

## Con Son Loran

A Story about Tight Reign and the Coast Guard during the Vietnam War

By

Chuck Zanti  
(Former ET2, USCG)



I first heard the term "Tight Reign" on a sunny afternoon in Florida. I was stationed at the Coast Guard Radio Station in Miami as an Electronic Technician Third Class. I had just gotten orders to report to the Loran C school in Groton and attached to my orders were the words "Tight Reign". After graduating from Loran C and only after going through weapons and survival school in California (Seer), our group agreed with the rumors that we were off to Vietnam.

June of 1966: Upon arrival in SE Asia, we were treated to a week in Bangkok, the headquarters for the Loran project. There were three stations ... the master in Sattihip, a slave in Udorn and Con Son, a slave in Vietnam. Even though the guys stationed in Thailand were considered then to be so lucky, now I am really glad I was chosen for Con Son. Some experiences are priceless. And during the year I was overseas, I had three great visits to Bangkok.

Anybody reading this who was around during the war and spent some R&R in Bangkok I'm sure will have the same fond memories. We all left for Con Son uncertain of what was ahead but grateful to the Coast guard for giving us a full week of fun.



While my first flight to Con Son was on the Coast Guard C123, I didn't personally meet the crew. I now know since reading about them, I admire all they had done. Con Son is part of the Con Dau Archipelago southeast of Saigon and about 200 miles offshore. It is now an hour's flight from Tan Son Nhut Airport. Air Vietnam flies there daily. The air strip is essentially the same and only small planes can land. It is now surrounded by fences and guarded. The easy access to the beach is forever gone.

After landing we immediately headed for the beach at the runway edge. The beach would be the main gathering place of service personnel during my year there. It was about a half mile wide, really tropical and beautiful. A few yards offshore, the half sunk hull of a Viet Cong arms runner shot full of holes, was the only reminder of the war. During the year on weekends many flights from the mainland would arrive with GI's to spend day at beach. It was an unknown "China Beach"



At the new airport

There were about 20 of us in all at the station. An ET warrant officer was in charge. Really great guy (sorry I forgot his name), a couple of Chiefs and First Class Petty Officers. All great guys, We were introduced to the camp soon and began our long building project.

RMK/BRJ (Vietnam Builders their Logo) was the company contracted to do the actual building of the base. They had all the government projects in Vietnam. Kind of reminds you of today in Iraq, huh?

The major construction contract was given to the largest construction entity ever, the RMK-BRJ (Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen, Brown & Root, and J.A. Jones Construction). Calling itself "The Vietnam Builders" and receiving highly lucrative "no bid" contracts. This consortium of private corporations was to turn southern Vietnam into a modern, integrated military installation that would enable the United States to properly defend its client. The Vietnam Builders entered into a contract with the federal government, via the U.S. Navy, as the exclusive contractor for the huge military buildup that was to come; there would be no open bidding or otherwise competitive process".

Anyway they had a tent city set up in this flat area which was to be the Loran station. All the workers were Filipinos and were treated hard and paid so little. I am sure the Coast Guard paid RMK plenty though. We lived in the tents with them for months. Food was good, plenty of time off for the beach. I remember we had fashioned wooden boxes with a light bulb inside to keep our clothes from rotting in the heat and humidity. Clothing was at a minimum but we had to keep our uniforms safe. The shower was a gasoline motor water pump and fire hose set up in a pond by the runway. Of course water buffalo shared that pond and sometimes brown stuff came down with the water. I saw the pond on my return visit there but the motor and hose are gone now.

One day the LST with all our Loran equipment and supplies showed up on the beach. Took a long time to unload and stow. The guys who thought up what we would need were pretty good for the most part. But a few things still stand out in my mind.



We were issued old WWII M1 rifles. Even the Viet cong had better stuff than us. We were trained with the M16 and all in Vietnam were issued them except us. Guess it was a budget thing. We had a lot of 40 oz bottles of good liquor avail we could buy cheap. We would trade with army helicopter pilots the booze for captured VC rifles so we eventually armed ourselves with our own weapons. I had brought my M2 carbine back with me stuffed inside my sea-bag.

Beach at the end of the old runway – then and now



Also we were sent diving stuff like masks fins and snorkels. After getting them we were amazed at the gigantic reefs just a few feet offshore our beach. I learned to dive there and still do here in Florida. We really wanted a small boat and motor but the bosses in Bangkok refused. We built surfboards out of plywood and managed anyway.



But now we had to work setting all the equipment up. We had a goal to be online and we worked hard for it. Afterward we were awarded the unit commendation medal for our efforts. Also we soon had real buildings with air conditioning, running water and beds. Living conditions improved daily during that period.

One day we were introduced to CDR Judd who was to be the commanding officer of the base. Now everybody in the Coast Guard knows that a Loran station doesn't need a LCDR to manage it. Our guess was that the ARVN had a major in charge and they wanted equal rank. If anybody knows a different reason I would like to know. He was very Military and came from a fine Military family and I think he had the best of intentions. Living as we were, however, there was a lot of tension between him and the rest of us. I remember on day I was driving one of the trucks (I actually had a Government License from Florida) and I had to pull to side of a rice paddy because a water buffalo was on the path. We were instructed to never ever injure a buffalo but the truck slid into the mud and I had to get the army to pull me out with a bulldozer. Judd suspended my license for a month. (Imagine requiring a government driver license in a war zone) He also liked to have his meals with Major Ve, the Vietnamese Army commander of the island prison. We always laughed at them.

Major Ve's House – then & now (a Museum)



Sorry to say his relationship with us grew worse. Since he came when everything was built and done he didn't share the relationship we had. I wish I could meet him again just to apologize for the crew. One day he just disappeared. Rumors were that he was in a Bangkok hospital. Again would like to know what had happened.

Another story I remember was the day we were told that the almighty, General Westmoreland was to visit the island. It was very, very hot and CDR Judd made us stand on the runway in dress uniform. We waited for hours. He never showed up.

Con Son was a prison island. Now it is a national wildlife park and war museum. You know all the time we were there we were never told nor did we know what was going on in the prison. We mingled with the Viet

army but I understand little Vietnamese. It was off limits to us and we didn't really think much about it. Little did we know of the infamous "Tiger Cages" and the horrible things done to the people there. When I went back and saw all these things I was so shocked and embarrassed for my ignorance. .



Inside the prison – now.



Prisoners were all over though. Some were free from being locked up. They all had a badge which described their "crime" and situation. They lived off the land and at the time I thought they didn't have a bad time. We had to pay the Commandant and they did our laundry, cleaned the base and all labor work. I got along great with them. I remember once a week I would take a movie projector and film to the city and play for the kids there. They didn't understand English but they loved the movies. I really got along well with the Vietnamese.

I met a young Viet girl whose father worked for the army and we became good friends. One day she too was gone.

Today the prisons are all still there. They are all just like they were then. New roads, schools, hospitals and new building is going on all over, but the old prison is there to remind all of us of what happened. A new 5 star hotel is under construction. I know that in the near future Con Son will be a great tourist destination.





New hotel under construction

U.S. Coast Guard Loran Station Con Son – then and now.





The old Coast Guard base is now just some old ruins. I found it in the woods all overgrown with trees and vegetation. From my old pictures I was able to place the buildings, just the concrete foundations are there. Nothing else is left.

***I found this on the web:***

"The Coast Guard's involvement in Vietnam ended in 1975. The day before Saigon fell the Loran Station on Con Son Island was evacuated. The final radio messages were:

To: Con Son  
From COMSEASEC.

Destroy equipment. Evacuate aboard Air America chopper. When safely evacuated, advise COMSEASEC your location and names of personnel. Also equipment salvaged, if any."

"This is Con Son. Roger. We will be going off air in five minutes and will destroy equipment. Will try to keep comms until the end."

Con Son Loran Station went off air at 1246 on April 29, 1975, closing the book on Coast Guard missions during the Vietnam War."

