

**120 Days In Vietnam: Getting Forces  
Out of the Mud**

**USAF Prime Base Emergency  
Engineering Force (BEEF) Team**

**22**

**(21 June 1966 – 18 October 1966)**

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## **Chapter One**

### **The Trip To Vietnam**

**I entered the Air Force in March of 1963 after graduating from Purdue University in January and as an ROTC Cadet at Purdue, reported to England AF Base, Louisiana later that year. I worked various positions as Vehicle Maintenance Officer in the Transportation Squadron and Base Mechanical Engineer in the Base Engineering Office. During the 1963-66 timeframe the Vietnam War was escalating under Presidents Kennedy and President Johnson. I was the acting Transportation Squadron Commander on November 22, 1963. Just after lunch that day my NCO came in my office and told me that someone had just killed President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. I told him to start calling all the personnel and to prepare for a mobilization. Sure enough about 20 minutes or so later the Base sirens were wailing away. We were under an alert situation.**

**Of course being in the Military during this timeframe one was always wondering if or when you would be called to serve in Vietnam. For the next two years I was assigned to the 401st Tactical Fighter Squadron, at England AFB. In this period I transitioned from the Transportation Squadron to the Base Civil Engineering Squadron. During this period I was reading up on the history of the Vietnam conflict,**

reading “Dien Bien Phu” by a French author concerning the French Indochina War and “The Ugly American” by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer. These books made me sensitive to the plight of the Vietnamese and also the sensitivity of foreign peoples to American diplomat’s presence. In June 1966 I received orders to report to Bien Hoa Air Base in Vietnam. At the time my wife and I had a 2 year old daughter and she was two months pregnant with our second child. So we made arrangements for my Mother to fly down to Louisiana to drive with my wife and child to our home in Gary, Indiana after I left for Vietnam.

The day arose for me to leave. On our way to the Alexandria, Louisiana commercial airport I told my wife to stop at Base Supply. We stopped there and I went in and checked out a newly deployed AR-15 rifle. The Sergeant asked “Going to the range Lieutenant?” I responded, “Yes, going to the range Sergeant”. I do not know why I did this, but I did. Maybe it was reading all those books about the conflict and knowing that we as AF personnel would not be issued weapons. Anyway, off again to the airport with my AR-15 slung over my shoulder. At the Alexandria Airport we were waiting for boarding and I noticed a Airman from my Squadron in the bar drinking. I did not think much about that at the time. So at boarding time I kissed my Dear Sylvie goodbye and boarded the Delta Airlines DC-3 for Dallas, Texas. At Dallas we changed aircraft to a Boeing 707 for the flight to San Francisco, California. In the layover I again noticed this Airman from my Squadron in the bar drinking

heavily. When checking in for the flight the stewardess asked me if I wanted to check my rifle in as baggage and I responded, yes. She looked at my orders and said, Lieutenant that rifle is not on your orders you are going to have to carry it. I said that is fine. While sitting there in the terminal near some Army troops obviously also deploying, one of the Army Sergeants came up to me and said, "Lieutenant, we'll trade you 5 M1's for that AR-15". We had a good laugh out of that. Anyway I threw the AR-15 rifle in the overhead luggage bin and we were off to San Francisco. In San Francisco we were bussed by an AF bus from San Francisco International to Travis AFB, California. There is was nightfall and we boarded a C-141 for Vietnam. (C-141 picture below)



There was some cargo on the aircraft and about 70 or so seats configured for passengers. We took off for the unknown and during the flight I met an Army Captain that was home for R&R and was returning to his outfit in Vietnam. He was a medical doctor and we were playing

cards on the Cargo Door of the C-141 early in the flight. That was a nice place to relax because all the duffel bags of the personnel were netted onto the Cargo Door for transport. I later read in the AF Times that these doors were blowing off in flight because of a malfunction. God protected me from that fate, I am sure. I realized that the Airman from my Squadron was on the C-141 also. I started to ask around as to what the people on the flight were assigned to in Vietnam and it began to dawn on me that most of these people were assigned to the same outfit I was assigned to, "Prime Base Emergency Engineering Force (BEEF) Number 22". And I was the only officer, so I guess I was in charge. About then Technical Sergeant Sidney Caldwell and Technical Sergeant Carl Ebbert introduced themselves to me and had determined that Sergeant Caldwell was the senior NCO of the Team and Sergeant Ebbert was the 2<sup>nd</sup> in line for top Non Commissioned Office (NCO) position. Kinda silly isn't it, that you find this out in this manner, so we self-defined a command structure. But, I guess that is the way the Military was functioning in Vietnam. Anyway the good Army doctor and I found a couple seats and were talking for many hours. About 6 hours into the flight we were at 31,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean. The Airman who had been drinking very heavily was sitting 10 or so rows ahead of us. At that moment he jumped up screaming and ran by us towards the back of the aircraft and was attempting to open the personnel door on the right side of the aircraft. Once I realized what he was trying to do I jumped up and ran back and tackled him away from the door. The AF Cargo

Chief was sitting at the front of the cargo hold facing us and witnessed what I had done. The Army doctor came back to assist me and we held the man by both shoulders and sat him down between us. We told him not to move and relax. The doctor gave him a sedative and after a short period of time the man relaxed and seemed to be OK. I am sure he was just frightened about going to Vietnam, as were we all.

A while later, the Cargo Chief came back to me and said that the pilot asked if I can come up to the flight deck. He escorted me up. The flight crew allowed me to sit in the jump seat as we were approaching Midway Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The navigator was explaining the Inertial Navigation System and I watched the longitude and latitude rattling off as we were moving along. The pilot told me he had radioed ahead for an ambulance to meet us at the ramp so that they can take the Airman that panicked to the infirmary for a check-up. About then the navigator told me to keep an eye out at a specific direction because we were approaching Midway Island. Sure enough in 20 minutes, or so, a postage stamp size little island came into view right where he had pointed on the horizon. We began our decent to Midway Island.

We landed and taxied to a parking location where the people were off loaded while the aircraft was refueled for the next leg of the flight. An ambulance had met us and was taking the Airman for a check-up. An AF doctor came on board and told the Army doctor and I that he was going to take us on a tour of the island while the plane was being

serviced. He said his wife, also a doctor, was going to care for injured Airman. So here we were at about 2 AM in the morning getting a tour of Midway Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The doctor took us to a beach area where the Japanese incarcerated the passengers and crew of a commercial Flying Boat during WW II. He showed us names and dates that were carved into the timbers. After driving around the island we returned to the aircraft where the men were beginning to re-board the aircraft. He asked me if I wanted the sick Airman returned to the US on the next flight. I told him no, he is coming with us; we have a job to do. So we all completed boarding the C-141 for the last leg of the journey.

We arrived at Tan So Nut Air Base in South Vietnam that day. We were taken by bus to the In-Country personnel processing office. I remember a few of us were sitting on the curb in front of the building waiting and this big bug that looked like a roach but was about 6 inches long came walking down the gutter. I got up and told the guys, hey, I think this guy has the right-of-way. Welcome to Vietnam.

We were processed into the country individually. During my in-processing the Sergeant processing me said "Lieutenant, that rifle is not on your orders". I said responded, "Sarg, I don't know if you know it but there's a war going on here. I'll give it to you on the way out." We all laughed and continued on about our business. After in-processing my engineering team boarded a bus that was taking us to Bien Hoa AB north of Saigon. It was about an hour ride through

packed streets until we got out of Saigon onto Highway 1 which ran North-South through the extent of South Vietnam. We passed Long Bien Army Depot before we got to Bien Hoa Air Base. Long Bien was a massive Army logistics port with miles of war materials stored there (More about Long Bien later in the story). I remember the distance being 10's of miles but looking at Google Earth I see it to be just across the river from Saigon. It's was just the congestion of the city and the mass of people on bicycles, scooters and motor vehicles that we had to weave through that made the distance seem farther.

The buses we took were AF dark blue with "US Air Force" in yellow on the side, not very covert. The windows had screen wire bolted on the outside to prevent the V.C. from throwing hand grenades through the open window into the bus. That was OK until the V.C. learned to just pull the hand grenade pin and hang the grenade on the wire screen. Kanda made you pucker up when you thought about it.

We arrived at Bien Hoa AB and the bus took us to the barracks where the enlisted men would bunk for the next few months. It was a concrete floored wooden structure with screen wire and wood slating at 45 degrees on the walls to allow air through but keep the bugs and rain out. The roof was asbestos concrete shingles, standard Vietnam construction. They were located right next to the personnel terminal for loading passengers onto military aircraft. Next the bus took me to my "houch" which was the home of the Air Rescue Squadron at Bien Hoa AB. They were pilots of

**the HH-43 Rescue Helicopters (pictured in Chapter 2) that were located at the base for rescue missions during crashes of aircraft at take-off or landing. They welcomed me to their humble adobe and offered me some cookies that one of their wives had baked and mailed from the States, an interesting group of men with a challenging job. So, I was there in Vietnam on Day 1.**

**It was in a way like coming home since many of the pilots and men here at Bien Hoa were from my assigned home base, England AFB, Louisiana. Below is a little history of the AF Squadrons that rotated through Bien Hoa during the war. Also I am attaching a link here that will hopefully allow you to see an airborne video taken in the 1966-67 timeframe that shows the magnitude of this military installation. Quite impressive**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-J1mBymtRe8>**

**Our 401<sup>st</sup> TAC Fighter Wing pilots from England AFB rotated on yearly tours through Bien Hoa during the mid to late 1960's. Typically, they would then come back to the US where they went to a training base to transition to F-4 Fighter aircraft and then find themselves at DaNang AB in northern South Vietnam, which I will discuss in a later chapter.**

## North American F-100 Super Sabre



### 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing

England AFB, LA 1964-1966  
Bien Hoa AB, RVN 1966-1969

Squadron	Tailcode	Callsign	Sqn Color	Sqn Name	Station	Years
90 TFS			Lt. Blue	Pair o' Dice	England AFB	1964-1965
90 TFS	CB	Dice	Blue	Pair o' Dice	Bien Hoa AB	1966-1969
306 TFS			Red	Rapid Rabbits	Bien Hoa AB	1965-1966
308 TFS			Green	Emerald Knights	Bien Hoa AB	1965-1966
416 TFS			Blue	Silver Knights	England AFB	1964
416 TFS			Blue	Silver Knights	Bien Hoa AB	1966-1967
510 TFS			Purple	Buzzards	England AFB	1964-1965
510 TFS	CE		Purple	Buzzards	Bien Hoa AB	1965-1969
531 TFS	CP		Red	Ramrods	Bien Hoa AB	1965-1970