

Tân Sơn Nhứt to Cu Chi... and back! **Into the Wild Blue Yonder**

822nd CSPS, 377th SPS, 69th CMSG/MACV
1970

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A slight transgression and the only worthwhile (pg rated) story from my Vietnam experience as an Air Force Security Policeman occurred forty-one years ago- July 1970 (well beyond the UCMJ statutes of limitations).

The day after I landed at Tân Sơn Nhứt Air Base in Saigon, Vietnam to begin my second tour, I went to the 377th SPS personnel office to report in only to find out that the staff sergeant to whom I was assigned was gone for the next few days. An airman clerk told me to go to the 377th barracks, find a bunk, hang out and be back in his office at 08:00 in two days. Since I was a Sgt at the time with three years in service and one previous, six month tour in Vietnam already under my belt, I felt at ease--*comfortable with the drill* and location.

Once in the barracks and somewhat situated (which took all of 30 minutes), I started thinking about my close high school buddy J. R. who was at the time in-country. He was a Spec 4 in the Army stationed at Cu Chi Army Base just up the road from Saigon. I sat there on my bunk, in the heat, listening to the helicopters fly over and land at the nearby heliport (anyone in the 377th will remember the noise). I thought it would be nice to see J. R. again. I gave some serious thought to a reunion and about that time, my previous training in the 822nd CSPS (Safeside) kicked in. I had an objective. I had a mission. Except for the two mamasan sweeping and quietly chattering, everyone in the SP barracks was sleeping. I could escape. I could evade. No problem GI. Drive on.

In my duffel bag, I had my old camos, combat boots, blue Safeside beret, a diplomatic passport from Safeside and a set of in-country travel orders also compliments of the 822nd. The old set of travel orders did not have an expiration date! I had used the orders once before in 1968 during my first tour with the 822nd CSPS at Phan Rang when I was transported by C-130 to the hospital in Cam Ranh Bay AB. I knew the orders had been/*could-still-be-official*. Would anyone else?

It was 09:00. I got dressed. In the mirror stood some nameless soldier dressed in faded camos with nearly washed out insignias, patches and name tag in Vietnam; I was all but invisible. I had the appearance of someone who had been in-country for quite a while (I had been there for less than 48 hours). Although I was sure that very few at Tân Sơn Nhứt had ever seen a blue Safeside beret, I wore it anyway--thinking I somehow looked more official.

I folded the old travel orders into my pocket and walked out of the barrack's screen door to find the heliport. It wasn't hard. I just followed the helicopters. The Army MP at the heliport gate looked me over, saluted and waved me in (I'll never know why he saluted--I just walked quickly past like I had important business). I went into the operations hut, carefully unfolded the old set of travel orders in front of the Army Sergeant at the counter and told him I needed to get to Cu Chi ASAP. As the Sergeant was looking over the orders, a Second Lieutenant behind him was giving him an *earful of Lieutenant*. I remember the middle-aged Sergeant looking at me like some old, broken down hound dog and then pointing toward an Army chopper that was a few hundred feet away--rotors turning. The Sergeant never said a word, handed me my very special travel orders, and I quickly walked out onto the tarmac and loaded into the Huey along with two guys in civilian clothes and two door gunners.

As I was boarding, the co-pilot turned and screamed, "Cu Chi?" We passengers nodded affirmative. Then he turned to the pilot and spoke. We were airborne. Cu Chi was located less than twenty miles northwest of Saigon and the chopper ride was quick and uneventful (I later learned that quite a few choppers had been recently shot at and shot down on that route). The two young guys in civvies both looked me over and one said "Bangkok" over the rotor noise. Both gave me a thumb up before they nodded-off almost in unison into what appeared to be R&R exhaustion.

When the chopper landed at Cu Chi Army base, I asked the co-pilot if he knew of a J. R. on the base. He smiled and said he had just been talking with him (over the headset). As it turned out, J. R. was one of the Fight Director NCOs or some such title and he was currently located in the flight line ops hooch. I walked over to the small gray building and J. R. was waiting at the door (thanks to the co-pilot on the chopper's radio).

What a reunion! J. R. asked his trainee to stand in for him at midday. We went to my friend's quarters where we visited and drank plenty of cold beer. Then, he took me around to a number of hooches (even woke up a few soldiers in the process) and bunkers (no one was sleeping), introduced me to his pals and invited them all to a party at his place. At the time, it seemed like all of those troops were from North Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Mississippi and Florida, all *good old boys* from the Deep South.

J. R. was a super nice guy from North Georgia, great at his job as I was told by everyone, and everyone I met seemed to really appreciate him. On reflection, I think everyone from private to officer at the base went out of their way for him not just because he was friendly but also because he had some control over the air exit out of Cu Chi, be it for a fire mission or to an in-country R&R location. None of the pilots or soldiers I met there seemed to want a fire mission (years later my friend confirmed my thoughts regarding his authority and privileges).

J. R. had been drafted by way of the lottery and was somewhat less than military minded. His hooch was a deluxe hunting cabin roofed in tin and surrounded by sandbags and screened windows. Inside he had a long, fringed, purple sofa (he never liked the color but reminded me that I was in the Nam), a worn leather reclining chair, desk, card table and metal chairs, triple lockers, screen window curtains made from parachute silk dyed black, reel-to-reel stereo, refrigerator, four-burner-electric-hot-plate-all-you-need-with-electric-blender kitchenette and a two foot by four foot welded metal beer cooler with a hinged plywood top.

On the exposed two-by-fours holding up the roof he had his framed pictures: fast-track rail cars, blond bimbos in repose and an oversized picture of him shaking hands with Gen. Westmoreland, Chief of Staff, U. S. Army. He also had an M60, M16, M-1 carbine, two 45s and a grenade launcher and belts and boxes, pouches and clips of ammo all neatly shelved, hung or propped in one corner. The hooch was big enough for an eight to ten man living quarters but everyone who came in that night seemed to know without a doubt that this was the "J. R. Ranch" (and it said so on a sign on the inside of the front screened door).

Early that evening, his friends started showing up. A Mess Pvt. came in with a block ice for the cooler (he chopped the ice with a bayonet) and baloney sandwiches. The rest of the guys floated in with their arm loads of beer and booze, and three who came in sat in a corner and smoked up the place. Every once in a while during the evening, J. R. would leap up and yell out a remembrance of our times as pals in school--mainly a bunch of lies especially when it came to the girls. He wasn't shy in his comments. Everyone would laugh and pat each other and us on the back before J. R. fell back down into his recliner.

The noise was over the top with stereo blaring, and the yelling and laughing. I noticed more than one M. P. in the crowd partying. No one came by to calm it all down. Soldiers came and went. Some left to go on night duty. Some came in after being relieved. That party lasted until 03:00 when illumination flares started going off on the perimeter and the sound of sporadic gunfire could be heard in the near distance (the Army base at Cu Chi was constantly under ground assault or taking fire and I imagine it was from all of the Viet Cong tunnels surrounding the base which were discovered a few years later).

I slept on the purple sofa and J. R. woke me early. My Safeside blue beret was gone (never to be found) and in its place was some stained and stinking (literally), faded khaki, NVA boonie hat--someone else's souvenir. I left that hat for good on the sofa and went to chow with my friend. After breakfast, I told J. R. that I needed to get back to Saigon (I didn't know if I was AWOL or not--I was still in the Nam). He got on his radio. A Loach chopper was landing and I was directed to it. As I was getting in, the pilot asked why he was flying me to Tân Sơn Nhứt and I replied that I just had to get back. The pilot shut the chopper down, stormed into the ops hooch and chewed on J. R. for a minute before storming out. I never learned what he said.

At about this time, a warrant officer pilot came into ops and J. R. introduced him as someone who had gone to high school not twenty miles from where we had graduated--Gainesville High School, Gainesville, Ga. J. R. asked the pilot if he would fly me back to Tân Sơn Nhứt. The pilot thought it over and then said that he would. *J. R. would owe him.* The pilot also said that he would need two door gunners for the run in his Huey. I was an Army door gunner on the flight back to Saigon and my friend J. R. was on the other M60. All three of us visited via the headsets during the uneventful (other than the aerial acrobatics) flight back to Tân Sơn Nhứt. As we approached the heliport from which I left, the pilot said that he could not touch down or the flight would be recorded, so he hovered two or three feet over a landing pad. I said my farewells and jumped out. They were gone in an instant.

On the way out of the heliport, the MP on duty told me to put on my cover (cap) or I was out of uniform. I said that I had lost my cap somewhere over Vietnam. He said to get another. I never did get another beret. For the next fifteen months, I served the 377th (night security on Foxtrot sector) and 69th CMSG/MACV (U. S. Embassy) to my best ability and never heard a word about my little side trip. After all these years, I still wonder if instead of going back to Tân Sơn Nhứt from Cu Chi (I still had a day before reporting in) I could have flown down to Vũng Tàu for a day on the beach. J. R. and I often laughed about my trip and our blow-out reunion party after we were both honorably discharged and we both got home to Georgia.

I still have a copy of those travel orders if anyone in the 822 SFS might want to fly on down to Baghdad or Kabul to visit a friend.

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