

My Trip Home from Nam

By Carl Zarzyski



My last minutes in Vietnam were rather interesting or at least memorable. I was leaving country from Cam Rahn Bay in the south of Nam while I had served in the northern "I Corps" area as an infantry Squad Leader and Platoon Sgt.

We boarded the plane for home in the heat of the day on a sweltering March day in 1970. I had spent my year in Hell and survived .It was now time to return to my beloved Michigan.

After all were aboard we taxied down the runway and took off. Our plane was circling to get into the flight pattern needed. During this we heard noises under the plane. Soon attendants came down the aisles and peered into small openings in the floor beneath the carpeting.

The noise continued periodically and then came the announcement from the pilot. We had problems retracting the landing gear and must go back and land to fix the problem.

As we circled back around to land I could not help but think that maybe if the landing gear wouldn't go up that maybe it might not lock down properly either which could cause a crash landing.

We landed safely and were asked to stay on board while they fixed the problem. They said it would be faster that way if we would agree to do so. Grudgingly we all agreed but were quite nervous sitting on the runway.

We could only wonder if some lucky VC would lob a rocket in on us and get us in our last minutes before takeoff. It got terribly hot in the plane and they served us ice cream while we waited which melted as fast as we could consume it.

Finally the pilot announced the problem was fixed and we would be taking off. We once again taxied down the runway and took off. We went into the familiar circling routine and heard some noise under the plane again. After what seemed like an eternity, the pilot announced that the gear was up and we were homeward bound for the United States of America. The loudest cheer you ever heard rang out amongst us .Once again we had cheated Charlie and headed to a safe LZ.

My return flight home brought me to Fort Lewis Washington. It was nighttime when we landed and some guys to include myself, kissed the ground after stepping off the plane. I had eaten dirt for a year but this tasted so good.

We were given a brief idea of what to expect upon arrival at the barracks. We were told that as long as we cooperated fully that we would be out of there in maybe a day and a half.

Some of us were mustering out of this mans Army and some still had time to do. I was only days from having my enlistment up. That day we were fed a steak dinner which was the best piece of meat I had eaten in over a year. We also went thru endless lines to go thru all the necessary paperwork and did finally complete it all in about 36 hours.

Finally it was off to Seattle and the airport. I was not disappointed as the words of the song held true. The "bluest skies you'll ever see are in Seattle". It was a picture perfect day and one could not find a cloud in the sky anywhere. I sipped a few beers at the airport bar while I awaited my flight out.

God it was nice to be clean again and enjoy the better things in life like a normal person. It was hard to believe that I actually was there and did not have to hump the jungles or rice paddies that day or ever again. I never thought that I would survive that year but here I was in the good old US of A.

My plane departed a few hours later and landed in Detroit Michigan. From the airport I went to the Greyhound bus depot for the next leg of my journey home to Houghton Lake.

While I had been born in Michigan's Upper Peninsula in Marquette on Lake Superior, we moved to Lower Michigan when I was 12 years old. I had an all night layover for the next bus heading there so it was to be a boring long night.

The terminal was full of seedy characters selling watches, sex, and whatever. One tried to get me to leave and go have a couple drinks somewhere but I declined all offers. They would have just as soon mugged a GI fresh home from Nam for his money as anybody. I felt naked without my M16 with me. It was hard to get a nap that night and watch my duffle bag with all the thieves around.

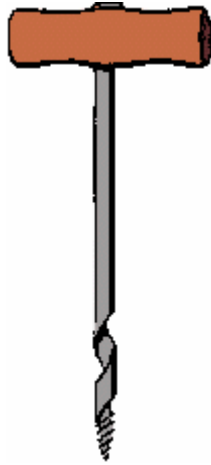
There were cops around but not enough to make me feel secure. I knew I could go thru one more sleepless night as I had just done it for a year. Finally morning came and I was off for the final leg of my journey.

I boarded the 7:30 am bus and we were off to Gods country. Along the way I admired the landscape as it awakened to a nice spring day in March. The snow had been melting and there were patches of grass showing everywhere. After all the stops along the way we

arrived in Houghton Lake at the bus station which was an old two story store that resembled the old country stores.

My dear Mother was waiting for me to welcome me home. I was surprised no one else came to see me arrive. We tearfully hugged each other at what I recall being about noon time. She said my Brother was working but we could stop down and visit him at the worksite if I wanted to .We did and it was great to see him again.

That afternoon I had a couple of beers at a local bar and it was like everyone else had just gone on with their lives and there was no war going on. I saw an old high school friend who asked me where I had been like maybe I had been on vacation. To this day I believe that if you weren't there and didn't experience the Nam as a grunt, you will never have any idea what it was like. I guess that's why we keep having wars.



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