Flight Home                                                              A Gueck 2015

It was another day in the bush, the heat, the bugs, the ever present fear that Charlie would ambush us.  Just another day in the hell hole we called the Republic of South Vietnam. We had just completed a mission, done our job for God and Country or at least for Westmorland, or at a minimum someone up the chain of command.  We were headed in, looking for a chance to shower, have a beer, drink water that did not taste of chlorine and maybe, just maybe change into clean uniforms and if we had been especially good, have a letter from home to read.  The more time you spend in the bush, field, Indian country, whatever you care to call it, the smaller the pleasures to make you happy become.

As we approached the fire base we were due to air lift from, our step became easier, the packs became a little lighter, and we could almost feel the wonderful feeling of a shower beating down upon us as we cleared the out laying guards and approached the gate.  Suddenly we were inside and as we realized that someone else was now responsible for security, the weight of our mission began to fade away. Yes, we still had a debrief to attend to, but that was then, not now. Now was drop the packs, sit down, have a drink of water and a meal that was not reconstituted.  Small pleasures. We could hear the sound of a chopper approaching, knowing it was our ride to our base camp, we began to saddle up and prepare to board as soon as it landed to get further from the bush and closer to our current definition of civilization. Ours was not fancy, but we had beds, a modicum of privacy, showers, clean clothes, someone else to stand guard, real food prepared in kitchens staffed by mess personnel.  As the chopper landed, and we began to board, we were surprised to find a member of the administrative staff on board. As we settled into our seats and the floor, we heard the most wonderful words in the world, “Gueck and Caldwell, You are going home, you got orders.” I just stared at the clerk, unable to believe that the end was at hand, that I was not going to be at war any more. As the wonderful words slowly sank in, I heard our team leader ask,  “What about the rest of the team? We all arrived in country in the same week?” The clerk replied with a shrug and indicated he knew nothing, typical poge.

The flight that probably took 30 minutes, seemed to last forever.  Until I saw the orders, had them in my hand, started the out processing, I just knew it was a huge practical joke, and the dream would burst as soon as we arrived at base camp.  I watched the ground rise up to meet the skids on the bird and felt the landing. The pilot began his shut down sequence, and the rotors began to slow as we moved off and away from the bird.  Could this really be my last ride from Indian country? Was I really going home? Was my time in hell done? What about our team? Only two of us had orders, as that question crossed my mind, our team leader announced that he would check on the orders and hand deliver them as well as check on the rest of the team.

We all headed to our quarters and the long anticipated showers.  We had been in the field way too long, our uniforms were ripped, rotting and not worth saving so as we left our quarters, mostly nude except for a modesty towel, all of us with our farmers tans, and moved almost in mass to the showers, each of us grabbed a cold beer and downed most of it in a single gulp.  The second beer lasted at least until the shower and most of us were now sipping as we stood under the streams of water as the dirt, sweat and whatever sluiced from our bodies and went down the drain and out of our lives in what we thought was forever. Man, were we wrong. Once each of us completed our shower time, teeth and other areas comfortably clean, we headed back to quarters to get clean clothes on and hopefully something to eat.

As we put on clean uniforms, dirty boots and started thinking about more beer and food, the Commander walked in and hollered to everyone on his team, “Gather round, I have news and orders.” We were there in almost an instant; someone handed him a beer, and we waited, hoped, prayed and sweated, not knowing.  We could see the huge three-inch stack of papers in his hand; knew someone was leaving, and we were all inching closer as not to miss a word. “First, Gueck and Coleman, I have your orders; Jones, yours are here as well. Congrats men, you survived and are going home. I will talk to each of you later. Everyone else, the word is orders will be coming down and will be ready ASAP.  Best news is, no more patrols as we are so shorthanded now and so few days left in-country.”

As I was handed my ticket to a plane ride back to the World, I could only stand there and stare, first at the paper that said I was going home, then at my friends, those with the paper and those without.  Not knowing what to say or do, I just walked up to each of them and hugged the people who saved my life and whose lives I cherished as much if not more than my own. Suddenly Jones hollered, “I got dibs on the jeep to out-process, anyone going with me?”   As the three of us piled into the jeep, we headed toward the administration building to get our out-processing sheet and get started. As I started to read my orders, I realized we could actually leave Phu Bai that evening to Da Nang and then to Saigon the next day.

As we stormed into the admin building, you need to understand that field troops, us, and garrison troops, the admin people, do not always get along.  As field troops, we are used to be in control or at least with an option, whereas the garrison troops have a daily routine that they do not like to have disturbed or disrupted.  Three raggedy, though clean field troops charging into their domain is not part of their schedule and seeing weapons on each of us, further disrupted their world. As we lined up to request our paperwork, it was obvious that rapid responses were not on the first order of their agenda.  A young officer looked up from his desk as we boisterously intruded into his quiet orderly world. He stood up and in a voice that strove to be a command tone asked, “What are you doing in this office under arms?” The response was simple, we were under orders and needed our out-processing paperwork.  The now worried looking young officer almost shouted to us to get out of his office and never come back. Fortunately, a senior officer, the S-1, Administrative Officer, stepped out of his office at the shouting of his subordinate, took a quick look at the situation, and turned to his Sergeant Major and quietly told the Top to take care of us.  He then requested that the young officer join him in his office. The Sergeant Major approached the counter, and without a word handed each of us an out processing form. With a look that seemed wistful, he quietly offered us a “Congrats and have a safe trip home gentlemen.” With a hurried “Thanks, Top” we grabbed our paper and departed the area.  With that piece of paper in hand, we now knew where we needed to go and to some extent the order.

We rushed off to the finance office which was on a distant part of the post, and not easily accessible from our compound.  When we arrived, we discovered we were requested to leave all weapons outside, unless we were payroll guards. We flipped a coin and Jones lost.  We left our rifles with him and the two of us headed inside to clear finance. I took Jones's paperwork with me just in case. We approached the counter and asked what we needed to do to out-process?  Fortunately, we found that all that was needed was a check to see if we had any payroll on the books and received an initial on our forms.

Our next stop was to the company headquarters, so we could clear and get ready to leave for Da Nang.  We pulled up in front of the HQ and barged into the office. At that same moment the Commander and our team commander were exiting the office.  Our team leader just looked at us and shook his head, and told us that before we could out-process, debriefs were due. We just stared at him and the air became so tense that is was almost visible.  The the two Commanders smiled and said, kiddingly, “Get your stuff turned in, make supply happy and then come back here, and we will get you cleared.”

Clearing supply was almost too easy.  We all had worn through so many uniforms that we were wearing almost rags.  We requested new uniforms and boots, so we at least did not tear our clothes.  We were issued two sets of new uniforms and stopped right there and changed in the supply room. Modesty was not an issue, but clean clothes were.  Boots were placed carefully to the side because it would take a day or two to break them in.

The last items to be turned in were our weapons.  We were going to have to spend our last few hours in Vietnam without the security of our weapons.  Weapons we had carried for a year, all day every day. Weapons that saved our lives, that were part of ourselves beyond understanding.  We looked at each other and called our Commander to see if we could turn weapons in in Saigon. The immediate answer was not only “No,” but a loud and obscene “NO! Now feeling naked to the world, we cleared supply and headed back to the company headquarters to finish our out processing and get a flight to Da Nang. Goodbyes were short, quick, and almost not existent.  We were relieved of our jeep and given a ride the chopper pad. Again, a quick good luck and so long and there we were, duffel bags, new fatigues and no weapons--much as we arrived in country. Fortunately, a flight of choppers arrived within an hour and when asked, rides were quickly given to Da Nang.

The birds lifted off and then it really hit me, we were really leaving this shit hole and headed back to the US.  I sat in the chopper seat, my head hanging down to hide my emotions and just relished the thought that I was going home.  After a 45-minute flight, we landed at the chopper pad at Da Nang, and the chopper crews wished us good luck and there we were.

We headed to the nearest Orderly Room and asked to see the First Sargent. When we were told to enter, we walked in and politely asked if a ride was available to Finance and then to transit quarters so we could clear and head to Saigon the next morning.  Fortunately, Top was in a good mood and hollered for his driver and gave him instructions to get us cleared through Finance, fed and bedded down next to the airport. We were told that the first normal flight headed south was an 8 AM takeoff and so we needed to be at the terminal by 7 AM. After thanking Top, we jumped into his jeep and away we went.

On arrival at Finance, we were each issued our “travel pay.” In each case, travel via aircraft, coach to our next duty station or our home. The Army way, all in cash, twenty dollar bills.  Way too much cash, but away we went. We got to the open mess just before it closed, and were well fed. Then to the transit billets for a place to sleep. We did sleep I am sure, but I know I spent way too many sleep minutes thinking, “I am going home, home, no more jungle.”

The next morning, we were all up and dressed by six.  To the open mess for coffee and then the short walk to the airfield.  One thing we did not turn in was our in country travel orders. They gave us a priority for boarding, and did we use them that morning.  By noon we were in Saigon, at the out processing center known as Camp Alpha.

Camp Alpha could be qualified as a very busy military motel.  All Army personnel were out processed via Alpha, so there were barracks, single and double rooms, a restaurant, and a bar.  As we reported in to Alpha as out processing, we were assigned beds and given a roster of out processing tasks to complete. The only major one was urinalysis.  Just before departure at the airfield, we would be subject to a customs inspection. As it was still early, we asked if we could visit the pee center now and hurry our departure time and date.  We were informed that we were scheduled for pee duty at 9 AM the next morning and for a 3 PM departure in the afternoon. Suddenly, it all became real, we were really going home.

We all headed to our quarters, and as we were NCO's, we had a four

bedroom to secure our gear and perhaps sleep.  We headed to the Open Mess and the bar to find a way to pass the afternoon and evening till we were rostered to fill the cup.  We found a table and realized that there was nothing to do at Alpha but drink or drink. We were sitting, talking about nothing when suddenly I looked up and there was someone from my Language School class.  He came over, I introduced him to my teammates, and we caught up on other class mates. As the evening progressed, we all caught up with friends we had not seen in a year or more--proof of the statement, small world.  Or to remember a classic movie line, “Of all the gin joints in the world, why in this one?” Sometime during the night, we all struggled back to our quarters and crashed.

At 7 AM, we were rousted out for breakfast and prepped for the pee exercise.  As I stood behind my blue line, cup in hand, I was grateful that the US Army was searching for drug use, not booze abuse.  We all passed and were returned to our quarters, and upon arrival were told to police up our gear and prepare to muster for DEROS (Date Expected Return Over Seas) flight.  I stopped and looked at a calendar, realizing that I had been in Viet Nam for 364 days. By the time I returned to California, I would have been gone an entire year.

We were bused to the airfield, Ton Son Nhut, the same place we arrived.  It looked the same, the only differences were that I could not smell Nam any more, and I had no fear as to what would happen.  Suddenly, we were marched to the tarmac, and we stood near a plane as it began to deplane a new levee of soldiers: fresh meat. Looking back, I am sure I looked just like the soldiers I saw when I arrived in country.  They needed to prep the aircraft, but for some reason, we were not rushing anyone. We knew this was our craft, our ride home, and we could wait. We waited just a few minutes; they were refueling in Japan, and suddenly we were invited on, a quick roster check and aircraft seats that were not just straps, stewardesses with smiling faces welcoming us on the aircraft and everything a reminder that we were headed home.  A welcome from the crew, safety briefing and suddenly the door was closed and the aircraft was moving. Each of us helping the craft take off in our own way, and suddenly lift off and a huge cheer; we are safe, going home, and out of Viet Nam.

The flight home was the exact opposite of the route to Nam: Japan, Alaska, and last but not least, Travis AFB, USA.  As we landed and deplaned, we endured another customs inspection, but it was of no major effort. Then we were offered rides to either San Francisco International Airport or to Oakland Army Replacement Depot for new uniforms, a steak dinner and then transport to the mode of our travel to our next destination.  Several of us opted to go directly to the airport, so we could get early flights East.

I was headed to Chicago and suspected I could fly out fairly early.  We arrived at the airport mid evening. Still light out, I could see the skyline of San Francisco, and yes the view was beautiful.  However, I have never returned to California since my plane lifted off headed east.

When we arrived at the terminal, we remembered the stories of other returnees about how the reception was due to the huge anti-war sentiment, and we only wanted to get something to eat, a place to sit and unwind and mentally prepare to re-enter a world that we were not prepared to join.  We knew that sirens, loud noises, shouts and multiple other sounds were not an indicator of someone trying to do us harm. We knew that kicking open a door, throwing a grenade through the opening and following with gunfire to announce our arrival was not going to be accepted by polite society we hoped to reenter.

Unfortunately, as we headed from the ticket counter to the departure area where we planned to eat and drink until our various flights were called, we began to walk through a gauntlet of some civilians.  Now I will admit, one of the individuals standing there was the vision of the California Girl, long bleached blond hair, blue eyes, tight jeans, and a very thin tee shirt, lovely bumps protruding from the upper part of the shirt, the very vision of part of who and what we had, in our minds, fought for over there.  As we approached these individuals, the one officer with us spoke quietly, “Keep it together.” The hippies began to harass us verbally with anti-war slogans and chants, but that was like rain, just rolled off, but the vision of American womanhood whom we all had admired as we approached felt it was acceptable for her to spit on us or at least on our uniforms.  We recoiled but did not respond as would have been normal. Other travelers walked on by as if nothing was happening. That was our introduction to how we could expect to be treated by the country we fought to defend.