

Vietnam

YOU TWO GO DOWN THAT ROAD SAPPERS ON BASE!

Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, SVN

August 5, 1969

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1969-1970

"Tonight you're infantry--unless you want a court martial..."

I always did my own laundry in Vietnam. When I got there I had several hooch girls offer to clean my area and to do my laundry for the usual few Piasters's a week. I think it's when I saw them washing my fatigues and socks in the runoff water from the enlisted men's chow hall drain that I started doing my own washing.

Our squadron had two old washing machines that worked when they felt like it, sometimes they would only work half a cycle, sometimes you had to start your clothes in one and finish in the other. I usually hung everything in the sun to dry. Sometimes I just washed them with an old brush and bucket in the latrine shower.

Ray Kastner walked in the laundry with his clothes while I was trying to persuade the washer we called *Bucking Bronco* to finish my load. Ray and I were the senior crew chiefs at Cam Ranh Bay for crash rescue. Recently I had been transferred to North Station, however, when we were on base we still hung around.

"What's Up Ray?" I asked.

"Nothing unless you count *breaking 30 days* and being promoted to Staff in January, my man."

"Congrats big guy, way to go. Are you still going to hang out with us low life's here?" I asked kiddingly.

He told me he would for a price, then asked me how I liked North Station. I had recently been transfer over to the other station. Sgt Mosley had been frustrated with me when I went to him and told him I wasn't sure how to finish the fire place grille that I was laying up in my free time. I had worked construction with my dad for three summers and thought I was a master mason. Mosley wanted a recreation area for off duty guys and I convinced him I could do it.

Photo of Larry T. Eley, the night O'Hara returned from Saigon Party



When I realized I didn't know how to put the roof around the chimney he calmly told me that he was disappointed and transferred me. It was not the kind of thing that would go on my record but it meant I was no longer with Ray and Harpo and Kevin at the South Station.

As he signed the order he said, "Eley I have to look at this incomplete mess for the rest of my tour, you're a good crew chief but you're not a contractor, that's for sure. I wouldn't recommend you go into construction for a living after the service!"

Ray started his clothes in the other machine we called the *Waterfall* because of its tendency to over flow. I started to go and he yelled, "Hey O'Hara is back from Saigon, come to my hooch tonight, we'll celebrate and hear his latest stories."

I told him I would and walked away with my wet clothes in a bag.

When I went to the chow hall later, Tyrone Burnett caught up with me.

"Hey Cap'n mind if I go to chow with ya?"

Tyrone had been here since April he had arrived with Harpo, Kevin and Lester. When I was at South Station he had been my driver for a short while after he qualified for that slot. That's why he called me Cap'n; I was his first crew chief. He was from Detroit and had played one year of junior college basketball before his money ran out. He wanted to play division 1 ball and then coach. Trying to guard him in our pickup games was like guarding a Cheetah, plus even though he was my Height (5'10) he could jump up and grab the rim with ease. He was a great guy.

"Cap'n you been practicing those dance steps I showed you?" I liked the Temptations singing group ("My Girl, Get Ready... You're my Everything) and he could do most of their choreographed moves, including the complicated circle move they were famous for.

"Sure Tyrone I am as good as Melvin Franklin right now."

"Sheeeit! You be dancing like a three legged cow doing the polka. Hey Brother it was in the wind you almost got snake bit the other day?"

I told him the story, "Yeah I was coming back from the sea, down the old dirt road, and I didn't see a big green snake up in the road--he was weaving and bobbin, he saw me first." What was it, a Cobra?" He asked.

"No I think it was a Green Vine Snake, but I didn't ask him I just reversed direction faster than you do with a basketball."

Sgt Waling at George AFB had given me a book about venomous snakes of South East Asia, I had read it but I was no expert.

We ate and started back to our hooch area when a jeep being driven by two Senior Master Sergeants pulled up along side of us. It was Moby Dick and Bluto; they were assigned to crash rescue, but they had created some kind of Inspector's job for themselves and were never to be found around either of the stations.

The joke was they kept the world safe from the evil Jim Beam over at the NCO Club. They had on starched fatigues and were wearing spit shined boots and I noticed they each were

wearing .38 revolvers with cartage-belts even though we were on base and not on any kind of alert.

The word was this was their first tours in S.E.A. They seemed to be having the time of their life's... I had heard they put each other in for the Bronze Star for taking a hand grenade away from a little boy who was in the squadron mail room. Stuff like that were always going around, I did not believe it.

The only times I had ever seen the two sergeants at South Station was when a rumor started that Joey Heatherton was coming through with a USO troop. That turned out to be false. The second time an Lt. Colonel came over to thank us for our response to an emergency. In fairness to them on the Fourth of July they showed up with some of those chow hall metal food cans with barbecued chicken and some cold brew on ice for the guys on shift.

Moby Dick said, "Troops, you want a ride?"

We only had a couple of hundred yards to go, but we got in.

"You boys get enough to eat tonight..? if you need anything let us know--nothing is too good for you guys--just let us know.

"Yes Senior Master Sergeant. Uh, you can let us out at the compound Sarge, uh thanks."

Bluto turned," Your Eley, right, Crash-2?"

"Yes Senior Master Sergeant, and this is Airman 2C Burnett.

They let us out and went on their way.

Burnett said, "Thank God for Sergeant Mosley."

I went to Ray's hooch. Tyrone went on to the Airman's club. Harpo Paddock and Lester Rheume were already there.



Photo: The unfinished fire place that future builder Larry T. Eley never completed.

We ranged in rank from E-5 to E-2 but off duty we were just Ray, Larry, Kevin, Harpo, and Lester.

Harpo had a big can of mixed nuts, I brought some candy from home, Ray had pilfered some cold cokes from somewhere and Lester had a bottle of Rum for those who wanted it.

While we were waiting for Kevin O'Hara we were talking about some of his better stunts since he had been in the tower as a radio operator. Plain and simple he was absolutely the best in Vietnam! When you're on line, especially in my position as a crew chief, and when an aircraft declared an



emergency you had to know right now, what type of plane, how many people on board, their condition, estimated fuel load, armament, and battle damage situation among many things.

Kevin gave all that info to you with a very clear cadence. Plus while he was talking to us he had main tower on the other radio listening to them.

Late at night he would get ornery, he had taped an album on his little battery tape recorder of a little know group called *The Chicago Transit Authority* from their first album in April 1969. It had a song on it he would play a part of it in the middle of the night.

You would be on line and then hear,

*Does anybody really know what time it is?
Does anybody really care?
About Time!*

Then there was horse racing of C-130's. It all started one night when we had an inordinate amount of C-130 traffic. When the seventh big heavily loaded cargo plane came lumbering out for take off he could not resist.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen to Cam Ranh Downs I am your announcer Chic "O'Hara" Anderson. For our seventh race tonight we have a C-130 from the 457 Squadron, 483 Tactical Airlift Wing."

"The Hercules is ready and he is off. As we approach the quarter mile point we are picking up speed, past line standby we go."

"Come on Herk get up boy get up you can do it."

"Approaching the Mile mark now, there goes the nose up, yes we have a winner. In one and one quarter miles, whew I didn't think we were going to make it."

I was on line standby with Tyrone, by now he was leaning out the driver's door spitting RC Cola out his nose laughing so hard he couldn't talk. I was eating a chocolate chip pound cake C- ration trying to not choke.

Suddenly a calm voice came over the radio.

Sgt O'Hara... *I want to see you in the morning.*"

"Yes, Sgt Mosley I understand... yes sarge."

Tyrone stopped laughing long enough to say, "Sheeeit, Mosley be laughing his butt off back at South Station he ain't going to do nothing to O'Hara."

Then he said, Some where out there in the bush Charlie is saying, "*What did O'Hara say, what is this a new way to launch C-130's quick get message off to Hanoi.*"

Mosley allowed some horse play; he knew Kevin was good for morale. Mosley was a good leader he knew when to apply discipline and when to let things slide.

O'Hara was our guy!

The screen door of the hooch burst open and Kevin O'Hara came in doing a Groucho Marks imitation. He walked back and forth three times, smoking an imaginary cigar, flicking imaginary ashes on all of us and finally he stopped and turned to Ray.

"SO... now you're a big wheel--a *Staff Sergeant*--well I ain't kissing your butt--what do you think of that *Pops*?"

We all laughed and I said, "Well speaking of the devil."

He had been going down to Saigon for a few months now, we couldn't figure how he got the flight orders but he was doing it somehow.

Lester asked, "What's the news from the world Kevin?"

"Some guys next weekend in upstate New York are having a big music festival--Hendrix, Joplin, The Who, just to name a few, and here I set in the Nam. There is going to be a lot of free lovin going on there. Some place called Woodstock. It's all people are talking about down in Saigon."

He told us the rest of the groups that were going to the festival and it sounded like the core of the Vietnam music. In high school I had grown up with Doo Wop music, The Lettermen, Jay and the Americans, The Four seasons, Ricky Nelson and The Jive Five. I liked the new harder stuff but it wasn't my favorite.

Photo by Larry Eley: Crash Trucks at South Station.



"Sounds like a bunch of damn hippies to me, Kevin."

"Oh Listen to you... we all know you got a thing for the long haired, round wire glasses, bell bottom type girl. You would swim across the South China Sea for Michelle Phillips from the Mamas and Papas."

This got a big laugh. I was one of the few who didn't have a girl at home to go back to. So I had a picture of Michelle in my Locker.

Harpo started to sing a goofy version of *California Dreaming* to torment me.

"Oh Michelle will be safe and warm in California--While your butt's in the Nam."

Everyone except me joined in with the next line, "*WHILE YOUR BUTT'S IN THE NAM.*"

We were having a good time when Ray said, "My first official order as a Staff Sergeant is to tell all of you to get the hell out of here so I can get some sleep."

We left for our own hooch's after some more good natured razing.

I envied the guys who had pictures of wives or girl friends in their lockers, but I did feel sorry for them because the separation was hard to bear for them.

Little did I know that half a world a way in Hilliard Ohio, my future wife, young seventeen year old Vikki Fannon with her long blonde hair parted in the middle, wearing faded jeans, with wire round glasses was preparing for her senior year in high school. She was a dead ringer for Diane Keaton in Diane's role in the Annie Hall movie that would come later in the 70's. She was in my future but not for a while, she would be worth the wait.

Photo by Larry Eley: An F-4C Phantom taxiing from a mission.

The next day August 6th 1969 we went back on 24 hour shifts. The day passed without much of anything out of the ordinary happening: Two F-4s called in emergency assistance requests from



crash rescue, one had smoke in the cockpit the other had an aileron shot up; and a couple of F-5s being flown by Vietnamese pilots almost collided on take off because they started to turn into each other rather than both turning the same way.

Somebody said there was a new movie on base and it was the Beatles cartoon, "Yellow Submarine." There was an outdoor theater over toward the Army Base. The Theater was just a few sheets of plywood painted white and an old projector that didn't work most of the time. I figured next time I was off duty I would go. I was about done with the Beatles music. I thought they were okay when they just wrote simple little tunes like, "Thank you Girl" and "Hard Days Night," but now they were the worlds leading experts on everything.

I had a couple of C-ration cans of Ham and eggs for supper. I actually preferred them to some of

the things that came out to us from the chow hall like the usual mystery meat and rice.

I saw on the duty roster that I had late line standby. It looked like it was going to be a calm night in the Nam... boy was I wrong... things were about to get dangerous--sappers were coming!

My usual driver, Ed Thornton, had to go to sick call for an infected arm. Because of that South Station had sent me over a driver that I only knew as *Knifer Boy*. We called him that because he was usually drunk off duty and always threatening to knife someone. When he was sober he just went around singing Merle Haggard songs. Recently Harpo and Granny Becker had told Knifer Boy that they were going to stick his knife where the sun didn't shine and sack him in a sandbag. Probably because of that he had been a little better lately.

I told him what I expected from him on an emergency and we settled in for our shift with him singing something about wanting to be an *Okie from Muskogee*. He could actually sing, I must admit I agreed with most of Merle's lyrics even though I wasn't a country fan.

Photo by Larry Eley: An F-4C Phantom taxiing from a mission.

The radio crackled and the main tower came on with, *Cam Ranh Bay is under attack! Cam Ranh Bay is under attack!*

This was followed by our radio operator calling me: "Crash-2! Crash-2! Return to South Station and assume dispersed position immediately!"

It was Kevin O'Hara and he was all business. I told Knifer Boy to go and drive slow with the lights off. We were following the runway markers. I had been the target of mortar rounds on line before... we had no idea what was happening. Were we under ground attack; were we in a mortar or rocket barrage? We did not know.

We went back to South Station because it was closer than North Station from where we were.

We left Crash-2 100 yards from the crash station as was disperse policy. This was to avoid a direct



hit destroying all the trucks. Then we ran toward head quarters at South Station, and as I got there Sgt Mosley was there with everyone on A shift.

Almost immediately Scat-2 arrived and Harpo jumped out and told Mosley, "I was down along the perimeter at the alert pads some SP told me that VC commandos have infiltrated the Army compound up north."

Mosley was wearing his .38 pistol and had an M16 slung over his shoulder. He looked around and without hesitation he began, "Okay, okay... we are going to issue weapons and form a defensive line here, facing east toward the sea. Then I want four guys to face north and four south to watch our flanks. Two men together then four yards between you, then two more men. They probably will not come from the direction of the planes unless," he paused then said, "unless they are already in there, in which case we will be hearing some explosions very soon." Then Mosley emphasized that we were likely all that was between the aircraft and VC if they were coming in from the sea off of Sampans, "They'll have to go by here to get to the Phantom's." He told Sergeant McCormick to open the armory and issue the weapons.



South Station was about a mile from the South China Sea, every night Sampans would set off the shore and supposedly fish. We did not know if there were any AF

Security Police forces down there or not. Rumors were flying with every dispatch. It boiled down to defend yourself or die to some of us!

O'Hara was still in the tower trying to keep communications open. Some of us were willing to *stand and fight* if necessary. Others were not.

Someone in back said, "Hey we ain't infantry--let the ROK'S (Republic of Korean Marines) or the SP's do it."

Mosley stepped toward the complainer and said, "Tonight your infantry unless you want a court martial. SP's are out there, but they got their hands full troop--do as you're told."

At that point Scat-3 arrived with Moby Dick and Bluto. Moby Dick said, 'What's going on here Sergeant Mosley?' When Mosley told him, Moby said, "NO--we will not issue weapons--everyone in the bunker now."

I had been there for eight months and had been through this before. At this point Bluto looked up and said for someone to get the guy out of the tower. "Get him out and down here," he roared.

I said, "Sergeant, I don't want to go in the bunker--we're all sitting ducks in there."

Kastner took it further: "Issue weapons now--we will all be killed if they come down that road--issue weapons, I can shoot, and so can Eley."

Harpo piped up and said he wanted to stay out too.

There were a lot of ways to die in Vietnam; it is true we were not infantry troops but all of us had proven are mettle time and again. Dying is dying whether from an AK-47 round, shrapnel from a mine, a failed rescue attempt, or dying from a 500 pound bomb or cooked off 20mm cannon shells.

Kastner continue his insistence.

So Moby Dick said,"Okay... you and your buddy here stay out. *You two go down that road toward the sea* with these flashlights and *if and when* Charlie comes you guys warn the rest of us by flashing the lights.

Ray looked at him and said, "No that's suicide no!"

Bluto walked over and asked if Ray was afraid. Ray towered over him and looked down at him and said, I am not afraid--but I am not stupid either."

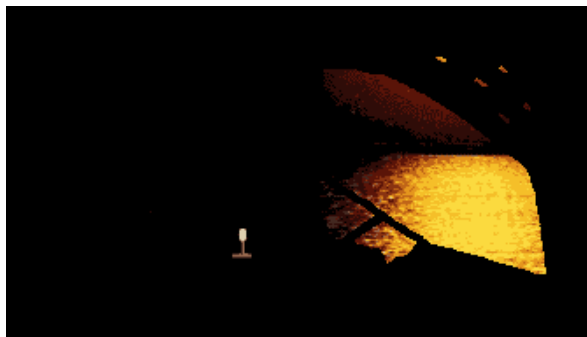
Sgt Mosley started to protest but Bluto said, "I will not arm A shift. Everyone but these two in the bunker now."

Bluto continued to question Ray's courage; in my mind this was stupid for two reasons: One, Ray had proven himself for almost a year on every emergency run; and two, Ray was a half foot bigger than Bluto and, well... Ray had, had enough of Bluto and Moby Dick and probably was thinking we were going to die anyway so there were no rules anymore. But to disobey an NCO's direct order in a situation like this was dangerous.

So in the end Ray grabbed the flashlights from them and gave me one, then barked, "Don't turn that light on for any reason at all." We separated by about 100 yards and as I walked away he said, "Hey, you can run faster than anyone or anything in the Nam... if you see or hear anything get back here quick!"

I walked down toward the sea on the old road that lead eventually over to North Station and found a place to get my back up against. I was watching and listening and of course flying in and out had stopped. I couldn't see Ray even though he was somewhere to the west of me, so that made me wonder how I was going to see professional commandos that may or may not be coming in off of sampans from the bay.

I imagined that I saw someone coming down the road, but it was just the vague shadow of the old C-45 from WW2 that was parked off the road that we used for mock set ups on crashed aircraft for the new guys' training.



I thought about what I would do if I saw some Black Pajama figures coming. I had never seen Cam Ranh so quiet and eerie. I made up my mind I would run as hard as I could toward the compound--but then what? I had the advantage of knowing where I was, then realized *they* had probably reconned this area if they were really going to hit us. I could run but not as fast as an AK-47 round. I realized I was unarmed, alone in the dark on a long stretch of road. How many hundreds of times had I seen sampans at night in the sea fishing with little lanterns, and tonight the sea was as dark as dead winter in Ohio where I lived.

For some reason I remembered when I was little and living on my grandparents farm. Once My Grandfather had been sick so I had to feed the cattle at 5:30 in the morning. My uncle was going to come over and milk but I had to feed. I heard a horrible sound in the barn like someone screaming and moaning, I had grabbed a pitch fork and went cautiously up to the hay mow. Just as I got up the light bulb in the mow went off and the screaming started again, I pulled out my flashlight expecting to see the headless horseman--it was a cat in heat. I laughed myself silly.

I was trying to fortify myself with memories of my youth, playing baseball for the school the big championship games. All the while watching down the road. After what seemed like an eternity the sun started to streak in the sky out over the South China Sea. As I looked back toward South Station I could make out Ray and he was waving me back.

"Its over! The VC infiltrated the Army's compound and killed several and wounded many at the hospital. Flying is about to resume."

As I looked at the old building called the barn where the trucks usually were I saw the guys coming out of the bunker and going toward the equipment. I found Knifer and we went back to North Station via crossing the two runways with tower's permission.

Initially we heard the toll that day was two killed and 98 wounded, 19 buildings destroyed. It was later down scaled to 2 KIA and 56 WIA, and 19 buildings destroyed. The Sappers got



away without a loss. The VC sent America the message they were still a viable force.

Moby Dick and Bluto stayed the night with us and then went back to whatever it was they did. I suppose they made the best decision they could. They were not trained to make a wartime decision like this and were probably handling it more like a stateside decision. It is enough for Ray and me to realize we obeyed orders and did not run or shirk our duty even though the orders were questionable and maybe even dumb.



Anyone shining a flashlight that night could have been shot by someone, either our SP's or enemy infiltrators. This does not even take into account the SP Dog Handler's out there on the line.

As I was putting this story together I could not sleep--it has haunted me for many years. Were we supposed to sacrifice ourselves for the guys in the bunker? Would we have had a chance if we had encountered the insurgents? Would my courage have held? As I lay awake last Saturday morning at 04:30, my wife, Vikki, rolled over and asked, "Are you in Vietnam right now?" Then she asked, "Larry, have you ever thought maybe Moby Dick did not know what to do and you and Ray were the only ones he felt he could have trusted with a really ugly thing?"

I didn't know the answer Vikki's question, and still don't. Best to let it go and leave it in the past.

If your out there Sgt Harold Mosley you still have my respect, and oh by the way, I was a building contractor for 32 years and I have been a state building inspector for 11 years -- *I owe you a fireplace!*

ANDA

WS



1. N.Y.

Thursday, August 7, 1969

24 Pages—2 Sections—10 Cents

Mixed

Cong Raid Wards, Kill Wounded GIs

SAIGON (UPI)—Viet Cong commandos invaded a hospital compound today and bombed wards filled with wounded GIs in the Vietnam war's first attack on the U.S. base at Cam Ranh Bay. Terrorists blew up a Saigon school in the worst such incident since the 1968 Communist Tet offensive.

Two American soldiers were killed and 57 wounded in the attack at Cam Ranh Bay, 190 miles northeast of Saigon. It had been considered so safe from attack that former President Lyndon B. Johnson visited it twice.

Terrorists set off a series of explosions in Cholon, Saigon's Chinatown, during the evening rush hour. Eight persons were killed and 62 injured, authorities said, in a blast that wrecked an English language school for the South Vietnamese military.

American officials said it was the worst such bombings in Saigon since the Tet offensive more than 19 months ago. The injured included 23 American servicemen teaching at the school, U.S. military police said.

U.S. spokesmen said perhaps as many as 20 Viet Cong wearing only sandals and trousers with explosives strapped to their bodies silently cut through barbed wire surrounding the 6th Evacuation Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay and ran through the compound hurling explosive charges.

The attack lasted 30 minutes, then the Viet Cong fled with other guerrillas standing on sand dunes overlooking the hospital and firing AK47 machine guns to cover the withdrawal.

The explosions set off fires that lit up the pre-dawn sky at the huge base.

which overlooks the South China Sea. The blasts destroyed nine of the 30 one-story wards which housed 732 patients. Two of four bachelor officer quarters also were destroyed.

The hospital is "marked with the standard Red Cross insignia" and lighted at night, military spokesmen said. The hospital handles mainly cases of wounded men, malaria and hepatitis.

One of the Viet Cong threw a bag containing explosives at a trailer occupied by Red Cross nurses. It failed to go off.

All the killed and wounded were patients at the hospital, military spokesmen said.

Earlier the military had said 99 men were wounded but hospital officials said the total had included those with "only scratches."



Comments to Don Poss

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