

### Chapter 3; Off to Nam

I had the opportunity to take a few days of leave on the way from Fort Rucker on the way back to Fort Lewis which was the shipping point for Vietnam. I had a chance to show off my haircut which had grown out a bit from the basic training buzz cut, but was still far shorter than the shaggy 60's look I got onto the bus with in January of 71.



It was good to be home and spend time with the family. I saw my sister from MN for the first time in 6 years. My sister from the west coast was back for a visit as well. I rented a plane and took some of the family members flying, went to drag races and enjoyed family picnics. These will be good memories to take with me, but the difficulty of saying goodbye reminded us all of the uncertainties ahead. I met my brother Jerry and his family at Portland and stayed with them for a couple days.

The military contracted with Flying Tiger Airlines to transport GI's to and from Vietnam. Every seat was filled in the aging stretched DC8 and every person had a large duffel bag stuffed with their belongings. We left McChord AFB 2208 July 15, 1971. The aircraft made a fuel stop in Anchorage where I arranged to have coffee with Laverne and Thelma, my brother and his wife. The aircraft was now fully fueled for its overseas voyage and strained and rattled and roared in the effort to lift the grossly overloaded machine into the air. The aircraft was configured for 6 seats across. I drew a middle seat between 2 big guys. After a



fuel stop at Yakota Air force base near Tokyo, the travel weary group touched down at Cam Ranh Bay, Republic of Vietnam 1730 pacific time July 16, however, it was 0830 July 17 at Cam Ranh Bay. The blast of stifling July heat hit my weary body as we waited on the sun baked ramp to pick up our duffel bags.

Today begins my one year tour in this Asian paradise.

Ready or not here we go, only 365 days left.

The first stop is the 544<sup>th</sup> Replacement Company. This is where the Army decides where to put you, and it can be a several day ordeal. Despite the fact there is little to do, they wake you early in the morning for breakfast. You have to roll up your mattress, because you might not be there that night. After breakfast, everyone must stand in a formation where various orders are handed out.

If orders have not been processed, frequently the lower rank personnel (I was a private first class, PFC) are tasked to perform various details. I drew garbage pickup detail. This experience left a permanent impression. The garbage pickup was routine (stinky), but the garbage dump was off base. I noted a large number Vietnamese civilians at the dump site. When the rear gate the truck opened, the locals



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swarmed into the truck bed. It was a near riot and they had to be literally pushed off in order to unload the garbage. I could see the desperation in their eyes. The meager scraps they may find might be the only meal these people had. When we were finishing up, a girl wearing fatigues came up to me and felt my mustache. She pointed at a fat guy in our group and said “he going to have a baby!” It was a reflective group that drove back to base, now less ticked off just because they had garbage detail when people just outside the gate had so little that the garbage we took out may be all they had to eat.



Whenever some crappy job needed to be done, the barracks would be the first place the Sergeants looked for “volunteers”. I soon discovered that moving to a non-replacement company barracks was a lot safer place to take a nap. I also spent some time at the USO tent. Flies were everywhere. I found some old window screen and fabricated a fly trap which was blessed as “beau coup numba one” by a Vietnamese USO worker.

Orders showed up on the third day directing me to the 335<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company 23<sup>rd</sup> infantry division, the Americal Division. We boarded buses that were sized for school kids. We had to hold our duffel bags on our laps. The transportation aircraft were not exactly plush. The C123 was a

bastardized conglomeration of world war two technologies meeting the jet age. It had two piston radial engines, and two avgas burning jet engines. The jet engines were excruciatingly loud, but thankfully shut off soon after take off.



The Americal Division was headquartered at Chu Lai south of Danang in Military Region (MR) 2. The first week was spent in indoctrination training. We attended classes on booby traps, weapons training, local customs and culture. We had to run through the gas training. The trainees were marched into a small building wearing gas masks, and then with masks off made to sing jingle bells at the top of their lungs. The air was filled with CS gas, a powerful form of tear gas. Eyes, noses, and lungs burn. The stomach frequently loses its contents.

Quite likely the most remembered demonstration occurred at night in the outdoor training area of the combat center. Our class had been lectured about sappers which are Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army men that are skillful in negotiating defenses to set off bombs or destroy equipment. The students stood in a circle around a circle of Razor concertina wire. The lights were turned off as the instructor continued to speak. He went on about the ability of the sappers to infiltrate for about 20 minutes, and then turned the lights back on. To the utter amazement of the students, a black pajama clad soldier stood in the middle of the concertina wire. He had crept between the assembled students and through the concertina wire in those few minutes without making a sound. Concertina wire is coiled wire about 2 foot diameter with razor sharp pieces of sheet metal attached every 6 inches or so. Had this been a magic act I would have said "cool". As it was, it was more like "holy s—t".



That night the attack sirens went off, and everyone rushed off to the bunkers assigned to them. The only thing that happened was a muffled explosion in the distance. In about a half an hour the all clear sounded, and everyone returned to bed. The next morning the news was that we had been attacked with 122mm rockets. They are aimed by sight and unguided. One overshot the base and hit the water of the South China Sea. One dud landed on base, and one landed short of the base.



The night before the new people were distributed to their companies, they had to stand guard. I manned a guard shack along the beach. After witnessing the sapper demonstration, I had visions of sappers coming ashore with every wave. Going to sleep on guard duty was not a problem that night.

For bunker 523, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to last in our guard sector, Sp5 Coffee, E2 Clarke and myself were assigned.

About 830, Clarke decided there were too many mosquitoes, so he sat out in front of the bunker in the light to read a book. In about 10 minutes, Coffee heard some static on the phone, picked it up and heard someone say, "somebody's got a person in front of their position!" Bunker 522 had seen Clarke and called it in, thinking he was a gook. The CQ(charge of quarters), Sgt of the guard, and the officer of the day got on the phone telling us to stay in the %#@\$! Bunker!