

## Burning Shit and Drinking Beer

### The Island

#### Rats

Sanitation on the island was primitive. To take a shit, we went beyond the wire and dug a hole. If you had to piss, you went in the Rach Tra Canal. We dumped our empty C-ration cans in a spot near the canal bank. At night, we could hear the rats loudly rummaging through the cans, so we started to set traps for them. The sound of traps snapping punctuated the night and in the morning there was always a sleek fat rat in each trap. Once we laid out a night's catch side-by-side - - five or six of the beasts - - and took a Polaroid picture of them.

But the best rat catcher around was a Vietnamese kid who trapped rats in the rice paddies north of the canal. We'd see him in the morning, setting off on foot along the paddy dikes, startling huge flocks of parakeets into the air, and returning a few hours later with a string of plump rats slung over his shoulder. He looked very much like an Asian version of a Norman Rockwell barefoot boy on his way home with his catch after a successful morning at the old fishing hole.

#### Sandbag Booby Trap

The island was mostly swamp and there wasn't nearly enough dirt to fill the sandbags necessary to build a bunker. So we got authorization to fill sandbags at Fire Base Hard Core, the battalion headquarters, which had a large sandy area right outside its perimeter. Swede drove the deuce-a-and-a-half to Hard Core with me in the cab and Al Lewis and Mike Klassen in the back. When we arrived outside the base, we could see a lot of GIs were already there filling bags and a bunch of Vietnamese kids were helping them or just hanging around.

Swede pulled the truck to a stop and we piled out. From the back of the truck, Mike and Al tossed down the bales of empty plastic sandbags together with a couple of shovels. A half dozen kids came running up offering to fill bags and after a short conversation in pointee-talkie and pidgin English, Al agreed to pay them a couple of piastres for their help. Swede, Al, Mike, and I started filling, one guy holding the bag opened and the other wielding the shovel. The kids filled their sandbags using wooden slats from discarded ammo crates in place of shovels. As the sun beat down on us from an almost cloudless sky, we began to sweat heavily and quickly peeled off our shirts. After about an hour and a half's work, punctuated by water breaks, all the bags were filled and we began loading them onto the truck - - my crew and I tossing the filled bags up to the kids who packed them in the truck bed. After the loading was completed, I gave the kids a handful of piastre bills and we drove off.

Arriving at Rock soaked with sweat and caked with sand, all we wanted to do was finish unloading as quickly as possible and jump in the cool waters of the canal. Swede drove the truck right down to the dock so we could offload the sandbags directly into a boat for the trip to the island. I was in the bed of the truck tossing bags to Swede, Al, and Mike when I lifted a bag and heard a snapping sound. Looking down I saw a spring and wire attached to one of the pieces of wood the kids had used as shovels. The wire led to a hand grenade wedged under another sandbag. My heart beating wildly, I jumped down from the truck yelling, "fire in the hole".

Everyone flattened themselves on the ground. Nothing happened. As we slowly got up I told them what I had seen. Cautiously, Mike and I climbed back onto the truck bed. Now I could make out that the grenade handle was still attached to the grenade and the pin was still in place. Wrapping his right hand around the handle and holding the wire with his left hand so it would not pull the pin, Mike slowly picked up the grenade. I painstakingly lifted up the spring and the wooden slat. Then, after sliding very carefully off the back of the truck, we walked the whole mess over to the dock and on the count of three threw it in the canal.

Swede and I drove back to Hard Core, but the kids were gone.

### Daytime

The ground surveillance radar was turned on only after dark, leaving our crew with a lot of free time during the daylight hours. Every now and then, we did draw a daytime assignment, such as planting sensors, building a bunker, or driving to the rear to replace worn-out radar batteries, but mostly there was a lot of down time during the day. Guys filled the hours reading, listening to the radio, and swimming in the canal.

The favorite reading material was mail from home, which took a couple of weeks to get to us, but came regularly. In addition to letters, I received copies of *Time* magazine sent by my parents and, although the news was always out of date by the time the magazine arrived, I enjoyed reading it. *Stars & Stripes*, the Armed Forces newspaper, occasionally found its way to the island and copies of *Playboy* received from home were prized - - most guys hoarded them, although eventually old issues would be passed around. Other, more hard-core, sex magazines were also in circulation.

Then there was armed forces radio, which could be heard on the cheap plastic radios GIs carried just about everywhere. Aside from brief, periodic news segments, the radio format was all music and spanned the popular spectrum from soul to rock to country, with some blues late at night. There was almost no jazz and absolutely no classical music.

The waters of the Rach Tra Canal were muddy, but refreshingly cool, so in the dry season the guys often went swimming off the makeshift dock on the west end of the island. There was a current running eastward toward the Saigon River, so you had to be careful not to drift too far downstream. Since we had no access to showers, we used the canal as a bathtub, soaking ourselves, soaping up, and then rinsing off. Once you had pulled yourself out of the water, the tropical sun dried you off in no time.

One day Al went upstream, landed at Fire Support Base Rock and went from there to the nearby ville where he picked up some *nuoc da* (ice) and also what looked like a basketball hoop. A few days later, Mike located a beat-up basketball at Rock, so we nailed the hoop to one of the timbers supporting the rocket wire around our radar tower and started playing ball. There wasn't much open space on the island and what was available wasn't exactly flat, but we were able to get games of two-on-two going, which made the daytime hours pass more quickly. We even started one game at night, by the light of the full moon. It was disorienting playing in the moon shadows on the uneven ground, so when small arms fire broke out about half a klick away, we didn't mind calling the game off.

Since the radar squad had the use of a truck, we sometimes filled the daylight hours by driving into Tan Son Nhut to visit the PX. The store was huge and had just about any item you could want, from high quality stereo equipment to beer and whiskey. In one part of the PX, a large number of shelves were devoted just to olives, stuffed with everything from almonds to anchovies to blue cheese, and clearly intended for martinis. I didn't start to drink martinis until years later, but I thought devoting a whole section of the PX to stuffed olives was truly impressive.

On the days we drove into the rear area, we usually saw scores of GIs hitchhiking along Highway 1, going and coming, like us, seemingly unsupervised; they appeared to have detached themselves, at least momentarily, from the war and were wandering around wherever they wished.

### Nighttime

We worked the radar during the hours of darkness, and divided the watches equally among the four of us. So depending on the time of year and length of the day, a watch could run from two to three hours. If the radar operator got a blip that seemed like enemy movement, he usually checked with another guy in the squad to confirm that it wasn't ground clutter before calling it in - - even if that meant waking someone up out of a sound sleep.

You had to be alert and sober to run the radar effectively, so any drinking or dope smoking was done after your watch was over. One night after Thomas completed his watch, he went off to his bunk and polished off most of the 40-ounce bottle of Jim Beam that he had purchased at the PX a few days earlier. Then he rambled over to the boat dock on the west end of the island, sat down by himself, and began singing snatches of songs. A few minutes later, he started howling. When Thomas was drunk, it was best to avoid him, but I had to do something. As I walked over to him, I noticed the recently risen moon was full and thought of all the stories I'd heard about the moon and lunatics. I crouched down by the dock and told Thomas that if there were any VC nearby they were going to hear him and send an RPG his way. So he'd better quiet down. He looked at me like I was speaking to him from a great distance. Finally he focused and said, "Yeah Sarge, I'll keep it down." A couple of times afterwards, he started to sing in a low tone and then, seeming to catch himself, stopped. Finally, humming to himself, he walked slowly back to the bunker and crashed on his bunk.

On St. Patrick's Day after my watch was completed, I celebrated with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label. I didn't howl at the moon like Thomas, but I was pretty scuttled by the time I hit my air mattress.

One night Al woke me up and told me he picked up a blip the size of the Queen Mary and asked me to check it out. I put on the headset and watched the screen, but didn't see or hear anything unusual. I handed back the headset and told him there was nothing there. Growing excited and a little annoyed, he cranked up the audio and said, "Now listen." Again, I didn't hear anything but normal ground clutter. Al now seemed a little confused and it dawned on me that he was stoned and was hearing all the normal radar noises much louder than they actually were. I was surprised and pissed - - Al was usually very reliable. I told him to go to bed; I'd take the rest of his watch. He didn't argue.

At the top of the radar tower, in addition to the PPS-5 radar, we had a Starlight Scope - - an optical device shaped like a large telescope that allowed you to see in very dim light. In late March, while I was operating the radar around midnight, I got an enormous blip, a very large yellow bulge on the screen and a loud and consistent grinding sound in the earphones. The source of the blip seemed to be in the very center of the Rach Tra, east of the island. Klassen, who was still awake, came over, checked out the screen and said there was definitely something out there. I told him to stay with the radar console and call in the sighting while I used the Starlight Scope to try to identify what it was. There was no moon that night, but it was clear and the stars were visible. I pointed the scope down river and started focusing, squinting at the nebulous green images that seemed to swirl in the lens. Suddenly, I saw it - - a sampan - - midstream in the canal. It had to be VC, since no one was authorized to move on the canal after dark. Klassen was already calling it in. Almost immediately we heard back from both

Red Leg at All American and the Surveillance Platoon at Rock that there were two 82<sup>nd</sup> nightingales in the area and therefore no artillery could be used. The ambushes would be alerted and, if possible, they would take the sampan under fire. Klassen said we had a clear angle from the top of the tower and asked for permission to engage the target with an M-40 grenade launcher or an M-60 machine gun. Negative to both requests because of the friendly ambushes in the area.

For whatever reason, the two nightingales weren't able to locate the sampan, so the clearest radar target we had ever picked up got clean away. It was extremely frustrating not to be able to hit it. But I told Klassen that being denied permission to fire had its plus side too; if we'd have stood on the very top of the radar tower blazing away with an M-60 or an M-40, we'd have made an irresistible target to any other VC who happened to be in the neighborhood.

## Rock

### Dogs

There were a lot of dogs in Vietnam and GIs often adopted puppies that usually became nuisances when they grew up. One day Al came down river from the Hoc Mon ice house with a puppy, whose name, he announced, was Shirley. She was just a little ball of fur and why Al christened her Shirley, I never did find out. She grew up to be a friendly, long haired mutt with a big curly tail and, although Al took good care of her, it seemed to me that she often looked miserable in the tropical heat and humidity. Just watching her running around in her thick coat of dark fur made me feel uncomfortable and I thought maybe she'd have been better off if Al had left her in the ice house.

At Rock, Corporal Roebing had a half-grown female puppy he named Tee-Tee, "Little One" in Vietnamese. After a few months when Tee-Tee went into her first heat and mated with what seemed like every male dog in the AO, Al started ragging Roebing about what a whore his dog was. Al swore that when the time came for Shirley to go into heat, he'd take her down to the island where no dogs could get at her.

A GI in the mortar platoon kept a mangy black and white mutt that was universally considered the ugliest and stupidest hound on the base. One afternoon, a platoon from Bravo Company returned to Rock from a reconnaissance in force near Highway 1 and one of the grunts found the mortar man's ugly dog asleep on his poncho liner. When he yelled at the dog, it pissed on his liner. The whole squad cracked up but the grunt was furious. He grabbed the dog by the scruff of its neck and managed to stuff it into a red nylon mail sack. Yelling to his buddies, "I'm going to drown this shit-eating dog", he slung the sack over his shoulder and headed towards the canal with the dog struggling

and yelping inside the sack. Just about then, the mortar man saw what was happening to his dog, grabbed an M-60 machinegun and ran after the grunt. "That's my dog you got there, asshole. Drop the sack." The grunt looked at him and said, "This sorry piece of shit just been pissing on my gear". The mortar man cocked the machinegun and said "Drop it." The grunt threw the bulging sack to the ground and stepped back as the dog's owner put down the M-60 and untied the bundle. The mutt scrambled out, bounded to the gate, and headed down the road. It never came back.

### Burning Shit

There had been no sanitation on the island, everyone shit in the bushes. At Rock, there were latrines, wooden-walled sheds with commode benches on one side under which cut-down 50-gallon drums had been placed to catch the shit. On the other wall there were "piss tubes", white plastic pipes widened at the top end to catch the urine and the bottom end running straight into the ground. The latrines were without screens and flies swarmed and buzzed all over inside where the temperature always seemed about ten degrees hotter than outside. If a Vietnamese, usually an ARVN soldier, used the latrine, he would invariably climb up and put his muddy sandals on the toilet seat before squatting, making a disgusting situation even worse. Although the odor of human feces was a common smell in Vietnam, where sanitation was primitive and human waste was often used as fertilizer, the latrines seemed to concentrate the stench - - it was overpowering from thirty feet away.

At Rock and other US bases, the solid human waste was not carted away, but disposed of onsite by incineration. It was a standing joke that the duties of those GIs, like the 4-deuce mortar men, who always stayed inside the wire, consisted of nothing more than "burning shit and drinking beer." When it came time to clean things up, the shit-burning detail would lift the wooden flap that ran the length of the latrine's back wall, and pull out the excrement-filled tubs. A metal hoop was supposed to be welded onto the back of the tub so that it could be pulled out with a hook, but the hoop was usually missing or broken so the pulling out was done by hand, often resulting in the GIs on the detail getting pretty crapped up. Once the drums were pulled out, the contents were doused with kerosene and set on fire. The smoke was thick, black, acrid and smelled, if possible, worse than the unburned shit - - a cloying, overpowering odor of burning feces combined with the sweet sickly smell of kerosene. Burning shit was a signature smell of US bases throughout Vietnam and, as nauseating as it was, for the grunts slogging back to Rock after humping the boonies for days and sometimes weeks on end, it was the welcome odor of safety.

### Whores

As evening approached, whores frequently came out from Saigon on Vespas and mopeds - - sometimes two or three on a bike, sitting side-saddle behind the driver. They'd arrive before dusk, before curfew was imposed, roadblocks put in place, and anyone traveling on the roads became fair game. They had a business arrangement with the ARVN officer in charge of the old French fort that sat near Rock's entrance and they would set up shop right inside the ARVN compound. The old fort had brick walls and a moat of sorts that was fed by the Rach Tra canal. In the center of the compound was a brick and concrete bunker whose interior space the whores divided by hanging filched Army poncho liners from the ceiling. They entertained their clients on Army air mattresses.

When you entered the dim interior of the bunker, you paid up front, either "short time" or "long time", the last meaning you could hang around for multiple sessions. Almost all the GIs chose "short time" - - the classic "Wham, bam, thank you ma'am." For their part, the whores always kept their blouses on and, wearing no panties, simply pulled down their elastic-waisted slacks to conduct business.

As far as I could tell, the ARVN soldiers never patronized these prostitutes; their customers consisted solely of GIs. Since the radar was set up outside Rock's perimeter on a tower right across the road from the old fort, the radar squad had free access to the ARVN compound. On the other hand, the ability of the infantrymen stationed inside Rock to come to the compound and enjoy themselves depended on their commander. Different units rotated into Rock and their officers had differing attitudes toward such extracurricular activities. One evening after Charlie Company had come back to Rock after a week of humping the boonies, the captain let a couple of squads visit the girls in the fort. The next day, with reports of a VC unit in the area, the captain decided to keep his men inside the wire. So when a trickle of GIs began heading for the fort, a lieutenant was waiting to turn them back. One GI began pleading with the officer, "Please sir, I won't be long; I'm so horny I could moo", but he got nowhere.

For a while, the prettiest of the whores was a young woman named Susie. Although very attractive, she had developed a reputation for being totally unresponsive - - a cold fish. But she surpassed even that description when, during a session with Corporal Dobbins, she started reading a comic book. Dobbins was having such a good time for himself, he didn't notice, but another GI who was in the bunker happened to see Susie reading on the job. For weeks afterwards, his fellow grunts always greeted the hapless corporal with, "Hey Dobbins, what you read in the funny papers?"