



The Tale of the Eltinge

Pat not sure if you witnessed the beginning of this adventure or not. Anyway about 4PM the afternoon of July 8, 1965 Sergeant Anderson gave us the word to grab our gear and fall outside in company formation the trucks were on the way to take us to the airfield. So steel pots on our heads, our load bearing equipment on, carrying our individual weapons we man handled our "A" and "B" bags down the stairs and outside. Excitement level is way high but after having been on alert so many times in the past it doesn't seem real. Everyone is formed up in platoon and company formation, we can see Charlie company across the way going thru the same drill. Headcount is made and reported all present or accounted for. We're ordered to remove the 101st. patch from our uniform shirts because we're involved in a "SECRET MOVE". Remember how we had been told all along that we weren't supposed to be telling people we were going to Vietnam? Still can't figure out how the ladies at the laundries off post didn't guess the secret when they were sewing everything on our jungle fatigues. It gets better as this story plays out. So there we are standing at rest in formation awaiting the trucks. As usual it's hurry up and wait. After about half an hour we're told to fallout but stay in the area, if we have to use the latrine to tell someone. More wait and no trucks. It gets dark and we're still waiting and no trucks but we're still being told the trucks are on the way so we can't move back into the barracks so we spend the first night of our Vietnam adventure catnapping on the grass in the company area. Can't leave the area, trucks are on the way.

At last at about O-Dark-Thirty the trucks at last arrive, just before sunrise as I remember it, cattle trucks and about that point we resembled a herd, but we at last begin the first leg of our "Secret Move". It all still doesn't seem real, just another alert or drill. We truck on down to Campbell Army Airfield and there sitting waiting for us are aircraft waiting for us. Not AIRFORCE transports as we would expect, no waiting on the tarmac are commercial airliners and they even have stewardesses on board. They must be all part of the plan to keep it a "Secret Move". No one was there to bid us farewell, not even the Division commander General Powell. After struggling to board the aircraft and get our gear settled we were on our way West. At this point the higher ups still hadn't filled us in on our complete travel itinerary so we didn't know how far we would be traveling in comfort. For a lot of us this was the first time on a jet aircraft. We were able to have drinks on the flight as long as they weren't alcoholic in nature and none of the guys got out of hand with the stews. There was some swapping of Jump Wings for Stew Wings but except for friendly smiles and kind words that was the extent of the interaction between troops and crew. Word at last was passed that we would be landing in San Francisco and shortly there after we started to descend, I was sitting by a window and looking down all I could see below was either fog or clouds, no sign of the city or airfield. Down we went into the clouds, down, down and down some more and I'm looking for the clouds to part and the ground to appear but all I'm seeing is clouds. When we did come out of the clouds we were low over water and I didn't see a runway in sight. The plane continued to drop and then made a turn and the wheels touched down on a runway extending out into San Francisco Bay, I thought for a minute we were landing in water. So here we were on the ground at San Francisco International, I would have expected a secret move would have us landing at either Alameda Naval Air Station or Travis Air Force Base to keep the secret from being discovered, but no. Instead of off loading us at an area away from the main terminal we deplane at the main terminal. As we left the aircraft all of the stews gave us warm smiles but they had tears forming in their eyes. Still wonder to this day how those air crews were sworn to secrecy about their part in our secret move. After deplaning and moving thru the jet way here we are trooping thru the main terminal with out steel pots, with airborne chin straps, M-16 rifles, first stateside Army unit to be issued those, our load bearing equipment and our two duffle bags each. We're not wearing a unit patch but with us wearing jump boots and carrying M-16 it wouldn't be too hard to figure out what unit was on the move. So we march thru the terminal with all these civilians witnessing our secret move to the outside where we board Greyhound Buses, still don't know what our final

destination for the day is. After what seems to be a rather short bus trip the buses come to a stop on a pier located in the Alameda Navy yard. After we unload the buses and gather all our gear we notice two grey ships tied up to the pier one looks modern, clean, new paint or as the Navy saying goes "Ship Shape". The second ship looks old, tired, in need of work with rust streaks showing on its side. The second ship the USNS General Leroy Eltinge is of course the one we shall board for the trip to Vietnam. In keeping with the theme of all this being a secret move all the pay phones along the pier are inactive, a number of guys reported this after trying to make a last call home. So we struggle up the gang plank from the pier to the rust bucket like a herd of pregnant cows carrying all our gear. Once we reach the main deck we enter a hatch in the super structure and start snaking our way down an endless series of ladders, what we land lubbers would call stairs. I guess we went down five decks to our troop compartment where we were to sleep for the duration of our time on board. The compartment was big but very cramped since it was a berthing compartment. It looked just like the scenes out of the old John Wayne movies when he plays a Marine. Our beds or racks were pipe frames with canvas stretched between, kind of like an Army cot without the legs. The racks were stacked five high with maybe 24 to 30 inches between the lower and next above. I lucked out I got a top rack so all I had above me was a pipe running over me. I was able to put one duffle bag at my feet, the other on with my Mae West at my head, my M-16 along my left side and hung my LBE over the pipe above me. Compared to the guys below I had a king size bed

We must have been one of the last units on board because shortly after reaching our berthing space we could hear that preparations were being made for the ship to depart. After getting my gear situated I made it back up to the main deck to witness our leaving San Francisco Bay. Going back topside I almost got sick, the ship was already clear of the pier and moving so there was the bow to stern motion of the ship and I'm going from side to side up the ladders. I swear I could feel myself going green in the face. As soon as I hit the main deck and could smell fresh air I was OK. When at last I made my way out on the main deck I found myself watching the city of San Francisco slip past as we headed toward the Golden Gate Bridge and beyond. One of the landmarks of San Francisco caught my eye it was Coit Tower which was built to honor the firemen who died during the fire after the great earthquake of 1906. Seeing that tower made my mind flashback to 1958 when I was in San Francisco with my parents on vacation. During our sightseeing we visited the tower and I remember watching ships leaving the harbor and wondering where they were bound for. I wondered if at that moment another 14 year old kid was watching us from the top of the tower and was having the same thought. The next sight to oh and ah over was the Golden Gate Bridge itself, a real sight to behold and we got the special tour by seeing the bottom side.

After passing the extreme western tips of California the only view in front or to the sides of the ship was the Pacific Ocean, we could still see land off the stern until it finally dropped below the waves. The sun was bright, the air crisp and fresh and the ocean was smooth but there were no deck chairs or shuffle board.

That evening we had our first meal at sea. There was no real rhyme or reason to feeding us. We all followed one another down a series of interior ladders (stairs remember) down to the mess deck. Chow was served on the stainless steel trays were all use to and then we had to find a spot at table to eat. The mess deck was standing room only, there were no chairs to sit in, and you stood at the table and ate your food. I remember the food during the whole crossing as being pretty good; our mess cooks must not have been allowed in the galley. The coffee was excellent. The majority of the economy cruise we were booked on the water was smooth enough to eat without having to chase your tray across the table, there were a couple of meals where things did get interesting. One of the guys in the company got seasick as soon as the ship left the dock and he was sick the full time we were aboard. I can't remember his name but he survived well enough to walk off the ship when we landed. After eating we moved back up to the main deck for air, ventilation below decks was bad and it got worse as time passed and we got closer to our destination. I think everyone had a late night that first night; everyone seemed a little keyed up, a lot of questions and no answers and nobody wanting to go below and sleep in the berthing compartment. I wasn't too excited about sleeping 5 decks down and no way out in case we sprung a leak. Eventually the sandman got the better of me and I did.

Next day after climbing to the main deck we were totally surrounded by water nothing to be seen in any direction except water. After morning chow we settled into what was to become the daily routine aboard ship. First priority was finding someplace to sit. We were told that we had to be out of the berthing compartment by 0800 and were not allowed back down there until after 1700. Since we the enlisted troops were restricted to the main deck only and there was almost 4,000 on that ship the space along the superstructure of the ship and the rail filled up fast. If you weren't able to find a spot to sit you joined in a column of troops just circling the main deck hoping to find an open spot. There were even restrictions on where to sit, no sitting in front of a hatch or ladder, no sitting on any hand rails, no climbing up on lifeboat davits other ship equipment on deck. So you would walk the track hoping to find a spot, if not you could luck out when somebody gave up their spot to go below for noon chow, but that generally meant going without eating yourself. Another priority was getting hold of something to read, paperback books were worth their weight in gold. People were so bored after awhile that people that never cracked a book were pleading to borrow the book you were reading. You could even trade a book for a place to sit. There were no formations, no briefings no organized activities all the time we were in transit. Boredom set in real fast. Another distraction we came up with later in the cruise to lessen the endless hours of boredom was making rings out of quarters. Remember back then quarters were made of silver and not wafers like they are now. The ring making process consisted of holding the coin vertically between your forefinger and thumb of one hand and striking the edge with your mess kit spoon. After each blow you would rotate the coin and strike again. On and on hold, rotate and hit. This started off small but after awhile it seemed everyone on the ship except the lifers and officers were engaged in this mindless task. You could identify fellow ring makers by the black and blue tips of forefinger and thumb on one or both hands. The process would widen the edge of the coin to resemble that of a white gold wedding band and in doing so reduce the thickness of the center of the coin. The final step was to pierce the center of the coin and trim it out to fit your finger. After this had been going on for awhile the Captain of the ship made an announcement over PA system that what we were doing was against Federal Law. Our reaction to that was "What are they going to do? Cut our hair and send us to Vietnam? After a time we even got bored doing that.

Looking back now on that time and after all these years I realize with all those long hours of nothing to do none of the conversation I can remember had nothing to do with Vietnam. We all knew where we were going, none of us except a few old timers knew what to expect but we just talked about everything else except Vietnam.

Word started going around that based on the condition of the ship General Leroy Eltinge must have been General Custer's intelligence officer before the battle of the Little Big Horn. Truth be told I found out years latter that the Eltinge was built Kaiser Shipbuilding in Richmond, California during WWII as a Liberty Ship. Learned from Chaplain Bowers that during the Korean War when he was an enlisted tank mechanic he had been on the same ship going from the states to Germany. The ship was USNS not USS denoting a ship of the regular Navy. The Captain was regular Navy but the rest of the crew was made up of civilian merchant marine seaman. One crewman everyone got a kick out of was a short Pilipino he had a handlebar mustache that looked like the horns on a Texas Longhorn. It was perfectly waxed and curled at the ends.

The boredom also got the rumor mill cranked up and running. First was that we were being shadowed by a Russian submarine and everybody seemed to know somebody that had heard that from a reliable source? The combined heartbeat aboard ship really went up one day when we saw a whale blowing off thru his blowhole, almost a panic. Then as we started getting closer to Hawaii the rumor started that we'd be stopping off there for jungle training, needless to say we went past Hawaii without stopping. After that we were going to get jungle training on Okinawa, didn't even come close.

To top everything off the ship was only able to produce a limited amount of freshwater each day so we had to take saltwater showers. You probably already know that normal bath soap doesn't lather in saltwater, it just goes on like grease and then doesn't rinse off. So with the lack of showers, bad ventilation in the berthing compartment I started sleeping on the main deck every night, found a spot under a ladder leading to an upper deck so I wouldn't get stepped on. The berthing compartment got worse with each day and getting closer to the Equator and the rising temperature.

Saw some of the troops trying washing their uniforms by tying rope and hanging them over the side into the wake alongside the ship. Did I happen to mention we had no facilities for laundry on the cruise? Anyway the washing of the uniforms suspended by rope into the wake just succeeded in shredding the clothes because water rubbing the material against the hull of the ship. But all was not lost; somebody on board had a sense of humor. We started having movies at night up on deck; you'll never guess what the features were? They showed us the old TV series COMBAT with Vic Morrow, what more could we ask for?

Shortly after the two week point in our all expense paid cruise the ship developed engine trouble and we came to a stop out in the middle of all that water. I think we were without forward motion for about a day and when they got the old bucket fired up again we altered course for Subic Bay in the Philippines for repairs. Of course the rumors of us getting jungle training before hitting Vietnam took off again. After tying up dockside at the Subic Navy Base we were amazed at actually seeing land again, it seemed like it had been forever since last seeing California. During the time it took for repairs they allowed a battalion at a time to leave the ship, it was only for a short time and we were restricted to the navy base itself. A group of us took off looking for the nearest EM club, I've never been much of a drinker but the idea of a cold beer sure seemed like a great idea. It looked like they had every MP, SP and AP in the Philippines in the area to keep an eye on us. Found out later that a boat load of MARINES had come thru the week before and tore the place up. It was late afternoon by the time we located the EM club and had our cold beers and since we didn't have a lot of money or things to spend it on we headed back towards the ship before sundown. As we were headed back to the ship and it was near sundown we heard the first notes of retreat being played over the base PA, we knew from our good military training that the lowering of the National Colors would commence shortly. So we stopped walking and turned towards a large American Flag on a pole and rendered hand salutes during the lowering of the flag and the playing of the music. The effect seeing the flag lowered that night affected me more powerfully than any previous time in service. Maybe because of where we were going. While we were standing at attention and saluting the colors the MARINE detachment on board a naval ship, I think it was a missile cruiser was making cat call and throwing verbal insults at us. We were good troops and ignored them and when the music ended we lowered our salutes and continued on our way. Before we passed the ship we could hear the Officer of the Deck and possibly the ranking MARINE doing some serious chewing of MARINE ass. Also while we were tied up in Subic while the repairs were being performed a team of Naval Underwater Demolition swimmers put on a demonstration of dropping off and picking up of their team. They came all the way across the bay from their base about a distance we guessed of 3 miles to show us how good they were. Two boats were involved one was a powered boat the other was a black inflated job kind of like a Zodiac that was tied fore and aft to the bigger boat. They started their run astern of our ship and picked up speed as they came even with us the swimmers would at timed intervals transfer from the bigger boat to the inflatable and then into the water. After all the swimmers were in the water the boat circled back around to the starting point to our stern and built up speed again, this time they had a pickup man in the inflatable with what looked deformed Hula Hoop. The swimmers in the water were treading water facing in the direction the pickup boat was coming from with their right arms up out of the water. The swimmers were between our ship and where the pickup boat would pass so we had front row seats. The idea was that swimmers would hook the hoop with their upraised arms and swung into the inflatable without the pickup boat reducing speed. On the first pass all the swimmers except one managed to connect with the hoop, the pickup boat again made another pass to pick him up and he missed again. Again the boat circled and made another attempt, he missed again. The boat then changed course for their base across the bay and I guess it was the diver in charge yelled over a bull horn for the swimmer to swim home. Like I said before I estimate the distance across the bay to be about three miles.

Anyway at last the repairs to the engines were complete and we continued on our merry way. We knew our remaining time aboard ship was drawing to an end but still nobody was talking about Vietnam. Shortly after leaving Subic Bay we were informed that LT Olyphant was being detached from the company and Sergeant Anderson the platoon sergeant would be taking over the leadership of our platoon. Rumor was that the LT was going to be liaison with Special Forces. Also about this time we got the word to sew the 101 patch back on our jungle fatigue shirts,

bitch, bitch, and bitch. Rumor again was that General Westmoreland was going to be there to greet us when we landed. If you remember not only was Westy there but also Maxwell D. Taylor out going Ambassador to South Vietnam, another former commander of the 101. I think he hung around because one of his sons was a company commander with the 502nd. Also we were given little books explaining such things as the culture and history of Vietnam, Vietnamese officer ranks, some basic Vietnamese words. One bit of info contained in the book that we found amusing was dealing with how to identify the enemy. I believe it went something like “The usual uniform of the Viet Cong is black pajamas and a conical hat”. Needless to say when we got off the ship and learned that that was the standard attire of the average Vietnamese we started feeling a bit paranoid. A day or so before we landed some of the troops got Mohawks to imitate the hair dos of the WWII 101st. prior to their jump into Normandy. I felt sorry for those guys when we left the ship because we had to have our steel pots on and the tropic sun had fried their scalps.

Then the cruise ended and you know the story as well as I from that point on. Had to share with you what you missed on the cruise.