

The Flight
By Andy Gueck

“Got on a plane in Fresno and got off in Vietnam,” *Still in Saigon*”

Charley Daniels Band

And that is how it begins.

I left my leave, my spouse and Chicago and flew to San Francisco, arriving and finding the military bus to Oakland Overseas Replacement Depot, Oakland, California. I still have somewhat of a bad taste in my mouth regarding the Bay area of California. Being in a Replacement Depot, waiting to manifest/be listed to depart to an overseas assignment is a constant round of inspections, clothing issue, clothing turn-in, medical checkups, details, either working or supervising and hours of doing nothing but waiting, smoking, silent tears in the darkness from the fear of the unknown.

The mess was open 24 hours serving steak dinners to returnees who were arriving at all hours. They were quiet, sun burned, eyes sunken, almost gaunt to the point of skeletal. They quietly ate, moving silently from place to place without a word except to one another. Some were in fatigues, others in new khaki with metals and devices attached. All of the replacement troops were issued new jungle fatigues and boots immediately, so the difference between the two groups was obvious to all, not just the soldiers. The warriors were not reclusive, but did not encourage the replacement troops to ask questions or even talk. It took a year until I understood what was happening. Here you have people who most want to go home and heal, and the rest who also want to go back home to safety. It does indicate a slight rift in attitude.

Every day the replacements were expected to stand a minimum of three formations: 7 a.m. for the morning departure flights, noon for head count, and 3 p.m. for the evening departure flights. You were always hoping to be called for departure if only to escape the insanity of the Depot. Yet, once you were called, that meant you were bound for overseas. Not everyone at the Depot was headed to Southeast Asia; some were going to Alaska, others to Japan or Korea, and a few to Thailand. But the vast majority were bound to the Republic of South Vietnam to join one of the many, many units there.

Finally, after three nights and two days of the insanity, my name was called, and I was manifested/listed on the morning flight with almost 200 other scared, sweaty, unprepared soldiers. We knew we were trained, but really deep down we also knew that there were secrets to survival that we had not learned. At 8 a.m., we were in formation; names were called one last time, informed that if we missed our movement to either the air base or the plane, we would be in violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and charged with missing a movement and other charges that could result in 20 or more years in prison.

We loaded our gear on a bus, filed on board and prepared for the flight that would change us forever. Of the nearly 200 souls on those buses, probably 150 were young men, 18-20. Some away from home for only the second time in their lives, others a little more worldly, but all scared, filled with bravado that young people have always shown when facing the unknown.

It took almost two hours to travel from Oakland to Travis Air Force Base in California. Not terribly long, but in terms of change, a lifetime. Upon arrival, the buses moved to the tarmac, fairly close to a plane. We were informed it was a DC-8, a stretch model, called a stretch by those who knew. To me, it was a damn big airplane, and I just hoped it would make the journey successfully. Again, we were in formation; our names were called to assure we were present, and then after what seemed to be hours, but in reality was only 30-45 minutes, we began to board. As we prepared to mount the stairs to the air craft door, we were to announce our name to the manifest holder, along with our social security/serial number, and then board the plane. We were not assigned seats, but as with most military activities, we quickly sorted ourselves according to rank and found seats in preparation for departure. For what was maybe the only time in my history, I actually listened to what the flight crew said during the safety briefing. I knew where my float cushion was located, how to use the oxygen mask that might drop in front of me, and I definitely knew where the emergency exits were situated.

Suddenly, the engines started; the plane began to taxi and then, the long roll to take off. Abruptly, my life was changed, and I was not ready. As soon as the No Smoking signs went off, it felt as though the entire plane lit up. Smoking was allowed back then, and if it did not help, it gave everyone something to do. Fortunately, for all of us, we were bound first to Anchorage, Alaska. The flight there was fairly short, about three hours. Way too short of a time.

Upon arrival in Alaska, everyone was looking at the scenery; none of us were from Alaska and it was our first visit. Upon deplaning, we found ourselves in a bar. ID's were not requested for anyone, and everyone had a drink, with the vow, hope, and prayer to be able to have another with the same group in one year. Lord, a year, a huge part of my life to date. Would I survive? Would any of us return to the United States? Would we be changed? Would we be like the returnees we saw in Oakland? A mind filled with questions, fear and uncertainty, yet an adventure, a chance to prove one's self in the ultimate contest—War.

All too quickly, the Non Commissioned Officers from our flights headed us toward the departure gate, and again we were manifested on board in case someone decided at this time to desert. All were there; we boarded and returned to our seats, settling in for a 15 plus hour flight to Japan. Yakota, Japan was our next stop, then Vietnam. If you have never flown across an ocean, believe me that once the plane reaches cruising altitude, there is little to see beyond darkness, clouds, and nothingness.

We tried to sleep, and I suspect we all did to some extent, but I know my sleep was intermittent, fitful and very, very restless. I know my thoughts were far ranging, unsettling, and mixed. My youth, my parents and family, my spouse; Would I have a future? Did I care? What would happen when we arrived? Not a good place to be, but I was stuck. I seemed to smoke

constantly, not quite one lit by another, but way, way too many. As the flight continued, we were given current date and time information, but I missed at least one or more and never did get my watch or my internal clock set properly.

After what felt like an endless journey, the announcement was made that we were headed for the ground and a chance to move around. A muted cheer ran through the plane if only to get off the aluminum tube. Suddenly, we were flying over Japan, alien to almost all of us: cars on the wrong side of the road, Mt. Fuji on the horizon, a foreign land. We were confined to the departure area, unable to do much beyond restroom breaks and exercise by walking. We were in Japan for less than two hours and then, again, herded back to our tubular conveyance.

Next stop, Vietnam. We all knew the names: Ton Son Nhut, Da Nang, Siagon, Binh Hoa, and others, but the announcement was made that we were landing at Ton Son Nhut Airbase/Airfield. As we flew down the coast of Vietnam, we were several miles offshore, but we could see the green of land. There it was, our home for the next year, perhaps our last call, the unknown, the crucible.

Then came the sounds of an aircraft preparing to descend and land. The flaps moving, the landing gear lowering, the change in the pitch of the engines. Finally, 22 hours of flying were over; the imprint of the seat felt like a permanent part of my butt. Grooves that would be there till I was old. The seat belt signs, then the no smoking signs and the flight crew's announcements of tray tables, collecting our gear, how much they enjoyed our company...the noise of the end of a journey.

Suddenly, came the chirp of tires on the tarmac...a sudden reversal of the engines...the rapid slow down of the plane...everyone trying to look out a window...a huge tarmac area filled with military aircraft, jets, helicopters all surrounding huge civilian airliners...Quantus, Northwest Orient, JAL, Flying Tiger Air, United, American...the way home, but only after a year's layover. The plane stops, a portable stairway arrives and the door opens.

The plane is quickly filled with the most unbelievable scent I had ever smelled. Overwhelming, nauseating, foreign, common with an overlay of burned aviation fuel. The smell of Vietnam stays with you forever. The smell of open sewers, fear, spices, burning rubber, sweat, burning human waste, and a smell that is uniquely Asian. I have not been in Vietnam since 1972; yet, I can still smell that initial blast of odor that encompassed all of us in our initial introduction to SE Asia.

A Non Commissioned Officer came on board and with the aircraft microphone, gave us information about how to deplane, where to go if incoming rounds happened, and other survival data. Everyone was herded into an open walled billets, told to grab a bunk and park. Most, if not all, racked out until roused to stand a formation and do a roster. Several names were called out and told to stand by for a bus to Long Binh for reassignment. We were then informed of meal times, detail assignments, formation times, and several other bits of important information.

As night fell, the skies were filled with the sights and sounds of war: illumination rounds in the distance, occasional tracer rounds headed out, jet aircraft taking off with a sound beyond description. Again, the smell of aviation fuel permeates everything. In the darkness, solitude becomes almost unbearable. Fear of the unknown runs rampant, and add the smells of a foreign country, the noises of war, and the not knowing what to do, really where to go or how to effectively deal with everything.

And, so begins my first night in Vietnam.