

“Thanks for Your Service”

By Ron Fogle

The island hopping trip to Vietnam aboard a C-130 in late April of 1967 is still a vivid memory. Landing in that war zone on my 21st birthday is equally unforgettable. I am sure that all of us who were on those C-130 flights remember going to and from Vietnam and then north to the DMZ--and the Dong Ha Combat Base.

My memories seem so clear of the flight over: loading up at *Point Mugu* and then flying up to Travis Air Force base before debarking from the continental US. Flying on to Hickam Air Field in Hawaii and experiencing the balmy tropical weather when getting off the plane at night and while walking to a building of some kind. Then on to Midway Island and seeing Gooney birds for the first time (and not since) was a real sight. These are graceful birds in flight but basically awkward as all heck when taking off and landing. We were then on to Guam and seeing flights of B-52's taking off on bombing runs, probably on North Vietnam not far from our final destination. Finally, we had a very short layover at Mactan, Philippines. Once we took off from Mactan, we were issued 80 rounds of ammo for our M-14 rifles and instructed to load the four magazines, each holding 20 rounds, which we had been issued with our combat gear. As we loaded the ammo into the magazines, I still remember the quiet and nervous banter that seemed to strike home to many of us of the stark realization that this was real and we were headed to a war zone.

Each stop of the flight over was for refueling of both plane and occupants. Our meals were either served in a cafeteria or provided via a box lunch. I believe the air crews were rotated also on many of these stops. I recall most flights being about 8-10 hours long. Some of the hops may have been longer. Many stops were only for a couple of hours, but it generally gave us an opportunity to stretch our legs. I recall Hickam was late evening or night and we received a box lunch. On Midway and Guam we went directly to the mess hall. The Mactan stop was during the day and several who knew the base headed to an enlisted men's club for some adult beverages. The difference of whether we got the chow hall or a box lunch was probably dependent on the time that we landed on each island, therefore, dictating whether the base chow hall was open or not.

Somewhere over the Pacific, the C-130 pilot asked if anyone wanted to come up to the cockpit to have a look around. Having had a little bit of flight training in small 2 and 4 place single engine civilian airplanes, I was eager to take my turn and found that to be an interesting experience to see the layout and various aviation instruments that were much more sophisticated than anything I had experienced in a small private plane.

The C-130 flight I was on had 60 Seabees on board and 12 cots mounted up on the side fuselage for sleeping. We were allotted 2 hours in the cot and then gave it up for the next 'Bee. You no more than fell asleep and the next person in line for the cot was waking you. Our seats were strap webbing mounting along the fuselage sides. Needless-to-say, it was really hard to get any

real rest on those island hopping flights. I recall doing a lot of standing at one of the side doors in the C-130 and watching through a tiny window at the ocean beneath. Long shelved memories came back about grabbing a cargo blanket and curling up on the deck back near the cargo door/ramp of the C-130. The metal floor wasn't comfortable, but it seemed better than getting just a couple hours of cot time.

As we got close to landing at Dong Ha, we were told to get ready to disembark along with instructions to be sure to take all our gear with us. They would be unloading the plane's center cargo area as soon as possible and we were to get off the plane quickly to allow that to be done. I'm sure the flight crew did not want to be sitting on the ground any longer than they absolutely had to in such a forward combat area. The plane landed and seemed a bit squirrely while it was slowing down. This may have been due to the landing mats that made up the airstrip. Then it taxied in and stopped and the back cargo doors opened with the loading ramp dropping to the ground. And I clearly remember the wave of heat hitting me as the ramp door opened. Seemed that no matter how hard one tried to suck in air, it felt as though your lungs just weren't working right. And the heat, I had lived in west Texas for a few years while growing up and thought that I knew heat, but this was another level.

I grabbed my gear and headed towards the trucks to take us to where our Seabee base was being set up within the larger combat base. There we were told to draw our cots and bedding and given instructions where to find our tents that the advanced party had already set up for us. The rest of the day was mainly spent getting squared away and getting some rest. I was more fortunate than some of the others in that my body seemed to quickly adjust to the heat.

The next day the Marine Gunny Sergeant assigned to the battalion gave a talk to remind us that we were now in Vietnam and not in California. He pointed out that we were surrounded by 35,000 unfriendly forces. After that we worked on filling sandbags and many other tasks to make our quarters safer and more livable. We also started on work assignments to get equipment repaired.

I spent my Dong Ha tour in 1967 on the base except for one trip to the Cua Viet river docks to check on whether a part for a grader had arrived. Some of our guys had very different experiences in that they served on STAT teams, went to Khe Sahn to rebuild the air field, spent time at Cua Viet or supported the Special Forces over near the Laotian border. Others were out doing various road and bridge projects and other construction support duties in the area both on and off the base. Some of our guys were in worse situations. We lost 9 guys in all, five to direct combat action. There were numerous others who were awarded purple hearts. I was more fortunate in never having much more than a minor foot wound that was received while jumping into a mortar hole during incoming fire one night. The wound was slightly infected by the morning and treated by a corpsman on my way to the shop. Other than that, while eating I discovered a missing temporary tooth cap and a corpsman replaced that. But these must be figments of my imagination, because a copy of my medical records that were requested a few years ago don't reflect these events.

I can't speak for others who served in Vietnam, but after returning from the Dong Ha tour and eventually mustering out, I spoke very little about actual service in Vietnam to anyone - even family. And even with family, it was never much and never anything about any experiences or events in 'Nam. People, even strangers, would ask me whether I had been in the military and I'd very proudly say "yes". Then many would ask what branch I served in and I'd proudly answer "Navy Seabees". Although it seemed from their reaction or follow-on questions that most had never heard of the Seabees or knew what they did. However, my father-in-law did know of the 'Bees, having served in areas with them in WWII in the Pacific when he was in the 5th Air Corps. Generally I'd get asked where I had served and I'd say "overseas". Some would ask whereabouts overseas, and I'd answer "Southeast Asia". Most people would get the hint by my vague answers at different stages of the questions and stop asking, but some didn't stop. When they pressed on with their questions, I'd finally say that I had been in "Vietnam", but quickly add that I was in a non-combat unit. Those that went that far in their questions would generally stop at that point.

I clearly recall the first time admitting openly to a stranger that I had served in Vietnam. This occurred on a flight returning from a business trip to London in May 1998, just over 31 years after landing in Dong Ha. While walking the airplane cabin to stretch my legs, I had stopped by an area where the flight attendants prepared food and drinks. There was a window portal there and I had stopped to look out at the ocean far below. I was swept up in the similarity of feelings on this trip as on the flight to Dong Ha and they were very vivid. A big difference, however, was that I was traveling business class on that flight in 1998. Some time passed and I heard a voice say something to me about being deep in thought. It was the head flight attendant who had spoken. I must have been standing there quite a while and had become lost in long ago memories. I realized that in my mind, I was back in 1967 and looking out the door portal of a C-130 as the ocean passed below. The comment from the attendant snapped me back to the present and in answer I just said "yes". Then for some reason, maybe because I was still not fully back in the present, I stated that I was back in time about 30 years and thinking about the island hopping flights in a C-130 to a country far away and at war and headed into an unknown situation. He then said 'thanks for your service' and I didn't know what to say or how to respond. I was dumfounded and was thinking 'why thank me?' I was only doing what I considered to be my duty in serving my country.

Reflecting back, I think the attitude that the public had developed towards Vietnam vets in general back then was such that I just built a shell around myself to avoid being associated with Vietnam. While I do not recall experiencing any of the treatment that some vets endured upon returning to the states, reflecting back I think that I just didn't want to expose myself to the possibility of giving someone that opportunity. It took several more years to be more open about serving in Vietnam and longer to become more comfortable when someone thanked me for my service. It wasn't until after I started going to the MCB 11 annual reunions that I became comfortable about being more open about serving in Vietnam. I think that the visits with other Seabees at these reunions have been a major catharsis in my change.

50 years later I wonder how many others that served in Vietnam had similar thoughts and went through so many years being unable to openly embrace their service to their country. One thing that seems evident is that the public putting blame on Vietnam vets for just doing their duty back in that era seemed to turn the tide for today's vets; they are not being blamed for being in the military and/or going to war. That blame seems more correctly placed on the politicians and other leaders who order the military to action.

To be sure, I always was, and still am, very proud of having served my country and even prouder of being in the Seabees. The "Can Do" attitude that was part of who we were has served me well ever since. No one should ever be made to feel that answering the call of duty to one's country is a bad thing. Up until the draft ended, many did not have any choice, except maybe for the branch of service, for which they chose to serve.

Time in the Navy and Civilian Life Since

After the Dong Ha deployment ended in late November and early December 1967 and we arrived back in the states, I took leave and went home. My wife had stayed with her parents while I was gone and she had delivered our first child, a baby girl. Around the first of the year, 1968, we arrived back on base at Port Hueneme. Our battalion regrouped and went through training for our next deployment which turned out to be Quang Tri, which was about 10 miles south of Dong Ha. Since I was due to be mustered out in late July, I was assigned to the Advance Party for that deployment. Quite honestly, after Dong Ha, once I learned the location of Quang Tri, I didn't really want to go back over. Then when I learned about early outs being granted to go to college, I applied for an early out. I had about a year and a half of college prior to joining the Seabees. After the first two early out requests were rejected, my third one was approved. I was processed out in early May 1968 and we returned to our home in southern Illinois and I enrolled in college. I subsequently earned an Industrial Engineering degree from the University of Illinois. During my professional career, I've had the opportunity to work in transportation, telephony, fossil and nuclear piping, industrial chemicals and wire manufacturing industries in various capacities. We have two married daughters and one grandson. We are fortunate to live near our grandson and we thoroughly enjoy spending time with him and watching him participate in sports. Now that my wife and I have retired this year, I'm sure that we'll try spending more time with him.

With the various industries and organizations that I've worked with professionally, in my opinion the Seabees was the best organization that I was ever associated with. When I went to join the Navy, I had never heard of the Seabees. But I'm forever grateful that things worked out as they did.

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