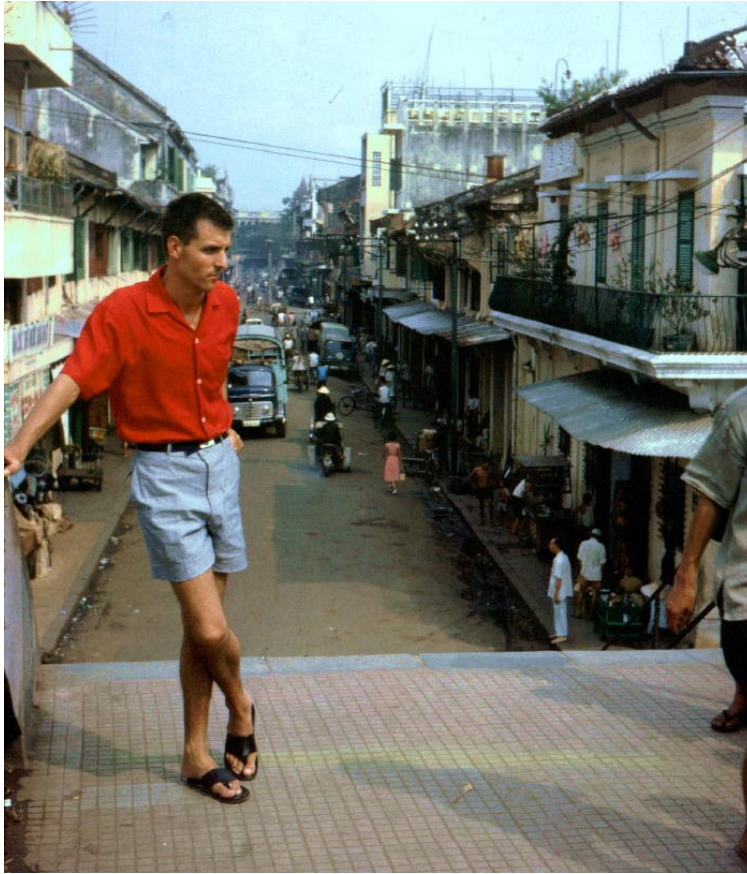


In Vietnam 1961-1963



In Saigon (Cholon) 1961

To better understand what this setback means to me, I need to go back to 1955 in Amsterdam.

As post 2nd World War youths we had no ambitions to be soldiers. The Dutch military, as part of NATO, had few volunteer soldiers. When my call for the draft came up in 1955, I was looking for any excuse to avoid the 18 months service, just like the rest of my generation. On the day of the testing, I grabbed a total coincidental chance, for which I was told to come back for more tests.

By the time the second interview was to take place, I was committed to my new personality. I was rejected, classified as S-5. The paper told me that I was unfit for modern warfare. I was the envy of my male peers.

But I discovered that my father was embarrassed and at work they must have thought: "Good story van Ommen, but there has to be something wrong with you." Other trainees like me, in the company, were being sent to their foreign subsidiaries, but I was not going anywhere.

This became the reason I got out of Dodge and headed for the United States, when I was 19, in January 1957. The US Consulate had informed me that since I had not served in Holland, I would be subject to the draft in the United States. I thought little of it. I had been told that the US had a very large voluntary army and that, contrary to Holland, the draft was quite strict in their selection. As required, I registered with the Los Angeles draft board.

Skiing at Mammoth Mountain in the spring of 1958 a cute blond Pasadena City College student "singled" up with me in the chairlift. We were married in 1959 in "Our Lady of Loreto" church in Echo Park, Los Angeles. My draft notice came in early 1960. I had my rejection papers translated. But I was told that they had their own system of testing me. Since I was unfit for modern warfare, I was hoping that the US military no longer operated any Bow and Arrow units. But for some reason they must have seen some potential in me and I was told to expect my notice for boot camp within a few months.

There was only one way to escape military service, for my wife to become pregnant. My boss, obtained a six months deferment for me, because of an order we were supplying to the Corps of Army Engineers. But it did not work. In January 1961 I started boot camp at Ford Ord, California. My first assignment was as a supply clerk with an Army Helicopter unit at Fort Lewis, Washington. In October 1961, we were told to get our affairs in order, get a will made up, etc. We were to go on an exercise of over 30-day duration to an undisclosed overseas destination.

Forty-four of our Pilots flew the 20 twin-rotor CH-21 "Flying Bananas" cargo helicopters, two single rotor CH-13 helicopters and a couple single engine fixed wing spotter planes to the Alameda Naval Air Station.

147 of us soldiers and officers of the 57th and 98th Army Transportation Company boarded passenger train cars and our Conex containers and rolling stock, including the field kitchen, were loaded on flat cars, at Ft. Lewis.

When the train arrived in Oakland, we finally knew where we were going.

The crates on the dock were marked MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) Saigon. It took a couple days to load all our gear and the helicopters. I went to visit the partner of my boss, who happens to live in Berkeley and I also managed to sell a few sails to Chuck Beery, sailboat dealer in Berkeley, for his Optimist dinghies. This was my moonlighting side gig for Molenaar, a Dutch sailmaker.

We had been told not to bring any civilian clothes, but I did not want to walk in with these people in my Army fatigues. I bought a pair of slacks and a short sleeved white shirt and wore my army dress shoes.

We embarked with another identical company out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the 93rd Transportation Company. After 24 days on the Pacific Ocean on the USNS "Core", a converted 2nd WW aircraft carrier, we arrived in Saigon. The "Core" tied up right at the very end of the main street "Tu-Do" or its French name Rue Catinat. There was a crowd of reporters and curious onlookers because this was the first time a full company had shown up in Vietnam. Until now it had been just a handful of men in small teams of Navy, Air Force, Marines and Army.

In that crowd I recognized a cameraman, who I knew since elementary school days in Amsterdam. "Ed van Kan!!" I yelled, and sure enough, after all those years I still recognized him from high above on the flight deck in this crowd. Because he has a peculiar way of walking, it's more like bouncing.

He yells back in Dutch: "Who are you??" How would he recognize me among those identical looking butch cut soldiers? When I called my name, he had to know where my twin brother was, because he never saw us apart.

By now the 500 odd men on the ship were convinced that I had organized this outing for them. I was a marked man.

Next, we were told that the Vietnamese government does not want to have the 500 men swarming all over town in their uniforms. In the morning, the men will be taken in small groups to the available tailors to get them civilianized. There were no department stores or ready to wear clothes anywhere to be had for these giant foreigners.

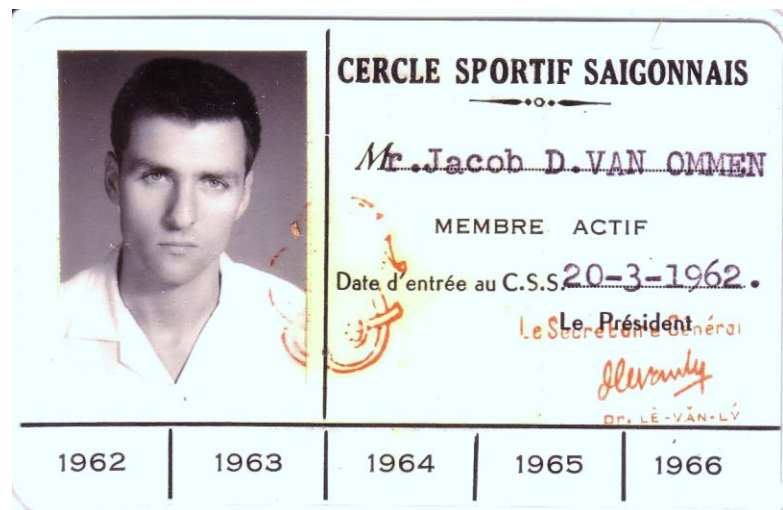
But the group's newly unveiled tour organizer got into his brown slacks, black army dress shoes and white short sleeved shirt and was the first to go down the ship's gangway into town with Ed van Kan.

I landed in a totally new world, a dream world. The warm heavy moist air, the smells of exotic food and spices, some I last smelled in the Amsterdam harbor warehouse district. Small Renault-Quatre yellow and blue taxis, pedicabs, motocyclos, gorgeous slender women in their sensuous flowing silk ao-dais, food carts and street vendors.

At first, I could not classify the familiar smell, then I realized it was the smell of urine. In the sanitized world where I now lived, you'd never get a sniff of it but it was common in Amsterdam. I would have never expected that this nasty smell would bring back some good memories of my childhood years, when boys were allowed to pee when and where the urge occurred.

Ed worked as a camera man for Movietone to make TV documentaries and UPI (United Press International). He knew the town and most of the press corps.

We ended up at the head of Rue Catinat in the Continental Hotel, on the terrace where ceiling fans brought some relief in the tropical evening; black uniformed waiters brought us “33” beer. We had a lot to catch up on. He told me what our mutual old friends in the neighborhood are up to.



The Cercle Sportif Saigonnais.

Ed introduced me for membership in the French sport club Cercle Sportif Saigonnais. It has a very nice swimming pool, tennis courts, etc. in a park like setting in the residential part of town.

I have spent many hours in this oasis, most likely no other US Army private has ever had the privilege I had here. This is where we met our other ex-pat friends and had lunch or drinks in the excellent restaurant/bar.

The next thing the Vietnamese government required from us was to have passports. Many of the soldiers had to send for their birth certificates from their home towns. My Dutch passport had expired. When I went to the Dutch legation, the chargé d'affaires, Squire Beelaerts van Blokland, to have it renewed, he took it away from me, because I was serving in a foreign military.

Now I was state less, a displaced person, a mercenary.

My next stop was at the American Embassy, I told them my sob story. To no avail. I would need to be naturalized to have an American passport and there was no facility to do this here. "Send me to Honolulu!" No soap.

I told my company commander Captain Kenneth Klippel. He had no solution either. I went back to the Dutch consulate. "Nee, Mijnheer van Ommen."

But because there was the draw for a cool swim in the Cercle Sportif, I managed to keep this up for a while. I bought a nice French five speed bicycle and I made my daily stops at the Dutch Consulate and the US Embassy, which I had down pat, and the rest of the day at the swimming pool.

I worked with just my boss SP-5 Carl in the spare parts warehouse. Since we arrived with plenty of extra parts, my job of filling the resupply requisitions, was done in the first half hour of the day.

In early January my passport came back from The Hague, extended and an apology from the squire. As I had already stuttered to him when he took it from me, I could serve in any NATO nation's force without compromising my citizenship.

With that resolved, I telephoned my wife, who had moved in with her mother in Yucaipa, California, after I left Ft. Lewis. She had worked for Boeing in a similar data processing job as she had when I was drafted. She was one of the first data processors on the Mercury moon shot project at JPL (Jet Propulsion Laboratory) part of Caltech University, in Pasadena, California. I convinced her to buy a round the world air fare ticket, valid for one year, with a stop in Saigon and Amsterdam. We had planned to make my first home visit together once I had finished my two-year service.

She landed in Hong Kong near the end of January 1962. I took leave days I had coming and my boss in Los Angeles paid my expenses, for me to meet several of our tropical hardwood suppliers in Hong Kong. The February 5th Lunar New Year was an incredible spectacle for us. We flew together to Manila where my boss also had suppliers. In Saigon I had found a very nice simple apartment, for \$35 per month, on Rue Hai Ba Trung¹, which was a reasonable bicycle ride for me to Tan Son Nhut airport where my company was bivouacked in tent city.

Joan found a job right away as an English teacher at the Hội Việt Mỹ. (Vietnamese American Association).

We attended the occasional parties at the Dutch consulate, like the Queen's Birthday, where I met Dutch ex-pats who worked for UNESCO, Shell Oil, a couple nuns, a Dutch missionary priest, etc. We made friends at the English language service of the O.L. Queen of Peace parish headed by the Vincentian

priest father Robert Crawford and his Dutch Vincentian assistant father Jacques Huysmans.

Most of the ex-pats lived in the same luxury and privileges as the French colonialists had for several centuries, with servants and drivers. It was therefore very easy to entertain and we frequently attended these gatherings. My American wife had several years of French in high school and managed quite well, this permitted us to also socialize with



French friends.

1962 Saigon with L.R. Joan van Ommen, Joan's students, Jack van Ommen.

¹ The legendary three Trung sisters. Women in Vietnam play a major role in family and society.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tr%C6%B0ng_Sisters



The beautifully restored art deco Saigon Post office. With Uncle Ho presiding. These are the seven phone booths from where the war correspondents posted their dispatches. This is where I called my wife to come and move to Saigon in 1961.

Ed van Kan had introduced me to his UPI boss Merton Perry and his wife, Darlene, through whom we made more friends in the press corps, one of them Peter Arnett, he was then just a 28-year-old upshot reporter. Arnett gained notoriety broadcasting for CNN during the fall of Baghdad. The first time I ever heard the term "Culture Vulture" was from Peter. That is what he called his Kiwi partner.

She and Joan would go to events sponsored by the Alliance Française, I remember listening with the two ladies to a concert of the I Musici di Roma.

In this period there was relative peace in Saigon. The only outward signs were the chicken wire cages around the outdoor terraces of the restaurants to prevent the occasional hand grenade attack launched from a fast passing-by scooter. One could take the elevator to the top of the Caravelle hotel and often witness skirmishes across the Saigon River.

Our task in the helicopter company was to fly Vietnamese Republican Army soldiers into their fight against the Viet Cong. We lost a couple men in crashes and one door gunner crew chief in action.

On their return from the first missions over the Central Highlands, our choppers came back with arrows stuck in their thin aluminum fuselages. Shot into them by the Montagnards with their crossbows. I ended up in the right war after all, with my "Unfit for modern Warfare" S-5 classification. The L.A. draft board must have had some advance intelligence.



Saigon in 1962. Photos taken by Joan van Ommen. Clockwise from top left: Rue Catinat (Tu-Do) now Dong Koi, with its magnificent Tamarind Trees and the Blue and Yellow Renault Quatre taxis. Top right: Le Loy Blvd with the Rex Hotel on right. Bottom left: taken from Majestic Hotel corner rue Catinat and Saigon River. Front Center is where USNS "Core" tied to the quay on Saigon River. Bottom Right: A Sunday with family in the Botanical Gardens and Zoo.

In the two months before Joan arrived, I used to explore Saigon and the Chinese Cholon section with one of the few other draftees, David Dirstine, from Spokane, Washington, the company clerk. We followed the Saigon River, the fascinating Botanical Gardens with the museum of history, the mysterious Buddhist temples and the occasional mosque. The majority of our GI peers did not venture much out of the compound at the airport. And if they did it was mostly to the same bars. I witnessed how the social race lines became drawn. Before our large infusion into the Saigon scene the few black soldiers went to the same bars as the rest and the Vietnamese treated both colors the same, just as they had the few black French Legionnaires until Dien Bien Phu. But the Vietnamese caught on quickly when they sensed an unspoken barrier and they were quick to adjust. And now we saw all black and predominant white bars spring up. As an immigrant, fresh off the boat, I had a hard time understanding how we could work together on base just fine but not socialize together outside the gate.

Joan and I travelled, on my leave time, in 1962, to Bangkok and Singapore and through the Malay Peninsula by train to the Thai border and by air to Penang.

The company paid my expenses to meet more lumber suppliers. These were exciting and unforgettable experiences for a 25-year-old.

One of my wishes is to make a pilgrimage to the grave of a dear friend from my time in Vietnam. Jacques Huysmans, C.M. a Dutch Vincentian priest, who was buried in 1971 in the town of Dalat.

He was born in 1888 on the Dutch island of Zuid Beveland. At age 26 he was sent as a Saint Vincent de Paul missionary, from the society's headquarters in Paris, to China. His voyage was interrupted when his ship was torpedoed by the Germans, at the beginning of the 1st World War, near Singapore.

In the communist revolution he ended up in Chinese prisons from 1951 until 1954. He was cruelly beaten and physically and psychologically abused. He still carried the scars of the hand cuffs twenty years after the ordeal². During the 1954 Geneva accords the French premier, Mendès France, brought up the cases, of Huysmans' eight imprisoned French colleagues, with Tsou en Lai, the Chinese Communist foreign secretary and in the same conference the Dutch prime-minister, Jan Luns, managed to plead for Huysmans' freedom.

Shortly after Huysmans was reassigned to Vietnam, he was forced to flee from North to South Vietnam together with large numbers of persecuted Vietnamese Roman Catholics. He joined his American Vincentian colleague Robert Crawford in Saigon. He was in his mid-seventies when we found him in Saigon. He was a big man and I still see him squeeze himself in the passenger seat of the Citroen Deux Cheveaux of our mutual friend Dutch rubber planter, Frits van Knippenberg, after a meal at "Cheap Charlie". With a couple large bottles of Tiger Beer, he would unsnap his stiff clerical collar and enjoy our company.

An Irish-American parishioner friend, Robert Burns, who worked for USOM (United States Operations Mission), told me once that, to his surprise, he discovered father Huysmans at the other side of the confessional window, instead of father Crawford. He confessed that he had changed his dollars on the black market. After a short pause, he heard Huysmans say, in his heavy accented English: "Son, where do you think we change our dollars?"

The fact that I was the only one in the whole company who had his wife with him here did not sit well with my company commander, Captain Klippel, AKA "the Deacon". A name he had earned by his lack of humor, serious attitude and the fact that he was Mormon.

He managed to demote me three times from PFC to Private. And I am probably one of the very few to boast having come back from Vietnam as a private.

I finally had enough of the harassment and considered that I had ample cause to go bitch in the Inspector General's office. He sat me down and then pulled out a thick file, he began with: "Private van Ommen, I understand that your father is the Dutch ambassador in Washington, D.C.". Here was an opportunity I totally screwed up and live to regret. I should have answered: "Yes, Sir".

My father, passed away a year before I left Holland, far too young, at age 57.

Where this "ambassador" business came from, the Lord only knows. But I had a few quirks that I never bothered to explain to the "Deacon". The only way to contact me from abroad, other than mail, was by cable and they had to come through the company clerk. For my travel expenses my boss would cable messages like "\$500 available at Royal Thai Investment Bank, at such and such address in Bangkok." Several of the pilots had spotted me through the gate in the Cercle Sportif and probably wondered how I had qualified for membership. But we did get some pleasure out of this, after all. My buddies on passing me in front of the podium where Captain Klippel sat in the hangar, would very demonstratively salute me with a loud: "Good morning, Son of the Dutch Ambassador" and the Deacon would have a fit.

² His memoirs of his imprisonment: www.cometosea.us/albums/HUYSMANS.docx

I chose to extend my one-year Vietnam tour and take my discharge in Saigon at the end of January 1963. This made my last four months more bearable with Captain Klippel and the rest of the company having rotated in October. Joan and I changed our plans to fly from Saigon to Holland, she returned to California just before my two-year active duty ended.

After searching for days, I finally found a Marine sergeant who knew how to handle the discharge papers. For many years after, I had recurring nightmares of still being in Saigon, years later, riding on my bicycle trying to find someone who knew how to get me back to America.

This done, I flew once more, at my employer's expense, to Singapore and Borneo. The visit in Sarawak in Dayak country was particularly fascinating. The next stop was Brunei and on to Sabah over Mt. Kinabalu. Back in Saigon I packed my bags and crated up an assortment of souvenirs and Asian art decorations we had accumulated, to be shipped back at tax payers' expense. I said my good-byes to our landlord family and friends.

I hitch hiked on an Air Force Lockheed Constellation, the seats were facing aft and windows were blinded. I was the only passenger. I left on February 27, 1963. We landed at Subic Bay and spent the night there. We left on the 28th, my 26th birthday. We refueled on Wake Island and then crossed the date line, back to February 27th. When we landed in Honolulu, I was able to celebrate my birthday once more. Home again after an incredible 18 months away from America. What I had fought so hard, in the end turned out to be an opportunity I would not have wanted to miss. It gave me the opportunity to work and sleep with people from all walks of life and experience a piece of America that made me more a part of it.