

Del. Rob Bell III, R-Albemarle County, grew up in a house filled with objects from the Far East. There were decorative elephants from Thailand and living-room chairs from Vietnam that he used as corner posts for his forts.

As he grew older he began to realize that these things were more than colorful artifacts. They were in fact touchstones that connected his father, Robert Bell Jr., to a period of his life when he was learning what it was to be a leader.

In the mid-1960s the future delegate's father was a junior-grade naval officer serving with the Seabees. During tours of duty in Thailand and later Vietnam, Bob Bell Jr. was involved with public works designed to help win the "hearts and minds" of rural residents.

In recent years, father and son talked casually about returning to Southeast Asia. The retired captain was initially less than enthusiastic about the trip. When the younger Bell told his father that he was serious about taking the trip, the father agreed to go.

In November, Rob Bell and his younger sister, Missy Bell, accompanied their father back to the lands that had helped define him. The trio went looking for answers and, perhaps, to catch a glimpse of the past. The following is a son's report of what they found.

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Fruit vendors brought fresh produce to the Seabee House in Kuchinarai in 1964.

Built to last

By Rob Bell
Special to The Daily Progress

In 1964, Lt. j.g. Bob Bell was stationed in a rural village in northeast Thailand. In November 2006, along with his son Del. Rob Bell, R-Albemarle, and his daughter Missy, he went back.

In the mid-1960s, the Viet Cong were engaged in bloody fighting with American-advised troops in South Vietnam. Although there was no fighting, there was significant communist agitation in Thailand's northeastern provinces.

As part of their regional efforts, American policymakers undertook a campaign

to help the Thai government win the "hearts and minds" of rural residents. Bob Bell, then 24 years old, was a Seabee, a member of a U.S. Naval Construction Battalion and the officer in charge of Seabee Technical Assistance Team 1101. In 1964, Bob Bell's STAT was sent to

Kuchinarai, a remote rural village in northeast Thailand.

Arriving in Thailand

Lt. Bell was airlifted to an unpaved airfield 30 miles north of Kuchinarai. With him were 17 men, several bulldozers and earth moving equipment and a mountain of tools, repair parts and food.

"When that last C-130 took off, I heard nothing but silence," Bob Bell said. "We really didn't know much about what we were getting into."

Bob Bell left several of the men with the equipment and went off in search of Kuchinarai. Once there, he had the other Seabees drive their equipment into town, which took the better part of a day to travel the 30 miles.

"Kuchinarai was a small village. There were no paved roads and no running water. Electricity was available for only a few hours a day, in the early morning and in the evening, Bob Bell said. "Virtually all of the buildings in the town were made of wood."

The Seabees had been given rudimentary language training, but they discovered that the northeastern Thais could not understand them at all.

"We used a lot of gestures," Bob Bell said.

The Seabees were expected to arrange their own accommodations.



Lt. j.g. Bob Bell posed with Noi, who cooked for the Seabees, in 1964. In the photo at right, the two were reunited 42 years later.

“We ended up renting a large house in town, which was owned by one of the local officials,” Bob Bell said. The Seabees employed local Thais to cook and to help with their laundry and ironing, and even made arrangements with a local woman to bake bread daily for the group.

“We were really at the end of the road,” Bob Bell said. “Although we had daily radio contact with Bangkok, we were only able to get supply flights to Kuchinarai every two weeks or so. On a day-to-day basis, we were pretty much on our own.”

Construction projects

The Seabees planned to do public works and to teach modern techniques to local builders. They recruited 20 Thai trainees,

who came to be known as the Thai Seabees. Midway through the program, Bob Bell awarded Seabee patches to the trainees. These patches became treasured parts of their uniforms - uniforms that they had made by local seamstresses to resemble the uniforms worn by the American Seabees.

In coordination with local government officials, Seabees undertook the construction of two earthen dams to control flooding to downstream rice farms.

The first project required Seabees to grade a muddy ox path and to top it with laterite.

“We were probably the first people to ever drive motorized vehicles on the roads,” Bob Bell said. “We essentially

had to construct the road just to get our heavy equipment to the worksite.”

Once there, the Seabees constructed a small earthen dam and an overflow culvert. The final road went over the top of the dam.

The second project was a much larger undertaking and included moving thousands of cubic yards of dirt and installing a concrete spillway.

“We had to mix the concrete in a small mixer and fix bulldozers under shade trees,” Bob Bell said. “We were washed out several times by early rains, but finally got everything completed before the full rainy season began.”

Given that there were few distractions in Kuchinarai, the Seabees also put their free time to use on small projects. Using empty oil drums, they constructed a swim raft for children at the town lake. They rewired their residence and installed a stone patio in the back. They acquired playground equipment and put it in across from the village school.

“We were really trying to be good neighbors,” Bob Bell said.

Living in Kuchinarai

Over the course of a seven-month tour, the Seabees did more than just work.

“We were the first Americans that most of the villagers had ever seen,” Bob Bell said. “Everything we did attracted a crowd.

“I remember getting a shave from the local barber. It was a dry shave, and his razor was so dull that he kept cutting me, but everyone had gathered to watch, and I didn’t want him to lose face. There were tears streaming down my face - I was

pretty happy when he was done.”

Like Seabees everywhere, the Kuchinarai contingent also made plans to celebrate the annual Seabee Birthday Ball in March.

“We had to pay the town generator operator to keep the generator running a few extra hours, and my chief petty officer made sure to lay on some extra cases of beer,” Bob Bell said. “There were a lot of toasts and our best efforts at traditional Thai dancing. People came from all over town just to watch the spectacle.”

Of course, there were some cultural difficulties. For Christmas dinner, the Seabees bought a turkey from a local family.

“We took it out back and chopped off its



It took the better part of a day to travel 30 miles in 1964.



In 2006, the Bell family found paved roads all the way into town.

head,” Bob Bell said. “Everyone looked horrified. We found out later it had been a family pet.”

Lt. Bell and the Seabee team left Kuchinarai after seven months. Bell later served with other Seabee units in Vietnam. He occasionally visited Bangkok, but did not return to Kuchinarai.

Returning in 2006

In 2004, Bob Bell’s five kids began talking about finding this Kuchinarai place that Dad had told so many stories about.

At first, Dad didn’t think we were serious. All of us are working now, and rural Thailand is not exactly Club Med.

But after he got his old pictures out, Dad said it would be really nice to see what had happened there in the 42 years since he left.

Over the Internet, we made arrangements to hire a driver and an interpreter. We made the 28-hour trip from Dulles Airport to Bangkok, and then caught a train to the regional university city of Khon Kaen. There, we met by our driver, who drove us to Kuchinarai.

Even in the dark, it was obvious that much had changed. Dad kept noting that we were on a nice two-lane paved road. He kept waiting for the dirt road to begin, but the paving ran all the way into Kuchinarai.

Upon arriving in Kuchinarai, the changes were obvious. The tiny dirt-road village had grown into a prosperous town with several hotels, three restaurants and many multi-story concrete buildings.

“I was astounded by how much had changed,” Bob Bell said. “I mean, I could withdraw money from the ATM and spend



Del. Rob Bell is all smiles when his father is reunited with Joi. The inset is of Joi in 1964.

it across the street at the 7-Eleven. There was even a golf driving range.”

In addition, foreigners like us were no longer oddities in Kuchinarai. Europeans and Australians taught in local schools. We found one restaurant that hosted a weekly “Farong [foreigner] Night,” where every foreigner in the region would come and swap stories over dinner. They typically drew six to eight people.

We even found a small nightclub where there was a live band playing on a week-night. In addition to the Thai pop songs, they worked their way around to John Denver and the Eagles.

Finding old friends

In some ways, Kuchinarai’s new pros-

perity made it harder to find evidence of the Seabees efforts years ago. The large Seabee residence had been razed and replaced by shops. There were hundreds of new, permanent buildings. New roads had been put in. Even the simple village lake had been landscaped as a tourist attraction.

We wandered around the town with Dad’s old photos, trying to find some of the old places, but without much success.

Eventually, we began interviewing some of the older Thais to try and find someone who remembered the Seabees stay in 1964. We showed them Dad’s old photos, but had only limited luck.

Finally, our interpreter found a shopkeeper who recognized Dad’s photo of the

Seabees’ cook, Noi. The shopkeeper was very excited to see Noi looking so young, and told us that Noi lived only a short distance away. Rather than try to give us directions, she shut down her store and hopped in our van.

She directed us to one of the older neighborhoods of Kuchinarai. The homes were wooden, with only limited electricity and no indoor plumbing. The shopkeeper pointed out a particular home, and said that Noi was working inside.

As we approached the open door, we could see into the house. We heard an older Thai woman talking to someone and bustling about.

The shopkeeper called out “Noi!”

Noi stepped back into the room, talking loudly and chewing her betel nut. Then she saw my dad. She did a long double-take and then recognized him. She shouted out “Mr. Bell,” ran over, and gave Dad a hug.

My dad looked like he’d been hit by a truck.

“She looked a lot like I remember her,” Dad said. “Only 42 years older.”

Given that she had not had any contact with my dad, we were all amazed that she recognized him at all.

Noi invited us into her wooden house, which was the same home she had lived in since 1964. The home had recently added electricity for refrigeration, but was otherwise as it had been. It was located on a dirt road near the center of town.

After we visited with Noi and her granddaughter, Noi climbed into our van. Given the driver, interpreter, shopkeeper and Noi, the Thais now outnumbered us. Together, we went looking for other Thais



A large dam that the Seabees built in 1964. Bob Bell (right) found another smaller project in 2006.



from my Dad's old photos.

Although many Thais had died or moved away, Noi did help us find Joi. In 1964, she had been one of the Kuchinarai children who hung around the Seabees and watched them while they worked.

Joi was working in the rice fields when we drove up. A friend ran down to the rice paddy to summon her back to the house. Just like Noi, Joi immediately recognized my dad. She and her daughter were amazed to see him. They also were delighted to see the photos from 1964, which showed Joi as a child. It was obvious that no one in the family had ever seen a photo of Joi as a child.

We made arrangements to host a large dinner with everyone and then went looking for the construction projects.

Still standing

The small dam on the road north from Kuchinarai was still being used, with the Seabees' culvert still providing overflow protection. Ironically, the dirt road that the Seabees had worked so hard to grade and level was now a smooth two-lane,

paved highway.

"It sure would be easier to get this done today," Dad said.

The other dam and spillway was further out in the country, and we had to repeatedly ask local residents for directions. As we got further out of town, it became quieter and quieter. We saw farmers manually working the rice fields the same way they have for probably a thousand years. We went down a dirt country lane into the farmland.

Once we found the worksite, we could tell that at some point, water had washed over the dam and had severely damaged the spillway. Dad could identify what appeared to be subsequent repairs by local authorities, but these too had had been washed out. Nevertheless, even with the damage, the dam itself remained and was still providing some flood control.

Given the pastoral quiet and isolation, it was hard for Missy and me to visualize a team of Seabees operating their bulldozers and heavy equipment.

"It was very strange to see something

that I had worked on 42 years ago," Dad said. "When we left, I never thought I'd see this place again. I'm really pleased that at least part of our work is still standing and in use."

Nothing remained of the smaller ad hoc projects. The town lake had been completely landscaped and did not appear to be used for swimming. The playground equipment was long gone.

Kuchinarai was no longer dependent on help from America.

Everyone was hurrying about to and from work and shopping. Instead of the one small school, there were more than a dozen well-appointed schools and even one private Catholic school.

Saying goodbye again

That night, we invited the local Thais and their families to the largest restaurant on the Main Street. Fourteen came.

Over heaping portions of pad Thai noodles, shrimp, curries, pig innards and beer, everyone had a chance to remember the day when 18 visiting Americans were a big deal. Dad's pictures were passed around, along with current family pictures. Even the story of the Christmas turkey was retold.

Afterward, we made our goodbyes and took new pictures for our scrapbooks.

"I was very pleased to see how prosperous Kuchinarai had become," Dad said. "It's amazing to think of all the changes that our cook, Noi, has seen in her lifetime."

"I'd like to think we were helpful at the time," Dad added. "But now, they really look like they are making their own way. All of those kids will have opportunities their parents couldn't even dream of."



Missy Bell, Rob Bell, and Bob Bell posed with old and new friends after dinner in Kuchinarai.