

The ARMY Aviation Craftsman

I believe that Craftsman Greasey Fingers is truly representative of the RAEME tradesman involved in the maintenance of ARMY Aircraft in its fledgling days of the 60's and 70's, and it may well be still true today. The term Greasey is considered to be one of endearment and refers to all RAEME trades, Instrument, Radio, Electrical, Engines and Airframe. He has the rank of craftsman because that is where we all start.

His Story

Craftsman Fingers was an Army Apprentice Fitter and Turner who were posted to 16 Army Light Aircraft Squadron in February of 1965. He was to undergo training as an Airframe Fitter on the first Army Light Aircraft Conversion course. The course was conducted at the Army Aircraft Technical Training School at RAAF Base Amberley.

He completed the course in June of 65, started "on the job training" and became qualified in his trade in October of 1965.

By December of 1965 he had qualified to a level in "all trades" and was posted to H.Q. 1 Divisional Army Aviation Regiment. As the first Army qualified "all trades" person he was then deployed to Port Moresby in January 1966, where he provided technical support to 2 Cessna 180s that were attached to the Pacific Island Regiment. (PIR)

This was a short deployment as a month later he was notified of his posting to 161 Recce Flight in South Vietnam. It was at the airport, in Port Moresby, when he first got the feeling that what he was doing was not the ideal in the eyes of all. A woman approached him, he thought her to be in her 40s, and told him that she belonged to a group known as Save Our Sons, (SOS), and that they were fighting to prevent Australians going to war in Vietnam. This was all news to Fingers, however it was a sign of things to come. By the way this woman also told him that she had never married, nor did she have a son.

Soldiers who were sent to Vietnam were trained at Conungra in the art of jungle warfare, and given a knowledge of the country and its people. Craftsman Fingers received some really deep and meaningful pre-embarkation training before going to Vietnam. It consisted of a run to Rosebank from Amberley (approx 9 miles) and a couple of days at the rifle range. (Presumably to make sure he was aware of which end the bullets came out) and very little else.

In April of 1966 he left Australia dressed in civilian clothes on QANTAS flight QF 276/144 to Manila.

The following day he departed Manila and flew dressed in uniform with Air France to Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon. He remembers that he and others with him were treated very poorly on the Air France flight and it was most likely due to the uniforms and the general dislike for the war in Vietnam. (A further image of things to come.)

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Upon arrival in Saigon he was unable to get to 161 Recce Flt at Bien Hoa as nobody was there to meet him and he had no idea where in the country they were.

As a result he spent a number of days at an American Camp known as 'Camp Alpha'. It was again due to the generosity of the Americans that he was able to get a lift to 161 Recce Flight who were attached to the U S Army's 173 rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa, about 25 miles north of Saigon.

Upon his arrival at the 161 Recce Flight, Fingers and those with him were informed that nobody at 161 was aware of their arrival in South Vietnam and that was the reason they weren't met. Great Military communication between Australia and Vietnam.

As the result of the lack of communication and accommodation, Craftsman Fingers found himself and his mate sleeping in a wooden box used for transporting Sioux helicopter bubbles. This at least would provide some protection from the weather.

These were fairly exciting and somewhat confusing times for Fingers and his mate, they had never been involved in a war before, nor had they heard prolonged artillery fire. They spent most the first night in the box trying to determine what was "In Coming" and what was "Out Going".

On the 13th May 1966 when 161 was to move the back beach of Vung Tau on the South China Sea, Fingers and a number of his mates were to have another exciting experience. Instead of traveling by road convoy, the conventional method of travel to Vung Tau, they traveled on the Clive Steele, a Light Ship Medium (LSM) an Army Small Ship crewed by Army Engineers down the Delta to the South China Sea then on to Vung Tau. The voyage down the Delta although uneventful was with rifles loaded and safety's off. On arrival at Vung Tau it was down with the landing ramp and charge the beaches. (Eat your hearts out Infantry. The poor bloody locals must have wondered what the hell was going on). After securing the beach (from the local swimmers and fishermen) it was off to Back Beach to establish the camp at the Australian Logistic Support Group. (ALSG)

On the 1st June 1966 that 161 Recce Flight was re-designated 161 (Indep) Recce Flt.

Fingers and his mates were initially camped on a hill back from the beach and later established the 161 camp on the beach front. Clearing patrols we carried out from the hill location for a number of days until it was realised that whilst Fingers and Co. were aware of the need for security the locals were not. The locals had continued to go to the beach to fish and swim, the clearing patrols were dropped and guards placed strategically around the perimeter.

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Life in Vung Tau for Fingers was never boring. Wind and sand posing some major heartaches. Camped in the sand on the beach brought with it, its own problems. Sand was in everything, all meals came with sand, showers came with sand, beer came with sand, sleep came with sand, and it was in everything, always.

There were times when the winds were so bad that the sand bag walls of the tents were below sand. It wasn't long before Fingers realised that to open his eyes after sleeping involved cleaning the sand out of them first.

Fingers and other aircraft personnel traveled daily from the Army Logistic Support Group (ALSG) at back beach to Vung Tau airfield daily to perform whatever duties they were allocated. Maintenance personnel were required to perform duties other than maintenance.

Fingers had the good fortune to be responsible for the camp canteen (boozer) a task that was very near and dear to his heart. It not only gave him unlimited access to beer, but also a landrover for regular visits to town to pick up ice, and sample local produce.

Working conditions at Vung Tau airport were primitive to say the least, especially for aircraft maintenance. Whilst there was a large workshop tent for the airframe and engine fitters to work in, it was generally too dark with little or no power for lighting. The majority of work was done in the open and when a work bench was needed, a table top or door would be set up on top of a couple of 44 Gallon drums. Balancing Helicopter main rotor blades and maintenance on hydraulic systems would normally require almost still and sterile conditions, which were never available in the sands of Vung Tau and the dust of Nui Dat. Instrument, Radio, and Electrical trades were very little better off. Although everybody did their best in the conditions that were available, it would not have been accepted by anybody anywhere other than Army tradesmen and Army Pilots in Vietnam. They were always there when the call came through. No aircraft were lost due to maintenance error.

161 Recce had 3 Cessna 180s and possibly 5 Bell G3B1s at that time.

The generosity of the US Army came to the fore again whilst camped at Back Beach. Demonstrations over the Vietnam War were causing a lot of unrest in Australia and as a result the Waterside Workers and Australia Post both went on strike as a show of protest against the war. This meant that the Australian troops were unable to receive mail, and Australian rations and beer stopped coming into the country. As a result the phrase "Punch a Postie" and "Wop a Wharfie" were formed. (Yet another show of things to come.)

The U.S. provided us with food and introduced us to Yankee beer.

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It was at Vung Tau where Fingers and a couple of his mates came up with the design and construction of the diesel fired water heater.

This was basically a 44 gallon drum mounted on a frame on its side with a diesel burner underneath. The principle was that to get a bucket of hot water out, a bucket of cold water had to be put in. This of course meant that there was always a supply of hot water for showers etc.

When the move to Nui Dat was confirmed, somebody had the bright idea that it would be easier to fill sandbags from the beach at Vung Tau rather than to dig the soil at Nui Dat. Great in principle unfortunately after Finger and co. spent many weeks filling sandbags and loading them on a convoy of MK3 trucks, most of the bags arrived at Nui Dat empty. Australian sandbags being made of a coarse hessian fabric allowed the sand to empty out

with the movement of the vehicles. So whilst the bags and the centre of the load remained full, those on the outside emptied out on the road from Vung Tau through Ba Ria and on to Nui Dat. Once again the Americans came through. The American sandbag was made of a finer woven fabric that didn't allow the sand to empty out with the movement of the vehicle

The establishment of the camp at Nui Dat was yet another hurdle for Fingers and his mates as they seemed to no sooner got established /organised in one place then it was time to move again.

Although decent Workshops, Kitchens, Bar and Living Quarters were to eventually be built at Nui Dat, unfortunately Fingers didn't get to see much of it.

Fingers left South Vietnam in May of 1967 having served just over 12 months.

His return to Australia was by Caribou from Nui Dat to Tan Son Nhut, then by Hercules to Darwin and Civil Air to Melbourne arriving under the cover of darkness at 4am.

All movements from Saigon onward were made under the cover of darkness so as not to attract any attention. (More signs of things to come.)

Craftsman Greasy Fingers was posted to 1 Division Army Aviation Regiment on his return to Australia and 10 months later found himself posted to 183 Independent Recce Flight Workshops, Lae, Papua New Guinea where he spent the next 3 years

But that is another 'story'.

Written by: Rex Willis

161 Recce Flight 1966

161 (Indep) Recce Flt 1966 - 1967

183 (Indep) Recce Flt 1978 - 1971