

MY SIX-BY GOT STOLEN!

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391st TFS & 12th AMS
Cam Rahn AB 1966



PREFACE: I see that Ev Sherwood is looking for stories for the December Log so I figure I'd better get on it while I'm still capable of putting a few words together. After all, 2009 was my 50th Wedding Anniversary and this is my 51st year since enlisting in the USAF in Indianapolis, Indiana and starting my big adventure.

JUST A CONTINUATION: This story relates to my "Look Mom, I'm an Auxiliary Motor Pool Driver" story posted some time back. I don't know how many trips I took to Nha Trang and back, returning with loads of corrugated asphalt roofing for the beautiful hootches we built on our tent sites.

NHA TRANG, GARDEN CITY BY THE SEA: I hadn't been at Cam Rahn too long when I was afforded a trip to Nha Trang by C-130. I don't think it took more than 15 minutes in the air to get there and after landing at the air base near Van Tau. I made my way to town and found an interesting hotel to stay in. Seems like I actually had a room in that one. I wandered around and bought a couple things to send home to the wife including one of those elephant hide purses that were everywhere. I can't remember what else I bought for her and then left the stuff in the room (big mistake) and headed out to see if there were any bars in the city. Ha! Are you kidding? Of course there were bars and restaurants there and I soon had a cold one, well, maybe two or three. Sometime I'll tell you about the 800P lobster dinner.

THIS IS A WAR ZONE: I was standing outside one of the bars with a 33 in my hand. That's bah-moi-bah, local Viet Nam beer or "bom de bom" for you insiders. All I can say about that beer is you needed to drink it COLD. Man, you talk about foul tasting if it was warm.

SPEAKING OF 33: I was first exposed to 33 at the Papillon (Butterfly) Bar in Saigon in 64 where we would play the bar girls hands of gin to see who would pay for the drink. Guess who won most often. The price was 15P, about 20 cents at the official rate and less than 15 cents at the black market rate. I guess the French called them Piastre, the Vietnamese called them Dong,

and GIs called them “P”, of course. For many years, I carried a shoulder type patch in my wallet that looked like the neck label from a 33 bottle. I think it was Bill Ferguson that gave me a couple of those as souvenirs. I had been so rudely awakened from my bunk at Naha AB and sent to Saigon – Tan Son Nhut to celebrate the Gulf of Tonkin event with a half dozen F-102s in August of 64. At one of the on-base gift shops, I had one sewn on my “Go to Hell” Aussie style hat we all wore and the other I carried with me to show off.

BACK TO MY STORY: Yes, I have digressed. I was chatting with one of the 12th AMS guys whose name I have forgotten when there was this very loud KA-BOOM! There on the side of a very near hill was an A-1E, standing on its nose, firing rockets at some VC in the palm trees. What a war! We’re standing in the street in civilian clothes drinking beer and eyeballing the girls passing by and we have front row seats to a rocket shoot! I remember later seeing those VNAF pilots sitting high, taxiing those A-1s and I’m thinking they’ve gotta’ be sitting on a couple phone books to be that high up. I think that’s the closest I ever got to the real war unless you count the “Rubber Plantation”. Of course, when I returned to my hotel room, the stuff I had bought earlier in the day had been stolen. Just another lesson of life learned. I never stayed at that hotel again, nor did I ever leave anything of value in a hotel in the Far East.

I’M AN EXPERIENCED SIX-BY DRIVER NOW: Not only had I become an experienced six-by driver, but also I carried a 45 and was in command of the coveted “shotgun” position in the truck. This was a valuable commodity, indeed. We would leave at o-dark-thirty on Saturday morning and return from Nha Trang on Sunday. By the third or fourth trip, I was familiar with the routine and the various scenic parts of the route to Nha Trang. We would cross the pontoon bridge and head up to Highway #1 and turn right. The ROC Marine camp was five or six miles from the turn off, as I remember, and then we came to the last ROC outpost we called “Checkpoint Charlie”. From that point on, we were paying attention to our surroundings. I don’t know what they called the dilapidated bridge we crossed one vehicle at a time, but you could see water through the holes in the concrete in many places. I guess it was OK, we all made it every time I went on convoy.

ABOUT ONE SHOTGUN: I worked in the WCS flight line section with guys from the 391st who came from Holloman and from the 12th AMS out of McDill. One of my favorite guys from the 12th was Leon T. Johnson, a tall, lanky, black three striper that was 6 foot 5 or so and was good to work with because he could open the radome on an F4 without a ladder or crew chief stand. He told some good stories too. He used to call me “Little John” and said he liked to work with me because I was a good troubleshooter. L.T. had an affinity for poker and got into some real high money sessions. I think L.T. was the reason that they limited our purchase of money orders to send home to the amount of our basic pay. He told me that he had sent enough home to buy a new Chevy Impala and then some.

HOW MUCH DONG DO I NEED: L.T. asked me if he could be shotgun on the next trip and how many P should he buy. I told him that the probably shouldn’t carry much more than forty bucks or so of P because somebody might relieve him of his money if he got in a bad situation in Nha Trang. He said that he understood and on the morning we were preparing to convoy out, I asked him if he had bought some P. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll that would choke a bull elephant. He must have had five hundred to a thousand dollars in that roll. I

scolded him and he said “Little John, don’t worry your self about it, I just might find a poker game out on the base and that’s as far as I’ll get to town.” L.T. did return with the convoy but he never said whether he had been successful or not. It didn’t dawn on me until later that he probably didn’t get into a game on base because he wouldn’t have needed P for that.

THIS COULD BE DANGEROUS: Continuing on. Then, we would pass the infamous “Rubber Plantation”. We would wind up those lumbering six-bys to about 50 and roll past in as big a hurry as we could muster. We had Security Police jeep escorts, front and back, packing 50 calibers, even so, I wasn’t hoping to stop for any reason. On one trip, one of the trucks turned up with a bullet hole in the driver’s door and the driver didn’t even know when it happened. Another time we zoomed by a couple of dudes in black pajamas and coolie hats walking along the side of the road and they just waved. They were just farmers checking the rice paddies. Sure they were. I seem to remember one was carrying a rifle balanced on his shoulder, holding the barrel forward with his right hand and he just waved with the other as he boldly walked. The real danger was not with the VC and the rubber plantation. It was all the passengers riding untethered in the back of the trucks. I remember one event where the convoy stopped and one of the drivers didn’t get his truck stopped and ran into the rear of the truck in front. It bruised up a couple of the troops in back and one TSgt had a large bump and a bad cut on the head. If I remember right, we left the truck on the side of the road and all I know is that it was not there when we came back through on Sunday. I suppose the motor pool folks retrieved it. The SPs investigated several folks along the road on various trips. I think I have pictures of one of the stops on the www.wd7f.com/rvn66.htm website.

I’VE GOT IT FIGURED OUT NOW: We would roll into Nha Trang and head for the MAC-V compound where we would leave the trucks. If things went right, we would get there by 8 or 9 in the morning and be turned loose until Sunday about noon. On my first convoy trip I found a villa that had been converted to a hotel by some enterprising person and it cost about 500P for the night. There were about three individual rooms in the place and the rest of the big rooms had been divided off with wire and curtained with sheets. It was first-come-first-serve for the rooms so I figured out how to peel off from the convoy when I got to the villa’s street and make a quick stop to secure a room. I would bring a case of Falstaff or whatever beer that was available and Mama-san would take that as payment for the room. I think a case of “Fallflat” was about \$2.40 at the time so it was a good deal all around. And, to make things better, I was allowed to drink a few of the beers while I was there. How about that? Then I would run out and drive the truck to the compound and all was well. One of the side benefits of the trip was the COLA chow hall at the MAC-V compound. It cost a buck or so for a meal, but it was great food. I guess the civilian contractors needed a nice place to eat since they didn’t make much money.

I DIGRESS AGAIN: We had a pretty good time at “The Villa” hotel. After a couple of trips, it became a bit old to bar hop and spend money. I was trying to save money to buy a good stereo system when R&R time came around. So, I (we) would set around on the big front porch of the villa, in our skivvies, drink beer and harass the girls who came by wanting to do business. There were young, 12 or 14 year old, boys who were pimping their “sisters”, you know the routine. They would stand outside the locked gates and solicit. They were ornery little guys and didn’t like our teasing and the way we harassed the business ladies. The villa was in a walled compound and the gates were locked at dusk, so someone would have to open the gate to let

them in. That was probably a good thing, remembering the elephant hide purse. You know that all the broken glass in the world imbedded in the top of the walls wouldn't stop those "steely-boys", a name I picked up in Okinawa. Some of the Army guys that stayed there were pretty crude and would get a bit rough and try to make the girls display her wares. Not that Air Force troops were much less crude, I remember one of ours playing "You show me yours and I'll show you mine!" with mixed results. He showed his, she didn't. We didn't get too carried away because on occasion, a couple QC (Qam Cua?) people's police would walk by. The QC was kind of like "La Guardia Civil", Spain's state police made famous by Franko. Long before I got to Spain, I had heard "You don't fxxk with the Guardia." Same rule applied here, therefore, most of the time it was peaceful at the villa.

ON WITH THE STORY: On one of the trips, I had peeled off to secure my room at the villa and when we got there, we all jumped out and ran in to dicker with Mama-san. I couldn't have been inside five minutes and when I came out, MY SIX-BY WAS MISSING! Where in hell had my six-by gone? I asked everybody I could find and nobody knew anything. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. I must have been in the hotel for much longer than 5 minutes. No, I had witnesses who went in with me and if we could find them would testify in my behalf. I'm so glad I was not stupid enough to have left my weapon in the truck and neither had my shotgun or the guys in the back. But now, I had a real problem.

LOGISTICS SUPPORT: There was this Air Force Logistics NCO who was responsible for the trucks getting loaded each trip and I figured I had better enlist his help. This guy was a SSgt who had been there for a long time. He was there during the assistance part of the Viet Nam campaign and even had his family there. I don't know how he had managed to still be there and arranged for his family to go back to the states, but there he was. He had a blue Chevy pickup with a bright blue & yellow trimmed tonneau cover to run around in and an office with very nice looking Vietnamese lady workers dressed to the nines. The poor guy just wanted to do well for his country with his sacrifice. Right. He would brag that his logistic equivalent in the Army was a Major. He told me that the process of buying the roofing materials made near Saigon required systematic bribing of the VC to get it all the way to Nha Trang. Paul Harvey would have told "The Rest of the Story."

THE BIG SEARCH: I made my way to the logistics office and reported to the Sarge that my six-by was missing and he said, "We had better find it soon because by tomorrow morning it will be painted canary yellow and on it's way to Laos!" I could see my stripes flying off with the six-by. We must have driven every street in Nha Trang and after an hour or so we stopped by the Military Police HQ to report the missing truck and to ask for help. Then we went out and around for a couple more hours without success. I was feeling pretty low by that time.

A CLUE: We finally gave up and returned to the MP HQ to see if anyone had reported anything. The NCOIC and my SSgt were discussing it all when a very young Army MP approached and asked what we were talking about. We told him and he said that he had seen a six-by being towed on Beach Road heading toward the air base early that morning. Wow! Could it be? We headed straight to the base and when we got there went directly to the motor

pool. And there it was, my beautiful six-by sitting there in the lot. I went to dispatch and asked the sergeant about the truck. He said that there had been a call that morning of a disabled vehicle and a tow truck had been sent to retrieve it.

RELIEF: It's a good thing that I was able to control my temper, but I was still showing some displeasure. I asked him what was supposed to be wrong with the truck and he says that it had a dead battery. Damn! I told him it didn't have a dead battery and it had been running just fine. The logistics guy assured him that it was my truck so I went to start it and get the heck out of there. Well, you ain't gonna' believe it, it DID have a DEAD BATTERY! That was just plain crazy! I still can't believe it happened. I had to wait an hour for the motor pool troops to put in a new battery, however, that wasn't a problem for me. I was a happy camper by then and even if it did eat into a few hours of my party time, I really enjoyed that drive back to the MACV compound.

I WONDER: You can bet that I was much more careful in subsequent trips to Nha Trang. The burning question is, what happened to the vehicle that actually was disabled and suppose to have been picked up that morning? That vehicle was probably painted canary yellow and went to Cambodia.