

VIETNAM
A WALK IN THE SAND
Tour-1: January- December 1966

William (Pete) Piazza, A1C
12th Security Police Squadron (PACAF)
Cam Ranh Bay AB, Vietnam
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A WALK IN THE SAND

I have read many articles about Vietnam over the years. Fellow airmen and officers just trying to tell their story wrote some, and professional writers wrote some. I guess it must be my turn to write about my three tours in Vietnam now.



I was stationed at Sheppard AFB, Texas from May 1964 - December 1965. In late November 1965, SSgt James Eason came into the LE Desk area, in the Orderly Room, and told me I had PCS orders to Vietnam. I cannot remember what I said, but I would guess it was *where the hell is Vietnam?* Needless to say I found out from the base personnel assignment section where it was, but not what I would be doing over there.

The funny thing about this assignment was in October 1965, we had an IG inspection at Sheppard AFB, Texas. The exercise they conducted was to send a squad with a Headquarters element to Hamilton AFB, California for training enroute to Vietnam. The one 2nd Lt., three SSgt's, and 15 airmen were sent through the whole mobility system to see if we could meet the requirements for this TDY. We even got aboard an aircraft and flew away from Sheppard AFB for 30 minutes before returning. I was one of the fifteen airmen on that exercise.

Now back to my first trip to Vietnam: After having a nice new year's time in New York City with family and friends, I was off to Hamilton AFB, California to spend two days there learning about the M16 and some other things about Vietnam. It rained both days so our training was cut short in some areas. I then left Travis AFB, California on 11 Jan 66 for Tân Sơn Nhứt AB, Vietnam.

As we came in for a landing at Tan Son Nhut AB, the sun was just rising. The pilot come over the speaker and told everyone that we would be making a drop and straight in approach to the base. He said this was because the Viet Cong (VC) would shoot at the planes on a long approach. A few minutes later we dropped down and landed without any bullet holes in the plane that we could see.

I was sent to billeting to get a bunk while they tried to think of where to send me because the 366th Air Police Squadron at Phan Rang AB was not in existence yet. After a few days and nights at Tân Sơn Nhứt AB and Saigon, I was sent to the 12th Air Police Squadron at Cam Ranh Bay AB, along with 56 other APs.

This was the start of our "Walk In The Sand" time. When we arrived at Cam Ranh Bay AB the sun was shining as bright as it could be. It was hot and the wind was blowing the sand all over the place. We were taken to a squad tent next to the flight line to meet with the squadron commander.

There we met Major Joe Herron, the 12th Air Police Squadron Commander. He gave us the *General Patton* speech about what we were doing in Vietnam and what he expected of us. Then he had us taken to the tent area at the far end of tent city so we could get moved into our new tent quarters.

The other APs and I had to work together to put the tent up and secure it so the wind did not blow it over again. Needless to say the first day at Cam Ranh Bay AB was very different from anything we had ever done before, except maybe as a boy scout.

During the course of the next few days, at the beach, we learned to fire many different types of weapons. Also learned to work as a team when making sweeps of the sand dunes. Then we got the grand tour of Cam Ranh Bay AB area, both on and off base, before we were sent to work on the flights. I was assigned to the night flight and worked flight line security for the F4's, on either the ARTs or SATs for sometime.

During this time we had to pull reserve SAT duties after getting off work. One Sunday morning, five other APs and I went to the RSAT building (no more tents) and settled in for the eight hours of standby duty. If you remember, the only time the chow hall had really good food was at the Sunday lunch meal. Well, my team and I went to get the steaks that they were cooking this day. We had just got our meals and had taken one bite when (you guessed it) CSC called and wanted us to backup the PSAT on a papasan in a boat that was stealing wood for the trash dump area by the bay.

We responded and set up by a bunker with a .50 cal overlooking the trash dump. The PSAT went to check the dump out, but the papasan had left already with the wood. At this time a voice came over the radio and told CSC to recall everyone not on duty to CSC for a deployment. My team and I looked at each other and knew we would not get to eat the steaks today. The rest of the squadron, except those on post, went over and surrounded a town and sweep through it for the missing wood that was taken.

Well, Major Joe Herron and the squadron had secured almost all the wood they could find in the town. Several Army officers came into the town and told Major Herron that the wood they had confiscated was given to the town folks to help them build up their homes. After sometime had passed, the wood was given back to the town folks and Major Herron loaded all the squadron personnel back onto the M-35's and drove back to base.

We have all worked with the other branches of the armed forces (Army, Navy, or Marines, Coast Guard), but on one real nice sunny hot day the Navy played a game card that was not very funny. As best as I can remember it started with a fly over of Cam Ranh Bay AB. Only problem was the two F-4's came in very low and did not tell anyone they were doing this. They were picked up on radar and something was mentioned about possible Migs coming in.

About that time they flew over us and as the base siren was sounding everyone was hitting the ground, sand or whatever. The wing commander dispatched the standby F-4's to give chase and they did almost the same thing to the flattop in the gulf after following the two Navy F-4's back to it. I think they called this incident "pucker up or games people will play."

Then one day we were told the ROKs (White Horse Div.) were leaving and we would have to take over their positions on the bay side and north end of the peninsula. We were also going to have to cover these areas without any new AP's for a while. You remember this part: "Do more with less." Well we did it and after getting some scares from the local tiger that walked around we felt real good.

Sometimes we would sit in our positions at night and watch a light or two being flashed in the mountains across the bay. Then we would see a light answer that light from the tower at the Catholic Monastery in *My Car village*. This information was passed on to CSC so someone could check it out.

I can also remember the day that a funny incident happened. We were on an M-35 (2 1/2) going to post when we stopped at one of the posts near *My Car village*. While the two guys were unloading all their ammo and equipment from the back of the truck, something happened. To set this up right you must remember that we carried our grenades in their small boxes and then in sandbag bags to make it easier to carry.

Well, one of the guys was smoking and some ashes fell on the sandbag bags under him. Someone else saw some smoke coming from the sandbags, but did not yell "smoke," but did yell "grenades." Needless to say everyone in the back of the truck hit the ground running. One of the guys even walked across the water on this incident to get away from the truck.

Now this was funny, but the three guys in the cab of the truck did not hear any of this. The only thing they saw was everyone running away from the truck. The NCO driving the truck kept asking what was going on and finally someone thought about what had happened and went back and poured water on the smoke coming from the sandbag. We all had a good laugh before going on to post that day.

I can say that during my tour at Cam Ranh Bay AB, we were involved in many incidents. We pulled convoy duty to Nha Trang AB and back, assisted in the riot near South Beach, and checked out two unknown people that my rider and I spotted one evening by the supply area. Well, we only saw their legs moving around by some crates. We were not sure what we had so we called it in and requested backup. We then deployed and came in from the sides because that gave us the most cover.

Well, you may have guessed it. We came upon a pilot and a female sitting in the sand with about six bottles of San Miguel beer (empty of course) in the sand. They both had a hard time telling us what they were doing in and around the supply area at that time of the evening. We did what we thought was the right thing and let them go with a warning, but we had a good laugh about it.

I completed my tour working in the armory and in December 1966, I departed Cam Ranh Bay AB for Clinton-Sherman AFB, OK. I would say this was my "Walk In The Sand". I can also say that I did not see nor hear a shot being fired at me. That is not to say that the VC did not have the chance to do it.

Being a young airman I was not sure what I had accomplished, but I did feel that I had done the job I was sent to Vietnam to do to the best of my ability and now I was going home on a "Freedom Bird" from Tan Son Nhut AB. Little did I know that I would be back in Vietnam in six months for a second tour, and involved in the TET 1968 offensive ([but that is another story](#)).

William (Pete) Piazza

A1C

January- December 1966

12th Air Police Squadron, (PACAF)

Cam Ranh Bay AB, Vietnam

[Pete Piazza earned a Silver Star at Biên Hòa (Logistics Sergeant)].

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