

Ban Me Thuot

The next stop on my journey was back to the south in (or around) Phan Thiet, a nice little resort village right on the ocean. Phan Thiet was down closer to Saigon in the south of South Vietnam. The army had built one of the many base camps right on the white sand beaches.

I was to discover upon my arrival that this would be a short stop, because the unit of the 101st I was to join, the 3/506 (101st Airborne Division, 3rd Battalion, 506th Infantry) was not in Phan Thiet anymore. The unit had been sent back up north to work with an Air Force unit.

There were three of us, who arrived for our assignments and would be here a day or two, mostly to pick up our gear and then actually join the unit, wherever they were.

We had heard back at camp Eagle (P-Training Camp) that the 3/506 was the only unit of the 101st operating in the south in II Corps (two core). Among others, II Corps was the home of the 173rd Airborne Division. As I found out later we were often referred to as: "third of the five oh who?" The other elements of the 101st Airborne Division were all in the northern region of South Vietnam in I Corps (eye core) and now we find that our unit is in the north.

When we finally arrived at our new base we discovered that we were still very far down in the southern region, but in relation to Phan Thiet we were north again. Basically we were in the central highlands. At this point, it wasn't worth thinking about anymore. It really didn't matter a whole hell of a lot where or how far south/north we were. It was all still Vietnam.

They were right about one thing, the unit was walking guard duty for an Air Force unit around the village of Ban Me Thout (Ban me too it). What the whole assignment amounted to was watching the outskirts of the chain linked fenced camp that had been built for the Air Force unit to do, whatever it was they were doing, in peace.

I couldn't complain though, because the Air Force had real plates to eat off and running water for their showers, but most of all, flush toilets. How long had it been since I had seen one of those? At least a month. Each of us had to pull an eight-hour shift of guard duty after which you were on your own.

Being a new guy, instantly renamed "cherry boy" (for not having been shot at or in a combat situation yet), it quickly became apparent where I stood on the priority ladder. Before I had a chance to set my gear down (which everyone was now calling a "ruck") I was handed an army version of a two-way radio, model number PRC25 otherwise known as a prick twenty-five.

The fellow handing it to me was all smiles and saying how glad he was to see me join the unit. I could instantly tell why he was glad to see me. Even more

so when I took the radio from him and felt the added weight. Although it wasn't that heavy by itself, added to the rest of my gear I knew... I knew... I knew we needed another cherry boy soon.

I was to be an RTO (radio telephone operator). It could have been worse, I could have been handed an M60 machine gun which, including the extra ammo you had to carry with it worked out heavier than the radio. You always have to look on the bright side.

As a new arrival, I would not receive a guard duty assignment until the next day, when the rotation had come back around. That enabled me to have the rest of this day plus the next off. Some compensation I thought, for being new.

It was late in the afternoon, so there wasn't that much to do but sit around exchanging hometown and war stories that night. One of the guys decided we should go over to the club the Air Force had set up for its lower ranking personnel. With most of us in agreement we set off to find the place in the totally dark compound.

Fortunately, it wasn't too far, just to the left of their mess hall. When we arrived they were showing a movie in a blacked out building next door, so some of us went there first. After the movie we went into the club for a few drinks. At least they had American beer there.

To cap off the evening's entertainment one of the Air Force guys showed a few very rough stag movies. I hesitantly admit that they were the first I had ever seen (and I'm sure I wasn't alone). Well, things were looking up. This had been the best day I had spent in Nam so far.

The next morning a group of us decided to go over to the "house". The "house" was a converted French Mansion on the main road outside the base. It probably was a beautiful place at one time in its history.

The people running it now had converted the first floor into a bar and dance area. The upstairs, I would find out later, had been converted into a mass of small approximately six by eight-foot rooms. As we entered, we broke into groups with the other two guys I had met in Phan Thiet and myself going off into our own group.

The first problem we faced was money. Jack and I had not drawn any, but Smitty had, so we were negotiating with him about how he could divide it between us. Since he had sixty dollars, it was only reasonable that we should get twenty apiece. Smitty, although very hesitant at first, finally relented and handed it over to us.

Actually it wasn't twenty dollars as we know it, but it was one of those MPC (military payment certificates) pink in color. I had heard a story that when they first introduced MPC over here, a bunch of GIs had distributed great hoards of a popular game board money (*the name copyrighted*) to the unsuspecting

Vietnamese. I was still entertaining that thought and simultaneously twirling the pink twenty when the girls walked up to our table ...

We spent two more days in Ban Me Thout, a week in all. I had learned a lot from this small village or at least from being assigned around it. A lot of growing up had happened in the week I was here. A certain coming of age had overtaken me and I felt a certain affection for this place, my first real assignment in Vietnam.

It was with deep personal regret that I watched on the news in 1975, the capturing of Ban Me Thout by the North Vietnamese Army as they swept through the South toward the end of the war.

No other place left as strong an impact on me as this place did. I had learned a lot here. Not just of the war, but of life and death as well.

Farewell Ban Me Thout.

(Excerpt from: *The Protected Will Never Know - A Vietnam Memoir* by Don Meyer)

In addition to the Vietnam Memoir, I have written two novels with a Vietnam flavor: *the American War* and *The Kittridge Manuscript* a novel for us "old guys." Currently retired and living in Arizona (near the grandkids) I am working on a new Vietnam project. Welcome home brothers!

Post Script: Fast Forward 25 years when my Daughter decided she was going to join the service after high school, she came to me to discuss what she should do and what branch of service she should join, should she join the Army like I did? I immediately said: "no, join the Air Force they eat off of real plates," flashing back to my experience in 'Nam at that Air Force base and how much nicer the Air Force had it. She did join the Air Force and spent eight years winding up in Pakistan in an Air Conditioned tent while "those Army dudes" lived in the heat. She sent me a thank you letter.

Don Meyer

(This excerpt from my Vietnam Memoir was included as a contributor to:
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