

NEWS



PUBLIC INFORMATION DIVISION
Treasury Department
U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters
Washington, D.C. 20226
Phone: WOrth 4-2993

Release No.

22-67

Date 8 March 1967

Time of Release IMMEDIATE

CON SON...AN "ALMOST PARADISE"

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The battles of Viet Nam are not limited to the sweated clash of armed warriors. Sometimes the battle is in a relatively remote and rugged "almost paradise where the enemy is not man, but heat, snakes, malaria, and boredom. In this case the island is Con Son.

Chances are Con Son would never have been heard of were it not for 26 United States Coast Guardsmen who have carved a semblance of modern civilization into the frontier of this island. The men toiled long and hard, fighting malaria-carrying mosquitos and kneedeep mud, to erect an electronic beacon in the midst of vines, insects, and monkeys. Their efforts helped establish a Coast Guard electronic air-sea navigation system for Southeast Asia.

Such a "haven", Con Son Island, exists some 150 miles south of Saigon. Con Son, home for some 4,000 islanders, is a primeval jungle broken only by towering mountain peaks that poke into the sky like skyscrapers. A narrow road slices along the mountainside, sometimes edging a sheer 200-foot dropoff into the sea, connecting a lonely airstrip with the village.

The road, a relic left by the French, constantly loses its battle of survival to the ever groping jungle. Deadly snakes slither through undergrowth ready to strike at unknowing intruders.

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Con Son, with similar establishments at Sattahip, Thailand, near Bangkok, and Lampang in North Central Thailand, near the Burma border, form a triad called LORAN C. These three stations form the LORAN network serving the approaches of Viet Nam, the entire East Asia Peninsula, and the eastern section of the South China Sea. This network is one of eight such systems operated by the United States Coast Guard in various parts of the world.

The term LORAN is derived by combining the first letters of the words, "Long Range Aid to Navigation." The electronic system assists a navigator or pilot in determining his position or a line of position accurately and quickly in all kinds of weather.

Con Son looked to be a formidable challenge to the Coast Guardsmen as they prepared to construct the station on a site across the mountains from the primitive village. The site was merely an acre or two of piled crates and equipment in a strange land of vegetation. The Coast Guardsmen, generally known for solid cots and clean bedding, slept in tents on the jungle floor. Surrounding them was a fortress of prefabricated building supplies, fuel and water tanks, transmitting tower equipment, and provisions.

It was late 1965 when the Department of Defense asked the Secretary of the Treasury to direct the Coast Guard to undertake the challenging project. Just a few short months later, the Coast Guardsmen were working feverishly to meet an August 1966 deadline for full on-the-air operation of the LORAN station.

A dependable water supply was one of the first considerations for the 20th Century Coast Guardsmen. Scoops of dirt were torn from the earth and a steady descent continued until a suitable well 45-feet down was established.

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A duplicate well was constructed to assure abundant supplies of the precious liquid.

But the water was undrinkable!

It was a repugnant yellow fluid thoroughly unsuitable for consumption. The need for a purification system was urgent.

The Coast Guardsmen, as always, were ready. They constructed a water plant including two 25,000 gallon storage tanks. From storage tanks the water flows to chlorination tanks and is passed through sand and charcoal filters resulting in sparkling clear and drinkable water.

Although the sailors use only 3,000 gallons of water daily, their purification system is capable of providing 17,000 gallons of pure water each day.

Buildings were completed and the intricate gear installed. Air conditioned living quarters were built and a 625-foot transmitting tower, a solitary challenge to the mountains, was erected.

Weeks of continued activity were brought to successful conclusion and the Con Son LORAN station was in full operation by the August deadline.

At this time the Con Son stationed Coast Guardsmen contribute greatly to improved navigation for the many supply ships racing to aid our fighting men in Viet Nam. Current plans indicate the station will continue in operation long after the fighting in Viet Nam has concluded, to provide safer travel lanes for ships and aircraft serving Southeast Asia.

Future Coast Guardsmen assigned to Con Son will never really appreciate the effort expended to set up this new modern looking station. Yet, they too will have to fight the continual battle against climate, snakes, malaria, and boredom. Con Son will remain an "almost" paradise.

The island is the habitat for some 12 varieties of snakes, some of which are the most poisonous in the world. A multi-colored log can easily turn out to be a sleeping python, and hanging among gnarled vines, some as thick as a man's thigh, may be a snake poised to spring at the unsuspecting passerby.

Just recently the men were lounging in their quarters when one shouted, "snake!" A blurred form disappeared from the doorway into the hallway. Cautious inspection ended with the discovery of a deadly Maylayan Pit Viper lying on the white tiled floor. A Coast Guardsman teased the startled snake with his booted foot, causing the snake to strike, maneuvering the snake to a point where the sailor could put his foot behind the snake's head. The snake population was reduced by one.

The men at Con Son, typical of servicemen stationed in remote corners of the world, learn to fill free time with hobbies. They make their way along white sand beaches surrounding the island, searching for unusual seashells. As one man put it, "You collect shells until you've got more than you can keep. Then you throw them away and start all over again."

Coast Guardsmen are assigned to Con Son for a period of 12 months without leave. The more adventurous fight boredom by organizing wild-boar and wild-hog parties. Some hunt for fruit bats, creatures with 18-inch wingspreads that resemble the Vampire movie models.

The hot humid climate becomes bearable with the air conditioned quarters and the recreational equipment from the States. Occasional visits by Army medical research teams greatly reduce the effects of the malaria-carrying mosquitos. Provisions and mail from home flown in by the Navy from time to time is a welcome break in the island monotony.

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Although the Coast Guardsmen are winning their battles against the perpetual hazards, Con Son still qualifies as only an "almost" paradise.

One sailor says, "There just aren't any friendly needed creatures... like women."