

## Leaving Vietnam? Meet the Customs Man

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SAIGON — "No, sir, you can't take your pet 12-foot boa constrictor on the plane with you," explained the soft-spoken customs inspector to the U.S. Navy commander.

It takes all kinds of people to make a war and the U.S. Armed Forces customs inspectors at Tan Son Nhut civilian terminal see a lot of them — about 2,000 persons a day at the airport and at Camp Alpha, the nearby R&R processing station.

"We're the first ones people see coming into the country and the last ones they see before leaving," said Air Force S.Sgt. Claude Harrison, boss of the 32-

man customs inspection detail at the Tan Son Nhut civilian terminal.

The customs detail, manned jointly by Army MP's from the 716th Military Police Bn., 18th MP Brigade and Air Force patrolmen from the 377th Security Police Sq., inspects about 70 per cent of all GI baggage passing through customs.

For most persons, the customs inspection is just a formality — another long delay in a schedule wrapped in red tape — but then there are others like the Navy commander and his boa constrictor.

Or the private first class masquerading as a sergeant who tried to smuggle a broken-down, fully-automatic M2 carbine out of the country in a suit bag. He didn't make it on either count.

Or the Navy river patrol crewman who had his "war souvenir" confiscated — a 12-foot-long link of .50 cal. machine gun shells.

Or the GI who planned to tote home a 105mm howitzer shell with the primer intact as "just a lawn piece."

Or the grunt who stored two fully-intact 82mm mortars in his suitcase.

Or the civilian, dressed in an overcoat in 90 degree weather, who tried to pass through customs with a live M26 fragmentation grenade in his pocket.

"Weapons are always a hassle — the proper paperwork is often incomplete," said Sgt. Jeff Nelson, head Army MP at Tan Son Nhut.

In order for war souvenir weapons, including knives, cross

bows, dart guns and machetes, to be taken out of Vietnam, they must first be cleared for release and registered as such by the provost marshal and be granted an export permit, he said.

War souvenirs or trophies, other than weapons, also require some paperwork, customs officials caution. Items such as Ho Chi Minh sandals, enemy headgear, and Communist web belts must be cleared and screened for intelligence value by local intelligence units.

Unsealed whisky bottles present still another taboo for the homeward bound GI. Alcoholic beverages not in excess of one wine gallon may be hand-carried aboard planes en route to the United States, but they must be sealed. However, the soldier who wants to take home a souvenir bottle of ba mui ba — Vietnamese beer — is out of luck. He'll end up drinking it at the gate or he won't get past customs. And no hip flasks either, as one Army captain found out recently.

Pornography is also a no-no, and a problem. The Supreme Court has been trying to decide for years just what constitutes pornography. A MACV directive has simplified the definition: if it shows pubic hair, it is obscene.

Pictures showing mangled or mutilated bodies are also prohibited.

An, of course, narcotics are out of the question. The MPs have pretty sensitive noses, and they are adept at sniffing out the grass from the tobacco.

Another headache for custom



Very little gets past the customs inspectors. Military men leaving Vietnam have their belongings checked carefully. (S&S Photos by Michael L. Kopp)

inspectors comes when GIs try to fly back to the old home town with U.S. government issue equipment — ponchos, poncho liners, knives, machetes — it's no go and the sharp-eyed, well-trained custom inspectors don't miss much. All confiscated government-issue equipment is turned over to the investigation section of the security police for further disposition.

Exporting pets poses another problem. Snakes, parrots, dogs, or other pets cannot accompany their owner on his flight back to the States. They must be shipped at the owner's expense as cargo on commercial planes and health certificates must be ob-

tained for all animals. But a recent ruling outlaws shipping pet monkeys to the States.

It can be a long, long wait in the hot sun. The MPs are thorough, and they go through every item of baggage with a fine tooth comb, sniffing tobacco pouches, unrolling socks, peeking into cuffs, feeling the lining of clothes.

But for many of the troops going through, it is just about the last long wait of their service careers.

They're short, they're going home, they've made it — and it would take a lot to really upset them now.



The hands probe, lift. It's your last "search and destroy" experience.