother and myself young. My wife is an invasive cardiologist, who is still practicing very hard.

Let me hear from you guys!

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