

# Pals now, and for the long run

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**T**RAN TRONG CAO is running his first marathon today, and there isn't much doubt he is going to have some stories to tell his chemistry students when he gets back to Hanoi.

He will be able to talk about the strange elbow-to-elbow affirmation that comes from running with 28,000 other people, almost 200 of them disabled, as he is.

He can tell them about the precious gift of a new leg, or about the best part of all: how he ran the New York City Marathon with Jerry Chmielak, covering 26.2 miles of pavement and burying a vastly greater stretch of pain and suffering.

For what they figure will be about four hours today, the 46-year-old Tran, a teacher at Hanoi University, and the 53-year-old Chmielak, a community-service activist from Baltimore, will be running partners, separated by no more than inches.

It will be just a little different than it was during the Vietnam War, when Tran Trong Cao was a North Vietnamese infantryman and Chmielak a West Point-trained Army captain.

Tran lost the lower part of his left leg in the war, and saw his homeland ravaged by death and destruction. Chmielak's avowed mission was to do that ravaging.

Three mornings ago at the West Side YMCA — where he is staying with Vu The Phiet, chairman of the Hanoi chapter of the Achilles Track Club — Tran sat next to Chmielak at a small table in the cafeteria. They each sipped tea.

"It is okay," Tran said through a translator. "That was a very long time ago. We are friends now." He had only met Chmielak a night before, at an Achilles dinner. Tran reached over and touched Chmielak's arm. His hand didn't leave there until a one-hour interview was nearly complete.

"I see this as a catharsis for me," said Chmielak. "I'd much rather have this kind of relationship with a guy from North Vietnam than the other kind."

## 2½ YEARS IN NAM

Chmielak spent most of his 2½ years in Vietnam in Bien Hoa, 30 miles northwest of Saigon. He was an operative in the Phoenix program, a CIA-directed effort to attack the hub of the Viet Cong war machine.

Tran never fought in South Vietnam. His soldiering career ended in Laos, in the

Battle of Truong Son. He was on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The date was April 9, 1969.

Tran had stopped to rescue a fellow soldier who had been wounded. He hoisted the man onto his back and began making his way through the darkness. It was 10 p.m. The next sound he heard was a land mine exploding beneath him, the power blasting up into his body. His lower left leg was shattered, never to be whole again.

Tran has a broad brown face and a wide, easy smile. Twenty-five years later, he speaks of the incident almost as if it happened to somebody else. He was asked if he harbored any lingering anger or bitterness about what happened. He paused a moment, then smiled.

"No," he said.

## GOT ON WITH LIFE

The first year after the accident was the worst. The shock and the pain were slow to leave. Tran was depressed. He had little interest in anything. Finally he resolved to get on with his life. He resumed his studies. He started playing soccer, volleyball and table tennis.

"After doing more things, I felt better," he said. "I thought about how I could live with the injury and join with other, normal people. When you lose something, you want to regain it."

Three years ago, Tran began running with other disabled athletes in Hanoi. Before long the group evolved into a chapter of the Achilles Track Club, an international organization of disabled athletes founded by New Yorker Dick Traum in 1982.

Being part of Achilles and being around others who refuse to let their disabilities stop them has been one of the best things that ever happened to Tran. "I think sports is the bridge to catch up with normal people," he said.

The catching up should only get better with the new state-of-the-art prosthesis he received, courtesy of Traum, Achilles and Medtech, the



BILL TURNBULL/DAILY NEWS

**IN STEP:** New friends Tran Trong Cao and Jerry Chmielak (top photo, left to right) will tackle the New York City Marathon together today. Above, Tran and Chmielak share a laugh last week.

New York company that made it.

It was also Traum's idea to pair Tran with Chmielak, who happens to be Traum's brother-in-law. Chmielak accompanied Traum when Traum ran the New York City Marathon in 1976, and has volunteered to run with a disabled runner virtually every year since.

## BREAKING THE MOLD

Chmielak's experience made him a logical choice to run with a first-time marathoner such as Tran. It didn't hurt that Chmielak can speak

some Vietnamese.

The more you find out about Chmielak, the more he obliterates almost every stereotype you might have about battle-hardened Army men. Along with two bronze stars and an Army commendation medal, Chmielak also earned a medal of honor from the Vietnamese government for helping to build schools and coordinate fund-raising for religious groups.

In 1975, he returned to Vietnam as a civilian. The end of the war was imminent, the evacuation of the South in full throttle.

"I just wanted to help people get out," said Chmielak.

While Chmielak has absolutely no "moral misgivings" about his involvement in Vietnam, he came to see the war as something less than the clear-cut, save-the-country-from-communism proposition he considered it at the outset.

He became close to some Vietnamese families. It was hard to be part of such relentless annihilation.

"There were times that became a difficult thing to reconcile," Chmielak said.

His most enduring Vietnam memory is right at the end, in late April of '75, when he was airlifted to safety from the roof of the U.S. Embassy a day before the North Vietnamese stormed Saigon. Even as he left, Chmielak vowed he would go back someday. He made that soul-cleansing journey just three weeks ago.

## ARM IN ARM

As they finished talking about the war that made them enemies and the marathon that has made them friends, Tran Trong Cao and Jerry Chmielak turned left out of the YMCA and walked into Central Park.

Under a bright sun and a canopy of leaves, Tran Trong Cao and Jerry Chmielak walked arm in arm down a winding path, and it was hard to imagine a more distant time.