

A WAR STORY **Flight to Vietnam**

by James J Blake, Jr.
483rd SPS, Cam Ranh Bay AB
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It had been a boring evening, waiting for the plane that would take me to a country I hadn't even heard of until just a few years earlier. Vietnam... it just seems to slide off the tongue when you say it, but there is so much more to it for those who have been there. Especially if you were there during the war.

The government chartered planes for us on the trip to (and from) Vietnam. The plane I would be going over on was a WORLD AIRWAYS plane. A charter airline that traced its roots back to the Flying Tigers in China in the pre-World War II days.

We were all herded onto the plane and just took whatever seats were available. Looking back on it now, many of the details escape me. But I do remember that we had the oldest stewardesses I had ever seen in my life! They all were old enough to be our mothers (in some cases, our *grandmothers!*), which was supposed to keep us in line, I guess. We flew from Los Angeles to Anchorage Alaska, where we refueled, then flew on to the Philippines for another refueling stop. Then it was on to Cam Ranh Bay AB, Republic of (South) Vietnam.

I do remember that the closer we got to Vietnam the more strained the atmosphere on the plane became and the silence became almost deafening. You could smell the fear and sense the trepidation that was felt by all. None of us knew what to expect when we landed in Vietnam, and it was that feat of the unknown that was so palpable. Every branch of the service was represented on the plane, with all of us destined to go to different areas in Vietnam, with different units and with different responsibilities.

We all knew that we were headed for, "the real thing" when we landed in the Philippines, deplaned and were immediately surrounded by armed military police, who herded us, like cattle, into a small souvenir shop where we could purchase souvenirs for lovers, family and friends back home. Only a few of the guys bought anything. The rest of us milled around until we were formed back up and herded back onto the plane for the rest of the journey. We were all in a state of shock over being *guarded* by military police at the airport in the Philippines. I asked one of the military police why they were there and the sergeant told me that some guys that were enroute to Vietnam a month ago had deserted while the plane was being refueled and serviced in the Philippines, and they didn't want to take any chances on that happening again. That was our first sign that things were not going to be the way we had envisioned at all!

As we were descending into Cam Ranh Bay AB, the base came under mortar and rocket attack and the pilot of our plane had to abort the landing rather rapidly. That entailed the pilot pulling back on the wheel and sending those of us in the aisle (returning from a visit to the lavatory) tossing about the plane. We circled the area off the coast of Vietnam until the attack was over, then we landed without further incident.

Before we were allowed to deplane, these short, stocky guys 'in tan uniforms came on the plane and sprayed something all over us. Then, we walked off the plane into what seemed like a furnace. There was a stench that seemed to hang in the air and it was so hot and humid it was like it just sucked the breath right out of you. By the time you got to the bottom of the stairs, you were soaked with sweat, then you had to walk to the terminal (a large hanger), where there was a dividing line (made up of floor-to-ceiling cyclone fencing to keep those arriving from those departing).

I looked at the guys leaving and it seemed really weird, as none of them really looked at us... it was as though they were looking 'through' us, and seeing things that no human being should ever have to see. It was a scary feeling, but the look was something I later found to be called the "1000-yard stare" that a lot of vets get after being in Vietnam for a few months. Every now and then one of the guys leaving would mutter something like, "Man, are you in for it now!" Of course, all that did was add to the mystery and to our anxiety.

Since Vietnam there have been many experiences I have had that have upset me, but nothing has ever influenced me like that first day in Vietnam - with all those unknowns ahead of all of us. Within a few months I would find myself, like so many others, believing that I would never leave Vietnam alive. Once you accept something like that it takes a huge weight off your shoulders, but it also puts this large albatross around your neck. Life can never be the same after such an experience as Vietnam.

It would be years before I could bring myself to talk about Vietnam, to express the way I FELT when I was there, to understand that it was OKAY to acknowledge that I had been there and that I had SURVIVED Vietnam.

But the grief never leaves you, the guilt never leaves you and the sense of loss and despair is ever-present, you just learn to deal with it in, the best way that you can. For some, alcohol and drugs became their coping mechanism. For others, it was becoming a workaholic, addicted to your job and so enmeshed with your job that it becomes for you what defines you as a person.

The best part of "looking back on Vietnam" is just that--that I can look back on it, that I am HERE to look back on it--that, to this point, I have SURVIVED Vietnam and everything since.

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