



Going To Vietnam

From REMF "War Stories":
17th CAG - Nha Trang,
Vietnam - 1969

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I was stationed in Ft. Ord, California when I first received the news that I was going to Vietnam. I was not quite 21 years old, just an un-traveled and green farm boy from North Dakota lonesome for

home. So far (I had been in the service for 10 months) I had missed all of the levies for overseas and was beginning to feel quite confident I would get to miss out on the Southeast Asian tour. Maybe Uncle Sam and the great administrative jungle of the army had forgotten about me. I would have been content to miss Vietnam and even the tour to Germany that I wanted. I just wanted to serve my time and get out of the army as soon as possible. It did not happen that way.

I was a clerk-typist in a personnel company and was busy typing away when our NCOIC (Non Commissioned Officer In Charge) popped in and asked a couple of us into his office. Mystery? There were a couple of fellows from my section and a few from other sections in the office. "What's up?" I kept asking myself. Promotion?

Demotion? Detail? I knew there was no special honor the army would want to bestow on me or these others.

The NCOIC called off a list of names and everyone was present. Then he spoke. "By Christmas all of you men will be in Vietnam. You will put in for thirty days of leave before you go. We will have orders for you in a few days."

Bang! I felt like I had been hit by a brick. My lungs contained no air. Most of us tried to manage a half-hearted smile or a lousy joke, then ambled out of the room to look for a chair or some solitude to grapple with this new thing. A few were actually happy and that confused me too. "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam," I kept saying to myself as if it would bring a more meaningful shape or color to the word. Up until this time that is all it was - a word that brought newsreel footage to mind or reminded you of someone that had been there. Now the word grew bigger like a fence or wall behind which you could not see because it was so high. "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, I am going to Vietnam!?" For the first few hours that is all my mind accomplished.

I should have been ready for it, especially since I was in the army! Maybe when I first went in I thought about it more - for like most civilians I linked the thought of the army with war. People are prone to settling into a routine, however, and forgetting about events outside their sphere of action. This was my fault, putting the war and its possibilities out of my mind and then letting it surprise me. It made me realize how many others were doing this same thing, allowing the war to be just another news report, just another highway fatality or armed robbery.

On the night of the news I called home to tell my family. I had to tell someone close, someone that would be shocked and afraid, someone that I might comfort so I could assume a different role, one in which I could become the strong figure. It is a natural defense, but does not always work. My family is relatively stoic and laconic. My mother only managed an "Is that right?" and

though I knew she probably was surprised and somewhat afraid, I could not comfort someone who did not react according to her appointed part. Maybe she had been prepared as a mother with a son in the army would have been at that time. I did not realize that until later, however, and at the time and after the conversation felt even more alone and cut adrift with my future.

I tried the same thing with my girlfriend with much the same reaction, though maybe not for the same reason. We were close but that closeness was jeopardized by distance and the alienation of over two more years in the army. She was off enjoying college life anyway and could not be blamed.

So I was still very much alone. Events beyond the date of my departure (December 22) were still a blank, but I had to put my remaining time in this country into perspective. I still had a couple of months of duty in Ft. Ord and a month of leave at home before I went. The bulk of my time was taken up with romanticizing about my upcoming days at home, but within the confines of my E4 pay I tried to get off the post when I could to see the sights and to drink and party. My best friends on post had also been levied for overseas duty and would be leaving at about the same time. One had a Volkswagon and the three of us putted around California to see what we could before we left.

On one balmy, west-coast evening we decided to "celebrate" our new assignments. My friends were really celebrating as they had been picked off for Germany. I was the butt of a good many of their "bad luck" jokes and we did laugh about it a lot - they enjoying it more than I. The evening was to be a long one.

After a few beers we decided on a whim to drive to Santa Cruz. We picked up some booze on the base to take with us. I do not know what was in Santa Cruz except a college and maybe we had the ridiculous notion we might meet some girls. That was a real joke as all soldiers

were felt to be illiterate hicks by young, pretty college girls at that time, and to tell the truth we probably were. We were also warmongers in their eyes. Being a "G.I." during this era was much different than being one during previous wars. We were scum and during those long-hair days there was no disguise for us - we could not blend into the crowd.

Predictably, nothing of note happened in Santa Cruz but we were well on the way to inebriation by the time we headed back. Mike, the driver and owner of the car we were in, was weaving back and forth on the interstate and was not dimming his lights (or so the highway patrol's report read.) We were stopped and caught with open containers in the car. Mike was of legal drinking age but not Chuck or myself. We gave the patrolman a "story" that we had all just been ordered to Vietnam (one third the truth, I thought ironically.) This must have helped some. He could have hung us al, as well as reporting us to the military authorities, but he did not. What he really got us for I do not know but it cost me \$70 and Mike \$120 with no loss of license. Chuck was asleep in the back and got off unscathed. I could almost hear him holding his breath as he feigned sleep and the subsequent chuckle and relief at his good fortune.

We continued on our way and went to Carmel Beach to ponder over the evening and our futures and finish a couple of last beers. I was ready for the sack but the others weren't ready to give up the evening. On the way we chided Chuck for his "cowardice," his lack of interest in meeting the patrolman and his unbelievable luck.

The beach was a light streak that divided the dark of the pulsing ocean from the dark of the trees and town. The moon was out enough to reflect on the millions of grains of sand and provide contrast for any objects that moved over their surface. There were no others but us and a few misshapen pieces of driftwood. It was peaceful, beautiful at this late, late hour with only the even, small crashes of minor waves reminding us that

there was a gut-beat of life waiting for the morning light to legitimize.

There wasn't much talk; the shock of the tickets and the onset of fatigue and too many beers turning all thoughts inwards. There was an occasional "Yep" and a "Well, what can ya say?" We sat leaning against an old driftwood log and I sifted sand through my fingers and stared off into the west not really seeing or focusing on anything. I wondered about that piece of land a couple of thousand miles beyond my eyes and was sad and alone.

My probing fingers ran onto an obstruction a few inches under the surface of the sand. It relieved the lack of direction and enthusiasm of the moment. With growing interest I focused my attention on freeing the object, digging down and around it. For each handful I pulled away a half a handful ran back into the depression. What did I have here? A watch maybe? A movie star's bracelet? A wallet? Finally I got a grasp on an end and could extract it knowing already it was none of these. It was a small figurine of some sort. I lit a match to see what I had and immediately wished I had never felt it, found it. In my hand lay a toy soldier and in the flickering light provided by the match I could see clearly that it had no head. The green plastic torso stood gallantly on its little pedestal but the missing part explained how successful that posture had been.

The match went out and I held the broken toy a few moments in my hand while my companions tried to laugh. Even they were struck by the unbelievable timing and chances of the find. I mumbled to myself and shook my head in the darkness while I reburied the fallen fighter. I had come down considerably on meeting the patrolman, but this really took me all the way. Omens and superstition were things of myth and legend - kid's stuff, weren't they? "It don't mean nothin'!" I told myself. But it did. I imagined the worst in my wait to get my year in Vietnam started and this did not help at

all. The memory of that discovery would hang with me the whole year I was there. If it never came true for me it did forecast an outcome for a nation; but I wouldn't know that for years to come.

We toured the land and the sea, taken in by the beauty and wonder of vast landscapes and the life and color in them. A friend had duty in the great Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation, several thousand acres of uninhabited mountains and trees. We visited him and he took us out along the trails and high in the hills to see the ocean huge and lingering blue and magnificent in the west. We skinny-dipped in the mountain pools. We spent a weekend camping on the beaches of the Pacific, fenced in between the awesome cliffs at that extremity of our continent and the pounding surf of the ocean. We felt the land and its greatness. It made me proud to be a part of it and sad that I was leaving it. This was too grand a land though to think it or the people that sprung from it could be doing something wrong. I had an obligation and I would fulfill it so that I might return.

I tried to forget about Vietnam but the collage of imagined circumstances kept creeping back into my resolve to put it out of my mind. I tried to look at it as an adventure and a challenge but the possibility of not returning always took the excitement out of it. I was too young to die and worse - to die a million miles from nowhere. There was that horrid fear of dying where no one would see you die, not necessarily that fear of dying for nothing. If you died there it was like it confirmed your unimportance, like it placed you irretrievably among the masses with never a chance to rise up as this country willed you, formed you to do. This was the greatest fear, where even your family could not see you, feel you die to give credence to your very existence. You had to go on though, put one foot in front of the next, and you succeeded. I told my girl

we'd forget that I was going until just before I actually had to leave.

An important prelude to going to Vietnam was RVN (Republic of Vietnam) training. This was 3 or 4 days of orientation on the Vietnamese people, their language and culture, ambush defense tactics, and proficiency with the M16 rifle, a small, light-weight, low-caliber, high velocity weapon developed for jungle fighting. The best thing about the training was that it got us out of the office for a few days and into regular fatigue dress (like trading suit and tie for levis.) For the most part we played war games, being designated to different mock units and trudging through rough terrain until being attacked by the enemy (other soldiers dressed up in Vietnamese clothing.) In one exercise I was designated squad leader because I outranked many of the other guys. I led a reconnaissance squad along one ridge while a second squad infiltrated another ridge across a small valley. The second squad was ambushed by a few "Viet Cong" in a machine gun nest. (It all sounded pretty realistic as our weapons were filled with blank ammunition.) I proceeded to lead my squad across the valley in a full scale attack on the enemy position to assist the other squad. It was the wrong move. I got chewed out because of it. Apparently I was to hold my position and protect that flank. My entire squad was massacred. So much for John Wayne. I was thankful it was only training. It was something I wouldn't forget. If their evaluation of my performance was correct, it made you see how lives could be lost quickly and unnecessarily through the incompetence and inexperience of one man. I had only followed my prior day's training. The previous day we had been loaded aboard trucks and driven through rough terrain when also ambushed by the enemy. In this instance we were told to dismount the trucks and attack directly into the fire of the enemy positions. The instructors explained that though we would lose a great many this way we had a better chance of at least some surviving. In the end the two days of

war games seemed an awful short education for the business as important as life or death. Then again we were not front line troops and if they spent more time on preparing those poor guys I did not mind.

We also spent a half day firing the M16. This weapon looked more like a prop from Star Wars than a real rifle. It was black and short with a triangular grip that tapered off from the chamber up to the end of the barrel. The sight on the weapon also served as a handle, hand-sized and raised up like a grip on a suitcase. The trigger handgrip extended down from the plane of the rifle like a pistol. This weapon fired either semi-automatic (squeezing one round off after another) or full automatic (like a machine gun.) The rifle had very little "kick" to it but it was amazingly difficult to hold it on target when on full automatic. The barrel would rise up and out of the target area. At the end of the day we were all judged proficient in the handling of the M16.

Perhaps the best thing happening during RVN training was winning a hundred dollars on a World Series pool. That year the Detroit Tigers won it in seven games. They had lost, I think, the first three games of the Series. I had a dollar in a pool that picked Detroit to win 4-1 in the seventh game. Needless to say, I had forgotten all about my chances of winning. Then while sitting in some bleachers listening to a black sergeant I could not understand trying to explain how to survive an ambush, I got the news. The trooper next to me pulled a transistor plug covered with yellow waxy buildup from his ear and simply stated, "Shit! Detroit just won 4-1!" I spent half of the winnings sending roses to my mother and girl - neither of whom had ever before gotten flowers. Both later related they cried and I was duly compensated.

My last month at Ft. Ord went quickly. I got my orders and flew home to frigid Sioux Falls, South Dakota where my girl was to meet me. My mind jumped with the

excitement of anticipated romantic encounter as the plane bounced down on the frosty runway. My girl went to school in Brookings, 75 miles to the north, and had driven down to pick me up. We embraced and hurried to her car, she letting me drive while sitting next to me. I couldn't wait to get where we were going so that I could plant a big kiss on her face. Her car was equipped with power steering and power brakes, features I was not familiar with, frivolous luxuries to my frugal upbringing. Talking excitedly on leaving the airport parking lot and not paying much attention to traffic, I saw a car out of the corner of my eye coming down the street where there hadn't been one before. I reacted accordingly, hitting the brakes hard. The power brakes took hold immediately. My head and shoulders shot forward, the motion stopping as my mouth slammed into the steering wheel. The blood began to flow evenly and my mouth swelled to clown-like proportions. We continued on, I holding a handkerchief to my face and issuing black oaths through my puffed face, my girl not completely succeeding in containing her amusement. So much for the brave, dashing figure returning home. It was funny, but for me only years later. It took nearly the entire leave to get my passion provoking lips back in shape.

It was one of the stormiest and snow-laden winters on record with snow nearly inundating our small farmstead. This and my puffed-out mouth are about all I remember of that leave, except that I did not have much Christmas spirit knowing I would be many thousands of miles away on foreign soil, in foreign circumstances, and in the middle of a country at war. My family had Christmas early and they gave me a fancy cigarette lighter with my name on it. I thought it was sharp. Sometimes you get some little thing like that and it is the greatest gift in the world - a thousand dollars or a new car would not have been as good. I suppose it was kind of a link to this country I was leaving and an even more special link

to those people from whom I had sprung. I cherished it and holding on to it was like holding onto a life or a flow of life.

It is difficult to say how I felt about the war at the time. I can relate how I think I felt but there was nothing sure or absolute. I do not care how much one felt that he had to go, that it was right, that it was the tradition of our fathers, that it was to help those poor subdued people; no matter what there was a cog in the works that kept you from feeling there was no question about it.

It was a difficult time. There were peace demonstrations, draft dodgers, and conscientious objectors. There were thousands of people being killed on both sides where sides or lines were not that easily discerned. And the mood of the country was not of full consent. Somehow that uniform was not what it used to be. Our fathers had not questioned authority but we were brought up in an analytical age and we did question. While many citizens did not praise the uniform neither did many of the soldiers wearing it.

Perhaps the worst thing was the sin of youthful optimism, of hope, the growing belief or feeling that maybe this was indeed the "Age of Aquarius." Maybe man really was coming to his senses, maybe man could really live in peace, maybe killing was not a part of man's nature. All of the wonderful youth of that age had a dream, a good dream, and it hurt, really hurt to go off to Vietnam which meant an immediate rejection of that dream. It meant killing a bud that could quite possibly (it seemed at the time) blossom into something so beautiful. We needed that dream. It was a time for needing something like that. God was dead and so was everyday fulfillment and meaning. Putting a foot in Vietnam was killing it because you immediately put yourself into a position to kill it. If some son-of-a-bitch shoots at you enough times most people are damn well going to shoot back no matter what they believe. It

was a rejection of your youth, your hope, and your times. It was a damning of yourself by yourself and by a lot of people back home who you needed to have believe in you. Even the ones who patted you on the back were beginning to pat a little lighter.

So - Vacuum! A vacuum where what you believed meant nothing and where life meant nothing. And insult added to injury with the seeming incompetence and ridiculous management of the military. To place oneself in this position seemed all but too much.

The soldier went to Vietnam fighting shadows. Even the grunt who killed actual bodies was shooting at that shadow trying to corner it. When the smoke cleared he found the shadow had escaped only to harass him again later and all he really had was blood on his hands and a little more of his dream and of himself chipped off to join forces with the shadow.

This was the situation or what it seemed at the time. I gave much thought to it and decided I had to go because I still believed in the American Dream. If that was not the reason, I decided I had to play the game. I was not quite idealistic enough or sure enough for that seemingly not so heroic end run north of the border. I did not want to preclude seeing my family and friends again. And I was not sure that those going north were going because of the ideals they should have been going for or because of what they were saying they were going for.

As far as practical preparation goes, I was ready for Vietnam. I had all my specially developed tropical underclothes right down to green army boxer shorts. I could never figure out that detail. I did not plan on seeking out the enemy in my shorts. I packed them faithfully in my duffel bag for the chance that should I have to attack that damned machine gun nest and all my clothes were blown off save my shorts they would not see me coming and I might survive!

I took my malaria pills according to the guidelines two weeks in advance to insure that I would be protected by the time I reached Vietnam. It seemed kind of strange taking malaria pills in North Dakota when it was twenty degrees below zero and the snow was ten feet deep.

I left North Dakota on the afternoon of December 20, 1968. My family accompanied by my girlfriend drove me to Fargo to await the plane. I had made most of my farewells when they announced that the plane would be two hours late. Ouch! Now I had to do it all over again and it was hell waiting two more hours on that nice secure ground that I probably would not see again. I hated standing there holding my poor girl's clammy hand. If she would have cried it would have helped some but she did not. It would have made it harder to leave but still have made me feel more missed.

The plane finally came down and I made all the big hugs again and it was hard holding back the tears, but I did. I turned and walked to the ramp but stopped at the top to wave one more time and take one of those scanning, noble looks at the countryside. That was a guaranteed heartbreaker even if all I saw was airport and windblown snowbanks.

I found my place next to a window and looked out at those funny, unreal people that were my loved ones standing there so somber, now turning and walking back to their everyday lives in Dakota while I headed for the unknown. It was then I grabbed my lighter, held it tight, real tight. A single tear ran down my face until I tasted the salt and decided it was time to get ready for Vietnam. I wiped the tear away and smiled a hello to the lady seated next to me, then sat back to wonder what it was all about, what I was all about, and what it would have been like if it were 1943. There would have at least been a lot less doubt and a lot more certainty as to our goal.

I had a long wait in the Minneapolis airport where I had to wait to hook up for a flight to the west coast. I

sent my girlfriend a card from there in which I said, "When a person is leaving home, I don't think there is anything more lonely or desolate than a large airport. It is a cold, unfeeling place to spend hours waiting for a plane after being warm and happy for the days of my leave."

I got to Ft. Lewis, Washington late that night, checked in and was sent to a barracks for the night. Transient barracks are usually the next thing to slum living. The building was cold and we had no sheets or blankets. There were only five to ten bunks set up on the floor. The rest were disassembled or broken, the mattresses being salvaged with GIs lying here and there shivering and trying to get as much warmth as possible from their rumpled dress greens.

We were all up at 5:30 the next morning to eat and get issued Vietnam fatigues and boots. The fatigues were baggy affairs with all kinds of pockets, four on the shirt and two huge ones on the sides of the trousers. They proved great for carrying beer cans and other bulky items but were so numerous you could lose things in them for months at a time. The boots had thick rubber grips with the biggest part of the tops made out of canvas rather than leather for coolness. After the issue we went back to the barracks and prayed we would not get caught for a detail or KP. There is nothing like slopping greasy dishes after a sleepless night and being headed for Vietnam at the same time. It does not do anything for your morale.

We formed up the next morning for our flight, a dark green huddle of over sized, ill-fitting uniforms looking like an unmade bed. Faces filled with fatigue, worry, and doubt topped the shuffling mass. I wondered how many were infantry and had a lot more to worry about than myself and how many would not come back or would come back much different than they were now.

We boarded a huge plane especially chartered for hauling G.I.'s to the romantic Orient. It was the same

plane used on commercial flights and even carried attractive young stewardesses. As luck would have it I ended up sitting in the very front of the plane, directly across from that little fold down seat where the stewardesses sit when the plane takes off or lands or when they are not busy at their appointed tasks. This was good luck or bad luck depending on how you thought about it. I am a sucker for beautiful legs and a beautiful girl showing them off up to her derriere. At the time though, it just reminded me of what I was leaving behind. There is so much creativity, serenity, and comfort in a beautiful thigh as well as mystery and excitement. I did not feel I could afford that luxury right then. I looked at the ceiling and tried to sleep, faltering in my fortitude and wisdom only once or twice.

We neared the coast of Vietnam early on the morning of the 23rd of December. Just prior to landing, the pilot came on the air to let us know where we were and to give the weather and ground conditions. The guy had a real sense of humor - again depending on how you looked at it. The ground conditions consisted of "light to scattered automatic weapons fire" and a few other things I don't remember but designed to scare the crap out of you. So there we were preparing ourselves right off for the worst, probably everyone hoping like myself that he would not be a complete coward.

It was a funny feeling descending the ramp to Vietnamese soil. The ground conditions reported were completely false but there were plenty of wary, wide-eyed soldiers that left the plane, moving out only because they followed the soldier in front of them. I remember saying to myself, "Well, here is another silly thing you have gotten yourself into. Here is to a year - or however long I last."

It was still dark in Cam Ranh Bay and from first appearances it looked like we had just made another stop at some airport completely unassociated with war and blood and death. After a few moments some flares popped

off in the far out perimeter areas completely illuminating a hillside and wiggling down to their death like a flickering candle carried by a ghost hunter descending into a spooky and foreboding cellar. Then I knew it was no ordinary airport and I stared apprehensively into the dark outside of the secured areas.

Tired, uneasy, and awestruck, we were loaded onto buses and transported to sorting areas where we would be broken down into small groups heading for the same area.

In transit military travel is like being suspended in time and space, watching a being with a form such as you imagine your own to resemble, proceeding forward in time and leaving you behind until such time as destination is reached and orderly living pattern is again resumed. At least it was that way for me. Ordinary daily functions did not work when I traveled. I did not eat, sleep or crap right.

Standing around dazed and bleary-eyed, we waited for our assignments but were sent to transit barracks for a couple hours of sleep. We were roused from fitful, damp sleep and shown to the mess hall for breakfast, then sent back to our barracks to lounge around. During this time we were told we could go to the USO for "something special." Seeing as how it was December 23rd, we knew it had something to do with Christmas and were curious enough to investigate. The USO provided some cookies and a bag for everyone who ventured forth. The bag contained playing cards, combs, a washrag and sundry other items that actually were quite dear to me that day.

On the trip to the USO and back we saw assorted Vietnamese men and women wandering about the camp working at their seemingly slow but steady and effective pace either washing clothes, digging ditches, or some other chore they had managed to procure from the rich U.S. soldiers and their government. It made me uneasy at first, much as it would make a country boy like myself uneasy to get stuck downtown in some big city bus terminal with all its assorted derelicts and weirdoes

and unfamiliar patterns. I was not acclimated to all this and I felt new and was obviously green with my store-fresh Southeast Asia fatigues and boots. So even as I started and stared at the sing-song speech patterns and strange attire they wore, they returned the stares seemingly in never ending curiosity over the fresh boys that kept coming. I became inwardly dramatic thinking that these people right here might be VC sympathizers. As I threw out "chow" (hello - and about all I could remember from orientation) and a smile with one eye I watched their apparent cunning with my other.

All this time and for a month to come I still was standing in the wings watching myself function, reaching out now and then to grab a few impressions or make a few suggestions but mostly just letting the form carry on. I imagine this is the way it was for most, knowingly or unknowingly, only for the soldier with the wrong military occupational specialty the apprehension made the dreamlike state a little worse. None of us at the transit camp knew yet where we were going so the anxiety level was still quite high for all no matter what the MOS - for even clerks were known to go to besieged outposts.

We gathered nervously for the assignments. Names were called and attached to obscure, unpronounceable names of no-doubt hideous places. "Muehlberg - Nha Trang!" I had never heard of it! It scared the hell out of me! It was probably another Khe Sanh only never heard of and worse - some little hilltop fifty miles from any real support with only a strand of barbed wire between you and the murky jungle and the death that lay there waiting for you.

Death scared me. I did not want to die - yet I felt that getting stationed at the wrong place in the wrong circumstances meant certain death for me. In situations of violence or danger I have never reacted well, never reacted quickly. No killer instinct. I was not smart

enough to back off in critical situations though. Pride and self respect made me jump into things even with little chance of outlasting an opponent or topping the situation. And because of that infinitesimal instant of hesitation that was a part of me, I always jumped in at the very worst moment. It was either too late to get the jump or too early to provide a defense with plans of re-attack. Or so I have always pictured myself. In Vietnam where the statistical chances of encountering danger multiplied, I did not think I had a chance.

I remembered there were a few others that had been associated with the same place and tried to find one of them with no luck. Finally instructions were given for people going to different areas and I met up with a few others going to Nha Trang. None of them knew anything about Nha Trang either so we just speculated amongst ourselves what it could be. We did learn it was north of Cam Rahn Bay and along the coast and that made me feel some better - Dunkirk! - a chance for escape by the sea! The next morning we were trucked to an airfield and an awaiting C130. There were several of them parked in three-sided metal reinforced revetments or rocket shelters without roofs. The C130 was one of those fat fuselaged planes used to carry cargo. In the butt of the plane was a tailgate that lowered to the ground like the lower jaw of a great whale and that allowed cargo to be brought aboard. The plane was big enough for jeeps and other equipment to be driven into it. It could land and take off in short runway situations and I believe had the unique feature of reversible props, allowing the plane to quickly decelerate on landing.

Today the cargo was us men only. There were about twenty of us with our duffel bags. Every few feet on the floor of the plane was a cargo strap that could be adjusted and tightened down to secure the cargo. They instructed us to place our duffel bags under this strap and to sit on them after the straps were tightened. If

we needed to hang onto something during the flight we could grab the straps.

So we left for Nha Trang, four or five rows of frightened troops in store fresh fatigues, holding onto the cargo straps as much to just hold onto something as to keep from falling off our perches. As the plane made its turn away from the airfield to Nha Trang a mile or two out over the jungles, I felt as if I were crawling into a dark cave with no idea if there was a way out of the other end. The plane creaked, groaned, and rattled all the way to Nha Trang. I will never forget that I thought we were being fired upon the entire way as the rattling sounded so much like automatic weapons fire. I pictured the rounds streaking up from the dense growth on the ground below and contemplated the vulnerability of my butt. I surely did not want to get shot in the ass. I also looked ahead to the possibility of being shot down and the crash in the jungle, estimating where the safest place in the plane would be to survive it. We did not have weapons on us and that did not comfort me at all. The only weapon I saw was a pistol hanging in its holster ahead at the rear of the pilot's compartment.

All of the worrying was misplaced - we had not been fired on and we flew over relatively secure ground. The plane circled, landed and taxied to the Nha Trang terminal. I did not know it at the time but we had dropped into what could be a picturesque, tropical paradise outside of war and which was an actual resort area for wealthy Vietnamese and French colonials in better times.

It was early afternoon and the two or three of us with orders for the 17th CAG (Combat Aviation Group) were picked up by someone with a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck. We drove away from the terminal and through a U.S. Air Force base that looked like it could have been transplanted lock, stock, and swimming pool right from the good old USA, except that the perimeters were close enough so that

what was outside them told you the truth. The route we took carried us towards a bay and out of the air base. We were on a road that paralleled the shore of the bay, a road we later knew well as just "Beach Road." It took us north. On the right s couple hundred yards of beach filled the space between the road and the Pacific. It was a beautiful view, one that made it difficult to believe that a few miles in the opposite direction was blood and death and suffering. On the left side of the road was an endless string of villas, half in disrepair and half holding their own, but all telling of past beauty, wealth and prestige. On the road we followed, we



met or passed other military vehicles of
Typical villa along Beach Road

every size and description and several military personnel on foot. Flowing into, around, over, under and through the hubbub of military activity were the omnipresent Vietnamese. These included the basket laden pineapple vendor ladies from the beach, the husband, wife and two kids on a Honda 50 weaving through traffic, prostitutes and the flypaper kids in packs of twenty surrounding walking soldiers and relieving the unwary of anything on them that wasn't nailed down. After a half mile of this we made a left turn that took us into the crowded, close traffic of the city of Nha Trang. The street was the main road from what was later to be my permanent residence to the beach. It was somewhat wider

than most of Nha Trang's streets, yet compared to what I was used to, it was close. The gaps between objects caught in the street were filled with the smells and the immediacy of a sweaty, fishy, garlicky, too intimate life.

The street ran for only about a quarter of a mile when it came to guard posts manned by both American and Vietnamese military police. The truck drove through the checkpoint without acknowledgement by either set of guards and proceeded to the compound that was to be my home for a year. I did not know this at the time. We bounced and bumped to a stop in front of an unpainted two story barracks about the size of a barn. We were told to dismount the truck with our things and - after our names were cross checked with forwarded orders - to



grab a bunk in the lower level open bay of the barracks. Acquaintance hamming it up in front of 17th CAG transient billets

I went through a set of circumstances then that took my spirits up and down. At the approach to the barracks I saw in big letters "17th Combat Aviation Group" on a sign on its front.

I thought "Well, this is it. It is not great but it does not look too bad." I thought I had finally reached the end of my immediate traveling. As we got down from the truck I noticed the smaller letters on the sign -

“Replacement Billets,” and I got that sick feeling that there was another leg or two of the trip to go. I was later to learn that the 17th had several battalions and units located in the “boonies” which I very well might have been sent to.

As it was I grabbed a bunk and laid down to contemplate the whole situation. In the back of it all was the fact that it was the afternoon of Christmas Eve. People have gone through much worse and I have nothing to complain about, but I was overwhelmed by it all. I was a farm boy from North Dakota. I had not been away from home much if you discounted my earlier army days in the states, and I am the type that travel tires out. Here was a totally new situation - the change in climate from the frigid North Dakota plains of my month's leave to the hot, humid weather of Vietnam, the holiday season, the days of travel and sleepless nights of not knowing where you were going or when and if you would come back, the mosaic of completely different sights, sounds and smells of a foreign culture. A person's body and mind work overtime in these situations putting out sentries in the senses to protect one against the unknown. Rest comes hard. It was not battle fatigue but it was fatigue of a type that must have been timeless, fatigue associated with anticipation and with, if not a great event, an event bigger than the person. It was a pre-pre battle exhaustion that millions of others in ages past must have experienced, above and away from the warmth of the schedule and the known.

I laid on the bunk for an hour or two trying to put everything into perspective, feeling depressed with the thought of moving on yet again to more new situations. It was then that Bill came bouncing down the long center aisle of the barracks, grabbed my bags and told me to follow him. I asked where I was going and he said only “You want a home for Christmas Eve, don't you?” I did not have time to ask more or was too tired to care. I

felt I might as well get the rest of the trip over and followed docilely behind him. I gave the two or three other "intransits" lying on their bunks a shrug and left.

Bill Sykes was tall, dark and good looking. His skin was darker than an ordinary Anglo and with his high cheekbones he could have been a handsome Indian but his mustache belied a different heritage. The heritage was Spanish. Later I would learn that he came from the very south of Arizona close to the Mexican border. His appearance was that of the aristocracy and his vocabulary and personality fit this idea. He was a charmer with the ladies I guessed. I always pictured Bill in other, earlier times as a Spanish cavalier or diplomat surrounded by the accouterments of class and wealth or as the don of a great ranch and magnificent adobe hacienda. Yet Bill was such a charmer I was never sure if what he told of himself was real or invented. In the end, and after getting to know him more, it did not seem to matter. I liked him and liked him more in the setting my mind had created for his past.

I followed Bill and my bags out of the transient barracks and over the dusty, dry earth of the compound to the adjacent barracks. These barracks were two-storied with an access to the upper levels gained by an open wooden stairway at either end of the structure. These stairways ran across the face of the building from the lower left corner of the bottom level up to a platform that was at upper floor level. The platform was only as wide as the door and carried a railing. We ascended this stairway and entered the top level, taking a right at the first doorway. Bill threw my bags on a sagging bare bunk and told me we would go back to the "office" where I would work and then get me some things I would be needing.

"The office where you will work!" He said it so quickly and I had been so much in a trance that I nearly

missed it. Relief swelled up in me. No more travel. I could begin getting settled and into a new schedule. I wanted badly to ask if they had to fight much here in Nha Trang but did not for fear of sounding like an anxious fool. I wanted to ask a million other questions but did not for the same reason.

I followed him like an obedient pup to a large quonset a hundred feet from "my" barracks. Inside the quonset were ten to fifteen desks arranged in little groups of one to four, each section heralded by its function - Personnel Records, Orders, Awards and Decorations, NCOIC, etc. Bill guided me to a huddle of three desks to the right. The sign above it said Awards and Decorations. He showed me a desk, told me it would be mine and introduced me to Pete, the other fellow in A & D. Pete was a big fellow who talked like the fighters in the old movies or like Rocky in the new one. He gave me a hearty welcome and told me I would like it here and that I was lucky I was here. That sounded awfully good to me. Bill, Pete and I exchanged a few other generalities and then Bill and I moved on again. He told me he would introduce me to other fellows in the office later, but that there were not many others around this afternoon as everyone but one man per section was off since noon for Christmas. This sounded halfway civilized and my apprehensions began to subside a bit. The warmth of two new friends and protectors also helped a great deal. I had roots.

We went to supply and procured bedding and a mosquito net and then to the arms' room for my weapon, surprisingly an M14. I had thought the heavier, bulkier M14 was obsolete. I found out that they were in use in the relatively safer support areas such as I was in. That was okay with me as I had had more training with and was more familiar with the M14 anyway.

We trudged back to the barracks with my new gear, locked my "14" in the gun rack and dropped my bedding and net off in my room. Bill said we could get the

bedding on and the net up later as a Christmas party was just beginning and he did not want to miss any of it.

We proceeded to a square, white plaster building a block away that appeared to be part of a larger pattern of the same kind of buildings, maybe a main compound. On entering the main room we encountered a party in an early level of progress. There were 8 to 10 people standing around sipping some kind of drink with eggnog and munching on a fairly impressive tray of snacks. Bill introduced me to several whose names I immediately forgot. We stayed at the party for an hour or so exchanging more general information. The people I talked to felt Nha Trang was a pretty secure area and it did not seem they were just trying to make the new guy feel good. It was easy to feel good too - having found a new home and already partying in fairly decent surroundings. I had prepared myself for the worst - a malaria ridden, rat infested filthy corner of the damp jungle - but now I was sipping eggnog and eating cheese in a training room much as back in the states. It was almost too good to believe.

The party never really got beyond the first stage so Bill suggested we hook up with a couple others from personnel and go to the bars. We walked across the compound and across a dirt road to a line of wood and metal shacks that extended for approximately a half a block. There were several openings along the front, shaded part of this row with attractive little Vietnamese women or girls standing half in and half out or just outside these entrances. As we approached the first opening two or three girls suddenly attacked me paying little or no attention to the other fellows. "Hey G.I. - U come ih. Ha drink. Okay? You numah one G.I.!" Before I knew it I was sitting down on a small sofa next to the door with a pretty girl sitting on my lap and almost imperceptibly sliding back and forth. I was overwhelmed with all the attention and felt warm and good from the drinks I had just had. My reactions were

mixed however. As I sat there nearly overpowered by the vitality in that little creature, I could see the other guys smiling and nodding knowingly to each other. At another time I would probably have felt conspired against but was enjoying myself too much to care. My ego was doing just fine. As the center of attention a person rapidly goes through some chemical process that makes oneself bigger in one's own eyes. I loved it. At the same time I felt a slight discomfort with this rapidly progressing familiarity with an "oriental." I was still a North Dakota farm boy, and though there are not too many prejudicial veins in my body, these people were still totally new, totally alien. Without the few drinks I had had, this feeling would probably have been stronger.

My reverie was cut short by Bill or some other pulling the vexed girl from my lap while she was alternately demanding, then begging coyly that I buy her a drink. I felt mildly annoyed myself, feeling I was developing quite a nice relationship in such a short time. I had not realized that my only contribution was a fresh, unfaded set of fatigues that carried a reputation of easy money, naiveté, and gullibility. As the girls shrieked and carried on in their singsong repartee, obviously scolding Bill and the others, we moved on to the next entrance, went inside and sat up to a bar. There were several girls sitting on or next to the few GIs in this bar but none approached us. From the ordering going on from our small group I could tell my friends were regulars. A cute little dark haired beauty of only 16 or 17 peered at us from behind the bar. She could barely reach the top with her elbows and the winning smile she gave was almost all you noticed above the bar. She gave me a glance and then gave Bill a knowing look saying, "New G.I., huh?" It began to dawn on me then. I stuck out like a sunflower in a potato patch.

We had several drinks there, my new friends paying for them all with piastres, the Vietnamese currency. All

my money was in MPC (Military Provisional Currency), the funny money the American soldier was paid in to prevent loss of the greenback. I was told that this was the "personnel" bar and for the most part the bar girls left the personnel people alone unless their company was sought after. The little girl behind the bar was straight and a good friend along with two others that ran the bar.

I learned a little more about my new unit, the 17th CAG. The company I was in was a Headquarters Headquarters Company which meant we were on the very top of a very large military organization. The 17th CAG had 7 or 8 helicopter and air battalions under it. These units carried troops into combat zones and out and provided support for ground actions. Our company supported the commanding officer of this group, a full colonel, coordinated troop replacements and movements for the group, and provided other administrative services such as write-ups for medals and decorations.

I learned that I was fortunate to get picked off for duty in Nha Trang and how that had happened. My personnel file had been scanned by the NCOIC. Awards section needed a clerk-typist and my military aptitude score was higher than average. This was a major factor in my favor. The personnel department was close to an elite sector with new personnel being picked either by educational background or aptitude score. My score was good enough to get me into a group of well-read, intelligent, and very interesting people from all over the states.



Medic building to left and our office to the right.
Fuel storage behind them waiting for a lucky hit by some VC
mortarman

Talk turned to the Christmas Eve bonanza at the NCO club. A "round-eye" (Caucasian) stripper was going to appear there in a couple of hours. It was rumored that she went all the way. I was not thrilled by the fact she was Caucasian but I was knocked over by the fact she might go "all the way." I had never seen anything like that and it was all I could think about from there on out. The other guys seemed just as excited about the fact that she was a Caucasian. I did not learn until months later what a treat this was. Gazing on the features of a pretty "round-eye" was a rarity in Vietnam and caused as much commotion as a rocket attack. The only difference was that the alert siren was not blown.

I drank a lot that afternoon and ate only a small egg sandwich and some kind of chop suey that they sold at the bar. When we left to catch the stripper I found it hard to walk. We had been sitting in the dark, relatively cool bar for three or more hours. When I hit the hot, bright receding sun around 7 p.m. my head reeled and I had to fight throwing up. I fought hard. I did not want to miss seeing "everything" on a real live girl.

We staggered to the club and pushed our way into an overcrowded, smoke-filled hall, into a stiflingly hot mass of bodies. We never got further in than a few feet from the front door, a good 25 feet from center stage. It was announced that the show would not start for another half hour. We managed to procure drinks and stood drunkenly sipping it for another quarter of an hour. Suddenly I could stand no longer. I made it through the band's first number, "My Girl", a song that

has been indelibly dated in my mind from that time. I begged leave, embarrassed and disappointed that I had to go. My new friends voiced concern at my condition and my ability to find the barracks. I assured them I could make it and staggered out, away from the closeness, the heat and the noise of the club back to the barracks that was now my home.

The bunk wasn't made. I remember trying to get up that spark of resolve needed to make the bed and set up the mosquito net apparatus. I managed only to set a folded up folding chair on one end of the stained mattress and to lean it against a wall at the end of the bunk. Over this I draped the net, tucking the other end under the mattress. I crawled into this little enclosed world and lay down still fighting the nausea and feeling strange and so alone again without my new friends. I pined for the missed stripper show, felt a million miles from nowhere, then fell into a drunken stupor, not seeing the abundance of inch round holes in my mosquito net that would not have kept the sparrows out.

I woke up the next morning with a head splitting, throbbing hangover and felt dirtier and sweat grungier than I ever had before in my life. In addition I was covered with hundreds of mosquito bites. My skin was puffed and hardened and itched all over. There were more mosquitoes inside my net than in all the rest of Nha Trang. It took me minutes to realize where I was.