

*Biên Hòa AB*

**O-POSITIVE!**

*Red Horse Augmentees!  
3rd Air Police Squadron*

by **Bob Vitray**

823 Civil Engineering Squadron (RED HORSE)

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**RED HORSE: "Can Do, Will Do, Have Done."**

**O NEGATIVE**

Hi Don, This is an account of a group of us that got "volunteered" for a mercy mission. It seems to meet all the criteria. Please edit if you need to bring it up to your standards. Bob

“Vitray.”

“What’s up Sarge?”

“Doc called -- your record says you got type *O negative blood*. That true?”

“O neg? I think so.” I made a show of checking my dog tags as if I needed to make sure. I was trying to figure out what was going on. Why did Doc care what my blood type was?

*Doc was what we called the sergeant and staff sergeant that the 823rd Red Horse Squadron had assigned as medics. As an independent squadron the 823rd had its own cooks, carpenters, mechanics, heavy equipment operators, water and wastewater processors and bug sprayers. That was my job. I was an engineer entomology specialist sometimes known as Otto the Orkin man of the Air Force. I spent very little time actually spraying bugs, though. Usually I was either out on the perimeter as an Air Police Augmentee or working with Vietnamese crews building shelters and revetments to protect our planes from rockets and mortars. The Red Horse mission required that we build a base capable of operating a tactical squadron and then provide support and services to that squadron while we enlarged and improved the base. Of Course Biên Hòa was already built when we got there so we engaged in heavy construction that the base civil engineering squadron wasn't equipped to handle. And why in the devil were they asking about my blood type?*

“Yeah, Sarge.” I answered in a deliberate drawl fingering my tag, “It says here that I am indeed type *O Negative*.”

“Wait here. When the bus comes you get on and do what they tell you.”

I was mystified. Because of my blood type I was being told (ordered) to get on a bus.

“Is this an augmentee job?” I had been spending a fair amount of time working on the perimeter at night as a sentry or on our RED HORSE quick reaction force, though I couldn’t figure out what my blood type had to do with anything unless the worst happened and I got shot.

“Nope, some folks downtown need some help and you *volunteered*.”

“Should I check out my weapon?”

“Naw, it ain’t that kind of a deal. They’ll explain it when you get on the bus.”

Since I had no choice I did as I was told and eventually the old blue school bus drove up and I and a few other *pink-ponies* clambered aboard. Apparently Red Horse was the last stop. The bus already had a bunch of troops on it from other squadrons. We were all mystified. The bus drove to the Main gate and after the driver dealt with the guards we went through. I had never been to “downtown” Biên Hòa before. I had not availed myself of the

opportunity to take a pass during the three months I was there before the town was declared “off limits” during Tet '68. I could get all the booze I wanted on base and the prostitutes in town lost whatever allure they might have had after our medics explained that the VD rate was about 115% (some of the ladies of leisure had more than one kind of disease) and that one of the strains of gonorrhea was so virulent that one might be consigned to Johnson Island for many months until a cure was effected. I didn't know if this was true, but it was enough to knock the romance out of me while I was there.

I don't remember much of the town. I have an impression of dusty red dirt tracks and low slung shacks. Eventually the bus pulled into a little compound that was only slightly more substantial than the slummy structures that surrounded it. The driver shouted “everybody out” and we all clambered to the dusty little courtyard/parking lot.

Then a tall guy accompanied by a rather attractive blonde woman approached us from the building to our left. “Good day, men.” He said with a strange accent. I noticed that his fatigues had strange little rank insignia on them and realized that he was an officer from *down under*. “Welcome to the Biên Hòa Australian Medical Mission, men. We need your help. To be specific we need your blood. I've got a woman here who just gave birth and we can't stop the bleeding. Your records indicate that you are universal donors and that you have all given blood previously. Is that so?”

We nodded our assent.

“Does anyone object to helping us out on this?”

I think it was the presence of the Nurse that did the trick on this one. I can't remember her well enough to say how she would have stacked up in civilian life, but we were as deprived as the sailors in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. What was a little blood compared to a chance to act studly while performing a good deed in front of a blonde, round-eyed, “female, feminine, dame?”

In any event, nobody objected. We were led inside and sat around a small ward while the deed was done and the life giving fluid was taken. Like many things in war the finish was anti-climactic. A surgeon did come out and tell us while the last few guys were finishing up their donation that they still hadn't managed to stop the bleeding. To this day I do not know if either the mother or the baby survived that day or the difficult years that followed. I like to imagine that we succeeded in our mission of mercy and that both are alive and happy to this day.

After a couple of hours we climbed back aboard the bus and returned whence we came. I got the rest of the day off and went and had a burger, fries and coke at the BX snack bar and that was it. A few nights later I was out on the perimeter manning an M60 ready to shoot anyone who tried to get through my position. Giving blood and *taking blood* -- it was a strange little war.

*We Take Care of Our Own*

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