

**A WAR STORY**

**Return to Vietnam: The Second Time**

**November 1996**

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**Cam Ranh Bay AB, 1965-1966**

**As the China Airlines 747 broke through the cloud cover over Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, I wondered what I would find below in Vietnam after 30 years.** I remember having that exact same feeling in 1965 -- wondering what was beneath those clouds. As we made our descent, that all too familiar landscape came into view. *I really was back in Vietnam!*

As our plane taxied toward the main terminal, the feeling of *deja vu* was more than overpowering, even if Tân Sơn Nhứt looked totally different. When I arrived in 1965, it was one of the world's busiest airfields, with a reported take off and landing (including helicopters) every 10 seconds or so. Now, it was eerily quiet. Very few aircraft were taking off, landing, or parked on the apron.

The first time I landed at Tân Sơn Nhứt in 1965, our plane was surrounded immediately by intense-looking young air policemen wearing camouflage fatigues, black berets with QC patches and sporting M16's. They took up positions to protect us from terrorist attacks. As we were processed, some of us, including me, found out that we too, had been "diverted" to a place called "Cam Ranh Bay AB," which none of us had ever heard of. We found out why a few days later when we arrived at Cam Ranh--it hadn't really been build yet! There was just a PSP runway, a "water buffalo," a handful of tents, an M60 and a handful of us making up the 12th APS, working 12 hours on and 12 hours off. Mostly we guarded the POL and bomb dumps until the squadron of Phantoms finally arrived. Mostly I remember rain, sand and C-rations and being scared in the teeming monsoon rain at night. By the time I left, of course, Cam Ranh was a "sprawling complex" and everyone now tells me how "easy" we had it there. (*Right*)

This time, my plane was met by several Vietnamese women, wearing white *ao dai's*, the traditional native dress, who efficiently herded us passengers onto large open-air buses for transport to the main terminal. As I stood on the flight line, it was hard to believe that I was actually back there, as I fumbled for my camera, my mouth drooping a bit, no doubt. I recognized very little. A rusted out hanger... one of the red and white checked towers (now faded) I think the main terminal is the same building we G. I. 's were processed through in the 60's. It seemed familiar. Getting through immigration was less of a hassle than I expected, thanks, perhaps to my feeble attempts to speak some Vietnamese, which brought a smile to the faces of some of the stern-faced officials.

I stayed a week in Saigon, saw lots of sights and met many local people and had many good conversations and laughs with them. Even now, they do not see many Americans, except for those who work there.

I did hire a driver and attempted to get up to Cam Ranh Bay AB, which was quite an experience. Cam Ranh is "off limits" because it is still technically under Russian control. Even the Vietnamese Navy is not allowed into Cam Ranh Bay AB, I'm told. Rumor has it that the U. S. Navy may return to Cam Ranh when the Russians pull out, but that's just a rumor. I got as far as Myca, which was a little fishing village on the edge of Cam Ranh AB when I was there in 65-66. It was off limits to us G.I.'s back then and was loaded NVA and VC. But darkness had fallen and the monsoon rain made a hasty retreat back to Phan Rang advisable. How ironic, I thought. In the 60's, I couldn't enter Myca from Cam Ranh. In the 90's, it was the other way around. But, then again--this was Vietnam--so it all made sense.

I spent my two weeks vacation in Vietnam last November and had an incredibly positive experience. I'm not sure every body should go back, but I am glad I did. I wrote about my feelings, comparing my return from Vietnam in 1996 to that of 1966. I shared copies of my article from the [Boston Herald](#) and spoke to a large group of homeless veterans--many of them Vietnam vets--about my trip. They seemed to feel better about Vietnam, somehow, when I had finished. They gave me a standing ovation, which, I was told, was a rare sign of respect from those guys. My brothers welcomed me home--again!

*Jim was a freelance writer from Boston, Massachusetts who specialized in veterans affairs, particularly Vietnam veterans. He served with the 12th APS at Cam Ranh Bay AB, Air Base, 1965-1966.*

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