

Ronald E. Fisher

Air Force

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Interviewed by: Samuel Nyon

Vietnam: An Unexpected Experience

I was about 24. I was teaching in Detroit, which gave me a draft deferment as long as I taught in the inner city without a teaching certificate, but I felt like it was unproductive to focus my whole life on avoiding being drafted. This could go on forever perhaps. I couldn't continue to teach and I wasn't really interested in teaching so I chose the Air Force as the avenue for doing my military service and perhaps avoiding Vietnam. The Air Force had a reputation of being safe and clean especially for non-rated officers.

I didn't go to Vietnam initially. I had a few assignments and the officer said, "Do you want to go to Vietnam now or do you just want to be put on the waiting list and see if you will be rotated in?" I decided I might as well go, get it over with, and be done with my life since everyone anticipated on being rotated over there eventually.

Getting to Vietnam is an army operation. Basically contract carriers take us over to major aerial ports and we get distributed through air force aircraft to our base of assignment; so initially it was an army operation. For a college student who's never been in the military and has only had a short amount of time on active duty, it was a different experience, a very different world. The Air Force had a more collegial cooperate and graduate attitude. The Army was more structured. It felt weird to be in an army environment.

I remember as I was getting off the Army contract aircraft, an army person got on because he was in charge of processing people. Well, this great old sergeant came on and there were 300 people formed along the wall. He said something like "Don't worry about your loved ones. Your wives will get screwed regardless of whether you're there or not." These contract carriers never stayed on the ground long. It was dangerous. They would get mortared. People came on the carriers while you're leaving saying things like "I hope this base gets mortared because we're gone." There was a lot of dark humor. It was playfulness in a dark sort of way. Everyone understood that you did your year there and hopefully you would come back safe.

In Vietnam, I stayed in the same place, Tuy Hoa Airbase, which was a fighter base, for the whole tour. As an aircraft maintenance officer, I did flight line operations: working shifts, signing releases for aircrafts to go on their missions, scheduling maintenance technicians to do repairs, and uploading of aircraft munitions. Sometimes there wouldn't be any missions, so you would do delayed or deferred maintenance to catch up with the light bulbs and minor bearings. But other times it was critical maintenance. The tempo depended on the status of the equipment and the missions for the day. That would last about 12 hours a day.

Tuy Hoa Airbase was a safe environment to be in, an Air Force base with security all around you. We had Republic of Korea troops that were housed on our base. They went out, scouted the area, and made sure the peripheral of the base was safe. We had infantry walking the perimeter at night and gun ships scouting the mountains. The only combat I saw was on the 4th of July when our sentries shot fireworks to celebrate. The base was promptly mortared by the people outside of the base to teach us that we may be safe but not to push our luck because they could mortar us anytime they wanted to. It was more to show psychologically that there were people out there than to hurt us.

In the officer's club there would be a barber. He was a Vietnamese who would cut your hair, shave you, and say "You know tonight I will come back in black pajamas," so it sort of was like on one hand the same people who were paid to work for us during the daytime would perhaps come back at night and do mayhem.

People would enjoy being able to be on the flight line with no shirt on because you wouldn't be able to do that in the US, so we got nice sunburns and people grew nice mustaches because you couldn't do that in the Air Force in the states. There were a lot of little things people did that they knew they couldn't do in the states. Simple pleasures.

When the army would come and visit us, they'd bring lots of steak and we'd give them the cold beer. It was some kind of reciprocity. While our supplies of water and food were plentiful, it wasn't of a high quality. The Army seemed to do better in the meat department, and we had the beer and the refreshments. It was hot during the day, so breakfast was the meal of choice and after that, it was basically hamburgers and beer. Dairy products were tasteless. It wasn't the best nutrition in the world.

We couldn't talk about where our aircraft was going but it was talked about in the New York Times the next day that we were bombing a Laos city or places like that. We had to use cover names and pretend what we were doing was a secret, but as soon as you left the base, everyone knew what you were doing. I thought that was kind of bizarre. There were levels of security that were really unrealistic that the military believed in but no one else did as soon as the reports came out that knew where our aircraft went and what damage although we weren't officially told about it.

There was also the frustration from being away from home; however, everyone knew they had a DEROS, a designated return date, and we knew that the military held to that. When your time was up, you went home, so the uncertainty of an open ended warfare was not there. You knew you were going home in 12 or 13 months, and they held to that. You may have to go back depending on the circumstances but you knew you would go home, and I thought that was a very desirable way to handle business.

I came back from Vietnam in September 1970. Things were starting to shut down. Aircraft were starting to return to the US. Equipment was starting to be boxed up. There was a definite feel of change in things. Less missions. Less work to do.

I felt the war was in our national interests to pursue what we were trying to pursue which was the avoidance of domination of communist inspired governments against the rule of the native peoples. Vietnam was a unique experience for each person who handled it. It was not a war in a conventional sense. We were there. We had supreme air power, and we were trying to use the air force to do things that could have been untenable both military and politically even with the will to pursue it. It was a good experience for everyone, including the Vietnamese who ultimately got unified and are now integrating their experiences for their own lifestyles and trying to figure out what they really want to do. I just looked at it as what needed to be done, and when it was done, it was done. No great scars or psychological effects. I was very fortunate not to be overstressed in my years there. I went to Vietnam to avoid going to Vietnam, but I would go back if asked to.