

CHAPTER 4

TOUCHDOWN

The slow, melodious tones of Vietnamese men talking made it vividly clear that I had landed in a completely different world. However the tales about the Coral/Balmoral battles from an old school mate, another Sig, who was about to board the same plane for home made it clear that I was definitely not on an Asian holiday.

The ceaseless buzz of military aircraft, with countless others sheltered away in protected bunkers, also heightened the reality that I was now in a war. But we still hadn't been given weapons. The farces continued

Ironically (farcically?) this was also a "civilian" airport where one of my mates would later meet his girlfriend when she stopped over on an international flight.

We were given a lunch box meal, supplied by Qantas, but the bread was a bit stale, the apples a bit ordinary and much was left aside by us well indulged Aussies. Several Vietnamese women began collecting the boxes which seemed strange as I had been told that this was a pretty grotty country. Then I saw that before binning the cardboard all consumable food was being eaten or kept. As I said I was now in a very different world and getting an indication of the locals' hardships and resourcefulness. It taught me a bit about myself.



Locations of Saigon, Vung Tau & Phuoc Tuy Province, the Aust area of responsibility



Clockwise from top left

1. Well dressed and unarmed troops arriving for war (back in uniform shirts)
2. Wallaby Airlines Caribou bringing in troops to return home
3. American Hercules aircraft in protective revetments (but how many were actually serviceable?)

In the early afternoon we moved out to an American Hercules aircraft bound for our Vung Tau headquarters. Clambering into its sparse, skeleton like interior we settled into the little bucket seats ready for our first "in country" journey. "Every body off it's not working" came an instruction so we shuffled back to the courtyard with barely a second thought. Some time later we were about to board a second aircraft when another Airman, a monkey on his shoulder, advised that it too was unserviceable. Our confidence in the American Air Force became slightly compromised, the SNAFUs continued.

In darkness we eventually boarded what would hopefully be a workable aircraft. However, I soon had doubts given all the thumping, groaning, revving noises that continued as we flew away. Embarrassingly though, after some great length of time, I was suddenly thrust backwards and realised we hadn't even taken off. We had spent all that time taxiing and waiting for other air traffic, the bumping and noises were coming from the tarmac. OK let's score that as False Alarm No 1 (see box below). Taking a deep breath I then crossed my fingers hoping that we would not crash, unarmed, into some Viet Cong (VC) stronghold given the recent performance of these aircraft. Nope all was ok, that was False Alarm No 2.

A bit later a Landrover sped us from the Vung Tau airport to our Camp. Through strange villages, late at night, everything different, people everywhere and so close up, what about all those dangers we were alerted to at Canungra, and still no rifle. I was somewhat uncomfortable but fortunately all that was just False Alarm No 3 and I would casually do the same sorts of trips many times in the future. Finally, late at night, as we arrived at our orderly room we were told "find yourselves a bed in that hut and we will sort you out in the morning". I crashed only to wake terrified, the building shaking like an earthquake, loud explosions going off. About to dive under my bed for safety I noticed that all those around me (who had "a bit of time up") were soundly sleeping on. Next morning I learned that it was a B52 Bomber strike on the Long Hai Hills, twenty odd kilometres away - False Alarm No 4.

False Alarms

These occurred when my fearful imagination started predicting or interpreting all sorts of dire consequences, which of course never eventuated.

It was often like having two little "Rex Voices" in my head, the fearful one telling me to do this or that because its not safe; the other cold, rational, Army trained one saying no it's alright, there is an explanation.

As you will later see I actually did predict correctly in one situation and called it very wrong in another.