

A Stroll on China Beach

An incident in 1965 recalled by Terry Aue in 2015

Our business was not about shooting at the enemy. At times it almost seemed that it was about having the enemy shoot at us. We provided them with a target aircraft—and a slow moving one at that. Seriously though, the Viet Cong took shots at us on takeoff and landing, as they hid in the forest outside the boundaries of the airfield and, on rare occasions, the North Vietnamese fired at us with SAMs as we flew in the northern reaches of the Gulf of Tonkin. (The SAM, or surface to air missile, with a rocket about the size of a fat telephone pole is a lethal anti-aircraft weapon with a sophisticated guidance system.) Enemy aircraft did not pursue us though, presumably because we had friendly escort in the form of two fighters flying in a weave or a scissors pattern, just above or below us. In our command, we had lost a bird near Albania, shot down by a Soviet Mig 17, but with our squadron, we had been lucky so far.

We were invincible, or so we thought, owing to the fact that we were young airmen and held that irrepressible arrogance of youth. They can't kill me, we thought. After all, I'm, well...me. Also, we had at this point already developed a habit of behaving as tourists in Japan, Okinawa, Thailand, and the Philippines, (and Taiwan, in the case of some) sweeping the countryside looking for exotic points of interest, all while carrying cameras and wearing civilian clothing. The enemy are always smarter than we think, it seems, and can spot an American military man a mile away and in any disguise.

Oblivious to all this, three of us; Ray Bernard, Bill Cornell and I, decided to roam the countryside. Bill had heard of a beautiful resort area called China Beach. "Okay, let's go!" we said.

We were temporarily and repeatedly assigned to Da Nang Air Base. Ray and I were from the 6988th Squadron in Japan and Bill was from the 6987th in Taiwan. Bill had previously been stationed at the Air Force Detachment on Monkey Mountain on the north side of the Han River, Da Nang being on the south side. At the time, we were staying in a twenty-man tent. Twenty was an optimistic number on the part of the planners. We had about a dozen men in our aircrew and it seemed crowded. It was comfortable enough, though—with a cot for each of us to sleep on, each equipped with small posts

to support a mosquito net. We had been warned to keep our faces away from the net, and we soon saw why when one of the fellows woke with his forearm swollen to twice its normal size and beet red from mosquito bites, his having kept that arm against the net unknowingly the night before.

The whole point of the tent was to provide crew rest. The guys drank beer, played cards or dice, talked and read books. Carling Black Label was a cheap beer and nobody liked it much, but it was available, so we drank it. The empty cans were stacked neatly to form a pyramid in the center of the tent, eventually climbing to the height of the tent itself. The books were welcome indeed. A sort of spontaneous free lending library sprang up amongst us. The way it worked was this: When someone had a book, having purchased it or received it as a gift, he would read it, then place it on someone else's bunk. That person would then discover it, read it and place it on yet another man's bunk, and so on.

Back to our quest to visit China Beach: Getting a ride from the Air Base to the town of Da Nang was as simple as climbing aboard one of the vehicles which made the trip on a regular basis. There were Air Force, Army and Marine buses and trucks, as well as Navy amphibious vehicles carrying servicemen back and forth. In town, we saw that many of the buildings were masonry

with stucco finish, most not more than two stories in height, and there were many fine churches. Bright tropical colors seemed to glow in the sunlight. We were fascinated by the narrow alleys where commerce flourished on the smallest scale, some of the storefronts consisting of little more than a canvass awning covering tables of glittering merchandise, the whole establishment barely three meters in width. And there were small shops and restaurants with the sights, sounds and smells of a place teeming with life. Ray told me that he was struck by the contrast between this modest display of enterprise and the grand gated compounds and elegant villas we walked past, previously occupied by the French.

Personally, I think the French unwittingly had done us a disservice by the nature of their presence as a colonial power. America has never had such ambitions for conquest, simply wanting to conduct trade. But the perception was that we and the French were cast from the same mold. This probably was a convenient recruitment tool for the Viet Cong, inspired by resentment of the specter of being occupied by yet another foreign power. Such perception seemed to turn treacherous.

As we approached the Han River, we were offered a crossing on a small sampan. We took that opportunity, of course. Once on the north side of the river, we set out walking northward

along the coastal road. Cars, jeeps, trucks and vehicles of various kinds passed us by, and one of them stopped to give us a lift. It was a young Vietnamese couple in an open truck. We hopped in the back.

As the husband drove, his wife spoke to us in English and talked about how great it was that Americans were helping them to fight the communists.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To China Beach.”

“Oh, that’s not far. We’ll drop you.”

They dropped us off at an access road to the beach. It was a good long walk on a narrow paved road partially covered with sand, giving it a random patchwork quality. As we walked through the sandy area just short of the beach, we came across a cantina and went inside. The place was empty, except for two people we took for the proprietor and his daughter. The man poured draft beers for us and the young woman brought them to our table. As we relaxed and drank, Ray chatted up the young woman. She was calm, friendly and pretty in a normal girl-next-door sort of way and spoke perfect English. One got the impression she had served lots of meals and drinks to the tourists, as she seemed competent and at ease in her job.

She decided to show us the beach. The four of us were the only people there as we walked down toward the surf. To me this was a different kind of beach than those I had grown used to on America’s West Coast where the waves were six feet high and roared onto the sand with great fury on a beach two to five hundred feet wide and miles long. This was smaller in scale, with breakers barely a foot high, and a beach just thirty feet in width and sloping fast into the water where one could wade to chin height in just ten or fifteen feet. Nature had a gentle way here, warm with a slight breeze, the sand lightly colored—not quite white—and the forest’s edge verdant with a tropical brilliance.

We went for a dip in the mildly cool water for a little while, then lay on the beach near water’s edge relaxing, drying off and soaking up the rays. How restful and soothing the air was, in that magical combination of solar warmth and adiabatic cooling. Time drifted away as we lazily enjoyed the sweetness of nature. It was the kind of time where you forget about the cares of the world for the moment and think of nothing but the present. Anything unsettling seemed out of the question.

Then the silence was broken when the young woman said she had to get back to work and left. At about that time I began to realize I was getting pretty hot and said, “Hey, I’m going in the water

again to cool off.” We all three jumped into the water and began to swim.

Then something happened that speaks to the senses about startling contrast; the contrast between peaceful tranquility and violent chaos. “POW...POW...POW,” was the ear-splitting noise of three mortar rounds exploding in close succession in the exact location where we had just lay relaxing not five minutes before. Moments later, three more shells exploded on the beach at close to the same spot. Hearts pounded, adrenalin rushed as we were awakened in a flash, as if one could be taken from a drunken state to sobriety and three hours of strong coffee and slaps to the face could be compressed into half a second. We could feel a shock from the blasts, and grains of sand blown into the air began raining down on our heads.

I said, “I don’t know if they see us, but I’m going to swim under water.” I thought we should be less visible there and it would offer some protection from shock waves. So, we swam to the South, away from the mortar blasts. After a while, I came up for air and another volley of three blasts occurred, a bit further away now. I don’t recall how long it was before it all stopped. By this time, we were some distance down the beach. In the new-found quiet, we emerged with proper haste and got on the road back to base.

When we arrived back at our tent and told our fellow crew members about the incident, one of the men said, “What were you thinking? Didn’t you know a couple of American soldiers were killed in that same area yesterday, their bodies left mutilated for other servicemen to find? You guys must have a guardian angel or something. Talk about dumb stupid blind luck.”

We were stupid and naïve, to be sure, but I think we have all had close calls from time to time. I’ve had several and now sense that life is a precious gift.

This account was recorded by Terry Aue for fellow airmen and for friends and family with supporting information provided by Ray Bernard from our squadron.