

A Rude Awakening

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August 7, 2020

In the spring of 1971, Gus Serino and I were assigned to Phu Cat AFB in Viet Nam. Located about 40 miles north of Da Nang, near the town of Thua Thien Hue, and a few miles inland from the South China Sea, Phu Cat was mainly a F-4 Phantom fighter base. The base also housed two gunships, an AC-47 nicknamed “Spooky,” and the AC-119 nicknamed “Stinger.”

Gus taught government, and I was scheduled to teach an introduction to philosophy and an English Composition course. When we arrived, we were met by Larry Warren, the ESO. We then were issued the mandatory flak jacket and helmet, were driven on an orientation tour around the base, and were finally taken to our BOQ. The BOQs looked similar to a single-story strip-mall motel in the States with twelve rooms back-to-back and a communal latrine in the center. Surrounded by a revetment wall about 4 ½ feet high and 12 inches thick, each room had its own air conditioner mounted above the bed. Gus and I were housed in adjoining rooms at the end of one building. The base commander’s “hooch” was perpendicular to ours, about 50 feet away.

During our stay, we did have a couple of surprise mortar attacks that were primarily aimed at the flight line. Usually, about thirty seconds after a mortar

attack, a siren screeched and “Giant Voice,” the base public address system, boomed out the obvious. Meanwhile, planes took off to chase after the scurrying enemy. I must admit that being in a war zone did raise the adrenaline response a bit. But all in all, we felt pretty safe.. And all was going well.. Our hosts were helpful, the students were interested, and our classes went smoothly.. In our spare time, Gus played a lot of tennis, and I worked on a novel manuscript.. In the evenings after class, I often stood outside my door behind the revetment wall mulling over my manuscript while military flares zoomed upward, ignited, then swung slowly with the wind as they parachuted downward, colorfully illuminating large areas below.

One evening, Viet Cong must have been spotted near the base because the two gunships, “Spooky” and “Stinger,” began flying overhead.. These gunships carried the modern Gatling-style machine guns that could spray bullets into every inch of a football-sized field in a matter of seconds. Each also had a powerful searchlight. With engines screaming, flying close to the ground, “Shadow” and “Stinger” weaved in and out, circling each other.. Their flying lights, and then their search lights, went on and off, as if speaking a secret code. With the flares, the noise, the planes’ acrobatics, and their blinking lights -- it was a surreal dance. Aesthetically, almost beautiful. But realistically, a Dance of Death.

3:30 AM: **WHAM ... BAM ..** a huge explosion jarred me awake and practically knocked me out of bed. I literally screamed “God damn, that mother fucker was close!” before I dived under the bed and scrambled to drag my flak jacket and helmet with me. I called out to Gus. He said he was under his bed but was OK. All hell was breaking outside, so we waited several minutes before we crawled from under our beds to peek out the door. A large VC rocket had landed about fifteen feet in front of the base commander’s hooch and about seventy feet from where I was sleeping. There was a large hole in the ground, and the roof of the commander’s hooch looked as though some hungry giant had taken a huge bite out of it. The revetment wall surrounding their hooch had definitely saved the commander and his fellow officers.

Naturally, chaos ensued as the military police, officers, ambulances and onlookers scurried around. Planes took off to search the area, but “Charlie” had long ago flown the coup. I later learned that “Charlie” often used a can of water, along with two stripped wires hooked to a battery, to ignite a rocket. As the water evaporated, the striped wires contacted to fire the rocket. It was not an accurate way to fire a rocket, but it was cheap, and it was effective. And it gave them plenty of time to escape.

A day later I noticed my air conditioner was no longer producing cold air. I walked outside to find several large pieces of shrapnel buried in the A/C’s screen.

I felt a bit of a chill. The chill turned into an “oh shit” when I discovered even more shrapnel scattered on the ground, as well as being embedded in the revetment’s outside wall. Clearly, that revetment wall had probably saved my life as well.

A couple weeks later, Ben Massey came to Phu Cat on a good will tour. After the requisite photo op in front of the Education Office, I gave him a piece of shrapnel as a souvenir. He mumbled an ironic “thanks,” patted me on the back, and said he was glad I was OK.

I think I still may have several pieces of shrapnel stuffed somewhere in a trunk.