

Through the Looking Glass

Dave Moore

PROLOGUE: As the Navy began to ramp up for the Vietnam War, they introduced several exciting new programs such as Swift Boats and PBRs that really appealed to young men. However, I heard from several sources that those who aspired to a naval career should stay in the "blue water Navy" as service in the "brown water Navy" would not enhance your long term career.

My year in Vietnam, and some of the 6 months leading to it, was strange in many regards-perhaps even weird or surreal. I refer to the early months of this story as "Through the Looking Glass".

With apologies to Lewis Carroll.

I was serving on a FRAM I destroyer enjoying a Midshipman Cruise as we returned from a port visit to San Francisco during the Great San Francisco "Summer of Love" - 1967. The helo brought the mail which included a post card from my good friends at BuPers. The formatted post card had three blank spots with the critical pieces of information: Detach in September; Report DUINS at NavPhibBase Coronado in October; ULTDUSTA: Advisor Coastal Group 26

(Junks). For the next two months I contemplated a future straight out of "Terry and the Pirates" on a big sailing junk like I had seen in Hong Kong. WTF

The three months of training in Coronado was really good and roughly divided into three parts: History, Customs and Culture of Vietnam; Tactical Training at Camp Pendleton and Warner Springs; and Language Instruction. The SERE Training took place in mid-December just before Christmas Vacation. Monday night was sleeping on the beach at North Island in our green utilities; we were invited to dig for clams with our hands if we were hungry and so inclined. Tuesday and Wednesday nights were really cold at Warner Springs. Groups of 7 or 8 were given a half a parachute to keep warm which didn't help much. The irony escaped no one that we were freezing our asses off to get ready for duty in Vietnam. A healthy amount of homophobia kept us from getting "too close" to each other under the parachute but by dawn we were all nestled like spoons. Thursday night was the POW Camp phase that was much like Plebe summer. About 4 am on Friday came the best bowl of oatmeal I have ever had in my life.

I think we completed training on Friday, 26 January, 1968 - Very normal event. We were each given 3x5 index card telling us to call Tiger 4110 when we

reached Tan Son Nhut airport and everything would be taken care of for us. We all proceeded in different directions and schedules. I went to Norfolk to see my mother about the time the TV news started to talk about something called the Tet Offensive. I reassured her that the news people were blowing this whole thing up out of proportion.

By 6 February I showed up with my B-4 bag at Travis AFB and proceeded to the assigned gate. There stood the brightest YELLOW Braniff Airlines plane you ever saw in your life. Since the TV was still reporting fighting at Tan Son Nhut airport and Cholon areas, I cogently inquired where we would be changing planes. "Oh, no. This plane goes all the way".

As we paused at the end of the runway at Clark AFB, the pilot of the YELLOW airplane hit the throttles. Just then, the music system started playing the song by the Vince Guaraldi Trio - "Cast Your Fate to the Wind". I took note that I was sitting in lucky seat 13F.

We landed at Tan Son Nhut on 8 February late in the afternoon or early evening. Forget dialing Tiger 4110. We were told the last convoy of the day for downtown had left but we were welcome to settle onto any concrete of our choosing for the night. Luckily, a few hours later a convoy did show up and we went

downtown. The BOQ bed was all one could hope for. The employees had not returned to work since Tet broke out but we were welcome to make our own sandwiches in the kitchen. We were also assigned watches on the roof (and perhaps elsewhere). There was no longer fighting evident in the city but at night from the roof you could still see lots of parachute flares and some tracer rounds in the night on the outskirts of Saigon. The streets were still pretty empty of traffic.

A day or so later, I received a phone call from my old plebe summer roommate, Ed Hutcheson, the Protocol Officer at COMNAVFORV. I was invited to a Sunday noon lunch and he would pick me up but I needed to wear my khakis. He took me to The International House (commonly called I-House) which is run by the State Department for their own purposes. We walked into a very large room with lights dimmed with many candles burning in candelabras. Long tables with white linen, vases with flowers, massive amounts of food in silver serving pieces, a group of 4 or 5 musicians playing soft music. And floating around the room were gossamer visions of lovely Vietnamese ladies wearing their traditional ao-dai dresses. Sure beat ham sandwiches in the BOQ.

At COMNAVFORV Hqtrs I met the Senior Naval Advisor, had several briefings, received green utility

uniforms, black beret, an M-16 and lots of "web gear". One briefer said: "You noticed that we gave you lots of web gear. The USN has the coastline under control with their Swift Boats and other units. What we now want you to do is go inland." Mentally I checked the front of my uniform to make sure it still said US Navy.

I flew to NhaTang in a C-7A Caribou so I could meet my immediate boss, a Navy Commander who ran the Second Coastal Zone and its Coastal Surveillance Center and all Navy advisors therein. I stayed in the BOQ there for one night. On the second floor of the BOQ was a bar/lounge where I sought refreshment. An officer brought out a cassette tape recorder with a tape for me to listen to. It seems that located kitty-corner behind the BOQ was a nice house with large lot where the Korean Army general lived in charge of security in that part of Vietnam. During Tet the VC rushed into the house to kill the general but he was not there. The Koreans surrounded the house with the VC inside and completely dismantled the house with small arms fire. The officers in the BOQ just kept on partying and making recordings of the action. As I listened to the tape, the gun fire was amazing but so was the sound of people ordering more drinks while the Beatles "Penny Lane" was playing in the background.

I hitched a ride in the back of a 2-1/2 Ton truck to Cam Ranh Market Time Base at the most southern tip of the peninsula. There on the beach near the PCF pier was our EN2 waiting for me. I said hello - let's go out to Binh Ba Island. He responded that a new laundry facility had just opened on the Market Time Base and the BM2 would be back shortly with the first load of fresh laundry. He soon arrived but there was another delay. Every other Wednesday our four man advisor team was visited by a Red Cross girl(s). Sure enough, in a few minutes this cute Red Cross girl arrives with a very nice pineapple upside down sheet cake. All right ! ! ! ! The four of us got in our very own Coastal Group 26 Advisor boat. It was a US Army 12-14' plastic boat which I believe was designed for crossing rivers in Europe once before being thrown away. The plastic is very thin. There are no seats or thwarts. The engine was about 5 or 10 horsepower so our one mile trip was quite leisurely.

As we rounded a rocky point, there stood my new home dominated by two large, two-story yellow stucco buildings with Mediterranean red tile roofs. Built by the French Army prior to WW2, they featured high ceilings and a wonderful balcony that wrapped completely around the second floor. The four man advisor team had one half of the entire second floor. We could have stabled 6 horses or cows inside

if we had wanted to (and coaxed then up the stairs). Below us were one room apartments, no windows, for the VNN sailors and their families. We had no running water; the entire base survived off a garden hose at the PCF Pier. But we had a propane stove and a kerosene refrigerator that was able to keep our sodas and beer cold. The four of us took turns with all domestic chores. The base had a big 40 KW generator the Navy got from the USAF but it had never worked. We also had a 10 KW generator that provided partial power for the VN officers in their Headquarters building and the Advisors and the family community center with the only TV. Coleman lanterns provided much of our lighting. The advisors also had their own outhouse nearby painted haze gray and the door featured a lock and a crescent moon.

The VN personnel on the base always gave us knowing smiles whenever the Red Cross girls visited because they well knew how the French did things. In fact, there were three small brothel building beside the (ungated) main gate in the same Mediterranean architecture as our main buildings. Each of the abandoned brothels was barely big enough for a card table and three cots. I do not think the VNs believed our protestations of innocence.

Our small family of 4 advisors was rounded out by

three dogs. My predecessor was a conservative person from the South and he named the dogs: the black and white dog was called Great Society; the brindle female was Eleanor Roosevelt, and the yellow dog was named Stokely Carmichael. Many months later we adopted a black puppy we named Stewpot. They were wonderful watchdogs who barked and growled at any VN visitors to our abode. They did not like the Vietnamese especially when the base dog butcher who lived below us would butcher a dog about once a month - a slow and noisy procedure.

The large building I lived in is still standing and can be seen in the photographs of Binh Ba Island (Cam Ranh Bay) on Google Earth.