

A DIFFERENT MISSION

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**483 SPS, Cam Ranh Bay AB;
388th SPS; Korat RTAFB 1972-1973**

Stepping outside the boundaries of Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base Vietnam meant finding oneself in "Indian Country". Our daily Guardmount "Intel Reports" always confirmed this fact. Each day our Flight Chief would read the Intel Report describing the latest sightings of VC, how many were seen carrying what type weapons, moving in what direction, and how many clicks from the Air Base. Most of the time I listened with both eyes closed and one ear open (Ranger Flight, 483rd SPS held Guardmount at 0430 hours).

One day the base Chaplain, a Catholic Priest, stopped by my post. He inquired as to the possibility of some Security Policemen providing an armed escort for him to travel to an orphanage about 20 clicks north of the Air Base. The orphanage was being run by the Catholic church. The Chaplain explained that he wanted to collect used clothing and items from the GIs on base and donate them to the orphanage. He told me he was afraid of taking sniper fire if he went without an armed escort. Seems an incident had happened earlier.

How could I turn down a chance to help out some little kids, who at an early age, had already experienced too much of life's difficulties. A few days before this request I had witnessed war's brutality toward children when an old man brought a wounded 10 year old boy to my post. He had placed the boy in a wooden cart and wheeled him several miles to the base. The old man explained the boy had stepped on a land mine at an abandoned firebase. His left leg was crudely bandaged and I could see the leg was severely mangled. My request to have the boy treated at the base hospital was refused. It was gut-wrenching for me to have to tell the old man that the hospital would not treat the boy. His eyes told me he did not understand why. I hope mine conveyed the same message.

I put the word out and it was easy to get volunteers to go on this mission. On the appointed afternoon the Chaplain showed up at the armory in his deuce and a half along with his aide, a Buck Sergeant, as his driver. The truck was loaded to the brim without used furniture, clothing and other such items. The truck had a White-Cross painted on each door panel. The "VC" wouldn't have any problem identifying who the truck belonged to. *[Sixteen Chaplains were KIA in Vietnam]*

At 0430 hours that morning I had listened intently to the daily intel report. Several groups of VC had been reported along our travel route and near the area where the orphanage was located. This occurred in late April or early May during the NVA's Spring Offensive that had started on March 30, 1972. By this time the NVA had opened up three fronts in the South and there had been a major build up of enemy forces in our area. There had been several rocket and sapper attacks on and around Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base. US and ARVN forces at Cam Ranh had suffered 10 KIA and 25 WIA in these attacks. We weren't getting very much sleep. Tension was running high.

Seven SPs climbed in the back of the truck and barely had room to stand due to the donated goods. We put one man standing behind the truck cab. He placed his M60 machine gun on the canvas top pointed in the direction of travel. The other six of us lined the wooden sideboards, three on each side, pointing outward. Each of us carried an M16 rifle. On my web gear I carried a USAF survival knife, all I could carry. 223 ammo and a .38 cal. revolver. No one accounted for ammo, you could have all you wanted and I always kept lots of extra rounds. I also wore my flak vest and steel pot (with a first aid compress bandage I carried in the outer band). The Chaplain and his driver felt secure and were much relieved.

We proceeded out the Main Gate, drove across the bay bridge and passed through the last friendly lines, the Allied Checkpoint. The driver did not allow much time for sightseeing as we sped north. After 20 or so minutes we arrived at the gate of the orphanage. We drove through the gate and parked. The mountains to the north were now very close. A body of water was to the northeast and it came right up to the main building. I was told the body of water was heavily mined. We were greeted by the Nuns who invited us in and offered each of us a Vietnamese beer and some food.

After we unloaded the truck we took some pictures with the children and enjoyed each other's CO. Finally, it was time to say goodbye so we loaded up on the truck and assumed our former positions. Not a word was spoken by any of us on the way out or upon the return trip. We went about our job with an intensity that most people will never experience. Even though we were young and sometimes took unnecessary chances, we had all been shot at enough to know this was no game. We had all been tested under fire. If the VC had so much as poked his head out we would have ruined his whole day. We arrived safely back at the Air Base before dark, mission accomplished.

Victor Charlie knew we ruled and he kept his head down. The trip was very rewarding for me personally as I'm sure it was for the other guys. The Chaplain was very appreciative of our efforts and as for the bottom line, so were the kids.

After all, we did it for them.

We Take Care of Our Own

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