

# **21 Days in the Saigon Underground**

## **The Birth and Death**

### **Of**

## **Radio First Termer**

**By Dave Rabbit**

35 years after the last words were spoken on the "Big 69", I find myself excited again about having the opportunity to relive and tell the true story of a part of my life that will be with me until they bury me face down in my grave so the whole world can kiss my ass. Just kidding, I have had a great life. However, like all things, there always seems to be something missing and, in my case, it was not being able to do my 3-hour radio program for an eternity. The fun, the fly by the seat of my pants without a net shows, the close calls, the looking over my shoulder knowing that this may be the day I end up spending the rest of my tour in **Long Bien** prison. It was a self-inflicted, self-fragging adrenalin rush. The only purpose of the show was to give the troops a laugh, a break from the life and death struggle that they were in second to second, if only for a heartbeat. I wish I could tell you that I had a master plan or even had an agenda when it started out. I cannot. However, it is funny how things that are not planned in the beginning seem to mold things as they go and you find yourself hanging on for dear life on a roller coaster from hell. As I recount the events that led me to Saigon and my destiny, remember that only one little thing had to change, just one. If any little thing changed on this journey, **Radio First Termer** would have never existed. One other bit of irony, if you will, is that my birthday is **August 15**, 1948. **AFVN's** first day of broadcast in Vietnam was **August 15**, 1962, on my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. You can call it luck, I call it **FATE**.

In the summer of 1965, about the time Adrian Cronauer was giving **AFVN** a new reality check, I was an incoming junior in my High School. I always had a desire to be a rock and roll star. I had a Fender guitar and a Fender amp. Three other students and I started a band and, in our minds, we were going to be the next Beatles. One day, about 6 weeks later, two other guys came over for a jam session and they were great. Bottom line, I sucked and was told I was not needed. After my junior year started, I was approached by the new guys and asked if I would be interested in just singing. I said yes, and one of the hottest bands in our area was born. During this time of screaming out songs by the Kinks, Rolling Stones, Beatles, etc., my voice began to change a bit and became deeper. This was also, and there are numerous teachers (if they were still alive) that would attest to this, that I began my class clown, hell raiser, indestructible stage. The band and I stayed together until my senior year until I got in a fight with a fan and was fired. So is the life of a rock star.

Like most students of the time, I watched the Vietnam War play out over dinner with my folks. With each passing story, with each passing death that I saw, I knew that I was not going to go there. As I had a late birthday, August 15, my parents held me back a year and did not start school until I was seven. Therefore, August 15, 1966 I was an incoming senior and was draftable by the Army as I was eighteen. Of course, I was deferred because I was

still in High School, but I knew my days were numbered and I had, if memory serves, a low number. Upon graduation in May 1967, I made the intelligent decision that I was bored with school and did not want to go to college. So to avoid being drafted and going to Vietnam, I enlisted in the U. S. Air Force for four years. "I'll show them", I said. Therefore, on my 19th birthday, August 15, 1967, I left for basic training in Amarillo, Texas. From basic, I went to tech school for Ground Radio at Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Mississippi. After 6 weeks, I found out that I was colorblind and the Air Force gave me a choice of reassignment. I had the choice of Security Police or Supply. I chose **SUPPLY** and went to Lowry AFB in Denver, Colorado. This Air Force career choice, unknown to me at the time, would be instrumental in my story.

My first real assignment and duty was Barksdale AFB in Shreveport, Louisiana. Barksdale was command headquarters 2nd Air Force for SAC (Strategic Air Command) and the home of the B-52's. Now one thing that you must know is that if every other command, other than SAC, demanded pressed uniforms, highly polished shoes, quarters bouncing off the beds 2 feet in the air when dropped.... then SAC was 10 times worse. Even with my con artist ability to get night shift duty where I was virtually self-employed, the barracks inspections and all the bullshit associated with it was not my choice of life. Therefore, as the old saying went in those days, if I wanted to get out of SAC, I had to make a drastic move. The next day, after a few of us who felt the same way had a night out drinking, we all marched into the personnel office and volunteered for Vietnam. We walked out, laughing and saying to each other that it would be 6 to 8 months or more before we would have possible orders. We all had orders in less than 30 days. My next assignment, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

May 1968. If memory serves, the flight from the states to Vietnam was around 16 hours. I remember when the pilot came over the loudspeaker and informed us that we were beginning our descent, I looked out my window and saw the dark green mountains and wondered where "charlie" was hiding. I also remember a chill coming over me and saying to myself "shit, what have I gotten myself into"! The guy next to me said "amen". Cam Ranh Bay, the gateway to Vietnam. Every major incoming and outgoing item that supported the war, including new troops, went through Cam Ranh Bay. My year tour of duty at Cam Ranh was not that eventful. The biggest thing I had to deal with is watching the civilian jets land with new incoming troops, refuel, and watch them take off again with a plane load of survivors who were lucky enough to make it through and go back to the "world" again. It was truly heartbreaking. More heartbreaking than that, however, were the caskets that were being loaded into the military cargo planes. If ever a person needed a dose of reality, that flight line would give it to you.

Towards the end of my tour at Cam Ranh, I went to personnel and selected my top three choices for stateside. I chose great bases with little chicken shit factors. When my orders arrived I was excited, I was getting the hell out of Vietnam. I opened my orders to see what great assignment I had, and there it was, Tinker AFB, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Great! **FUCKED** by the Air Force again. Tinker was depot base that was 90% civilian run with the 10% military being the step and fetch it boys. Now I find myself doing some really important work for the war effort by doing inventory control and counting nuts and bolts.

Well, to quote an old country and western star I told them "take this job and shove it". I marched down to personnel and, you guessed it, volunteered for another Vietnam tour. In almost the time it took me to pack my bags, I was off to Phan Rang Air Base, Vietnam.

August 1969. Believe it or not, I was home. Unlike Cam Ranh, Phan Rang was considered an R & R site for the ground troops. We had an air-conditioned theater, swimming pool, movie stars (just kidding). I was assigned to Headquarters Squadron this time, not supply, and as I told you at the very beginning, **FATE** was going to lend a hand. I was roomed (cubicalled) with a fairly decent guy, but he was short and only was there a few days. My next roommate, who arrived a few days later, was assigned to the broadcast group for the base. They did interviews with the troops, sent the tapes back home to the folks and to the papers, that kind of thing. We hit it off okay, although we were complete opposites in personality. He was very close to the vest and me, well; let us say I was not. Then one day he comes into our hooch and informs me that Phan Rang is going to start doing a local 3-hour broadcast that will override AFVN's signal. He informs me that all of the bases are creating their own little radio stations and shows and will promote activities that are happening in their own communities. He says he will have to ask his Major, but feels that if I wanted to; I could be his studio engineer for the launch of **RADIO PHAN RANG, 101.75 FM**.

It was a crazy set-up. We had a couple of Teac reel to reel decks, an amplifier, a monitor speaker, a portable cassette player, a turntable, a telephone and a few cords and wires that hooked everything together. However, the neatest thing was this little switch. When 8 p.m rolled around (and we had a big clock that was God), we flipped the switch which put our signal out over the radio relay station that overlooked Phan Rang. 50 Watts was nothing to brag about, but it covered not only our base, but also the towns and hamlets that surrounded Phan Rang. We use to do a gig where I would call in as "charlie" and request certain songs to be played. Occasionally, the "boss" would let me do a Red Cross donut dolly report or something equally as stupid, but as the Japanese once said, "Beware the sleeping giant". That year, I learned a tremendous amount of things, but more important, made a tremendous amount of friends in the Relay Station. By August 1970, my tour was coming to a close. My year at Phan Rang was extremely productive and in addition to all the others I had met, I became best friends with a member of personnel, whose name was "Pete Sadler". Not wanting to go through the nightmare of stateside roulette again, with a little help from "Pete", I was given another Vietnam volunteer assignment, to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon and he decided to tag along.

September 1970, after going home for a 30-day leave, I arrived at my final Vietnam destination, Saigon. It was beautiful. Again, I was stationed in Headquarters Squadron and "Pete" and I became roommates. Over the course of the next few months, we listened to the bullshit that was constantly cranking out on AFVN. Stars & Stripes was no better. I remember receiving some newspapers from my Mom and comparing them to what we were being told in the Stars & Stripes. That is when "Pete" and I really started understanding what bullshit was being poured over our families and friends back home, but more importantly, the guys who were putting their lives on the line every day and not realizing that we were

never going to be able to win the war in Vietnam. The politicians and their buddies, who were cranking out weapons and ammo out the kazoo, were making sure of that. Winning was not profitable.

"Pete" and I kicked around doing a show similar to what was done at Phan Rang. The bad news, of course, is that Saigon is home to **AFVN** and if they kicked out someone like Adrian Cronauer, I sure would not have a chance in hell to do a **LEGITIMATE** show. What to do, what to do. If my dream was to take shape, I needed help and I needed it from the right people. First thing we needed was equipment. The same rig that we had at Phan Rang, but better. I thought about asking my parents for a thousand but decided; "Midnight Supply" was a more viable option. A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend made sure we had the best. Next, we needed a place to broadcast from. We sure could not do it from the base; we had to do it somewhere in downtown Saigon. But where? There was a "gentlemen's club" aka "whore house" where "Pete" knew the "madam". We approached her with renting one of her rooms on a monthly basis on the top floor in the far back. She requested a few things in return for the favor of keeping her mouth and those of her girls shut. You might recall I said choosing **SUPPLY** would be important down the way for an Air Force job. So, we had a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend deliver a few products that guaranteed us our first 30 days and additional products for whatever time after that was required. The next thing was to make the room soundproof as possible as we could not have street sounds, screaming or banging next door interrupt our shows. We covered the room in 1" thick cork tiles and mattresses. We added a few pieces of needed furniture here and there and the studio was set. We did some test runs with recording and playback to see if we could hear background noise etc. The only thing we added was foam padding around "Pete's" and my microphones. That small addition allowed me to get closer to the microphone also.

It is November 1970 and everything is ready except material and how to broadcast our signal beyond the Saigon area. Those friends of mine that I made back at Phan Rang in the Relay Station were the true geniuses that made everything happen. **AFVN** was able to carry their signal throughout Southeast Asia because they relayed their signal from tower to tower throughout the country. If we could not go all the way, I just did not want to risk it at all. Fortunately for us, the Phan Rang guys had some great friends in the other area stations, and with a few electronic devices and wiring, we were set to go with a flick of a switch. Not counting the hotel full of whores, we now had a group of about 10 trusted people that knew what we were going to do.

Recruiting "Nguyen" was a no brainer for us. We knew we needed a female voice and she was a bud and we trusted her. More important than that, she worked in the office of **AFVN** and got us all kinds of filler stuff including "Your Air Force in Action". Probably the most important thing she did for us, however, was let us know how "hot" we were and if we needed to shut down.

It is Thanksgiving 1970. "Pete", "Nguyen" and I meet at the station to begin our final plans of what we want to do. Believe it or not, at this stage we had not decided on a name or anything like that, as it would be moot if we could not get on the air. The original program name was going to be **Radio First Timer** to play off the "first time in country" slogan. However, the more we sounded out with each other, it just did not ring for us, and so we changed it to **Radio First Termer**. Since we were going to be broadcasting in **FM**, we had a full dial to choose from to use as our broadcast frequency so I picked my favorite number **69**, and the rest as they say, is history. We met every day after work and on our days off and hammered out music, commercials, gimmicks and shticks. We all covered the "latrine scene" and wrote down any and all things that were written. "Nguyen", believe it or not, brought in a lot of funny stuff from the ladies latrines. We went into it knowing that we wanted to have **30 DAYS** worth of programming. Honestly, I thought we would be lucky if we lasted a day. I did not see how we could keep pulling it off for multiple days without being caught. To make our broadcasts smoother, we pre-recorded each day's music and marked each day accordingly. If you listen, you will hear "Pete" cutting the Akai reel to reel on and off occasionally. We also pre-recorded all the gimmick stuff like "Capt. Pansy's Daily Weather", "Swap Shop", "Theater Schedule", etc. We had three big Akai reel to reels. One for pre-recorded music, one for pre-recorded commercials and one for pre-recorded gimmick stuff. Unlike DJ's that have a delay in case of screw-ups, we were totally **LIVE**. You can catch "Nguyen", "Pete" and I in tongue twisters a few times but we just had to struggle through it. Everything is done. We are ready. We plan to hit the airwaves on January 1, 1971. We just have one last thing to do, get the word out.

January 1, 1971. D-Day. Although we have tried to spread the word as much as possible, we do not have the luxury of showing our hand too soon. We decide to take a big gamble and hope that it does not bite us in the ass. We decide that we are going to preempt **AFVN** on their own frequency and promote the new **Radio First Termer**. At 7:59 p.m. on January 1, 1971, the following message plays on **AFVN**'s own frequency.

**"Vietnam, in just 30 seconds your radio experience will change forever. Turn your radios to 69 Megahertz on your FM dial. If you don't we are going to re-up you for another tour of Vietnam".**

With that, **AFVN** returned to their regular crap and at 8 p.m., 2000 hrs. for you maggots, **Radio First Termer** was **BORN**. With the increasing threat of being discovered, 21 days and 63 programming hours later, it was laid to rest forever.

Taking one of the famous radio lines ever spoken by Edward R. Murrow and changing it just a bit, my last words were:

**"Good Night Vietnam and Good Luck!"**

During our run, we did do a few crazy things that drove the base commander crazy as well as the establishment; we had placards made with the rabbit logo saying "Rabbit Power". We also had about 250 Dave Rabbit Hard-On Shirts hand painted that were sold by Vietnamese Merchants to the troops. All of the station equipment, mattresses and furniture were given to the "madam" as payment for rents due. In March 1971, "Nguyen's" tour was up and she went home. I elected to go back to school and got an early discharge leaving Vietnam in May 1971. "Pete" discharged a few months after and went home. The three of us kept in contact for a few years off and on, but like most real life military friendships, moved on with our own lives and lost contact somewhere along the way.

In the summer of 1982, 11 years after Radio First Termer ceased, I am at a dinner party and begin talking with a gentleman. Somehow or other, we get to talking about military service. He tells me that he was in the Army and served in Wiesbaden, Germany. I tell him I served in Vietnam. He asks me if I ever heard of Dave Rabbit. I ask him why? He tells me that Dave Rabbit and his Radio First Termer program is extremely popular overseas. I ask him, how he heard a program that was done in 1971. He tells me he has a tape. I tell him that I am Dave Rabbit and would like a copy of the tape. He makes me do some of the latrine sayings in my DJ voice, and then proclaims that I have made his day. I say no, you have made mine. That is the first time that I knew that someone, somewhere and somehow made a recording of one of the programs. He makes me a copy. A few months later, my teenage daughter decides that she needs some cassette tapes to record some of her music on. She grabs the tapes of Radio First Termer. One day when I am getting ready to transfer them to another median, I hear radio songs, but not mine. My daughter has wiped out my only copy. I would never find this guy again.

On February 9, 2006, 24 years after my tapes have been wiped out by my daughter and 35 years after the show in Vietnam, I am searching the internet for some Vietnam pictures for a project. I click on a sight that has Vietnam Audio Files. I look down through the list and come upon two that say Radio First Termer. I click on each and am blown away that they are from one of my programs. Even more intrigued, I do a search for Dave Rabbit and Radio First Termer and am even further blown away when I see the number of sites that has to do with the program and especially the **Home Page** created by **Will Snyder**. Like a kid in the candy store, I download every MP2 file Will has on the **Home Page**.

As I said at the beginning..... **FATE!**

To those of you who have made Radio First Termer a passion and love and have kept my dream alive for all these years ... From the bottom of my heart ... **THANK YOU!**

# Dave Rabbit

## RUMOR CONTROL, FACTS & PHILOSOPHIES:

1. I was a 3-striper sergeant, not a **CAPTAIN**. An Officer? Not in my lifetime... no thanks!
2. I am not **PAT SAJAK**. Although I am willing to learn if I can have the money. If **VANNA WHITE** had been available at the time, we might have had a new "Nguyen".
3. I am definitely not **ART BELL** or **ROBERT ABBETT**; I am much better looking than both of them combined.
4. Although we did "promote" an anti-establishment society of free wheeling sex, drugs and rock & roll on the air, that was the "entertainment" aspect of it. We gave the troops in Vietnam what they wanted to hear, not what the military or the government wanted. Our intended message was and has always been for the troops to use their God given brains and talents, to think for themselves and not be a mindless puppet of the military conglomerate.
5. The phone numbers, extensions, APO mail box numbers, etc., of course were all bogus. I mean, we were not stupid and sure as hell were not going to give anyone any idea where we were. I am sure, however, there were a few troops who might have been trudging along the roadside when "Nguyen" was driving and stapled and glued \$2.98 to a post card for a "Dave Rabbit Sweatshirt" and mailed it. I do know that the Tan Son Nhut post office received hundreds of letters and post cards that were sent to us. They, unfortunately, went where the "Letters to Santa" went. That would have been some interesting reading 35 years later. By the way, there was an extension **6969** at Tan Son Nhut. I do not recall who it was, but it was some officer's office extension. He was not pleased.
6. The photograph of the guy with the dark moustache on the "Vietnam Audio Documentary" On Vietnam Research.com, of course, is **NOT** me. I am short, but no damn midget.
7. As mentioned in my story, I left Vietnam in May 1971. One report has me staying after being discharged to do the show. That did not happen.
8. Our radio **NAMES**. Obviously, they were fake. "**Nguyen**" was created because we wanted to have a tie in with Vietnam and we wanted it to sound exotic and sexy. "**Pete**" created his own persona from something mid-western sounding. "**Dave Rabbit**" was a no brainer for me. In the 60's there was a DJ by the name of "Jimmy Rabbit". He became the unofficial manager of our band and was really a great guy. In fact, there was a time when I wanted to pursue that career because of him, but my fate led me in a different direction. "**Rabbit**", was homage to him. "**Dave**" was after a long time friend that I have known over 40 years. He has been kind enough to act as my "buffer" to the world. I did not want to have a bunch of "fans" or "enemies" marching up and down the front of my house carrying "**Rabbit Power**" signs while wearing homemade "**Dave Rabbit Sweatshirts**", stomping my wife's flowers to the Ground.

9. Some author, Lydia Fish, writing an article for college credit or thesis grade back in 2003 on a topic to do with "Pirate Radio" during the Vietnam era wrote this:

**"The most famous of all the radio pirates, the legendary Dave Rabbit ("Radio First Termer, 69 on your radio dial") may in fact have been an elaborate hoax on the part of some AFVN radio technicians. Several tapes of broadcasts featuring hard rock and lots of talk about sex, drugs and the general incompetence of the military are still in wide circulation, but the quality of the recordings is suspiciously high for a station using improvised equipment."**

With all due respect to "Ms." Fish, she obviously did not know AFVN. Secondly, our equipment was NOT improvised; it was TOP OF THE LINE stuff from the "Midnight Supply" company. Last, I want a COPY of her HIGH QUALITY recording she has access to. Everyone I have talked to on the websites have had to do a tremendous amount of audio Clean up work just to bring the quality level of the show recording to a DECENT LEVEL, much less a HIGH QUALITY one.

10. Where did the recording come from? I have had more fun reading all the speculation. Let's see, CIA, NSA, OSI, Security Police, SETI, Military Police, The Base Commander (just kidding), AFVN, then President Richard Nixon (it was found with the other White House tapes), X-Files or just some troop that was "missed" on the roadside by "Nguyen" on her way to work one day. Considering that I did not find out myself that it even existed until eleven years later, we will never know I guess.

11. Where am I now? At 57 as of this writing, I ask myself that same question every morning when I look in the mirror. Seriously, here it is. Married, four kids ranging from 18 to 27, two grandkids, 5 dogs, 5 cats, self-employed. Never pursued my love of broadcasting but did do a lot of Master Of Ceremonies work during my early years. Fell in love with Scuba diving and became a certified Scuba Instructor. And yes, my language to this day would be considered COLORFUL.

12. Are there any more shows? Based on 35 years and only one show surfacing, my guess would be NO.

13. Finally, NO.... I am NOT.... HOWARD STERN'S FATHER or BROTHER! :)