

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia To Viet Nam Section Four

Leaving Georgia For Saigon

by Clenton Thomas, B Btry, '68-'69

At the end of my 21 day leave I went to the Atlanta Airport to catch my flight to Viet Nam. When I got to the ticket counter I was told that my flight would take me first to Chicago where I would change planes to fly to California. This kind of scared me. I was going to a large strange city and I would have to find my way in the airport, to catch my next flight. I could just imagine not making my flight and would be declared AWOL. Now, due to my nervousness, I had an over active bladder by the time I got to Chicago. When I went into the terminal and got my directions to the next gate, wouldn't you know it was on the other end of the terminal! I had to have a restroom right quick so I started looking for the nearest one I could find. Finally I saw a sign with Restrooms above this semi-lighted area.

The next problem I had was which alcove was the men's. Spotting what I needed, I went into the room. Now again it was semi-lighted and the room had dark patterned walls. The only thing I could see was what looked like a fountain in the middle of the room. But there was no water flowing in it. The room was designed where it looked as though it had no other openings in it. I thought I had stepped into the ladies lounge by mistake. So I go back out and recheck and I had the right room. I go back in, right up to the fountain. I looked all around me and it looked like the fountain was the only item in the restroom. And I'm thinking, this is not very private, do you reckon everybody stands in a circle around this fountain and do their business. I wonder how you flush this thing. I'm not very mechanical minded, but looking at the thing I notice a bar at the bottom and it looks like it could move. So I step on it and out comes water at the top of the fountain. OK, so that's how you flush it.

Now I was raised up in South Georgia in my earlier years and I knew all about outhouses and some of them was a two header even. But even they had more privacy than this place. And I have even used a limb to set on in the woods when nature called. But I could not imagine a bunch of guy's sitting on the rim of this fountain doing their thing. Also the drain was not big enough and it had a cover over it with small holes in it. It would take forever and a ton of water to flush that all down. Well I have always heard, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do", and I didn't see as I had any other choice.

Deciding that I would go around to the other side of it just in case someone else came in it would be somewhat more private having the head of the fountain between us. Going around the fountain, I heard a noise and glanced up. From the position I was now in I could see an opening in the wall and just past it was a line of urinals, must have been a dozen at least. Boy, was I relieved. Here was something I could use and right now, my eyeballs were floating by now. As I headed for them I heard a toilet flush to my left and looking that way I saw a line of doors in another section. And all this was hidden from view when you first entered into the room. This brought on another thought ... what was the fountain for then?

I had an idea, so I held off just long enough that I could peek around the wall at the guy coming out of the john. He went straight to the fountain and started washing his hands. Ok, now to take care of my business. I've got a steady stream going when all of a sudden I hear this jet airplane crank up and it sounded like it was in the restroom with me. First thought I had was **if that was my plane**, I'm going to miss it. There was no way I could turn this off and race to the other side of the Terminal. **I was going to be AWOL after all**. Then I heard that jet airplane quit running. Maybe I had time enough after all.

I needed to finish up, get my hands washed and hurry to my flight gate. I go to the fountain, wash my hands and look for a paper towel to dry them with. There wasn't one that I could see anywhere in the room and I didn't remember seeing one outside the room either. The only thing I seen on the wall was this white box with a silver button on it. Maybe that's it. I go over to it and bend down to look under it because I didn't see any paper towel hanging down. I didn't see any, though maybe you pushed that silver button and it would dispense a towel. So I pushed it and that jet airplane started again. That was the damndest thing I've ever encountered. I sure was going to be glad to get out of Chicago. As I left the restroom I reviewed what had just transpired and thought to myself: "our Government was going to send me to Viet Nam to be a Medic, **what were they thinking!**"

I caught my flight to San Francisco. It would be a four hour flight. Now I've heard stories about California and here I was headed for San Francisco. I didn't know what I would encounter when I got there but if it was anything like Chicago there wasn't no telling what a restroom in it would be like so I figured I'd better use it on the plane before we landed there. So I did, the only thing I had against the airplane restroom was that it didn't have no seat belt. What if I was in there when we started to land and we had a rough landing?

I cannot for the life of me remember anything about landing or taking off from San Francisco. I don't remember if I stepped off one plane onto another or I spent the night there. I do remember being on the plane and the stewardess telling us that

it would be a twenty three hour flight to Saigon. Our first refueling stop would be in Hawaii.

When we landed in Hawaii they told us we could go into the terminal, they had snacks or food if we would like something. Or you could stay on the plane, it would take an hour to refuel. When I got off the plane a bunch of Hula-girls came running up to us. They had these flower necklaces to put around our necks, some were even shaking their booty at us. The one that came up to me, I told her that we were not staying, we would be going on to Viet Nam in an hour so they all took off for another plane. I go on into the terminal and I wasn't hungry so I decide I'd go get me a drink.

I go into the bar and order me a Screwdriver. I'm sitting there drinking my drink and looked around to see how many other soldiers were getting a drink. Well I was the only one in there, and I'm thinking, *maybe I wasn't suppose too be doing this. Wonder what would happen if an officer came in and found me drinking? Well, what were they going to do to me if they did find me in here! Send me to Viet Nam? Duh! I'm going there already, --- keep me in the States, now I could live with that.* So I just enjoyed my drink. When I finished it, I headed back to the plane.

We had flown for several more hours when the stewardess once again told us we would be taking on fuel on Wake Island. This time it would only take around thirty minutes to refuel. She then informed us that there wasn't much to the landing site, there was a hotdog stand and they also served soft drinks. Well not knowing if I would ever get another chance to see Wake Island I got off. She was right, there weren't but a couple of small buildings and the strip was close to the ocean. I did purchase a hotdog and a drink. So I could say I had a screwdriver in Hawaii and a hotdog on Wake Island. You could say I was somewhat of a world traveler and I was doing it on Uncle Sam's dime.

Back on board the plane our stewardess informed us that we were two hours from Saigon and when we were fifteen minutes from landing she would make an important announcement to us. When we were almost there, she stood before us and thanked us for flying with them (*like we had a choice!*). She then explained why we had stopped off at Wake Island. The pilot wanted to top off the fuel in the plane. On some occasions when a troupe delivery plane landed in Saigon, Charlie would fire mortar's or rockets at them and even small arms fire sometimes. If we were to receive fire when we landed and you had already went through the door, do not turn around and try to re-enter the plane. Keep going. There is a bunker on your left, head as fast as you can to it. If you are still on the plane, turn around and return to your seat and fasten your seat belts.

The outside steps will be removed from the plane and the door will be shut and we will take off again. If you try to re-enter the plane I will push you back out and

slam the door in your face. We will circle around until we get an OK to land again. Then we will land and those who are still on the plane will be put off. If you have luggage on the plane, stand up and get it now. Take your seats when you have your luggage and fasten your seat belts. When we land, stand up and in an orderly fashion to leave the plane. Do not push or shove one another. But as quickly as possible, exit this plane. We will be glad to see you in a year from now to return you to the States. Thank you for flying with us.

Needless to say, those were not encouraging words to me. But it did bring home some important facts. I was to be left in a country for a year with no way home. And I was being left in a country where they would be trying to kill me. And it could be stepping off the plane when it happened. Some eighteen minutes later at the end of the plane's steps, I set foot into a War Zone. I had boots on the ground, and could not turn around and go back to Georgia. I could only do my duty and hope for the best!

[Return To Soldiers' Stories](#)

[Return To Contents](#)