

BOB SCOBIE

CON SON LORAN STATION – VIETNAM – Jun69 to Jun70

Golden Journeys Booklet – 2015

I was rewarded for making LT by being assigned as CO, Con Son Island LORAN Station, Vietnam.

The island had a major Vietnamese prison that was home to the infamous "Tiger Cages," but we never had any problems with any of the prisoners.

WIKIPEDIA

At the request of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the U.S. Coast Guard started pre-construction plans for a chain of Loran-C radio stations to serve Southeast Asia 15 January 1966 in support of Operation Tight Reign during the Vietnam War.

The actual construction of Station Con Son began during April with the delivery of construction materials by USCGC Nettle (WAK-169) and award of construction contracts to Morrison-Knudsen Corp. and Brown and Root Company. Station Con Son was one of five stations in the Southeast Asia chain and was designated SH-3 Yankee. It consisted of a 625 foot (191 m) tower, transmitter equipment buildings, fuel tanks, generators and barracks for personnel located on the north end of Con Son Island.

The personnel complement for the station was two officers and 23 enlisted men. After commissioning on 2 September 1966 the station began the testing phase of operations and the five station chain was fully operational by 0400 on 28 October, just nine months after the initial request from the Department of Defense. The station provided, along with its sister stations in the chain, signals that allowed aircraft and ships to receive accurate all-weather positioning data for navigation purposes.

During January 1973 the operation of the station was turned over to civilian contractors who were responsible to the United States Coast Guard for all functions of the station. The Coast Guard continued to supply logistical and technical support on an as needed basis. When the fall of the South Vietnamese government was imminent, Station Con Son was directed to stay on the air until the last possible minute to provide navigation signals to aircraft and ships fleeing South Vietnam.

Station Con Son stayed on the air until 1246 local time on 29 April 1975, after which the crew oversped the generators and damaged critical pieces of electronic gear.

CON SON LORAN STATION

Bob Scobie

March 8, 2021

Con Son Loran Station was on Con Son Island, Vietnam - the largest of 12 islands in the Isle de Poulo Condor, located about 100 miles south of Saigon and 50 miles east of the Mekong Delta. It is a tropical island divided down the middle by a mountain range with a peak of nearly 2,000 feet.

The two sides of the island were connected by a narrow mountain road. On one side was the Vietnamese prison complex and the supporting infrastructure including housing for prison staff, guards and their families. On the other side was the Coast Guard Loran Station, an air strip, a beach and a small Vietnamese village.

There were thousands of Vietnamese prisoners on the island. The vast majority were in "out prison" camps throughout the island. They were guarded by Vietnamese police (aka white mice). Most of the prisoners, both criminal and political, were happy to get out of the war and were of no threat. They were trained in such skills as farming, fishing and wood working.

Prisoners, who were more of a threat, were housed in the main prison complex which was an old French prison. These folks were held behind walls and guarded by armed Vietnamese soldiers. The most incorrigible of these were held in the infamous Tiger Cages. To picture these cells check out the old movie Papillon with Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. The cells were very small cement units with a concrete bed, a huge iron door, and bars across the ceiling to let in some air. There were 3 to 4 residents per cell. Prisoners were allowed out for 5 minutes a day. There may have been even worse cells that I did not get to see.

A C-123 landed one day with a load of prisoners. These were all women who had burned down a prison on the main land. When the rear loading ramp was lowered, it was obvious that this was not a group of friendly folk. I don't understand a word of Vietnamese, but I could tell that the prisoners were telling the guards what they could do. They all became residents of the concrete cells.

The Coast Guard paid to allow us to have half a dozen prisoners as helpers on the station. They worked in the kitchen and other tasks normally completed by seamen. For their help we paid a handsome salary of \$1 per day per prisoner. They were trustworthy and did not create any problems. For example, when a chief transferred, the houseboy came to me saying the chief left his loaded.45 in his locker.

I relieved LCDR Louis McDowell in June 1969 and was relieved by LT Mike Bell a year later. Our crew totaled 25 - 2 officers and 23 enlisted in addition to the half dozen prisoner house boys.

Con Son was the Yankee slave of our Loran chain that was under the command of the Southeast Asia Section headquartered in Bangkok.

We tried to keep normal working hours which included round the clock watches in the transmitter building. The warrant XO oversaw the transmission operation and I was more involved in the paperwork involved in the overall operation of the station. My administrative assistant was a SK, who doubled as a YN. We were required to submit a number of reports - this was before computers - so we had outlined all required reports on a manila folder. Once the report was completed, we crossed it out.

There was a small US Navy radar station at the top of the mountain and the US Army and US Air Force used facilities on the island. It was the first time in my career that I was the senior commander in a multi-service group. People actually came to us begging for parts, food, etc.

We had a hooch on the beach, which was used after hours and on weekends. A cooler of beer was usually present, especially if we were entertaining visiting folks who flew in for a day relaxation from Saigon. In addition, each crew member was given a week R & R. I spent my week in Taiwan visiting one of our bridesmaids and her husband, who was stationed there in the US Navy.

Overall, the tour went well. Our on-air time exceeded 99% from our 625 foot transmitting tower. This is not to say that the time was without some interesting events. Strange things happen on isolated duty. Many should remain unpublished even after the statute of limitations has long expired. However, here is a glimpse of some things that did occur:

- We had a visit from Walt Viglianzone, a classmate, and had a great game of football on the beach next our beach hooch.
- CGC Mendota anchored off shore and crew members came ashore for a day of R&R.
- We sent our alcoholic mascot dog to the mainland to be dried out.
- A SA reported aboard. During his initial interview, I asked why he had been assigned to the station. He had been told that it was his turn. His service record indicated that he had been busted for smoking MJ at Fort Derussy recreation facility in Hawaii.
- A crew member showed sign of a heart attack. A call went out for medical advice. We were told to have the corpsman check the man for vitals. The corpsman was the one in pain. So, another crew member with some Boy Scout training took the vitals. As a result, a medevac was requested. The flight was delayed until the US Air Force could find a front end loader to load our pallet of beer. The corpsman actually suffered another ailment that resembled a heart attack and was back on duty in a couple weeks.

- Vietnamese President Thieu had a small hooch on the island that he used when visiting to do some day fishing. His idea of fishing was to embark on a patrol boat, toss a hand grenade in the water, and have his attendants jump in the water to gather up the fish as they floated to the surface. This was very efficient method of fishing.
- One day he asked us if we would temporarily store 12 burlap bags of fish for him in our refrigerator. We gladly did that and returned 11 bags at the end of the day. The rest tasted very good.
- We had fruit cocktail in Jell-o one day. The XO called the cook over to ask what was in the Jell-o besides the fruit. The cook replied that it was walnuts. With a puzzled look the XO asked when did walnuts grow feet.
- A crew member spotted a deadly poisonous Russell viper near the walkway between our quarters and the transmission building. He decided to kill it with a hoe. Although he struck it in the neck, it did not die. Rather the snake turned around and headed after the crew member. Fortunately the snake succumbed to its injuries before the crew member ran out of energy.
- There were frequent supply flights to the island. Often Americans would arrive on these flights to spend a day of R & R on the beach. We were always trading items with them.
- We were having trouble with weeds growing around the base of the guide wire to our antenna. A deal was made that for a canned ham we would receive a large bag of powder that we could sprinkle around the bases and never again have a weed problem. Fortunately, the deal fell through as I am sure now that the magic powder was Agent Orange.

GOL-239/Scobie

While I as Commanding Officer of an isolated Ioran station on Con Son Island, Vietnam, one of our crew members suffered symptoms that appeared to be a heart attack. We immediately radioed for medical assistance and a medical evacuation. We contacted a Coast Guard cutter and the ship's doctor advised us to have the corpsman get the patient's vital signs. We replied that the patient was the corpsman. A survey of the crew found an engineman who had a few months experience as a volunteer EMT and was able to get the vitals. Another crew member had been a Boy Scout and remembered how to make a person comfortable in a situation like this. Continuing to follow the ship's doctor's advice, we got the patient stabilized and comfortable.

Finally, after several hours, an Air Force C-130 landed in a heavy rain storm to medically evacuate the patient. Just before the plane took off I asked a crew member why they had taken so long to get to our island. He said they had a hard time finding a fork lift to put our pallet of beer on the plane. After being examined on the main land, the determination was the corpsman had not suffered a heart attack. However, we were reassured that we had done the correct thing by calling in the aircraft.

BACKGROUND

In 1966, MACV (Military Assistance Command-Vietnam) requested a Coast Guard buoy tender to install, maintain and service aids-to-navigation (ATON) in South Vietnam. Soon, a buoy tender arrived to set petroleum buoys for offloading fuel. In all, five buoy tenders marked South Vietnamese channels and maintained lighthouses along the South Vietnamese coast. Buoy tender duties included marking newly-dredged channel and coral reefs, positioning mooring buoys, and training the Vietnamese in ATON duties. Vietnamese lighthouse service personnel were assigned to temporary duty aboard Coast Guard buoy tender that reactivated and automated all South Vietnamese lighthouses.

Under Operation "Tight Reign," the Coast Guard built and manned LORAN C stations allowing mariners and aviators to accurately fix their positions. LORAN's original purpose was to provide

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electronic aids to mariners and aviators in areas where surface aids were nonexistent, waters relatively uncharted or skies frequently overcast.

(Source: The Long Blue Line; Coast Guard joined the fight in Vietnam over 50 years ago...)

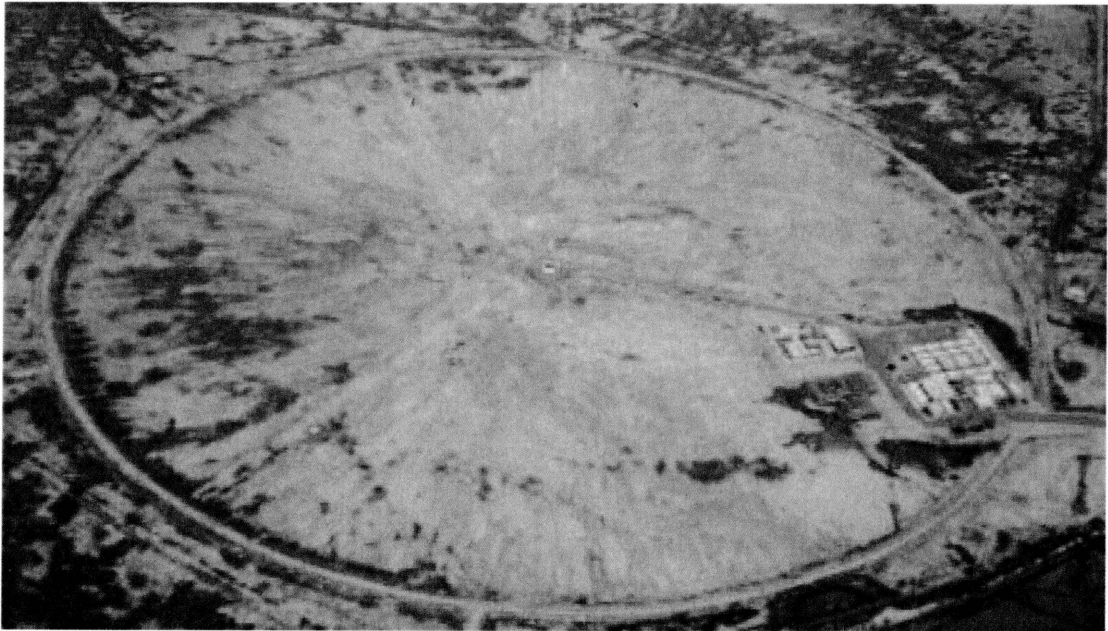
The rapid development of deep water ports in Vietnam brought an expanded need of navigational aids for preventing vessel accidents. South Vietnam's small aids-to-navigation force with its one buoy tender could not meet the demand. Coast Guard buoy tenders in the Pacific made periodic trips to Vietnam installing and maintaining buoys. A Coast Guard Aids to Navigation (ATON) Detail was set up in Saigon to coordinate workloads for these visits as well as keeping buoys and range markers lighted.

LORAN C in Southeast Asia was able to provide warplanes with precision navigation. The Coast Guard LORAN Construction Detachment began work in January of 1966 and on 8 August 1966 the navigation network was on the air with station established in Lampang, Sattahip and Udorn in Thailand and Con Son in Vietnam. A fifth station was later added in Tan My, South Vietnam.

(Source: Coast Guard at War: History p.12 of 15

http://www.uscg.mil/history/articles/h_CGatwar.asp)

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An aerial photograph of the LORAN station located at Tan My in Vietnam. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

The service built and manned Long Range Aids to Navigation (LORAN) stations allowing mariners and aviators to accurately fix their positions. LORAN's original purpose was to provide electronic aids to mariners and aviators in areas where surface aids were nonexistent, waters relatively uncharted, or skies frequently overcast. Under Operation "Tight Reign," LORAN stations were established at Con Son Island and Tan My in Vietnam; and at Lampang, Sattahip and Udorn in Thailand.

Scobie '69 17 Dec

Dear Capt and Mrs High,

Christmas 1969 finds the Scobie clan 1100 miles apart, but in good health and good spirits. This has been an eventful year for us. I guess the orders to Con Son was the first bit of excitement. Ditsie took it like a real trooper. Next came an addition to the family. Heather Anne arrived in April which of course was very exciting.

I had to leave about four weeks later, but we had time to move Ditsie and Heather in with Ditsie folks in Arlington, Va. All reports show they

both are doing well.

As for me, I have no complaints. The facilities here are outstanding. All spaces are air conditioned, supplies come in once a week, and occasionally the men get to Saigon for a few days. Where else in VN do people worry about mowing a lawn. The amount of unusable time is small in fact last month it was only 28 minutes.

I remember several years ago now a class advisor telling of the merits of being C.O. of a loan station. Of course we all had a good laugh. But I'm

afraid the last laugh is on
us. C.O. is the only way to
go. If the station falls apart
it's your fault, if it goes
you get the credit. The one
part that drew the biggest
laugh was that you get to
know the wife better. I can
honestly say that in our
three years of marriage
Ditsie and I have never
been closer than we are
today. Then for this station
there is the bonus of hostile
fire pay and \$500 tax
deduction. All in all I think
the good outweighs the bad.

Last weekend was "hump
day" so it's not going to
be long now. I am looking

forwarded to going back to
school next year. I plan to
do better than I did at the
Academy.

For my family as well
as my self I would like
to extend to you best
wishes for a happy holiday
season.

Sincerely
Scooter, Ditsie and
Heather Scobie

wd: VCGA 65 Photo

1 message

William Carr <carrw1943@gmail.com>
To: Robert Scobie <scobiebob73@gmail.com>
Cc: Walt Viglienzone <viglie@aol.com>

Wed, Aug 21, 2024 at 7:35 PM

Bob - Thanks for the photograp which adds nicely to the "Class of 1965 Experiences In Vietnam" portfolio in Special Collections at the Academy Library.

Additional Vietnam photographs and stories of classmates serving in Vietnam would be most welcome additions to that collection....Bill


----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Robert Scobie** <scobiebob73@gmail.com>
Date: Tue, Aug 20, 2024 at 3:19 PM
Subject: VCGA 65 Photo
To: Bill Carr <carrw1943@gmail.com>

Bill,
Attached is a photo of Walt and me on Con Son Island when he came to visit our Ioran station 1969/70. It might make Alumni Bulletin material.

Sorry for the unfinished editing. Just got a new computer and am working out the procedures.

Bob Scobie

 **Walt and Bob.pdf**
137K

