

June 22, 1971 (audio tape transcribed and tweaked bit for clarity)

We had a photo lab at Long Thanh North Army Airfield that we could use for personal use. My hootch-mate SP4 Seacord, who was into photography, somehow finagled the position of "keeper of the photo lab" in his spare time. He had a great time messing around there and I'd go occasionally, and he'd teach me about photo developing and enlarging. Pretty cool. Honestly, we didn't really have all that much free time, but on this particularly rainy evening we were at the photo lab when our section chief came running in with an urgent request.

You see, I actually had a job in the army in my NOT spare time. I was an airborne radio relay operator. We flew on U-21A aircraft and set up FM relays for units in the field too far apart for good comms. So, this particular rainy evening Sgt. Davis came in with the edict:

"We've got a radio relay mission and you have to go check out the radios in Triple Zero (tail number of the plane we were to fly on the mission) and be sure they are working. "

So I was still in my civilian clothes, bell bottoms and T-shirt. Yeah, I know, what army was this? It was Vietnam 1971 in the rear (sort of) with the gear. He took me up to operations. It was a little screwed up there. I was supposedly going to get some kind of briefing. They just told me to go back and get enough clothes for a couple days - a change of clothes, shaving kit and stuff like that.

Well, I came back to the hootch real hurried-like. This was quarter till 7 pm. This was supposed to be a 7 pm take-off. Of course, that never happened, but came back and got into my flight suit and grabbed an extra flight suit and field jacket, flashlight and shaving kit and headed out to the airplane.

The radios in Triple Zero were all hooked up, so I proceeded to check 'em out. First bank worked pretty good, and I got as far as the second bank and it wasn't working right. So, I had to make some quick deductions and come up with an answer as to why it wasn't working. I figured it had to be one of the cables or the amplifier, so I went back to the hanger.

Sgt Davis and PFC O'Briant were hooking up the radios in 061. I asked them whether they had an amplifier and they said there were no good ones 'laying around' so I didn't have much choice but to hope it was the cable. I grabbed the cable, took it out to the plane and put it in on. Luckily it worked.

We had the plane all ready. The pilots came out about 7:30 pm and we took off. It took us more than one try to get off the ground. We got halfway down the runway the first time and the air speed indicator wasn't working right so they had to stop and turn around, go back, then tapped the indicator a couple times and it started working again. So, we finally took off.

We ended up in Nha Trang about 8:30 pm. We went to 21st Signal Group headquarters there and got our briefing for the frequencies, crypto codes and things like that. We waited around there a good while till we got things straight and they decided that they wanted us to fly. Finally, about 10:30 pm we took off again. It was just me and the two pilots. We were flying between a radio station in Nha Trang and another in An Khe. These were two regular fixed stations. The trouble was that in An Khe something went wrong with one of their radios and they had to use some other radio that wasn't quite so powerful.

So, we had to get in between them to help them contact one another. We were flying between Nha Trang and An Khe using the Tuy Hoa ADF beacon. They'd fly up to Tuy Hoa and then they'd fly away from it. And that was messing us up a little bit because they had artillery out there too and we couldn't go too

far west. That kept us out of the direct line between the two of those stations. And for a while there we could talk to one guy in Nha Trang and then we'd have to fly back and we'd lose him and then we'd pick up An Khe till we finally found an area where we could fly that we could pick both up. That was about 1 am when we finally found where we could fly to pick them both up. So, I set it up for automatic transmission. Up to that time if they had something to say they'd just ask us a question and we'd fly up north and get the answer then fly back down south and give them the answer.

We really didn't have to do that too often. We finally found that area where we could fly and set up for automatic retrans. We flew till about 3 in the morning. 061 had taken off to replace us and they had PFC O'Briant as the radio operator. It was the first time he had ever flown a mission and he didn't even get any OJT other than looking at the radios in the shop. He had never been on a mission with another operator. They just sent him up by himself.

But the pilots knew quite a bit about the radios and they helped him out. He flew till 7:30 am. When I got back they found me a room where a guy was away on R&R. I got to bed about 4 am and slept till maybe 7am. I was expecting to be able to go home back to Long Thanh North if you want to call that home. That's why I got up early. They had told us this was only going to be a 10 hour mission and we'd already flown our two missions. And they didn't wake me up to fly again after O'Briant so I figured we'd be going back.

But as it turned out they wouldn't give us a clearance to go back. Some General that was supposed to be able to give us the OK to leave was flying somewhere and they couldn't find him to get an answer to whether we could leave or not. So, we stayed around and every hour or so we go in and they'd say come back in about an hour. Well, 6:30 pm we were still sitting there so they decided they'd better find us a room, someplace to sleep.

There was a crew chief on the mission SP5 Hayes. So, they sent the three of us Hayes, Obriant and myself to a 21st Signal Group transient hootch way on the other side of Nha Trang. We slept there. It was not a bad place. They had some real nice showers, hot water and flush toilets for a change. It was really a nice clean place compared to back at Long Thanh North. All we have there is cold water. So, we enjoyed that and had a real good sleep since we were so tired and it was pretty cool. No bugs to bother us for a change.

So we slept in till about 7 am the next morning and went up to the snack bar and had a ham and egg sandwich. Then we came back for a while and went over to the 21st Signal headquarters again waiting for our officers to show up. They never showed up. So, we walked over to the visiting officers' quarters where they were staying and we found their room. They weren't in their room, so we laid down on their bunks till they came back about 10 am or so.

We got some transportation to the airplanes and headed back to Long Thanh North.

So that was a day (or two) in the life of an airborne radio relay crew in Vietnam in 1971.