

Lifer

Tuesday, 26th February, 1969.

The sound of the four Pratt and Whitney JT3 Jet engines was becoming louder as the speed of the QANTAS 707 decreased as we approached Saigon airport. Looking out the window, I could see the landscape changing from the dark green and shimmering rivers, to more defined shapes, and buildings. Mixed with these were the round dimples in the ground, running in lines. The results of a B52 dropping its load of 30 tons of high explosive bombs. But what was the point I thought, there was nothing there but green vegetation.

The engine whine grew louder, the wings of the 707 appeared to grow as the spoilers and flaps are extended, setting the aircraft up for the point in space when gravity overcame the lift from the wings, hopefully at the piano keys painted on the runway at Tan Son Nhut. A series of clunks was felt more than heard as the landing gear locked into place, not long now and I will be in Viet Nam. The land is getting closer, the 707 becoming a little rougher in the ride as the thermals from the tropical heat buffeted the wings, the engine noise varying now as the pilot flies the plane to the ground, getting closer by the second, trees and landscape moving faster as we get closer.

Thump, screech, screech, thump. The engines increase to a louder than normal roar as the clamshells close for reverse thrust. Looking out the window at the runway intersection, there are aircraft waiting to enter as the 707 clears the runway. F4 Phantoms loaded to the gunwales with bombs, funny looking transport planes that I had never seen before, along with the familiar C130 Hercules. The 707 taxis past revetments, some containing these and other aircraft, others empty. There were also various passenger aircraft, painted in company colours that I also had never seen. This was definitely a different place to anything I had seen in Australia. Driving beside the 707 now was a Jeep, but this Jeep had a M60 mounted in the rear, and a soldier sitting in the back caring for his toy. This was definitely different to anything I had seen in Australia. All the vehicles looked as if they were from World War II movies, all the men dressed in dark green. Somebody was taking this business seriously.

The airconditioning system in the 707 was losing the battle now with the heat, and the cabin was becoming stuffy. Soon enough the aircraft braked to a halt, the external power cart plugged in, and the engines shut down. The silence was unusual after so long with the background noise of the jets, and the shuffle of the passengers was now evident as cramped limbs were stretched. Someone always has to spoil things, and in this case it was the Army, as a sweaty body emerged through the door telling all to stay seated until told to move. Back in the military again. Now the outside heat was really becoming oppressive, and sitting in the centre of the 707, I would be one of the last to get out.

As I stepped through the door, the heat really hit, and what is that peculiar odour. Why wasn't I told about this, and how am I going to put up with that for a year. There were buses waiting to collect us, and as I got in I noticed something unusual, there were no windows, only mesh. Luckily the Yank driving had a sense of humour, and told us that the bars were not to keep us in, but to keep the grenades out. I thought he was joking, Christ I am only here to fix aeroplanes, not get into slinging matches with people throwing grenades.

As we left the bus at what could be a terminal, we were told "Army going to Nui Dat over there, Vung Tau over here". There was a group of sick looking blokes crowding around as we passed, yelling stupid thing like, "Lifer", "365 and a wakey suckers", and similar things that I really didn't understand. I was soon to learn the facts of life in Viet Nam, but now, well I had only been there twenty minutes. Out on the tarmac was a RAAF Caribou, that was what I was here for, so I thought that would be my ride to Vung Tau. Not so!

The people going to Vung Tau were herded down the tarmac to one of those funny looking transports, kind of like a small Hercules, but with piston engines, and a couple of jets in pods, just like the Neptune had. It turned out to be a Fairchild C123. But what a grubby looking ship, surely they weren't going to put us in that. That's right! All aboard. The interior was no better than the outside. There were no seats, bar a few, and tie down straps strung across the floor at about six foot intervals. "Officers on the seats, the rest on the floor and hang onto the straps on take off and landing", said the big Negro with a flight helmet the same colour as everything else here. They must have had a special on dark green paint. So with all of us real people sitting on the floor, the ramp door closed, and with two clouds of oil smoke the engines start. At least that is comforting, little else is. As the Bookie taxis out to the runway, the jets wind up, and after a small wait as some F5 Fighters take off, we line up, and the noise and vibrations increase to a point where I think the whole thing will fall to bits. Amazingly though, the thing actually flew, and about a half hour later we were in a landing pattern, and landing at Vung Tau with a sound like a thousand cans rattling together. The source of this noise was to become obvious as we slowed the strip and taxiways were made of PSP, steel sheeting joined together. As the door opened, there was that smell again, although I had not noticed missing it.

It wasn't as hot here, as there was a bit of a breeze from the ocean, but it was still hot. The bus here was more familiar, even painted like the buses back home, and it had windows. There must not be any problem with grenade throwing here. When the bus stopped at what was to be home for the next year, we were greeted by some ADG's (Airfield Defence Guards) with L1A1's slung over their shoulders, leaning on a pile of green sand bags, calling us those stupid names again. What did 365 and awake up mean, and what was a lifer? It must be the heat affecting these blokes.

We were shown to our billets, long wooden two story constructions, segregated into the particular units here, 35 Sqn, 9 Sqn, and the Operational Support Unit. It was about this time I met a familiar face, one of the guys who left home about a month ago. He gave me some good advice when I said I hadn't got a bed yet, "don't go upstairs, it's too hot during the day". So I went down stairs, and never regretted it. Life here is tough, no privacy, only what you can manufacture by moving lockers around, concrete floor, no windows only fly screen along the length of the building where the window should be, and ceiling fans which didn't all work. Oh and there were these two local women sweeping the floor with a strange looking broom, and placing clean uniforms on beds. Luckily I picked a bed that was right next to a working fan. At that time however, I didn't know how comfortable that fan was to become.

As we moved about getting out gear stashed and familiarising ourselves with the compound, we were still being called those stupid names, and it was starting to get to me not knowing what it was all about, especially when some people shouted things like "six and a wakey, suckers". It must have something to do with this 'a wake'.

A bit after 5 o'clock (that's 1700hrs for you Grunts) there was an influx of bodies, this time all the blokes I was looking forward to seeing again, but they were still going on about this Lifer shit, and I just had to risk making a fool of myself and find out what it was all about. Well, it was all clear when I was told with much good humour that I had 365 days to go before I awoke and returned to the real world, and that the bloke who had '6 and awake up' was real short (in time) and was going home next Tuesday.

Dinner was a bit different to what I was used to, being sourced from the American system, but not all that bad, especially as there seemed to be ice cream unlimited, and syrup thick chocolate milk. I soon learned to mix it half with plain milk, but that was not today.

Whilst getting used to paying 15 cents for a can of beer (its no wonder we came home with alcohol problems), the suggestion was to go into town and see the sights, such as they were. I have difficulty sleeping in aircraft, and was pretty beat, but accepted the challenge. The short timers

accosted a 'Lambro' driver, and the price into town was agreed upon, three packets of Salam cigarettes. Seeing that I don't smoke, this seemed a pretty good currency to me, especially since I was not used to this Monopoly money they had given me for all my good Australian bills. And I certainly didn't know what a 'Pee' was. Good fun this Lambro ride into town, me sitting in awe whilst the others had their fun with the girls sitting side saddle on the Honda 50's. Once again somebody had to tell me why that was, but apparently that the slopes found ways around that problem too. I got to taste Beer 33 on the first night, got propositioned by many girls, was told not to buy them 'drin', so they went to greener pastures screeching about 'Cheap Charlies', preceded by how someone called Ookda was lying. I also tasted my first 'Noggie Roll' that first night, and was quite taken by them. Apparently the pigs are full of worms, so we shouldn't eat the ham, and the ice full of bacteria, but it still tasted good to me. I am still addicted to them though, and eat one every chance I get.

Time was running out as we had to be back at the base by 10 o'clock, or stay out all night, which on the first night didn't impress me, so we hitched a ride back with some yanks in a World War II surplus truck. I soon learnt that they were not as old as they looked. Another 15 cent Flag Ale (that was my beer of choice at the time) and I hit the bed exhausted. Oh yes! It was a real bed with mattress and sheets. Life was pretty tough for the 'Blue Orchids' at Vung Tau. As I drifted off to sleep to the sounds of drunks coming back from the Club, and 50cc Honda bikes going down the road outside the wire fence, I thought, "Only 364 and a wakey".