

VIETNAM

FINDING MYSELF IN VIETNAM

Cam Ranh Bay Airbase, SVN
January 2, 1969

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*Even in the heat of war, USAF Crash Rescue crew fight training fires at Cam Ranh Bay AB.
Photo courtesy [Air Rescue Photos from the Vietnam War](#).*

January 2, 1969

Somewhere out over the Bering Straits....

"We're all gonna die, the wings are going to come off and we're gonna plunge 40,000 feet into the ocean! Feel them wings? They're coming off I tell ya!"

I had been asleep, but the turbulence we had hit and the clowning warrant officer woke me and everyone near him. I was setting in the back of the big D-C 8 with a group of Huey pilots and one of them called *Big Montana* was trying to convince everyone that we were doomed. He was kidding but he was getting louder and more insistent with each jolt. Finally a grizzled old Army E-8 turned around and said, "Warrant officer put a cork in it or I'll have you arrested in Tokyo...I mean it--*shut up.*"

Big Montana laughed but when he saw the hash marks, the decorations, and the paratroop wings on the sergeant's uniform, but he stopped.

We had left McCord AFB a little while ago and we were on our way to Vietnam. The stewardesses on the plane that was contracted to transport troops to South East Asia had just announced we were going to be served a meal in forty-five minutes. Big Montana raised his hand like a silly school boy and asked what it was going to be.

The young girl said, "Sausage sandwich, oatmeal, fruit cup, and a beverage of your choice."

Big Montana asked for straight *Jack*. Then he got out a deck and challenged three other pilots to a game of poker for their breakfast.

I had to use the head and needed to walk through their game to get there. Big Montana let me through and said, "Hey wait Air Force--you got any money or want to bet your breakfast?"

We did not have Warrant Officers in the Air Force so I wasn't sure what to call him: Sir? Big Montana? Warrant Officer? So I settled on Warrant Officer and told him I was broke *and* hungry. I realized Big Montana was hung over.

When I came back he asked if I had *gone* for him. I asked him if he felt better and if so I must have. He liked that and then won the next two rounds, and before he was through the other three guys had to buy their breakfast back from him.

After we ate I fell into a conversation with an Air Force Staff Sergeant setting beside me. He told me this was his second tour in Vietnam and he had reenlisted a year ago. He said three years ago he was an Airmen Second Class (E3) at Phan Rang.

Like me, the Staff Sergeant was in Crash Rescue, and on flight-status with the helicopter side of crash rescue. He had a chest full of medals; to go with his flight wings, and headed for his second tour PCS at Tuy Hoa Airbase.

He guessed correctly, looking at my barebones medal row that I was on my first tour. I told him he was right, and told him I was going to Cam Ranh Bay Airbase.

"Lots of flying there Sergeant ... lots of flying!"

I couldn't sleep so I set there with my eyes closed trying not to hear Big Montana sing his college fight song.

I rehashed the last 48 hours of my life, and found it hard to believe that 36 hours earlier I was at a New Year's Eve party an old high school friend had thrown at her house. As it was, my old High school baseball buddy Rick Mock had called and told me about the party.

“Hey I got your letter and I figured you were home on leave. Listen, there’s a big party at Mary Ann’s tomorrow...come down, I am bringing a friend to introduce to *Maid Marianne (Mary Ann)*.”

I showed up to the party, not expecting anything; I really hadn’t been in the loop when in high school. But the party was jumping and I saw some old friends. Rick arrived and introduced me to his friend. I think two minutes later neither of us remembered the other’s name. He was a Worthington High School guy, or Ohio University, or something.

Rick was making introductions of his friend to Mary Ann when tall John Murphy, our basketball star from high school, sauntered over and looked down at me from somewhere up around 6’6”.

Hey runt ... “What you been doing?”

I told him I was in the military and was leaving for Vietnam in the morning. The beer box balanced on his head made him look like he was eight feet tall.

He said.” OOOOOOH ... trained killer?”

I just said “Bye Murph.”

I looked for Rick who did not suffer from shyness like I did, and he was entertaining a couple of gals ... so I slipped out the door and went home.

I had been stationed at George Air Force Base for the last two years...and it was obvious things had changed at home. I had made good friends at George AFB and hated to leave those guys, but for the most part, the Air Force did not ship units together, and I was going by myself to fill a slot.

The Staff Sergeant started talking again, and to pass time asked to me, “Where were you when you found out you were going to Nam?”

I laughed and said that I was home on leave watching *Bonanza* with my dad when a friend named Hal Watts, from George, called and told me I was going to Libya. When I pressed Hal for details he said he had to go because he only had six quarters and it was still a couple of days till payday, and so I didn’t really know much about where I was actually going. I went on to explain that four days later Hal sent me a letter with a picture of a *skull with a knife* in it with a scrawl that just said, “*Forget Libya your orders have been changed to Vietnam.*”

My dad saw it and said, “Son the Army Air Corp has changed the way it sends orders.” Dad knew the Air Force had originated from the U. S. Army Air Corps in 1947, but still referred to it as that.

I kept the scrawled note and pulled the skull paper out of my pocket, figuring it would be good to hang it up in my hooch in the Nam.

The Warrant Officer laughed loud enough soldier's looked up from their seats a dozen rows around and said, "That's a good story... I like it!" He looked at the skull drawing, then at me, and got serious. "Eley...keep your stuff wired-tight in Nam you will see some crashes there--I guarantee. *Do you know your stuff?*"

I didn't answer, but thought back to my two years of training at George and just said, "Yeah."

Sleep would not come. Big Montana had finally wound-down, after eating two or three meals, and the flight was settling down to hours of boredom. The quiet background hum of jet engines didn't help; I simply could not sleep. When the Staff Sergeant dozed off, I thought back over the last four months.

Tech. Sgt. Waling, our trainer, had spent a lot of time with me going over aircraft rescue and weapons. He put me through scenarios for every plane that George had. He told me to increase my physical training and scheduled me for more simulation fire rescues in the fire pit. I owed him a lot.

Finally I realized why I could not sleep. I had to admit to myself I wanted to be tested to the limit in Vietnam, and wanted to know if I could do my job under war time conditions when everything was really on the line. Like a *right-of-passage*, I had *wanted* Vietnam, and now I was headed there.

Tet 1969.

Ray Kastner and I were cleaning our M-16s a week and a day after the crash of an F-4 (Phantom Down <http://www.war-stories.com/crb-phanton-down-larry-eley-1969-1970.htm>). Sgt. Kiderman came over and told us Sgt. Mosley wanted all of us at his hooch, now. Sgt. Kiderman's hooch also served as Headquarters for Crash Rescue.

When we were all assembled Sgt. Kiderman began. "Men, we are going to have to realign, we are shorthanded and Dirk is rotating home in two days and Big Ed goes next week."

"So Sgt. Kastner, you will be the Crew Chief on Crash 3. Eley you will become his driver...Airman Hall, you will become SSgt. Koor's driver. Also, Line Standby (<http://www.war-stories.com/crb-one-night-on-line-standby-larry-eley-1969-1970.htm>) will become longer and more frequent."

"Big Ed has an announcement so go ahead Ed."

Big Ed stepped forward. "Guys I made Staff Sergeant, I reenlisted, and a week from today I will be home with Rhonda and then I am going to Germany for three years." This was followed by applause; Ed was by far the most popular man on A shift.

"Six days and a wake up, I'm so short I got to look up to see down--how many days you got Eley?"

"Uh...334." Everyone laughed.

"Lawrd Child--Ray get a shovel so we can plant him here where he stands. That tree over there will leave before he does."

This was again followed by good natured laughter. In the week since the F-4 crash, a negative surfer nickname I inherited had about disappeared. Kastner told me losing the nickname, associated with a DEROS'd surfer no one liked, was because I was one of the responders to the Phantom crash and guys were figuring out I was a *can*, unlike the other guy. I didn't quite know what that meant so I intended to ask him about it later.

Sgt. Mosley called out: "Dismissed!" then added, "Sergeant's Eley and Kastner, remain."

Sgt. Mosley did not mince words so he started right in. Sgt. Kastner, I am counting on you. He looked at me and added, "Eley, you will drive for him for a short while and then you will be a crew chief."

"If I read the incoming troop reports right, we are not going to get any replacements till April, and then it appears most of them are Airman 3rds and A2C's. Sgt. Eley you will be a crew chief by then too. So...until then you two are my *premier crew*--don't let me down."

When Tet started we had to disperse our equipment each night. A direct hit on a crash rescue would put Cam Ranh out of the business. With no crash rescue there could be no flying, and our mission at Cam Ranh ultimately was to provide air cover for the infantry.

Ray and I had midnight line that night, so when we were out I asked him about what a "*can*" was.

He thought for a second and said, "Well, it's like this. In the Nam regardless what your job is your fellow troops watch you to see if you *can* or *can't*--and we have some *cant's* here, like Kiderman and some others who are hiding, shirking and just hoping to muddle through this. It's true, some of them are just scared—they should be—and some just don't know what they're doing."

I ask about Kiderman and Ray responded. "He is a fourteen year E-4...he is afraid of the dark...and he couldn't do a rescue if he had to. Mosley inherited him from the previous Shift Sergeant two months ago. Kiderman has forty plus days left and just wants to skate until then, and Mosley's just trying to get him home alive and lets him do basically nothing except smoke and talk, which is what he's done since day-one. Kiderman is listed as a crew chief--but he really isn't."

"With Dirk gone and Ed leaving, we are hurting. Of the twenty of us, maybe ten can be counted on--remember that. Right now the guys are thinking you're a *can*--don't blow it!"

I thought of Matteo, Hal, Harold, Bob, and Bear back at George Air Force Base, and all of them could be drivers or crew chiefs here. I told Ray how overstuffed we had been there and the irony of our being shorthanded here.

Ray looked at me and said, "Cause it's the Nam man...it's the Nam."

"I thought I would see the best of the best here, Ray."

"Oh you will troop, you will, there are enough *cans* here to handle the mission, you got first watch, wake me in two."

But before he went to sleep a C-141 taxied out. Ray said, "About two years ago one of those Starlifters crashed on take-off and went in to the bay. I guess the copilot forgot to change the automatic spoiler select switch or something."

I already knew there were seven of nine crew members killed in that crash (April 17, 1967).

"My point is," Ray continued, "we are crash rescue, and you never know if one of these planes is going to crash and we have to be ready all the time. You need to think about what we would do if that C-130 coming out behind the Starlifter went in with forty or fifty people on board."

"Are you ready to put your life on the line?" Ray asked, but didn't really expect an answer, "it's what we are trained for--*wake me in two hours.*"

I took first watch; it was all new to me I couldn't have slept even if Ray had taken first shift. With about twenty minutes left, a single mortar hit out in front of us with a resounding thud. Neither of us we're startled but Ray opened his eyes and said, "If there are more we have got to get in the bunker...it's the Nam man it's the Nam."

There were several mortar attacks during Tet and one night they over shot us and hit the C-7 Caribous area causing some damage to several planes. We were safely dispersed so no damage was done to the crash equipment.

The three Squadrons of F 4's increased their workload and we spent endless hours on line. We responded to many emergencies from aircraft coming in on emergency, or because of on board problems or battle damage. Although when Tet 1969 ended, it was nowhere near as bad as in 1968.

A week after Tet, Crash 3 went in for maintenance and Ray and I were waiting at the shop. While we were there Gary Root, one of the Mechanics, was up on Crash 3 making an adjustment when the rock group *Jefferson Airplane* came on Armed Forces Radio with, *Don't you Need Somebody to Love*.

Gracie Slick would scream *Don't You need somebody to Love*, and Gary would grab himself and yell, "Come on over here Gracie I'll give you some love." Gary then grabbed a wrench and started singing along.

When Gracie sang, butchering some lyrics, he wailed out, "*Your Tears are running ah down your breast.*"

Gary joined in and sang along mostly with his own lyrics: *Ah I can smell your onion Breath down the hall.*

Gary's fellow mechanic Randy Root (we called them all Root for some reason) bellowed out, "That ain't the lyrics dummy."

Gary yelled back, "She *know-ooohs* what I mean."

Up front someone yelled, "Look here, look here!"

A C-130 was flying about a klick away at 1500 feet. South Vietnamese Paratroopers began to bail out, and after about thirty had jumped, one came out with his chute streaming. We saw him *skywalk* off of two opened canopies and grab at his own shrouds--one paratrooper tried frantically to grab him but missed. The doomed jumper then fell the remaining 600 hundred feet or so. Ray looked at me and said--"It's the Nam man."

I began to understand what the Staff Sergeant had told me on the plane coming over about keeping your stuff wired-tight. The minute you let down or felt you could relax something happened—guaranteed-- to remind that you were not *back in the world*.

Day after day I began to feel more and more that I could do this job. The lives of every aircraft crew that took off or landed or called in to the tower for help were depending

on us to save them if they went in. We had seen that in January and on several other minor emergencies. Whenever we would pass an F-4 taxiing out the pilot and weapons officer never failed to salute or acknowledge our fist up salute. I felt like part of the mission, and wrote my friends at George about it.

I thought about how naive I had been in basic training, thinking I would be a pilot. Now, I was proud of what I was doing in crash rescue.

To further my training, Sgt. Mosley caught up with me on the first of March and said to me said, "You and I are going over to Navy flight operations today; I want you to go through orientation on the Navy's P-2 Neptune and the P3-C Orion."

The Navy flew surveillance up and down the coast; you need to go through them for rescue purposes."

We drove through Cam Ranh village and I saw the refugees living in shanties and shacks made out of anything they could scrounge. When we got to the Navy side we were met by LT. Commander Headley, a 14 year Navy Pilot.

We did the crash rescue for everything that flew near Cam Ranh and Sgt Mosley wanted me to know where the crew would be in the aircraft and the rescue procedure. When we entered the big P3-C *Orion* a swabbie asked, "Hey what's the Air Force doing in my plane?"

He was only half-kidding so Lt. Commander Headley replied, "Ensign these are some of the guys who are going to pull your butt out of here if you buy the farm out there."

I asked the Ensign what they did when they were flying up and down the coast. He asked me what my security clearance was. When I told him he nodded and said, "Uh we are the good ship Lollipop." That got a big laugh and then they invited us to chow.

Navy squids know how to chow down—like a real restaurant. They even had ice cream from the new factory the United States had built in the Cam Ranh area, although it resembled icy-crust that catches behind tires in the winter. But it was good and seconds were for the taking.

On the way back to the airbase, Sgt Mosley was humming *Soul Man* by Sam and Dave. When I looked at him he said, "What...you think I don't know some bad Jams?"

Then he looked at me and with a quizzical look asked, "Uh Eley I been dying to ask you--are you really a surfer?"

Kurt Naper the surfer that had DEROS'd and no one liked, had gone home, but his nickname had transferred to me because I looked like a surfer and therefore must be a

“can’t”, along with all the other baggage he carried. When Bobby Brown the slick sleeve airman also DEROS’d the name was pretty much gone.

I just said, “No, Sgt Mosley--I am from central Ohio--I can’t surf.”

Mosley laughed, “Listen Eley...do you know Sgt. Akin from north station?”

“No, why?”

“He went AWOL last night and they are going to bust him down to A2C--he was up for Staff.”

“I am going to have to use you as a crew chief for at least a week till Sabo gets back from R&R, but even then he wants to go to the communications tower. I wanted to keep you and Kastner together till April, when the new guys get here, but Akin’s bust changes everything.”

When we got back, Ray was waiting with Scat 2 and he told Sgt. Mosley he was going to take me to see the shopping center. When I got in he told me that will be something to write home about.

I asked him where there was a shopping center in Cam Ranh. He said, “You will see” and grinned.

We drove for a few miles and came to a dump. Tons of trash, garbage and debris were piled all over the area and it smell overpowered the general decaying smells of Vietnam. There were many elderly and crippled Vietnamese stooped and scrounging like ants over the garbage, picking through it and putting treasures in baskets and bags.

Ray shook his head in both disgust and pity and commented, “Everyone’s got to make a living.”

The next day Akin was waiting for me and I told him we had line at 1200 hundred hours. We left and he said nothing to me. After an hour he slammed his fist into the dash and shouted, “*Damn Lifers!*” An hour later he looked at me as if seeing me for the first time, and asked what my name was. When I told him he replied, “Oh yeah...your that surfer guy—crap-- gotta be on line with one of the *Beach Boys.*”

Then Akins blurted out, “My fiancé is pregnant by some other guy--I got a little crazy last night---and I know you’re wondering what I will do if something goes down. I’ll be okay....”

He went on to say he wanted to make a career out of the Air Force and he was angry because he messed up. I told him I had heard that six clean months and you could get a stripe back.

Behind us a Jolly Green Giant chopper was landing and a



Vietnamese O-1 birddog was taxiing out for take-off. The Birddog went to the halfway point



on the runway and did a rolling take off with the wind, not into it. He got about 30 feet high and lost control stalling, and went prop first into the PCP metal runway.

Photos: Left: SVN VNAF O-1 Birddog flyby at Cam Ranh Bay Airbase, 1969. (c) Don Poss 2013. Right: USAF HH-53 Jolly Green Giant. Giant power lifting helicopter.

Akin and I were the second truck to get to the scene. I jumped out and helped get the pilot's dead body out. Most of his face was gone from impact with the control panel, and it was obvious both wrists were broken. Akin did his job and after we checked the little O-1 for potential explosives or fire. Sgt. Mosley spoke to Akin and told him to come see him when we were in off line. He then clapped me on the shoulder and said good effort *Crash 2*. Crash 6 then doused the plane with foam –fire retardant as a precaution as it was leaking fuel and fluids.

Akin stayed clean and got his stripe back before he left in June. Considering everything, I felt good about that.

Days became weeks. Kastner and I crewed-up again. I was told when the new crewmen arrived I would have Crash 2 (O-11 B truck) as the crew chief. When Ray and I came in off line one afternoon in early April there were six new troops in the mess hall. By now I had been here almost three months my fatigues were faded, my boots were scuffed and I was the color of burnt toast from the sun, as was Ray. Before us stood six new guys, with the wide eyed look we all had upon arrival. I looked at their name tags, O'Hara, Paddock, Rheume, Elliot, Mason, and Burnett.

A2-C O' Hara was so Irish he could have been a Leprechaun. He stepped forward. Ray Kastner had a big duster-mustache so O' Hara said, "You, I will call "Pops". Then he looked at my long blonde hair which wasn't quite regulation length and said, "Troop--there will be an inspection at 0800 tomorrow," implying I should get a haircut. He had an ornery look on his handsome Irish face. He was obviously a joker.

I looked at Ray and laughed, then looked at the others in general but specifically to the big quiet-one named Paddock. I commented in general, "Guys we play sand football here."

Burnett, the smaller of the two soul brothers replied, "Hey how about some B- ball."

I told him Kastner was our resident basketball guy.

I remembered how hard my first month had been here so in an effort to make things light I said to Mason, the other brother, "You guys may want to stay out of the sun I was black when I got here and the sun has bleached me out."

Pointing to my obvious blue eyes and blond hair.

Mason Laughed and said, "Sheeeitt...you mean I gotta turn white for the man! "

Just then Sgt Kiderman arrived in the four wheel drive R-Deuce. He had asked all of us who did not smoke for our ration cards that morning. He claimed he was going to bring us back a treat via his horse trading. I had heard there were T-bones in Vietnam if you new where to look. I had not ever had one.

Instead he walked in carrying ten pounds of spam in a green camouflaged can. He was as proud as a peacock and he said, " Hey guys I made Staff Sergeant and guess where I am going when I leave here in ten days?"

No one asked, "Well guys I am going to Andrews Air Force Base, I'll probably meet the President. "Let's Celebrate."

I stood there in disbelief. When he opened the Spam I started to unsheathe my K-Bar to cut myself a piece.

Then the alarm sounded, we had a C-7 Caribou coming in on one engine only, low fuel and hydraulic warning lights going off, with twenty refugees on board and a crew of three.



Ray and I took off but before we did I turned to the new guys and said, "Welcome to the Nam."

Ray beat me to the truck, he wanted to drive, and we had been doing that lately because he and Sgt. Mosley wanted to

Photo: Cam Ranh Bay Airbase: C-7 Caribou taxiing on PSP (Pierced Steel Planking) apron. (c) by Gene Rust.

evaluate my response to different emergency situations. So I took the right seat and we rolled. We went to the east end of the PCP (Marsden Matting) runway because that was the runway the C-7s used. At Cam Ranh everyone took off and landed into the prevailing winds toward the South China Sea, so I was surprised when the tower called me and warned us, "*Crash unit at the east end, be advised the Caribou is landing from the east, repeat landing from the east.*"

Ray and I looked at each other we both knew instantly the pilot was doing this because he thought he might have to ditch in the sea, hopefully the shallow part up near shore.

"Ready to get wet buddy, we may have to go for a swim here." Ray looked deadly serious.

About a quarter mile out we saw the high tail of the de-Havilland Caribou. Sure enough she was coming in with #2 out. Because we were at the east end she was coming right at us.

All C-7s land like Blue Herons in a stream, you just are not sure they want to touch down and get their feet wet. A couple of years prior the Air Force had taken possession of most of the Caribous in some kind of trade with the Army.

We had several squadrons of the Caribou's at Cam Ranh.

When she came over us I heard the one good 1450 hp Pratt and Whitney running smooth. The pilot was compensating for the one engine landing he was doing great. Briefly one wing rose and the tail swung to the side slightly but by some miracle he righted her and set down very gently. I told Ray to fall in behind her.

I looked at Ray and said, "We have the best pilots in the world."

When the plane unloaded its passengers. Sgt Mosley kept one truck there for precaution and the rest of us were released. On the way back we ran through some *what if* scenarios, then he reached over and shook my hand and said, "Well Friend, you're a crew chief now--Mosley told me to tell you."

Ray and I would have many other adventures in Vietnam; he and Kevin Paddock, Kevin O'Hara, Lester Rheume and I formed friendships that stood the test of time.

I treasure their friendships.

Finding myself in Vietnam would prove bitter-sweet in years to come.