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Can eight thousand Air Force men be wrong? Is Cam Ranh Bay Air Base really the

Best Base in Vietnam?

by SMSgt. JAMES A. GEORGE



IT was dark when our C-130 taxied to a stop on the pierced-steel-planking ramp at Cam Ranh Bay AB. As we stepped off the aft cargo door with our luggage, a blast of biting, stinging sand rained down on us. A helicopter had rotored into sudden action in response to a possible emergency on the runway. Its blades whipped the sands of Cam Ranh through our deplaning group.

There are tons of sand at Cam Ranh Bay. But then, it's a huge base, with most things available in large quantities, including about 8,000 US Air Force men plus other American servicemen. But Cam Ranh Bay, unlike most air bases in South Vietnam, does not have any allied military men stationed on its soil.

Twin-jet F-4C *Phantoms* roar from Cam Ranh Bay runways around the clock, and the aerial sky giants hauling their vast cargoes come and go in a steady stream. Cam Ranh Bay is a major air base, a resupply depot, a medical evacuation site and a port of embarkation and debarkation, among other things.

Busy scarcely describes the steady flow of men and materials to and from the "sand city"—Cam Ranh's

nickname. Even its base newspaper is aptly named the *Sand Script*.

It all started in August 1965 when a dozen Air Force men arrived and shuffled across the barren, sandy peninsula, pointing here and there to what would come later. Within a few months thousands had followed and made their own imprints in the sand. By November 1965 an aluminum matting runway was completed and elements of the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing began arriving from MacDill AFB, Fla. The F-4Cs went into action against Viet Cong targets immediately, and Cam Ranh Bay AB was in operation. By February 1967 pilots of the 12th TFW had logged 25,000 combat sorties.

A second runway opened for action in October 1966 and the base continued to grow. New quarters have replaced tents and hootches. The base has become a huge resupply depot, and early this year was added to the Military Airlift Command's aeromedical evacuation sites. The Air Force's largest medical facility in Vietnam is also located at Cam Ranh Bay.

This thriving base is on a peninsula about 18 miles

long, some 160 nautical miles northeast of Saigon, and faces the South China Sea. A large, deep-water port is just seven miles south. US Army, Navy and civilian construction firms have enlarged the port and harbor facilities until, today, a large portion of all materials shipped to Vietnam on ocean-going vessels steam into Cam Ranh Bay for offloading.

Naval ghosts of the past linger there too, because Cam Ranh Bay's port was once used as a naval base by the French, as a World War II Japanese naval staging area, and as refuge for the Imperial Russian fleet when, earlier in this century, it sailed to catastrophe in the Straits of Tsushima.

Golfers' Dilemma

"All we need is a golf course," a sergeant told me at Cam Ranh Bay AB. "We've got the sand traps already." Ironically, the massive base which plays such a vital part in the allied air war and the aerial resupply of Vietnam also has one of the finest beaches available in-country to American servicemen. Within walking distance of the flight line, on the other side of a sandy knoll which shuts out all view of aerial combat preparations, is a beautiful stretch of peaceful beach that is used extensively as a three-day, in-country rest and recreation site for American military men. The South China Sea breaks gently on these shores to provide plenty of fun in surf and sun.

The base also caters to the off-duty enjoyment of its officer, noncommissioned officer and airmen personnel with outstanding clubs for each group; and excellent two-story library complete with one of the finest tape-recording facilities available at any military base; a large indoor gymnasium; indoor and outdoor theaters; and other recreational facilities.

But war is always near at Cam Ranh Bay AB. From its central position in South Vietnam the four F-4C squadrons of the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing fly daily and nightly missions against the enemy in both the north and south.

I talked with Colonel Jones E. Bolt, former 12th TFW commander, shortly after he had returned from an air strike mission against enemy forces in the "panhandle" area below the demilitarized zone (DMZ). His closely cut hair is greying, but with all the pressures of a four-squadron F-4C wing and one of the largest, busiest air bases in South Vietnam, he was flying four or five F-4C missions a week.

He discussed the variety of interdiction, air strike, close air support and aerial escort missions his pilots were flying to the north and south, and the colonel pointed out that all his operations staff members were

experienced pilots who fly their share of combat missions. "I won't have them if they won't fly," he said. "And they don't wait around for the easier missions." There's a general feeling among the key staff officers of the wing that if you can't hack the full load you don't belong in the 12th, the first USAF wing to convert to the Mach-2 F-4C *Phantom*.

We also discussed the tons of sand at Cam Ranh Bay AB. Was it a problem?

"It gives our maintenance men some headaches," he said, "especially when the wind picks up. For example, we've noticed more rapid failure rates in some aircraft component parts. And the flight surgeon tells me he handles a lot of cases involving sore eyes and sore throats. Our men on the flight line have it rough . . . sun, wind and sand are things they learn to live with. Sometimes we have sand storms and rain storms at the same time, and this sand has a high silicone content." The Japanese import sand from Cam Ranh Bay areas to make some of their finest glass products.

Little Things Mean A Lot

Except for civic action and humanitarian activities, the men at Cam Ranh Bay were restricted to base activities. Why?

"The primary reason, of course, is to prevent inflation of the local economy. This restriction to base is becoming the rule throughout Vietnam, by direction of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Local economies suffer when large numbers of Americans spend huge sums of money at the market places. Prices go sky-high, and invariably advance to the point where local materials are priced completely out of reach of the local citizen. The average working man suffers most — the family man, and those who depend on him.

Aircraft landing at Cam Ranh Bay AB is framed by sign proclaiming the base best, and young palms planted as part of beautification program.



"There are other advantages, also, to our remaining on the base. Let's just say that a man has a better chance to stay safe and well."

The subject of morale came up and Colonel Bolt said that his people had "top spirit . . . top morale." But then, commanders almost always say that about their units. It's what the people at a base say about it individually, and privately, that counts.

I learned one unusual fact about Cam Ranh Bay AB which, I thought, had a bearing on this subject. Colonel Bolt and his unit commanders were actually *sending* their men on R&R leaves. I would have thought that most men in Vietnam would have jumped at a chance to visit Hong Kong, Bangkok, Hawaii, or some of the other approved R&R spots, but apparently the Air Force people at Cam Ranh Bay felt no such urgent desires. They were pleased with their assignment, content with their beach and other recreational facilities, and none that I talked with informally had any complaints about the fact that there was no place to visit off base.

"Colonel Bolt has a simple philosophy that is well-known," a senior sergeant told me one day, "and that is 'don't irritate people with petty inconveniences.' Little things mean a lot to a man who is separated from his home and living in a combat environment; and the little things you do which *annoy* him are as important as the big things you do to make him reasonably happy," the sergeant philosophized.

They were making plans at Cam Ranh Bay to purchase fishing boats which could also be used for water skiing, and for the formation of a scuba club. "Mainly," Colonel Bolt said, "we try to provide things for people instead of

F-4C pilot Capt. George Devorshak and aerial photographer A1C Bruce E. Gaston check final plans for filming 12th TFW air strike mission.



Off-duty Air Force men play volleyball in air bubble gymnasium which includes weightlifting, exercise and other physical fitness facilities.

having them frustrated in their search for adequate, satisfying recreational activities. Our open messes are among the finest, and our dining halls serve outstanding food." He was dead right on both scores.

Blueprint for Success

Tagging along with Lt. Col. James Crossey, commander of the 12th Civil Engineering Squadron, I went to the far corners of the base, which, I discovered, is more like *two* bases. Across the parallel runways from the main base, and at the opposite end, another "base" was under construction. It would include large freight warehouses, giant power plants, maintenance hangars, and operation facilities for aerial port and airlift activities. The F-4C fighter missions remained on the other side of the field, where 60 Porta-campers were used to house busy flight crews and senior officers of the wing.

Colonel Crossey said that a larger, better-equipped recreation area was included in base construction plans. Potable water was originally a problem at most air bases in South Vietnam, but he said that Cam Ranh Bay AB would have 11 wells, seven on one side of the base and four on the other.

We toured the construction area where 36 modern dormitories were rising from the sand. Even as they were being completed, tents were being taken down. Only a few of these would remain and they would be the hard-backed tents. Across the field, in the newer area, another 26 dorms were planned, along with a thousand-man dining hall. The busy Cam Ranh Bay passenger terminal would remain at the northwest end of the base, near the

12th Tactical Fighter Wing headquarters.

Colonel Crossey also said that a 2,000-man naval air station was planned for the southeast end of the base. As we drove around we saw the results of many individual and group attempts to beautify the base. The men of Cam Ranh Bay had planted a wide variety of plants in their sandy environs, and most were flourishing. These included coconut, banana and palm trees. Then we suddenly came upon a grassy area between several administration buildings. The grass wasn't thick yet, but it was a pleasant surprise.

"Grass will grow in this soil," Colonel Crossey said. "To offset early erosion problems, Air Force Logistics Command came to our rescue with four types of grass seed. These were planted and are treated with tender loving care. The effort's beginning to pay off."

Defending These Shores

This strategic air base and port is practically surrounded by US Army and Republic of Korea Army units — or water — and more easily defended than most bases against attacks from the air, sea and mainland. Nevertheless, security police units, including a sentry dog force, take every possible precaution to guard against enemy infiltration or sabotage. Defensive bunkers which dot the base perimeter and a good-sized hill overlooking the seacoast are strategic vantage points for the air base defense. A US Army *Hawk* missile battery is located near the base, and security precautions require all Vietnamese employed in base facilities to depart the base before nightfall.

Maintenance men and armament technicians of 12th Tactical Fighter Wing ready F-4C Phantom for one of many daily air strikes in Vietnam.



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Compared to other bases I've visited during two trips to Vietnam, it was obvious that the men of Cam Ranh Bay AB think and talk less about "getting hit" than do the Air Force men at several other air bases. Even with the long workdays and round-the-clock efforts by Cam Ranh people, there was a more relaxed, less strained atmosphere than I found at other bases in Vietnam. It was hard to figure at first, because the sand seems to me to be a natural enemy. It gets in your shoes and eyes and hair and into engines and living quarters, and can be a major irritant in this high-temperature locale.

But the men of Cam Ranh Bay have something else going for them which more than offsets the long work hours, the pressures of war and family separation, and the winds that eternally shift the sands and create problems. They have a healthy attitude that says they can lick the problems, whatever they may be. And although this same kind of attitude prevails throughout Vietnam, these American airmen approach life with a generally more relaxed determination. Every person I talked with at Cam Ranh Bay AB echoed one sentiment: He would rather be at CRBAB than at any other Vietnam base.

I mentioned this to a lieutenant a few hours before catching a C-130 northbound, but added that I wasn't completely convinced that Cam Ranh Bay is the best base in Vietnam. He offered to request all 8,000 Air Force men to line up on the runways and let me hear the answer to that question in one tumultuous roar. I declined.

Is Cam Ranh Bay AB the best base in Vietnam? Perhaps. At least the men I met there were convinced that it is. And that's what really counts. ●

Called Phantom Lake by base personnel, rain-filled hole is caused by jet engine blasts at Cam Ranh Bay jet engine test cell operation site.



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THANKSGIVING IN VIETNAM

Air Force personnel are hosts to Army troops for Thanksgiving Day dinner under sunny skies of Vietnam.