



Goodbye Sunshine, Hello Rain

Every Cloud has a Silver Lining (except a Monsoon)

Da Nang Airbase, 1965

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For more than a month the sun has not shown through dark bruised clouds. It can get cold in Vietnam. Back home, in southern California, rain was light, borne on warm trade winds, infrequent, and scrubbed the smog till mountains could be seen. Until Vietnam, I never thought of rain as anything but a passing fancy that spotted my '51 Chevy. In Vietnam, rain drizzles, spits, sneezes, whoops, showers, pours torrential, deluge, and a thousand other scourged names for that wet pestilence of humidity, heat, and suffocation. Monsoon drinks away light, sucks away colors, and devours life. A sopping plague that pounces, punches, stifles, assaults, whips and cannot be ignored until all are worn down to drown in despair and exhaustion.

It is night again and Blackie, my K-9 German Shepherd, looks like a drowned mongrel. I kneel down and pull him under my poncho and have him lay down for a break. We are patrolling between the active runway and the new runway under construction. The blue lights along the runway will wink if the Sarge is near, and if Charlie dares...*Blackie never sleeps.*

My vinyl-like rain poncho does little to deter the constant pelting, like drumming keys of a maniac typewriter upon the poncho's hood. Humidity assures I am soaked to the bone beneath the poncho. *Who cares?* The rain, by now, must have tattooed a dozen new chapters upon my poncho. No aircraft has landed nor taken off for more than an hour. This world's busiest 'airport' is broken by the storm. Blackie raises, quakes in futile effort, and moves forward resuming patrol. Drizzle swirls a vortex around a mile-marker sign as we trudge past. Bazillions of indifferent wet droplets, impossible to swat away, catch the dimmed light of marker-number-5.

A C-47, from somewhere, kicks a string of flares over the tree line of the Marines' perimeter. Flares sizzle in rain, illuminating every raindrop like a crazed artist's watercolor painting, then carried by the wind are swept into the storm like fading afterburners of an F-4 Phantom. Automatic weapons can be heard somewhere ... *someone else's war.* Monsoon smothers sounds ... if you can hear it, it must be nearby. But weapons grow silent, flares ghost-out, and the Gooney Bird is gone.

The rain is still here, lashing without mercy, and the night will be long. Blackie alerts toward winking runway lights. Gary Eberbach and Bucky are at the edge of our adjoining posts. He must want to BS. Gary found a piece of plywood the construction crew left along the new runway. He had propped it up against something and made a lean-to to crawl under and ate most of his C-rations before the wind popped it away and drowned his food. Bucky ate the rest. We soon part to check our two thousand foot long posts.

Sarge and the LT can be seen checking posts two posts down. Their pickup bounces along unseen rain-filled potholes. Both make it to my post and I heel Blackie. Both get out of the truck as it is just as wet inside as out. Both know better than to approach too closely. Blackie would kill them if he could. I report my post. They comment on the obvious. Sergeant Kays places a coffee with a lid on the hood for me. Both get back in the truck, I grab the coffee, and they continue on dodging potholes toward Gary Knutson and Eric's post. I think of *bookends*-Gary's adjoining my post.

The K-9 ton-n-half truck arrives a little early picking us up right at dawn. We ride with our dogs muzzled, heads tilted against the driving rain.

Dogs put away for the day. Handlers decide to head for the chow hall. Caked in mud, clay too thick to melt from driving rain, we splash and stomp mud-puddles like *five-year-olds* on our mile hike to the guarded compound. The gate AP checks other airmen entering for ID's and uniform violations, but with the storm his focus is mainly on ID's. He looks at us, grins, shakes his head and stands just inside the doorway of the gate-shack, pretending to be dry.

The flight line APs have beat us to the chow hall. Thick mud clumps from scraped bottoms of their boots scar the raised cement sidewalk near the entrance. As we enter, heads lift to stare, amused, disgusted, or indifferent by our appearance. They slept a sound sleep because of us, *and they know it*. No one says anything. We quickly eat the yellow stuff, the white stuff, the brown-shingles, and wash it all down with the black stuff, the white stuff, and the orange stuff.



Our tents in a Monsoon



Gary Eberbach, 1965 VSPA LM #673

An hour later and I am in my tent. The tent sides and roof are bulging and flapping, breathing with the wind, and snapping like a sail on a beached schooner. Humidity is 100% and the temperature matches. I take off my boots and collapse on my cot. No one has stolen my mosquito net during the night – *there is a God*. Someone is shoveling gravel-drops against my side of the tent, and I cannot sleep. I want to sleep. *Who cares?* Breakfast is demanding I trudge the 75 yards to the John and showers. I am beyond pretending I don't have to go. I open the tent's flap and the insides expand like a giant billows. Latching the flap, the tent deflates like a gasping balloon.



The wooden-plank sidewalks to the john are barely above water. With each step, the platforms rock and sink and cause mini-tsunami waves that rush toward tent flaps on both sides of the walkway. Curses echo in my wake (*heh-heh*). *Too bad*. The generator to the John must be out again. Someone is standing outside buck-naked, lathered with soap and showering in the rain. He curses the rain, generators, and earth -- drops his soap and kicks it, cursing the soap.

Heading back to my tent, I gleefully stomp the planks (more curses). Mosquito net still there—*check*. I rest my head knowing I will not sleep. The constant rain ... the monsoon ... is *toying with my brain*. *Maybe* today Vietnam will sink or float away to California. *Maybe* LBJ and Lady Bird secretly smoke pot. *Maybe* Uncle Ho will *accept Jesus* and call off the war. *Maybe* Jane Fonda will become a Republican. *Maybe* the earth will split open like Hanoi Hannah's big mouth and swallow everything but the freedom birds flying home. *Maybe* the sun will come out. *Maybe* someone will tell me Short is when I have less than 300 days left. For more than a month the sun has not shown through dark heavy clouds—*shut up brain! I like the rain. Who cares?*

Suddenly it is time to get up, get ready for the night, get Blackie, and *get monsooned*.

299 and a wakeup.

Former VSPA President Newell Swartz was stationed at Phan Rang and Phu Cat in 1966-67 and had similar experiences with monsoons. Below is his response to Don Poss' story about those Vietnam Monsoon storms.

Looking at the monsoon storm approaching Da Nang on the webpage brings back a lot of memories. It sent a chill down my spine, just like when you walked out into the night rain waiting for the first drops of water to find their way under your poncho and run down your back. As you got ready to go to work it seemed the night shift was always colder. You just had to get used to those first drops of rain getting you wet under the poncho and then you just relaxed and accepted it. At Phan Rang and Phu Cat in 1966, we didn't have any washers or dryers so our clothes never ever dried out during the monsoon season. Sitting beside a foxhole with water in it on top of Nui Dat at Phan Rang with absolutely no shelter and really cold, words from a Charley Pride song came to mind "*Rain dripping off the brim of my hat (helmet), sure is cold today ... Is anybody going to San Antoine or Phoenix, AZ*".

But Phu Cat was worse. Water standing everywhere, K-9s walking in mud and the guys on the M-60 bunkers had their foxholes filled to the brim with water. Just wait in the mud till dawn when you got relieved. I hated sticking a fuse into the claymore when it was raining, not sure if static electricity could set it off or if lightening might hit nearby and set it off. But even the guys in the M-60 bunkers built on top of the triple tier graves or railroad tracks got wet. Now everybody knows why guys went to our little clubhouse and drank beer until breakfast. I don't know how we ever got used to it but other than that little shiver when the first water ran down your back as you stepped out into the rain to go to post, it just came to be a way of life. Now I am sitting in Phoenix praying for the summer monsoon (LOL).

Newell Swartz, LM #262 - Phan Rang, 35th SPS; Phu Cat, 37th SPS