

The Sundance Kid of XAUN LOC ARTY

via Steve Kieffer, former Sp4, USA, ret.

[retired, as soon as they'd let me].

edited by [Tony 'the Tiger' Spletstoser](#) 14 july 1998

It's funny what comes back to you, memory wise. I can close my eyes and see the red dust on my boots as I walk the dirt road between the MACV compound and the radio comm building that I worked in. I remember how in trying to look like a bad ass bush savvy grunt I took to carrying a captured Chicom AK until one of the gate guards pointed out that was going to be real confusing to all parties in a night time fire fight.

I'm still pissed at Uncle Sam for instilling the prejudices against the Vietnamese people. It took a while in country for this 18 year old to figure out that they were just people who didn't have any more control over their daily lives than I. These people had been screwed by a succession of leaders and invaders for farther back than a midwest teenager could comprehend at the time.

On a lighter note, I have gleeful teenage testosterone-saturated memories of the young ladies I bought many a Saigon tea for at the old French restaurant turned whorehouse outside of the compound..

Did you know that they all loved me? Really! They told me so every pay day!..... If I hadn't gotten to 'Nam, I might never have gotten laid.

How did I get involved with this dumb war? This is how I made it to Vietnam:

I got kicked out of high school during my second year in tenth grade. The principal and I had a dispute over who was better qualified to set attendance policy: turns out **he** was.

I was seventeen years old. My brother Mike was sending letters home about hanging out the side of a Huey lighting up the countryside with his M-60 GPMG. "Cool Man." I really believed the "Domino Theory" and was worried that the war would be over before I could help my country stop the spread of communism. Falling asleep with hazy dreams of my brother and I, along with John Wayne killing the enemy soldiers.

That was in January 1969. I had turned 18 and, since high school didn't seem to be working out for me. I went to the recruiter in Milwaukee and enlisted for three years. A few weeks later I was off to beautiful Ft. Campbell for basic and Ft. Sill for Arty. AIT.

Then on to Ft. Bliss for "**Redeye**" missile training. (If you're not familiar with the **Redeye** system, it was a shoulder fired, passive infrared heat source seeking AA missile. It came with a few minor draw-backs, like because it had an intense back blast as it left the launch tube you were supposed to fire it from an open area like a field or roof top in order to be clear

of any flash fire ignition. While from General Dynamics Corp.'s point of view this was logical, I was a little concerned about the missile's propellant smoke trail, which, like tracers, works both ways. That smoke trail pointed a big white smoky finger directly back to the poor fool who had just shot down an enemy aircraft next to any **BAD GUYS**, so **they** knew just where to shoot back in revenge.

(I still have a copy of the deployment manual that was issued to field commanders of units with **Redeye** teams. It is in a quasi comic book format..very confidence inspiring).

Now back to the travels of Steve. After Ft. Bliss, they shipped me off to Hawaii to be the leader of the first Redeye team to be stationed at Scholfield where I would be met with welcome arms, if not a parade. My head was pretty puffed up.

This head-puffiness lasted until I proudly reported to the first sergeant: "PFC Steve Kieffer - Redeye Team Leader Reporting for Duty!" Top looked up from his desk to ask me what the fuck a **Redeye** was, and could I drive a truck...soo, our four man teams contribution to the proud history of the 25th Infantry Division was to cruise the post in an old 3/4 ton Weapons Carrier picking up fallen coconuts and beer cans.

While Hawaii was a great duty station, I wasn't going to stop those Commie Rats by spending my service time policing cigarette butts and making sure that my underwear was uniformly folded in my foot locker.

Our companies reenlistment NCO told me that the only way I could get to Viet Nam was for me to sign up for another three years. The lying SOB had me discharged and reenlisted all in the same day.

I took a short leave home to see friends and family. My father took me to a favorite watering hole to fulfill some sort of father son camaraderie. He spoke of his joining the Navy in WW II, after one of his school mates had been killed in action. I felt very much a real man sitting at the bar in my class A uniform, drinking whiskey which I couldn't be legally served for another three years, smoking cigarettes, and listening to my father and the other men relive **their** wars.

At my leaves end, my mom drove me to the airport. I hid my tears when we hugged goodby. She told me years later, that watching a second son board a plane for Viet Nam, was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

My first night in-country at the Long Binh Replacement Depot, my FNG education began when I woke up to find my 16 m/m Minox camera gone. The strap cut from my wrist as I slept. Lessons learned, more to come.

After in-processing, Command had me on my way to FSB Nancy because of my arty background. Along the way someone was impressed that I could key a mike and chew gum at the same time, so I found myself dropped into the AASWCC slot where I was assigned

as one of the four or five RTOs' at Xuan Loc Arty.

The Vietnamese city of Xuan Loc is pronounced like "Swan Lock."

The city of Xuan Loc was located some 40 klicks east of Bien Hoa AFB on highway QL 1. If you traveled due south via highway LTL 2 for 50 km, it would take you to the best in-country R&R in Vietnam, Vung Tau on the South China Sea. On a good day you could miss most of the ambushes.

I wasn't a "FAC" (**Forward Arty Controller**) our job was to furnish Arty information to any aircraft who might be flying through an **Arty Fire** mission area. I had my butt planted on a little folding chair for 12 hours a day or night, in the "**AASW-CC,**" hut. (**Arty. Air Strike Warning Control Center**). It was your basic **glamorous and exciting support** job. (AKA **REMF**).

Sierra Kilo aka "Sundance Kid" ... (Keeeefrignnrrrrriiee-esstt! That was 27 years ago!) Any way, when I was "the **Kid**", I was on the Fox Mike Radio for "Xuan Loc Arty" Artillery Air Strike Warning Control Center (Hot Damn that sounds big time!)

Over at the A.A.S.W.C.C. we, theoretically, knew where the hot spots were and gently guided you fly boy types around any danger so you could safely return to your cushy officer type hooches.

We were located in a metal building down the road and across the road from "Hope" airfield at Xuan Loc.

Our unit's living quarters were on the MACV compound next to the "**Aloft**" O-1 Bird Dog compound.

LIFE AT XUAN LOC, Rep. of Vietnam

I have disjointed memories of the daily life I led, things that at the time seemed ordinary, but were really out of the ordinary.

Hooch mates at our MACV compound, a real culture clash. The redneck hooch lifers getting drunk and playing loud country music. The Brothers playing R&B, lots of dap hand shake action and raised fists. The Hippie hooch guys getting high and playing loud Hendrix and Jefferson Airplane. Country Joe's gimme an "F" song, their anthem.

There were centipedes so big they looked fake. Beetles you could put your full weight on only to have them walk away, clicking as they went.

Having an inert grenade tossed in my bunk when I was a first week newbie.

A mamasan coming into the showers to collect towels.

Learning what a piss tube was, but never figuring out why it was placed in the center of an open area.

Rows of boots. Polished by the hooch maid, lined up outside our door.

Trying to act nonchalant while the Vietnamese barber shaved me with a straight razor. (We had been warned that the V.C. might pose as barbers then slit our throats.)

Finding out that I had paid the equivalent of about \$10.00 in

local currency for my first incountry soda.

The boy along the roadside, selling coke with a chunk of muddy ice and the same cup for all customers.

ARVN troops armed with B.A.R.s that looked as though they had just had the cosmoline removed.

Malaria pills and salt tablets.

My first night on guard duty. At its onset, my ARVN companion immediately curling up on the guard tower floor, asleep in minutes.

Surreal nights, in the perimeter tower watching, always somewhere on the horizon or in the sky were flashes and explosions. Listening and knowing there were fire fights out in the jungle. The crackle of automatic weapons fire, red and green tracers, so pretty from a distance.

On my first night of guard duty my ARVN partner curled up on the floor and went to sleep. I guess he thought I was ferocious enough to fend off the Cong by myself.

I jumped when the big strobe light air burst bombs suddenly went off directly overhead during one of the Air Force's high speed silent photo mission.

Listening to the tiny frantic voices from the PRC 25, knowing that men were dying in the jungle, as I sat, guilty and secure in my tower.

The Fire Bases pumped out harassment and interdiction rounds between support missions.

The psy-op boys flying around and playing loud Country Joe's "Gimme an F" song the same time they dumped chu hoi leaflets. At Christmas they would play carols over their speakers.

Straining your eyes as you tried to keep vigilant and alert. Laying your weapons sights on civilians to break the monotony. Then getting bored again and shooting flares and star clusters towards the Sea-Bee compound until the O.O.G. would yell at us over the field phone.

Other nights pulling guard duty in the tower overlooking the swimming pool that I never saw anyone use. Fondling the M-79 in your hands, visualizing what the 40 mm load of fleshettes would do to the pool and then wondering if you could keep a straight face while you told the O.I.C. that you think you saw a sapper right before it happened.

Our Commo Hooch was shared by Thai, ARVN, and Aussy RTO's for their Arty Control. Aircraft would check with us before flying into our air space, to see if they would be clear of any arty fire, air strikes, etc. etc.

You should have seen me on the first night that I walked to work. I'm all paranoid, because I had to walk down this scary dark road (made extra special, because I was nicely back lit from the two compounds' lights and I was sure the VC had me in their sniper scopes).

It was only two or three hundred meters from the MACV compound to the building I pulled duty in. But this was Vietnam, I was a Newbie and it was dark.

As I walked toward the radio shack, I stumbled over something lying in a shallow depression in the dirt path. Since I had seen the normal quota of John Wayne movies, I knew just what action to take. I probed around in the dirt with my bayonet until I'd made out the outline of the biggest land mine that this boy had ever seen. The damned thing was the size of a Jeep wheel.....That's because it **was** a Jeep wheel. Some engineer troop had put there to fill the hole as part of a quick repair job. Ah well, what can you expect from a "Newbi."

Being issued two M-16s, "But I've already got one! " **Supply**, We know, but S.O.P. is to issue a weapon to troops new to the unit." It remained in its foil and paper bag until I left, at which point I tried to turn it in, **Supply**, "Sorry, SOP states that only one weapon may be turned in."

The fire bases and air strike coordinators would tell us where they were setting up and firing into, what the max altitude for the shells the guns were firing, and where harassment and interdiction missions were targeted for, etc.

We had 100 or so pounds of radios and a field phone that actually worked one day. Lots of big plastic covered maps screwed to the walls. The **Hi Tek** tool we used the most was the grease pencil tied to a string. The other end of the string was nailed to where Bien Hoa AFB was on the map.

For 13 months, we had 12 hours on, 12 hours off, seven days a week. I'm still kicking myself for not taking R&R.

The way it worked was around the 11th hour I would be waked from my boredom-induced semi comatose state by the crackling of a radio, I would immediately leap into action by grabbing the wrong mike, squint at the map, use the anchored grease pencil system (accurate to within a klick +/-). You draw an arc out from the string anchor point and try to read the vital info scrawled by the last guy in the 11th hour of his shift. Then I'd tell the aircraft calling in how to avoid the perceived hazard.

Nobody ever complained about being rerouted through an Arc Light mission or a Puff gun ship target area. So I guess I did an okey dokey job. (Or else they went down before they could reach their radio.)

I'll share more happy fuzzy memories as they come to what passes for my mind... intimate mental Images of what was **my** Vietnam tour.

On duty one day, when in walk four or five really high ranking (to this PFC) Vietnamese officers, white dress uniforms, shoulder boards with lots of scrambled eggs, and they don't speak a word of English. All this while my cohorts and I in dusty sweaty fatigues, and we don't speak a word of Vietnamese. Lots of saluting, hand shaking, and speech making. The Viet officers presented each of us with some fancy certificates printed, of course, in Vietnamese. To this day I have know idea what the hell it was all about. I will scan the award someday and put it on the net hoping that someone can tell me what I won.

The men and boys I worked with. Well, the same story that most of you have heard before, "I can remember all of the faces but few of the names." But three of us, I remember.

There was one guy with the callsign "Daughters of the American Revolution," aka, Darrell A. Root. Darrell would frequently change his on the air name (radio callsign) in attempts to use all of his initials. Then the "Rubber Ducky" aka Ron Davis and finally, the "Sundance Kid," aka, Pvt. Steve Kieffer.

Although just as important to the day to day operation, the names of the rest of our crew have faded from my memory banks. Ron, Darrell, and myself were part of a much larger detachment that manned the AASWACC radios. I just can't remember the names of the others. I don't want readers to think that I played a bigger part than anyone else.

I was in the Infirmary getting a Clap shot, while an old man, a Vietnamese civilian, sat patiently, quiet and timid with his intestines pushing out through a gash in his stomach, waiting to see the medic. Seeming to accept his situation with stoic resignation. I never could understand the priorities that had placed our lives in this order.

Our local "Sky Pilot" telling us that we would have more fun staying on the compound watching movies at night than going outside of the gate to get laid.

Watching "Easy Rider," dim images on a white painted plywood screen. The "lifers" cheering at the end when Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda get killed. Some Pvt. spraying weed killer, (agent orange?) around the movie area. Drunken games of ping pong at the rec.(wreck) room.

Learning to cook our "C Rats" with C4 from the Claymores.

The terror, of having some wise guy "click" the remote Claymore switch while you're out checking to make sure Charlie hasn't turned the mines around to aim at you.

Going to the METRO unit on our compound to watch as they launched weather balloons. Little "dunk" batteries that were activated by immersion in water, to power small light bulbs that illuminated the balloons to help keep pilots from running into them.

Guys stealing the amphetamines from the survival kits.

Finding a friend passed out in a chair in his hooch, the heroin syringe hanging from a vein.

Having the unit's new jeep stolen 10 minutes after we got it.

Sitting in the back seat of an "Aloft" Bird Dog, trying to kick up the rear pedals and put the control stick in it's socket, while the pilot up front laughs as he lights his cigar, both hands visible as he says "you've got it." Nose down then nose up, as I tried to fly the thing. Some aerial maneuver that left me nauseous and eyes full of the debris that used to be on the plane's floor in response to my question to the pilot, "Do you know any tricks?"

Nights spent outside the wire with Kim, she was maybe 14 or 15 years old, content with a box of Tide and a couple cartons of

Salems a month. Always asking me to take her back to the states with me, and me lying that I would.

Those little packs of cigarettes that came with C rats. That toy piece of toilet paper that also came with the C's. Strong French cigarettes.

Going to a French restaurant on a nearby rubber plantation. Top of the line Cognac at the PX for a couple of bucks worth of MPC.

1st Cav officers wearing large brimmed blue hats and yellow ascots.

Laughing when I first heard the coin of the realm referred to as "Dong."

Paying old women a half penny apiece to fill sand bags all day in the sun so we wouldn't have to do it.

Receiving a Christmas present from a stateside ladies church group, the box contained Kool-Aide mix and Brillo pads.

The novelty of eating cookies that came packed in cans from the PX.

Kim making dinner for me, rice with a small portion of vegetables and a minuscule amount of meat, the majority of which was served to me, as I was a guest. Looking up from Kim's' bed to see her younger brother threatening me with a hatchet because I was with his sister - Kim consoling him and returning to my side, weeping.

The smell of the ditches that ran alongside the roads in the village.

Very young boys begging for gum and cigarettes. Offering me us the service of their sisters.

Monkeys dropping the strange green fruit that grew in the trees above onto the metal roofs of the hooch's below...below.

Starting a diary but giving it up-the last week's entry being just "no mail."

Making a MARS call from Xuan Loc, "Hello mom? I love you, over."

Crossing off the days on my short-timer's calendar. Some guys had lots of calendars so that it seemed like you could make time pass faster when you checked off more than one each day.

DEROS, right around the corner. Getting cocky as I get ready to go home. Then finding out I'm going back to lovely Ft. Sill.

Having my poncho liner made into a jacket, "When I Die I Know I'll Go To Heaven / I've Spent My Time In Hell & etc" emblazoned on the back, "Kieffer" on the front. Packing my stuff in one of the nice aluminum foot locker that the Aussie troops were issued.

At the compound I spent my last few days in country, watching a prostitute work her way down the row of buildings, then my turn. Hot and tired, she made no effort to smile or patronize me. She knew she was there to be used and nothing more.

Hitching a ride on an Air America plane back to Bien Hoa.

In the rear. Vietnamese home grown from a "Cherry Blend" pipe tobacco pouch, with a sticky brown line of liquid opium streaked

down the rolling paper. Waking up the next morning, sitting cross legged on the hooch floor, my door key wedged between the door jam and the wall.

Buying a brilliant blue polyester disco pants and vest sort of outfit, big gold buttons, white shirt with huge pointed collar. The tailor assuring me that this was the hot set up back in the states.

Freaking out a few days later, I could see my Freedom Bird loading out on the runway and me, straining to fill the urine sample bottle that had to be done before you could leave.

A line of us pissing in bottles. An NCO sitting behind us on an elevated platform where he could view via the mirrors mounted above each urinal, keeping an eye out for people sharing "clean" urine. Then finally making it on the plane. All cheering as we lifted off, burned out, face against the window, flying home trying to figure out why I didn't feel anything.

The Harrisburg airport that I flew into on my way home for a thirty day leave. I had gone back east first so I could visit my relatives in Hershey, then on home to Wisconsin.

Dressed in fatigues and boonie hats we walked through the airport, laughing at new guys in their ill fitting class A's, fresh out of boot camp-on their way home before AIT. Lots of stares and people moving to the other side of the hallways. Everything looking new and boring at the same time. Not at all like the way I had seen it in my mind.

Mostly I went to see my grandparents. They were the ones who wrote me most often when I was incountry, my grandfather always telling me to be careful and that I was in their prayers. I have a picture of my grandparents holding a "welcome home Steve" sign my grandfather had made. At the time I thought it was pretty corny. It was only later that I found out that my grandfather, who also had been a teenager in a far away war, had been gassed and bayoneted and knew what it was like to come back home.

Home to Wisconsin on leave. Sleep-sleep-eat-eat. A civilian high school friend telling me about his big adventure to far off Chicago and had I been somewhere? He hadn't seen me around for awhile. Welcome home Steve Kieffer!

See you later Tony. More to be scanned when I figure a few software riddles ... Xuan Loc Arty ... over . Steve

PS Subject: "This is Xuan Loc Arty to the Slick leader .. over ..." Haven't seen my brother Mike in the past few months. Nothing to my knowledge has changed for the worse in his life "same feces - different day." I miss him, but he won't let anyone help him. (Eds Note! Steve's brother Mike, was a former CE with the 335th AHC, the Cowboys, who has now withdrawn into his PTSD World, in a sense, of his own making.)

"Crackle-pop".... "Tiger 15.. you're clear all the way from Fire Base Nancy into Bien Hoa...do you Roger that Tiger?" ...

click clickSteve Kieffer the "Sundance Kid."