

## VIETNAM

### 24 HOURS IN VIETNAM Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, SVN 1969-1970

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So we go out the side door."*

#### 24 hours in Vietnam

**23:00** Sgt Bevin informs me I am to take the FNG as my driver tonight on Line.

**23:15** Chow arrives from the Army 24 hour mess hall. It's the usual fare: powdered eggs, SOS, and shingles (Toast), a special treat is chocolate milk in a cardboard container.

**23:45** I tell the new guy to get his gear and we will go. We don't get 20 feet when 81 mm mortars start to hit. In real life mortars sound like a sheet of plywood being dropped on the deck of a new home. The KA-WAMPs stop as suddenly as they started and Sgt Bevin is on the radio with South Station confirming that we are clear.

**00:00** I am in Crash-2 with the new guy (FNG). He grinds the gears horribly and backs us up violently. I look at him and say, "*Forward.*"

He grinds again and we bunny-hop out to our line position.

**01:00** I ask the new guy about his experience and he says he put in for photo lab but got stuck with this. I ask him if he's ever been in a real situation, he says no, and doesn't want to either. I tell him to get out of the driver's seat and just ride. I tell him if we have anything I'll drive and he can ride, and when we get there I'll *rescue* and he can operate the foam nozzle, then I ask, "Can you do that?" He says, "Uh ... show me."

I ask why he is here, he misunderstands and says, "Kastner said to try and get you because your patient, uh not like Elliot."

I mutter under my breath—*patiently*.

**01:30** Spooky arrives from Nha Trang and begins a slow counter-clockwise circle over the hills to the northeast of us where there are suspected VC. Then all hell cuts loose and 18,000 rounds a minute start to rain down. You can hear its moaning and it looks like the tongue of a dragon.

**03:00** Spooky leaves and I tell the new guy to radio check. After he does, he tells me he is from Maryland, and then says he also knows Arlo Guthrie, and I mutter, "He's a damn hippy." He replies, "Well so am I, but here I am in Nam."

In spite of all this I like him, and invite him to meet the guys in our group.

**07:00** We head back for North Station, as this is the only half-hour a day when no one is on line while we are changing shifts. I exchange comments with B shift's crew chief of Crash 2, and then Bevins tells me to burn the crap. I take a long hook, go to the latrine and pull out a barrel of green-brown soup gunk. I tell the new guy to get me four gallons of diesel and we torch it, sending a column of thick black smoke into the sky.

**07:30** A 6x6 arrives and we get in the back for the two miles trip along the coast to South Station. Out in the bay there are Sampans with fishermen. One of the boats has two teenage Vietnamese girls who are diving in the water. They are naked and everyone shifts to my side of the truck for a look and a catcalls.

**08:00** At South Station we get in a two-and-half tons truck and get ready for the trip back to base. Sgt Kastner asks me if I was on line during Spooky's show, and when I said yes, he looked at FNG and says, "If you're hungry we'll go eat at noon—it's too late for breakfast."

**09:00** I'm lying on my cot. Those of us lucky enough have bought or stolen plywood and made little-partitions around our small 8x8 areas.

In the next area I hear Sgt Carson's cot rocking and slamming against our common wall. Soon it ends and in a few moments a mamasan comes into my area and is dragging a young girl about 14 with her. "Hey you van-ew-wah (Vanilla; aka blonde hair), mamasan calls out. She asks if I want a #1 fu-eee.

She pushes the little girl forward. I look at her and say, "tee-tee" (too little). Mamasan says, "No she numah-one ... she love you *long-time* van- ew-wah."

Carson raps on the wall and yells, "Go on Eley-- I got her broke in for you."

I respond, "You're an asshole, Carson."

Mamasan says, "Me like Van ew wah too...you want good-time wif me?"

I looked at her... she probably was attractive ten years ago but the war, lice, and beetle-nut have taken there toll on her. I say, "No Mamasan—no."

She says, " You mus be fwee-dollah-bill," and holds up three fingers. Then she pulls the girls white blouse off exposing her small breasts. "See—van-ew- wah—she good-young, no lice, no scar—she new."

Then she pulls the girls pants down revealing she is very slender and small. The girl looks like a dog that has been whipped unmercifully. She stands there looking down with her long hair over her chest. She appears to be resigned to her fate. I stand up and put my fatigue shirt over her. Then I hand the Mamasan three dollars in MPC and deliberately drop it. When she goes down for the MPC, I give the girl a five and she slips it in her pants out of sight as she pulls them up. I tell her to Dee-Dee (Go). Carson yells over at me—"Jack Armstrong—the all American boy is at it again."

**12:00** I wake up and go down to the latrine for a shower—maybe there will be water today. When I get there not only is there water—it's hot.

As I pull off my towel there are two Vietnamese girls about 20 years old in the first bay of the shower room soaped up and washing each other. They appear to be half-bloods with French-blood from probably a Legionnaire father in the late 40's. They look at me and smile. It is not uncommon for the locals to use our showers, and its one reason there's no hot water most of the time. One girl looks at me and says in good English-French Pidgin talk, "Hey G-I...both, both us 20-P right now—we good."

They want 20 Piaster's [.20 cents] for themselves. I think, *this is insane...we have ruined this country*. I look at them and they are both attractive, but I took a vow to myself to stay away from this during my tour as some of the stuff you can catch here, there's no cure for ... *and* it's just wrong. Believe it or not, many feel the same.

**13:00** Kastner stops and says, "Hey let's go eat and swim." There is an area in the South Chine Sea we can swim in, if the VC are not in the hills around it. He had FNG with him who introduces himself as *Boots*. I hadn't asked the night before.

We eat chow and as we walk Boots asked, "What's the *love-life* around here like?"

Kastner snorts—and I say, "Well our area has four local prostitutes: Cuddly Chink, Crocodile Girl, Teddy Bear, and Wooly Bully. Be careful troop—they gals got razor blades in their crotches—they will get ya."

Boots says, "Yikes!" He then goes on to explain he is called Boots because he loves Nancy Sinatra, and his Buddies at Davis- Montham called him *Boots* cause he played that song "These Boots are Made for Walkin" too much.

We go down for a swim and the flag is out today, meaning its safe.

**17:00** We are back on base and decide to go to the Airman's Club because the Pillipino group "Do Wop Bop" is there tonight, fresh in from Đà Nẵng, and they sing Phonetic-versions of American hits.

**20:00** We go to the club and order some mystery burgers, Ray plays the slots and I watch the group set up and start to eat. I don't know what it is, but I order another burger.

Boots says he is sorry he can't drive, and Ray sits down and says, "We will look out for ya little guy, won't we Sarge?" I agree that we will—Boots is likeable.

In the years to come we all would realize how much Kastner looks like Tom Selleck, Aka, as Magnum PI, to the point that when we talk to him now, we call him *Magnum*.

**21:45** A fight breaks out because Do Wop Bop alternates singing a *white song* then a *black song*. Tables are pushed aside and chairs go flying. We are in our regular spot in the corner and set and watch until the bouncer, who knows us, says, "SP's are on the way." So we go out the side door.

**23:00** Finds us in my hooch sharing the last of some cookies my mom had sent, then they go back to they own hooch's.

**23:15** I read for the tenth time a letter from a girl who has been writing to me, telling me that she will no longer be writing because she is engaged, and her fiancé is a war protester on campus. I have a special place for this letter ... in the latrine burn barrel next shift.

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*Check out Don Poss' Book Review of Larry Eley's new Book:*

[\*I Never Learned to Dance\*](#)

