



REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

A Memorial to the American Experience in Vietnam

APRIL 2022

Safe at Tan Son Nhut

The other "Good Bad and Ugly"

By: Peter F. Beyette

Detachment 5, 6922 Security Wing, June 1966 – June 1968



It is likely that you know The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (Italian: Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo, lit. "The good, the ugly, the bad") a 1966 Italian epic Spaghetti Western film directed by Sergio Leone and starring Clint Eastwood as "the Good", Lee Van Cleef as "the Bad", and Eli Wallach as "the Ugly".

This is a different story. Let me explain.

THE GOOD

We were safe at Tan Son Nhut!

As a wet behind the ears nineteen-year-old I arrived at Tan Son Nhut in June of 1966. I am not sure that I knew where Viet Nam was or why we were there. That is where Uncle Sugar said I should go. So, off I went Preparation included a confidence course with a couple of explosions and earning my expert marksmanship designation with an M16. (The next time I held one was the night of the TET Offensive. Like I said, we were safe at Tan Son Nhut. But that is another story.)

As an aside, sometime earlier in the spring, the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge (NCOIC) of my unit at Kelly AFB on the hill, Air Force Security Service Headquarters outside of San Antonio (not where the planes were) told me and a work mate, Jim (Jim was teletype maintenance and I was ground radio maintenance) that we would soon receive orders and he was quite sure they would be for Berlin. He cautioned, "Don't say anything to anyone until you receive orders." Of course, being somewhat excited, that evening I telephoned my family to tell them the news.

Within two weeks Jim received his orders for Berlin and of course he asked me whether I had received mine. Well, *NO!* So, I waited. Finally, a short time later I received my orders, 6922 Security Wing Detachment 5. No address, no city, no country. A bit more than curious I asked the various senior airman and NCOs where this was. No one knew. Finally, one staff sergeant told me that the 6922nd was in the Philippines but he had no idea where Det. 5 is. Now, I know where I am going, sort of. Finally, I did learn that Det. 5 was at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon, Viet Nam. Time for another phone call home. Of course, I was able to take a leave prior to my trip across the big pond.

Now, my father was an interrogation officer in WWII and by then a major in the Army National Guard. As I was growing up his day job was the office manager at the Connecticut Street Armory in Buffalo where I had spent time playing as a child. He also went to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio and returned with my first pair of real cowboy boots. We used to go to the club at Fort Sam, as I recall, a really nice place. So, he was familiar with where I had been stationed for the last year. One book on his bookshelf was Doctor at Dien Bien Phu. So of course, he knew where I was going as well as where I have been.

THE BAD

Landing at TSN in June of '66, having made a couple of stops on the way, it had been a pleasant but long flight with a really good dinner. Now, the commercial pilot warned us that we would make a steep approach so that we would avoid enemy ground fire. Really? That certainly got my attention. Then, as I disembarked, it felt like the air was sucked from my lungs. Basic training at Lackland, San Antonio in August was hot, but this, to say the least, was different.

Okay, here I am, now what? Check in for further instructions. Some how I was issued a top-secret badge so that I could enter the Det. 5 compound which was located within the MAC V compound somewhere in the middle of the base. After making my way to our small building introductions were made and I learned that I was the only ground maintenance guy in the unit of a couple of dozen NCOs and airmen who were all specialists in their field. There was supposed to be a maintenance NCO for me to report to. The previous one had rotated back to the world. I was informed that he was a bit of a “flamer” who managed to shoot a 45 round through the roof without injuring anyone.

What next? I had gone to tech school and o-j-td for a year at Kelly and now I felt like I didn't have a clue. One thing I did know was to maintain clean equipment and perform preventive maintenance. So, step one was to open the backs of the racks to inspect. SHOCK! Filthy would be an understatement. You would likely know that over time, in a hot wet area, you can grow mold and mildew. It was so bad that I was able to simply peel the crud in strips off the equipment. Following that little exercise, it was time to spit and polish and take each piece of equipment to the work bench in my little designated area to perform preventive maintenance.

As I became acquainted with the guys, one seasoned troop invited me to accompany him to Saigon to “see the sights.” Basically, this was to visit bars and drink beer. Here we go, my first ride on a two-seater motorized machine with the driver behind us. After a short ride we disembarked at the New York Bar. (See picture on Page 3) Cool, I am from upstate New York. Down the street was a river. Cool, I grew up on the Niagara River.

Once inside I was introduced to Ba Mia Ba (you all know what that is). Lore had it that it was made with formaldehyde. Okay, that will help preserve my system. “Hey, this place is filled with beautiful young ladies wearing interesting costumes.” I learned that this was the traditional apparel call au dai. Next lesson was “You buy me Saigon Tea?” Well, being a friendly nineteen-year-old gentleman, it seemed appropriate to buy her a Saigon Tea; whatever that was.

KABOOM! Almost knocked me off my seat. “Relax Peter. They blew up the ammo dump at Long Bien.” Sure got my attention. Remember, Tan Son Nhut is a safe place. The war is out there somewhere.

THE UGLY

So now it was the better part of a year later and it was decision time. I made the decision to do another tour at Det 5. As you likely know, when you do that Uncle Sugar will transport you any where in the world for 30 days. Hmmm, another decision. I decided to return to the world and the home front to visit family and friends. Did you know that when you do that your uniform can shrink? It was time to go back to Det 5 and I was barely able to fit into my 1505s. Sign of a good time at home.

My father and I had not been particularly close, and I remember thinking as I sat on the return plane, when I come home next year maybe we can get to know each other.

Now, back at Det 5 for a month or so, one evening I was standing outside of our work building when the NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge) Sergeant Clark called me to come into the building for a phone call. We didn't get phone calls. That was the first and only phone call I ever received there. He handed me the phone and I heard a representative of the Red Cross introduce himself and say, “Your father has suddenly and unexpectedly died.” After he asked me whether I understood what he said and I acknowledged that I had, he told me that I would be transported home as soon as possible. He told me to give the phone back to Sergeant Clark. Sergeant Clark asked me whether I understood what I was told and I said I did. I was on a plane home the next day still in shock with a strange pounding headache seated next to a Green Beret who told me his wife had died. That is all I remember about the flight.

When I arrived at the airport my older sister who had returned from the west coast was waiting in the family car with my two younger brothers. Once settled in the passenger seat I said, “What happened, heart attack?” She simply answered, “Gunshot.” No further explanation was needed.

When I arrived at the funeral home I was greeted by the funeral director who was a friend with whom I had spent time with on my recent leave. Jay simply said, “it's a tough way to come home.”

I asked my Mother if I should apply for an emergency discharge and she, being a military wife, simply told me to return to duty.

Now, I returned to Det 5 and carried on.

On January 31st a high school friend, Al Ziehm, now an Air Policeman at TSN had somehow located me and came over to share a beer. After a while Al said he had to get back because there was something going on.

Of course, that was the night of the Tet Offensive.



The New York Bar, Saigon, from Peter Beyette



Angela Pan Photo,
January, 2012



Chaplain's Corner-Whispers By Andy Csordas, Associate Chaplain

While working in the UK a number of years ago I had the opportunity to visit St Paul's Cathedral in London. It is an amazing structure from the basement to the top of the dome. If in the area it is worth the time and effort to visit. Hitler hoped to hit the cathedral during the bombing of London during WWII. It was never destroyed but many buildings nearby were leveled as seen in this picture from that time.



At the base of the dome is an area called the whispering gallery, seen in the picture below. This gallery is located approximately 100 feet above the cathedral floor. It is a bit of a climb up the 257 steps to reach the gallery. One of the amazing things about this gallery is where it gets its name. If you whisper on one side of dome someone on the other side from you can hear your whisper. It is 137 feet across and there is background noise from below, but you can still hear that whisper.



So how does that relate to our relationship with God? Think about it. God can hear your slightest whisper, or even unspoken thoughts or pleas. No matter the circumstance God can hear us.

But it starts with a relationship with the living God. Isaiah 26:16 tells us: "Lord, they came to you in their distress . . . they could barely whisper a prayer." But to communicate with God you must have a continuing relationship, not a temporary relationship such as praying the plane doesn't crash. God ex-

pects us to have that relationship with Him. We do that by acknowledging the Savior who will take the punishment for our sins. Whispering that prayer, acknowledging the Savior for that forgiveness can bring peace no matter the circumstances in your life. If you have questions contact me.

Jimmy Avera Remembers

Hi Larry,

Here's an oddity for you. I spent about 7 months at Tan Son Nhut and my tour was cut short because of Vietnamization and my job in the 1876 Comm Sq was taken over by Federal Electric Corp. My tour started on 1 June 71 and ended on 1 Jan 72. I spent a total of about 30 minutes of the early morning midnight hour of 1 Jan 72, as I was on a troop flight, Freedom Bird, back to the United States. As we rapidly ascended, looking out the plane windows we could see remnants of either some ground warfare or fireworks. I was so glad to be leaving yet sad that others were still left behind. After approximately 24 hours and crossing the International Dateline, we approached the west coast. Travis AFB airport was fogged in so we flew down the coastline to Oakland International. As we flew, we could see the continuing New Year's Eve fireworks displays and celebration. But it scared hell out of me! I had just awakened from a nap and seeing all of those fireworks made me think that they had taken us back in-country. What a relief!! So, the irony is when I post my tour dates of 71-72, it always felt odd as I had only spent that 30 minutes or so in-country.

Thank you very much Larry for your efforts, dedication and steadfast publishing of the Revetments in support of the TSNA.

Sincerely,
Jimmy Avera 71-72.

A Recollection from a Comm Center, by Andy Csordas, TSNA Treasurer

This is not a story from Tan Son Nhut but reading Jim Henney's article in February's Revetments brought this back to me. Before my time at Tan Son Nhut I was stationed at the Detroit Cleveland Air Defense Command's Headquarters' Battery in Cleveland. My MOS was 31S30, Field General COMSEC Repair, but while stationed in Cleveland we were responsible for running the switchboard and the Comm Center. On rare occasions I actually used my MOS and repaired equipment.

Jim talks about changing the codes on the Crypto units each night and how critical it was to the operation. We were not as busy as Jim's center as we only had two circuits, one send and one receive, for the teletype communications. We also did not have Top Secret gear at Cleveland, we had the KW-7's which were only rated for Secret or below messages. As Jim said, nothing interrupted the changing of the settings each night. One evening I changed the patch cords on the equipment and tested them back-to-back to see if they worked. They did and I thought everything was fine and initiated a line communication with the other end of the circuit at Fort Leavenworth.

Unfortunately, they could not communicate. To make a long story short I had patched both units the same, but incorrectly. So I started again and needless to say it took much longer than normal. In the middle of me trying to solve the problem I received a knock on the Comm Center door telling me a Major from the Detroit end of the Air Defense Command wanted to talk to me right now! It was kind of fun, a Spec/4 telling a Major to wait, but I was very preoccupied and could not enjoy it at the time.

When I did finish and went to the phone, there was a private waiting for me. The major came on the line and with his best command voice said, "Soldier did you receive a Top Secret message tonight?" I simply replied "No sir and we will not." To put it mildly he was not happy with that response. I had to explain to him, more than once, that you could not typically transmit Top Secret messages over Secret equipment. There was a way to do that but it was very involved. They eventually flew the message down to Cleveland for Detroit. I never did find out what was in the message.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT JAMES ELLIOTT WILLIAMS

Submitted by George Plunkett
TSNA President Emeritus

This email was sent to me by a retired Navy CDR, former enlisted man, helo pilot. When the subject is bravery in combat, his footprint is large. Here is a link to his website. <http://www.combatsar.com/>

Even larger is the footprint of James Elliott Williams, whose story follows.

We remain free only because we remain the land of the brave.

George



I guess we should go back and tell the story of the gallant river battle fought on Halloween night, 1966, by PBRs 105 and 99, led by Medal of Honor recipient, boat captain and patrol officer James Elliott Williams, whose motto was "Lead from the Front."

While patrolling the Mekong River just before dusk, PBR 105 took fire from two sampans. Williams quickly gave chase and ordered the fire returned, killing the crew of one sampan with the other fleeing. While pursuing the second sampan around a bend into a tributary of the Mekong, the patrol surprised the 261st and 262nd North Vietnamese Army Regiments, just beginning to move by boats down river. The feisty Williams, in his last year of service, cut through the enemy forces, running over sampans at full throttle, twisting and turning PBR 105 to present a poor target, with PBR 99 right on his heels. All the while, Rubin and the rest of the crewmen on both patrol boats manned all guns and were blasting away at the target-rich environment.

Facing overwhelming odds, Williams led his patrol against concentrations of enemy junks and sampans, carrying fifteen to twenty enemy soldiers each, cutting through the middle, chopping boats in two. All the while, guerrillas armed with mortars and small arms fired on the Americans from fortified riverbank positions. When the enemy troops returned fire, many times they didn't lead the fast boats far enough ahead, resulting in missing and hitting their own forces on the opposite side of the two speeding boats. This rocked the sampans and small junks with the waves of the boats' wakes, throwing the enemies aim off. One communist rocket did find

its mark, but it had been fired at such a close range that it did not detonate, passing through the bow of PBR 105 and out the other side, exploding on enemy forces. Meanwhile, Williams radioed for support from the heavily armed Navy Seawolf attack helicopters, who scrambled immediately.

After passing through the first inlet, the two PBRs turned into a second and larger staging area, with larger junks and more communist soldiers. Again the two speed boats waded into the enemy forces, who were caught off-guard taking heavy casualties. By the end of the run, the two Huey Seawolf gunships had arrived, and Williams kicked off another attack in the fading light. The Seawolves flew low to the deck with their Zuni rockets, as their door gunners blasted away through the enemy, who were retreating into the trees returning fire, taking devastating hits. Many more firing runs were made into the night as Williams ordered the searchlights turned on to press the attack, even though it made the patrol boats better targets. In spite of this, and a dwindling supply of ammunition, his patrol confronted the enemy onshore and routed its entire force, destroying sixty-five boats and inflicting 1000 NVA and Viet Cong casualties. The two fiberglass patrol boats and their crews had done what most would have considered impossible. They were later proclaimed the heroes of one of the greatest Navy victories of all time: the Halloween Massacre.

There were many more times when Williams, Binder and the Delta Dragons of River Section 531 chased down Viet Cong party members and VC tax collectors, who terrorized the Vietnamese villagers, taking their money and supplies to support the Viet Cong. Willie, as Williams shipmates called him, was famous for his expert boat handling and shrewd use of speed, as well as courage in facing the enemy. Time and time again, James Elliott Williams and PBR 105, along with the Delta Dragons, caught and decimated communist forces. On one sunny day, they caught more than 400 Viet Cong crossing in the open.

Through the years Williams, Binder, McDavitt, and many who served in those first river sections stayed in touch and remained friends, proud of their service together. They did not call or think of themselves as “River Rats,” as that title was already being used by the legendary U.S. Air Force, Red River Delta “River Rat” pilots, who flew bombing missions into North Vietnam in 1966-67. Most river sailors referred to themselves by their unit name, such as the “Delta Dragons” in the case of River Section 531. When they referred to themselves, collectively they used the terms “Brown Water Sailors” or “Brown Water Navy.”

James Elliott Williams retired in 1967 and was honorably promoted to chief petty officer in 1975. Later, he worked as a U.S. Marshal and with his wife and childhood sweetheart Elaine, they raised five children. He was asked to speak in public on many occasions, tearing up the King’s English, as the burly South Carolinian put it. But Williams minced no words. Of his men he would say:

“These men, they wasn’t no dumb-bunnies. They had a lot of common sense, and they worked hard at what they were doin’. And that was at a time when they were sayin’ that ever’body was crazy and dopeheads, and in Vietnam in partic’lar, which just wasn’t true.

“I think the men that deserve the credit in Vietnam was the youngsters,” said Williams, who was an “old man” of thirty-five when he reported for duty on the river. “They’ve never got the credit they rightfully deserve. They did such a good job if you were willing to show them, to lead, to get out front. They didn’t ask you why. They done what you told ’em. And they did a good job of it. The young people that I got, they were throwaways, they were rejects. Their commanding officers wanted to get rid of them, and they turned out to be the greatest young men in this country. In a year and four days, we lost only one man. I’m not trying to brag, but we accounted for some 1,400 kills and 180 captured. You could not have done that without teamwork.”

Willie and Rubin survived to return home, although they were both wounded while in combat. Cruising Vietnam’s notorious Mekong Delta meant trouble. But Williams was used to trouble and left Vietnam as one of the war’s most decorated heroes. The crew of PBR 105 would cast a giant shadow that was hard to surpass, setting an example for future river sailors, instilling pride in the units. It was considered an honor just to serve in the same force they helped establish. In many ways, serving in these units shaped many who went on to do great things. For this, I will always be grateful to Williams, Binder, McDavitt, Toole, and the rest of the Brown Water Sailors who served in Vietnam. For the fame they earned trickled down, to be shared by me and the rest of the naval forces that served in the Republic of Vietnam.

In 1999, when Chief James Elliott Williams passed away, Melissa Binder said her father broke down and cried. On December 11th, 2004, USS James E. Williams, DDG 95, was commissioned in Charleston, South Carolina. Over 100 Brown Water Sailors wearing their Black Berets were present at the ceremony.



A Day in The Life (at Tan Son Nhut)

I was transferred from the 541st Military Intelligence (MI) Detachment, 519th MI Battalion attached to the 11th Armored Cavalry (ACR) Regiment in February 1971 to the 45th MI Company, 525th MI Group at Tan Son Nhut. The actual transfer process took a few days, and after a number of days without showers or clean uniforms we were initially transported to the Parker Compound on the Saigon River. We arrived late at night, and fell into our newly assigned bunks in an old horse stable with concrete floors. The following morning, we arose to learn we would have to stand inspection in our new "barracks". Being from a line combat unit we rose in the morning (sans showers or a shave) to face our new first sergeant. Coming from a line unit with no opportunity to clean-up, we faced him in faded, unclean, unpressed fatigues, jungle boots that were way far from well-polished, un-shaven or showered, and we all had personalized jungle hats instead of the apparently Saigon required ball hats. We were not "strac". Can you guess how many demerits our little group accrued? As Top began handing out infractions to our group, I remember SP4 Joe Curran (whose uncle was General Wyant) saying to the first Sergeant "what are you going to do, send us to Vietnam?" Not to mention that later that night in our makeshift NCO club we had to put up with derisive comments about being from the "Pony Cav". And they wondered why we called them REMFS! While we were all intelligence specialists, none the less we were all assigned to one of the three (Red, White, and Blue) quick reaction forces that rotated being on alert each night. It seems that our compound was across the Saigon River from an area believed to be frequented by the Viet Cong (or was it the NVA?) Dong Nai regiment. A bridge across the river just at one end (but outside of) the compound was guarded by ARVN troops who had a habit of throwing grenades into the river at all odd hours supposedly to deter VC sappers. However, rather than a defensive tactic, on observation it was clearly a tactic the ARVNs used to stun the fish so they would float to the surface and be easily collected for eating!

Every morning we were transported to the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV) via a large bus with heavy screens over the windows. Our bus driver Benji drove like a mad man between the compound and CICV, more than once drawing the ire of officers on board, who swore disciplinary action would be taken. Eschewing any resemblance to military decorum or respect, Benji advised the officers that he alone was the vehicle commander, and that therefore his opinions (only) were what mattered on that bus. He further irritated the officers by always wearing a beanie with a silver propeller instead of the required ball hat! No disciplinary action ever befell him. At a point several months later, I was transferred to a barracks billet located on Tan Son Nhut and the adventures with Benji were no more.

As a senior imagery interpreter, I was assigned to the CICV Out Country Section (North Vietnam). I primarily worked the area from the DMZ north to the port of Dong Hoi. Generally, our group was responsible for reviewing imagery flown primarily by 7th Air Force Recce although we also reviewed films from Buffalo Hunter drones, occasional missions flown by the U-2 out of Udorn Thailand, and some recce missions flown by Army Mohawk aircraft, particularly along the Ho Chi Minh trail. We worked with ARVN counterparts and were responsible to locate, identify, analyze, and report on all military activity in our Area of Operations (AO), with particular attention to the presence, identification, and disposition of Soviet military equipment. Our reports were used by tactical commanders in country, by the CICV targeting group as input to the target selection process for aerial bombings, and were also forwarded to the National Photo Interpretation Center (NPIC) at the Washington Navy Yard for further strategic assessment.

K.H. Elliott; CICV II/OC 1971
Oct 70 - Sep 71
525th MI Grp



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**Come as strangers,
leave as friends!
Bring your cameras
and capture some
valuable memories!**



**We would like to shake your hand and
share a cup of coffee over some small
talk!**



**There are no
strangers in
TSNA - only
new friends
waiting to be
discovered!**



**None of us are
getting any
younger.
Come this year
and have a ball!**



**If you've never
been to one
before, come and
see what you're
missing.**

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REGISTRATION FORM WITH PAYMENT MUST BE RECEIVED

NLT September 1, 2022

Questions regarding Registration should be directed to:

Paul Mortensen

Director of Reunion Planning

TSNAreunions@gmail.com

Hotel Information

Hope Hotel and Richard Holbrooke Conference Center

10823 Chidlaw Rd (Outside Gate 12A)

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937-879-2696

Registration must be made by telephone. Mention **Tan Son Nhut Association**, Do not say TSNA

Rm Rate \$109.00 plus taxes

Breakfast Coupons will be provided at check-in

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P.O. Box 236, Penryn, PA 17564-0236
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Dale Baker Photo

NEW MEMBERS

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James A. Henney	Monroeville	OH	May 69 - May 70	1876th Comm. Sq.	Comm. Center Operator
Keith H. Elliott	Charles Town	WV	Oct 70 - Sep 71	45th MI Co, 525 MI Grp	CICV Imagery Interpreter
Margaret H. Anno	Fairfax	VA	Nov 72 - Feb 73	12th RITS	

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