

HISTORICAL OCCURRENCES

R&R Taipei, Taiwan 1967

By Ken White

As I mentioned in the January 2010 newsletter, I had the opportunity to visit Taipei in November, some 40+ years after having spent a week there on R&R in July 1967. My lady friend was lucky enough to be able to attend a two-week long Chinese gourmet cooking class in Taipei for overseas Chinese, so we flew there several weeks before the class started to spend time touring Taipei and visiting some neighboring cities, such as Keelung. I'm happy to report, that Taipei is still there, just bigger, busier, and more colorful than ever. Taipei is a very large city—on the scale of New York City, and for the most part, is very modern, clean, and fast paced. It is filled with taxicabs, subways, and coffee shops, and of course, motor scooters. The tourist literature in the hotel claims that there are 1.5 million scooters registered in Taipei, ranking it right up there with Rome, Italy for having the most in any one city.

Of course, I couldn't wait to get to Taipei to see if I could find any of the old haunts from R&R days. With the help of Google and YAHOO Maps, I was able to locate the old club and bar district frequented by myself and the other Americans on R&R. It is located in the Jungshan District in the northern part of the city, about half-way between Taipei Sungshan Airport and the Danshuei River, along Min Quan Road East, and immediately south of the Taipei Art Park, a large urban park of Chinese gardens and horticulture exhibits. Min Quan is one of the main east/west roads in that part of the city.

In 1967, Taipei was really off the beaten path for most American tourists but was a favorite R&R spot for American troops. It was one of about eight or so R&R destinations that we could pick from - Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Manila being some of the others. Taipei had a reputation for being a bit more low-key compared to say Bangkok or Hong Kong. After spending a week in Taipei, I can't imagine what those places must have been like.

We flew on a U.S. Army Caribou airplane from the Cav's base camp at An Khe to the U.S. Air Force Base at Nha Trang, some 20 miles north of Cam Ranh Bay on the South China Sea. There we boarded a U.S. Air Force C-123 for the three hour flight to Taipei. In 1967, Taipei Sungshan Airport was the international airport in Taipei. Today, Taipei Sungshan is a domestic city-to-city airport, much like National Airport here in the Washington, DC area, and Taiwan International Airport in Tao Yuan City west of Taipei is the international airport. Once we arrived there, a U.S. Army bus was waiting to take us to the R&R Center located just off Min Quan Road East, south of the Taipei Art Park. There we went through an abbreviated immigration procedure and were then set loose only to be met by an army of representatives from the local hotels located along Min Quan Road East eager to register us for our week-long stay.

The R&R Center was actually co-located with the U.S. Navy's Sea Dragon Club, a 24/7 enlisted man's club that served food and drinks, and had live music and dancing. If I remember correctly, it also had a steam bath and sauna, and offered massages. Today, the Sea Dragon Club is the headquarters of a local Taipei taxicab company and has yellow Honda taxis lining both sides of its street.

The notorious OK and Suzie Wong Bars, known for separating the GIs from their money in record time, were located just a block or so from the Sea Dragon Club and served as the local water holes when not at the Sea Dragon. I don't remember what the legal drinking age was in Taipei in 1967, but I don't remember anyone ever having a problem getting served alcohol.

At any rate, it was a thrill to visit Taipei again and I look forward to returning again someday.
