

#19

21 June '71
Da Nang

Dear Family -

Excuse the scribbled effect, but at the moment I'm sitting at Da Nang Airfield waiting overnight to get the first plane back to Chu Lai in the morning (in fact I'll probably post this there). To be more precise, I'm sitting in the USO (it really exists) drinking what I believe is tea - or else weak coffee with detergent added. Anyway, to back-track, a few days ago my section OIC said, "I wouldn't know would you like to go to Long Binh?" I jumped, of course - Long Binh is the site of US Army HQ in Vietnam, and only a short distance away from Saigon. Possibly the only chance I'd have in my entire tour to actually see something of Vietnam besides one base - also to see something of how this entire enterprise is being run.

So, the early afternoon of the 19th I hitched a ride down to Chu Lai airfield - properly outfitted with travel orders as a classified courier - and got a plane down to Tan Son Nhut AFB (which also doubles as a civilian airport) in Saigon. The flight down there is only about 1 hr & 15 min, but the attendant regambole stretches it out, so I arrived after the last military bus for Long Binh had left.

I signed in at the Saigon transient barracks and went to the E M (enlisted men's) Club there with a couple of other enlisted couriers to have dinner and

2. See a show. I must admit that Army personnel live in comparative luxury there. The first thing that I noticed was that their club had a roof - beyond that, though, I'd say that it would make a very passable restaurant in the World - carpeting, panelled walls, upholstered chairs, etc, etc - thoroughly unreal.

In the morning I took the bus out to Long Binh to find USARV Casualty Branch, my "higher headquarters." Fortunately I know most of the people there from my daily telephone calls there (using military telephone networks in Vietnam is an adventure in itself), and they made me feel very much at home. After delivering the odd bits of information I carried, I got down to my real business there - questioning the various people in the Medvac Section as to their exact procedures, policies, etc, etc; and spent the entire day (the 20th) doing that.

By the time the last bus was ready to go back to Saigon in the evening, they'd decided that I had to stay the evening. Inasmuch as Saigon was off-limits for Vietnamese Armed Forces Day 5 till (it was on the 19th) except for the military-run sector I'd been in, and inasmuch as the city wouldn't have been safe at night anyway for a lone GI, I accepted gladly. That was a good thing ("Good Thing" c.f. 1066 + All That), because I was invited to, of all things, a Father's Day party (a lated. Happy 7th D, Dad) thrown was by a not-so-young lady civilian employee at USARV - which turned

a very pleasant evening with an excellent dinner in non-GI surroundings. I also met some (forgive my arrogance) people who'd been working at advanced degrees or in university admin when they'd been drafted. I also met someone who was plotting ways of getting to New Zealand on his R & R; we exchanged notes.

The amusing thing was that these people considered Chu Lai, which is really rather comfortable, to be the absolute end of the earth. The degree of comfort available at hqs in Saigon and Long Binh, I must admit is simply outrageous. In the morning today, when I dropped by the USARV hqs to pick up the stuff I'm bringing back, I noticed that their air-conditioning forms thick frost on the outside of the window: "40° cooler inside."

Then there are the generals' (lots of them) offices - enough to do credit to Trudential. I walked by some of the senior officers' quarters in Saigon; they were probably built by the French - and odd combination of Bretagne country and Asian - and very, very big and well kept. No wonder Wiotmoreland didn't want to leave; I rather doubt a general has it quite this good on a base in the US. Of course, I imagine a lot of it has to do with prestige in the eyes of our more-or-less Allies. But still; good grief!

This morning (the 2nd) they found me a bed for the night, after picking up my documents, & got a ride ~~to~~ to the airport from one of the people in the USARV office, who was adding the authorized mileage.

4. For the month to their vehicle by just driving it around and performing a few errands for a Colonel. Since I didn't have to show up for my plane until 2:00 PM today, this was the way I toured Saigon - in a military vehicle, which made it all legal.

Saigon is definitely quite a place. Imagine a 12th Century city suddenly hit by 20th Century technology and you'll have some idea of it. Riding through absolutely insane traffic - jeeps, trucks, old Frenchautos from 1948, cyclos [pedicabs], hop-tacs [Lambretta taxis, essentially a motor-scooter with an enclosed cab & seats for 6 facing each other in back], bicycles, and heaven knows what else - One catches sight of dirty alleys that turn into tree-lined footpaths further back, a carpenter's shop (no front, just a location with part of a roof over it) with a whole family sawing away with the most oddly designed tools, an old man and his (?) grandson occupying motor-scooter tyres the hard way, with a kerosene lamp & patches of rubber, fruit markets, etc, etc, etc. — all impressed on the eye in fractions of a second.

I don't want to give the impression that it's "quaint." It's not; it's just thoroughly different: the feeling for space that goes into the shape of the everyday architecture (as opposed to the colonial "palaces" the French left scattered around the city), the

popular ideal of the human form evident in the popular art (movie posters, ads, propaganda billboards). It's unquestionably dirty - by the standards of shampooed linoleum in Howard Johnson's - but in many of the shops you can see that the broom is being used constantly - the Vietnamese are neat, if they can't always be entirely clean.

The buildings (except shanties, which follow a universal pattern) even in the slums are an interesting contrast to ours (mass dwellings, that is). Obviously, the major differences are imposed by materials and tools available - & as result they're much smaller and (apparently, only, I'll bet) much less permanent-looking. However - & this seems to be the difference - all their seemingly meaningless convolution appear at closer examination to be intended to provide as much light & air as can be admitted to such a cramped area - of course it doesn't always work out that way (especially with another building right on top of it). Still, as an attempt, it does beat the "cube-with-an-air-shaft-down-the-middle" approach you find in New York.

Of course, the most noticeable thing about Saigon is the fact that it is, after all, the capital of a country at war. All the young men are in uniform. The public buildings are surrounded by blast walls & have machine-gun bunkers at the corners of the lot - and barbed wire all over

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the place. A tank parked at a cross-roads with its gun pointed down the avenue. Steel-plated cupolas for gunners in the middle of the road, where we'd have a toll-booth. Endless convoys coming through the streets. US, Korean, and Thai military personnel swarming about. The effect is overwhelming.

Anyway, I had lunch at an Americanized place, was dropped off at the airport and made my plane. Unfortunately, the only one I could get a seat on (I made arrangements as soon as I hit Saigon) was to Da Nang. When I reached Da Nang (some miles north of Chu Lai & really the major base in Nam) I tried to book a chopper ride back to Chu Lai, but they were all socked in. So I made arrangements to get on the first straight-wing flight in the morning (in the process I took a very fast mini-tour of Da Nang & got to watch a fighter squadron).

It's been instructive - to use a bad word - and I wish I could really get all my impressions down - which is rather difficult to do. But now I can say that I've really seen something of Viet Nam - and it's a nice way to break up the time, which can get somewhat monotonous, sort of a miniature R & R, & just what was needed.

One other thing - which I'm almost embarrassed to mention: On the 19th there was an awards ceremony for the Adjutant General's Branch in which 10 people were decorated, and I was given a Bronze Star. The embarrassing thing about is that at one time the award was made purely for valor, but in my case (of course) it was for "meritorious achievement" (it's possible ~~to~~ even get it for "meritorious service"). It seems a pity to down-grade the thing that way, but I might as well admit that I wasn't about to refuse it. However, that thought was somewhat compensated for by a Sergeant First Class who works in the Colonel's office who walked up to me & said, "Ten people got awards tonight and only four deserved them. I just hope you realize that you're one of those four." It's a nice thought, whether or not it's entirely true; and one always likes to hear something complimentary about himself.

I guess that's about it for now; I'll try to get some sleep before my flight. I love you all very much & miss you, but the year year will be over very quickly.

Bob