

VIETNAM

Back to NAM

Photos and Return to NAM,

6 Aug 2009

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377th Security Police Squadron

Oct 1967 to Aug 1970

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Sgt William Joseph Cyr

Back to Nam – 8/6/2009:

Alone, I travel back to Vietnam, after a 39-year hiatus.

This is the exact day that I left Vietnam 39 years ago, August 6, 1970. I had been in Vietnam for almost 3 years.

The first time, I was nineteen. It was October of 1967, and I was in a Boeing 707, loaded with replacements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, headed to DakTo. The plane was like a sardine can but full of thick, heavy cigarette smoke. As a non-smoker, I suffered with teary eyes and being unable to sleep for most of the 25-hour trip. We stopped for one hour in Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines, and then went on to Biên Hòa, my assignment to the Air Force 3rd Security Police Squadron, now Security Forces.

I volunteered for Vietnam on another August 6th in 1967.

I wanted out of SAC and the crap related to guarding U-2's, F4C's, Titan II missiles and the nuclear weapons storage area. I couldn't imagine what could be worse than three swings, three midnight and three day shifts, and the SAC killer training on our days off. Even worse were the nuclear security readiness inspections. Not surprisingly, my request was granted immediately, and I was soon off to Vietnam!

First, I went T.D.Y. to Camp Bullis, Texas for one week of "combat" training. At the end of the week, I was supposed to be prepared for war! Ha! Ha!

I arrived at Biên Hòa and had three days of in-country training for combat with M16's, M60's, grenades and also tear gas instruction. I was then ordered to the 377th S.P.S. at Tan Son Nhut near Saigon, as a two-striper, and still very naïve about worldly things. I know I was scared to death! Being in combat, however, was still the furthest thing from all our young minds.

At Tan Son Nhut I was able to repeat the 3-day, in-country training. The first guy I met was Bill Cyr from Massachusetts and we bonded immediately because I am from NH. We both spoke New England ... Red Sox, Celtics, Boston, Lobster and Chowder.

We heard all the rumors of Charlie on base and our A.R.V.N. and V.N.A.F counterparts who could be VC. We also heard of the headless Frenchman guard who was decapitated on guard duty back in the fifties on post A-1.

After training, Bill was assigned to Echo Sector; I was assigned to Alpha Sector, a very fateful order. Two days after training, I luckily received my promotion to SGT, retroactive one month. I then had more responsible jobs including the supervision of others.

Back to Today, 8/6/2009

Why am I now on this plane, flying out of Boston, heading back to Vietnam so many years later? My best friend, who is my fishing and hunting buddy, Ric Courtemanche, an Army Vietnam Veteran from 1969 was called in May of 2009 by his former employer, IBM, to come out of retirement to head up a project in Hanoi for 6 months. Ric and I knew each other as kids because his cousins were my neighbors. We bumped into each other in Vietnam in 1969 and kept in touch. He came home in 1969 to college and I came home in 1970 and, unknowingly, matriculated to the same school, SNHU that he was attending. Ric graduated in 1973 and went to IBM. I graduated in 1974 and took a finance job at our local hospital. The hospital decided to engage IBM for our first main-frame system and Ric was assigned the job. It seemed we couldn't avoid each other!

Ric and I had previously talked about going back to Vietnam after we became Trustees of our University and had given Jan Scruggs, the founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, an honorary degree in 2000. So, when Ric emailed the dates that he would be there, and available, and my wife gave her approval, I decided to join him.

- **Flashback** – I remember my first night on duty, from 8:00 pm to 5:00 am, in October of 1967 at Tan Son Nhut. This was a one-man guard bunker on the Alpha Sector main line of resistance. I was scared to death. There were flares lighting the pitch black sky, artillery booms in the distance, the smells and sounds of aircraft taking off and landing. I was on alert all night, alone, waiting for Charlie (VC). I was wearing my helmet and flak jacket and had my M16 at the ready. The air was hot, steamy and smelly. I almost passed out from my tight helmet liner. This was the most fearful night of my life ... *up to that point.*



As I move ahead to January 30, 1968, I remember when we went on Red Alert. I was assigned to Tower 14 on this night. This tower was near the Utah Ditch [*photo left*] on the w-n-w perimeter. Suddenly, at about 3:30 am, on the morning of January 31, 1968, all hell broke loose. Tet 68 had begun.

A few hundred yards from us, in Echo Sector, Bill Cyr and four others were being overrun. He and 3 others were killed in action [see "To the Last Man"]. We took fire and returned fire from the area of the North Church ville off the perimeter. The battle continued all day and then we were relieved and placed on 12-hour shifts for a long time.

On February 18, 1968, Tan Son Nhut was rocketed with Russian 122mm tube-fired rockets. I saw the rockets come up from T-14 on the Western perimeter but did not know what they were until the impacts scared the hell out of me and everyone else on the giant Air Base. From that day on, and for months, I was a rocket spotter.

In April, a few of us were formally trained by elements of an army artillery unit attached to the 25th infantry out of Cu Chi. I was sent to Cu Chi in



April 1968 and Dau Tieng in 1969 for scope training. The rocket towers became my home for over 2½ years.

I was promoted to SSgt when I extended in Nam for the fourth time and my enlistment was for 6 months.

My diary, which I kept daily for all of 1968 and 1969, documents over 80 rocket and/or mortar attacks. I plotted sightings directed to Tan Son Nhut, Saigon, Biên Hòa or Cu Chi. Sgt Dave Trolley of Maryland, trained me in early 1968 on Tango 10 and I subsequently trained over 40 guys on the three main towers, T-1, T-10, T-A, all on [Charlie Flight](#), which is night shift, when most attacks occurred. We were the early warning system for troops to take cover when our calls to Central Security Control commanded the base-wide warning sirens to blare.

While at Tan Son Nhut, I matured a great deal and learned valuable leadership skills because of the enormous pressure and stress of remaining continuously vigilant every night in those towers. The VA tells me my PTSD is called Hyper Vigilance Syndrome.

A few of the tower guys had to be relieved because of the stress and two guys I knew developed bleeding ulcers. Most guys didn't make it for a full year and we had all been hand-picked from the top of the security personnel on base. I wish I could locate more tower guys than the six that I have been able to stay in touch with and visit periodically over the last 40 years.

I made great friends of my Vietnamese counterparts, Hoa and Kinh. I lost contact with Hoa in 1972 and Kinh in 1973. I've worked hard to try to locate them but have failed. I wonder if they are still alive. I wonder if they were forced to undergo "re-education." I also wonder if they may have made it to the States. Not knowing haunts me daily. We worked, ate and slept in Tango 1. I took them to our clubs on base and they reciprocated. I worked longer with them than my American subordinates.

In January of 1970, I was accepted for the fall college term at SNHU, on a probationary basis. I had very mixed emotions when it came time to leave Vietnam. Believe it or not, I felt that I was going home to the unknown of attending college and leaving my comfort zone in Nam. This

idea was more frightening to me than when I first arrived in Nam. I had a huge decision to make ... to risk college or re-enlist.

Back to Today, August 7, 2009

I missed my connection on a Northwest Flight from Tokyo to Saigon. After 14 hours in Tokyo Airport, I boarded a Vietnam Air flight. The business class service was as good as any I have ever experienced and the friendliness of the staff was extraordinary. I sat with a mother and her two college-age children, headed back to Saigon to meet with her husband who was visiting his mother. She told me they could never move back to Saigon. He spent years in reeducation camps, or prison, after 1975. They love America and she gave me a big hug.

I am amazed as I sit here in the Vietnam Airliner, being served by a beautiful 25 year-old in red and white Ao Dai, drinking fine French white wine and eating an appetizer with Russian caviar! This is certainly better than that smoke-filled, troop-carrying 707 back in 1967!

... Back to the story

I was very torn in trying to decide if I should go home to college or re-enlist and extend for a 6th tour in Vietnam. My decision was made easier when a Lt. Col., whose name I have forgotten, called me in for my re-enlistment talk. When I told him of my college acceptance, he exploded and reminded me that I owed my country an obligation. This was after I had spent 3 years in Vietnam. I decided then and there to ask for a discharge ... after which he really exploded!

I headed home after three years in Vietnam, Tet '68, May Offensive '68, Mini Tet '69, and over 80 rocket/mortar recoilless rifle attacks. I made and left many friends, both USAF and Vietnamese, and a 2-year love with an assistant BX manager, Ms. Alice Huong. My many experiences included countless training sessions, a *Dear John* letter early on, too much alcohol (but no drugs), watching other guys become alcoholics, drug abusers, black marketers, and currency black marketers. I lost my Catholic faith, but took up long-distance running to reduce stress. I learned a lot by reading a book every two to three days and taking University of Maryland correspondence courses. I had endless ear and skin infections and constant diarrhea. I said too many sad good-byes to guys going home before me and to Alice as I left her crying at the airport. I gave Hoa and Kinh Seiko watches as parting gifts of lifetime friendships, and wondered if I would ever see them again. I turned in my best buddy over the 3 years, my M16 rifle, for the last time. I had countless other experiences that bring a tear to my eyes even now.

I headed home for college, a successful marriage, a great career and my son, Tommy, who is my pride and joy. I have experienced delayed PTSD and assistance from the VA.

Post Vietnam has been awesome but never a day passes that something does not remind me of my time there. Vietnam, for me, included a maturation process and an education that could never be duplicated. I accept it as one part of my incredible life, filled with many different experiences. I also see it as the beginning of my real life. When I returned, I was no longer "little Tommy Tessier" the skinny, shy kid who joined the Air Force ... and not the marines.

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I get off the plane and find myself momentarily in September 1967 all over again. I immediately feel the blast of heat, but now there is no foul smell, no troops and no jet aircraft fighters. Only the remnants of the semi circle aircraft revetments in Delta Sector and Charlie Sector remain. They are now weather-beaten and stained brown and black with mold.

I recognize very little from 40+ years ago.

VSPA has permission to use the article but add a disclaimer that it does not represent historical facts and the opinions expressed are my own based on personal recollection and notes and my diaries from 1968 and 1969.

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