

V I E T N A M

Air Police / Security Police

Nha Trang AB

Arrival and Departure

by **Pat Houseworth**

© 1999

Nha Trang, 1969



Photo, Birddog - 1969

Life, and the war, moved on and I was on my way from Tân Sơn Nhứt AB to a base called Nha Trang. Earlier, I had snapped this photo of what I recall as a "Birddog" aircraft taking off from TSN sometime between 8/67--8/68. As best I recall, the Birddogs scouted for enemy locations and communicated their whereabouts to tactical units, air and ground types. We used to receive BDA (battle damage assessment) reports from AF tactical fighters and relay them to 7th AF Hq. on TSN, as well as doing our other radio communications duties. Our route to the radio communications compound on TSN was around the flight

line, and so we were close by when aircraft took off, and, hence, the close-by action photo. Was it an evening or a morning shot? I cannot recall jack squat about that. But I always rather liked the photo's sepia qualities, which I assure you was not intended by me. The coloration somehow communicates a certain unreality to the war while the pictured aircraft is a somber reminder of the war's reality.

Meanwhile, as the C-130 cargo plane lumbered out of Tân Sơn Nhứt heading north to Nha Trang, I had time to reflect. As I looked out the open cargo hatch to the trees and jungle below, I looked back on the past year and how I came to be there.

June 1968, I left Columbus, Ohio, on my first plane flight, one that would take me to Amarillo AFB for basic training. The reasons I joined the Air Force were simple, I was not inclined to be a draft dodger, but I was not gung ho for the war either. My brother Mike's best friend, David "Kim" Deeter was killed in April was serving with the 1st Infantry. Kim had decided to let the draft take him rather than serve 4 years. In the middle of my basic, in July, I received word that my cousin, Jackie Ray Poling had been killed in a fire fight while serving with the 101st Airborne. Jack had saved my life when we were kids, pulling me out of a canal that we were swimming across, I was a poor swimmer at that time, Jack was an excellent one! I was 10 at the time, Jack was 12, we were in deep water, I panicked, and started to go under, Jack wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me across to shore. I lived, Jack was now gone. He was 20 years old, so was Kim Deeter.

Basic Training at Amarillo in the summer of 68 saw hot days, cool nights, and no rain that I remember. Staff Sgt Joe Prokop was my primary TI. I was to meet Joe again, at Tân Sơn Nhứt. Joe Prokop was an SP first who took time off to become a damn good TI. I remember filling out the "Dream Sheets", Air Traffic Control was my first pick, can't remember the others, it didn't matter! "Houseworth", Sgt Prokop told me, "You are going to be an Air Police Specialist, which means in a year or so you will probably be walking around the perimeter of Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base, with a dog on a leash". Not quite, but Joe was close.

After stopping a Lackland for 8 weeks of SP School, I was shipped to Dover AFB, Delaware. Dover was close to my mom's hometown of Wilmington, I had a uncle there, my off base time was great. However, my on base/work hours were to say the least, "not fulfilling". The mounds (nuke store site) was

my hangout, long boring shifts, topped off by a TSgt we called "Smiling Jack", that I did not see eye-to-eye with. I had joined the Air Force to stay out of Vietnam, but here I was at Base Ops, signing a sheet to volunteer. First choice: Thailand 2nd pick: Vietnam!

The orders came in April 1969. Nha Trang, RVN. Where was Nha Trang? I asked myself. After some research, I found the spot on a map, the shores of the South China Sea, north of Saigon. Several of my squad mates got orders the same time, we went to AZR School together, but I was the only one going to Nha Trang! To me AZR School at Lackland, was just an extended part of my leave. A break of sorts from the bars and boredom of western Ohio. At 20 years old I have the "wanderlust", I wanted to keep moving.

I moved on alright! On June 29, 1969, I said good-bye to my parents, brother, and sisters. My dad was with the old Army Air Force during WWII, brother Mike had got out a month before I went in. He was a Fire Protection Specialist who last served in Thailand. I left Dayton for San Francisco via Chicago. After an overnight stop at Travis AFB, I headed over the pond. Quick stops in Hawaii and Guam, then on to Saigon. Another stay overnight in transit at Tân Sơn Nhứt, I was on my way to Nha Trang.

It was around noon 2 July 69, when the plane landed on Nha Trang's combination concrete and metal runway and ramp. I had made it this far! The next 6 months would be, as I look back, my favorite time in USAF.

My Supervisor was a Staff Sgt named Melvin Sloan. Sgt Sloan was a tall black man with nearly 20 years of service. I was from rural Ohio via the beaches of southwest Florida, but I had found a supervisor whom I could respect, a man despite our differences, I enjoyed working for and with. I worked, as did most of the SP's, a combination of law enforcement, and base security. We rotated shifts, I believe we worked 6 on 1 off and rotated all shifts (my memory is a little foggy, but I believe that was the setup).

The 14th had good living/sleeping quarters, a base outdoor theater just across the street, as well as a special movie house for the SP's just behind our barracks. Movies and sports and news reels were shown late night at that location. Our free time was our own, mine, I worked on my tan or headed to Nah Trang City for relaxation.

Things went smoothly for the next several months, a few mortar and one nasty rocket attack, but nothing we couldn't handle. Then the bad news, the base was going to phase down and turned for the most part over to the RVA, the 14th as we knew it was going to be gone. I watched guys I knew and hung with head out to other bases or home to the world. Johnny Claflin went to Phù Cát (?), Harry Bevins, went home to his wife in Philly, Melvin Sloan headed home and retirement. One by one or in small groups they left, I and others stayed, at least for awhile longer.

Late in 1969, there were 2 tragic plane crashes. First in October, a fighter pilot ejected, his jet slammed off the beach end of the runway, near the Main Gate (going the wrong way no less). Two 5th Special Forces from our sister Army Base were killed as the plane slammed into their ton and 1/2. Several civilians were killed and injured as well. The pilot lived.

Then just before Christmas, while I was on LE duty we received word that a Air Vietnam passenger plane had a small explosion on board and was coming in for an emergency landing attempt. Our job was to make sure the picture takers and rubber neckers were out of harms way if the plane came down hard. We secured the area despite some harassment from a few Army Warrant Officers who tried to "pull rank". It didn't work! The plane was carrying around 80 crew and passengers and the landing gear was shot. They lowered it by hand. The plane made a touch and go landing, to see if it was alright, then came the moment, the plane hit hard, slid off the end of the runway, and hit several houses. It just missed the elementary school located at the end of the runway. If I remember, 10 or 11 people were killed on the plane, near the back section where the explosion had occurred. Most were lucky and walked away. It is a sight I will not forget!

Just a few days before the Air Vietnam accident, I had received my orders, I was being assigned to the 377th SPS at Tân Sơn Nhứt. Once again I was shipping out alone. I spent Christmas packing, and left Nha Trang for Saigon on December 27, 1969.

Again I was leaving for a different type of base, same country, but no where near the same. Nha Trang was small, Tân Sơn Nhứt and the 377th were BIG. I missed Nha Trang, but the next stop holds a spot in my heart as well... but that's another story!

Pat Houseworth

14th SPS, 1969,
377th SPS, 1970

Nha Trang Stories & Photos

We Take Care of Our Own

[Click to Report BROKEN LINKS or Photos, or Comment](#)

Music & © 1998, by J. Eshleman, ll BMI

All music is played by permission of the composers and copyright holders.

© Vietnam Security Police Association, Inc. (USAF) 1995-2018. All Rights Reserved.