



# REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

## Tan Son Nhut—the longest year

By Ron Boydston  
525th Combat Evaluation  
Group, U. S. Army

The 504<sup>th</sup> Signal Detachment, located on an isolated compound on the far side of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, provided radio and teletype communications for the U.S. Army's 525<sup>th</sup> Combat Evaluation Group in South Vietnam.

The name sounded more innocuous than it actually was, however. The group's mission was to collect military intelligence on VC and NVA activity, and bring it to field sites all over the country. This data was compiled into reports which were then sent down to Saigon via shortwave radio, printed out on five-copy carbon paper, then forwarded via landline teletype to MACV headquarters at the big Allied military complex on the other side of the base.

And it was to this detachment that I was delivered in the middle of September 1969, a PFC reporting for my first and only active-duty assignment, as green as the jungle fatigues that I was wearing.

For the first week I was without two items which I needed badly

- a job and a mosquito net. Until I was in-processed and put on the duty roster there wasn't much to do, and there was no place to go - the compound was a good distance from the other side of Tan Son Nhut with all of its amenities, and the only available place to go, aside from the comm. center, barracks, and mess hall, was the club, a well-worn and much-frequented spot that served as bar, restaurant, theater, and occasional concert venue.

So for those first days I waited, going to formations in the morning, taking care of paperwork, wilting in the humidity, and attempting to function in an environment in which the only living creatures interested in me seemed to be NCOs and insects, which took turns bugging me by day and by night.

But eventually supply came through with the mosquito net - sweet relief! - and my work schedule also was set up, and I began the life of a soldier in a war zone, plying my trade with switches, dials, frequencies, and cryptographic codes, and passing intelligence traffic that hopefully could be used to locate Victor Charles and his NVA buddies. We worked 12-hour shifts, three day shifts, three night shifts, and then off for three days, which sounded better than

it actually was, since we spent the first day sleeping off the graveyard cycle, then pulling a day of details, with some guard duty thrown every couple of weeks for good measure. That meant in a typical nine-day stretch we would get one actual day off.

And so the year began to slowly go by. We worked in our windowless radio-teletype rigs or in the windowless comm. center, aware that the field operatives who were supplying us with information in a very risky business. But we also knew that the location of enemy forces, their strength and direction of travel, and any other information could be very useful in preparing for them a surprise party of the type that they would not like. Most of the traffic came in during the day shift, but we were on duty 24 hours a day, and occasionally the shortwave radios would come crackling to life during the night, with some update that had best be sent pronto to the war planners.

One very satisfying distraction to the daily duty was the flying activity. A base the size of Tan Son Nhut provided a constant stream of aircraft - lumbering C-130s, nimble Caribous, ghost-gray Starlifters, hot-footed Phantoms and Voodoos, chubby C-123s, and sturdy little Skyraid-

ers came and went on their business, and the runways were alive with the sounds of jets, turbo-props, and radials at all hours of the day and much of the night as well. Along with the military aircraft were airliners with Pan Am, TWA, Air France, or contract carrier markings on their sides. The civilian jets gave wing not only to flight, but also to daydreams – they would rotate off the runways, nosing into the sky, on their way to distant places, places far from the war zone, and I would be glad for the passengers, and looked forward to the day when it would be me sitting in one of those seats.

Airplane-watching was always worthwhile, but the real attention-getters were the F-4s. The Phantoms – assigned to a recon squadron and armed with cameras instead of munitions - would taxi out for takeoff and, with a creak and a match to the afterburners, would be gone, thundering furies that announced to the entire base, and anybody else within earshot, that they were on their way. Listening to them provided a very visceral satisfaction, knowing that they were taking the fight to the Communist enterprise that was intent on cutting down the fragile democracy trying to take root in South Vietnamese soil.

As I settled into life at an Army unit located on an air base, I had occasional opportunity to get over to the populated side of the field, where life looked almost state-side; civilian, even. There was a gym, a swimming pool, and two theaters, and I visited each of them in turn, but as circumstances would have it, never more than once or twice. Most of the time I had to settle for a trip to the exchange, a bustling beehive of a place that offered food, watches, cameras, and the usual

assortment of military items, along with glossy brochures for cars, stereos, and other ripe and shining fruit from the capitalist tree.

But getting to the other side of the base was no easy matter. There were almost always a couple of jeeps parked close to the orderly room, ready for use, but they were rarely available to lower-ranking enlisted troops, and even when we were able to get one, even for official business, we would have to take enough keys to qualify us for work as prison guards. The hood was locked, and the battery was locked; so was the gas cap and spare tire. The steering wheel was not only locked, but fitted with a length of chain as well – for Jeeps were highly desirable commodities in those parts, and so driving them was an exercise worthy of Houdini himself.

And trips off the compound came around infrequently, almost always limited to our days off. Mostly we worked, one shift following another - days, nights, a couple of days off, and then starting the cycle all over again. Duty was both servant and master: it demanded our time, and ground us down into the fine dust that accumulated everywhere, but at the same time it provided a structure that helped us to face day after weary day.

I had only been in-country for several months when the 1969-1970 holiday season arrived, and that year I learned to appreciate holidays as never before. The Army did its best to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas and other holidays – a few seasonal decorations would go up, the food was plentiful and festive, messages came down from the various commands thanking us for doing our duty, and there

were programs, some of them available on military tv, featuring entertainers from the States who had come to perform for the troops.

But celebrating in a war zone was a makeshift affair at best, and the sentiments and decorations were pasted onto the holidays like cheap wallpaper. There was no disguising where we were, and what we were there for. Home was far away, and only the end of our tours, or worse, would change that. But I was thankful for the letters and boxes that arrived from home during the season, and shared my bounty with my little circle of friends; we were a makeshift wartime family, and we looked after each other as best we could.

Death kept its distance for the year I was there. The Tet Offensive had taken place nearly two years before I arrived, and save for a peppering of rockets that December, the base did not come under attack.. One night an AC-119 gunship, on a fire support mission, crashed on takeoff and went into a rice paddy, killing all five crewmen; but like the rocket attack, I found out about it in the Stars & Stripes the following day.

So at our compound the sand-bagged bunkers next to the barracks went unused, our rifles stayed in our lockers except for guard duty or weapons qualification, the incendiary grenades in the comm. center (to be used if we were overrun) remained in their wooden crates, and the M-79 grenade launcher that hung on one wall of the orderly room collected dust between inspections. Not that I minded, but at the same time it added to the feeling of being in a never-ending time loop which continually replayed and in which nothing ever happened.

But there was a daily reminder of the toll of war just a few blocks away, at the Army mortuary, a large anonymous structure that was our nearest neighbor. Rarely did a day go by without a chopper paying a visit and offloading its sad cargo – usually Medevacs, but when there was action in the field unmarked slicks would also show up. On occasion there would be multiple flights during the day, their departure pattern right over our compound, every flight casting a shadow which was a reminder of a much larger and darker shadow that had recently fallen. At the beginning of the day the soldiers who had been flown in had been among the living, and now they were not; and soon wives, girlfriends, brothers, sisters, parents, relatives and friends would be getting some very bad news.

By the five-month mark I was beginning to wonder if I would last the year. Day after day went by in slow motion, each one a duplicate of the one before; the same duty, the same details, the same humidity, the same barracks, the same club. It was an assignment that once upon a time had had a beginning but with an end that now seemed to be a perpetual mirage, a shimmering horizon that seemed to get no closer. I began to fear for my sanity, and only with great difficulty was I able to drag myself from one day to the next.

One day, after I had been in-country for some months, a chance to relieve the tedium came. I was able to arrange a three-day pass to Nha Trang, that resort town on the coast that our pilot had mentioned when we were on our way into the country.

Finally! A chance to get away from the endless duty cycle, to see some of the country beyond

Saigon, and to be out of reach of details and formations. I could read, set my own schedule, eat and sleep when I wanted to, and shut out the rest of the world – just what I needed to restore my spirits and help me face the remaining months of my tour.

So I got my paperwork from the company, packed my bags, and hopped a flight over to the coast, looking forward to some beach time (I grew up in southern California, where the beach was the place to go) and in no time at all was on the ground again, anticipation building.

I didn't get much farther than the Nha Trang air terminal. We had to process through a checkpoint, and the MP on duty told me that I did not have the right kind of pass. Sorry, he said, you can't stay, you'll have to go back and get the correct paperwork.

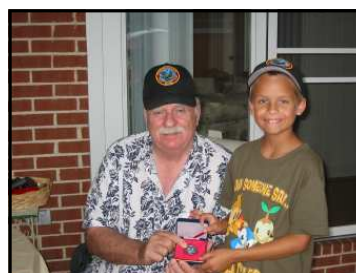
A tropical beach resort - I was actually there, close enough to taste and touch the weekend – and I was turned away. Dang! It wasn't enough that I had been sent halfway around the world to a heat and bug-infested war zone, and cooped up day after day in a shabby little military compound with few places to go. No, the Army would dangle a prospect of paradise in front of me, then snatch it away at the last possible moment through the whim of a by-the-book MP. For the next hour I went from disbelief to rage (a printed transcript of my thoughts would not have met the editorial standards of this newsletter) to resignation, and then started the cycle all over again, until I was out of emotional energy and laying, exhausted, on the shore of unfulfilled desire.

But there was nothing I could do, so back to Tan Son Nhut I went, to salvage what I could of my

days off, and left to wonder what might have been.

There would be other diversions during that year, but none like the shining prospect of that lost Nha Trang weekend. It was one of the lowest points in a year that seemed to have no end.

(To be continued)



### **PASSING IT ON!**

President Emeritus Wayne Salisbury is shown presenting a TSNA Challenge Coin and a TSNA hat to his grandson, 7 year old Jack Nordeen from Minnesota, while Jack and his mother, Wayne's youngest daughter, were visiting Wayne and Tobey in Roanoke.

How many grandchildren have you presented with TSNA gifts??



### **SECOND TET IN MAY**

**By Gary Edwards**  
**377th CES Bulk Fuels Storage**

I got to TSN April 27, 1968.

On the final approach into TSN we could look down watching helos attacking a position right below us.

When we got off the plane at the Main Terminal, I am looking around wondering what are all these civilians doing here????

For the first let's say about a week and a half, I was housed as I remember over towards the

Main terminal.

I remember we were housed next to the South Korean's barracks, if anyone remembers where they were located.

During that time we went to the base supply to get our issue of in-country clothing; boots, helmet, flak vest and other supply for my year long vacation!!!! For a week and a half they had us doing odd jobs until I was finally assigned to the 377th Civil Engineer Sq., in the 800 barracks area.

The first morning I woke up at the CES 800 area to gunfire, bombing and looking overhead at an A-6 Skyraider diving on to the French Cemetery, outside the perimeter fence, plus helos attacking, just outside the perimeter of the base, near the Main Gate.

I went to the bomb shelter in front of the bathroom-showers for awhile. Nice way to start off my second week in country.

When the second Tet started they did not allow any civilians on base, so we had to do some of the jobs the civilians were doing.

I had to also do some guard duty, once on a truck going to Long Binh.

Another time another guy and I had to do guard duty in a pagoda that was outside the main road in front of the main gate to the left if you were coming into the base.

One time we had an extreme storm come through with lightning and thunder extremely low. It was so low that I was shaking in my boots.

Never been in anything like that. It seemed like it was at roof top height and we were going to be hit by it.

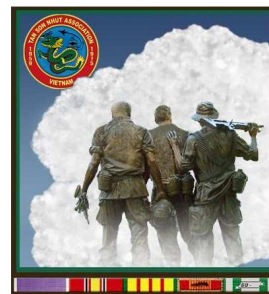


### THREE MISSING MEN

Text and Graphic by Charles Penley  
TSNA Webmaster

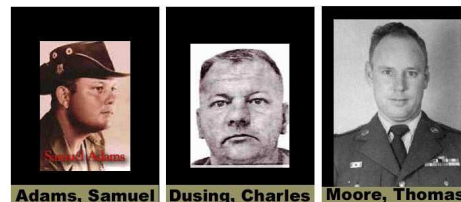
The Tan Son Nhut Airbase was located on the northeast edge of Saigon and was destined to become the primary port of entry and departure for all military personnel serving in Vietnam. Vung Tau was located on the Vietnamese coast approximately 38 miles southeast of Tan Son Nhut and was a favorite resort area for the Vietnamese elite and foreign visitors alike for years. At approximately 0900 hours on Saturday, 30 October 1965, SSgt. Samuel Adams, SSgt Charles G. Dusing, TSgt. Jasper N. Page and TSgt. Thomas Moore departed Tan Son Nhut Airbase in an Army UH1B helicopter bound for the resort city of Vung Tao and a weekend of swimming in the South China Sea. They arrived at roughly 1000 hours that day and the aircraft was to return the following day to transport them back to base. They rented a beach cottage and spent the remainder of the day and the next morning swimming and lying around the beach sunning themselves. In the early afternoon Samuel Adams placed a call to the Tan Son Nhut Airbase to confirm their flight back. He was informed the aircraft would not be there to pick them up as planned. After notifying the others, they began thinking of ways to return to Saigon.

All four men were captured by the VC. Only TSgt Jasper Page escaped from the enemy and gave an account of the other three men. To this date the other three men remain missing in action.



Graphic by Charles Penley  
TSNA Webmaster

THIS MONTH, LET US SALUTE THE MEMORY OF:



## TSNA BOARD NEWS

If you know Accounting, TSNA needs you to fill the upcoming vacancy of Treasurer. Please contact any officer to volunteer for this position.

As "Uncle Sam" says, WE NEED YOU!



**Hello Fellow Members:** The Board of Directors has decided to hold the 2009 Reunion in Pigeon Forge, TN during October or early November. Pigeon Forge is centrally located in the mid-east and is a great place to meet. Check out [www.mypigeonforge.com](http://www.mypigeonforge.com) for details on this great location. Three great hotels there meet our requirements. We will begin negotiating with them soon and will inform you as soon as one is chosen and firm dates for the reunion have been set. Honored guests and a guest speaker will be announced when plans are finalized. Please contact Charles Penley at [cepenley@chartern.net](mailto:cepenley@chartern.net) if you intend to attend the reunion and he will add your name to the published list on the web site. Click on the reunion button at the bottom of any TSNA web page to obtain the latest info about the reunion. We look forward to a LARGE NUMBER of attendees.

George Plunkett (1st Mobile and 1961st Communications Groups, TSN 1962-63-64-66-67)

<<<<<< TSNA >>>>>>

## My Saigon Guard Duty Experience

By CMSgt Ken Witkin, USAF (Ret.)

I arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnam on 16 January 1965 after a very long and tedious World Airways flight that originated from Travis AFB, California.

I was assigned to the 33rd Air Base Squadron on Project "Top Dog VIII" as a C-47 and C-54 airborne radio operator, AFSC A29372. As an NCO and an aircrew member, I was used to a certain way of life that normally included air-conditioned sleeping quarters and no additional duties.

Of course, I ended up in tent city with hundreds of other enlisted personnel and the only "air-conditioning" I had was the breeze created by the rather large fans located in my tent where the daytime temperature was well above 100 degrees.

One day after I had returned from an in-country C-47 supply mission, I was told to report to the squadron first sergeant. Upon reporting to our first sergeant I was informed that I would be "pulling guard duty" at the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon the very next day.

When I protested to our first sergeant that (1) I was an aircrew member and therefore shouldn't be performing guard duty except when it was to guard the aircraft I was flying on and (2) the Army was responsible for the security of Saigon—not the Air Force, I was told to be at the squadron orderly room at 0700 the next day.

The following day, upon arriving

at the squadron orderly room, I was issued an M-16 rifle and four clips of ammunition and then, together with about 10 other airmen and NCOs, I was driven to the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon.

My guard post was on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel and I remained there, quite alone with no food or drink for the next eight hours when I was relieved by another Air Force NCO. The only "enemy" that I encountered during my eight-hour-shift were rather large Vietnamese rats running rampant on the roof of the hotel.

After performing this additional duty four times during a 60-day period, I was finally removed from the Caravelle Hotel guard duty roster when I failed to report for my guard duty shift. You see, the day before my shift I was sent TDY to Thailand on board a C-47 and our aircraft had a serious maintenance problem that required both the flight mechanic and me to remain with our aircraft for seven days.

Needless to say, I was never assigned to guard the Caravelle Hotel again nor was I assigned any other additional duties during the remainder of my tour in South Vietnam.

At least someone in the chain of command recognized that taking an aircrew member out of his primary AFSC to perform guard duty at the very swanky officers' hotel in downtown Saigon---just wasn't the smart thing to do.

### FROM THE EDITOR

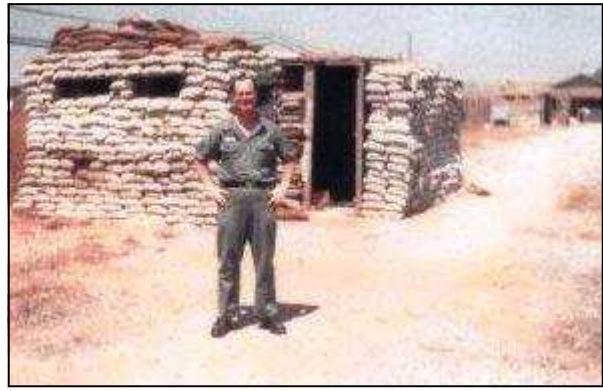
I need stories. How about writing something about what your Christmas time was like at TSN. Send to me at: [lfry2@dejazzd.com](mailto:lfry2@dejazzd.com).

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Tom Rosinski in Vietnam



Tom Rosinski at TSNA 2008 Reunion

**DURING MY TOUR**

**Tom Rosinski, 7th Air Force Plans  
TSN 1968**

During my tour at TSN (Jan 68-Dec 68) my duty days were 12 hours a day, 6½ days a week and probably not as long as some of the other members of this association. I was lucky enough to have a half day off and being an avid golfer, I found that I could check out golf clubs from Special Services and play a round of golf at the Saigon Golf Club just in back of MACV. Prior to the TET Offensive, I could count on that half day off regularly. I had to bum rides to the golf course and was fortunate that a lot of the military vehicles heading for Hq MACV would give me a lift. It was relaxing for me to get on the golf course. However, Tet changed that as the golf course was off limits for a long while after Tet 68.

However, when I did get back to my one half day at the golf course, I found it very strange feeling as all over the golf course were gun emplacements and camouflaged bunkers which had been built during the Tet Offensive.

I had heard stories about the VC coming across the golf course. Seeing the bunkers was a real reminder that TSN had been very close to being over run by the VC.

Again, thanks to the After Action Report which is posted on the TSNA Web Site, I again was taken back to what could have happened at TSN had not the security personnel performed so bravely that night. I am proud to have served in Vietnam and proud to be a member of the TSNA.