

About Two Weeks at Det 2

By

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My name is Steve Green. Actually it's John, but that's a long and boring story, so we'll skip it. I was relaxing in Saigon, and my countdown had gone to about 220 days left in the Army, a little more than seven months to go and I was perfectly willing to sit them out in the relative safety and comfort of Davis Station, headquarters of the Third Radio Research Unit, Tan Son Nhut Airbase, Republic of Vietnam. I went to work in the motor pool five days a week, like a nine-to-five job. The only solid evidence of war that I could see in early 1965 were the jets taking off in our backyard, delivering a load of misery on the unseen black-pajamaed bad guys 'way up north, and then disturbing my sleep as the jets returned.

I was called into the orderly room. I thought, *Man, what do they want? This is never good news.*

"Green, you've been honored with a transfer," the desk sergeant said.

"Hawaii?" I asked. "The Philippines? Thailand? I could like Bangkok." I wanted to believe that they were letting me out of this weird and dangerous country. The whole place was dirty and smelly, from what I'd seen. And it seemed like a war or something like it could break out any moment because the government kept changing hands and Buddhist monks kept burning themselves in the streets of Saigon. It would be a great place to leave.

"Get your gear together," the sergeant told me. "You're on a truck out of here first thing in the morning."

“To...”

“Bien Hoa, I think. They need a truck mechanic there.”

“Awwww.”

Okay, I thought, they need a truck mechanic at Bien Hoa Airbase, it can't be that bad.

All I was really losing was the night life in Saigon. It had been a good run of French restaurants and other fun things. I could put up with this new place if it had hot showers, and somebody to make my bed, and had a decent NCO club, all conveniences that were available at Davis Station. There were other considerations, but these were the big three. I had to think positive: they probably had a good pizza at the club in Bien Hoa, and a juicy burger with American cheese on it. Yeah.

So I got drunk with my old pal Jon Fetzer that night. We'd been together at Fort Wolters, Texas, and now here in Saigon. We had big Midwestern cities in common. That, and the absurdity of our twenty-year-old lives so far. “Don't get yourself killed, Stevie,” he said.

“Aaah, don't worry about it,” I said. “Bien Hoa probably looks a lot like this place.”

“I'm not so sure about that,” he said. I thought I saw worry in his face, but maybe it was the light and the bourbon.

I was the most immobile soldier in the history of the US Army. By the time I was done packing I had a footlocker and two duffle bags filled with my stuff: lots of civilian clothes, all my jungle fatigues, tons of extremely white t-shirts and jockey shorts, a heavy reel-to-reel tape recorder and a couple of hundred books purchased in Saigon flea markets, paperbacks in English, lightweight books of anything from ancient Greek plays to current American novels, literally a lending library that I had started months before. I wasn't going to leave my books behind, or much of anything else, apparently.

Nobody questioned why I thought I was entitled to take all of this stuff with me. I loaded it on the truck, a newer model deuce and a half, not an older Davis Station truck but one fresh from the US. Half a dozen other guys were sitting in the back, and I joined them. “Going to Bien Hoa,” I said.

“I think that's where we're headed,” one of them said.

“So, you been to there already?” I asked.

“We just got in country.”

“From...” I asked.

“Fort Huachuca,” the first one said.

“Fort Wolters,” another.

A third. “Fort Lewis.”

All of these different places were ASA, Army Security Agency. Okay, I’m definitely on the right truck. I asked, “So does anybody know what this is about?”

“We’re going to some place called “Detachment 2. Det 2. They’re setting up an operation.”

“Oh, my god,” I said. There was no NCO club in my immediate future. Instead it would be the boondocks. I sat uncomfortably in the back of the deuce and a half as it bounced up Highway 1. I thought I heard cosmic laughter.

It was a jungle out there. A staff sergeant named Williams handed me a machete. “We got to clear some brush before nighttime. Here, swing it like this,” he instructed. “Kind of like you’re playing ping pong. Or slicing a genoa salami.”

“But with a deadly weapon,” I said. “How much of this crap are we cutting down?”

“All of it. Just kidding. We just need some area to set up a couple of tents. Rumor has it a bulldozer is coming.”

“When?”

“Soon. Meanwhile, we have to live here. And watch out for the big boulder-looking things, they’re dangerous. Don’t ever hit one of them with your machete. Or kick it.”

“Land mines?” I asked naively. “These things are rigged with land mines?”

“No. They’re *ants*. Inside them. Or termites. I don’t know which. A million of them will climb up your pants leg and eat your nuts.”

I covered my crotch reflexively. “Ow.”



“And watch out for the scorpions and centipedes. They’re poisonous.”



“Centipedes are poisonous?” I hated bugs, especially the ones that can make you sick or even kill you.



“Oh, yeah, they’re poisonous. And the snakes. And...”

Never send a city kid into the jungle without about a month’s training in indigenous plants and animals. I had very little frame of reference. I’d seen water bugs and the occasional cockroach while growing up. I’d seen worms coming out of the ground during a heavy rain. One time I’d even seen a live scorpion in a huge glass jar in Flagstaff, Arizona, with a note that read, “Don’t put your hand in this jar.” You bet I won’t.

What was needed at Det 2 was somebody to get on a stage in front of all of us and say, “Don’t touch this plant or your hand will swell up like a bunch of bananas,” or “black ants are like bricklayers the way they build these mounds so solid, and another thing, for chrissake leave them alone or they’ll eat your nuts off.” I needed to see someone literally screaming, clutching at his privates before it sunk in. Every day for the rest of my time in Vietnam I tucked my pants into my boots. And shook my boots out in the morning before sticking a foot in them. And shook my pants. And shook my shirt. And shook my hat. And...

“Gentlemen, get your entrenching tools,” the sergeant said.

“Have you got anything bigger, like a real shovel?” I asked.

“All in good time.” Like the bulldozer that was coming any minute now.

And we dug and bagged and dug and bagged and miraculously a hole appeared. Bags were strategically placed around it and voila! A bunker, a defensive position. Then two, then three.

When were all our trucks and equipment coming, anyway, so we could actually do our jobs and stop digging holes?

Soon.

The first night at Det 2, we slept on air mattresses on the ground, a slight buffer from the ants and scorpions. I passed out from toiling with the dull machete and the blistering entrenching tool.

The sound of an explosion woke me. No, it didn't just wake me. I woke up going "Aaaaaaaaagh!" In fear, taking inventory of my body parts, grateful that I had not shit my pants. "What the hell was that?"

"Artillery," Sgt Williams told me. "No big deal."

"What?"

"Our artillery, a quarter mile down the road. You heard boom, whoosh."

"I don't understand."

"You heard boom, a shell being launched, followed by whoosh, the projectile going over our heads, traveling out somewhere, then a really distant boom. You want to worry when you hear whoosh, boom, and that's incoming. Got it?"

"Think so." But I knew I wasn't getting much sleep that night.

Rat-tat-tat, and I knew it was small arms fire. "Ours?" I whispered, coming fully awake.

"I think it's theirs. Not too close, I don't think."

Then I heard the sound of an air mattress being emptied, ssssssss, and I knew somebody was trying to get that three or four inches closer to the ground.

(This particular story has entered the realm of Det 2 apocrypha, i.e. everybody tells it but not everybody could have been there at that moment. Maybe I heard it so many times that I remember it as truth, that during my first night at Det 2, Odell Williams let out the air in his mattress, not more than ten or fifteen feet away from me.)

I awakened on the second day at Det 2. I was sore from any number of serious exercises, swinging a dull machete against hostile plant life, and shoveling slimy clay dirt into many, many sandbags. My hands were blistered, I had sunburn on my back, my arms and shoulders felt like I'd done a thousand chin-ups. I was on about two or three hours' sleep.

Let's have a hearty breakfast of C rations.

The P-38 was a small steel can opener designed by a genius. It was no more than two inches by one inch, with a hinged sharp edge for cutting into cans of C rations. There was one in every box of rations. It had a tiny hole at its tip, and it quickly found its way on to the same chain that held our dog tags. The P-38 was as indispensable a tool as had ever been in the jungle.



C rations were absolute boxes of joy, containing two or three cans of food, chocolate, cigarettes and toilet paper. The idea was to have an entrée, some cracker-like biscuits and a dessert, enough to keep a man from starving but not much else. Every item but the toilet paper was bartered among us. Then there were the ham and lima beans. I never met anybody that liked ham and lima beans, and I wondered what procuring general had taken serious money under the table to put that mess in front of us and call it a meal. We were on C rations forever, or for about a week, which seemed like forever. And I had been hoping for a cheeseburger or pizza at some non-existent NCO club.



I went out to see what the shooting was all about the night before. The farthest bunker seemed to have a hundred punctures, bullet holes. A Spec 5 was also out there, Dick Lee, or possibly Bill Page, I don't remember. "Jeez, that was all last night?" I asked.

"Uh-uh. Couple nights ago, before you got here. And Shearer got shrapnel in the forehead."

"Is he...dead?"

"Nah, he's got a bad headache, though."

"So we've been taking fire," I said.

"Not so much after they figured out we weren't leaving real soon."

"But it's possible that we'll get shot at."

"It's always a possibility."

"Snipers?"

"Sure. Could be."

The rumored bulldozer showed up, and without ceremony it flattened a serious portion of jungle, defining Det 2's length and breadth. It was fun to watch the ancient machine work; Bill Page rode shotgun, literally, rifle at the ready. I was grateful to put away my machete. In retrospect, I'm amazed that I didn't cut my leg off.



For the first week or so I seldom knew the names of the people I was working with because it was so nasty hot that nobody wore a shirt, and most communication seemed to

be grunts. You could tell the NCOs and officers by the rank on their hats, but the common man, the Spec 4, the PFC, had nothing.

When we finally got sorted into tents, the maintenance guys here, the linguists there, the ditty-boppers over there, then I started to know who was who. But that took a while because I didn't have the advantage of knowing anybody from the boat.

Joe Carter was nearby, and Ike Iacino, and Dennis Saint Germaine, Street Germ for short. I think Ken Mizell and Bob Swankoski and Orval Sheese were also in that tent. And Ed Sutkas and John Mattingly, I believe. Sorry if I don't remember everybody. It was a friendly bunch. We quickly tapped into the power, and Armed Forces Radio Vietnam was all over the place.

A few days later, about a quarter mile over that way, we suddenly had a mess hall. They served B rations, or the field mess, in which we get to use our mess kits. There was a knife, fork and spoon, each with a hole the size of your thumb on the end to slide them on to a long thin handle, half of the turtle-like shell of a mess kit. You took it with to the field mess, a large tent with all manner of stoves and coolers and miserable human beings that had KP that day. I always felt bad for the cooks themselves because they had to go through this suffering every damn day, heat on top of what seemed to be the hottest place on earth.

We ate out of our mess kits, and had to wash them afterward in three large heated garbage cans. The first can had suds and we scrubbed our kits with a heavy brush. The second can was the first hot water rinse, and the third was the second rinse, and we did them all because we were told that if we didn't, we would get the shits. Of course I never had the shits or knew anybody that did for not washing his mess kit.

Our mess kit was our friend. I must have treated mine like a bad friend indeed, because I set it down on the running board of a truck one day after lunch, came back a few minutes later and discovered it had been run over by a deuce and a half, flattened to the thickness of a vinyl record. I took the sad smashed carcass to the supply tent. "I need a new mess kit," I said.

"We don't have any."

"So what do I do now?"

"Shouldn't a let it get run over."

Earl Hatch in the Motor Pool handed me a ball peen hammer. "Work it out," he advised, and so I did, whacking away at the thin steel for a couple of hours. Amazing what I can do when I'm desperate. The thing still didn't close very well, but there it was, a

surviving casualty of war, dinged and pinged and looking more like a piece of modern sculpture than a functional mess kit, though eventually I would eat a hundred meals out of it. I thought it belonged in a museum.

I tried to turn in my damaged mess kit in when my tour was done. "I don't want this piece of garbage," the supply sergeant said, so I took it home with me, a trophy from the war.

Two weeks at Det 2 and my sunburn had evolved into a nifty tan from the waist up. Finally, there was some good news.

"The trucks are here," Sgt Kraft announced. "With all of the equipment."

"Halleluiah," I said. "Now we can stop digging holes and get down to business."

I felt relief for oh, about two seconds. Sgt Kraft continued, "No, now we have to dig holes for the trucks, and sandbag them, and..."

Great. Only about 200 more days to go.