

My Tour at Binh Thuy Air Base
Phong Dinh Province, Republic of Vietnam
August 1968 to August 1969
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I was sworn into the U. S. Air Force at the Los Angeles Induction Center on Halloween Day, 1966. I'm still trying to figure out if I got *Tricked or Treated* that Halloween. After basic training, I remained at Lackland AFB to attend USAF Security Police Tech School. During the course of my Air Police training, I received orders for my first duty station with the 51st Air Police Squadron at Naha AB, Okinawa. It would be an eighteen-month tour, from Feb. '67 to Aug. '68. Naha AB was home to a squadron of F-102 Fighter Interceptors. The F-102s were tasked with the air defense of the Ryukyu Islands. The aircraft on alert status would scramble fairly often to intercept long-range Soviet bombers that ventured too close to US airspace. The base also had two squadrons of camouflage painted C-130 aircraft. These cargo aircraft flew in and out of Vietnam on a regular basis.

The war in Vietnam was raging during the time I was on Naha. The buildup of US forces in Vietnam was in high gear. We heard a lot about the war because northern Okinawa was a training area for Marines on their way "in-country." In addition, Camp Kue Army Base had a large hospital that treated our wounded flown in from the war zone. I was a pretty impressionable 19 years old kid. I wanted to do something important with my life. When President Kennedy said, "*Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,*" I swallowed that bait...hook, line and sinker. When it came time to fill out a "dream sheet" for my next duty assignment, I volunteered for Vietnam. It wasn't long before I received notice that I would be assigned to the 632nd Security Police Squadron at Binh Thuy Air Base in the Republic of South Vietnam. One of guys on my flight had recently transferred to Naha AB after completing a tour at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. When I asked him if he knew where Binh Thuy was, I was a little surprised when he said he'd heard of it but he wasn't sure where it was. After asking around, it seemed like no one knew very much about the base. That on its own should have caused a red flag to start waving, but I was young, patriotic and didn't see what was coming. When the reports about the 1968 Tet Offensive began hitting the news, I started to pay a lot more attention.

On August 21, 1968 I flew out of Kadena AB (Okinawa) on a Boeing 727. The government had a contract with a civilian airline to make regular shuttle flights from Japan to Vietnam, with stops on Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines. We arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB in the middle of the afternoon. As the airplane made its final approach, we flew over the barbed wire fence lines that surrounded the base. Within those fence lines, I could see dozens of large impact craters from the fighting that occurred during the Tet Offensive, earlier that spring. The reality of the situation started to sink in. As we deplaned onto the tarmac, the heat, humidity and smell were overpowering. Even though I had been stationed on a subtropical island for eighteen months, everything about Vietnam in this regard was different. It was hotter, more humid and the smell was far worse than even Okinawa's open benjo ditches in the

summer time. Once I got my duffle bag, I joined a group of other new arrivals already in the terminal and we were bussed to the In-Country Processing Center on the base. The one thing I remember about the ride to the processing center was that the bus had wire mesh covering the open windows. The driver told us that the wire mesh was installed to prevent Charlie from throwing grenades through the windows. That little bit of information gave me another red flag for my growing collection.

The next couple of days were a blur. Most of the NCOs seemed to delight in beginning their instructions with a quirky little smile and "Welcome to Vietnam." They then proceeded to tell us what we could do, what we couldn't do and what we couldn't even think of doing. During the in-country processing we weren't permitted to go outside the compound. They kept us so busy waiting, we didn't have much time for excursions anyway. On the morning of August 22, the day I was to catch a flight to Binh Thuy, the base's Security Police (SP) roused awake everyone in the transit barracks. The SPs were checking for AWOLs who were known to use the bunks in the transit barracks to catch a goodnight's sleep. It was about 05:30 when they came in. One of the cops stood at one end of the barracks, blocking any escape route as the other cop yelled out his instructions. He wanted to see our ID cards and our orders. I sat, half asleep on the edge of the mattress as he made his way down the row of bunks. When he got to me, I handed him my ID card and orders. He looked at them and said, "You're a cop, huh?"

"Yeah," I muttered.

Reading my orders, he said, "...632nd SPS...where's that?"

"Binh Thuy" I replied.

He looked me right in the eyes and said, "Well, Good Luck!" Although I was half asleep, my brain said, "Whoa, wait a minute!" It was obvious that he wasn't wishing me *good luck* in a half-hearted way; he was wishing me, "Good Luck" as though I was really going to need it!

As he started to walk off, I caught a hold of his elbow and said, "What do you mean by that?"

He looked directly at me and stated, "They got the shit kicked out of them last night." With that, he walked to the next newcomer, leaving me alone with my growing collection of waving red flags.

After getting all my paper work together, and a Gamma Globulin shot that left a huge knot on my butt, I picked up my gear and walked down the flight line to find my ride to Binh Thuy. It was a C-130, probably from Naha, but I didn't even think to ask. I'd never flown in a C-130 so I thought it might be a cool new experience. It was, except the engine noise was really loud since there is no insulation in the cabin walls. After about a thirty-minute flight, the plane started a steep descent, while banking to the starboard. The crew chief motioned to me that we were landing. As I looked out of the

small porthole-type window, I caught my first glimpse of Binh Thuy Air Base. Compared to the size of Tan Son Nhut, Binh Thuy looked like an outpost. *"That's it?"* I thought, *"man, that base is really small... what have I gotten myself into?"* I later read a quote by an NCO who described the base as being, "a mile long and five city blocks wide." From the window of that C-130, it didn't even look that big. The single runway and taxiway were paved with asphalt. The aircraft parking area was paved in some areas and covered with PSP (Perforated Steel Plank) in others. Each aircraft was parked in its own three-sided protective enclosure called a revetment. The revetments were about twelve feet tall and three feet thick; they were constructed out of heavy, corrugated aluminum and filled with sand. They were intended to protect the parked aircraft from shrapnel during a mortar attack. Most of the streets on the interior of the base were paved, but the narrow road that ran around the perimeter of the base was rough, oil treated dirt that developed deep ruts and potholes during the monsoon season. The buildings were clustered on the northeast end of the base. The land the base was built on was formerly rice paddies. The undeveloped area within the base perimeter that was not filled in with silt dredged up from the adjacent Bassac River, it was partially flooded and over grown with grass.

As I deplaned, the aircraft's crew chief directed me to the passenger terminal. It was more like a barn with a cement floor. Several Vietnamese civilians with baggage were sitting on wooden benches waiting for the next Air Vietnam (civilian) passenger plane. I asked the Airman at the air terminal counter how to contact the Security Police Squadron. He pushed the phone toward me and gave me the number to call. After a while, a jeep with two Security Policemen pulled up. The jeep had a machine gun mounted on a vertical post secured to the floor on the passenger side. I threw my bags into the back seat and jumped in. While driving on the aircraft parking ramp the driver stopped a couple of times to pick up three inch pieces of jagged shrapnel; leftovers from the enemy activity that occurred earlier that morning. "FOD," he said in a one-word explanation. "Here, have a souvenir." FOD is a military term for Foreign Object Damage. FOD was anything that could get sucked into an aircraft's engine, causing it damage. It's a term used mostly with jet aircraft. Binh Thuy didn't have any jet aircraft at the time, but it was important to pick up the FOD because it was still a hazard to the tires of our aircraft and support vehicles. The sharp, jagged pieces of shrapnel were scary-impressive, but the thing that really caught my eye was the damage to the walls of the large, metal maintenance hangers that we passed. The walls were punctured with thousands of holes caused by the hundreds of mortar shells that impacted near them and sent the deadly shrapnel spinning through the air. It was a visual testament to the severity of the mortar attacks that the base had already been through. Judging from what I learned about the previous night's activities, the Viet Cong (VC) were well trained and totally committed to bring the fight to us. They shelled the base twice during the early hours of August 22, the morning of the day I arrived. Thirty-five mortar rounds fell during the first attack at 0015 hours. Another twenty-two rounds hit the base at 0455 hours.

I signed into the squadron and got a ride to my new home in the Red Horse area. The area got the name "Red Horse" from the stylized logo of the USAF 555th Red

Horse Construction Squadron. The barracks had cement floors and were constructed with 2x4's, 1x6's and a lot of wire screening. As I unpacked my gear, I noticed that just like the maintenance buildings on the flight line, shrapnel had gouged out large gashes in the wall studs and ceiling beams. This definitely did not look like a happy place and I sure didn't want to be in here during a mortar attack. The first night in any new environment can be restless, and that held especially true for my first night at Binh Thuy. Because the base was so small, the barracks were only a short distance from the base's western perimeter. I was jumpy, lying there in bed looking at all those gashes in the walls and ceiling. It seemed like I spent half of the first night jumping out of bed whenever someone on the perimeter fired off a slap flare. I went directly to Vietnam from Okinawa, without going to AZR (advanced training), so I wasn't familiar with much of the equipment that the SPs used in Vietnam. After jumping out of bed a few of times, one of the guys who had the night off explained that the "pop-swoosh" sound I was hearing was an outgoing slap flare. After learning that, I was able to settle down a bit.

For the first couple of days I was busy getting my paperwork and pay records registered with the various administrative offices on the base. I also had to get jungle fatigues, boots, rain gear, web-gear... etcetera, issued from squadron supply. "In-processing" took place during the daytime while the cops that guarded the base at night were asleep. Except for a few guys who had the night off, the barracks were empty so I had very little opportunity to talk with the other cops about what working security in a war zone would be like. Since the mortar attacks occurred during the hours of darkness, I really wanted to get to work. I figured being at work was safer than being in the barracks, but completing the in processing seemed to move at a snail's pace. The clerks who processed new comers onto the base were in no rush. I guess they figured, "What's the hurry? You're not going anywhere for a year, anyway." During the night of my second day on base, I came to understand they were just saving all their energy for when it really counted. That night I experienced my first mortar attack. When the rounds started to impact, everyone in the barracks jumped out of their bunks and highballed it like Olympic track stars across the open ground and into the bunkers. (That attack was on August 24, 1968 at 2339 hours: 12 rounds of mortar fire). Standing there in the bunker with a couple of dozen other world class sprinters, my knees were really knockin'. It was almost midnight, so most of us had been asleep for a while. Most of us were barefoot and in our underwear. I'm obviously the new guy, because I'm the only one in skivvies who was wearing a flack vest and helmet. Exactly when I had time to put them on I don't recall, but the "seasoned vets" looked at me and gave me that (now familiar) crooked little "Welcome to the Nam" smile. It was actually a relief to get the first attack behind me.

At least I knew what a mortar attack was like and I knew that I had a decent chance to survive if I could get into a bunker. That new knowledge proved to be only minimally reassuring because the next night (August 25, 1968) at 0119 hours, the base got mortared again, this time with 33 rounds. Once in the relative safety of a bunker, the only thing we could do was listen as the rounds impacted on the base. This attack was scarier to me than the attack the night before, because not only were there more

rounds hitting the base, these rounds were falling very close. The first few rounds fell about 100 yards north of the barracks, which gave us time to make it safely into the bunkers. As the rounds continued to fall the VC adjusted the direction of their fire and began walking the rounds toward us. The sound of the exploding rounds began to get much louder and the ground shook hard under our feet. As the rounds started to bear down on our bunker, without a word or a signal of any sort, everyone began to slowly squat lower and lower, a little at a time. It was the strangest experience to both observe and participate in what I would describe as a “dance of self-preservation.” Then, for reasons known only to the gunners, the rounds suddenly stopped falling around us and shifted to the flight line. No one was killed during the attack, however two people on the base were wounded. Things quieted down for the next few days and then on August 29th the base got rocked with forty-four rounds. We lost two aircraft and had 38 damaged, but no one was killed or wounded. I’d been on Binh Thuy for less than a week and I’d already been through four mortar attacks. My collection of red flags continued to grow.

I clearly remember my first night on guard duty with Devil Flight (Devil Flight was the designated name the 632nd Security Police Squadron gave the night shift). With no AZR training and no briefing by any NCO upon arrival, I had absolutely no idea what to expect or what was expected of me. During Guardmount I was assigned to a perimeter bunker with another Security Policeman. The SP assigned with me told me to go to the armory and sign out an M-60 (machine gun) and ammo. I said, “What’s an M-60?”

He got an incredulous look on his face and asked, “Didn’t you go to AZR?” I told him I came directly to Vietnam from Okinawa and didn’t have any additional training prior to my arrival. Since I was not qualified with the M-60, I didn’t have a weapons card used to check one out of the armory. He seemed annoyed that he had to be responsible for the weapon.

Photo-1 Title: Bunkers & Towers, Perimeter. Many Security Police spent their tour on the perimeter in a tower, a bunker or in a SAT Jeep. Shown here (on the west side of the base) is an MLR bunker (on left) and steel frame tower (on the right). In the distance is a wood frame tower.



1: Binh Thuy AB: Perimeter, Bunkers and Towers.

Once we got our gear and weapons the bunker teams loaded up onto a large truck and headed out to the perimeter to be posted on their assigned bunkers. Our assigned perimeter bunker was close to a wooden guard tower whose radio call sign was “Charlie-3.” Once we

got settled in I started noticing things that

piqued my interest. For instance, about twenty feet in front of the bunker, a six-foot tall chain-link fence was erected. When I asked him why it was there, he acted like I was imposing on him. Reluctantly, he explained that (supposedly) the fence would cause any B-40 rockets to detonate before they could blow up the bunker. It didn't take long for me to realize this guy was a real jerk. The only thing he really wanted to do was sit on an ammo can and check for holes in his eyelids. It was going to be a long night.

As time passed, I stayed alert while he checked for those holes. The opportunity to help him see things differently occurred when a vehicle with the sector's NCOs came rolling down the road. Since he was asleep, he didn't hear the truck approaching and since I didn't appreciate his attitude I sure as hell wasn't going to warn him. He jolted awake and jumped to his feet when the truck's tires skidded to a stop on the loose dirt. He shot me a real pissed off look...mine in return said, "sleep at your own risk." He got the message and stayed awake (barely) the rest of the night. During the two weeks or so that I was assigned to Devil Flight all the other cops I worked with were both friendly and helpful. I figure I must have drawn Devil Flight's biggest *knucklehead* on my first night out.

Most of the time that I was on Devil Flight I was posted in perimeter bunkers and in bunkers along the MLR (Main Line of Resistance). The MLR bunkers were located in the interior of the base, near the flight line. They were meant to intercept any Viet Cong sappers that might get through the perimeter defenses, attempting to destroy the parked aircraft. I also spent a couple of nights assigned to a QRT (Quick Response Team) that was posted as a reserve force at a small site on the eastside of the perimeter known as OL-26. The Air Force personnel who operated OL-26 directed and monitored the B-52 "Arc Light" strikes that bombed the southern environs of Southeast Asia. This was a very important facility, but what was done there was kept low-key so as not to invite undue interest by the enemy.

The only "formal" in-country training I received took place one night while on duty with Devil Flight. A Staff Sergeant escorted myself and two other new guys to predetermined area on the perimeter road. He set up an M-60 machine gun, loaded it, and had us lie down behind it one at a time. He showed us where the safety and the trigger was and had us fire about 10 rounds apiece. We did not load it ourselves, nor were we shown how to clear a jam or how to replace a barrel. *That was the extent of my training.* Everything else I learned came by way of the guys on my flight who had been in Vietnam for a while.

Even though I carried an M-79 grenade launcher on a regular basis, I never received any training on its use, the same with hand grenades. We were never taught how to respond and effectively deploy from a Security Alert Team (SAT) jeep in support our tower guards. We had almost no knowledge about the terrain around our security fence lines, nor how the enemy might use it to gain access onto the base. We received no training or instructions on how to escape and evade in the event we needed to

escape from the perimeter, back to the Main Line of Resistance. In retrospect, I can't help but wonder if our officers and supervisors had any real training themselves. If they did, I did not see it reflected in the training effort we received. While, to a man, we were committed to the task of defending our base, it is training, not commitment, that saves lives when the bullets start to fly. In that regard, the "professional" Air Force surely failed us.

NOTE: The Air Force was aware that the training regime for Security Police was lacking and in response, a test group within the career field known as Combat Security Police was created and trained. This group of highly motivated men received considerably more in-depth training than the average Security Policeman. However, when they were deployed to Vietnam as a fully trained and equipped unit, they were broken up into small groups and sent (TDY) to existing Security Police squadrons. Although men with their level of training were surely needed in Vietnam, it appears the Air Force commanders simply did not know what to do with Combat Security Police.

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After a couple of weeks on Devil Flight I was reassigned to "A" Flight-Security. "A" & "B" Flights worked on a 90-day rotating cycle of Day shifts, then Swing shifts. Because of my reassignment to "A" Flight, I moved out of *Mortar Alley* (the Red Horse area) into the barracks right next to the base chapel and not far from the NCO Club. It seemed that my lot in life had improved. But, that little self-deception was halted on September 11th when the base was rudely awakened at 0225 hours: The VC hit us with 16 rounds of mortar fire. Then, just to thumb their noses at us, they hit us again during that same 24 hour period at 2217 hours with 40 more rounds. *Jeez! Didn't they know I had to get up early to go to work?* Thankfully, no one was killed or hurt, but we lost two more aircraft and 21 more aircraft were damaged. It had been a few weeks since the last mortar attack, so I suspect the VC waited until the mechanics got the previously damaged aircraft repaired then hit us again.

Just when I thought we might make it through the rest of September without another foot race for the bunkers, we were hit again with 40 more rounds on September 29th. On October 4th, I celebrated my 21st birthday. No surprise party by my little friends in black P.J.'s. How thoughtful of them! In fact, the entire month of October was eerily quiet. After all their handiwork during August and September they either ran out of ammo or possibly their C.O. gave them some well-deserved R&R! By the middle of November, their C.O. must have figured they'd had enough "Rest and Recuperation" because they started up where they left off. They hit us again, twice in the same 24-hour period, 16 rounds during the wee hours of November 11 and then with 40 more rounds later that same night. I wonder if the VC knew that it was Veteran's Day?

It's interesting to see how humans adapt to difficult situations. After a mortar attack, we all seemed to have the same ritual. We'd go to the latrine, take a leak and then get back into our bunks as though nothing at all had happened. I suppose we understood that we had no control over the situation, so we just pushed the fear down inside and did the only thing we could do; act like it never happened. I never actually slept very well that entire year. If it wasn't the anticipation of being mortared, it was the damn mosquitoes buzzing around my ears at night. I tried using a mosquito net when I first arrived at Binh Thuy, but I'd get tangled-up in it even if I wasn't in a mad dash to exit the barracks. I decided it wasn't worth using because the slightest delay in getting into a bunker could mean getting killed. I had other plans.

Photo-2 Title: Sgt Hall Wading. After being tasked to check our fence lines & cut down elephant grass, "A" Flight's work party waded across this canal to get back onto base. This was not as much fun as it looks; that water was really nasty.



2: Sgt. Hall, wading with ammo can.

The land that the base was constructed upon was formerly rice paddies. The rice paddies were filled in with sand that was dredged up from the Bassac River, adjacent to the north end of the base. Everything on the base was no more than three to five feet above the former rice paddy's water line. The Bassac is a brown water river flowing eastward, out of Cambodia into the Mekong River Delta and out into the South China Sea. A large percentage of the base's interior had not been filled in with dirt, which

meant that the land reverted to overgrown delta marshland. During the monsoon season, the water in the undeveloped areas of the base was in many places knee deep. Small canals snaked their way through the defensive fence lines and through the low areas on the south end of the base.

Prior to the building of the base, the small canals supplied for the local farmers' rice paddies before emptying into a much larger canal along the west side of the base, which emptied into the Bassac River. In some spots, the drainage canals that ran through the base were up to six feet deep. Fish and snakes came onto the base through those canals. Fish found their way into the even smaller canals that ran behind the perimeter guard towers. Some of the fish were pretty large, weighing as much as three to four pounds. When I was posted in one of the towers at the far south end of the base (Kilo 7-Alpha or Kilo 11-Alpha), I would sometimes lean over the back of the tower and shoot them with my M-16. Those two towers were far enough away from the main part of the base that the gunshots would go pretty much unnoticed. I really wasn't too worried about getting chewed out for firing my weapon since it was unlikely that someone of authority would hear it.

Our flight's senior NCOs made very few trips out to the perimeter and I don't remember seeing any officer drive by a tower more than a couple of times the entire year I was there. Working the Day/Swing shift on a small, semi-remote Vietnamese air base could be very boring, but it had its advantages. I could never decide whether the NCOs and Officers rarely came out there because they worked at night and slept during the day or because they didn't think being on the perimeter in broad daylight was a safe place to venture.

In the late afternoon, ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops would come on the base after being in the field all day. First they got a meal in the Vietnamese chow hall and then they got trucked out to spend the night in the cement bunkers that ringed the perimeter road. If my "fishing" had been good, I'd holler to them from the tower and point to the canal, yelling, "Hey Ong, toi soc-mau ga lop!" Which (roughly translated) means, "Hey Mister, I killed a big fish!" One of the ARVN troopers would spot the fish, floating belly up. He'd strip off his uniform and wade out to get the day's "catch." They must not have been given much to eat at their chow hall because they were always really happy to have those fish. They would flash a big toothy smile and yell up to me, "You num-bah one GI, you num-bah one!" I didn't have the words to tell them that I only shot the fish because I was bored out of my mind. Still, there was satisfaction in knowing that in some small way I had made their miserable lives a little better.

Poisonous snakes that made their way on base were a real threat to our K-9 teams that patrolled the perimeter at night. The K-9 handlers were on the perimeter road all night, so they were most likely to be bitten by one of the snakes. When an SP spotted a snake crossing the perimeter road he would radio into Central Security Control (CSC) requesting, "Permission to shoot a snake." When the "10-4" was received from CSC, the fun started. The towers were thirty feet tall and the snakes were often well down the road. From that height and distance, the chances of hitting a pencil thin line wiggling across the road were just about nil. Once it was confirmed that nothing but the snake was in danger of getting shot, I'd take careful aim and squeeze off a round. Of course, there was little chance that I would hit a snake from that distance, but the snake thought it was in deep trouble and would start to wiggle its way for cover at top speed. At that point, I'd forget about all that breathing and trigger squeezing discipline I learned on the firing range and just start blasting away. The faster I squeezed the trigger, the faster the snake wiggled across the road. I probably shot at a half dozen snakes, but not surprisingly, I never hit one of them. I was definitely better at "fishing."

Before long, the guys on the flight realized that no one ever checked when we were shooting at snakes, so when one SP got permission to shoot at a snake, it wasn't unusual for one or two other bored tower guards to start shooting, just for the fun of it. We knew that our NCOs and officers were inside the air-conditioned offices at CSC, so they couldn't tell how many people were firing. If someone of rank got curious and contacted CSC to ask about the gunshots out on the perimeter, CSC would tell them the

truth; an SP out there was given permission to shoot a snake. "Snake shooting" was fun for a while, but its popularity waned when we got tired of having to clean our weapons.

One more snake story: the squadron had a group of guys who were permanently assigned to painting and fixing stuff. They did stuff like, build shelves in the Officer's quarters, trade floor tiles for steaks at the Navy yard so the NCOs could have a barbeque, cut the grass, plant and water the flowers and trees in the squadron area, and of course change the identification numbers on Army jeeps that they *found*--stuff like that. Under the category of "Real Work," they were also given the dubious honor of tearing down and rebuilding perimeter bunkers. Rebuilding bunkers was real work because they worked in strength sapping heat and humidity most of the day.

I was on a SAT team (Security Alert Team; a two man jeep patrol, armed with a M-60 machine gun) one day in the Charlie area (west side of the base) when we stopped to see how the work party was doing. They had stripped away the old bunker's roof and plywood sides, shoveled off the sand that filled the bunker walls and were about to remove the PSP (perforated steel planks) that was used for the floor. As they lifted up one section of the PSP, out popped an enormous cobra. They immediately dropped the PSP and decided to call into CSC for instructions. A First Lieutenant (whose name I don't remember) must have been in CSC at the time because he drove right out in his jeep to get a look at the snake. Being a leader, he made an on-the-spot decision. He sent one of the guys from the work detail to the armory for a shotgun. When the two-striper came back with the shotgun, the Lieutenant snatched it from him, as if to say, "This is a job for *Super-Lieutenant!*" The work crew realized that they were going to have to act pretty quickly so the cobra wouldn't have time to strike. Truth-be-told, I'm not sure whether they were more afraid of being bitten by the snake or getting shot by the Lieutenant.

Two very nervous Airmen lifted up the heavy PSP and with a mighty grunt, tossed it aside. The Lieutenant brought the shotgun up into the firing position and leaned forward to absorb the shotgun's kick... he took deadly aim... the cobra reared up, ready to strike. Everyone took a step back in unison! About that time we all realized that the cobra had a big rat in its mouth. The snake couldn't swallow the rat and it couldn't spit it out. Super-Lieutenant went into action... when he yanked on the trigger, he also jerked forward, anticipating the recoil. The problem was that he had forgotten to disengage the safety and the gun didn't fire. He looked pretty silly doing all that jerking around and we couldn't help but laugh out loud.

That wasn't very smart for two reasons: 1. Laughing at an officer could have long lasting repercussions on a lowly Airman's existence; and 2. he had a fully loaded shotgun in his hands! He really gave us the ol' *stink-eye* for laughing at him like that! Regaining his composure and a modicum of dignity, he clicked-off the safety and fired, but he missed! We looked at each other in disbelief, but no one pushed his luck by laughing at him again! He did kill the snake with his second shot, but sorry Lieutenant, no kewpie-doll for you. Since no one was volunteering to find out if the snake was actually dead, I decided it was time for my SAT Team to depart before our brave,

sharpshooting leader assigned the task to us. When we got off duty that evening we had a lot of fun telling that story to the other guys in the barracks. I never did find out what happened with the snakeskin and I don't remember ever seeing that Lieutenant on the perimeter again.

Fun events of that nature were pretty rare, most of the time the duty was just plain boring, especially when you were posted in one of the perimeter towers. All day long, you stood in the tower watching an endless sea of green grass. One's immediate concern was to watch the area within the fence lines, a half-mile to the right and left of the tower. But in some areas, the grass was so tall that it was ridiculous to think that you might actually spot an infiltrator sneaking their way onto the base. While you could see all around you from an elevated position, anyone watching you had the advantage of cover and concealment. When I was posted in a tower for the first time I recall thinking about how vulnerable I was sitting up there. Trying to ease my anxiety I said to myself, "No sweat, man, Uncle Sam will take care of you." I was immediately brought back to reality when it dawned on me that I was Uncle Sam and I was the one "taking care" of the people behind me on the base. That realization put a very sharp edge on things for a while.

A break in the boredom came when (and if) you got relieved for chow. That's about the only time being a Security Policeman had any perceived privilege (the key word there being, perceived). We had a very limited amount of time to get to the chow hall, eat and return to post. We only got chow relief if we had enough personnel on the flight to allow it so we often ate C-Rations on post. Chow relief worked like this: First, the guys on the Security Alert Team would go to chow, then after they ate they would exchange places with those of us posted in the towers and bunkers. When we got to the chow hall we were allowed to cut in front of all the other enlisted men waiting in the long line at the door. The dirty looks we got from some of those guys could have dulled a bayonet. Occasionally, someone in line would complain out loud about our cutting the line. Most of the time we just ignored them, but once in a while one of us would respond with, "I'd be happy to stand in line, would you like to come out on the perimeter and take my place?" Since they weren't all that excited about spending their days in the heat and humidity associated with guard duty, that would usually shut them up. Occasionally though, some wise guy would say, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind doing your job!" When someone responded like that, we'd suggest that they go to their supervisor and volunteer to be an augmentee. We rarely heard from them again. However, there were a few confused souls from other units who did volunteer to join us. When they did, we welcomed them; anyone who wanted to join us was a true brother! I wouldn't vouch for their sanity, but they were brothers all the same!

When I first arrived on the base the facilities were pretty fundamental. For instance, the chow hall was just adequate for the number of Americans on the base. Because of the menu items served, I suspect the kitchen equipment was pretty basic. The food was always good quality and well prepared, but we had a lot of entrees on top of rice. Chili and Beans on rice, Beef Stew on Rice, Chicken Chow Mein on Rice, Rice on rice. I don't know for sure, but I have a sneaking suspicion a lot of that rice was

captured from the VC. When I got back to the States, I didn't want to eat rice for a year. Enough already! During late spring of 1969 a large, well-equipped chow hall was built in the Red Horse area. It had two dining rooms with the kitchen centrally located between them. One or both of the dining rooms could be in operation, depending on the number of personnel to be fed. We still got served a lot of rice, but the quality of the food got even better and the variety of menu items really improved. It wasn't as good as mom's home cooking, but it sure beat the hell out of C-Rats.

Very few Air Force personnel were authorized to carry weapons on a base, even in Vietnam. Some Air Force personnel with specific job descriptions did carry weapons while on duty, but the Security Police were the only personnel who normally carried weapons out on the flight line or in the streets of a base. Being armed was so normal to us that the weapons were like a part of our uniform. Many of the weapons we carried in Vietnam weren't issued on bases outside a war zone. When we went to chow, we couldn't leave the weapons in an open Jeep, for fear they would be stolen, so we had to bring them all into the chow hall. Most Air Force personnel were rarely around weapons and judging from the expressions on their faces, it must have been kind of intimidating for them to see us hauling in an M-60 machine gun, an M-79 grenade launcher, boxes full of ammo, M-79 grenades, hand grenades and slap flares. We also carried in our M-16s and some guys carried .38 caliber handguns in holsters. We probably looked like a portable armory to the other personnel. Except for the handguns, the weapons were always unloaded before going into the chow hall. While eating, we'd hang our M-16s by their slings over the backs of the chairs. Occasionally, the sling would slip off the back of the chair and the rifle would clatter loudly onto the floor. Judging by the startled look on their faces, the other personnel were very uncomfortable when that happened. For us it was just a nuisance.

There were times when the flight was too short on personnel to allow chow relief, so we were issued C-Rations to eat on post. Some of the newer style C-Rats weren't all that bad... but some of the older ones were really awful! The Security Alert Team (jeep patrol) assigned to an area was given the duty to drive around with a case of C-Rations and let you pick your poison. If the SAT team leader was your buddy, he might drive out to your post first so you could get one of the "good" meals. If for some reason you'd pissed him off, you got whatever was left over. In my opinion the worst or the worst was *Pork Slices, Canned*. Talk about a god-awful, greasy mess! Being on the SAT Team had two bennies (benefits) at mealtime. One, you got first choice of the C-Rations and two, you could heat up your C-ration can on the jeep's engine manifold. The trick was in knowing when to remove the can. If a can was left on the manifold too long, it had a nasty habit of blowing up. It would often take days before the stench of *Beanies and Weenies* cooked off the engine manifold.

Getting a day off was a rarity and there really wasn't much to do on Binh Thuy when you did get time off. You could catch up on letter writing or beer drinking. I learned to maximize my time off by doing both at the same time. *Hey, it seemed to be the sensible thing to do.* Of course, you could always go down to **Ben Xa Moi (Ben Sah Moy)**. Ben Xa Moi was located on the outskirts of Can Tho City, about 7 miles

from the base. I'm convinced it was built on the outskirts of the city because the good citizens of Can Tho weren't real excited about having GI's invade the peaceful streets of their beautiful provincial capital. That was okay--they could keep their peaceful streets, GI's only wanted what was in Ben Xa Moi anyway.

Photo-3 Title: Ben Xe Moi, Ben Xe Moi's main intersection, 1969. Down the street and to the left was the "bar district" where the "Cowboys" met you as you ventured into the alleys.

To describe **Ben Xa Moi** as a "bar district" would be charitable. It was a collection of old one and two story buildings, probably built during the French Colonial era, set right on top of a pigsty. Narrow alleys led to small bars, steam baths and brothels. There were no sidewalks, so during the monsoon season the alleys and walkways were quagmires of mud, trash and animal feces. Many a drunken GI stumbled out of a bar and fell into an instantly sobering experience that he'd never forget.



3: Binh Thuy AB: Ben Xe Mi.

The bars were pretty much all the same, long narrow rooms furnished with low U-shaped booths or cheap sofas and coffee tables. Some actually had a bar with stools and everything! Vietnamese girls, who understood English better than they let on, would sit and talk with you if you bought them a Saigon Tea. Saigon Tea was a generic term. I got the general impression that it was usually warm Coca Cola, but it could have been dark tea or even coffee. It was served in an undersized shot glass. The price: one dollar. Payment wasn't made with the Greenback Dollar, it was made with MPC (Military Payment Certificate). Greenbacks weren't allowed in Vietnam. Members of the American military were required to trade their Greenbacks for MPC when they arrived in Vietnam. The bar girls were more than happy to take the MPC rather than the Vietnamese Piaster. It seemed that even the Vietnamese didn't want their own money. There was a danger in taking the MPC, though.

In order to discourage the use of MPC by the civilian population and keep the counterfeiters at bay, the military would periodically issue a new version of the MPC. A "surprise" announcement would be made that an issue of new MPC would be made the next day and the old MPC would be worthless. The surprise however, was only for the GI's, because the Vietnamese businessmen always knew about the exchange a few days ahead of schedule.

Forewarned, the Vietnamese businessmen would ask GIs they thought they could trust to change over their MPC for them. In exchange, the GIs got to keep a generous

percentage of the new MPC. That's the only time I ever heard of a GI getting the better part of a deal with the shrewd Vietnamese businessmen.

Most of the women in the bars were "nice girls," probably from good families, too. Good, but sadly desperate. If a GI had too much to drink and got a little too "touchy-feely" with a girl, she would set him straight right away. "You be nice, GI! *I good girl!*" The "not-so-good" girls were available, but they were in a different kind of establishment. Being married; I stayed out of those places.

Outside the bars, skinny, malnourished flea-bitten dogs wandered the alleyways aimlessly looking for anything edible. They were very wary of humans because in Vietnam, dogs sometimes ended up as entrees. Scrawny, sick looking chickens had the run of the streets. Feathers would fly as squawking chickens dodged the military vehicles and Cyclos (taxis) that sped through the area. Old women dressed in tattered, ratty clothes, holding tiny, un-bathed babies would beg for money. They positioned themselves along the routes the GIs took to the bars. When they saw a group of GI's approaching they would stop talking among themselves, turn toward the GI's and put on a sad face. As the GIs passed, they would whine and cry in Vietnamese. They would hold out a dog-eared piece of cardboard with a message written (in terrible English) that explained how they had lost their husband or son in the war and had no one to take care of them and their four kids. After the GI's passed, the women would regroup and resume their singsong conversation. The word was that they actually made a lot of money performing their little act.

Small bands of preteens called "Cowboys" would cluster around you as you made your way down the streets strewn with bits of paper, desiccated orange peels, chicken feathers and lord only knows what else. The stench was indescribable and unfortunately, unforgettable. The Cowboys owned the streets and as you walked their gauntlet, they would pester you with questions about what you wanted to buy. They offered to sell you anything from drugs, to their older sister. They would pat at your shirt pockets, hoping to find out where you kept your money. If they thought they'd found it, they would try to get at it by slicing open your pocket with a razor blade that was concealed between their index and middle fingers. My cube mate, Tom, was always coming back to base with his pockets sliced open. He got real good with a needle and thread. While you were distracted by all the pocket-patters, a kid who was trained by the Vietnamese version of Fagan would slap at your wrist, attempting to unlatch your wristwatch. If he succeeded and it dropped to the ground, he would snatch it up and run off. So much for that nice Timex your grandparents gave you for high school graduation. It was the same whether you were coming or going, so it was not a good idea to go to Ben Xa Moi alone and it was never a good idea to drink too much while there.

Getting a ride back to base always seemed more difficult than getting there. The main intersection was actually pretty large with traffic consisting of military vehicles, small motorcycles, bicycles and Cyclos (taxis). While waiting for a ride, you were advised to keep alert and never gather in groups larger than three or four. Evidently,

the VC had no trouble getting hand grenades and a large group of drunk and distracted GI's was an easy target. You were really lucky if a military truck would stop and take you all the way back to the main gate of the base. If it was getting late and it looked like no trucks were forthcoming, the Cyclos were the only option. Cyclos were three-wheeled motorcycles with a bench-seat over the rear axle that faced backwards. The drivers were the worst! I spent eighteen months riding in "Kamikaze Cabs" on Okinawa, but even that didn't prepare me for those Cyclo drivers. Talk about an "E-Ticket" ride! And you did it facing backwards! After a couple of trips down there, the glamour of Ben Xa Moi wore off and the NCO club started to look like a pretty good alternate.

Photo-4 Title: Binh Thuy AB BX & Barracks. Binh Thuy's Base Exchange was so small that a limited number of people could enter at one time; hence the line outside the door. The buildings in the background are the Post Office, the Chapel/Theatre and Security Police barracks for Alpha and Bravo Flights.



4: Binh Thuy AB: Base Exchange (BX)

Back on base, the **BX (Base Exchange)** was just down the sidewalk from my barracks. When I first arrived on Binh Thuy, the BX had very little to offer. You could get a pad of writing paper with the map of Vietnam printed on it, but they were frequently out of envelopes. For a month or so I made my own envelopes out of magazine pages. Laundry soap and shower sandals were items that were also hard to come

by in September of '68. I had my wife send them to me by mail. The BX never seemed to have any trouble stocking the big three: *Cigarettes, booze and beer*. As far as I can remember, there was never a shortage of those items. You might not like the brands they offered, but they had them in depth.

Mail is probably the most important factor for a GI's morale. Getting mail from my wife turned out to be a very big problem. She wrote often, but evidently the military postal system wasn't prepared to handle mail that was sent from her Okinawa FPO (Fleet Post Office) to my Vietnam APO (Aerial Post Office). To make a very long story short, my wife and I knew each other since we were very young. We lived on the same block and our mothers were close friends. We dated before I joined the Air Force and we were serious about getting married at some future date. We just hadn't worked out the details due to my deployment to Okinawa. Her father was a Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel, who after a year at Da Nang, received orders for Okinawa. The family arrived on the island in early October of 1967, eight months after I had arrived. Talk about a jolt, it was a dream come true! The problem was this: she wanted to

surprise me and made everyone in my family promise not to tell me that she was coming to Okinawa. Before I learned that she was coming to the island and since we had no firm plans on when we were going to get married, I volunteered for Vietnam. Once she arrived, we weighed our options and we decided to get married on Okinawa before I left for Vietnam. While I was in Vietnam she lived with her parents and worked in a government service position on one of the Marine bases. Her letters would be delayed for weeks at a time and then they would arrive in batches. It was often more than six weeks between batches of mail from her. Meanwhile, letters from the States would arrive in three or four days. It got so I wouldn't check my mailbox for days at a time because I just knew there wouldn't be any mail from her. I'd wait longer than I could stand, then go and check my mailbox only to discover there still was no mail from her. It made me crazy and I was really down. At least I was getting mail from my family.

Care packages from my mom were a real surprise. I received two from her during the year I was at Binh Thuy. Did I mention they were a real surprise? The first one was a chocolate birthday cake. It arrived over a month late and the package was caved in. The cake was smashed and stale. Mom had mixed up my Vietnam APO number and my Okinawa APO number so the cake bounced around the military postal system in the Pacific for weeks until a postal clerk actually read the squadron address and forwarded it to the right APO. By then it was too late. The second care package was chocolate chip cookies. Mmmmm! Boy, did I love her chocolate chip cookies! The cookies arrived unbroken, just four days after they were mailed. Mom had packed them in popcorn to keep them from getting banged up. Great idea! The surprise came when I tried to eat them. I guess she figured I would enjoy having some popcorn too, so she salted it. The salt got all over the cookies and made them inedible. I could have cried! Talk about subject matter for a Sad Sack cartoon!

Binh Thuy had a number of "high-end amenities." For instance, early in my tour, the building next to my barracks served as the theater on Saturday night and the chapel on Sunday morning. The attendance on Saturday night was normally much greater than the attendance on Sunday morning. Except that is, after a mortar attack. For some strange reason mortar attacks seemed cause an increase in the number of guys attending church services. Hmmmm? There was also a barber shop...sort of. It was a small shop with two chairs and one barber. His implements were very basic. He had a couple of dirty combs, a set of semi-sharp scissors and the manual version of barber's shears. Nothing fancy here! No electric shears like back in the states. No sir-ee, this was a war zone. It probably didn't make any difference anyway because this guy would cut your hair one-way and one-way only...very short! One visit to his barbershop and you didn't need another haircut until your tour was up! I remember seeing one GI who must have learned about the barber from a departing friend. When he sat down in the barber's chair, he took the shears and held onto them. The barber could use only his comb and scissors. When he walked out, the guy's haircut actually looked pretty good! As a side note, it was later reported that this very same barber was shot dead by the ARVN one night while he and some "friends" were trying to sneak onto the base. That's what passed for "moonlighting" in Vietnam.

Like most air bases, the physical layout of the base was planned around the flight line. Almost all of the buildings at Binh Thuy were located at the northeast section of the base. The flight line and runway stretched along the west side of the base. Around the outside of the base was the perimeter road. It was a dirt road just wide enough for two jeeps going in opposite directions to pass. Supply trucks and Armored Personnel Carriers or other large vehicles could travel on the road, but the road was so narrow they had a tough time making a U-turn.

Photo-5 Title: Effects of Agent Orange. Taken from a guard tower on the west side of the perimeter, this photo shows the effects of Agent Orange. Except for tree lines, the Delta was monotonously flat. On the left is OL-26, the facility that monitored the B-52 Arc Light strikes.

On the outside edge of the road, every couple of hundred yards were cement pillboxes that the ARVN (Army, Republic of Vietnam) soldiers manned at night. **Along the inside edge of the road, the Security Police had their guard towers.** The towers were manned twenty-four hours a



day. They were pretty far apart, but they had a commanding view of the entire perimeter. Four or five barbed wire fence lines were strung at intervals outside the perimeter road, around the entire base. Trip flares were hidden in the grass to warn the guards should a VC sapper team try to infiltrate onto the base. The elephant grass was very tall on both sides of the south end of the base where the canals flowed in. Around most of the perimeter the grass was three to four feet high, but in some areas the grass was twelve to fifteen feet tall. The height and thickness of the grass made it easy for sappers to slither through the fence lines, so the ARVN set up night listening posts in strategic places a few hundred yards out from the road. The defoliant, Agent (or Agent Blue) was used extensively on the interior of the base to control the heavy vegetation. However, due to a lack of proper equipment it was difficult to spray the defoliant on the grass outside the base. Attempts by SP personnel were made, but the grass was very resistant.

5: Binh Thuy AB: Effects of Agent Orange.

The Security Police worked in and around the defoliated areas on the perimeter every day. Many of us developed Type 2 diabetes as a result of exposure to the toxic

herbicide. I learned years later, that the Staff Sergeant who was in charge of the detail that dispersed the herbicide contracted cancer related to Agent Orange exposure. On the interior of the base, in addition to the aforementioned bunkers that made up the Main Line of Resistance (MLR), there were SP bunkers and jeep patrols within the aircraft parking area. During hours of darkness, the SP's manned a mortar pit whose radio call sign was "Firefly." Firefly was located on the west side of the taxiway just north of the aircraft parking area in what I call "Mosquito Ville." Specially trained Security Police on Devil Flight manned "Firefly."

The Security Police designated the flight line as the "Alpha" area. It contained all the important stuff: Control tower, aircraft maintenance buildings, base fire department and of course the aircraft. The USAF aircraft consisted of two C-47 Gunships dubbed "Spooky", a C-47 PsyOps aircraft, Cessna 0-1 & 0-2 "Birddogs" that were used for Forward Air Control, and 2-HH-43F "Huskies" used as Search and Rescue helicopters. They went by the radio call signs Pedro 39 and Pedro 91. The VNAF had a squadron of A1Es and a squadron of UH 34 helicopters. During the late spring or early summer of 1969, the VNAF started flying the A-37 "Dragonfly." The A-37 was a small jet, perfect for close-in ground support and ideal for the short runway at Binh Thuy. Until that time, the only jets on Binh Thuy were the ones that landed due to battle damage. For a short time in mid-1969, Binh Thuy hosted a detachment of Marine OV-10 Broncos, from the "Black Pony Squadron." They flew ground support for the Navy's river patrol boats located at the Binh Thuy-Navy yard, just up the road and east of the air base. Many years later, I discovered that the "Black Ponies" were from El Toro Marine Base. El Toro Marine Base (now closed down) was located only a few miles from where I grew up.

The northeast corner of the base was known as the "Bravo" area. This area contained the cantonment (housing) areas, administration offices and Base Headquarters. Law Enforcement Security Police were responsible in this part of the base. In reality, the work done by the security flights and the law enforcement flights was very similar. On Binh Thuy everyone's job was security no matter what section they were assigned to work. The SPs who worked on the Security flights pulled duty on the flight line and along the perimeter. The guys who worked Law Enforcement pulled duty on the main gate with the (VNAF) Vietnamese Air Force's Security Police (QC). They also pulled security duty in a cantonment area known as "The Hilton" and at entry checkpoints into the cantonment areas.

The Hilton was a fenced compound located off base just west of the main gate. The Law Enforcement (LE) personnel worked day and night shifts in bunkers and towers in the Hilton compound. At night, ARVN and Devil Flight personnel supplemented the Law Enforcement personnel on the main gate. During the morning and evenings, LE personnel were responsible for checking the IDs, handbags and packages carried by the Vietnamese that came on base to work. They were also responsible for quieting "disturbances" in the NCO Club. When things really got out of hand at the club, Law Enforcement would call in a K-9 handler to help restore the

peace. From what I've been told, once those sweet little tail-waggers arrived, everyone became friends again.

Photo-6 Title: Sgt Hall Tall Grass. This illustrates how tall the elephant grass was in some areas within the perimeter fences. Twenty yards behind me, the grass grew so thick that you would not have been able to see me.



6. Sgt. Hall in Tall elephant grass.

“Kilo 4-Alpha”, “Kilo 7-Alpha” and “Kilo 11-Alpha.” “Kilo 11-Alpha” was located at the far southeast corner of the base. Guards on “Kilo 11-Alpha” were responsible for maintaining watch over a sea of tall elephant grass that stretched southeasterly, seemingly beyond the horizon.

The entire length of the base's west side as well as its southwest corner was the “Delta” area. This area included the bomb dump that was located near the northwest corner of the base. SPs were posted at the bomb dump around the clock. The radio call sign for the Security Alert Team that patrolled in the Delta area was “Delta One.” The call sign for the bunker at the entry of the bomb dump was: “Delta 3.” There were two towers along the length of the west side; their call signs were “Delta 4” and “Delta 5.” On this side of the base, the Delta Sector's towers overlooked an area of elephant grass and barbed wire fences that was about 300 yards wide. That security zone was bordered by a north south running canal that bisected and emptied into the large east-west running Bassac River. We called this the Tra Noc canal. It paralleled the entire western length of the base and looked to be about 40 feet wide. It joined with the Bassac River a few hundred yards to the northeast of the base. The village of Tra Noc was located on the opposite bank of this canal. Tra Noc was considered a “friendly village”, but off limits to GIs.

Being posted in the Delta towers was a ringside seat to the real Vietnam. I would sit up in “Delta 4” and “Delta 5” and observe the daily life of the villagers of Tra Noc through binoculars. The walls and roofs of the houses were made of woven and thatched vegetation; very *third world*. I watched the village women as they worked outside of their huts in the shade, their babies sleeping quietly beside them. I could see young kids swimming and splashing in the shallow spots of the muddy water. Older

men would cast their throw-nets into the canal hoping to catch their supper and old women sat in little groups, smoking and gossiping. It was all very interesting and it sure made the time go faster.

As I mentioned previously, there was a small drainage canal that ran through the barbed wire fence lines on the south end of the base. This small canal emptied into the Tra Noc canal. Some of the men from the village would sneak under our fence lines to put conical shaped bamboo fish traps in the drainage canal. They knew they weren't allowed in there, but I guess the fishing was worth the risk to them. If they were in there at night, they would almost certainly be shot at, but they weren't in danger of being shot at during the day because we all knew they were from the village. Still, they weren't supposed to be in there, so we were told we could fire slap flares in their direction as a warning for them to get out. The swooshing sound of the slap flares wasn't always enough to scare them off, but the slap flare's secondary effect really set the fishermen to running. During the dry season, the phosphorus from the burning flares was hot enough to set the tops of the dry elephant grass ablaze. The prevailing breeze would push the flames across the tops of the dry grass right toward the "intruder." When the villager realized the fire was coming at him, it was all he could do to get out of there. Those skinny little guys could really run! There was only one person I knew who could run that fast--me, during a mortar attack. Amazingly enough, even that didn't always deter them from going in there; it must have been a mighty good fishing spot!

The Delta sector, along the west side of the base by the bomb dump, hosted the annual "Toad Festival." It's something like the annual Grunion run in California. Grunion are small, tasty fish that spawn on select California beaches at a specific time of year. The toads come out to spawn too, but unlike the Grunion I don't think you'd want to eat those critters. Anyway, the whole toad festival thing is about mating. At night, the participants of the "Toad Festival" came out of the Tra Noc tributary. They came in hoards, hopping out of the water, advancing en mass through the elephant grass and onto the base. These were no ordinary toads. No sir-ee! They were bumpy and greenish-brown and they were huge! Many were as large as a cereal bowl. I later learned that their Latin genus designation is: Humongous Porkus Uglius (OK, OK, I made that up). They chose the perimeter road as their dance floor and final destination. And when I say final, I mean...Fini! As they gathered on the road to dance and sing, the jeeps, trucks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) from Devil Flight ran over them. The resulting carnage wasn't so bad in the dark of night, but when the sun came up it was hideous. Some toads were flattened paper thin by the big tires on the APCs. Some were only partially flattened, with their internal parts squirting out all over the road. Nothing dead (or alive) in Vietnam went unaffected by the blistering hot sun. So, as the day heated up, so did the dead toads. I can't even think of words to describe how bad it smelled. It made you wish you hadn't eaten breakfast and made you hope your lunch wasn't *Pork Slices, Canned*. The stench of a million rotting toads attracted another well-known Vietnamese species. The "Shark Fly", which is a distant cousin to the Vietnamese mosquito. (Ok, I made up the "Shark Fly" thing, too.) These weren't your little ol' run-of-the-mill houseflies; these were big aggressive flies, predatory and insatiable. Not known for passing up a free meal, the flies joined the celebration by the

millions! They added to the festival with their buzzing and biting. Once the feeding frenzy started, even humans were fair game. The sight, the sound, the smell! Oh, the humanity!

Perimeter bunkers were four sided with the entry way at the rear. They were about 8 feet wide by 8 feet deep with a PSP floor. They were constructed with 4x4 corner posts and 2x4s were used to frame up the plywood walls. The walls were about forty-eight inches high and two feet thick. The space between the inner and outer plywood walls were filled with sand. The "counter tops" created by the exterior and interior walls were topped with plywood and then covered with a layer of asphalt roofing material. An M-60 machine gun was set up on the counter top. Perforated Steel Planks, layered with sandbags served as a roof. The roof had a shallow bunker on top that served as an observation deck and a gunner's platform. They were painted OD green. A 6-foot tall chain link fence was set up about twenty feet in front of the bunker. We were told that the chain link fence would detonate a B-40 rocket before it hit the bunker. Thank God I never had to find that out. Devil Flight manned the perimeter bunkers at night.

Binh Thuy had two types of perimeter towers; wood frame and steel frame. The two wood frame towers we manned were located close to the main part of the base; they were part of the MLR (Main Line of Resistance). They were about 25 feet tall, constructed out of heavy timber with large, wooden cross braces. Like the bunkers, they were also painted OD green. The covered observation platform was about 12-foot x12 foot. Access to the tower platform was by way of a ladder and trapdoor that came up through the floor. Since the tower was open on all sides, a large sandbag bunker was built in the middle of the platform. Extra layers of sandbags were put on the bunker floor in case mortar rounds exploded beneath the tower. Only one of these towers needed to be manned during the daylight hours, but after dark both towers were manned by heavily armed SPs.

The steel towers located on the outlying areas of the perimeter were much smaller. They were about thirty feet tall and had a roof covered platform that was only about 4 foot square. These towers had plate steel walls four feet high and one-half inch thick. Climbing a steel-rung ladder and pulling yourself through an eighteen-inch opening in one of the steel plate walls gained access into the tower. The insane thing was that the access opening faced out toward the perimeter. Either a really dumb American or the Viet Cong were in charge of installing these towers. Anyone with half a brain would have been able to see that a cross-eyed sniper could easily fire a round through the front opening. The bullet could then ricochet around inside the steel enclosure until it hit the guard. In addition, during the monsoon season, lightning storms were common in the Mekong Delta. Tall steel towers were a perfect lightning rod on the flat delta plain. These towers were very hot during the day, radiating the sun's heat inward like an oven. The towers were manned 24 hours a day by all the Security Flights. They were equipped with a military field phone that was connected to a switchboard at Central Security Control. Guards had a battery operated Motorola radio and a set of well used binoculars. We were issued a Starlight scope during the hours of

darkness. Devil Flight personnel mounted an M-60 machine gun on a post that was affixed to the tower floor. I always felt like a sitting duck in those towers.

Another interesting tidbit about Binh Thuy AB concerned the runway. The fact that the runway was only about 5000 feet long was probably of special interest to most pilots, but that wasn't the most unusual factoid about the landing strip. It appeared that over time, the earth beneath the south end of the runway had settled a bit. During the monsoon season, water drained into the low areas and that included the south end of the runway. Printed in an issue of the Pacific Stars and Stripes, a departing pilot reported to the tower that he had observed live fish swimming on the active runway. Now there's something your average pilot wouldn't see every day, unless of course he had daily flights in and out of Binh Thuy during the monsoon season.

The runway at Binh Thuy ran along the full length of the west side of the base. That meant erecting a guard tower at the south west corner would have put the tower in the direct flight path of departing aircraft. The lack of a tower in that area created a big gap in the base's security, so during daylight hours, after the Vietnamese Army left to patrol the outlying areas, a Security Policeman was posted on the pillbox located on the far southwest corner of the base. This post was designated with the radio call sign: "Fox 4." The post was really scary. You were out there all by yourself with tall elephant grass growing right up to within 4 feet of the pillbox. The only thing you could see in front of you was a wall of green grass and the sky. If ever there was a place that needed defoliation, this was it. I imagine the ARVN soldiers didn't like being posted there either, especially since they manned the bunker at night.

Unusual things seemed to happen on the south end of the base. One night Devil Flight was training a group of SPs on how to fire the 90 mm recoilless rifle. They chose to conduct the training on the perimeter road about fifty yards to the east of the Kilo 11-Alpha tower. This kind of training was known as "H & I," short for "harassment and interdiction." Basically, it was On-the-Job-Training with live rounds. The recoilless rifle is a long, tubular shoulder fired weapon similar to the World War II Bazooka, but larger in diameter and much more deadly. The two most common rounds fired are the H.E. (High Explosive) round, which is used against tanks and bunkers, and the Beehive Canister, which is an antipersonnel round. The Beehive Canister fires thousands of little darts called fleshettes. The fleshettes spread out as they leave the muzzle, mowing down anything in their path. Very, very nasty!

The story, as told to me by a certain retired NCO (who will go unnamed) is this: The group's instructor forgot to tell the SP firing the weapon to keep the muzzle elevated. So when the SP fired the beehive round, all those thousands of little darts mowed down the elephant grass in a swath about four feet wide and 50 yards long. Oh, did I mention that the little darts also took out all the barbed wire fence lines in its path? The following morning before sunrise, without being informed of what had occurred during the training exercise, I was posted on Kilo 11-Alpha. The dawn's early light revealed the results of the night's "training." When I saw the damage I wondered, "What in the world could have caused that?" It wasn't long before the mystery was revealed.

A Duce-and-a-half (two and a half ton) truck with a work party comprised of the “newly trained” SPs came out to fix the fence lines they had mowed down. The incident reminds me of something that my dad used to say, “Tragedy plus time, equals humor.” In regards to this event, I’m sure the humor was a-long-time-coming because those guys had been on duty all night long and after their shift was over, they were sent out in the hot sun to fix the fence lines they mowed down.

It was always hot in the Mekong Delta. Wet or dry, day or night, it was hot. In the middle of the afternoon, it was a challenge to stay alert. After consuming a nutritious lunch of greasy C-Rations the afternoon heat and the natural drop in the body’s metabolism caused one to get drowsy. On one occasion while posted on the tower, Kilo 11-Alpha, I was barely winning the challenge when there was an explosion from the direction of the pillbox, Fox-4. Shaken out of my groggy, grease induced state; I grabbed the binoculars and focused in on the pillbox. Richard Wiggins was posted on Fox-4 that day. As I anxiously peered through the binoculars I could see him walking around down there like nothing had happened. I said to myself, “OK, if I call it in to CSC, what do I say?” I could see that Wiggins was OK and there was obviously no danger. I decided not to call it into CSC. When we got off duty that evening, I asked Wiggins, “Hey Wig, what was that explosion down by you around 1400?” He nonchalantly replied, “Oh, I always wondered what a hand grenade sounded like going off, so I threw one out in the elephant grass.” I just kind of looked at him for a minute and said, “Oh, ahh...yeah...OK...” Unusual things like that just sort of happened out there on the south end.

While the greatest threat to us was from mortar and recoilless rifle attacks, the Viet Cong still tried to get on base from time to time. They learned during the early months of TET 1968 that they would have to pay a big price in lives if they tried to get sappers onto the base. The air traffic control compound known as Paddy Control was right off the perimeter road, in the southeast area of the base. Paddy Control personnel managed all the air traffic that flew in the upper Mekong Delta region. It was operated by both USAF and Vietnamese Air Force personnel. If the VC could get a sapper team into Paddy Control and destroy some of their equipment, it would be a major victory for them. It must have been a very tempting target for the VC commanders because the compound was right on the edge of the perimeter.

After a double mortar attack on November 11th, things quieted down for a while. There were no *standoff attacks* (mortars/rockets) through December 1968 and there were no enemy teams reported in the area through the first week of January 1969. Then, during the second week of January, reliable intelligence sources reported there were recoilless rifle and sapper units in the area. We were pretty sure we were going to get hit and the tension among the guys in the squadron was evident; everyone was on edge.

On January 10th, the base received a double dose of mortar rounds. During the time I was there, January 10th was the bloodiest day for Americans and Vietnamese on Binh Thuy. At 0200 hours the VC hit the base with 62 rounds of 75 mm recoilless rifle

fire. One American and three Vietnamese were killed. Five Americans and five Vietnamese were wounded. Then just before 2300 hours the same day, the VC fired 56 more rounds of 75 mm recoilless rifle fire onto the base, killing two more Americans and wounding five more Americans and one more Vietnamese. No aircraft were lost or damaged.

The VC weren't trying to destroy the aircraft, they were targeting the barracks. After those attacks, they must have decided to "di-di mau" (get out, quickly) because we never got hit like that again. I'd like to think that one of our infantry units or one of our C-47 "Spooky" gunships took care of them for us. A few days later, during the early morning hours of January 13th, the Army Airfield at Can Tho (about 6 miles from Binh Thuy) was attacked. The VC infiltrated the base through the barbed wire fence lines and succeeded in destroying 18 helicopters with satchel charges. While doing that, they killed 8 GI's and wounded 15 more. We could hear the explosions and small arms fire from Binh Thuy. The dragon was breathing fire. It was reported to us that three GIs in one of the perimeter bunkers at Can Tho must have been asleep on duty because they were found with their throats cut.

During January 1969, the VC reminded us that we were in a war zone. After January, we were mortared only one day each during the months of February, May, June and July. None of those attacks exceeded eleven rounds and there were no casualties and no aircraft reported damaged.

During the two and a half years I was overseas (18 month on Okinawa and 12 months in Vietnam), I received only one letter from my dad (other family members wrote frequently). The letter arrived around January 20th. Dad knew that Binh Thuy was very close to Can Tho Air Base and evidently the attack on Can Tho was severe enough to make the evening network news. In his letter he mentioned that he heard about the attack on Can Tho AB and wondered if everything was all right at Binh Thuy. It was easy to figure out that he was pretty worried about me, but I had long before decided not to let anyone in the family know about the real situation at Binh Thuy. I figured if I told anybody in the family that Binh Thuy was getting mortared, sooner or later my parents would find out about it. I had seven younger brothers and three sisters. My parents had enough to worry about. They didn't need to know about the mortars and sappers. When I answered dad's letter, I told him it was really great to hear from him and that everything was fine. Years later when I was talking to my mom about being in Vietnam, she told me that during the whole year I was in-country, he would come home from work, pour himself a drink, go upstairs and turn on the network news channels to see what was happening in Vietnam. I had no idea how much my going to Vietnam worried him. He never said one word to me about it, but he knew about war, he'd been in the thick of it during the Battle of the Bulge.

The only time I was in danger from small arms or machinegun fire came on January 29, 1969. "A" Flight was working swing shifts, 1200 to 2000 hours (Noon to 8pm). I was posted on the tower K-7 Alpha, located on the east side of the base. I couldn't see very far into the distance due to the haze that accompanied the low cloud

cover, but I wasn't really concerned with how far out I could see because my main job was to watch the area inside the perimeter fences. The problem was that I couldn't actually see much inside the fence lines because of the elephant grass. Just the same, I watched carefully because I knew that a Viet Cong sapper team could easily wiggle through the grass and do a lot of damage with their satchel charges. Knowing that and the fact that I was out there all by myself was a good reason to stay alert. It's amazing how the human mind adapts to unusual situations. After a while, being in a perimeter tower all day long becomes routine and normal. But, in reality it's neither routine nor normal and that's what I had to keep reminding myself or I might become complacent and let my guard down. If that happened I could find myself in real trouble.

The day had been like many of the hot, humid and boring days of the past five months. Standing there in the tower, scanning the area, there was no reason to think that this day would be any different. The afternoon dragged on into the late evening and per the normal, daily routine the ARVN (Army Republic of Viet Nam) troops were trucked in from the field and posted on the cement pillboxes that ringed the perimeter road. In addition to the big olive-green trucks that brought the ARVN soldiers out to the pillboxes, the traffic on the perimeter road increased as smaller vehicles carrying personnel for the shift change at Paddy Control paraded by. Paddy Control was the air traffic control center for the Mekong Delta. It was a small well-bunkered compound about a quarter mile down the road from my tower. There weren't really that many additional vehicles on the road, but by comparison to the rest of the day, it was Binh Thuy's rush hour. The early evening was the nicest part of the day for a tower guard on the swing shift. The temperature dropped as the sun got lower in the sky and the increased activity along the road gave me something different to look at which partially relieved the boredom. It was a sign that I would soon be relieved from my post and that was always a welcome thought. On the other hand, it also meant that it was going to get dark soon and "dark" was when Charlie came out to play so it wasn't a time to get distracted.

It wasn't dark yet, but the light level was dropping quickly so I used the binoculars to scan the area outside the perimeter one last time. I concentrated my interest in an area a hundred yards off to my right and a couple of hundred yards out into the fence lines. A shallow canal flowed through this area so the elephant grass grew very tall and very dense there. This gave cover and concealment to VC sapper teams and that made the area the most likely route to infiltrate the base. Since there was no breeze to blow the grass around, I was watching for movement of the grass itself. Movement would be an indication that something or someone was displacing the grass. After a few minutes of observation, it occurred to me that the perimeter lights on my side of the base (the east side) were not yet turned on. Normally, by that time of day they should be turned on. I looked across the base to the west side of the perimeter and I could see that the perimeter lights were lit up. In the past when the lights weren't operational, they were out on both sides of the perimeter. "That's odd", I said to myself. By then it had grown fairly dark so I picked up the Starlight scope to check out the area in front of me. Because of the low cloud cover and lack of perimeter lighting to activate the internal sensors the Starlight scope, it was just about useless. Around that time I began to get

an odd feeling about the situation. Call it gut instinct or an *angel on my shoulder*, I don't know, but *something wasn't right* and I just couldn't ignore it. As I stood there I recalled what our instructors in Tech School taught us; the optimum time for infiltrators to penetrate a base is during a shift change when the guards were distracted. That nagging feeling about something not being right got a lot stronger.

Per standard procedure, once it was dark the K-9 handlers were posted along the road. Their big stake-bed truck stopped at the base of the tower and dropped off the K-9 team that was assigned to patrol the area near my tower. After the handler helped his K-9 partner off the truck and got his gear together, the truck pulled off. I leaned over the edge of the tower and told him I thought something odd was going on. I pointed out that the perimeter lights were out on the eastside, yet they were working on the west side, that the cloud cover made the Starlight scope all but useless and the shift change was occurring. He was quiet for a minute and then said something like, "You know, I think you're right. I'm going to walk down the road a little ways." I thought to myself, "Jeez, he probably thinks I'm crazy."

About ten minutes after the K-9 team disappeared down the road, the fireworks started. An ARVN listening post was situated about 250 yards out front and to my left. From the listening post, tracer fire cut a crimson path directly across in front of me. That was immediately answered by green tracer fire from my right directed at the listening post. My intuition had been right all along because the Communist forces used green tracers. As the tracer fire volleyed back and forth I felt like I was in the middle of a lethal tennis match. I grabbed my radio to report the automatic weapons fire to Central Security Control, but I was so shook-up that what came out of my mouth was gibberish. I kept waiting to hear CSC dispatch a Security Alert Team to the area, but of course they didn't because they couldn't possibly have made any sense out of what I had called in. After taking a moment to calm myself down, I picked up the field phone and called into CSC. I asked them if they understood my radio report. "Yeah", the voice said, "You have gun fire outside the perimeter."

"No!" I countered excitedly, "I have automatic weapons fire **inside** the perimeter fences!" Right about then another volley of red and green tracers were exchanged so I picked up the radio, held it up high and keyed the mic. This time I knew they got the message loud and clear because the radio chatter increased substantially. Within minutes, SAT teams and NCOs were all over the place. Interestingly enough, none of them showed any desire to come up in the tower. Who could blame them? Hell, I didn't want to be there either!

The squadron's mortar crew requested permission to lob out a few H.E. rounds, but the ARVN mortar crew got the assignment. The ARVN gun crew peppered the area with several rounds. After a while, "Firefly" was allowed to shoot off some mortar flares, but I wish they hadn't because the light from the mortar flares lit me up like a June bug in a ballpark. At times like that, one becomes acutely aware of one's mortality. The ARVN mortars made it clear to the sappers that they didn't have a chance-in-hell of getting on the base that night, so I guess the sappers decided not to push their luck and

took the rest of the night off. After an hour or so, when everything settled down and the night flight (Devil Flight) was posted, I was relieved from post. I turned in my weapon, went back to the barracks and reviewed the evening's event with a good friend, John Barleycorn.

An investigation discovered that the lighting system on the eastside of the base had been sabotaged. The approach route taken by the sappers indicated that the Paddy Control compound was their probable target. By infiltrating prior to the shift change, the sappers would have avoided the increased security provided by the larger Security Police night flight. All the elements were working in favor of the sappers, but the ARVN soldiers detected them before they could complete their mission. I still wonder about that night. The strength of the premonition I felt was like nothing I'd ever experienced. Where did that overriding sense of the impending danger come from? Was it ESP, spiritual intervention or simply on-the-job knowledge?

As history will attest, the Viet Cong were just one of the challenges faced by the US military in Vietnam. The social changes that were occurring stateside were also occurring at Binh Thuy. An undercurrent of racial unrest had been building since the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. in early 1968. Most of the men on the base were making an effort to work together and get along, but a few radicals, both black and white, were committed to making life miserable for everyone. It wasn't enough that the VC was killing people; the knuckleheads on both sides of the racial conflict had created an extremely negative environment through their blind intolerance. The tension created by the hotheads made life very difficult for those of us who were trying to retain the friendships we enjoyed. When the distrust created by the troublemakers caused tempers to flare, heated arguments, threats and fist fights broke out in the barracks and in the NCO club. Racial division festered like an infected wound in a sub-tropical environment. Long time friendships were severely strained. Sometimes a simple misunderstanding caused an argument. Other times it was due to outright lies told by a troublemaker. Conflicts would start with something as simple as a white guy playing their country music too loud, which would irritate the black guy in the next cubicle. In retaliation, the black guy would turn up his soul music. When someone with a more level head made an attempt to strike a compromise between them the "peacemaker" became the focus of their misdirected hatred. Arguments ensued and the tension built. Meanwhile, no one could get any peace and quiet. After a while, the perimeter became a more desirable place to be than the barracks.

By the middle of July (1969), I was anxiously awaiting my orders to go home. The next six weeks just seemed to drag on and on. I was sick of Vietnam, sick of the racial problems in the barracks and especially sick of *Pork Slices, Canned*. Did I mention that I really missed my wife? That especially! There had been no significant attacks on the base for weeks and the intelligence reports gave no reason for alarm. My tour had been like the month of March, "In like a lion, out like a lamb." Between August of '68 and August of '69 I experienced one attempted sapper attack and sixteen standoff (artillery) attacks. The majority of which occurred between the late summer of 1968 and the spring of 1969. Over 430 rounds of 82 mm mortar and 75 mm recoilless

rifle rounds impacted on the base during that time. While that was scary stuff, it was a walk-in-the-park compared to what the personnel on Binh Thuy went through during the early months of the '68 Tet Offensive. They really caught hell. The Communists did not like the punishment they got from the aircraft on Binh Thuy and they gave it back in spades. I was happy to get out of there unscathed. Once my orders arrived, I became cautious about doing anything out of the ordinary. I had a bad case of what was known as the Short-Timer Shakes.

A short time after arriving at Binh Thuy I was notified that my hold baggage had arrived (hold baggage are items and equipment that cannot be hand-carried while in transit to a new assignment). I was told that I could pick it up at the Transportation Management Office (TMO). The TMO wasn't much more than a large room with a bunch of boxes, a desk and one very bored three-striper who looked like he had been on Binh Thuy for a while. He was very curious about the fact that my hold baggage had been shipped, not from a Stateside APO number (military equivalent of a Zip Code), but from an overseas APO that he didn't recognize. I told him that I had come directly from Okinawa without returning to the States. He wondered why I hadn't gone home on leave. I explained that I was married on Okinawa, that my wife had been a military dependent and that she was still on the island living with her parents. I explained that I'd much rather spend the time with her than go back to the States. That made sense to him.

At that point, my luck kicked into high gear. He told me that according to Air Force regulations, all military personnel in Vietnam were authorized a seven day "In-Theatre" leave (anywhere in the Pacific Command) in addition to a seven day R&R. Additionally, under certain "hardship" conditions when I DEROS'd (departed Vietnam after my tour) I could get approval for a three day delay-in-route on Okinawa and once there, my wife could join me and we could fly home on the same aircraft at government expense. That was some interesting news because I didn't have sufficient rank or time in service, so we were required to pay for her return flight to the States.

Photo-7 Title: R&R Toroku Gorge. My wife and I at Toroku Gorge, Taiwan in May, 1969 during my R&R.



7: R&R, Taroko Gorge.

There was no hardship condition that I could think of, but I sure could use that In-Theatre leave! Little did I know that in taking the In-Theatre leave, the reason for the hardship conditions to arise would be created. I went back to the barracks with my hold baggage and wrote about the good news to my wife, Michol.

In February of 1969, I took that In-Theatre leave to Okinawa. It was fantastic! Several weeks after I returned from R&R, Michol wrote to me announcing that she was pregnant. We were really happy. We began making plans for my R&R. After trading letters for a month we decided to meet in May; we would be celebrating our first wedding anniversary in Taipei.

May finally arrived and I climbed on the fun-jet at Ton Son Nhut for a week away from the mosquitoes and mortars. After landing at Taipei, we were loaded on several buses, given an ice-cold beer and instructions on what was going to happen when we got to the R&R Center. The R&R Center was like a huge bus station. A couple of hundred guys were milling around, trying to figure out what to do next. There was a long counter with large signs on the wall behind it. On the signs were painted the names of hotels that met the safety standards required by the military authorities. We were to pick out a hotel, put the name of the hotel on a form and give it to one of the men behind the counter (this was done so that in an emergency they'd know where to find you). The problem for me was that Michol had already made reservations at a hotel and that particular hotel was not listed on any of those signs. I went up to the S/Sgt at the counter and explained that I was supposed to meet my wife at a hotel in Taipei, but the hotel she had chosen wasn't on the list. He asked, "Is she American." I said, "Yes." He pointed and said, "*There's a young, American woman seated right over there.*" I walked over by a large support column, but couldn't see anyone. I walked around the column and there sat Michol, with her face buried in a travel guide. I can't imagine how intimidated she must have been with all those red blooded American GIs milling around her. No one was trying to talk with her, but I'm sure they wondered why in the world that "round-eye" was sitting there all alone. Most of those guys hadn't seen an American woman in months. I stood there for a moment, taking in that beautiful sight, then bent down and gave her a soft kiss on her cheek. Before we left the R&R Center, we solved the lodging problem by changing hotels. In looking back, I wish I could have seen the expressions on those other GI's faces as they watched an Air Force Two-striper walk away with "that Round Eye." I imagine the only thing keeping them from hitting on her was they were afraid she was an officer's wife

We had an incredible week. We went to the National Palace Museum to view some of China's most treasured ancient art. We visited the Taipei Zoo and ate great meals in nice restaurants. We met an Air Force Staff Sergeant who was stationed at Tainan Air Base. He and his wife took us out for a Korean BBQ dinner. The restaurant was located on top of a hotel with a sparkling, nighttime overview of Taipei City. We joined a tour group and took a short flight to the city of Hualien, where we boarded a bus to the famous and beautiful Toroku Gorge. As part of the tour the group ate in an open sided restaurant. The meal was served family style. The main course was a large, whole sea bass covered with cherry sauce. After the meal, Taiwanese dancers performed traditional folk dances to live music. We returned to Taipei the same day, exhausted. Toward the end of the week, we went shopping. We found out later that we'd been shopping in "Hagglers Alley" and probably overpaid for everything we bought. But, the prices seemed good to us, so we just paid what they were asking. Like all good things, it was over way too soon and we had to return to reality.

Shortly after I returned from R&R, it dawned on me that Michol would be over six months pregnant when I was to leave Vietnam. If she had to fly home by herself, it could be a pretty difficult trip for her. That's when I remembered what the Three-striper in the TMO office told me. I inquired about applying for hardship travel authorization and wrote a letter to the proper Air Force authority requesting accompanied air travel for my wife; citing the difficulty that a woman who was six months pregnant would encounter while traveling alone. In the meantime, we were trading letters about baby's names, how she thought she could feel the baby moving around and where we would be stationed upon our return. It was all pretty exciting.

One day, without explanation, I was relieved from my guard post and told to report to the Chaplain. When I met him in his office, he told me that Michol had miscarried the baby. I wanted desperately to go see her, but her father must have anticipated my reaction to the news and told the Red Cross that it was not necessary for me to come to Okinawa. I was furious; I could have caught the air shuttle that brought me to Vietnam and been with her the next day. In a letter that I received from her a week or so later she explained that she had contracted a kidney infection and that had caused the miscarriage. She wrote that while at work, she told her friends that she wasn't feeling well and they should go to lunch without her. When they returned from lunch they found her unconscious, in a pool of blood, on the floor of the women's bathroom. They rushed her to Camp Kue Army Hospital. Her doctor told her that she lost so much blood that she almost certainly would have died if her co-workers had not found her when they did. That news made me even angrier with her father and even more frustrated at my inability to help. It seemed so ironic that I was the one in the war zone, but she was the one who almost died. That was my lowest time during the entire year. My attitude changed drastically toward the negative. I went from upbeat and positive to cynical and critical in a very short time. Since I never shared the loss with anyone on the flight, I imagine they thought I was really losing it, because one afternoon I drank too much and got into a fistfight with one of the guys on my flight. That was completely out of character for me.

Not long afterward, I received a letter from the Air Force. I was informed that the paperwork for (hardship) travel with my wife had been approved. They would forward more information to me when I received my orders for departure. Occasionally, while dealing with bureaucracies, it works to your advantage when the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. I said nothing about the loss of our baby and just let the paperwork move us toward home.

I was getting real short, but still hadn't received my DEROS (Date eligible for return from overseas) orders. I didn't even know where I was going to be stationed once I got back. Then, around first week of August, my orders arrived. I was to fly to Kadena AB, Okinawa, where after three days I was to gather up my wife and together we would catch a big Seven-O-Seven to Travis AFB, CA. My next duty station was to be Homestead AFB, south of Miami, Florida. After two-and-a-half years overseas, I was going home and I was taking my bride with me! It was just the news I needed.

To be truthful, I don't actually remember my last week on Binh Thuy, but I'm pretty sure it involved the repetitive use of the word, "Short." I don't remember flying up into Tan Son Nhut or staying in those crappy transit barracks. I don't remember much about Out-Country processing or even how long it took. But, I vividly remember my departure from Vietnam. The shuttle flight that I took out of Tan Son Nhut to Okinawa was a very different experience from what the flights that other departing GI's took on their Freedom Birds. I had heard about the celebration that erupted when the pilot of the departing aircraft announced that they had just left the coast of Vietnam. It sounded fantastic; all the screaming and hollering and dancing in the aisles! But, the aircraft that I was flying on carried only a few passengers as it made its return trip through the Philippines, Taiwan, and Okinawa, then on to Japan. I was probably the only person on the aircraft who was actually going home.

As we cleared the coastline of Vietnam, there was no announcement from the pilot and no shouts of joy from the passengers. The only sound was the muted roar of the 727's engines as the jet gained altitude. I had a great sense of joy and relief. I wanted to jump up and shout, "I made it! I'm going home!" But, there was no one else to share the celebration with. Instead, I sat quietly by myself looking out the window, trying to flush all the crappy memories out of my mind. As I watched the coastline of Vietnam fade into the distance, I thought, "*You didn't get me Vietnam-- you didn't get me.*"