

# Vietnam

31st SPS

## Tuy Hòa Air Base

### No Way to be Home

### 1970

by John Fox  
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*It all started when Charlie Bickford and I finished our last day of duty at th. In three days we would head back home; back to familiar sights and sounds, and family.*

**Tuy Hòa Air Base:** It was the morning of July 1st, 1970, and we had gotten off the last night shift with Tiger Flight. We cleaned our weapons for the last time and turned them in along with our ammo, and dumped our stuff off back at our hooches. Charlie's hooch was in the fourth row and mine was in the fifth row, about 6 down from his. After dumping our gear we headed to the early bar at the back of the NCO Club. It was about 0700 and the bar had already been open about an hour. We walked in and grabbed two beers apiece. At one of the tables was an Army sergeant that was slowly but surely emptying a bottle of Cointreau. He had been there just an hour and there was only about two fingers left in the bottle. At another table were two old NCO's drinking a quick breakfast before going to work.

By the time Charlie and I finished our first beer, the bottle-baby got up under his own power and walked out the door-the bottle was empty. Charlie and I finished our second beer and headed back to get some sleep.

About noon I cleaned up and collected Charlie so we could begin our out-processing. We took care of getting everything going that first afternoon..., shots, finance, travel, personnel, education (thanks to Ben Yamzon, a high school buddy from back home), the works. Final out-processing would be on July 3rd. There was nothing left to do but get drunk and stay that way.

The morning of July 2nd there was a squadron party in back of the headquarters hut. We were honored by the Oops officer for being lucky (or dumb enough) to have lasted this long. Then they gave us some ribbons and a lighter from the squadron. We also got a cheap lighter from the compliments of the Tuy Hòa NCO Club (it wasn't even a Zippo). We drank a lot and watched skin flicks and paid last respects to the late comers who could not go home yet (I had finished eighteen months and Charlie had twelve in), so I didn't feel so bad for the newbies-it was time to go.

After the party a bunch of us grabbed some cameras and headed to the back gate for one last look at Phu Hiep, the Army side. It was only about a kilometer from us to them and there were four of us...Mark Sevigny, Mike Pokrjac, Charlie and me. We killed a few hours that way and wasted a few rolls of film. We were in the walking mood so when we came back through the back gate we kept on around the base perimeter road until we got to the front gate, and we took some more pictures there. We continued around the road, past the observation towers and along the South China Sea, the last time Charlie and I figured it would happen. Of course, that night we got drunk again...there was only a few of us as most of the guys were on duty.

The next morning we dragged our hold-baggage crates down to the air terminal for inspection and sealing. Then we headed over to personnel to finish our out-processing. By eleven o'clock we finished that and went to the squadron orderly room to clear out of there. By two o'clock we were debriefed and signed out. We were catching a C-130 for Cam Ranh at about 0800 in the morning and did not want to get hung up at the orderly room waiting for some idiot to come in late. Then we went back to the club.

We were forced by circumstances to leave the club at about 0130 hours-they closed up on us. So we headed back to our hooches to get some sleep...six and a half-hours to go. Back at my hooch I had undressed and put a Credence tape in, and was lying on my bunk ...WHUMP!...what the hell was that?...WHUMP!... All I could think of was EOD blowing up old ordnance down on the beach... WHUMP!!... It's a quarter to two in the morning. Holy cow, we're under mortar attack!...WHUMP!

I sat up and pulled my pants on ...WHUMP!... and dived off my bunk and under Tony's (Cornejo) bunk. After about thirty seconds there were no more explosions so I came out and grabbed for my boots. I had just gotten the second one on WHUMP!...here they come again. I stood up and got between two wall lockers-not too smart, but then I had been drinking WHUMP! That wasn't near the hooches so maybe I've got a chance... WHUMP!...OK, now I

hear the base sirens and I know there will be a posting truck around soon ...WHUMP!... OK, that is the fifth mortar in the second salvo. I step out from between the lockers, zip up my boots and grab for my shirt... WHUMP! Wow, that was close... WHUMP!... Oh no, they're walking them in through the hooches. I dove under Tony's bed again...WHUMP!...That was a lot closer. Then...WHUMP!...a frightful tearing of metal and a rush of wind and noise... WHUMP!...The last one was beyond the hooch, heading for the South China sea. I waited for a minute, just to be sure, and climbed out from under Tony's bunk...my bed was a mess.

I ran outside to see a truck coming. I climbed in with about four other guys and we headed to the armory. I could hear other mortar rounds hitting somewhere else on the base, but it was away from us. When we got there we lined up at the window for weapons, and even though I had processed out, my old M16, number 91, was given to me one more time. I actually did feel better.

I was placed on the clearing barrel for "Augmentees", arguably one of the most dangerous positions I have ever worked. After the weapons were handed out we loaded up and headed out to the perimeter. I stayed in the truck, as they didn't want us shortimers to get into too much trouble. Just before sun up we picked up all the "augies" and headed back in where I was once again blessed with the clearing barrel. I eventually handed in my M16; this really would be the last time. I hadn't seen Charlie during the ruckus so I headed toward his hooch to help him get packed-this was the big day. In about an hour and a half we would flying down to Cam Ranh for the freedom bird.

When I got to Charlie's hooch he was asleep, so I woke him up and asked him what he had done during the attack. "What attack", he replied. I said, "You gotta be kiddin'. We had four salvoes of mortar rounds and you don't know nothin' about it? Hell, they ripped them right through the hooches, and one hit right outside of my hooch. I heard the shrapnel tearing through the walls and flying around---what do you mean, 'What attack' "?

I couldn't believe it. He slept through the whole thing! We got him packed and headed back to my place. By that time, most of the shift had come back and they were cleaning up the mess. My bunk had been shredded by at least three pieces of shrapnel... Tony's never got touched. That's when it began to get to me; that's when I started to get scared. I packed what I had left and we took off to the air terminal. On the way we took a slight detour to see what kind of damage had been done. The mortar round that hit my hooch had actually landed on top of the plywood revetment outside of the hooch. It had missed the shelter we were supposed to run to, just five feet away. In and out processing had been hit and there were records and papers all over the place. There was a latrine in the back, in a separate building, and it had been peppered with shrapnel from at least two rounds that had shattered every porcelain fixture inside. Other than that, and a few other hooches that were damaged, there were only some holes in the ground with striation marks. Amazingly, no one was killed-I don't think anyone was even injured.

Well, Charlie and I got to the air terminal and were immediately told that the C-130 would not be in until about 10 O'clock. I immediately told the Sgt behind the counter that he better dig up something because I really did not plan on missing that flight home. He apologized but said there was nothing he could do. He then said there was an Army Caribou due in that was headed that way, but he didn't know if they had room. About 20 minutes later this C-7 Caribou came in and lumbered up to the parking ramp. The Sgt Talked to the pilot and got us a couple of spots on the floor. By 0900 hours we were watching Tuy Hoa disappear in the distance as we headed for Cam Ranh. I didn't realize it at the time, but this wasn't to be my last contact with th.

At Cam Ranh we checked in and got settled on a bench. Aside from scarfing up some food a few times, and a few beers, we never left the bench because space was at a premium. We actually had to stay in that darn terminal all night because the flight, F2C4, would not leave until next morning. Actually, the time we spent there is not that memorable. The only clear memory is that of seeing my first C-5 Galaxy take off. That's another story, short and unrelated to this one.

At last it is approaching boarding time. When they announced that they were ready for us to board, there was dead silence, and then the place busted loose. The noise was so great it could have lifted the roof. Then we settled down and started boarding. My god, how soft were those seats. They were a little tight, but oh so soft. Charlie and I sat about midway in the airliner, I think it was a DC (stretch)-7. By 0830 we were rolling.

It was only later, in retrospect, that I recalled that I didn't sleep during the entire trip. The flight first went to Yakota AB, Japan, and then it was supposed to go to Anchorage, Alaska, but the pilot announced that he had a tailwind, and enough fuel, and was going straight through to Washington State. That got a rousing yell from all of us---who in hell needs Alaska?

The flight takes about eighteen hours, and we also crossed the international dateline, so we wound up arriving at approximately the same time that we left Cam Ranh. There was heavy cloud cover, but when it was announced that we were about 10 minutes out from the coast, there was a sudden hush, like everyone was holding their breath. When we finally made it over land, the noise was absolutely deafening. Now we were getting set to land in about 20 minutes, and all the way in for that period, it was just as quiet as it had been loud just moments before. It stayed that way until the wheels touched down, and then it went wild. We were home.

We debarked the plane and went into the terminal, and were immediately greeted by...customs agents. Where are the happy cheering crowds? Where are the "thank you's" for doing our duty? Where's a cab?

Four of us got a cab to the SEATAC Airport---even the driver was strictly business. "Yeah, you get a tip...not likely".

That is where Charlie and I split up. He caught a flight back to...I don't even know where. I had to wait a few hours for a flight to San Francisco. They

made us change from "cammies" to khakis ..."we don't want you making a bad impression in an already difficult situation". Nobody really pays any attention to us ... more cattle for the stock cars.

When I flew in to San Francisco, there were some protesters, not many, who couldn't wait to yell at me and call me "baby killer". There were about six of us altogether, two were officers, and we just looked at each other and shook our heads. It was time to leave the AO. I found a phone and called my folks. I told them I was in and would catch the helicopter to the Berkeley Marina.

My family, Mom, Dad and my younger brother Jody (Herman), drove up about fifteen minutes after I landed. At least they were happy to see me. I was beginning to wonder if there was a friendly face left.

We arrived home and my Mom told me to clean up and get into my "blues" because we were going to a wedding. It turns out that my best friend, Neil, was getting hitched that very evening so my folks wanted me to be there. It was okay, and Neil was sure surprised, but I was pretty leery of how others would view my presence while in uniform.

We finally got home around 0100 and I went in to shower before bed. After I went to bed I could not sleep. That should have told me something because I had already been awake for something over 60 hours. I got up and watched TV for awhile, but there wasn't much on. I listened to the radio and played cards for the rest of the night.

In the morning my dad had to go to work, so I got up and had coffee with him. I helped my mom out with some house chores and then went walking around the neighborhood. I ran into a girl I knew, Judy Watt, while I was over by this small market. I hadn't seen her since I left the last time, and she was looking pretty good. I ran with her brother for a while, in high school, but she was much younger then...not like now. Now she was well rounded, and intelligent, and interested. I had lunch with her at her grandma's house (where she lived) and then we went for a walk.

On towards evening we started to go over to the college, but when we got to San Pablo Avenue I balked; not purposefully, mind you. I just couldn't make myself cross that street. I was actually surprised by the traffic...almost baffled. Judy was halfway across when she realized I wasn't with her. She came back to see what was wrong and all I could do was stand there. She finally took me by the hand and led me across. By the time I got there I was in a cold sweat; mostly, I believe, because I couldn't understand it. All that traffic really shook me...not that it was cars. It was the sheer volume of them.

Once across, and on the college grounds (walking through a wooded area) I felt more at ease (and not surprisingly, more alert). We walked around the campus for awhile and then started back. As we came to San Pablo Avenue once again, I started shaking a little, but we made it across okay. I walked her to her door and then went home (three houses down and across the street). I helped my mom with the dinner dishes and went and watched TV with my dad. This was Friday night so my dad stayed up a little longer. I was tired, but I still couldn't let myself sleep. I went off to bed but as I lay there, I kept thinking that the only reason I was alive was because I had not been in bed.

I know I drifted off once because I woke myself up with a yell. In the process, I also woke up my mom and dad, because they came in to the room. I was in a cold sweat once again. That did it for me. I could not let myself go to sleep; not if I was going to keep dreaming like that. At that time I was at close to 90 hours without any real sleep, and I was starting to hallucinate (I guess). I'm sure it was brought on by sleep deprivation, but that was brought on by nothing less than fear.

My dad finally talked me into taking a shower and going to bed. He reassured me that nothing would happen because I was safe at home. I know now that I really must have been acting kind of goofy, because when I finished my shower I was going to shave. No matter how much I dug through my shaving kit, I could not find my razor, so I gave up and just went to bed.

I slept for about ten hours straight, and when I woke up I still felt tired, but at least I wasn't (acting) irrational. I went back to the bathroom and discovered why I couldn't find my razor. My kit was there, all right, but I had been going through my dad's tool bag. I was digging through screwdrivers, wrenches and pliers. Yeah, I guess I was tired.

Well, that ended the saga of my "long night's journey into day". The future would still have some scary memories, and some crying jags, but I had someone with me (most times). I don't like thinking about those times alone so I tend to repress them. Actually I'm not sure which was / is worse-- the dreams or the facts. The dreams are not the same as the facts (entirely) but they seem to stem from the real events. Some of the real stuff is scary enough without dreaming up new things to add to it.

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1969-1970

*We Take Care of Our Own*

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