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The Aussie

by Ray Arthur Monigold II
when a secret can't be remembered

The Army gave me an airplane once. Just gave it to me. I mean I had to sign for it. And they said I'd have to give it back when they asked for it. Plus they told me to take care of it and that if I wrecked it, or let someone else wreck it, that I'd spend the rest of my life paying for it, but other than that, the Army just gave me the plane.

One catch, in the free plane deal, was that I could only take it or let it be taken to places they said where OK. And only when they told me.

Oh, and another thing was the maintenance. I had to provide the day to day maintenance for the plane. But any big stuff, like major services or a blown engine, then there was a facility I could report to for help.

I had to log in every flight, any passengers or cargo or both. And keep track of the fuel and oil I used too. And these records would be checked often. And if anything was not in order, I would loose the plane and be set out in a field with a big red target painted on my helmet.

So far this is all true.

I had been in the Army about a year when I got the airplane - a HUGE single engine, tail dragging cargo plane with fold down seats. It was an Otter, the biggest tail dragging plane ever made (except for one from Russia which didn't count 'cause they were commies back then).

For the initial nine months of my stint with the military I had been in training. First "Basic Training" - well, actually not first. FIRST I was sent to an advanced testing facility and then assigned to K.P. duty, around the clock, for another week with little time to sleep - tough work that. But among other things, before the Army, I had been a dishwasher at a restaurant and when asked at my induction interview what my favorite job was I said dishwasher - although true, perhaps I should have said bed tester.

Anyway, after that I went to Basic Training where they stripped us, literally and metaphorically, of all we once had and had been and then replaced it with only the things we needed to be a soldier. After that it was Advanced Infantry Training - more guns and stuff, then basic aviation school. That was the first school where I was "graded" and the only one where I didn't score near or at the top of my class. Then there were the advanced aircraft classes and flight orientation schools. And between classes I was assigned to K.P. I even spent the Christmas New Years break of 1966 on K.P. After all that schooling I was sent to California to await orders for Vietnam. While there, for about a week, I pulled K.P. But, I was assured, that once in Vietnam there was NO K.P. because the locals were hired to do all that kind of work. We were there just to fight the enemy.

The problem with fighting a foreign enemy who is a different race and culture, is that they all look alike. What I mean by that is that the regular law abiding people and the insurgents out to kill you all look the same, dress the same and sound the same. So sometimes you don't know who to shoot and who to root for. I guess one way was a favored slogan that was painted on walls, worn on shirts, affixed to all sorts of flying and driving machines that simply stated - "KILL 'EM ALL, LET GOD SORT 'EM OUT"

Oh, I almost forgot, on my way to California Judy Garland was on the plane, in First Class, and the stewardess (yes, that's how long ago it was), anyway, one of the stewardesses came and got a few of us in uniform that were headed for Vietnam and brought us up to meet Judy. She was DRUNK. And wavering and slurring and cursing and some young guy, named Peter Allen, was with her, in a Hawaiian shirt trying to calm her down. All of us G.I.s were bumed. This was NOT the Judy Garland I remembered, with Mickey Rooney and on TV singing. This was a drunk lady in a mink stole with some young guy who only LOOKED like Judy.

When we landed in Vietnam it was really freaky. It was hotter than hot and stank bad of poop and garbage. We were loaded into busses with wire over the missing windows to keep out the hand grenades and there were "Four By Trucks" driving past us and in front of us, driving all around us with 50 Cal machine guns shooting at whoever was out to get us. We were driven into the hills outside of Saigon and unloaded at the L.B.J. processing center. That's where everybody got their orders and was moved out to their assignments. The entire country smelled like poop and garbage too, at least for the first few weeks until it didn't smell at all.

After a week of K.P. (don't EVER believe what you're told in the Military). Again, after a week of K.P. that began after a night on the perimeter with a loaded gun shooting at whoever was out to get us and another day burning human waste, that's when my week of K.P. started. But then I got my orders to report to the 54th Aviation Company in Vung Tao. When I asked how to get there I was told to go to where the airplanes are and get a ride - "Do I look like yur friggin tour guide. Now GET!"

The hour or two trip to Vung Tao took a day, after getting the usual run around (where people had fun sending the new guy all over the country). But the funny thing was that someone was keeping track of my travels because when I finally DID get to the Vung Tao airfield, a jeep pulled right up and told me to "Get in." "Me?" "You're Monigold, right?" "Yea" "Then get in, you're late." "But I got sent to the wrong places." "Tell it to the Chaplain kid, I don't care - yur LATE."

A couple of months went by where I did NOT pull K.P., just night guard duty (L.B.J. was my LAST K.P. duty in the Army). I was assigned to one of the 100 HOUR maintenance crews that worked on the Otters. See, after 100 FLYING HOURS, the big planes needed a complete engine and airframe service that averaged about a week to complete. I really dug that job. It was hot, dusty, greasy hard work. But I fell into the routine and soaked up all that I could learn.

Each of the maintenance teams had several sections and each section had a lead mechanic and the sections rose in prestige from tail wheel man all the way up to the Power Plant - the Engine Men. Engine men were the best of the best. They had done every job on the team to get there, even the records keeper. But we all knew that EVERY job was important. If the tail wheel failed (the lowliest job) the plane would ground loop and maybe flip, killing everyone on board. AND, after each major repair, the entire team and the chief inspector had to go on the test flight - THAT kept you concentrating on what you were doing, believe you me!

After working my way up to lead engine man I was finally given my airplane, and a promotion. I was a Crew Chief! - the most prestigious job in the unit. Even pilots held us in high esteem.

The fleet of the Company's big olive drab birds were scattered all around Vietnam. The 54th did very little flying, they just loaned the planes out to whoever needed them and had qualified pilots. Otherwise the 54th provided the pilots. Usually two. But sometimes there would only be one and that's when the "Chief" flew right seat (Co pilot).

As a Crew Chief I was the daily maintenance technician, the fuel and oil service guy, the cargo master, the flight steward, the door gunner, the guard, the gopher, back up pilot and guy that was shot at, yelled at and lauded, sometimes by the same people on the same day.

Once I was loaned to the Aussies.

A 54th pilot flew me to Saigon, then hitched a ride out. I was to meet the Australian pilots there. As I stood next to the back door of my plane, log book at the ready, waiting for the pilots I heard the strangest sound - "Hae mate, you the chife?"

"Yes Sir" I retorted with a stiffening stance and a snappy salute.

"Blimey bud, don't do that, its only me." said the man who approached me wearing baggy trousers, short sleeve shirt and a western style hat with one side pinned up. His whole git up was a dirty tan, except for his brown boots, which resembled old WW II Army paratrooper boots, only his were all dirty and scuffed - permanently! He had a cardboard box on his shoulder and another under his arm.

I had always prided myself on spit and polish ever since being a Boy Scout on Air Force bases. Boots spit shined, belt buckle polished, gig line straight (the seam in the front of my shirt matched up with the seam on the fly of my pants broken only by the squared off brass belt buckle). I tried to break starch every morning, no matter where I was. I carried extra uniforms and boots with me on the plane for that very purpose. My trousers were always bloused over the top of my boots in a near perfect crease. I was a proud soldier. My plane matched my personal appearance - always. The first thing I would do after landing ANYWHERE was square away Big Daddy 312, then myself. Only then would I take a break, although I usually busied myself fixing the small "gigs" in my log book.

But I was an anomaly in Vietnam. I still wore the outdated, optional O.D. Fatigues instead of the popular, ubiquitous Jungle Fatigues with their baggy fit and big trouser leg mounted pockets who's shirt sleeves had been designed for rolling up with a button flap to hold the fabric in a random roll, covering any shoulder patches. Plus the shirts were more like frocks that didn't get tucked in. They looked very sloppy, no matter how hard a person tried to make them look otherwise. I should know, cause I tried. And since only Jungle Boots were available, whose soft flexible leather toe and heel covers were hard to shine, I spent the extra time and energy needed to keep mine shiny.

"Ear - ya reedy ta goi?" the man asked. I knew he was an Aussie because I was told that's who I'd be meeting, but I had never seen one or heard one and if this was an Aussie, looking all sloppy and talking all funny, what would he be doing to my plane? I wondered as I responded "Yes sir, she's ready to fly, sir. How long before the other pilot shows sir?"

"OTHER? Ain't I good enough? Don't know yur plaine chife?"

"Yes Sir, I know my plane. Just you then? What about your gear?"

With that question he rolled the box from his shoulder to the ground as easy as a magician might topple his hat full of rabbits with a flourish - from head to hand. He then placed the box that was under his arm on top of the first one and said "This heerz it Mate. You ever hear of a Salty Dawg?"

"Yes sir, it's my mom's favorite drink. Grapefruit juice, vodka and a splash of salt."

"Roit ya ere again. But ya can bag the salt cuz we got nun. So pack this in and that'll do."

"This is all you have?"

"Need more? Ya that thirsty?"

"Thirsty?"

"This here's me Salty Dawg kit Mate. Never travel without it."

"This is vodka and grapefruit juice?"

"Glass fifths and a case of number teen cans."

Number ten cans were the food staple in Vietnam. Yes, there were C-Rations, each a multi-coursed meal in a small box that was just a bit bigger than a Good Earth tea-bag box, with 2 or 3 neatly packed metal cans of food, a packet of toilet paper, gum, cigarettes, matches, some kind of sweets and in every other one a P-38 can opener. But for cooks in the field, Number Ten Cans came filled with all sorts of food for making meals. Juice, meat, potatoes, vegetables, tomatoes, just about anything you could think of. They were a bit bigger than a Folgers bulk coffee tin and were unmarked. Only the cardboard boxes (that each held four of the cans) told of the ingredients within. Loose the box and the fun had just begun.

I lifted the two cases up on to the floorboard of my plane as the Aussie jumped in and asked "Where's yur canteen mate?" I got him my canteen. He unceremoniously unscrewed the cap and poured my hoarded water on to the ground. Before I could do anything but gawk he said "Heere, open one a them number teens and pass it along."

He had already torn the case of vodka open, pulled out a bottle and unscrewed the cap. Pouring in the clear liquid he complained "Chife hurry along wif that nummer teen." Grabbing the crudely opened grapefruit juice can he poured enough in the canteen to overflow it a bit. He replaced the cap with a quick spin and started to shake it. "Remember this mix chife." He took a gulp and handed it over to me with a drinking motion.

"Bottoms up - and hurry along, we caint leave til it's gone. It's me courage Mate."

Low, Slow and reliable was the Otters' motto and so it was for the Salty Dog mix.

By the time we had landed in the jungle, I was nearly passed out. My C Ration stash had been decimated with the empty tan boxes scattered here and there plus partially consumed olive drab cans rolling around on the floor. I don't remember much of the flight, but I do remember the arrival - a landing into an area barely big enough for a Huey helicopter, or so it looked. The approach was so steep it dislodged my strapped down hundred pound tool box and brought it and everything else sliding right up to the cockpit doorway.

We were greeted by a jeep - and the driver, seeing me close to falling out of the cargo door that was a good four feet above the jungle floor, ran over and caught me. He carried me to the jeep and put me on the canvas stretcher strapped across the back of the vehicle. We drove off toward a low palm frond covered bamboo framed structure snuggled amongst the thick jungle foliage, that they called THE HUT. I rolled off the stretcher and landed almost on my feet. That's when I launched my load, fell over and was out until at least the next day.

When I came to, my plane was gone. Oh shit. I couldn't honestly tell you if I felt worse because of my hang over or having lost my plane. I seemed to be alone too. I stumbled through the structure grabbing my head, slightly bent over. It was about 50 feet square (having lived in a number of mobile homes as my family traveled around the country following my dad from one military base to the next, the dimensions were memorable). There were cots scattered around in different areas and a big table in the middle of the single room that was lashed with ropes to some of the support poles. It, the table, was littered with C Rations, fresh fruit bits, empty and half empty liquor bottles, poker cards and cigarette butts.

"Feelin better mate?" a voice called to me from somewhere.

"Where's my plane?"

"The boys took er out for a spin while you slept off the Salty Dawgs."

"I need my plane back. I signed for that thing."

"What you need is the hair of that dawg what bit ya Mate."

I'd like to tell what happened for the next 100 flight hours of my plane. But I can't. Either I was too drunk and hung over, or maybe I just can't. Either way, one day I was being shook awake by a pilot from the 54th while sleeping in the back of Big Daddy 312. Looking around, I realized we were at Saigon. I got up, not feeling too bad, and hopped out onto the taxi way. As I glanced inside the plane searching for my log book, that was opened in the doorway where it belonged, I could see more cases of C Rations than I had left with stacked where they should be, plus two of the now familiar cases next to them.

The 54th pilot spun my log book around and looked at the rows of gigs and repairs listed on the page. EVERYTHING was tidy and in order. "Good work chief. Lets get this bird back for it's 100 hour maintenance". As I closed the book I noticed the writing wasn't mine, but it was all proper. The Aussies had taken care of my plane after all.

The last coherent thing I can remember saying to the Aussie pilot was "Be careful with my bird sir." "Why?"

"The Army gave me this plane - I mean I had to sign for it."