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Two Views of a Field Station in Vietnam March 16



Recently, *History Today* related the circumstances behind the establishment of the Army SIGINT collection site, the 8th Radio Research Station, commonly called by its location name in Vietnam, Phu Bai. Many thousands of American SIGINT persons passed through Phu Bai in their careers; here are the memories of two of them.

James had enlisted in the Army Security Agency (predecessor of today's INSCOM) in 1957, and trained as a traffic analyst. He had several interesting overseas assignments, and several less exciting stateside tours of duty where he painted and washed trucks. In 1964 he volunteered for Vietnam to avoid one of these less interesting assignments, and arrived in Phu Bai in March 1965. As a staff sergeant, he was the NCOIC (noncommissioned officer in charge) for six months, then became a section chief when a sergeant first class arrived at the site.

William, a Marine, had trained as an intercept operator at Pensacola, Florida, in 1964. After graduation, because there were no open slots for his specialty in the Marine Corps' 2nd Battalion, he got the opportunity to study Vietnamese at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. Immediately after graduating the course, he was shipped out, and ended up at Phu Bai in October 1966 as part of the Marine Support Battalion. Although Phu Bai was an Army facility, contingents of Marine and Navy personnel worked there, too. William's luck held: there were no billets for linguists, so he became a Morse intercept operator.

James found both good and bad points on the assignment. Personnel worked twelve-hour days, but had fewer military duties, such as KP, than other locations. The only recreational spot was the NCO club; there was no scenery, "nothing but sand, not a tree in sight." William felt the same; days off were infrequent, and the

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few days in which they were not on the job, they did physical training or filled sandbags. William recalled, "People played lots of practical jokes. There was nothing else to do.... Sometimes tempers flared because of our frustration."

There were fewer military duties because South Vietnamese were hired to do KP and other jobs. For part of James's tour, South Vietnamese military personnel served as compound guards. William recalled that South Vietnamese women did their laundry. Because the clothes would not dry hanging on a line outside in the humidity, they were dried over a fire. However, as William put it, "Since wood was in short supply, they fueled the fire with dried water buffalo dung. The clothes came back nicely pressed, but what an odor! You knew it was time to do your laundry again when your clothes no longer smelled."

William's family sent him a light bulb socket, which he used in his locker to keep his shoes from become mildewed.

Reminders of the combat side of the war were always there. The compound would often take fire. William remembered being in the latrine trailer when a mortar landed next to it. "The trailer walls were very thin so a piece of shrapnel flew right past me."

James said that during a rocket attack personnel were to jump into the nearest trench for cover. "We hoped there were no snakes in the pit with us. It was hard to decide who was more dangerous, the enemy or the snakes."

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