Fifty Years Ago

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13 - 17 September 1968: I can't remember how I got out to Travis Air Force Base. I'd met up with Bob Fox, a high school buddy who had gone to Vietnam in the big build-up of 1965. We spent two days wandering around San Francisco by day, catching Count Basie at the Blind Lemon one night, drinking and bull shitting in the Starlight Nightclub on the top floor of the Sir Francis Drake the next.

Somehow I ended up at Travis around 1700 hours on Sunday, the 15th, duffle bag over my shoulder and Samsonite suitcase in my left hand. (I had to keep my right hand free to salute.) A sign pointed the way to the check-in desk, orders and shot records presented, my name checked against the flight manifest. "We'll be calling your flight forward at 20:00 hours, sir. Make yourself at home," said the clerk.

Make yourself at home? Home, in this case, was a Spartan, all hard surfaces, cinderblock room with a blue and white linoleum tile floor. There were some single chrome and black leather chairs and two rows of well-worn couches scattered about, but nothing that could serve the needs of the crowd. A series of large windows looked out on the flight line. Crammed with anxious young men in dark olive fatigues, teary-eyed moms, dads, siblings and girlfriends, and me, the place throbed with the deafening noise of high-pitched, emotional voices chattering ceaselessly in an effort to suppress the anxiety. Home indeed.

For two hours I paced, peed frequently, checked my watch, paced some more and simmered in my loneliness. If this was a time to think of what my job might be like, or what life would be like in Vietnam, those thoughts eluded me.

"All personnel manifested for flight 237 for Bien Hoa Air Base, please head for the passenger gate. Have a copy of your orders and your ID card ready."

Hugs, kisses, sobs and screams, probably a prayer group somewhere, and me; alone with my thoughts and doubts, I shuffled toward the doors leading out of the waiting room. A sergeant barked, "Officers and senior NCOs to the front please." I hated the use of rank at times like this and tried to stay back, but the sergeant spotted me, "Get up here with the officers, sir." I could feel the red running up my neck as I walked past others to join the hand full of officers on the flight. "You'll board first," we were instructed," sit where you please." Single file, we climbed the stairs and entered the cabin door. I took a seat on the right side, a row before the wing. I wanted to see where I was going even if I didn't want to go there.

The 707 taxied out to the runway. I thought of home, the faces of family and friends were clear to me. My rooms at two different homes in Dayton and two apartments from Ohio State days came to life, as did the people I knew in those places. My thoughts were melancholy with a twist of fear, fear that I would never be back in those places, fear that I would never see or talk to those people again.

We roared down the runway, the brightly lit passenger terminal and the air base fast fading. The lights of California's coastal communities slipped by, replaced by the endless black of the Pacific. A little more than six hours later we landed in Honolulu.

1968 was a time when things closed in the US, TV stations played the National Anthem and went off air, McDonald's Golden Arches went dark, the sidewalks in most towns "rolled up." So it was with Honolulu International. Our plane parked next to a dimly lit terminal. We were allowed to step inside or go out on the balcony, but there were no hula girls, no restaurants or bars, no souvenir stands to welcome us to the Aloha State. I stood out on the balcony, the warm, sweet smell of the island coming to me, the sound of distant surf rumbling contentedly, and imagined what the place looked like in daylight.

Here I was, in Hawaii. A place my parents talked about so often. A place they yearned to see. A place which had turned their world upside down. A place to which I owed my life.

I stood and inhaled the sea air and remembered a photo in the family album: Dad, Granddad, Uncle Bobby, and Uncle Cliff stand in front of a one car garage, a sawhorse in front of them, Uncle Bobby has a foot up on the horse and the four of them hold glasses of beer. Dad and Uncle Cliff have parlayed good paying jobs at Delco and Uncle Cliff's time in the Three C's into purchasing a double lot in Van Buren Township. They have finished the two garages and will move into them while they build their Sear's kit houses on the front of the lots. It's late November 1941. On the Sunday they finish roofing the garages, they get the news: Pearl Harbor has been bombed. The United States is at war. Uncle Ray, soon to be Uncle Bill Kozmar, Uncle Cliff, will be drafted. Uncle Bobby, only 16 at the time, will drop out of Wilbur Wright High School and join up as soon as he turns 18. Mom, Aunt Rose, and Aunt Betty will become Rosie the Riveters in Dayton's GM factories. My parents, Uncle Cliff and Aunt Rose will live in the garages, but the Sear's home will never be built.

As protection against the draft, Mom and Dad will try and get pregnant again, rationalizing that my five-year-old sister won't be enough to keep Dad out of the draft. I arrive in February of 1943, but Dad is drafted in December of 42.

What irony, I think. Here I am, next to Pearl Harbor, the place and the event that created my life and like my father and uncles
I'm unable to avoid going to war.

By the time our plane is refueled and takes off, it is already the afternoon of the 16th in Vietnam. We fly on, heading into sunrise. It is 10 in the morning local time when we set down on Guam for our second refueling. The terminal at Guam is a small clapboard 2-story building with a glass-walled control tower on top. At the east end we see a line of giant B-52s lined up; planes that regularly fly from here to bomb North Vietnam. If we took courage from the sight it was offset by the line up of gray and white C-9s - large red crosses on the front of the fuselage and tail – air medical evacuation jets used to fly the wounded from Vietnam to Japan and then on to the States.

We mostly just stand around, pace, and chat to kill the time until we are called back to our plane. I can't speak for all who were on the flight with me, but the image of those C-9s will ride with me even after we land at Bien Hoa.

By now I was so sleepy that I could finally fall asleep as the 707 pushed on. We crossed the International Dateline somewhere, so it was now the 17th - exactly one year since I reported for active duty at Fort Eustis - when I awoke to the captain announcing that we were entering Vietnam airspace. "If you look out the left side, you can see Da Nang," he continued as we all scrambled across the aisle and squeezed our heads together to catch a glimpse.

The navy base was easy to spot, ships at anchorage in the water, some at quays jutting into the water. From our height, we could see vehicles moving around, ordinary life in the combat zone. A minute later, our eyes still focused on the ground, we saw more of the war – actually more of the results of war. Huge scars appeared amidst the green of trees and foliage. Orange-red earth mounded up to form circles and ovals filled with water where artillery shells and bombs had cratered the land. From our height, it looked as if much of the country had smallpox. Some of the water looked like a mirror, silver, and blue – a new wound created just days ago and filled with fresh water. Others were muddy brown, or slime green, or a hideous, pustulent yellow; opened wounds scoured out months, perhaps years ago, and festering – just as the war was festering. There were so many, across such a massive area, that we – most of us rookies to war – still could realize that this area had been fought over repeatedly. We could put ourselves into the news film we had been watching for the last five years; drowning in sweat, or soaked to the bone in rain and trudging across fields, hills, and valleys seeded with danger.

I possessed no hero's ambitions of glory. I wanted to do my job as best I could, be fair to the men who would work for me, seem competent to the men who would command me, and get home in one piece, as close to the person who left Travis two days ago as possible. Little did I realize how far from reality my ambitions were.