

## II CORP HQ, PLEIKU 1970-1972

### Can You Drive Stick?

© 2021 by [James Donzella](#),  
SP4, MACV Team-21, Pleiku

**Photo: Pleiku, 1970** – Sp4 James Donzella, MACV Team-21, Pleiku, II CORPS HQ was the old French HQ. Walking distance to the 71st EVAC Hospital. 10 miles or less north of Pleiku. I don't have any photos of HQ. I've attached a photo of the II CORPS NCO Club. Decorated with 122mm rockets. Just about everyone at MACV Team-21 took pics at that spot. Two rockets that failed to detonate, hit in the middle of the compound. Wish I had more pics of HQ.



Two days of flying, plane packed with GIs, laughing—talking, playing cards. Left Osaka for the last leg and all went quiet two hours out of Nam.

Midnight disembarked Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon. Nostrils assaulted by musty smell of decaying vegetation. No matter where in-country, you always encountered that smell. The forecast, from now until eternity: hot and muggy. That's how it was. For every planeload of GIs coming in, two headed out.

Troop withdrawal, talk of the day.

We were pulling out.

Most guys said if Nixon's father had pulled out, we wouldn't be in this mess right now. Rode a school bus to Long Binh where everyone processed in and out of the country. I collected bedding and settled into a transient barrack. It must've been a hundred degrees and hundred percent humidity.

Not much sleep on night one. On my back, sweat pooled in that hollow spot just below my Adam's-apple. It filled to overflow capacity; the sweat then trickled down the side of my neck, felt like a spider. Slept on my stomach from then on.

Long Binh compound was huge: 60 basketball and volleyball courts, dozen swimming pools, softball fields, tennis courts, three libraries, mini-golf course, three full-service restaurants and a theater complex. This wouldn't have been a bad gig if it wasn't for the heat and that smell. Dodge City we called it. Made sense to me, everyone there wanted to "get outta' Dodge." I had a "secret" clearance status, assigned to G-2 but when I finished processing the job was eliminated, putting me in limbo. That sucked. Limbo turned out to mean I was pulling perimeter security every night six days a week. Sunday was off so I hit Alice's Restaurant for a cool beer and burger when, to my surprise, I ran into Sanchez from basic.

"Hey Chez," I called. "What's happenin', bro?"

"Got in last week. You?"

“Three, long, disgusting weeks ago man, shit. Stacker was here. They shipped him out first week. I CORPS.”

IV CORPS—Mekong Delta—and I CORPS were the worst deployments you could get. Delta was humpin’ rice patties; I CORPS was dealing with NVA Regulars.

I said, “Where you workin’?”

“Finance bro. Payroll.”

“Nice. I’m on the wire. Sucks.”

Coupla beers, burgers and fries then walked over to the theater to catch a movie.

Theater had AC. It felt like 400 degrees outside. Inside, the theater was heaven. I think if they got the temp down another couple of degrees, we could see our breath. Hardly anyone in the theater so we talked whenever we wanted. Film was a western with Gene Hackman. After the film, we hit one of the other bars.

For the next three weeks, it went like that. Worked nights, slept days, drank beer, sat around smoking cigs with Chez on my day off. We met at Alice’s Restaurant one hot afternoon for “beverages” as Chez called it. We positioned ourselves at the bar. I ordered a Miller.

Did I mention it was hot as hell?”

Jack and Coke,” Chez said. “Jack and Coke?”

“Gotta’ try it bro. Hey! Make it two JD and Cokes.

The Vietnamese girl behind the bar put the can of Miller back in the cooler and fixed our drinks.

“Never heard of this,” I said. We clinked glasses. I took a nice swig.

“Whaddya think, JD?”

“Sold.”

That day I became a Jack and Coke fan, big time.

Days passed and my education continued.

A fresh, dark green uni’ signaled Greenie or Newbie to everyone. If you conducted a survey, one could determine how long a GI had been in-country by the degree of pigment fade from months of washing. It was like a chart. Lighter the color, shorter the time left on your tour. Short-timers carried a stick, fifteen-inches long, when they had less than 60 days left to their tour. It told everyone: Don’t mess with me, I’m short. When your tour got down to two weeks, an inch was cut off until that day you dropped that last inch in the trash and boarded a Freedom Bird home. People would gawk when one of the guys would strut into one of the bars with a stick six inches in length. I could only imagine what that would feel like. I sat at a table in the commissary, reading a copy of the Stars and Stripes when Staff Sergeant Cummins, my immediate superior, came in.

“You get one of these yet?” he said dropping a Pacex Catalog on the table.

“What is it?”

“Mail order. You need to get yourself a cassette recorder. Send tapes home. There’s cameras, electronics, all kinds of stuff, cheap.”

I thumbed through the catalog.

“Get two and send one home.”

I did and my family started sending me money. I had thoughts of going into the importing business. I ordered bone China dinner services for hundreds of dollars off retail in the U.S.

Cameras, color TV sets, stereo systems, and silver dinnerware. It was cheap, duty free—nuts.

My cassette recorder arrived a week later, Sony AM/FM radio, battery operated, or plug-

in. I was stretched out on my bunk, ready to start making tapes.

Gains, Pennsylvania kid, 20-years-old, looked 50, flung the door to the hooch open, strutted in, all smiles.

“Gainzee!” I said holding up my new toy. “Check it out,”

“Echo—Tango—Sierra,” he said walking with a distinct swagger. “Echo—Tango—Sierra.”

“What’s with you?”

“Echo—Tango—Sierra, my friend,” he drew out the words like the most beautiful girl in school said yes to the prom. “Estimated. Time. Of Separation. Two friggin’ weeks left and I am out for good! Done! Finis! So long Army. I’d like to say it’s been fun, but it hasn’t.”

“Two weeks, huh?”

“The three most beautiful words in the English language: Echo, Tango, Sierra.”

“Do me one, bro?”

“Sure.”

Dug through my barracks bag and found a used envelope. Tore off a piece of it and wrote down a number. Gains lived about 60 miles from my parents.

“Here’s my home number. When you get back, can you call and tell my mom everything’s okay.”

Gains took a couple of steps and stopped directly in front of me. The smile had disappeared. I stood up, offering the piece of paper. He paused for a moment, then reached into his hip pocket, extracting his wallet, stuffed the paper in. “I don’t want to lose it,” he said.

We shook hands, hugged, and slapped each other on the back.

That was the thing about this living nightmare. It was a constant flow of guys coming in and guys going out. You bonded with someone. They guided you and then they were gone. It seemed to me unproductive. It was like running a football team with twenty-four players, one for each position. Then every couple of weeks one of the team leaves and he’s replaced with someone who has never studied the playbook.

Gains said his goodbyes. Never did find out if he burned his uniform like he said. Unlike me, Gains had enlisted. What he thought he’d signed on for didn’t turn out to be. He was bitter and disappointed. We were fighting for an ungrateful nation. He wondered if anyone would ever understand. For me, I’d hit the lottery. A number so low I had little choice, so I reluctantly accepted the situation. I accepted the lack of gratitude.

Cummins called me into his office one evening.

“You’re off tonight.”

“What’s up?”

“I have your orders. There’s good news and bad news. What would you like first?”

God, I hated that. If I got the bad news first, I guess the good news would balance out the disappointment. But I remembered the joke about the guy who goes to the doctor.

Doctor: “Well, Mister Jones, I have good news and bad news.”

Jones: “Give me the bad news first, Doc.”

Doctor: “We have no idea what you have, unfortunately you only have a couple of weeks to live.”

Jones: “Christ Doc! What’s the good news?”

Doctor: “We’re naming the disease after you.”

”I said, “What’s the bad?”

“You’re assigned to a Com Unit in I CORPS.”

I stood there waiting for the punchline: They're naming the base after you.

“It’s not a fire base. Headquarters in Da Nang.”

“Okay,” I said, and left.

I slowly walked back to the hooch, deep in thought. My stroll took me past the chapel. I went in, took a seat in the back. I had questions. First question. What did I do to deserve this? Second question. What the hell did I do to deserve this? Thoughts went back to when I arrived at Fort Dix for basic. There were plenty of stateside deployments as well as Germany, Italy—hell, even Korea. Basic over, next came advanced training. According to the battery of tests I took, my abilities were valued in administrative functions. I took courses in map reading, classified and secret correspondence messaging handling. Finished top of the class, promoted to Assistant Instructor. I gave other recruits their exams.

All going well. Then I received a request to meet with a National Security Agency officer. NSA guy met with three of us. Our test records pulled, background checks made, and information provided about the Agency. We were next interviewed, for over an hour, by FBI agents. Once we cleared that hurdle, we were offered jobs. I eagerly accepted a post with the NSA Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Three days later, I received my orders, NSA Saigon, Vietnam.

WHAT!?

Now I packed my barracks bag. Had “beverages” with Chez, who kept telling me that everything would workout. Rode the school bus to Tan Son Nhut, loaded into a C-130 around 1300 hours local time. Landed at Cam Ranh Bay for a layover. Next stop was Pleiku Airbase, landing four hours later to change planes. Grabbed a seat on a bench unable to check-in, as the flight desk was unmanned. Some ten minutes had passed when a Sergeant stopped in front of me.

“Where you headed?” “Da Nang, Sarge.”

“No more flights goin’ out tonight. Throw your shit in the jeep,” he said, pointing to the vehicle just outside the entrance.

I tossed my bag in the jeep and waited. Three minutes later Sergeant Fletcher returned with two others in tow, a Sergeant Maltz and Hall returning from R&R. Fletcher stood nearly six-feet, bushy blond hair, surfer-dude like. Grin permanently affixed.

“I’ll take you to II CORPS Headquarters. You can get some chow and a bunk for tonight,” Fletcher said, and the other two men piled into the jeep.

Fletcher started the jeep, and we took off. It was already past dusk, wanting to get back to Headquarters before dark, he jammed the accelerator to the floor the entire ride. Fifteen minutes later, we pulled into II CORPS Headquarters main gate. Fletcher pointed out the barracks and the NCO Club on the compound. I reported to Company Headquarters, was issued linen, and dumped my stuff in the transient barracks. Twenty bunks lined each side of the barracks with shower and toilet facility off to one side. I had my pick of bunks. No one else would be occupying the barracks that night.

The following morning, torrential rain. After the mess hall, I checked in with Headquarters. No flights out today, weather, try again tomorrow. Following day, the same. I found the library and borrowed a couple of books. I had nothing to do all day and it was 7:30a.m. The day dragged on. At noon, went to the Mess Hall for lunch. I checked with Headquarters. No flights going out today, so I hit the NCO Club, bought me a JD and Coke and a can of potato chips. Lays, Ruffles—in cans. Fletcher showed up with a couple of other sergeants, Ghomes, a stocky African American and Leven, thin with receding hairline. They called him Fletch. I kept it to Sarge.

“Where you headed?” Sergeant Leven asked.

“Da Nang.”

“Sheeeiit!” Sergeant Ghomes said. “You don’t need that kind of aggravation son.”

Sergeant Liao came to the table, short, dark haired Filipino. Introductions made; a round of drinks ordered. Everyone had the same response. Da Nang? You don’t wanna go there.

“Did Colonel Patrick get a new aid?” Fletch asked Liao.

“Not yet. He hasn’t had anybody for a week. Wilson filled in from Motor Pool, but his spelling wasn’t up to par.”

“Can you drive stick?” Fletch asked me.

“I can drive anything.”

“I’ll set up an interview with the Colonel tomorrow,” Liao said.

0900 hours, I arrived at Colonel Patrick’s office on the first floor of II CORPS Headquarters building with Sergeant Liao. Colonel was around 5’9” tall, 180 pounds, around 50 years old, wore wire-rimmed glasses and displayed a warm smile when I entered the office. Sergeant Liaomade the introduction.

“Thank you, Sergeant,” the Colonel said. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Sergeant Liao tells me your next duty station is Da Nang.”“Yes sir.”

“You don’t wanna go there. It’s a shithole.”

The Colonel then proceeded to sell me on the job. I knew I wanted it as soon as the word “shithole” left his lips. He described all the duties and perks. I wanted to yell:

YOU DON’T NEED TO SELL ME, SIR—I’M IN.

“Need someone who can transcribe interviews and keep track of investigations ... accurately.”

“No problem,” I said, a bit flippant. Followed by, “Um... not a problem, sir.”

He called the Motor Pool. I took a driver's test.

Colonel Patrick changed my orders. I was assigned to the Inspector General Office, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, MACV-Team-21. MACV, a special unit created to advise the Vietnamese military how to conduct operations. I walked out of the office. The rain had stopped, and the sun was out.

I threw my orders to Da Nang in the trash because *I* could drive stick.

Several months later, I spent three days in Da Nang on an assignment. It was just like they said. I didn’t wanna go there.

One of these days, it would all make sense.

END