

# **Operation Tight Reign Site Survey and Construction**

## **The Beginning**

**By Don Fenstlaff**

It all started out innocently enough, with the rattling of the teletype in the radio shack, on a sunny quiet afternoon, sometime in August or September of 1965. As I ripped the message off the machine, I noticed the addressee was Personnel Office, Coast Guard Group NY, from USCG HQ, Washington, DC. It was a simple request for six enlisted personnel, to report to CG HQ for TAD, Southeast Asia. It sounded like a fun break from the routine.. I walked the message across the hall to the Personnel Office, and what I hoped passed for charm and wit followed by pleading I talked the Lieutenant. into sending me off on this apparent vacation trip of a life time. There were no other volunteers from our base, but with the exuberance of youth I figured the message got misplaced, or some other circumstance. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to the local US Public Health Service clinic for some “routine” shots, to keep me safe while overseas. Fair enough. And still no foreboding; which, to this day, I never figured out why not.

Sometime before Christmas, I received my orders along with a one-way ticket to Washington, DC, via the Pennsylvania Railroad, so I packed up and made the short trip to Penn Station, in mid-Manhattan. I boarded the train on first call and shortly after settling in for the trip, another Coastie boarded, and then another, and after some brief formalities, we learned we were all bound for that same legendary edifice known as Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C. We departed on schedule, heading south, and somewhere along the line, we picked up a couple of more guys in familiar uniforms, and we all decided that we would be far more comfortable in the club car, where we could discuss everything we knew about what had to be our upcoming deployment. Of course, we knew absolutely nothing so reverted to downing some adult beverages and telling “Sea Stories”

As we approached the doors of Coast Guard HQ, we all began to experience some doubt as to whether volunteering was really a good idea after all. We entered the building, sea bags in hand, and sought out the Duty Officer. We handed him our orders, and he acknowledged that he was expecting us, and extended his hand in greeting. His first questions were to ask if we had found accommodations yet, and whether we had any civvies, to which we all had the same response: No. He turned to a safe behind him, opened it, and handed us each \$500, and told us to find a hotel, and go out the next morning and buy some decent civvies, and report in whenever we got it together. He said to keep the receipts. Additionally we were directed to ditch our sea bags, and go out and buy ourselves steamer trunks, because they were what we were to be living out of for the duration. At this point, it began to dawn on us all that this was not going to be a routine, ordinary deployment.

That night, we checked into a local hotel, not the best, not the worst. The next morning, after breakfast, we found a men's clothing store, bought what we thought might be appropriate for a group of fine young men that were probably going to be spending a lot of time with some very impressive people named "Sir." When we walked into headquarters we were warmly welcomed, by someone who seemed to be in charge, who, in hindsight, had to be Cdr. Horner, of the First Coast Guard Construction Detachment. We were introduced to most of the rest of our companions for the next few months, mostly all civil engineers.

The next few weeks were pretty much a blur to us, with still little clue as to what we were going to be doing, where we were going, or what the First Coast Guard Construction Detachment actually was. Little by little, bits and pieces in our on-going education began to give us some clues as to what, where and why: Such as having to attend an extensive in-depth required course in the traditions, taboos and customs of the Thai culture, with particular emphasis on the more, shall we say, delights and potential pitfalls of Bangkok nightlife. We learned of the ever-present Thai sense of humor, and their particular delight in practical jokes. We learned more than a passing knowledge of Thai history, the importance of Buddhism, and the fierce independence of the Thai nation and the complete reverence for the King and Queen. It was about this point that we also found out that we had been going through a complete security check for the highest Top Secret classification since before we arrived in D.C. As I recall, it was somewhere around this point that we became fully convinced that what we were about to embark on was certainly not going to be routine by any stretch of the imagination.

Now came the final acts of preparation: The introduction to Secret Service training, where we became intimately familiar with what were to become our constant companions and protectors, the Model 1911 Colt .45 Automatic pistol, and the vintage M-2 automatic .30 cal. Carbine. The earlier rounds of inoculations at the USPHS were augmented with a few more, protecting us from some of the deadly diseases rumored to have been eradicated years ago, but which were apparently still around.. We were asked to make out a last will and testament, which put the final cap on the lid. Not only was this no longer "routine" this was going to have potential for being dangerous. We were told that our mission was to provide land survey for some new-type Loran stations throughout Southeast Asia, including in a country suddenly becoming more and more familiar in the news, Vietnam. Some of us didn't even know how to pronounce it. In the words of one of our enlisted gentlemen from the Deep South; "Lordy, what have I done gone and got myself into this time?" It was a sentiment pretty much universally held by us all; but we were all Coasties, and actually believed we could handle almost anything. We were to travel light, taking with us some chambray shirts, jeans, and other relatively innocuous clothing, with these last words ringing in our ears, "make yourselves look like civilians, because that's what you are supposed to be". And now it was time to go abroad. "Gentlemen, here are your tickets for Pan Am flight 001 (to the best of my recollection) to Bangkok, Thailand, boarding at Dulles International Airport. Enjoy your flight!" And what a trip it was to be.

## Welcome to Bangkok, US Coast Guard!

It was an uneventful flight, leaving Dulles International on time, first stop Heathrow International, then on to Vienna, Beirut, Istanbul, Karachi, and then into Bangkok. When we disembarked, the first thing we felt was the heat and humidity, particularly after leaving Washington, D.C. in winter. We collected our steamers, passed through customs, got onto a bus, and headed into Bangkok. The sights were incredible, the traffic doubly so, and, for myself, I was in total wonder of such a change in culture, compared to a brief 24 hours earlier. As I recall, our first stop was at our new headquarters, located on the third floor of the Bangkok Bank, on Silom Road. After meeting a few new folks, and saying hello to some familiar ones, we got word



**Bangkok**

to take this day and the next off, were given some Thai currency, and the address of the Bangkok Hotel, the our home away from home for the duration of our deployment.

We hailed a few Toyota taxis, the mainstay of the full-size taxi companies in Bangkok, did some obligatory haggling with the driver on the cost. All taxis had meters, by law, but for some unknown reason, none of them ever worked. We headed across town to our hotel. We found out on this, our first expeditionary mission, that Bangkok was a really, really, large city, and that the traffic was worse than anything found in Los Angeles, Manhattan and D.C., combined. We thanked our stars that the Thai currency, the Baht, went a long

way. Our trip cost us a staggering \$.75 US, with a 2 Baht tip, so all of eighty five cents. Of course, because of our steamers, we were limited to two people to a taxi, and our drivers, quite spontaneously, and in the true spirit of Thai competition, decided to have a contest to see which one could get us to our hotel the fastest. There is no way to comprehend what a terrifying, white-knuckle experience that can be. Even though the main roads were multiple lanes in each direction, usually four, the common practice was to squeeze at least six lanes of cars, along with trucks, tuk-tuks, bicycles and motorcycles, into four, and then drive with reckless abandon, regardless of whether other cars and pedestrians got in the way. And, all of that paled in the face of the heart-stopping, stomach-churning detours our drivers decided to take when the heavy traffic on the main roads reduced their speed to below 35 MPH. I am sure the taxi drivers thought it was all great fun, and thought nothing of holding a one-sided conversation with us for the entire trip, with nary a sideways glance at the road in front of us. Believe me when I say, there isn't an amusement park ride anywhere in the world that could ever compare to the thrills and chills of travelling the highways and byways of beautiful, bustling, urban Bangkok by taxi, at any price. It was a ride we looked forward to almost every day during our off-again, on-again, six month stay in Bangkok, and counted on it to get our hearts beating in lieu of a few cups of coffee every morning. It always worked.

The week or weeks that followed were a bit of a blur, but I recall our headquarters, and how it slowly got filled with furniture, made to fit us all like a glove. It was the finest teak, and all handmade by local craftsmen. These weren't just furniture makers, they were artists in wood. However, the downside - we learned first-hand about the term "Bangkok Time", which was a national philosophy observed throughout the nation, from the largest city to the smallest village: - If you want it fast, you've come to the wrong place. However, because of their peculiar custom of never being able to say "no", the general response to when it was going to arrive/be completed/ETA, etc., was always a standard variation of "maybe tomorrow". But when our furniture finally did arrive, it was exquisite. Whoever was doing our purchasing was a wizard, and deserved a medal for his work. We were all a lot more comfortable than we expected, which, as we would find out later, was a good thing, and much appreciated.

Our hotel was comfortable enough, not the fanciest, but clean and it had a 24-hour restaurant and bar. The rooms were basic concrete walls, with basic decorations, but always overseen by the ever-present portraits of the King and Queen of Thailand that appear in almost every room of every building, residence, shop, or even taxi, like miniature shrines attesting to the universal adoration of the royal couple. Our rooms were on the back of the building, overlooking one of the many klongs - or canals, and the swimming pool, away from the hustle and bustle of the incessant traffic on the street in the front of the hotel. We shared our rooms, two to a billet, although we probably did not need to, as our per diem was more than adequate to put us up individually. Whether we arrived at that decision as a throwback to the accommodations we shared in our prior units, or because of the sense of camaraderie that was part of the common link that men form in the face of the unknown, it tightened our bond. It also increased our available entertainment budget, which, in our eyes, was a primary consideration for our self-preservation.

The food at the hotel restaurant was exceptional, and a 5-course steak dinner was about \$3.00, mixed drinks were \$1.00, and beers, including the preferred local brew, Singha Beer, were \$.50. Surprisingly, the steak was water buffalo, and was so tender it could be cut with a fork. The flavor was wonderful, possibly the best I have ever had, and we never got tired of it for our main choice for dinner. Like so much else in Thailand, meals were definitely a good bang for the buck. I ingested something, somewhere, that wasn't prepared to US standards, and I had to be transferred to the US Public Health Hospital in Bangkok for treatment of the dreaded Bangkok Belly, AKA a very nasty form of dysentery, which laid me up for close to two weeks. As luck would have it, it was during that time that the first site survey took place, in Sattahip, Thailand, and I was forced to stay behind. From what I heard, I didn't miss a whole lot, and it was all fairly routine, other than that the local wild tapioca was an especially difficult plant to cut down, and much of the site was covered in it. By the time the crew returned, I had made a full recovery, and was ready for the next trip. The others, however, weren't quite as ready, as their blisters had to heal first. A malady which I would eventually find out about, the next survey trip we were to take.

## **Destination: LamPang, Thailand**

My memory isn't as sharp as it once was, and for the life of me, I cannot recall the exact sequence of the site surveys we completed. I am arbitrarily entering our trip to Lampang, in northern Thailand some 110 clicks from the Laotian border, as our second site survey. I will leave it up to clearer recollections to confirm or change this order, but I suspect that this is the correct order.

As usual, it was clear, hot, and oppressively humid when we headed for the airport outside Bangkok, where we met up with our ride, a venerable twin engine DeHavilland CV-7 Caribou turboprop cargo plane, in the military area of the sprawling airport. The Army crew was aboard when we arrived, with a warrant officer at the controls, and all our gear was stashed and lashed down by the time we boarded. Being a typical military cargo aircraft, it had a ramp that folded down in the back, for access by vehicles, pallets of equipment, a number of paratroopers, or even a group of really unusual passengers, such as us. This was a good thing, as air conditioning isn't a perk usually found on most military transport aircraft, and we left it half open for the trip north so as to keep us relatively cool. The seating was no more than nylon cargo straps arranged along the sides of the aircraft, forming a rudimentary seat and back for each of us, and our cargo served as our footrests.

The air crew was somewhat curious as to what the heck we were doing here, and why we were heading up-country to Lampang, so close to the Laotian border. With nary a body of water to be found anywhere, other than irrigation ponds and rice paddies it did not seem to be the habitat for a half dozen enlisted Coasties and a cadre of CG brass. Due to the lack of uniforms the only means to tell the difference was the seeming tender age of the enlisted troops.

The country below changed slowly from relatively flat, parceled farmland and moderately sized towns to rolling hills, and more and more forest. Small villages dotted the landscape below, and wisps of smoke rose into the air from numerous wood fires, used for everything from a noontime meal to possibly some local industry. From our altitude, it appeared more like a fantasy world passing below us, with the hills getting steeper and more rugged, and the forests crowding out the open spaces that spread to the South. As I sat there looking out over the exotic countryside below, what I saw could have been taken from the pages of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or *The Trilogy*, and I almost expected to see a dragon appear from a cave far below to take chase of our craft, but not so; our trip remained uneventful for the remaining hours.



CV-7 Caribou

Eventually, we began our descent into the modern well-appointed airport at Lam Pang, complete

with a large concourse with multiple ramps. It appeared to be quite vacant, with no automobile traffic visible, coming or going. And, on our final approach, it became obvious that we were going to be the one and only aircraft on the ground, and that we would probably be the only *people* there, as well. As we rolled to a stop outside the main terminal, a covered deuce-and-a-half truck in khaki, with the Thai Army cartouche on each door, pulled alongside our now fully deployed cargo ramp. Three or four large soldiers emerged from the back and began offloading our cargo into their truck, with hardly a glance in our direction, except for a slight smile that crossed their faces when our eyes would meet. Now, when I say large, I am not merely saying these men were tall in comparison to most Thais. They were huge, in every sense of the word. I don't think any of them were shorter than 6'4", and they looked like they weighed in at a very solid 250 pounds, minimum, and all muscle. The driver was more normal in stature, and in relatively good English told us he was to be our liaison during our extended stay. As we looked around at the sprawling airport, we couldn't resist asking why it appeared to be so totally, completely, empty. He explained that at one time, the United States had some interest in the area, and offered to assist the Thai government in building this edifice to the entrepreneurial, industrial spirit of both countries. The only thing, they couldn't find anyone who wished to be that entrepreneurial or industrial in this part of Thailand, so the airport languished with just a few flights arriving every week or so, mostly private planes from Bangkok and other areas ferrying vacationers and tourists to the beautiful North Country.

After our equipment was safely stowed on the truck, we headed off to downtown Lampang to check in to our hotel, and then travelled out into the countryside to meet our culinary beneficiaries, a French doctor and his Thai wife, who would be providing us with our meals. Our meals. Once again, our wizard procurer came through, and he was able to locate this couple out here in the middle of nowhere that were more than willing to keep us properly nourished and healthy. The best of all, our benefactor's wife was an incredible chef, and the food was nothing short of remarkable.

Because of the remoteness of this particular region of northern Thailand, and Western visitors being a true rarity, the bathroom fixtures in our hotel were unusual and a bit awkward at first, until we were able to get the hang of using the hole in the floor in each bathroom where a toilet would normally be located. To shorten the learning curve, ceramic footprints were thoughtfully, and humorously, we thought, placed on each side helping to guide us to the proper operation of these devices without any major cultural faux pas. Otherwise, the rooms were large, the beds comfortable, and the hotel itself bordered on being palatial, in the French style so prevalent throughout Indo-China. There were copious amounts of marble throughout, notably on the grand double winged staircases and railings in the lobby, with floors of beautifully polished stone. In a contrast from the French architecture, the furniture was traditional Thai, mostly teak or ironwood, the indigenous wood species of the area, and of the highest quality. Lush tropical plants, both potted and growing naturally on the grounds, put the final touches of elegance on this aging but still impressive hotel. The staff was impeccable, and provided outstanding service, and despite some language difficulties, all our needs were met with courtesy, grace, and an ever-present smile..



**Tight Reign Construction unit: To the best of my memory from left to right – LCDR Olson, Fentzlauff, Goldstein, Truex, Purdy, -?- , CDR Brock, LTJG Pulley, -?-**

Regarding our daily routines, our workdays were long, dirty, and exhausting. We hired local villagers to do the majority of the clearing and cutting that we needed to do, although we were not exempt from picking up saws and axes and assisting, wherever required, and I was soon nursing the blisters my fellow mates had acquired on their trip to Sattahip. The forest was dense, and the trees were quite hesitant to give up their upright status, despite our best efforts. They fought back mightily, defying axe and chainsaw alike. They held tiny allies who made their homes among the massive branches above us. We would remember that during our indoctrination to the customs and peculiarities of the Thai people, we had learned that they have a tremendous sense of humor, and in particular, they loved practical jokes. It was here we found this to be all too true. We were curious as to why the local workers, upon receiving their orders as to where we needed to clear, would begin work on one tree, and then move on down the line, and eventually would work their way back to the first tree, and would repeat the process until the trees finally fell. Thinking that maybe it was just an idiosyncrasy of the local workers, we decided that it would be far more efficient to cut down one tree before going on to the next, so we began to tear into our first ironwood trees. Suffice it to say, these trees come by their name honestly. With each cut, the trees would shake, and the result of each mighty swing of the axe was a small sliver of wood falling lazily to the ground. Being young and strong, this did not deter us, of course, and before long we were all working up a huge sweat. It did not occur to us to pay

much attention to what was falling out of the trees, until we began to wipe away the sweat and the debris from our brows with our forearms, and were horrified to find that those little things falling like rain were ants - thousands of ants! As we began to retreat from our target trees in pain, we were met with howls of laughter from the local workers, and suddenly it dawned on us that their unusual method of felling trees was driven by self-preservation, not laziness, or quirk of personality. Good naturedly, we had to begin laughing at ourselves, despite the pain, and soon our entire team was in stitches because of our discomfort and naivety. The locals did sympathize with our plight, and after patting us on the back in encouragement and in recognition that we were good sports, they helped apply a home-brewed salve liberally to our affected areas. Soon after, we were able to resume work, a bit worse for the wear, but not permanently scarred. From that point on, we paid considerably more attention to the lead of our workers, and their vast knowledge of their local environment. It saved us considerable pain and aggravation, I am sure, and ultimately made the job go smoothly, with no further loss of time or effort.

Our site areas were large, although I couldn't estimate whether they were measured in square yards, acres, or miles, but they encompassed the area of the antenna array and beyond, providing areas for housing and equipment buildings. Along with assisting the locals in felling trees, we handled the stadia poles, as the engineers took the transient readings for elevation and direction off our placement. We were tasked with making sure that the cuts through the forest were straight as possible, as any deviation would cause inaccuracies, requiring the path to be re-cut and re-sighted, a delay we couldn't afford. From this spider-web-like structure we were building in this ancient forest, it was hard to picture what it would look like when completed. We got to know our workers fairly well, despite the language barrier, through makeshift sign language and common experience. We made strong bonds with them, sharing our families through pictures, and the camaraderie made the days go by quickly. They worked tirelessly alongside us, and were pleasant companions through it all. They seemed to enjoy their work, and demonstrated their humor and goodwill throughout. These workers were always gracious hosts toward this band of strangers from a foreign land, and we owed them much. The ironwood trees didn't fall any easier, and the ants didn't stop falling from the canopies, but the trails inexorably extended out further and further, and despite being exhausted, we always fell asleep with a feeling of satisfaction that the job was going well, and soon we would be heading back to Bangkok.

Our recreation was usually limited to Sundays, which we took off to recharge our batteries for the following week, but one warm and sultry weeknight, when it was too hot to fall asleep, a few of us decided to take a walk around town before retiring for the night. To preface what we were about to experience, I think the thing that impressed me the most about the Thai people was their sincere friendliness and their desire to please visitors to their country. We were welcomed wherever we went, even to this small city where Americans were not a common sight, and where English was not as commonly heard. On this particular evening, we were just strolling around, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells, when we heard a remarkably familiar voice coming from a side street, and our curiosity drew us towards the familiar ring of what sounded like John Wayne's drawl, so familiar to all of us. The closer we got to the end of this little street, the more crowded it got, and we were having trouble seeing what was providing this familiar dialog. Soon,



the crowd began to part, and we were ushered forward to the front porch of a home where a TV was proudly set up for the enjoyment of all to listen to and watch, of all things, *The Duke*, in black and white with Thai subtitles, in one of his many movies about the American West. We were quite surprised when we were escorted to comfortable chairs that appeared from within the house, and handed ice-cold Coca Colas in glass bottles, recognizable by the shape and the Thai equivalent of the famous logo. We were honored guests, and we were treated like royalty, despite our young ages and being such complete strangers. As the Thai culture dictates, we could not refuse the hospitality or gifts offered by these wonderful, warm people, and to do so would have been a serious affront to our hosts. The remainder of the evening was filled with laughter and the enjoyment of newfound friends, all because of an old black and white American Western.

After another week or so of work, our mission to Lam Pang ended, and we readied for the trip back to Bangkok. The morning, as usual, dawned bright and warm, and while we said goodbye to our hosts, our equipment was packed into the Thai Army trucks. We headed off to the airport, and when we arrived, we found it still as empty and silent as when we had flown in. With nothing else to do, we pulled up a packing crate or two and sat to await our flight. Two hours after we were to have departed, there was still no sign or sound of our trusty Caribou. By 1400, our boss was very much annoyed by the delay, so he got on the radio and began searching for our plane, with little luck.. After an hour, with no sign of anything flying other than a flock or two of unidentified birds, contact was finally made with an Army Caribou heading to Chiang Mai, carrying cargo for some Navy Seabees. The boss, with the power of our highly classified and urgent nature of our mission, finally "persuaded" the pilot and his superiors that our team needed to return to Bangkok that day, and that this plane needed to land immediately. Luckily, the Thai soldiers and their trucks were still there, along with our equipment, and they were quite happy to unload the cargo destined for the Navy from within the Caribou and load our equipment aboard in its stead. Then, without further ado, we were airborne and heading back to Bangkok.

I suppose that it was only natural, considering how our day had gone up to this point, that the fun had just begun. Dusk had begun to fall when we finally departed Lam Pang, and by the time darkness had set in completely, we became aware of some rather heated discussion coming from the cockpit. Soon, the co-pilot made his way aft, and had a conference with our Boss. It was evident that there was some sort of bad news being conveyed, from the Boss's expression and some apparent epithets being thrown in the direction of the cockpit. Of course, this was in a tone that seemed to perplex the co-pilot, considering that he had already explained that the crew was already looking for an airport to refuel.. He explained further that there was a 7000-foot runway just outside beautiful Phitsanulok, Thailand, which was about midway between Lam Pang and Bangkok. only "they were having a hard time finding it as this airport as "unlighted". After some air to ground communications, we were told to look for the "headlights lighting up the end of the runway", and to land at that point. The headlights were finally spotted and we headed toward this inadequate lighting on this moonless night. As soon as our pilot crossed the headlight beams, he cut the power and we dropped some 10 feet to the ground. With the pitch fully reversed on the props, and the pilot standing on the brake pedal, we all watched as the brake discs began to glow from dull red to orange to a very bright yellow before we finally came to a stop. To our pilot's credit, he had become aware that the headlights were not at the end of the runway, but somewhere in the middle. The why was never determined.

At any rate, we were safely on the ground, and not much worse for the wear. Now, our next task was to get the plane refueled and back into the air. It turned out there was no “fuel king” on duty, and that he might be a bit hard to find. As he was the only one with keys to the tanks— the chances were slim to none that we were getting any fuel that evening. So- we were shuttled off by jeep to beautiful downtown Phitsanulok where we found accommodations in a local hotel on the main drag through the center of town. I’m not sure how all this was arranged, or paid for, but suffice to say our procurer earned his pay once again, and fully deserved at least a medal for performance of his duties above and beyond the call of all that was natural and holy.

Luckily, our hotel was clean enough, had all the modern amenities that we had become accustomed to in Lam Pang, and would be quite satisfactory, or so we thought. This night was not yet over! There was a noodle cart right outside the hotel, and a few of us decided that it was as good a spot as any to refuel our bodies. I have to say that my dinner had to have been the best fast-food entre I have ever consumed, even to this day. It consisted of something similar to chicken, along with vegetables and noodles coated in a slightly sweet and spicy sauce with a smoky flavor that was beyond comparison. Despite it being street fare with ingredients of dubious pedigree, there fortunately were not any adverse effects. So, with this conclusion to our long day, we all headed off to our rooms, looking forward to a well-deserved good night’s sleep. Or so we thought. We all should have known better. Oddly enough, among all the street noises, automobiles, music, and chatter, we all missed one sound that would ultimately end up haunting us for the rest of the night. Right behind our hotel, and facing our rooms, was the main rail interchange between north and south Thailand.

After a very restless and sleepless night, morning finally came, bright, sunny, hot and humid, and still very noisy. By this time, we only wanted to get back to our old comfortable hotels in Bangkok so we could crash for a day or three. We boarded our hijacked Caribou for the uneventful last leg of our journey home, with no further incident. After dropping us off, the good Army crew, who had to put up with us the day before, bid us a safe journey, and took off for other adventures, most probably hoping against hope that they would never have the misfortune of running into another Coast Guard unit.

So went our second trip to the hinterlands of this wonderful, magical, and mysterious country. All went reasonably well, and we remained on schedule, despite our one-day delay in Lam Pang. There was one variable, however, which we had no control over. Along with the deadline placed by our bosses back in Washington, the weather provided another deadline, one that was completely unforgiving, and that was known as the typhoon season. If we were unlucky enough to not be done when the rains began, whenever that may occur, all our work would likely have been literally washed away, and it would be necessary to start over. So far, we had beaten that deadline, with one site left...one fraught with the unknowns and dangers of a country that we also happened to be at war with – Vietnam.

## **Into the RSVN, Con Son Island**

After some R&R time for us troops, we were ready for our next site survey, and this time we were off to the Republic of South Vietnam, a place we were all a bit apprehensive to visit. It was

primarily for this destination that we had spent so much time in Secret Service training back in D.C., where we boned up on our weapons training, self-defense tactics, and survival skills, anything to help our chances of getting the job done. Increasing our odds further was the detachment of South Vietnamese Rangers we were promised. After all, doing a site-survey had the potential of us appearing like a target in a shooting gallery for anyone not happy with our presence there. At any rate, our weapons would be waiting for us on the plane, along with sufficient rounds of ammunition, and we were told to keep our .45 cal. pistols on our hips, and our M-2 carbines slung over our shoulders, once we were on the ground. We left for the military area of the Bangkok Airport where an aging Navy R4D awaited us. All of our equipment was already stowed on board when we arrived, along with enough provisions to last us for our stay on Con Son, which apparently didn't support a restaurant of any sort, at least none available to us. A cursory inspection of the waxy cartons, marked in typical military language, revealed the contents to be Rations, C, dated sometime back in 1949. It was always nothing but the finest for the Coast Guard.

Our flight out was uneventful; the weather was clear, and the winds variable. Flying in this old relic, which could well have flown in the same theatre in WWII, was an experience, but never worrisome. The twin R-1830 Pratt & Whitney radials hummed in sync, and were reassuring in their roar. The accommodations, again, were not the finest, and the sanitary facility was a hole in the rear bulkhead, just forward of the tail section. The old war bird finally got us to our destination, a relatively unknown but notorious dot in the



**Navy R4D**

South China Sea some 50 miles from the mainland. On our approach, we got our first glimpse of the island, a small, lush, overgrown jungle island with two peaks, one on each side of the landing strip, one shorter than the other. A runway bisected the hills on what appeared to be the only level and cleared land on the island, with the ends of the runway terminating in the South China Sea at either end. The runway itself was perforated steel planking, or Marston matting, and could possibly have been there since WWII, from the looks of it. It was a rather short runway, which was of some concern, because R4Ds don't have reverse-pitch props to assist the brakes in bringing the plane to a stop. The pilot seemed well versed in flying one of these birds. However, this is one little island that our pilot had never flown into, and had never experienced its one major flaw – a particularly nasty crosswind between the two hills on either side. Our first attempt to land was fairly routine, approaching over the leeward side of the island. Everything was going well until we crossed over the beach, when a sudden downdraft pushed us dangerously close to the sand berm just before the runway began. So, with a quick application of power and a fast pull back on the stick, we were up and banking for another run. No biggie. On the next approach he

stayed aloft a bit longer, aiming for touchdown further down the runway. We crossed the downdraft area successfully, and then were hit with a crosswind that dropped one wing almost to the deck, which prompted another fly around for try number three. This time, our pilot corrected for the crosswind, but ended up touching down too far down the runway to safely stop before running off the end of the runway and into the reef beyond. So, around we went again, and our pilot brought it in spot on, on the fourth try. He taxied us back to the leeward end of the runway, and stopped in front of what at one time had been some buildings, back when this island had been a British Decca communications station back in the '50's. Stepping out of that plane into the oppressively hot and humid jungle was like taking a step back in time; the R4D, the Marston landing strip, C rations from the 1940's, an abandoned Brit military station and our WWII-era weapons had to have looked more like a time and a place more familiar to our fathers and uncles, a generation ago.

Shortly after we landed, a group of Vietnamese soldiers showed up in assorted army vehicles, and helped us unload all our equipment into the largest and most intact building left in the complex. We deduced that this was to be our quarters for the duration, as these few rooms were the only ones which still had functional roofs over them. Comforting, because it guaranteed that we would at least stay mostly dry, despite the fact the windows had long lost their glazing, if they ever had any to begin with. Screens were all that were left, to the best of my recollection, and they at least kept out the larger beasts and pests. After setting up camp and picking out what we felt would be the best location for our racks, we took a ride over to the nearby Vietnamese prison camp, a particularly nasty facility of which we were fully briefed and forewarned, before leaving Washington, D.C. This was the home of the infamous Tiger Cages, run first by the French, and now by the South Vietnamese government. Some of the worst of the worst prisoners were kept here, although we were not to see the conditions they lived under while we were there. This camp was the primary reason for any civilization existing here, as this was a fairly inhospitable location, with little to draw people to visit, other than the invasive and ever-present jungle. It was here that we met the prison commandant, a Vietnamese officer of some rank, who explained to us in broken English that he would be providing us with our laborers, for a nominal fee per day per prisoner. We were assured that they would only be South Vietnamese political prisoners, due to the top secret nature of our mission.

After a long and arduous day, we settled in for our first night under the stars, so to speak. We tried the c-rations, and, despite them being some 16 years old, they weren't bad, all things considered. Hunger has a way of making almost anything taste palatable, I suppose. The only things that were totally unsatisfactory were the small cigarette packs, which, due to their advanced age, had gone quite stale, and even the tinfoil liners had turned brown. Fortunately, we had brought our own favorite brand of smokes, knowing there would be no PX or store for purchasing goods once we got here. This was going to be camping out at its finest and most primitive - and an adventure for us all. We were not allowed on prison property, and any of their stores were also off limits, so what we had was what we got. On our first night we were also introduced to our fellow bunk mates, the geckos and other lizards that inhabited every room in the place, that came and went through the numerous openings in the walls with impunity. We suspected there were also snakes among the mix, too, but they tended to be very quiet and stayed to themselves, unlike our four-legged reptile friends, which actually became our little watchdogs.

As odd as it may sound, once they got to recognize us, they would raise an alarm whenever someone or something they didn't know ventured near our rooms. We didn't realize that we had other bunkmates as well, until a few days later, when the rustling noises that we thought were coming from outside were actually coming from within, and discovered they were cockroaches the size of small dogs, searching out any food stuffs we may have left behind. The rats showed up a few days later, looking for the cockroaches, which apparently were rat delicacies. To our amusement, this turned out to be great entertainment and involved endless hours of wagering to see which combatants would win the battle, the rats or the cockroaches. It was a while before we actually got a good night's sleep, what with such unexpected company keeping us awake, but we finally got used to it all, and ended up sleeping soundly most every night.

On our first day of work, the Vietnamese Rangers brought the prisoners to our base point, where we issued axes, machetes, saws, and hatchets. The Rangers looked at us as if we were more than slightly insane, but this was not a particularly unusual reaction towards us in one form or another during our travels. After all, we were an unconventional and diverse looking group, particularly compared to the very squared away Vietnamese Rangers, so we thought little of their trepidation. They seemed especially uneasy with the prisoners, and watched every move they made. Through sign language, grunts and hand signals, we showed the prisoners what we wanted them to do. None of the Rangers spoke English, and, of course, none of us spoke Vietnamese, but we got the message across, and we got to work. At first, the prisoners were slow to work, and spent a lot of time sharpening their cutting instruments, and looking at us out of the corners of their eyes. We thought little of this suspicious activity, and thought that they were most likely suspicious of foreigners, particularly Americans. Little did we know the real reason behind the burning looks we got. The prisoners wore the standard Vietnamese high couture, black pajamas, but with colored badges on the breast of each top. Because we had our hands full with the work at hand, we were unconcerned as to the meaning of these badges, as anyone working for us was alleged to be a South Vietnamese political prisoner.

Our work progressed slowly, due to the reluctance of the prisoners, the oppressive heat, and the thick jungle, and we thought this was going to be how it was to go, despite the looming monsoon season. The work was hard at best, grueling at worst, and we were wringing wet by the first few minutes into the day. We had no power tools as I recall, just the machetes, axes and hand saws, and fortunately, they were wielded by our workers more than by us, but still, the work was exhausting. To briefly explain how the process worked, we would start at the central point where the antenna was to sit, and worked outwards in what looked like a huge spider web, chopping trails through the nearly impassable jungle as straight and true as humanly possible. It was slow going, because the terrain was not as flat as our other site locations, and it was obvious the prisoners weren't giving us their best effort. Slowly, however, the prisoners work ethic began to change. An occasional smile would cross their lips, and there was even some lighthearted banter amongst them, although we had no idea what they were talking about. Maybe they were planning our demise at their own hands, with our tools, or at least an "accident" here or there? At any rate, we continued to give them our cast-off C-rations and cigarettes, gave them breaks from time to time, and in general treated them like any of the other workers we had used on our site surveys. They appointed a straw boss, who took over and the work began to proceed at an accelerated pace, and their ability to cut a perfectly straight line through this horrid jungle

became very evident. With just their axes, machetes, and hatchets, they were able to lay out site lines so straight that once a stick was placed at the beginning of a run, you couldn't see another stick beyond the first, they were so straight and precise.

About two weeks later, a new guard was assigned to us, and he spoke decent English, at least enough to communicate somewhat fluently. After a while, we asked him why the prisoners were so reluctant to work for us at first, although they seemed to be doing better and working faster in the last couple of weeks. He wasn't sure why, either, but he did ask why we had so many Viet Cong and North Vietnamese prisoners working for us. Needless to say, this little piece of news hit us like a bag of hammers; he went on to explain the badges and their meanings. The yellow were political prisoners, the yellow and red were Viet Cong and the red were North Vietnamese. And it was very obvious that yellow badges were almost nonexistent among our workers. Even though we finally found out who it was that we had working for us, we decided not to change the way we had been treating the prisoners, and continued to give them our smokes, sat with them during breaks, in the traditional squat used throughout Asia, and treated them as equals. After a few more days, the prisoners began running up the coconut palms and bringing down coconuts for us, opening them and giving us the choicest ones first, before taking their own. Smiles began crossing their faces regularly, and they genuinely seemed to enjoy our company, despite the language barrier.

On our down time, during the evenings and our one day off a week, we actually found quite a bit to keep us busy. Of course, there was beach combing on the pristine beaches, and a half-sunken Chinese fishing boat we swam out to explore on more than one occasion. There was still contraband on board, mostly scavenged US Navy nautical equipment, which we figured we should repatriate to the good old US of A, although it never made it back into the actual US Government inventory. After scavenging whatever was worthwhile, we used the hulk for target practice. Other times, we would walk down to the windward end of the runway, where the waves were bigger, and provided us with flotsam and jetsam to sort through for anything usable. Occasionally, we would find some scrap plywood or planking floating about, and turned them into makeshift surf boards, although the reefs were quite shallow, and we ended up with more than one reef burn attempting to ride the waves. We had to be quite a sight, a ragtag bunch the likes of which hadn't been seen here anytime in the recent past, if ever. But, thanks to our Coastie heritage, we never lacked for entertainment, whether it be mundane or horrifically dangerous, it was all in a day's fun.

After our evening meals, sometimes we would go down to the leeward beach and walk with the locals as they caught shrimp or whatever else they could catch with their fishing baskets. Their methods were interesting, something none of us had ever seen before. They walked in the still, shallow waters, holding a woven basket, wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, while holding a kerosene lantern high above their heads with their free hand. Once we figured out what they were doing, it was pretty simple. Shrimp's eyes would glow red in the lantern light, and when they fluoresced, the fisherman would drop the basket over the shrimp, reach into the top of the basket and pull their haul out. Primitive, but quite efficient, except when a hole would form in their holding basket slung across their back, and the shrimp would end up falling back into the ocean as fast as they were thrown in. We all had some good laughs over such misfortune, but there were never any hard feelings. We ran into the locals often, tending farm plots here and

there, and fishing along the beach or in small boats just off the beach. They all were very friendly, and shared with us anything they had. There were no piers or docks anywhere, so what was happening here on this little island was self-sufficiency at its best. Other than outbuildings surrounding the prison camp, which we assumed belonged to the guards and their families, we saw very few buildings, other than our relics we called home, so we had no idea where these folks lived. We found out later that most of these locals were actually trustees from the prison camp, who were allowed to grow the crops and catch fish and crustaceans, mostly to feed the prison staff, and that they returned to the prison at night. As I mentioned earlier, we were about 50 miles from the mainland, so escape was not an option, and good behavior was reluctantly rewarded with something that almost bordered on humane treatment.

And so the work went, day in, day out. We got to meet much of the flora and fauna native to this speck of land, from almost every variety of poisonous snake found in Southeast Asia, to spiders the size of dinner plates. The ever-present geckos and other lizards were always pleasant distractions, and the other critters usually paid us no mind. The biggest hazards were the spitting cobras, but they seemed to take offense to our presence and generally made themselves scarce. The coconut palms provided us with nature's own perfect refreshment, coconut water. Our workers always provided us with plenty, taking over the job of opening the containers when we awkwardly tried to open one ourselves.

Soon enough, our job was finally complete, and we began preparations to leave this place. In respect towards us, before we were to leave, the prisoners talked the prison commandant (with more than a little help from our boss, through our unofficial interpreter) into allowing them to go out into the South China Sea to catch some sea turtles, and, along with some of the locally grown fresh fruit and vegetables, provided us with an elegant gift of a feast, fit for a king. With bows of respect to each other, we bid farewell to our workers, and we finally departed Con Son Island.