

Vung Ro (Bay)

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2:00 pm

Vung Ro (part 1

I was standing on the deck of my amphibious BARC the first time I view Vung Ro Bay. It was plain in some ways and beautiful in others. It had a horseshoe shape that opened to the sea and was surrounded by mountains. The mountains came all the way down to the sea except at two areas at the north end, one area had a beach with rows of barracks and the other area, the working beach, was mostly dirt sand and was perfect for beach landings by the BARC's. The two areas, some one hundred yards apart, were connected by a road that had been dug out of the mountain and ran about six feet above the water line. On days when you had a unusual high tide there would be sea water on the road. The DeLong pier was located in the working area just before the start of the road going to the living area. It was 10:00 AM, September 1968, and it was an incredible beautiful day. The mountains were gray and strangely lacking in any vegetation matter. No trees, no scrub bushes, and no grass. The beach in the living area, which had the barracks, was bright, almost gold in color. The water was the best part of the bay, extremely clear, with shades of dark blue, light blue and green. It was definitely different from the DMZ where I had been for five months. No flat open spaces with a defined perimeter, bunkers and tanks. My first thought about Vung Ro Bay was that it had a nice appearance, but was it safe.

The primary concerns of most GI's is their security, mess hall conditions, and amount of items in the local PX. They weren't always arranged in that order, but my security was always a top priority on my agenda. My first impression of Vung Ro Bay was that it was indefensible, no place for a perimeter, the mountains got in the way. A public highway, QL 1, ran right above the living area about half way up the mountain. I always thought that you could load up a couple banana trucks with NVA and drive right into the compound. A Korean Whitehorse unit was located above us and seemed to be very competent, but I always wondered about their dedication to our security. Vung Ro Bay was hit before we got there, it was hit while we were there and it was hit after we left. You never saw it coming and the security conditions never changed. The military considered it a necessary operation, with risk factors, and as long as the price paid was not too high, the operation continued. There was a popular song at the time called "Lubbock in my Rear View Mirror", I always felt that about Vung Ro Bay, happiness was pulling out of there at about sundown.

Aside from the security factor and the fact you could get killed, if you had to be in Vietnam, Vung Ro was not really that bad. The living area had a main street, everyone called it main street even though it was the only street. The barracks were lined up facing the ocean, the back door adjacent to the mountain with sandbag bunkers in between. It seemed there were never enough bunkers, someone was building them the day I arrived and someone was building them the day I left, nine months later. The headquarters building was located at the north end of the barracks

and the mess hall was at the south end. I don't remember complaints about the food, being a boater I wasn't at the mess that often, but I remember it as always being a pleasant experience. It was clean, the food decent and they had cool-aid, what more could you ask for. The PX had the necessities, plus cameras and watches. It was actually big enough to walk around in and look at stuff. Vung Ro had an EM and NCO club, I don't think I ever set in either and had a beer. We were making that ten mile run up to Phu Hiep almost daily and had to look elsewhere for our entertainment

Vung Ro (I shortened that because no one ever said Vung Ro Bay just Vung Ro) was the first place I was assigned in Vietnam that had Vietnamese working at the post. They filled sandbags, did KP, and kept the barracks clean. The mommy-sans kept the barracks clean among other things. I'm not sure how the system got started, but it worked and it probably worked because of its simplicity. You left your dirty clothes at the foot of the bed and mommy-san took care of the rest, included in this service was sweeping, mopping, and making up of the beds. They also did windows. A duce and half would bring them in the morning and take them out in the afternoon. The cloths were hand washed and hung out to dry, maybe a little to close to the latrine to suit me, but hey it was cheap. After a two or three day run up to the Phu Hiep, Tuy Hoa area, when you got home at least you had clean cloths. On the rare accessions when I would be at the barracks in the day time, I did notice this strange ritual conducted by the mommy-sans.

Our BARC, it was long ago and I think it was the 18, not sure, had arrived back at Vung Ro after a two day run to Phu Hiep at about 5:00 AM. We turned the BARC over to the maintenance crew, loaded up on the 3/4 ton truck and headed to the barracks. One of the first things the 119th Trans tried to do when we arrived was take our weapons. The theory was that if we needed them we could just check them out of the armory. I think there were about twenty-five BARC personnel at Vung Ro at the time and it was unanimous, if you want our weapons then come and get them. The subject was never brought up again. It is my understanding that when the attack came in June 1968, most of the peoples weapons were locked in the armory. That would never happen to us. We did find a lot of neat stuff in the armory, they let us check out M-60's, .50 calibers, and M-79's. We armed the BARC to the teeth for the first couple of months, until we discovered there were few threats offshore just don't hug that shoreline. I was dead tired when I got back to the barracks and immediately grabbed some zzz's.

The nights at Vung Ro were usually cool with a nice breeze, the days were almost always hot and humid. I was awoke at about noon by a mommy-San walking past my bunk with a wash pan. You have probably seen the type, plastic, different colors, red, green, blue, about two feet across and twelve inches in depth. You can buy them at the local K-Mart. The BARC people were assigned to the last barracks adjacent to the mess hall, we thought it lucky to be that close to the food. I found out years later that was the first barracks hit in June. We were on the top floor mountain side. Anyway, mommy-San walked past to the outside stairway and tossed the contents of the wash pan out on the ground. She then put the wash pan under her arm and walked down the stairway. This would not be unusual, but there was no running water in the barracks. I honestly did not give this a second thought. One year in the army and I had saw a lot of things that did not make sense. As the days past I notice other mommy-sans with wash pans, same shapes, different colors, walking around balancing these pans half full of water. I did ask one of the 119th guys one time what was the deal with the mommy-San and the pan of water, he just

laughed. The barracks also had one man rooms for the NCO's at each end of the barracks. I might of been a country boy, but I was no fool. I soon learned that Vietnamese women are very clean, especially after sex. "Other things" included the oldest profession in the world.

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The main mission at Vung Ro was moving tonnage. Everything centered around off loading the ships, LSTs, and LCU's. Get them off loaded and on their way. The De Long pier was the main hub of activity. The pier was large enough for two Liberty ships or cargo vessels, but I never saw more than one moored there at one time. The trucks, mostly 545th Trans [Company] and their five-tons, had priority during the day time. It was a greater effort if the ship being off loaded was an ammo carrier, the trucks would pull under the ships crane and the bombs would be loaded onto the truck. Mostly, the ordinance that arrived at Vung Ro were Tuy Hoa Air Base bound 500-pound bombs. It seems they came in bundles of four bombs or one ton. I believe they put four tons on each truck. They may have added more weight to the trucks, the army always had the habit of overloaded everything. The truckers were the best, you had that high grade going up the mountain, then the curves and bad road conditions going down the mountain. Vietnamese motorist, including buses, banana trucks, motorcycles, and other vehicles that can only be described as having wheels, engine, and moving as fast as it can go. The roads could be mined in the early morning, but I don't remember ever hearing of a US truck hitting a mine, the Vietnamese vehicles usually cleared first. Then you would finally get into the valley, with it's obstacles of water buffaloes, bikes, and little old mommy-sans and granddad who seemed to like to wonder onto the road. The main bridge had been blown when I arrived so a small one way platoon bridge was erected for traffic a few miles into the valley. Plus, it rained a lot and charley might pick a spot to take a few shots. A tribute should be made to the great job all those guys did, they should of all got medals. Loading in the day belong, to the trucks, night operations belonged to the BARC's.

Like I said the ammo ships were a priority. Get them off loaded and out of here. If the VC had made a determined effort to land a rocket or mortar on the ship and got lucky, we would have all been toast. Crispy toast. When the truck loading operation was completed for the day, the BARCs one at a time would pull along side the ship and the bombs would be lowered onto the deck. Sixty tons is supposed to be the loading capacity of the BARC, that was never used, instead it was loaded until waterline marks were reached. Watching the bombs being loaded I estimated that we usually carried one hundred tons of 500-pound bombs. There were three BARCs at Vung Ro at that time, so we would carry three hundred tons each trip. Whew, what a load and we had to move this load twelve miles up the coast through angry seas, currents, and sometimes surf up on to the beach in twenty foot sets of waves. The BARC unit had it's operation shack in the working area of Vung Ro. The two officers and E-7 did not live in the barracks area with the rest of us, though there was a officer and senior NCO barracks. They also had a special security detail that guarded them at night. I pulled that detail a number of times and found it pathetic. You would never find these gentlemen riding on the BARCs. I walked into the operations shack one day, I avoided the place like I would

a plague, and found charts, maps, and graphs hanging from the walls showing our tonnage records and trip records. It sure looked impressive. We hauled the freight, they filled out the charts, what a team.

No one worked harder than the 119th Trans [Company] stevedores. They lived in hell, but each day went out and got the job done. Vung Ro was a twenty-four hour operation with few days off. At least on the BARCs we could get away for days at a time, the 545th truckers were now living in Phu Hiep, thanks to the VC attacks, at Phu Hiep it was less likely that their trucks would get blown up. The 119th was stuck at Vung Ro all the time. Mostly, everyone got along. Sure there were conflicts. Like the night Steve.....uh.... I mean someone tear gassed the club. Evidently, the night guards weren't allowed to attend the show being presented at the EM club one night and gassed the place. I had been working on the BARC and walked past the club well after the event, heading for midnight chow at the mess hall. I was stopped by an sergeant (E-6) who proclaimed that some people around here (Vung Ro) acted like children when they didn't get their way. I wasn't sure why I was picked to receive this verbal wisdom, but I agreed it had been a terrible thing. Actually, I was somewhat a rebel myself and knew exactly what point was being made. It was arranged thereafter that everyone would be allowed to attend night shows that were put on at the club. Point made, problem solved.

BARC duty was great, I shouldn't be giving this secret away, we lived like pack rats, but we were happy pack rats. I hope no medical evidence ever comes forward showing consumption of C-rations hazardous to your health, because we consumed lots of C-rations. Before each trip we would be issued a case of C-rations. If I remember right there were twelve meals to each case. Beanie-weenies (everyone's favorite), turkey loaf, chicken something???, meat balls and spaghetti, and something called greens beans and ham. There were those little packets of cigarettes, matches, toilet paper, and coffee. Hey, I'm getting hungry just thinking about it. If the BARC was on the beach or it was a calm day you could heat up your C's, otherwise you ate them cold. Our BARC had obtained a large military style igloo cooler. You could put a very large block of ice inside. That block of ice would stay for about four days. On runs to Phu Hiep we would always stop by the ice house. The engineers had made BARC roads so we could go anywhere in Phu Hiep. Shacks were built on the stern of the BARCs. It included benches for sitting and sleeping and protection from the weather. We didn't bath regularly, but no one on the BARCs seemed to mind. My main love of the BARC centered around the fact that everyday was different, you were always on the move, there were no inspections, and the lifers could rarely keep track of us, so they seldom tried. Being young troopers we would take advantage of this lack of supervision in the days to come.

Next: That first **trip to Tuy Hoa**

Vung Ro (part 3)

All names that I used in these essays are fictitious, that person does exist, but I don't feel it would be right to use their names without their permission.

Mornings in Vietnam were to me always so peaceful. That might have been because the nights were usually so noisy. Mortars popping flares. You could hear the flare as it left the mortar tube, as it traveled into the atmosphere and then as it exploded into light. If it was close and it always was at Vung Ro, it would light up the inside of the barracks as it past overhead. I don't know if anyone ever spotted anything with a flare, but we sure used a lot of flares at Vung Ro. Weapons of every caliber were being fired through out the night. Navy destroyers would pull into the bay on occasions and test fire their weapons. Then there were the mad minutes where all weapons were fired into all direction for one minute. It could diffidently effect your night zzzz's. So with morning came a certain kind of calm. It was like being deaf, it was so quiet. It was a rare morning that I would wake up in a real bed, so that may have had something to do with a feeling of inner peace. I also took a shower, got to sleep in my OD [olive drab] boxer shorts between two clean sheets and that was living. In the morning I would get into my clean jungle pants that mommy-san had washed the previous day, lace up my jungle boots, and put on my jungle fatigue shirt over my OD T-shirt. Sometime during our arrival at Vung Ro Bay and assignment to the 119th Trans [Company], the BARC unit had also lost it's authorization to wear the MACV patch. We had become 1st Log [Logistics Command] troopers wearing the "leaning shit-house." Having got six months of duty with MACV we found we could wear the MACV patch on the left sleeve and the 1st Log patch on the right sleeve, we didn't want to lose our groove so that was done by most of us. It seems petty now, but at the time it seemed vastly important. Looking and feeling sharp I would walk over to the bay side stairway and look out on the bay. The waves would gently lap on the beach and the beauty of the sea and mountains flowing together was breathtaking. If I was in the barracks late in the morning it also meant we had completed a Phu Hiep run the previous day and if the other BARC crew was headed for Phu Hiep with a fresh load of something, then if none of our lifers saw me, I would have the whole day off.

Sp/4 Kincaid was our BARC pointman, if it was something that maybe we shouldn't do, Kincaid always did it first. Since Kincaid and myself always seemed to be teamed together I was always the second BARC person to do something that might get you into trouble. Kincaid had discovered "Eden" and with the first opportunity I planned to tag along. It was one of those peaceful mornings that presented the opportunity for an adventure with Kincaid into Tuy Hoa City. I grabbed my M-16 and tied a bandoleer of magazines around my waist. This was before the days of banana clips so our magazines contained fifteen or sixteen rounds of ammo. I taped two magazines together so I had about thirty rounds in the weapon. I would just flip the magazine around when the first magazine was empty. Kincaid had a system of hitching a ride into the "Forbidden City." A ¾-ton truck left the CQ [charge of quarters] building at 9:00 AM making a daily run to the Korean Army Whitehorse Division on the mountain. It would go by the check point, which is where we needed to be to get a ride into town. The main object was to get by the BARC operations shack centered in the middle of the loading area. If you were caught in that "kill zone," the term was designated by BARC crews to emphasize the importance of not getting caught by a lifer while trying to escape somewhere, usually Phu Hiep or Tuy Hoa. The BARC operations people (we called them lifers due to fact the military was their life) consisted of a E-7, warrant officer, and several E-6's. I never had anything against the lifers, they had their priorities and we had ours. Their main purpose in the Army was to get promoted, our main purpose was to stay alive and maybe have some fun. So if you were caught in the kill zone the first question would be, where do you think you are going? And of course your free time would be spent doing worthless details. Some of the guys caught in the zone, while trying to escape

somewhere to have fun, had to dig flower beds and plant stuff. The lifers always wanted the zone to look pretty.

Well, Kincaid and myself wouldn't be planting flowers on this day. We got through the zone and were dropped off at the check point with no problems. The check point was a bunker adjacent to QL 1 and the road down to Vung Ro Bay. All types of Vietnamese vehicles passed by the check point headed north and south. The buses were amazing, loaded with people and animals, some of the people seemed to be hanging on for dear life, and the driver had one speed, as fast as he could go. The cargo trucks, we called them banana trucks, because that was usually the cargo, had a slower safer pace. We would hitch rides on these vehicles later and sit on the cargo, banana's, rice, etc. It was an enjoyable ride all the way to Tuy Hoa. That day we caught a ride on a 545th five-ton truck carrying cargo to Tuy Hoa Air Force Base. The driver was our kind of guy, the top was down (no cab cover), his shirt was off and hanging on the back of his seat, his jungle hat was sitting just right on his head, newest aviator sunglasses with love beads and Montanyard bracket. Kincaid and I were dressed the same way only we had on our shirts. I had a large black leather watch band for my Seiko watch. GI's in Vietnam always greeted each other with the same comment "where you from in the world," then it would go to what is your unit and how is it there. Conversations would usually be brief unless you were from the same area. This ride was mutual beneficial, we had a ride and he had a couple of shot gun riders. It was a beautiful day.

QL 1 from Vung Ro to the valley was dusty with dangerous curves. One side of the road had a dangerous drop off and the other side was the mountain with very large boulders. No where to go. It was bleak. Thank goodness it wasn't a very long ride, maybe a mile or two. When you could see the valley it was a complete contrast to the mountain. Everything was green. Coconut trees, banana trees, palm trees, streams and rivers. Small villages, large villages, animals, chickens, water buffalo and ducks. Lots of ducks and rice patties. People were everywhere, mostly working. Those not working were almost all riding Honda motorcycles. They must have been the family car, I would see three or four people on these things. Dad at the handle bars, kid in basket in front, mommy side saddle behind dad with another child squeezed in between. Most of the road at this point was paved though the engineers were still working on it and a bridge that had been blown. I was desperate to see what the girls looked like, I had been in country six months and had rarely saw Vietnamese. Along the road girls were hard to find and even rarely seen. One thing was for sure, those bamboo cone hats hid their faces and they were almost all the same size. This was all very romantic, but the fact was that a person could get very dead in this place. Kincaid and I would have to get another ride, the 545th Truck [Company] had to turn off QL 1 and take the road to Phu Hiep. We were still about five miles from Tuy Hoa City.

They called this intersection the Phu Hiep cut off. There was a small shed with a bench so you could sit down out of the sun. Young girls had coolers of beer, soda and packets of marijuana. Neither of us smoked and it was too early for a beer so a cold Pepsi was paid for, opened and consumed. The girls were always careful to get paid first before handing over the merchandise. Sitting back, relaxed you could really take in the atmosphere of what was happening in that small corner of the war. It was busy, with the Vietnamese military and civilian traffic, everyone tried to stay out of the way of the Americans who stopped for no one. American jeeps, ¾-ton trucks, 2 ½-ton trucks, 5-ton trucks with trailers of every description were flying by in every direction

except Tuy Hoa. Things did come to a stop though when a flock of ducks crossed the road. The ducks formed a single line and marched from one rice paddy to another rice paddy on the other side of the road. There was no pushing or fighting, each duck seemed to know his place, and in short order everyone was across. Too bad the Vietnamese army wasn't as well disciplined. For that matter maybe all of us could have learned something from those ducks. Shortly a ride to Tuy Hoa appears and on to the Emerald City. I think my hormones are starting to run wild.

Next: Tuy Hoa City