

SAIGON – Southern Vietnam – 3100s

RMK-BRJ

Edited by Ron Bird



In 1966 there were around 385,000 military personnel in southern Vietnam. American force levels later peaked at around 542,000. By all accounts a traditional society, southern Vietnam needed an infrastructure to receive this influx of military aid. Responsibility for building that necessary infrastructure was given over to the largest construction entity ever, the RMK-BRJ (Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen, Brown & Root, and J.A. Jones Construction). Calling itself "The Vietnam Builders" and receiving highly lucrative "no bid" contracts, this consortium of private corporations was to turn southern Vietnam into a modern, integrated military installation that would enable the United States to properly defend its client. The Vietnam Builders had entered into a contract with the US federal government, via the U.S. Navy, as the exclusive contractor for the huge military buildup that was to come; there would be no open bidding or otherwise competitive process.

The fact that the nation of "South" Vietnam had yet to be created, U.S. officials ordered a staggering volume of military projects be begun immediately. The congress granted to the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson for 1965 \$700 million for the expected ramping up of a direct American military role. Of that sum, \$100 million was earmarked for the Defense Department's construction projects already begun. Figures ballooned rapidly. Initially contracted for around \$15 million prior to 1965, the lead corporation, MK, was shocked by the magnitude of orders for rapid construction. As one MK executive said early in 1965, "all we knew was that they wanted a "lotta" roads, a "lotta" airfields, a "lotta" bridges, and a "lotta" ports, and that they probably would want it all finished by yesterday."

To support these activities Control Data 3100 systems were acquired by RMK-BRJ and shipped into Saigon early in 1966. They were installed in a Saigon suburb in the vicinity of the Catholic Cathedral.

The systems were used for applications including office administration, payroll, civil engineering, etc.

Control Data Australia people involved in this project from 1966 on included:

- Peter Spotswood (first EIC) ,
- George Crawford
- Bruce Smith
- Charlie Yates
- George Petrou,
- Dave Innes,

- Bernie Pohl,
- Bill Messer,
- Ron Bird and
- Jim Callaghan.
- Richard Aspnes (CDC USA)
- Clem Brzoznowski (CDC USA)

Accommodation was provided for the 20 or so programmers and engineers including CDA personnel in a secure three story walled villa at 51A Phan Ton, Dakao Saigon complete with cook and maid.

Of an evening one could sit on the roof and drink “black market” Fosters cans labelled “For UK and Australian Service Personnel only” or words to that effect and watch the war in the distance.

Whilst these systems were being installed a great deal of electrical equipment was stolen (despite heavy security) and replacements had to be purchased on the local black market. Most items were able to be acquired with the exception of some important air-conditioning temperature control gear. As this could not be sourced locally or quickly from the US a temporary solution was to employ a local Vietnamese boy to watch a thermometer and manually turn the AC on and off to maintain the 72 Degrees F required by the systems.



RMK-BRJ Saigon Site 1967 *Photo courtesy of Richard K. Aspnes*

Meanwhile the construction demands on RMK - BRJ outstripped the capacity of any one of the corporations. Equipment requirements alone for the Vietnam project far exceeded all equipment owned by MK for all of its worldwide operations and all subsidiary companies. The value of the project leapt from its 1964 starting point of \$15 million of work in place per month to over \$67 million of work in place per month within two years.

Three of the four firms making up the Vietnam Builders ranked in the top ten of four hundred U.S. corporation doing business abroad for 1966. Collectively, and individually, they gobbled up hundreds of millions in profits for their efforts. In the process, Vietnam Builders employed 8,600 Americans and over 51,000 Vietnamese. They built six ports with 29 deep-draft berths, six naval bases, eight jet airstrips 10,000 feet in length, twelve airfields, just under twenty hospitals, fourteen million square feet of covered storage, and twenty base camps including housing for 450,000 servicemen and family. In short, they put on the ground in southern Vietnam nearly \$2 billion in construction of various kinds of facilities and infrastructure. Military commanders called it the "construction miracle of the decade." (Jones Construction Centennial)

Republicans in congress began to criticize Johnson's handling of the Vietnam situation. In 1966, Illinois Representative Donald H. Rumsfeld went further than most when he charged the administration with letting contracts which "are illegal by statute." He urged investigation into the relationship between the private consortium working in Vietnam and the Johnson administration, in particular the infamous "President's Club," to which Brown & Root, one of the principle Vietnam contractors, had given tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions. Rumsfeld argued on behalf of serious inquiry into the whole affair saying, "under one contract, between the U.S. Government and this combine, [RMK-BRJ] it is officially estimated that obligations will reach at least \$900 million by November 1967...why this huge contract has not been and is not now being adequately audited is beyond me. All the while, the war in southern Vietnam continued to spiral out of control despite the dramatic increases in firepower and troops and military construction. The government's contract with the Vietnam Builders ended only in 1972 shortly before the Nixon administration itself quit the commitment to the long failed project.



Bob Ueno Senior operator, two local operator ladies and Bruce Smith



TET (New Year) 1967 Saigon Bar scene: Dave Innes, Bruce Smith and Swiss Programmer.

Bruce Smith recalls some highlights from these days:

- Playing golf with Dave Innes and a couple of Americans at the Royal Saigon Golf Club, in between fully armed and manned bunkers, shortly after the TET offensive.
- Driving to Dung Tau on the south coast in our CDA Mini-Moke. Drinking Fosters with Aussies on R & R there. On the way, the rear shocker that pulled apart after we hit one of the many potholes ("craters"?) in the highway.)
- Drinking the local beer "33" with Charlie Yates one night and discovering a small furry, slimy "thing" in the froth, and never had a "33" again.
- Watching the local sparkies testing power lines by touching them to earth points, and never getting a shock.
- Dining at some of the remaining French restaurants on buffalo "filet mignon" and "French onion soup."
- Eating breakfast at the American Club until we were banned because we were "Third Country nationals"
- The R&R's in Bangkok with Bob Hammond and Vilas Ansununta, and also Honkers.
- Finally going home after 2 1/2 years of my original 1 year assignment.

Ron Bird's memories from a short visit:

- Doing a sightseeing tour down south with a bunch of US army nurses.
- Being introduced to frogs and snails by Chas Yates at his favourite French restaurant.
- George Petrou and I being a bit too close to a shootout in "The Street of Flowers" where a couple of Vietnamese Military Police let off a few rounds at two army deserters right in front of us.
- Visiting the Saigon Zoo which was quite good considering the country had been at war for years.
- Shooting 3 reels of Super 8 movie film (including the shootout) on a Yashica camera that I had bought for Peter Rechnizer in Singapore on the way through. The camera turned out to be faulty and unfortunately no film was exposed.
- Trying to leave Saigon on a booked Thai Airways Caravelle flight to Bangkok only to be told when I arrived at the airport that they had overbooked the flight by 20 people. As my visa was about to expire the next day I was forced to take an Air Vietnam Douglas DC6 (a 4 engine propeller driven aircraft) flight to Hong Kong that evening. I recall being told by the locals that Air Vietnam's planes were "very safe" and that they were serviced once a year whether they needed it or not! As it turned out this only applied to their one Caravelle - DC6's did not get serviced at all. Scariest flight I have ever had as it was Monsoon season and most other airlines were not flying. After two attempts we landed at Hong Kong coming in from the mountain end of the then small runway at Kai-Tek airport with a strong side wind blowing.