

VIETNAM

Phan Rang Air Base

35th Security Police Squadron

From Boys to Men

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Phan Rang AB: 1969-1970

February 1969, I was a young kid, wet behind the ears and thought I knew it all. I enlisted in the Air Force in November 1967, and was now stationed at Langley AFB, VA. I had everything I wanted: family, friends, a girlfriend back home and several in Virginia. Yes, I had it all; then came my orders. I was to report to Lackland AFB, Texas, for Advanced Combat Training, then 30 days leave, followed by a trip to sunny Vietnam. My Orders were clear: report to the Commander 35th Security Police Squadron, Phan Rang AB on April 8, 1969. Phan Rang, were the HELL is that? I'd never heard of it. Wait it must be a mistake! I'm not old enough to drink or for that matter vote. Vietnam, that was someplace I heard of on the news, and people were getting killed there. I felt a pit in the bottom of my stomach. VIETNAM, it must be a mistake. I need to reread these orders, I just registered for William and Mary College. Several other boys in my unit also received their orders. Their orders read much like mine with the exception that they were going to other exotic named places like Cam Ranh Bay, Biên Hòa, Đà Nẵng, Phù Cát, and Pleiku. No, the orders were real, no mistake--I was going to Vietnam.

The day came when I said my goodbyes to my fellow Security Policemen at Langley. Some of the older troops gave me advice and wished me well. It was hard leaving a place which I had spent the last 13 months meeting and making new friends. It was even harder to understand why I was going to a place I never heard of, a place where people were dying, but it still hadn't sunk in. I was going to a place which until my enlistment in the Air Force I had never heard of.

I arrived at Lackland AFB, and reported as ordered. The next few weeks were going to be packed with training, inoculations for typhoid, small pox, and malaria, and I'm sure we were given shots for other unnamed diseases. We received additional training on the M16 Rifle, .38 Caliber revolver, and then introduced to the M60 Machine Gun, .50 Caliber Machine Gun, M79 Grenade Launcher. We fired and cleaned these weapons so many times that I think I can still take them apart and put them together blind folded.

I learned how to drive an APV, with its spring loaded doors. This was important, you lower the seat first before releasing the doors, or your head would become detached from your body. Survival was also a big part of training, along with First Aid. SURVIVAL, FIRST AID? This was starting to sound real serious! Each day we learned something new, something that we would need to survive in a place that soon we would find ourselves. Training was now over. Our Drill Instructors taught us everything they knew so that we would be able to take care of ourselves, however this was mostly textbook with some practical experience. The real thing was still to come. As I left Lackland AFB to go home on leave, I still thought this was all a dream.

Home; boy it was nice to be home. I was back to family, friends, and of course my girlfriend. Home cooking, hanging out with friends, drive in movies. Yes, with my girlfriend. It seemed like I had never left for the Air Force. I forgot all about words like M16, SURVIVAL, and FIRST AID. I was home for 30 days, and then with the blink of an eye the days flew by. As each day passed I watched the news more often, hearing about the numbers of Americans killed and wounded, seeing body bags lying on the ground in places I never heard of, waiting to be put on helicopters or planes for their final trip home. Watching young men who lost parts of their bodies, both physical and mental. This was now becoming surreal. Tomorrow was the day I was to leave for Vietnam.

As my mother, father and four brothers gathered around me trying to make small talk it became

evident to me that they were as worried as I was. As I packed my duffel bag there was an eerie silence throughout the house. It was now time to leave, and as we all loaded into the Pontiac for the trip to Newark Airport. I began to have flashbacks of the previous few weeks. The home cooking, family, friends and of course the drive in theater with my girlfriend in the Pontiac. My thoughts now turned to the training I received at Lackland: Remember to change the barrel on the M60 or it will cook off rounds when hot; charge the .50 caliber twice so as to chamber the first round; keep your M16 clean so that it won't malfunction. Then I heard on the news something that sounded like *Canada!* Was I hearing correctly? Some guys were leaving the country and going to Canada to avoid Vietnam. Words like deserter, draft dodger, and conscientious objector. This played out in my mind. What should I do? I was brought up to love this country, and it was my obligation to protect and defend her. I was going to Vietnam.

As I waited to board the airplane I said my goodbyes to my family. I still see the tears in my mothers eyes. I remember my father telling me to be safe, stay low, and don't volunteer for anything, but the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. As I boarded the plane I didn't look back, because I didn't want to see the anguish my family was going through. Next stop Travis AFB, California, then stops in Japan, Guam, and then Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

As we approached the coast of Vietnam it looked like a peaceful place. We landed at Cam Ranh Bay at dusk, and as we disembarked the plane the heat and smell of the country slapped me right in the face. This was certainly different than what I had just left. We were ushered to a transient barracks, long enough to drop off our gear, and then taken to the mess tent for some dinner. Once finished it was right back to the barracks and we were told to get some sleep, that we would be leaving at 5 a.m. to board a C-123 which would take us to Phan Rang AB. Sleep! What sleep? Between F-4C fighter jets taking off for combat missions, the anxiety, and my adrenaline pumping there was no way I was going to sleep. This was my first wake up call. Phan Rang was the birthplace of Hồ Chí Minh, the leader of North Vietnam. He was the enemy, and I was going to where he was born. Next stop Phan Rang.

We boarded the C-123 and took off. There was nothing unusual about the flight other than we sat in web-netting. Our flight was short and as we approached Phan Rang the plane went into a steep dive. Later I found out that the base was surrounded by mountains and that if we flew low over the mountains to land you would be inviting enemy ground fire. This was my second wake up call. My next observation, as we taxid toward our departure area, was aircraft and trucks damaged or destroyed by enemy mortar or rocket attacks, filled in by the occasional sapper attacks. Remember earlier when I said we were given text book training along with some practical experience, well no one mentioned "sapper attacks." This I would learn later was when Vietcong would attempt to penetrate the perimeter of the base, and make their way towards the flight line to blow up our aircraft, fuel and ammo dumps. The sappers only had one problem, they needed to get by our K-9 Units, and the security towers manned by the Security Police. Our primary goal was to detect and prevent the enemy from penetrating the base.

Once I reported to the Commanding Officer, it didn't take long to be assigned to a post. As they say I went from the frying pan right into the fire. Tower duty was one of the scariest assignments I had. Visualize being dropped off by yourself with a M16 rifle and a radio in a desolate area. Now climb up the wooden tower which is approximately 15 feet high. From this vantage point you lookout over three courses of barbed wire fence spaced out by approximately 50 feet apart with claymore mines and pressure mines strategically placed. The barbed wire has tin cans tied to them so as to make noise if anyone or anything attempts to enter the wire. Now add into the mix "Charlie", which was slang for Vietcong, who was out there waiting for you to screw up. Throw in a moonless night and you have the ingredients for disaster. As your being dropped off at towers with names like Bravo 8 or Juliet 4, you are reminded to stay alert and awake, and then came the occasional "if your tower is being overrun by Charlie go to the farthest corner of the tower, bend over and kiss your ass goodbye," but not before you call in that your being overrun.

Now your in the tower looking out over the wire and all you see are dead trees and bushes which were sprayed with what we now know was Agent Orange. Your killing-field extends several hundred yards. Occasionally you see a villager with his livestock passing by, or is he Charlie posing as a villager checking you out? The next time you see a friendly face is when SAT team pulls up to drop off food, water, and additional ammo. If you spot movement in your field of fire you call it in. The SAT team responds to back you up, but until they get there you're on your own. The security desk stays in radio contact with you informing you if the movement in the field is friendly's setting up an

ambush based on intelligence. In either case your heart is pounding and your weapons are made ready to fire and trained on the movement. If friendly's are not in the area, you are given clearance for H & I Fire (Harassment Interdiction Fire). This is an attempt to let Charlie think you know he's out there and you're confronting him.

Every day that goes by you become closer to going back to the world, otherwise known a home. Back to your round eye girlfriend if she didn't send you a "Dear John Letter." Back to your fellow countrymen who would appreciate that you went to war and served your country, and back to a government that gave it's all to make sure you won the war they sent you to fight, and are now ready to support the troops who returned with wounds that are visible and invisible to the naked eye.

In closing I hope we all learned from our mistakes. I will never forget the faces of those I proudly served with, even though time has erased most of their names. I will never forget or condone those who left this country as draft dodgers or whatever they wish to be called, or the people who gave them amnesty years after the war ended. I'll never forget how I along with many others were treated when we returned stateside. I'll never forget the 58,000 men that were killed in action or the thousands of wounded who did come home broken and in pieces. I'll never forget the MIA's (Missing in Action), or their families who today still wonder where their missing loved one is. Finally I'll never forget those that died or are dying at an early age due to illnesses caused by Agent Orange. It is my Honor and Privilege to know and serve with you. So, to those BOYS who became MEN who I proudly served with, I salute you and I say loud and clear "WELCOME HOME".

Mario P. Campanaro
Sergeant U. S. Air Force
November 2, 1967-November 2, 1971

Phan Rang AB: Republic of Vietnam
April 8, 1969-April 8, 1970

1. I was cleaning out the closet today and found this news article among some other papers I had. I believe the actual date of this was Feb. 11, 1970. Maybe one of the other members can verify the date. The article was published at the time in the base newspaper, which I don't recall the name, and now looking back I wish I kept the whole paper.



2. (Photos 2 and 3) I was visiting Sgt Mike Diaz, LAPD. Mike and I served together at Phan Rang AB 1969-1970. Upon discharge from the Air Force I became a Newark, NJ Police Officer, and Mike went to LAPD.

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