The Tour Through the Eyes of Pyramid 05

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For some curious reason, more narratives appear for this particular site on the 505 TCG web site www.squawk-flash.org than for any other site in SEA. Fonder memories? Popular site? Better weather? -- who knows? Ban Me Thout was a town with a population of approximately 20,000, located in the Central Highlands (II Corps). The Call Sign was "Pyramid," and the site was south of Pleiku ("Peacock,") west of Hon Tre Island ("Portcall") and north of Saigon ("Paris"). At an altitude of around 2,000 MSL, the weather was considerably cooler and less humid than most of the other sites in Vietnam. The environment consisted of red dust (everywhere) during the dry season and red mud (ubiquitous) during the rainy season. I served there from 5 Jul 68 (my birthday, whoopee!) to 3 Jul 69.

Site Description

The site was located near a small airstrip about a mile from town. There was a much larger airfield located about eight kilometers away, named "Eastfield," which had the TACAN, a much longer landing strip (too short for jets). The airfield handled cargo aircraft and was also the home of a number of FAC aircraft. Our site was a compound approximately 300 x 300 feet in size, located within an Army Assault Helicopter area which had both Huey and Cobra helicopters. Barbed wire was strung around the perimeter, and four small bunkers were located at each corner, with a larger command bunker located in the center of the site. When I first arrived, the Ops Center was an S-80 shelter. The S-80 was later replaced with a cinderblock building with Ops/Admin offices taking up approximately 25% of end, and the other 75% of the building being devoted to the darkroom.

Two concrete towers (left behind by the French)* approximately three stories tall were located near the Ops Center. On one was the radar antenna, and on the other were the UHF antennas. About halfway through my tour there, a bunker was added to the top of the radio tower. Separate small buildings existed for radar maintenance, radio maintenance, and power production. The comm center was located in a metal Conex, which got quite hot on sunny days. Halfway through my tour, a new chow hall was built at the site (prior to that, we ate C-Rations during night shift).

* the concrete towers were actually built in the spring of 1966 under contract from RMK-BRJ and went live in the fall of the same year. The Webmaster

Site Defense

All personnel were issued M-16 rifles, and the officers were issued Smith & Wesson .38 caliber Combat Masterpiece revolvers in addition to their M-16s. A few of the M-16s were equipped with the XM-148 40mm grenade launcher, since replaced by the M-203. We had six M-60 machine guns -- four in each corner bunker, and one each on top of the radar and radio towers. The Supply Section also had a 90mm recoilless rifle, but the Supply Officer refused to

unpack it and set it up anywhere, arguing quite sensibly that nobody was trained in its operation.

We also had magnesium parachute illuminating "slap flares," about 1 ¼ inch in diameter and ten inches long -- these were really neat, especially if you had been a fireworks fiend when you were a kid -- they would light up a really large area. We had two types of grenades -- both of the old "pineapple" shape. One had a neural on the spoon and was supposed to have a 7-second fuse, and one had a plain spoon, and was supposed to have a 4-second fuse. However, since nobody was really sure, we treated them all as having 4-second fuses.

Many of us were experts in the art of "scrounging" and barter. I remember we traded two pallet loads of ¾ inch plywood to some Army guy for a .50 caliber Browning Machine Gun, which was set up on the radio tower during my tour, replacing the M-60. Later on, we got some of the "baseball" type grenades, timbers, and steel plating for our bunkers, all through the barter system.

I have always thought the theory that USAF personnel could somehow magically be transformed into effective ground troops for self defense immediately after entering a combat zone was ludicrous at best. It really strains credulity to think that a 3-day course in the operation of an M-16 and officer's annual qualification (stateside) with a revolver was sufficient training. Besides, USAF personnel are basically a bunch of highly trained technicians, whether they were radio maintenance folks or hot-shot fighter pilots. I suppose that the Air Commandos and the Combat Security Police might come up to Army fighting standards in a ground conflict, but the Army guys next door must have been laughing at the rest of us. Bear in mind also, that the operation of the machine guns and use of grenades/slap flares was taught during a one-hour "OJT" session during the first week of orientation at the site.

On the night shift, everyone pulled a 2+ hour guard duty shift, including officers. However, the officers on duty during the night shift were lowest-ranking (two per crew), while the senior officers ("day weenies") spent the evening in quarters in downtown Ban Me Thuot. We only had one attempted ground assault by the VC while I was there, and that occurred on the "outer perimeter" surrounding the Army helicopter squadron -- they never made it to our inner perimeter because an Army gunship scrambled and hosed them down with 2.75 FFARs.

That's not to say we never came under attack. If memory serves, the site came under mortar attack about every ten days while I was there. Not me, personally, because the crews rotated on night shift -- I think I was only at the site when it came under attack 12-15 times during my tour. We were never bothered in our quarters, although I'm sure the local VC all knew where we lived.

You never forget the first time somebody tries to kill you in war. Fortunately for me, every sphincter in my body tightened up instead of letting loose during the first mortar attack I went through. I was virtually frozen in place until I saw all the experienced guys bailing out towards the bunkers. Once I figured out what was going on, I played "monkey-see, monkey-do" along with a healthy shot of adrenalin.

The good news is that the VC were usually trying to mortar all the helicopter gunships that were lined up on one side of our compound. The bad news is that they sometimes missed. Their mortar teams would "walk" the rounds towards their intended target, so that if they "walked" by either side of our compound we were OK. However, we knew we were in trouble when we could hear the "whumps" getting closer and closer…

The main concern was that if the first mortar round hit on the top of our Ops Center, (no advance warning by sound) it would just blow shrapnel all through the place. We had chicken wire hung four feet above the roof -- some cockamamie theory that the round would either not detonate if it hit a hole in the chicken wire, and if the centerpoint of the round did hit the wire itself, the shrapnel would be slowed down by the time it made it through the roof. Fortunately, I never had the pleasure of seeing shrapnel fly around the Ops Center, so I can't write about it.

For some reason I've never figured out, our squadron headquarters in Saigon had made a rule that at least one controller had to stay on duty, on scope, even if the site was under attack. This made for some major pucker-factor when I had to stay on scope after everybody else had bailed out -- hoping like hell the mortar rounds would miss, and that no guys in black pajamas would come storming in. On one occasion, a pilot asked me if the site was under attack -- I asked him how he knew (perhaps he was close by and saw the flashes of explosions) -- and he responded: "nope, didn't see any flashes -- just noticed your voice went up an octave or two!"

I never got used to mortar attacks to the point where I became complacent, but after a few, one knows by sound how close or far away the rounds are hitting -- if further away, you at least had time to make sure you didn't stub your toe bailing out. A final note on "fear and panic in Vietnam" -- when I was at Ton Son Nhut on a TDY once, a mortar round landed at the far end of the runway while I was in the Pizza Place eating. Being experienced by now regarding these events, I knew by the sound it was far, far away. However, all those REMFs bailed out of the restaurant post-haste while I stayed there, eating a rare (for me) pizza. What really torqued my jaws the next day was when I found out <u>every single one</u> of the "Paris" controllers at the Saigon site had bailed out for the bunkers, while us poor CRP types in the hinterlands were required to keep a controller on scope -- I've never forgotten <u>that</u>!

The Darlac Hotel

USAF had leased the Darlac Hotel and a two-story villa immediately adjacent to the hotel as quarters. Enlisted and NCO personnel were housed in the hotel, 2-4 to a room, and the officers were housed in the villa. Generally, the field-grade officers had a room to themselves, the senior Captains were two to a room, and the lowly 2/Lts were 3 to a room. The hotel had sort of an "all-ranks" club, including a bar and a pool table -- both got a lot of use! A reel-to-reel tape deck provided music, with the taste tending towards Country and Western for the older NCOs, and Rock for the young folks. The officers had an "honor bar," but the lieutenants usually didn't use it. In back of the main part of the hotel was a small courtyard with a stage of sorts, and occasionally we would get a USO troupe or a bootleg group of Thai strippers come through, but there definitely was not entertainment every night as was the case at the large airbases where the REMFs were stationed.

Messing was at the MACV compound, and a shuttle was run between our quarters and the chow hall for all three meals. However, the food was pretty poor, so some of us bought canned meat at the small BX, bought rice on the local economy, and just made our own stir-fry over little propane stoves. (The trick with the rice was to poor cold water on it first, so the weevils would float to the top). We'd skim off the weevils, then proceed with cooking -- whatever weevils remained probably just added to the flavor and protein. Our first attempts at cooking yielded a rather bland product, so we started buying green onions downtown, supplemented with flavoring from "Heinz 57" sauce and "Tabasco" sauce which, for some strange reason, was stocked by our small local BX. We never seemed to get it right until one drunk poured some beer into our dinner as it was cooking one night, and that was the ticket! Beer-stir-fry was a pretty common meal after that. I should mention, however, that a chow hall was built out at our site halfway through my tour. It offered excellent food, with the midnight meal being the high point of a night shift. As I was due to rotate, construction had begun on quarters located at the site (3-foot high concrete foundation walls were supposed to provide protection for mortar shrapnel). It is my understanding that all the troops moved from the hotel/villa out to the site about 6 months after I left, which would have been around December 1969.

Equipment

If memory serves, we had three or more 100 KW generators in the power production building. The radar set was a MPS-11 with a substantial amount of waveguide added to it to reach all the way up the concrete tower to the antenna. We also had a TPS-10D height-finder which worked about 10% of the time. OK, maybe 15% of the time. As old radar sets go, the MPS-11 could produce a pretty decent picture if it was "tweaked" right, and as we had an outstanding radar maintenance crew on my shift, the air picture was excellent when the equipment was operating.

The darkroom was divided longitudinally into two sides. Standing on the top dias looking down, the USAF personnel were the left, and the VNAF on the right. On the left side, two UPA-35 scopes on the top dias were used by the USAF Air Traffic Regulation Center (ATRC) personnel (16XX/272X0 AFSCs) for control of civil air traffic and USAF cargo flights. On the next dias down were the Senior Director/Crew Chief/Control Technician positions. Next down were the "Duty Controller" and "Flight Follow Technician" postions," and on main floor level were the surveillance scopes. We had the standard plexiglas plotting board, with wing-boards for weather info, Tactical Mission Display, and Offensive Mission Displays. The VNAF side was set up about the same, although I believe they had about two fewer scopes. In addition to the UPA-35s, we had a HRI scope and a very old OA-99 display.

We also had a GTA-6 communications central which provided point-to-point "ring-down" comm to two DASCs, the CRC, and two other CRPs. We had local land-line comm to the Army helicopter guys, and our quarters downtown. In addition, there was a "Fox Mike" (frequency modulation) radio on which we received "artillery warnings" from the Army's fire bases.

The IFF/SIF system was pretty antiquated -- I can't remember the nomenclature, but it wasn't anything like the fancy GPA-122 decoder sets that they had at the fancy sites in

Thailand. We had Mode 1 (64 possible codes, I think) and a two-digit (not four-digit) Mode 3/A. No Mode 3/C for altitude. The Mode 2 decoder inner and outer wheels were set up alphabetically, thus not permitting a decode capability for the entire spectrum of 4,096 codes. It was real mental exercise to try and translate the AA through ZZ spectrum into a digital code, and when we did, it rarely worked. As a result, we confirmed most of our "radar contact" calls through "flash," "standby," or bearing/range position + heading confirmations.

The Mission

We had three crews: Alpha, Bravo and Charlie. I was assigned to Alpha Crew. The crews worked two 10-hour days, two 14-hour nights, and two days off. A typical Ops crew consisted of a Senior Director, a Duty Controller, a Crew Chief, a Control Tech, and two to four surveillance operators, one or two of which might be qualified as Flight Follow Technicians (FFT). On night shifts the Senior Director had a dual role as "On-Scene Commander" since all the day weenies stayed in quarters. So on the night shift, the SD was also "in charge" of the two Air Traffic Route Controllers (ATRC) -- on the Ops side, more or less, and also the maintenance crew, usually consisting of one radio maintenance, one radar maintenance, and one power production guy. There was also a comm ops guy and upon rare occasions, a crypto maintenance guy -- however the latter usually only worked the day shift. So, the crew size at night varied from 12 to 15.

Co-located with us, in the darkroom, was an Army Flight Operations Center (FOC), which maintained contact with Army fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft by radio. They had no radar, but sometimes coordinated with us. They always passed on the 5-mile impact radius for the B-52 drops to aircraft on their frequencies. I often wondered how safe it was for the Army aircraft to whiz around the sky without radar guidance, but more about that later.

My first impression of the work in the darkroom was quite similar to that recounted by Lee Dixon in his first hand narrative about "Portcall." Bear in mind that I had just transferred from a SAGE site in the U.S. where the massive SAGE computer kept track of all the tracks, providing gobs of data relating to IFF/SIF, heading, speed, altitude, Call Sign, which radar sites were painting them etc. I was <u>amazed</u> on the first day to see the controllers and FFTs keeping track of 20-30 aircraft with paper charts and grease pencil marks. I had only been combat ready in SAGE for about eight months, and had actually built up a level of confidence. That flew right out the window when I saw what kind of operations were being handled on these manual scopes, and my first impression was that I would never be able to do it, especially without my trusty "light gun" from SAGE.

I learned quickly. The training method at Det 9 was "baptism by fire," because the already overworked staff wanted to get the fresh meat up to speed as fast as possible so they could have a few more breaks. Seriously -- I remember "piss cans" next to the scope which were used when the crew was short-manned and there was nobody to relieve the duty controller or FFT for a quick run to the latrine.

When you relieved someone on scope, you plugged in and stood behind him until he briefed you on which aircraft were where. Then he got up and you sat down in his chair. As a

new aircraft would call in, you would ask him for his altitude and bearing/range position from the local TACAN. After you found a blip in about the right place, you asked him to squawk flash or standby for confirmation. That usually worked, and you would record the information on a log (rarely was a Weapons Tech available to do this). After that, it was a matter of keeping track of the guy on scope through the tried and true grease pencil method.

In addition to new tracks checking in, there were the usual handoffs to other sites (usually just a "radio" handoff, as we only did "formal" landline handoffs on special or TS missions). Meantime, the Army firebases would be calling in artillery warnings, and these would be plotted on the scope face as azimuth wedges with a range arc, and the "max ord" (maximum apogee of the ordnance) altitude inside the box. We then had to vector aircraft around these boxes if they were below the "max ord" altitude.

The missions which were the most common: 1) flight-following fighter or recce aircraft, generally north/south; 2) flight following slow-movers, which could be going in any direction, and 3) handoffs of CAS missions to FACs. We generally got one or two special missions per day, the most common being the B-52 "Arc Light" bombing runs -- these usually traveled in cells of three. Other special missions included the occasional VIP, SR-71 recce flights, "Ranch Hand" and "Buffalo Hunter." We usually had a frag for all of the special missions, and sometimes they would be so sensitive that the handoff would be made using encode/decode authenticators over landline.

The most common type of aircraft we controlled were F-4s, RF-4s, RF-101s and F-100s for jets; C-47, C-119, C-123, O-1, O-2, and L-19 for props; and Hueys, Cobras, and Chinooks in the rotary wing group (rarely did we control CH-3, CH 53, HH-3 or HH-53). We never controlled a tanker all the time I was there, although I actually controlled two F-102s on a "bump-heads" practice intercept mission -- once.

The concept of FFTs was new to me, as we only had Weapons Techs in SAGE. We trained E-5 and up to be FFTs on the spot -- they weren't required to have any formal schooling. The two on my crew were Channler Drawdy and ??? Abernathy, who we just called "Abbey & Drawdy." I've always felt that being a good controller was innate -- either you had the wherewithal to handle the constantly moving three-dimensional geometry, or you didn't. Certainly you needed some technical training to do it, but I don't think having a college degree made any difference. I've seen officers who couldn't control their way out of a brown paper bag. Abbey & Drawdy were excellent FFTs, better than about half of the 17XX officers assigned to the unit.

One of our supplemental missions was to train the VNAF crew to eventually take over our mission. This was by and large just given lip service. However, once I was promoted from Duty Controller to Senior Director, I concentrated on this area. It was virtually impossible to get a lot of missions for the VNAF controllers, since the F-102s left about two months after I arrived, but we trained the VNAF surveillance crew intensively, even holding English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English classes on the night shifts to improve communication. I'm proud to say that when I departed the unit, the surveillance function was wholly operated by the VNAF. I didn't get much support in this area from my Ops Officer, who was quite

ethnocentric (OK, bigoted), but I think our crew got some grudging respect for the effort at conversion of duties. Remember, it wasn't until much later on that Nixon came up with "Vietnamization." Now there's a term that probably wasn't in the dictionary in the 1950s!

Off Duty Activities

There were several good restaurants in Ban Me Thuot. While not too many of the troops assigned to our unit were interested in immersing themselves in the local culture, I was. I had grown up overseas in Africa and the Middle East, so perhaps was more inclined not to be ethnocentric. I developed a friendship with Lt. Cam, who was my VNAF counterpart on the crew. He and I would often meet at various restaurants in town for lunch when we were off duty, and I developed an appreciation for Vietnamese Cuisine. He introduced me to a lot of his friends, and I visited his home often. His wife was an excellent cook! I ended up being the Godfather of their son (they were Catholic).

Our crew usually organized some sort of party about every second or third two-day break that we had. Lots of beer, pop, and some hard liquor -- remember when Jack Daniels was only $3.00 a fifth? The munchies we had were either from the BX or from "care packages" shipped from the U.S. by our families. On rare occasions we'd get hold of some bootleg steaks, and barbecue them in a pit we had. As the relations improved and warmed up with the VNAF on our crew, we began inviting them to our parties. I don't remember the other crews doing this, but we were fortunate in developing a good relationship with our VNAF counterparts, which spilled over to off-duty get-togethers as well.

Ban Me Thuot had its share of bars, just like any other Vietnamese settlement adjacent to an American military installation. For some reason, we called them "Huki-Laus," which I think is a Hawaiian term. When I first arrived, my boss took me to one, educating me on how to avoid getting ripped off (don't buy "Saigon Tea" just for some fake companionship, etc.) They usually had good music, and were a good place to relax when the small bar at our quarters got too crowded. The officers by and large did not partake in the "Love for Sale" freely available, and at times our commander would give us a big speech about not leading the troops into sin -- we certainly didn't do it by example, and I'm sure if we had stayed away from these "entertainment facilities," our single red-blooded over-testosteroned troops would have found their way there anyway. VD was a significant problem. The "hostesses" at these "entertainment centers" all had numbers, and were inspected weekly by the Army and USAF medics. We would get a briefing from our medics every week, somewhat along the line of: "number 14 and 27 at the Imperial have it, numbers 8,10 and 15 at the Dalat have it," etc. The medics gave a lot of penicillin and Gamma Globulin shots to our troops. There was was young sergeant who would catch VD, get cured, and go catch it again. Constantly -- to the point where he was only able to pull his shift about 20% of the time. He was counselled several times, and finally received an Article 15 -- not for partaking in sins of the flesh, *per s*e, but for being absent from duty without a valid excuse.

It was pretty easy to hitch-hike around the country by air, especially if you were a controller. Several of us did this during our two days off We just hopped a jeep out to the main airfield, and would start asking pilots during their turn-around on the ground where they were

headed. Once we found a plane (usually C-9s, C-123s or the occasional C-130) heading where we wanted to go, we would just advise them that we were a Pyramid controller, and they always gave us a ride -- except on the C-130s that had SIGINT crews on board. Our first two commanders didn't seem to mind, but our third commander put his foot down on this sort of in-country traveling -- the logic being that if a plane was shot down, he would lose one of his "key personnel" (translation: "controllers"). Gee, what a compliment!

As the two-day break could get a bit boring, especially if one didn't want to stay drunk all the time, a number of the enlisted troops and a very few of the officers started flying on the Army gunships as door gunners. This avocation didn't require any special training, and it was quite exciting. It wasn't hard to do -- all you had to do was hang around the gunship operations shack and ask one of the Army door gunners if you could have his slot for that particular mission. This went on for about the first eight months of my tour, until the commander (the third one we had) got some paperwork in from the Army awarding an Air Medal to one of the enlisted troops. He couldn't figure out what was happening initially, until the first sergeant told him about the gunship rides. Another big speech & edict! Some argued that they were helping out the war effort, devotion above and beyond, etc., but the commander's concern, again, was that somebody would get shot down and our unit's "combat readiness" would be degraded.

We had one officer whose hobby was skydiving; the only person in our unit who practiced this rather unique off-duty activity. He had a ball, because it was so easy to catch a ride on a helicopter, and just jump out. Plus, he didn't have to pay for the ride, like he did in the States!

Vignettes

On one night shift, a C-119 "Shadow" gunship lost its right engine and declared an emergency. Abbey was on scope at the time, and started vectoring him towards Ban Me Thout. The main airfield was under attack, so the pilot was advised that the only airstrip available was the one right next to us, or else we could vector him to Nha Trang. The pilot was about 30 NM out when he decided to land at our airstrip. The antiquated lighting system consisted of oil drums, but the guys from the Army helicopter squadron couldn't get them all fired up in time, so I had the majority of the crew line up alongside the airstrip and fire off slap flares when they heard the engine (singular) of the aircraft approaching. The pilot barely made it, because the airstrip was so short -- he managed to stop with the nose of the aircraft sticking about 2 feet into the chain link fence at the end. The aircrew were very thankful -- sang our praises, and were going to put Abbey in for a bronze star. However, our Ops Officer put the kabosh on the award because he thought I, as an officer, should have taken over from Abbey once the emergency occurred. I argued that it was more important for me to get the runway light up in my capacity as On-Scene Commander, but I ended up getting my butt chewed by the Ops Officer and Abbey never got his Bronze Star. (Management decision-making at its <u>best</u>, let me tell you!)

Transportation from our quarters to the site was via 1 ¼ ton trucks. Two in front, the rest of the crew sitting on rails in the back. One of the ATRC enlisted controllers was a really reckless driver. He always drove too fast, and seemed to be able to hit every pothole in the road. I was in the back end one time, and after seeing how the crew was getting thrown around

and bruised, I chewed his butt. Then I went to his boss, a Captain, and demanded that this kid's driver's license be pulled. Nothing happened. So, the rest of us just manipulated things as a team, and made sure somebody else was always in the driver's seat when it was time to go to or from the site. The kid was essentially ostracized, and asked for a transfer to another crew. Fortunately for all, the Captain approved it.

I had to go TDY to Tan Son Nhut for some reason. I had nabbed a ride on a C-9 during a rainstorm in Ban Me Thuot, and arrived at the rear echelon with a flight bag and a revolver strapped to my waist. Not 50 feet from the air terminal, a Sky Cop stopped me and told me I had to check in my firearm. I was amazed! I (somewhat sarcastically, I admit) asked this Sky Cop if Tan Son Nhut was no longer in a war zone, and he heatedly informed me I could meet with the Base Commander if I wanted to, but only Sky Cops were authorized to carry firearms on base. OK, fine -- he told me where to check in my firearm, and I did. Not fifty feet from the weapons storage area, another Sky Cop stopped me. "What now," I wondered to myself -- "did I bring a grenade along that I forgot about?" Nope -- the guy points down to my boots, and tells me they're not shined. I look down, and indeed there was all sorts of Ban Me Thuot red mud on my boots. I explained I had just arrived from upcountry, but to no avail. I got a "ticket" for not having my shoes shined!!! This may help to explain my less-than-salutary comments about REMFs earlier in this narrative…

The best power production guy in our unit was Boatman, although he was usually pretty much out of it when off duty, whether from booze or drugs, I never knew. Before one of the night shifts, I was assembling the crew for transportation out to the site, and Boatman was missing. I asked around, and discovered that he had a girlfriend in town, and often stayed with her during his two days off. I asked about three different troops to go get him, but I could see they were pretty nervous about doing it. I got directions and went myself. I entered this slightly darkened shack, and saw him asleep on the bed with his girlfriend. I gently shook him awake, and he sat straight up in about two nanoseconds -- eyes bloodshot and blurry, with a .45 Colt pointed about 1/8 inch into my forehead. I was about ready to do the sphincter-release thing when he recognized me, and said "Oh, Hi, Lieutenant" in a really fuzzy voice. "Come on, Boatman -- it's time for our shift" said I, in a really quavery voice. He threw on some clothes and we managed to get to work on time, but I never went to wake Boatman up again after that. Lesson learned! I had a red spot on my forehead from the .45 Colt for about a week afterward -- I'm sure everyone noticed (and probably knew the story behind it), but nobody dared to laugh!

I've mentioned before that we issued "artillery warnings" to transient aircraft. One time I had a flight of F-4s heading through an artillery box that had max ord of 28,000 feet. The flight was at Angels 25, so I gave them a vector around it. They wouldn't take the vector, saying they were too high -- artillery posed no threat to them, they said. The gun firing was a big one, so I got on the horn to the Army fire base and asked them about the max range of the gun. Then I got back on UHF and advised the pilot that the 175mm cannon could fire 102,000 feet straight up. Response back from the pilot: "Say again vector?"

I had a Huey driver check in one day, and once I located him by position, I noticed about nine or ten other blips with him. To confirm his location, I asked him to "Squawk Flash." He says "what's that?" "Hmmmm," I said to myself, "maybe the Army doesn't teach these young Warrant Officer Huey drivers about IFF/SIF." So I explained to him that there was a spring-loaded switch on his transponder, and that he should flick it once. "What's that do?" he said. "It makes your radar position twice as bright on my scope, and then it's easier to find you," I said, minimizing the technical aspects. So I see the flash, and tell him I have radar contact. Then I see the guy behind him flash, then the next guy, and so on. Each one would call in and ask if he was brighter! What a hoot! Those guys fooled with the flash switches all they way home until they landed.

Earlier, under "mission," I mentioned the Army FOCs, and my concern that Army aircraft were flying in the same airspace as USAF aircraft, but there was little coordination or deconfliction. During my tour, Murphy's Law set in, and two Army fixed-wing aircraft had a midair, and pranged in. About two days after that, our workload almost doubled, as every Army aircraft in our area started checking in with us. Lesson learned!

I think we were allowed to send 600 pounds of hold baggage back to the states when we rotated. Rumor was it went by air, since all the cargo aircraft were emptied out once they arrived in country. I think most guys shipped back a small amount of stuff -- tape decks, cameras, binoculars -- all the sorts of things you could get a great deal on through the PACEX catalog. Not me! Woodworking was my hobby, and I had noticed that a lot of the Vietnamese homes were built out of a beautiful pinkish-red wood. Everyone referred to it as "mahogany," but it was a true hard wood -- where as the Philippine Luan Mahogany commonly found in the U.S. is so soft you can put your thumbnail into it. I asked my VNAF buddy Lt. Cam to go with me to the local lumber yard (actually, a lumber mill), and he translated while I had them custom-cut some large slabs suitable for coffee tables, and some 1 x 4s, 2 x 8s, 4 x 4s, etc. All this was done in centimeters, but it was pretty close to the dimensional lumber in the States. When the mill workers heard from my friend that I was having the lumber flown back to the States, I'm sure they thought I was crazy. A few days later, the lumber was delivered to our quarters, and I built a crate for it, also loading in a tape deck and some other sundry items. All of us officers had an additional duty as "customs inspector," so I asked my roommate 2/Lt Mark Mayberry to sign off on the stuff. Now Mark had an accounting degree, so he was quite detail-oriented. After some study of the customs regulations, he advised me that I couldn't ship the lumber back to the states because it was an "agricultural product." After a few beers, I convinced him it was <u>really</u> a "forestry product," and therefore qualified. When I got back to the states, and got to my Dad's home, there was the crate -- with a little tag on it showing that it weighed 860 lbs! They never charged me for the excess weight, and I've been able to make some beautiful pieces of furniture, fireplace mantels, and pencil holders out over the lumber of the years. A final twist -- a friend of mine, who is a lumber broker, identified the wood as "Keruing," the twist being that this guy served at "Waterboy" (Dong Ha) in the mid-1960s -- small world!

One of the Crypto Maintenance guys had done some bartering, and was the proud owner of a fully automatic .45 caliber "grease gun." He planned to take it back to the States, but all of us told him he'd never get it past the MPs at Tan Son Nhut, much less through U.S.

Customs when he got back to the "world." He just smiled to himself, ignored us, and never told us what his plan was. The rest of this is second-hand, but the story goes that he had disassembled the weapon, and mailed all the small pieces back to the states. However the barrel was pretty large, so he put it in his pay tube. He made it through the MPs and U.S. customs, but forgot the pay tube in some phone booth at some stateside airport. Somebody found it, turned it in to the airport cops -- they open it up, find the gun barrel conveniently wrapped in his pay records, which of course immediately identified him. Rumor had it that he got a year or two at Leavenworth for that. Probably also lost his TS Crypto clearance, I bet!

Summary

Being an SD as a lowly second lieutenant was one thing, but being the "On-Scene Commander" really gave me a lot of responsibility at a very young age. As background, I have to admit that I had the "I'm only in for four years" attitude when I got to Vietnam. I thought I had had foresight to avoid becoming cannon fodder by joining the Air Force instead of the Army, but my intent was just to do my duty as an American male, pay my dues for four years, and get out. I had never been a "leader" type in high school or college -- but I was savvy enough to know what answers they wanted on the questionnaire used for admittance to OTS, and so became an officer.

The point I'm trying to make here is that the Vietnam experience changed my whole perspective. I was, for the first time in my life, responsible for the lives of others when the site came under attack, and I took the responsibility seriously. Throughout the course of that year I changed from being slightly introverted to pretty extroverted. I began taking an interest in the needs and problems of my subordinates, and we developed into a real team. I even got to the point that I would fight "City Hall" (the command structure) when I thought my crew was getting the short end of the stick.

The good thing about serving in Vietnam was that you got an "extra edge" on choice for your next assignment. I ended up in Germany, and, as I had learned to like the leadership role, I was rapidly promoted into positions of increasing responsibility. I changed my attitude from "only four years" to becoming a career officer. That lasted until my wife got tired of the many TDYs and remotes some years later, and convinced me to get out. So, I never served 20 years of active duty. However, I joined the Air National Guard and later the USAFR, ending up my career as a Lieutenant Colonel with 28 years of service. I sincerely don't think that would have happened if I had not had the tour in Vietnam.