

## Standing Guard Duty! Really?

by John P Slusser, SMSgt USAF Retired



On the 8<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1964, I was stationed at Naha Air Base on the Island of Okinawa and had been there for about a year. Naha was my first overseas assignment. It was quite a change for me, being a farm boy who joined the Air Force to “see the world”. Prior to Naha, I had the good fortune to have spent over four years at Lowry AFB, Colorado as an instructor of Fundamentals of Electronics. I was married and had two little boys and they were waiting back in Illinois. So, by the time I arrived at Naha, I was about to turn 23 and was experienced in the ways of the world. Right! I thought I did, but you know how that goes.

Anyway, I had pretty much settled down and had a good handle on the flight line maintenance concept and was as good as anyone at troubleshooting problems in the F-102 Weapons Control System. One thing about the USAF as opposed to the Army or Marines is that my job was more about maintaining and repairing aircraft than it was about carrying and using a weapon. You know what I mean, training to no visible end, ad-nauseam, humping it through mud and jungle with a back-pack of gear and maybe shooting at someone on occasion. But wait, I’m getting ahead of my story.

That morning, much too early, like 02:00, the alarm was sounded and all of us poor grunts that lived in the barracks had to head for the flight line and see what it was all about. It turns out that the alert was in response to the hyped up Gulf of Tonkin event off the coast of North Vietnam. We gathered and the bosses gave us nearly impossible orders. We were to box up a complete MG-10 system radar mock-up and all the supporting equipment and get ready to deploy to somewhere. Since we were an outfit whose responsibility was to



support an air defense squadron of deuces, we were definitely not used to picking up and going anywhere. Never the less, we began packing up. Soon, however, they singled out those of us who were to deploy with the equipment and sent us to process out.

So, there we were, having gone back to the barracks to pack a bag, returned to stand in line, fill out papers and process out. We were briefed on this and that, given shots and what-have-you, plus, if I remember correctly, a whopping \$25 in advanced pay to hold us over. Finally, we were herded out of the building and boarded a bus which was tasked to take us to the flight line and load us on a C-130 destined for who knows where. Just as we were backing out, one of the processing clerks jumped on the bus and said, “Who on here is Air Police?” Some held up their hands and the clerk says, “Off the bus! Another alert has been called and they need you.” At the time, I didn’t think much about it, but it did have an effect later. You’ll see.

We loaded up on a C-130 Hercules and it was packed to the top of the cargo hold with pallets of gear and all of our bags. There we were, sitting on each side of the equipment in the web and aluminum drop down benches you’ve probably seen paratroopers sitting on in the movies. Those things get mighty uncomfortable after a few

hours and space to lie down was at a premium. I'm pretty sure that was my first go in a C-130, but not the last. Off we went!

After several hours, we landed and when we got off the aircraft, it was apparent that we were in the Philippines and to be more exact, Clark Air Base. By this time, we had looked at the orders and all of the pertinent information as to where and what was starred out. Classified stuff, it was, so, we all were asking, "Are we there yet?" Just like kids in the back seat. Nope, we weren't there yet. We took off after refueling and a quick bite and in an hour or two landed at our destination.

We were all piling out of the aircraft and someone says, "Hey, we're in Cambodia!" "How'd you figure that?" says someone else. "Well, look at the hangar roof. It says Air Cambodia!" Then about that time, a C-46 tail dragger, looking like it was held together with bailing wire and typhoon tape, taxied by and on the side it says "Royal Laotian Airlines." Hey, maybe we're in Laos. The problem is that most of us didn't know much about either of those places, so we could have been there. "No, no!" says one of the chiefs, finally, "We're in Vietnam!" Vietnam! Where the hell is that? Wait! I remember seeing something about Vietnam in an Air Force News film about the airmen who were doing an advisory service, living in jungles with monkeys and all. It turns out we were in Saigon! Yeah, I'd heard about Saigon in the movies. Then we dragged our tool boxes and bags to the tent area where we were to be assigned.

Tent living, get used to it. There were actual barracks on Ton Son Nhut, but they were taken up by what you would call permanent party. We were in eight man tents, and at least they were built on plywood floors. We were afforded all the amenities such as a chow hall, barber shop, snack bars and souvenir shops, an NCO club, Officers club and best of all, an Airman's Club! Beer, Salty Dogs! Yeah! As long as you have beer and hamburgers, you can make it! I especially remember giant cinnamon rolls for breakfast and some of the best cheese burgers I've ever eaten. All of this was in a concertina wire topped, totally fenced in compound called the MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam. Of course, our tents where we slept weren't in there.



We were not far from the main gate and an old French grave yard. There were lots of mostly young women walking around in pajama looking clothes, all had long hair, black as coal, and spoke in a sing-song strange sounding language. A lot of them had what we use to call "coolie" hats made of straw. I especially remember the shapely waitresses in the club wearing high neck, sleeveless Chinese dresses with the slits up the sides. Oh yeah, almost forgot, there were giant mosquitoes and



cold showers. You should see some of the lizards and bugs living in those latrines and showers. Most famous was the large "fuckyou" lizards. They could literally scare the crap out of you with their loud yelp. I finally learned to look all around for those bastards when I went in the shower just to see where they were. The first time it happened, one of the big boys was sitting not a foot from my head on the wall. I jumped three feet when he "fuckyou"ed. Someone said not to mess with them because they eat their weight in mosquitoes and other nasty flying and crawling critters, they'd even take care of the occasional rat.



On a more somber note, I especially remember the occasional passing of a military vehicle with a flag draped coffin heading to the air terminal. Those were moments of reality and we knew that it was serious business there.



As an aside, speaking of cold showers, I once went to the infamous “Hundred-P-Alley”, which I’m sure that most of you have heard of. I had just had a couple of bom-de-boms (Beer 33) and was walking and observing when I stepped into a benjo. Damn! It was up to my ankle so I immediately headed back to base. By the time I got to the first shower I came to, my foot was burning nicely! I got in there clothes and all. What a mess!

Our six F-102’s that were deployed were already there so it wasn’t long until we were taking the long walk down toward the flight line to recover them. We passed by “Patches”, the famous C-123 defoliation aircraft.

There must have been six or eight of those planes there.



I suppose I went on a couple work orders before we received our surprise. Since those air cops hadn’t made it with us, we (E-4 and below) had to perform the guard duty on our aircraft. I guess that the local air police squadron was a bit short handed with all the air traffic there. Without any significant briefing, we were put to work. We had a Conex box with several M-2 carbines and not much ammo. I never did figure out why were given seven rounds, not even a full clip, of ammo. Probably didn’t want us flyboys to have real ammo. We might shoot ourselves in the foot or something. One of the guys recently told me that he and others actually bought

ammo in the black market in Saigon. Can you believe that? Guard duty it was. My first shift was from 03:00 in the morning until 07:00. Man, that walk down past those 123’s was kinda’ spooky at that time of night. I’m glad that there were two of us on duty at a time. There we were, guarding those deuces.



There were long lines of aircraft parked on the flight line. There were RB/EB-66’s, noisy RB-57 Canberras, RF-101 Voodos and C-130’s by the dozen sitting in a row. At about every fourth aircraft was an air police guard standing near the nose of the aircraft. I suppose it was because we didn’t get a briefing about what we were supposed to do that we did NOT stand in front of our deuces. And that leads us to the next part of the story.

After we’d been standing for a while, we could see a pickup coming down the flight line. It would stop and the driver would get out and he and the guard would perform some ritual. As it were, it was the duty sergeant for the air police and he would give out coffee and donuts. When he reached the last air police man standing in front of the closest aircraft, he headed our way. I was behind the wing near the main gear of the third aircraft in the row and my partner was sitting on a wheel chock under the wing of the first deuce. The Staff Sergeant NCOD got out with his flash light and was looking all around for someone when “Joe”, I’ll call him, said “What do you want?” The sergeant nearly jumped out of his shoes on that one. In no uncertain terms, he told us to get our asses out from under the aircraft where he could see us. After chewing on us a while, he said “If you want coffee and donuts when I come around, you’d better at least be out front where I can see you!”



We passed the word to the other guys and we didn't have another such event during that trip. We heard that the local Air Police commander had requested of our deployment commander, Col. David Taylor, that we stand out front like the others, but he must have nixed that. He probably thought that we might really get into trouble and shoot somebody.

On my final morning of guard duty, the Air Police NCOD came by in his truck and said to keep an eye open because some VC had infiltrated the base. Wow! Here I am with seven rounds of ammo and I'm supposed to shoot those VC when they come to blow up those deuces? So my partner and I were standing raptly watching the lights and action across on the other side of the runway. We had heard a few shots, and were wondering what was going on. We were concentrating on that area when I looked up and almost had a heart attack. Here came were at least fifty helicopters flying above us shining their flood lights all around. It wasn't long after that that the NCOD came by and said all was clear. Whew. Then next morning there were helicopters parked everywhere on the flight line. That was about the most exciting occurrence we had.

Our guard duty commitment lasted about two weeks when, finally, our Air Policemen showed up from Naha. We were able to go to Saigon three or four times during those two months. It seems that there was a coup d'état every other weekend so we would be on lock down. That meant we could go to the Airman's Club. Not the worst place to be. I was a happy camper when we returned to Naha after that TDY. As a result of that tour, we were rewarded the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal.

