

**“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, Vietnam  
...keeping the memories alive**

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Phan Rang AB News No. 109

**“Stories worth telling”**

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## **ESTABLISHING AN AUSSIE PRESENCE AT PHAN RANG**

Only four months separated the Australian Government ‘s announcement in mid-December 1966 that No.2 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) was to be transferred from its forward base at Butterworth in Malaysia to South Vietnam, before its Canberra bombers flew their first fragged bombing missions from Phan Rang on 23 April 1967.

Early 1967 saw the height of the dry season, as 70 members of Detachment B of the RAAF’s No. 5 Airfield Construction Squadron, assisted by the USAF’s 554th (“Red Horse”) Civil Construction Squadron, endured very harsh, dusty conditions in creating a small Aussie village on Phan Rang Air Base.

Because of a shortage of US construction workers and material, coupled with a backlog of work urgently needed by the USAF at Phan Rang, the Aussies had no option but to send in their own team and carry out the bulk of the construction by themselves. However, under Colonels Mix and Carey, the Red Horse graciously offered accommodation and messing to the new, temporary residents.

In just three months, using works plant, vehicles and pre-fabricated buildings shipped from Australia, a bare patch of earth just below the small hill at Phan Rang known as Nui Dat was rapidly transformed into suitable accommodation to house and feed 250 RAAF personnel.

A complete stainless steel-aluminum kitchen arrived in March 1967 and not only were purified

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water reticulation and hot water installed, but No. 2 Squadron was the envy of the base when it became the first unit on Phan Rang to feature a sewerage system with flushing toilets.

No. 2 Squadron personnel, in the early days of 1967, found much of their spare time devoted to finishing off their new dwellings and surrounds to make them more livable. Of course, due attention was given to the high priority of ensuring that the airmens, sergeants and officers messes



**RAAF domestic quarters in 1969**

were all equipped with refrigeration systems to keep their beloved VB beer cold.

Later arrivals helped put in an all-ranks swimming pool and the Phan Rang Opera House, built for visiting entertainment groups, many who came over from Australia to entertain US and allied troops around Vietnam. It was nothing like the



**RAAF Phan Rang Opera House and Swimming Pool**

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iconic Sydney Opera House which was then under construction back home in Australia before being officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in October 1973.



On the southern tarmac, not far from revetments for the Canberras provided by the USAF, a British-designed Bellman pre-fabricated maintenance hangar was erected for RAAF technicians to work on their aircraft and equipment under shelter on a 24-7 basis.

**In front of No. 2 Squadron’s maintenance hangar, RAAF pilot Flight Lieutenant Merv Lewis gets the obligatory hose-down following his last combat mission.**

Not far away, a two-story headquarters was built for operations, communications and administrative staff.



**Headquarters, No. 2 Squadron RAAF, Phan Rang Air Base.**



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It was a rare occurrence for an Aussie flying squadron to function as a fully self-sufficient unit, covering all trades from pilots through to cooks, pay and postal clerks, but this is what happened at Phan Rang.

In addition, No.2 Squadron’s Air Defence Guards (ADGs), who were primarily tasked with the unit’s security on the base, also undertook night-time patrols with Korean Army troops outside the Phan Rang perimeter, thus contributing to everyone’s safety on the base.

**Judging by the photo, these ADGs took things far too seriously when they decided to protect “Aussie national territory” from invading Americans, but it was only a fun incident. (The sign says: “Border Zone, Keep Left (as Aussies drive on the left-hand side of the road), Australian Territory, Beware of Kangaroos” (In the nation’s capital, Canberra, each year on the roads there are around 1,000 vehicle collisions with kangaroos)**



Most of No. 2 Squadron’s logistic support – fuel, rations, clothing, engineering stores, bombs - were either shipped from Australia, or purchased from the USAF, as Australia was believed to be the only US ally to pay its own way in the Vietnam War.

Even the Commanding Officer’s car was an Aussie made (General Motors) Holden sedan which

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came by sea from Australia.



**No. 2 Sqn CO's  
Aussie-made  
GM Holden  
car, with Nui  
Dat in the  
background.**

He also had his own air-conditioned hooch.



**No. 2 Sqn CO's air-conditioned hooch**

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**Somewhere in Vietnam**

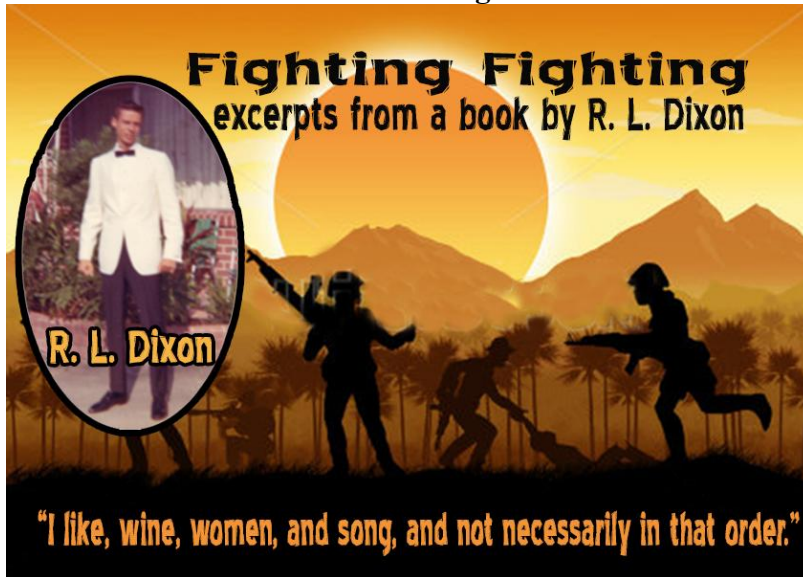
He left here with a smile on his lips.  
A life full of dreams at his fingertips.  
Somehow they got lost,  
**SOMEWHERE IN VIETNAM....**

They shaved his head, sent him off in a plane  
The man who came home, I don't know his name.  
Somehow he changed,  
**SOMEWHERE IN VIETNAM...**

They took him away, put a gun in his hand  
Put HIM in control, put HIM in command.  
Somehow he's still,  
**SOMEWHERE IN VIETNAM...**

I've never been to that far away place  
Where they steal the smile from a young mans face.  
Yet, somehow I feel **ABANDONED**  
**SOMEWHERE IN VIETNAM.**

*-Brenda Maynard*



**Fighting Fighting  
Chapter 5**

**(This is the final installment of three installments of Chapter five in Phan Rang News 107 and 108.)**

**Vietnam 1966**

The C-123 known as the "milk run" usually hop-scotched from base to base before reaching its final destination. It was a welcome surprise to travel straight from Nha Trang to Ban Me Thout in only 40 minutes flying time.

We arrived in time for the First Mob trooper to take us straight to the chow hall, located in the same building as our temporary barracks. He had "Tex" emblazoned on his hat.

"Ban Me Thout was at one time a tiger-hunting lodge," he said, "built out of teak logs by the French. Same as those old Frenchbuilt teak wood rockers on the porch. Pretty, ain't it!"

Bertle and I settled our trunk and ate. Then I wandered a couple of hundred yards out from the lodge to smoke, but mostly to look back at the lodge.

A serene and cool air filled my nostrils, mountain fresh, fouled only by my Marlboro. The dark teak logs look polished in the last minutes of the mountain sun.

I wonder what stories the old rocking chairs had heard. How many were told in French? How many tigers lost their lives and are now hanging on walls somewhere in France?

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I tried to picture where we were according to the map. I knew it was high in the mountains, near the Cambodian border. We were in the "wild west" of Vietnam.

I smoked another cigarette, feeling the night air get colder as the logs lost their luster, becoming as dark as the mountain jungle surroundings.

I heard something rustle behind me and saw shadows in the brush. I headed for the light from the lodge with a slight backward glance.

I had a fitful sleep that night.

In the morning light, I could see the US Army ran things here. A small airfield with a short runway and a small contingent of Air Force was the only acknowledgement of our presence.

The First Mob had one small van with just a few pieces of Crypto gear. We were supposed to be done in one day.

After we finished the modifications I went to the Army infirmary because of a pain I had when urinating.

"Nodix, you got the clap," the doctor said. Damn! Gonorrhea from that prostituted quickie. Now I knew why she was smiling the whole time she was riding me.

The Army doctor gave me two huge shots of penicillin, one in each cheek. I delayed our trip by lying in the bunk sweating that night and for the whole next day, my body fighting infection. I wasn't able to move without hurting all over. I had a high fever and was at times delirious.

I told God I would use a rubber next time.

I told Bertle I had unspecified uretharitis. Bertle knew better.

"Nodix, I want you to think about something," he said. "You can take the path of the devil and destruction, or you can change your ways. It's your choice."

"Bertle, I'm sorry," I said. "You think I like this?"

"You must," he said. "You drop your pants in every town."

You smoke and drink like there's no tomorrow. You'll be dead before you're 30. Remember: good or evil, your choice!"

"I said I was sorry! What do you want from me? A confession?"

Okay. I'm a sinner. God help me. God help me get some sleep. God help me out of Vietnam."



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I was swearing to God, telling him I would change my evil ways and go down the path of the righteous.

When the fever broke, I told myself I never should have dropped below 12 semester hours.

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Still feeling puny, we boarded the "milk run" going to Qui Nhon next. If I ever wanted a non-stop trip, this was the time. But we hop-scotched to Pleiku and Da Nang before arriving at Qui Nhon.

We lucked out and arrived in time for lunch. I had the chance to go to a brothel with the local First Mobbers and turned it down.

Nothing exciting happened in Qui Nhon the whole week we were there. I remember it was a beautiful city by the beach and had a great restaurant where we ate Caribou steak and French bread with our meals. (I bought those little loaves of bread every time I smelled them. I was addicted to French bread.)

We worked hard and long hours modifying the many and different types of Crypto machines deployed to Qui Nhon by the First Mob.

We left Qui Nhon and stopped at Cam Rahn Bay and An Khe before arriving at Pleiku, just missing lunch. The First Mob was billeted on the flight line, in tents, next to the A1E's and A1H's, the World War II reciprocal engine fighter aircraft now used by the Vietnamese Air Force.

The planes were in bunkers, on alert, and full of bombs, and our communications van was surrounded by sandbags that had shrapnel rips everywhere. The rips occurred during the weekly Viet Cong mortar attacks. They were accurate enough to hit every aircraft on alert.

The First Mob guys assigned to this base looked pretty ragged out.

The Air Force planned a long stay at Pleiku because they were building a permanent communications center on top of the mountain nearest the flight line. The First Mob was helping the permanent communications squadron install the wiring.

Bertle and I had finished the first round of wiring modifications on the flight line vans. We took a maintenance truck to the mountaintop site for a look-see, when we heard some distant explosions and small arms fire erupt.

Everyone inside of the building went outside to see what was happening. From our vantage point on top of the mountain, we could see helicopters circling, firing mini-guns and rockets into the valley to the south of the runway about a mile and a half from us.

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One of those helicopters burst into flames and did some wild gyrations before hitting the tree tops and disappearing. It looked like it hit green water, and then sank slowly below the surface.

From the radio in the truck came a call for help. It was a female voice, calm, but urgent.

"The twenty-fifth infantry is getting the shit kicked out of them! They need people on the flight line to help with the wounded. Copy?"

Every one of us packed into the trucks and went to the flight line to help. Two C-130 air-evac aircraft were already parked with the ramps lowered. Medic troops were fanning out as we arrived on the flight line.

It looked like a Keystone Cops fire drill, but actually was an organized staging area as wounded were transferred from helicopters and ambulances to the triage area. There doctors decided who would go to hospitals in Saigon on the C-130s and who would be treated locally.

It was bloody stretcher time again. Only this time it wasn't dead Vietcong. It was wounded Americans.

The aircraft bay was filled with moaning and crying sounds. Some were yelling. But I heard no screams.

I helped another First Mobber install a stretcher with a very young black soldier on it into the C-130. They had bandaged him with huge pads and strapped with wide tape, but it wasn't tight enough to stop the sucking of his chest wound. He was full of morphine and yelled repeatedly, "I'm going home now! Back to the land of the round eye!"

He yelled that twenty times as we got his stretcher installed in the last empty rack on the aircraft. He tried to yell it a twenty-first time, but his words were gurgling in fluid. I knew he was bleeding internally because he couldn't talk.

I frantically motioned to the female Air Force captain walking up the ramp of the C-130. She was either a nurse or a doctor. I could see she was pissed that I had suddenly become concerned for just one trooper.

"We are ready to go, airman. Thank you," she said. "We will take care of him now!"

She spoke with the same urgency and was just as calm as when I heard her on the radio asking for help. I wanted to ask her how many of the troops with sucking chest wounds made it out alive. But her captain's bars, coupled with the urgency in her voice, made me walk down the ramp in silence.

I looked back as I went down the aircraft ramp and saw the soldier's eyes wide open - a

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haunting stare, as if he were pleading for help from me. I couldn't see his chest heaving like it did when we put him in the rack. I couldn't get it out of my thoughts that he had died with his eyes open.

It was hard for me to close my eyes that night because every time I closed my eyes, I saw his—wide open.

Pleiku has a large squadron of the Vietnamese Air Force using World War II aircraft. Their pilots mustered in the mornings and did calisthenics on the taxiway in front of the First Mob tent area.

Bertle and I had just finished our morning breakfast of C-rations in the tent. We walked to the communications van, watching the Vietnamese pilots doing push-ups in the cool morning mist.

I turned my attention to some of the younger Vietnamese girls walking on the road as they were going to their jobs on the base when a shot rang out.

"Did you see that?" Bertle said.

The South Vietnamese squadron commander's .45 automatic pistol still smoked as he stood over the body of one of his pilots. Portions of the pilot's head were splattered on the ground and on the other pilots, who were still up on their arms in the top of a push-up position.

"What the...?" I said.

Bertle said, "I saw the commander argue with him and then, fast as he could, he pulled his .45 and put it to the back of his head and fired. Holy Jesus, he just blew his head away!"

The commander was looking straight at us as he ordered his men into a "Dress right. Dress" position. He then ordered some of his men to drag the body away.

"Let's disappear into our van for a while," I said.

Bertle followed without a word.

Later that night, while drinking a warm Schlitz at the smokefilled, dirt-floored little shack, called "The Club," I learned why he was shot. It seems that this pilot had come back from a mission with no ordinance remaining on the aircraft and mud on his tires. Not even the last shell casing was remaining in the mini-guns. The last shell casing has no way of getting ejected without human hands removing them. He was obviously landing and giving all his ammunition to the enemy. He was questioned and summarily shot on the spot.

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I took this news back to Bertle, who was reading his Bible by flashlight.

That night another mortar attack had us jumping into our flak jackets and helmets and running for the bunker. Bertle grabbed his rifle, his Bible, and his flashlight.

I watched Bertle as he read by flashlight, his mouth movin ever so slightly, reading silently. The flashlight's bulb would dim and he'd knock it against his knee for more light. It seemed to get brighter every time he knocked it against his knee.

I said for all in the bunker to hear, "See there. Bertle reads his Bible. The flashlight quits working, and he says, 'Let there be light' and there is light!"

Some laughed.

"Shut up, Nodix," Bertle said.

I knew I shouldn't have joked like I did, but Bertle and I had become as close as two brothers. He was a five-stripe, Technical Sergeant and I was the two-stripe Airman Second Class. The equalizer was the fact that we both lived out of the same trunk. We both dressed in front of each other, and I knew I put my pants on the same way he did. (Very seldom did I think another man was my superior. That was the Nodix in me.)

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We finished in Pleiku and hopped a C-123 cargo plane, headed for Da Nang. The same milk run, flying that same route. This time we had to backtrack to Cam Ranh Bay before going on up to Da Nang. We waited from noon until after six in the evening while the crew had maintenance look for an oil leak in the number one engine.

Bertle didn't want to leave the area for fear of the plane leaving without us. We took the trunk into the operations building and waited and waited. Each time a mechanic came into the building, we asked for an estimated time of departure, and each time they said, "about an hour." Being in maintenance ourselves, we didn't want to say they didn't know what they were doing.

Bertle said, "I don't like anything about Cam Ranh Bay."

"Ditto. Dead boys and airplane crashes are two things I've never much cared for," I said.

We took off late and arrived in Da Nang as the sun was setting. The dark came before we got a good look at our transient barracks. It was a shanty in Da Nang east, next to the amphibious "Duck" personnel carriers the Navy Seabees operated.

The first night we had no mosquito nets. So our first priority the next day was to find netting,



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even before breakfast. We were apprehensive about leaving the truck with all our belongings at the musty, mosquito infested, haphazardly-repaired barracks, but we needed netting now.

The mosquito netting was at the base billeting headquarters. We walked in with red bites all over both of us. The redness of our eyes attested to the miserable night we had. The supply clerk had the same attitude as all supply clerks—the "you are bothering me" attitude. I just knew he was going to say something in that "smart ass" supply clerk tone.

I simply said, as he looked us over, "We need mosquito netting. Please."

I felt like punching out the one-striper clerk as he said, in his New York accent, "Youse guys shouldn't sleep wid out netting. Whatta you, stoopid?"

I leaned over like I was giving out confidential information. "Listen, airman, you can talk disrespectful to me, but have some respect for an old dying technical sergeant, okay?"

With the mosquito netting under my arm, I slammed the screen door on the way out for emphasis. Bertle just smiled at me and said, "Dying?"

Da Nang was a large base in 1966 with chow halls, wooden barracks, running water, and hot showers... and a week's worth of Crypto gear to be modified.

Bertle and I worked 12 hours a day taking the equipment from the communications vans to a conex box wired for maintenance. We performed the modifications like surgeons in an operating room. We would break to eat, or to go to the latrine, but mostly it was long, tedious, hot and hard work.

After calling it a day, we had to find our way back to Da Nang east by hitching a ride. None of the First Mob maintenance trucks were available for us transient troopers.

After arriving at the transient shanty, Bertle and I tried to stay out of each other's way as we ate some C-rations, straightened out our trunk, grabbed a shower, pulled our beds close together and got inside the prize mosquito netting.

I found I had to be really tired to fall sleep with the noise of jet fighters, jet freighters, diesel generators, diesel trucks, amphibious vehicles, motor scooters, helicopters, thousands of helicopters, and party noises from the Navy barracks across the street. But I fell asleep quicker if Bertle talked. His monotone voice and words of wisdom put me to sleep like a baby listening to a lullaby.

We were the only people in the rundown transient billets—barracks large enough to hold 50 men. Sometimes we talked because it was good to hear a close human voice drown out the background noise. The barracks had obviously been mortared before, and there was always the

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possibility of being mortared as we talked.

I would usually start the conversation with, "Hey, Sarge!"

"What?" he mumbled.

"How much longer you figure we got in this Da Nang east hellhole?"

"I figured we'd be out of here in less than a week, but I didn't figure we had to remove and replace every piece of gear ourselves. I'm getting too old to lug those KW-26s very far. I don't like the fact that no one has even asked where we are staying or if we need transportation to and from. I'm fed up. It's like a big city. No one gives a poop except for themselves."

"Yeah, the regular troops take vacation when we get on-site."

"Don't get much help here at all. Don't even get me started."

"Sarge?"

"What?" I could hear the irritation in his voice.

"You are about to retire. Right?"

"So?"

"Wasn't it hard having to leave your wife and children to come to the Philippines, knowing the First Mob went to Vietnam?"

The length of time it took to answer told me I had hit a soft spot. I think he was touched that I should care about his family. I'm sure he was conjuring up mental pictures of his family because his voice was much softer, preoccupied, and tired.

"That was the toughest thing I have ever done. The night before I left, I cried like a baby. She started to cry and then we both sobbed so hard we woke the children. It was hard, but we both believe in the Lord and know we will be together again.

"Nodix, trust is the main thing in a marriage. Trust in her and trust in the Lord. It takes maturity and time to build trust; that's why it's hardest on the children of younger marriages.

"The children regret the selfishness of young parents. We had children late in life, but my children benefit from the maturity of trusting in the Lord."

"I wish I had your conviction. I'm not sure about any religions, especially the ones where they

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set themselves on fire like the Buddhists."

I'm gonna pray for you, Nodix. Right now, let's get some shut eye."

"Good night."

"Good night, Nodix."

"Sage?"

"What, Nodix?"

"What about the Indians? I mean, if they believe in the happy hunting grounds as heaven, can they get to heaven without believing in Christ? You know, the Christian Bible says you have to believe in Christ to get to heaven."

"Nodix, the Indians get to go to the happy hunting grounds and the Christians get to go to the heaven they believe their heaven to be. What is your idea of heaven? And don't say 'free sex and hot cars.' Be serious about your idea of heaven."

"I think of heaven as a place for only your spirit. No body is attached. It's only thought. And all the thoughts you have had all through your life, on earth, are added up to see whether you go to heaven or hell. The cutoff is 50%. You know, if it's fifty-one, forty-nine to the good, then its heaven. I haven't figured out how one spirit will know if another is male, or female, without a body. And without a body, how will a spirit experience things like French kissing and—"

"Nodix, shut up and go to sleep. I knew you couldn't get serious." This time his irritation practically screamed at me.

"But Sarge, I was serious. With some girls, French kissing is heaven in itself."

G00000dnniiggght! And remember, you reap what you sow."

I closed my eyes and prayed silently that Bertle would get to retire soon and see his wife and children, forever more. I realized I was praying, but I wasn't sure who was listening. How could Bertle be so sure God listens to his prayers?

I formed my own religion, which changed vastly depending on the latest book of theory I read. I didn't study theology, but I listened to different worship services on the AFRTS radio on Sunday, and I listen to Bertle when he quoted the Bible. I never read the Bible myself; I didn't want to look religious.

I still believed in one God throughout all of my different paths of learning. I couldn't imagine

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more than one God ruling the heavens and earth. Two to rule just wouldn't work. Two living out of one trunk was far too much sharing.

Because I was not indoctrinated in any one religion, I put all I knew—all the religions I had ever heard of—together, to form the one God belief. I believed all religions were basically the same. It was just a different time, or people, or language, or messenger that brought the same God to the different peoples.

I believed technologically advanced aliens, from outer space, sent by God, had visited the earth and had given humans differences from the other animals.

I believed in evolution. But I also believed in Adam and Eve.

I believed in the "Big Bang Theory" started by God.

I believed in Joseph and Mary and Jesus, except that I didn't believe in the immaculate conception theory. I believed Joseph and Mary were not celibate, but were just two humans in love.

I believed Jesus was God's best emissary, grew in Mary's womb from Joseph's seed, grew in God's favor through his learning by studying, possibly at the Great Pyramid of Egypt, and then teaching God's love.

I believed Jesus was God and human at the same time, just like he said he was. I loved stories of his rebellious attitude towards the corruption in the Jewish synagogues of time. Bertle said, "He should have kicked more ass, but his mission was to teach God's love and die for it."

I believed he was resurrected and I believed in the spirit world, just as the American Indians believed. I believed in rain dances. I believed in evil spirits and the devil. I believed you did not have to be a Christian to talk to God.

If you were to ask me questions of religion at different times, I would answer differently each time, depending on the last input to my religiously-starved brain.

The story of Christ fascinated me. I wanted to read the Bible, but was afraid of being pulled into a ritual of religion. I wanted to be religious, but was afraid of being an outcast or a conformist. I wanted to read the Bible but did not own one.

My parents went to church on Easter, Thanksgiving and sometimes around Christmas. I was growing to know: the more you know, the more you know you don't know.

I thought of religion more than ever before while traveling with Bertle.



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We were finished in Da Nang and trying to get to our last stop of the modification trip. A place called Dong Ha. I told Bertle, "All the prostitutes would say that to me when I dropped my pants.

`Dong Ha!'"

Bertle didn't laugh. I don't know why. I thought it was rather humorous.

We were at the MAC dispatch but trying to get a ride, and were told we'd have to wait two days for passenger planes to come through Da Nang to Dong Ha.

Bertle asked if any cargo planes of any sort were scheduled to Dong Ha. The answer was affirmative. However, it was a petroleum flight, a C-123, and no passengers were allowed on petroleum flights whatsoever.

But we explained to the man that Bertle and I were of the First Mob and had a "Top Secret" Crypto mission. Being called a passenger was an insult.

We were given permission to talk to the captain of the cargo C-123 that was in the process of being loaded with two rubber bladders full of JP4 jet fuel. The bladders looked like king-size, olive-drab water beds, filled to the bursting point. They appeared far too heavy for an old C-123, a two-engine cargo plane resembling a miniature Spruce Goose.

We lumbered across the perforated steel plating—I with the trunk in my left hand and, as always, Bertle had the trunk handle in his right hand. I had an aluminum and plastic M-16 rifle slung across my shoulders. The M-16 felt like a toy compared to the M-1 rifles of military school. In my other hand was a steel ammunition box of 200 rounds of "full metal jacket" bullets.

My world was nothing but metal and sweat. I wanted a beer in a metal can so I could drink and exude the contents through my pores. I was trying to form a song about "metal and sweat."

The stinging sweat in my eyes, the steamy vapors coming from the flight line made it hard to see. I couldn't stop to wipe the sweat out of my eyes. I stumbled. The trunk hit with a thud and Bertle softly said, "Watch it, Nodix!"

"Watch what? Watch the fact that I always have to use my left arm in carrying that stupid trunk? You didn't care about me pulling a groin muscle. You only care about that stupid trunk!" I knew it was an overly harsh retort, but I had had enough.

"I thought you always wanted to use your left arm!"

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"Hell no, I don't always want to use my left arm. You know I'm right-handed."

"Did you hurt your groin, really?"

"Hell, yes, I hurt my groin! Damn!"

"Go ahead and cuss if it makes you feel better."

"F><kin-a-tweetie it makes me feel better!"

"I hope the captain will let us get on up to Dong Ha today. I sure don't want to sleep another night in Da Nang."

"I don't want to carry this trunk with my left hand anymore, either. Look at my left shoulder compared to my right. It's two inches lower."

I knew I was whining, but I couldn't help myself. My arm was killing me.

"I thought the ammo box offset the trunk pretty well."

"The ammo box is stupid, too! We should have the bandoleers like the Army uses...free up one hand just in case someone might want to wipe the sweat out of one's eyes."

"O000hhh...Testy!"

"No, it's just that here we are near the end of this trip and we find things we should have found in the beginning."

"You ready to talk to the captain? Pick up this end of the trunk with your right hand and let's go before they get that flying coffin started."

"What if my right arm has atrophied from non-use?"

"Nodix, don't make me laugh!"

"Sarge, don't make me cuss."

"Nobody made you cuss!"

I knew I should be quiet for a little while.

We had to convince the captain that we needed to be in Dong Ha that night for the Crypto modifications and that he was our only hope.

**“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, Vietnam**  
**...keeping the memories alive**

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Phan Rang AB News No. 109

**“Stories worth telling”**

"No problem, G.I." he said. "Get on board. The crew chief will show you where to sit."

We were instructed to sit in the two swing-away, stool-like seats near the back ramp. We found them right where the crew chief said they were. It was awkward and uncomfortable to sit in; one leg rested on the rear loading ramp and the other leg dangled in mid air.

To keep my one leg from dangling, I put our trunk under my seat and rested my foot on it, with my rifle and ammo resting against the trunk. I got in and buckled my safety belt, ready for takeoff.

Bertle and I faced each other and smiled. We knew we were on our way to our last stop on this TDY.

Looking toward the front of the aircraft, we saw the two bladders strapped down and a closed door to the cockpit. I felt abandoned in the back of that noisy, fuel-smelling cargo plane. We were nothing more than part of the total weight.

It had Jato engines stuck on the wings to supply enough thrust to get the ugly box off the ground. Takeoff was loud, shuddering, with the Jato screaming and my ears hurting. I pressed my fingers in my ears to block out as much noise as possible.

As we leveled off from a surprisingly quick ascent Bertle and I smiled at each other again. We both had watched the JP4 bladders strain at the tie-down straps, glad they hadn't ratcheted loose on takeoff.

When we started our descent into Dong Ha, it felt like we were going straight down, then the aircraft started a side-to-side dance. Bertle and I looked at each other with concern. We noticed the straps straining on one side, and then the other, as the aircraft slipped from the weight of the JP4 in the bladders. Bertle and I fought the motion by holding onto the static line and bracing with our feet against the fuselage.

A split-second before the aircraft touched the runway, our trunk slid out from under my legs and clipped the tie-down ratchet of the rear most bladder's tie-down straps. It ratcheted loose with a "toong - twang!" and the bladder was free to go where it wanted. It headed first to my side to break up the sliding trunk and smash my M-16, then to Bertle's side to try to crush his legs and then straight for the front of the aircraft where it stayed for the remainder of the few short seconds it took to stop the old, out of control, crash landing aircraft.

I smelled JP4. A heavy dose of the jet fuel hit my nostrils, constricting my throat immediately. I couldn't breathe and I wanted out.

As soon as we came to a complete stop the cockpit door burst open and the crew chief flew out yelling, "Get out! NOW!" He headed for the only door by scrambling over the bladders and

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**“Stories worth telling”**

exiting without saying more, without panic. The pilot and co-pilot exited through their windshields. Bertle and I reached the door at the same time and exited almost as one. Bertle first.

Our eyes squinted at the brilliance of the sun as it filtered through the red dust settling back to earth. The dust was everywhere, high in the air from the mishap.

My head, swimming from fumes and fright, took a long minute to get it together. My knees knocked together so hard I was sure the sound could be heard all over the airfield. I knew we were lucky we didn't perish in a ball of burning jet fuel; one spark and we would have ignited.

Bertle verified I was a nervous talker when I started talking an octave higher than normal. "It's a good thing the crew chief said, 'No smoking.' Hey! Hey! Hey! This red clay runway reminds me of traveling through the longest state in the Union... Georgia."

Bertle kept repeating, "Thank you, Jesus." He then said, "The trunk is ruined."

I mumbled, "Piss on that trunk."

\*\*\*

We stayed out of harm's way as the Marines sprayed everything with foam. I thought the aircraft looked reparable with not too much work. I overheard a Marine Lieutenant say, "They're gonna bulldoze it off the runway!" Looking at the runway, the gouges in the red clay, plane parts strewn, made me feel lucky that I could tell about this someday, if I ever got back to the good ol' U.S. of A. I had HAD it with this Vietnam War.

We were allowed to retrieve our possessions and it was clear the aircraft fared better than our trunk did. The side of the trunk I carried most was smashed, but the leather handle was still attached. My M-16 was broken at the narrow part of the stock, so I put the strap that held the pieces together over my shoulder and took up my half of the smashed trunk with my left hand and the unharmed ammo box in the other hand.

Bertle and I did our ritual walk/stumble to the waiting truck, neither of us saying a word...mostly not talking because of shock and being tired of this trip.

We were shown to a tent that had all the bunks occupied. The bleary-eyed and dirty Marine jeep driver said, "Pick a bunk; all the Air Force troops that were in this tent were here on a survey team, and they all got killed this morning. All five are dead. Their guns and ammo were stripped from 'em and they found the bodies in a pile by the side of the road. Somebody wasn't worried about getting caught stacking bodies into a pile. Probably ARVN (Army of Vietnam) troops killed them for their money and weapons. Probably sellin' 'ern on the black market to the VC right now."



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**“Stories worth telling”**

I was emotionally drained, and I just wanted to lie down and sleep, to get away from some of this bizarre reality. I went to a bunk and flopped down to rest. I grabbed the pillow, rolled to a fetal position and stared at the picture of an attractive woman in a short lime green dress holding an infant wrapped in pink blankets. I stared at that picture and wondered: when will she learn he isn't coming home? When will the little girl learn to say "Da-Da" and will the "Mommy" be married again by then?

The lump in my throat grew larger.

When will the Air Force come and take his belongings and send them back to her and the child? When five men die at the same time, do their spirits get to say good-bye to each other? At what point do the spirits separate when some go to heaven and some go to hell? Is it really at the Pearly Gates?

Tears rolled out of my eyes as the lump in my throat dissolved. Some tears rolled across the bridge of my nose and into my other eye. Larger drops formed and rolled on down the side of my temple and soaked into the pillow just before seeping into my ear.

I went to sleep and didn't wake up until I heard Bertle say, "Nodix, you awake?"

"I think so. What time is it?"

"It's 2330. "

"Is that why it's dark?"

"You O.K.?"

"I think so. Can we sleep somewhere besides here?"

"You already slept six hours or more. I got us set up in the comm van. It's against the regs, but I think it's necessary."

"Lead the way; I'm still sleepy. I THINK I can sleep in that noisy van."

"It's air-conditioned!"

"And noisy. "

"Shut-up and grab the trunk."

As I reached for the smashed trunk, a loud BA-BOOM reached our ears. Visual effects of red dust shone in the sky from the lights of a flare that had just gone off overhead. We dropped

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the trunk and ran for the communications van because the sand bags surrounding it looked safe, and inside was air conditioning, and the cots Bertle had rounded up.

The next morning we set about the task of finding a place to shower and shave.

We found things as crude as any base we had visited yet. The only place to wash, brush your teeth, and get a drink, was a water tank on a olive drab trailer with the words "Potable Water" stenciled on the sides. I asked Bertle if that meant the water was from a Po - table and didn't cost much, or did that mean the water was okay to drink after it was carried in a pot and boiled?

Bertle said, "Let's find some food, Nodix," smiling just ever so slightly.

I really didn't know how I could joke after the events of the day before. I started to realize it was a defense mechanism I used. Something to take my mind off death. Something to try and get the family photos beside the dead men's bunks out of my thoughts. It must have been obvious to Bertle; the jokes came more frequently when I was troubled.

While eating powdered eggs and fried Spam at the field chow hall, Bertle asked, "What was that big boom last night? Sounded serious."

A block-jawed Marine corporal said, "Another damn MIG came down from Hanoi and lobbed a 250-pound bomb on us, f&kin' Air Force can't stop 'em."

A young Marine captain said in a voice louder than the corporal, meant to expound on the corporal's statement, "It is common practice for the MIG's to race down from the north and, as they bank sharp to turn around before the DMZ, they release a bomb at the precise angle that will hit our base. Sometimes they do, after releasing from as far as five miles away."

Inside the TGC-9 Van at Dong Ha, Bertle asked. "Nodix, is this the last one to be modified?" "I believe it is. I mean I can't believe it is." "No more hot soldering irons with you breathing your beer and cigarette breath all over me."

"OK, Spam breath. You think you smell of roses?"

"At least I don't smoke or drink beer." Bertle smirked.

"Well, then, what is it? Halitosis? Or is your false teeth cleaning solution getting weak?" I grinned.

"Here, hold that diode steady so we can finish this machine.

And try not to breathe in my direction, Marlboro mouth."

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**“Stories worth telling”**

"0000HH, Marlboro mouth is it! Well. I have wanted to talk to you about your deodorant, or lack of."

"I'll have you know, I use Right Guard every morning, Blatz breath!" Bertle tried to look incensed, but failed.

"I don't drink Blatz. And you should also use it under the left arm instead of just the right, to guard against body odor."

"That's it! Put the board in the slot and fire it up, cook and test it, while I clean up the tools, Budweiser breath!"

"O.K. But did you know that you are so old when I get close, I can hear you rot."

"Watch it with the OLD business. I don't want to have to hurt you, and you know, I am an Air Force trained killer!"

"I plum forgot. Now I'm really shakin' in my boots."

We both lost it at that point and cracked up laughing.

The thought of getting out of Vietnam made us joke with whole-hearted abandonment. We forgot the unwritten rules of Technical Sergeants not fraternizing with Airmen Second Classes. We were friends, and rank was secondary. The age difference was known to both of us but meant little because we were like a father and son who suddenly found they were each other's best friend. I wanted that friendship from my own father.

We went back to the Philippines as soon as we were able. We didn't want to stay one minute longer than necessary.

The Philippines looked much more beautiful upon landing at Clark AFB. Before I was to go anywhere, I was instructed to fill out my DD form 1351-2 Travel Voucher or Sub voucher. I followed Bertle's example; he was the one who noted all the dates and times and how many meals were eaten by us at a government or nongovernment eatery.

Under penalty of a maximum fine of \$10,000—or a maximum imprisonment of 5 years, or both, I know Bertle had that down to the minute and it was true and factual. I signed it and hailed down a base taxi to hurry me to the barracks so I could clean up and get to the Airman's Club to buy a fifth of Jim Beam on my way to the Tun Tavern.

\*\*\*

Lester Wiggins laid down the stack of writing I had given him earlier and grinned his devilish grin. "You write with more self effacing humor than Ian Fleming. It's good! I like it!"

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**“Stories worth telling”**

"Nodix, don't you just love those 007 movies? NOW! I want just a few more pages... pages on how you got shot at... running with your pants down. Sounds funny but that was serious. Fill us in on the jungle survival school and why Felix thinks you are immature.

"Ho boy! I personally think that's a hoot! A Negrito thinking a Crypto maintenance man is immature... A HOOT!..

NOW! We're almost finished here. Go to it."

**Has this left you with wanting to read more? If it has, please visit his [web site](#) for more information and how to order his book.**

## Phan Rang Reunion T-Shirt Sale



The front design on our reunion T-Shirt is a front and back image of our Phan Rang AB Challenge coin and the back is the control tower and a list of all of the known organizations that were at Phan Rang AB.

[Design-Apparel](#) is changing a few things to make this year's ordering experience a better one. They will be shipping UPS only so there are no missed deliveries due to the post office.

Orders placed between Friday May 13, 2016 and June 13th will be shipped on June 30th. June 13th and July 13th ship July 30th. July 13 and August 13th ship August 30th, 2016. Any orders after August will be mailed September 30th, 2016 for those not attending the reunion and for those attending the reunion pickup will be at the reunion at the registration table. They will have additional merchandise at reunion for purchase. Hope to see you in Oklahoma City.

**[Click here to Order](#)**



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**Here’s a quick rundown on the reunion as of 29 May 2016:**

**Total Reservations at Hotel: 57**

**Total Number of Guests: 102**

**Number for Tinker tour: 32**

**Number for Capital/Cowboy Museum/[45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Museum tour](#): 28**

**Number for the Wiley Post Apt. tour: 38**

**[Click here to make your hotel reservation.](#)**

**Please make your hotel reservations now!**

**PHAN RANG STAFF MEMBERS**

**Joseph Burkhart:** Master of Ceremonies

**Robert Kellington:** Tour Coordinator

**Jack Anderson:** Treasurer

**Lou Ruggerio:** Site coordinator/Contract negotiator

**Douglas Severt:** Reunion Coordinator

**Ed Downey/Barbara Brandt:** Ceremonies

**Christopher Boles:** Photographer

**Kirk Minert:** Aircraft Historian

**Bob Tucker:** Keeper of the Rolls & Badge Board

**Joe Kaupa:** In Memoriam (new)

**Mike Maleski:** Chaplain

**Jim Erixson:** Associate Chaplain

**Bob Howe:** Australian Ambassador

**FACEBOOK GROUP ADMINISTRATORS**

**Douglas Severt, Joseph Burkhart, David McGaughey, Vincent Joseph Miller  
(Susan Anderson-Miller) and Kirk Minert**

**I hope that you enjoyed this issue of the Phan Rang Newsletter. As a two striper, can you imagine telling your NCOIC that when you get close to him you could hear him ROT? This newsletter was compiled and published by [Douglas Severt](#).**