

Put 'Em Away, Boys

On December 13, 1968, I had only been on nightshift a few shifts when Maj. Dugan flew a plane I was helping with. The crew chief on the plane was one of the experienced guys who were rotating back in a week or two. It turned out that he and Maj. Dugan were from the same hometown. For some reason, I believe it was in the Midwest, but I'm not really sure why I believe that. They seemed to know each other quite well. Maj. Dugan asked the crew chief to call his wife when he got home and let her know he'd be home himself in a month or so and that all is fine. With a big smile, the crew chief said he'd be happy to do that. Maj. Dugan gave him his phone number.

Three hours after the launch, we gathered the wheel chocks and fire extinguisher and sat down on the tarmac and waited to recover the plane. The crew chief and I just sat there on the concrete shooting the bull, waiting for his plane to return. He told me that if I had to be in Viet Nam, Phan Rang was the place to be. It had never been attacked and was very secure, a great place to be stationed if you happen to find yourself in a war zone.

As things were to turn out, he got out of there just in the nick of time.

We could never be sure exactly how long the missions would last because there were too many variables that affected their length. We were given ETA's (Estimated Time of Arrival) with our flight schedules, but the timing was very tenuous. I'm sure we started looking at our watches after they had been gone for three and a half hours. They didn't have much more than four hours of fuel when on missions. We thought perhaps the major had gone to another base for refueling. They often did that when they spent extra time at the bomb site and weren't sure they had the fuel to make it back to Phan Rang.

While we sat there discussing the possible scenarios, our maintenance chief drove up in the flight line van and said in a very resigned, somber voice, "Put 'em away boys, he's not coming back."

He had been involved in a midair collision at the target area, neither he nor the navigator survived. I later learned that the navigator was Maj. McGouldrick. I felt very bad for the crew chief. I could tell he was devastated. I'll never know if he ever made the call to Maj. Dugan's wife, and if so, what he could have said. For his sake, I hope he found a way to make the call.

Welcome to the war zone, son.

This was the first time I really came to appreciate the fact I was in a war zone and people did get killed. Prior to that it had only been the smells and the

heat that were different from what I had known before. Now it was totally different. Everything changed that night. Viet Nam would never be the same again. I was no longer an FNG.

And yet, the first mortar was still more than a month off.

Years later, when my wife Judy and I were living in Hawaii, we went to the Punchbowl on Oahu. It's the Memorial of the Pacific. There on a wall, honoring the servicemen and women who had given their lives in the Viet Nam War, I found the name of Maj. Dugan. It was a very reflective moment for me. His face still remains in my mind to this day.