

## Chapter 3

### A Routine Day in Vietnam

Our team was in Vietnam from June to October of 1966. This must have been the rainy season for we certainly had a lot of rain. We had to pour concrete in the rain and perfected methods of protecting the curing concrete with plastic. I would typically walk from job site to job site on the main part of the base. I remember sometimes just being soaking wet, there just was no way to get away from it. We had a schedule of work for the ground preparation crew, foundation form crew, concrete crew, carpentry crew, plumbing crew and electrical crew. Typically we would have multiple sites under construction in various stages of completion. The electrical generation and distribution system at Bien Hoa Air Base consisted of 100's of diesel powered generators that were in the open all around the base. Power distribution cables 2-3 inch diameter were laying all over the ground in a random fashion. Walking around in the rain and puddles, I always wondered if my next step would be a "shocker".

I would get up in the morning and take a nice cold shower in the officer's latrine commons area. Not a whole lot of privacy. I would then come back to our "houch" and get dressed and then go to the Officers Club for breakfast and start my day. The Base Civil Engineering Office was a few blocks away. I would spend some time there almost every day discussing new projects and coordinating equipment and materials for the different sites under construction. Because of the rain the only way we could get Quonset Hut Kits and plywood bundles out of the storage area was with an Overland Forklift with the huge tractor tires. These kits were several thousand pounds. It was interesting but these kits were manufactured in the 1930-40's for WWII. God knows where they had been stored for the last 20+ years. We had been cutting the banding ties and manhandling the individual pieces into our trucks and it was killing our schedule. The forklifts were in very short supply and we had to schedule them way ahead. The situation was very dire and I was complaining to Col Maggart. He said "John, the South Vietnamese's were given all the overland forklifts and they will not let the American's use them". I asked him who controls them. He said the Vietnamese Base Commander. I asked him if I could go see him, and he said yes, but it's not going to do you any good, we have tried.

So I looked up the Vietnamese Base Commanders office and walked over there. I talked to his NCO outside his office telling him that I was there to request a favor. I sat outside his office in the waiting room for over an hour as far as I could remember. It seemed like a long time, but I knew he was going to be measuring me up as to my sincerity and respect (another lesson from "The Ugly American"). Finally the NCO came out to me and said, "Lieutenant Tomich, Captain (?) will see you now. I walked in to his office and snapped to attention across his desk and saluted him, holding my salute until he returned it. He probably had never been saluted by an American. He asked me why I was there. I told him the situation of moving heavy materials in the mud and not having the proper equipment. I told him that I was told he had such equipment. I explained that I was in charge of an Emergency Engineering Team just trying to get people out of the mud and would appreciate his assistance. He asked a few questions and I answered him. I stood there for a long while as he just looked at me. Finally, he reached over and pushed the intercom button and called his NCO in. The Sergeant came in and stood next to me. The Captain then said to the sergeant, "Give this man anything he needs". I

saluted him again and said, “thank you sir”, turned and followed the sergeant out. Needless to say when I got back to the Base Engineers Office Col Maggart was speechless. Thereafter, any time I needed an overland forklift I just went to the Vietnamese Base Commanders Sergeant and he assisted me.

If I had to go off base to visit construction sites or go a distance on the base I would borrow a vehicle from the Base Engineers office. A couple of times the office at Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon would call me and inform me of off-site construction projects that they needed accomplished. I mentioned the one in an earlier chapter where Sergeant Ebbert took a few men for a few weeks to a mountaintop communications site to construct some protective revetments (blast shields). This was the initial purpose of the AF Base Emergency Engineering Teams, building revetments to protect aircraft (picture below). The principle being that a mortar round would only take out one aircraft and not start a chain reaction of disaster.

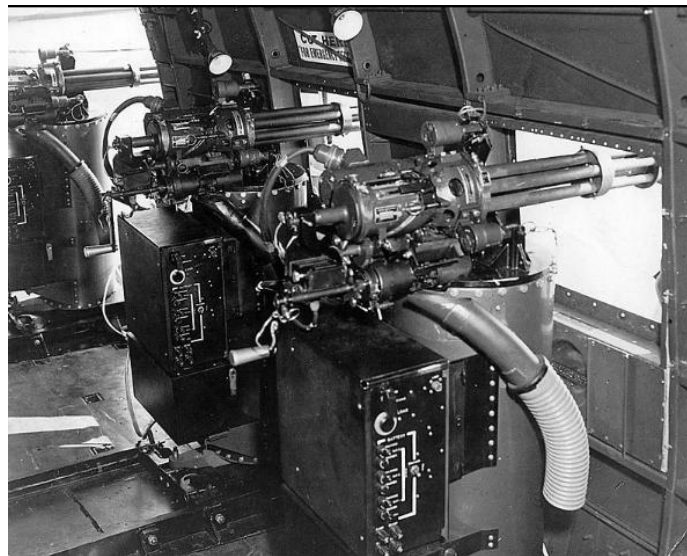


I ate my meals at the Officers Club every day. The food was pretty good. In the evenings I would go to the Officers Club for dinner and stay to have a beer afterwards. We had an Army Officer that was with a nearby Army outfit that would come in almost every evening and play the piano. Needless to say he never had to buy a drink. They were lined up on his piano. He was our only entertainment and connection to civilization. He would play 40's music and some popular themes. Some evening he would come in all muddy. We all looked forward to his visits.

In the late evening I would write letters to my Sylvie and have a standard snack of sardines and saltine crackers that I would buy at the Base BX. The BX had all the necessities of life and was a great place to shop. One day, at the BX, personnel from the South Korean “White Horse Division” came in on their 6-By trucks. The American service men were typically wrinkled and slouchy, but the Koreans were spit-shined with ironed and creased fatigues. The story around the base was the V.C. didn't want anything

to do with them. They were too tough. They fought the same way the V.C. did, no holds barred. Their Division commander used to drive in a staff car with a driver back and forth to Saigon, no armed escort. On one occasion the V.C. shot his car up and killed him. The next morning the nearest village was surrounded by the RoK troops and they gave a warning that all non-combatants were to leave the village. They said that anyone left in the village would be killed, and after several warnings they did so. So, after that the V.C. just pretended they were not there and ignored them.

At night we would always have a D-3 outfitted with mini-guns rotating over Bien Hoa AB. They called it "Puff the Magic Dragon" (Pictures below). He would support the Army if they were in firefights during the night in the general vicinity. You would see the waving stream of tracer bullets and then hear the roar of the guns when he was shooting. I would put my camera on time exposure and try to capture a time lapsed photograph of the light show. It was hard to tell what you captured on film since this was before electronic cameras and you had to send off the 35mm film for developing.



Some of the things you learn in "scuttle butt talk" around the base was do not wear an expansion band on you wrist watch. Everyone would buy a leather wrist band for their watch. The young local

boys would jump you (several boys) and grab your watch pulling it off and lacerating the palm of your hand in the process. Well, being new guys in the neighborhood I guess we never got that lesson. One morning Sgt Caldwell came up to me and he had a big bandage on his wrist and hand. He had been out drinking and a few of these kids jumped him from behind and pulled his watch off lacerating his palm. His second mistake was he gave chase since they were just a bunch of little boys. They led him down alleyways and he fell in a puddle of mud. Being that most of the cities had open sewers, that was very bad. He had gone to the dispensary and had the wound cleaned and dressed and received an antibiotic shot. But as time went on he had a massive infection in his hand and had to have further operations and antibiotic treatments over the next few weeks. He almost lost his hand.

One night I came back to the hooch after working all day and there was a new guy there drinking a beer. He was a Captain in the Air Rescue Squadron. I introduced myself to him. He told me that he just arrived that morning at Tan Son Nhut AB and the Squadron Commander flew one of the HH-43's (pictured below) down to meet him and give him an orientation flight on the way back to Bien Hoa. Well on the way to Bien Hoa they received an emergency call from the Army. (In 1966 the HH-43 AF Air Rescue helicopter was the only chopper with a penetrator on the wench that could penetrate tree foliage to pick up wounded troops). They answered that they were responding to the emergency request for assistance and flew towards the extraction location. Upon arriving they went into a hover over the rescue point and heard 50 caliber reports, so they abandoned the pickup and flew out away from the rescue point. Huey's then went in and dusted off the immediate area to subdue the 50 caliber gunner. They declared the area clear and asked the HH-43 to return for the rescue. The HH-43 came back into the area and went into a hover over the pickup point. They immediately took heavy 50 caliber incoming fire and received three hits in the transmission and fell out of the air through the trees. The pilot was unhurt, the crew chief had a broken leg and this Captain was thrown out of the cockpit and landed in a ditch uninjured. The next thing he realized was an Army Captain shaking his shoulder and firing an automatic weapon while asking, "Are you all right"? He said bullets were going every which direction and this Army guy was just standing there returning fire. He told him "I'm fine but I'm not getting up". The Army guys backed an APC so he could scamper in and they rescued the rest of the aircrew. So this guy looks at me and says, "I am married and have four children and I have been in country for less than 12 hours and I have already been, shot at, shot down, and rescued and I have 364 days to go to get home". Welcome to Vietnam. I hope he made it home alright in 1967.



On Sunday we would stand down so the men could do whatever they wanted. We did have a swimming pool on the base. I had never used it. There were Vietnamese military families living on the base and in the center there was an American compound that was separated with a 6 foot wire fence and barbed wire. Our Air Rescue Hooch was right on the edge of the American compound. And my bunk was the last bunk on the end. So I had the back door there and then a bunker for cover in case of incoming mortar rounds, and then the fence.

The evening of Tet 1966 I was called to the Base Engineering Office and we were briefed that our intelligence had found out that the V.C. were planning to attack all the bases in Vietnam that night. During the war there was always a truce during Tet and all the Vietnamese servicemen would go with their families to their homes. Well the V.C. in typical unorthodox fashion was planning an attack during the truce period to catch the Vietnamese off-guard. The Intelligence people briefed us on where we were to muster our troops after the attack to begin repairs to the base in case of damage. I told the briefing officer that my men did not have any arms, what were they to do to defend themselves. He responded that the Army would protect the base, the enemy will never get into the base proper. So here I now went to brief my men at their barracks and tell them what I had just been briefed on and where they were to muster in case of an attack that night. Of course this was 1966 and "The Tet Offensive" did not start until the evening of Tet 1968. We just had the plans of the enemy two years in advance and must have forgot about the attack over the next two years, because the "Tet Offensive" caught the whole country by surprise. And in retrospect the carnage of that few weeks was so severe, the V.C. could have done massive damage to Bien Hoa AB had they attacked in 1966 with the intensity they did in 1968. Researching the Tet Offensive and Bien Hoa, I was surprised that the Base defenses held up superbly with minor damage. In fact it was a historical first in that it was the first time a US Air Force Base defended itself with air strikes as it was under attack. It launched and recovered aircraft for air strikes against its perimeter.

Needless to say I slept with my boots on and my AR-15 rifle next to my bed that night. It did not make me sleep any better that our hooch was on the edge on the American compound and my bed was the first bed coming in the door. Well, we awoke on Tet and there was no offensive that night. I thank God for that.

Speaking of thanking God; on Sunday's I would always walk into the city of Bien Hoa to the Catholic Church for Mass. The service was in Latin so I could follow the Mass, except for the Sermon which was in Vietnamese. The people were very devout and I remember the church always being filled on Sunday. Of course I was always in my fatigue uniform and the people were respectful of me. The universal Latin language for the ordinary of the Mass was very helpful when you did not know the local language. That was an interesting experience because when I returned home to Alexandria, Louisiana our parish had transitioned the Mass from Latin to English and it struck me that the universal Latin served a useful purpose in a world of many languages. That brings to mind the Biblical Story of Babel and how God cursed mankind to use many languages so that they could not rebel against his purposes for mankind as easily. And also Saint Augustine's "Confessions" where he writes that when two groups of different language backgrounds meet on the road it is easier to communicate with their dogs than it is to communicate with the people. Just maybe, God had a purpose of wanting

us humans to communicate with him in a second (dead language), so that we could adore him universally.

The Vietnamese AF was flying Navy propeller driven A1-E's out of Bien Hoa AB (pictured below). They were a very tough aircraft with an armored underbelly to stop small arms ground fire from injuring the pilot. One day I saw one of these aircraft on the taxi way after an emergency landing. There was a three foot long, 6 inch diameter tree limb vertically impaling the frontal wing about where the inboard bomb is in this picture. Obviously the pilot flew so low that he hit a tree, cutting it down and bringing back about a 3 foot piece of the tree vertically stuck in his wing. Now that's a tough aircraft.



One story I will relate to you here is a conversation I had with Col. Maggart's Administrative Assistant. She was Chinese and spoke fluent English. She told me the story about her family. She said her family was from Shanghai. During the early stages of WWII when the Japanese invaded China she and her family fled to western China ahead of the Japanese. They lived there during the war years and then toward the end of the war the Communists came to western China so her family fled western China and returned to Shanghai. Then in 1947 when the Communists were taking over all of China she and her family fled to Hanoi in Vietnam. In 1954 when the Communists were taking over North Vietnam her family fled to Saigon in South Vietnam. She told me the most important thing that a family can invest in is the education of their children, fore, you may have to leave your home with only the cloths on your back in times of great peril. Today, I often wonder where is this lady and her family? Australia, America, South Korea?