

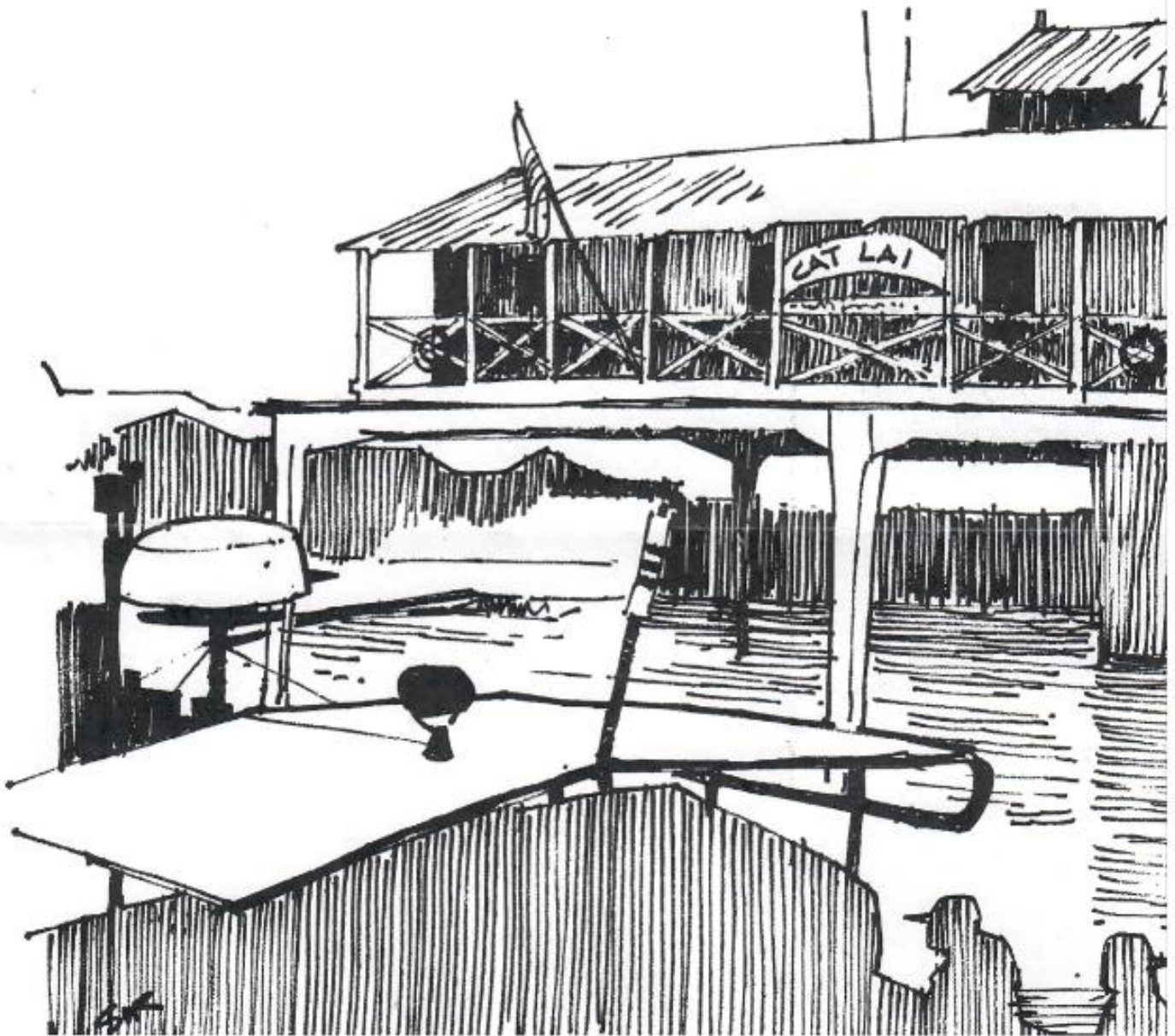
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Cat Lai Terminal

Ghosts in the Wine Cellar?

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Much of the grandeur and majesty of its former owners is lost in today's use of Cat Lai terminal and compound. Gone forever are the huge French Navy Privateers and Japanese Mitsubishi seaplanes that once roared out of their selected lanes on the Dong Nai River about seven miles southeast of Saigon.

But the present users, officers and men of the 11th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) agree to a man that Cat Lai is a most puzzling, but intriguing and desirable duty station.

Built by the French during World War II, the terminal and adjacent compound lie bounded by a thick concrete wall. Many French buildings and fortifications remain as reminders of the former occupants. There are many interesting and intriguing

points of the Cat Lai terminal, not the least of which are reported ghosts in a wine cellar.

Today, the compound is the site of troop billets and shops of the 11th Trans. Bn. and Republic of Vietnam Army and Navy units. The harbor has three deep-draft anchorages which are usually occupied by ammunition ships. The dock facilities include berthing areas for many different types of vessels including tugs, patrol craft (PBR), Mechanized Landing Craft (LCM), J-Boats, and Q-Boats.

Still visible are the remains of French gun positions, while across the river from the main pier the hulk of a Japanese destroyer sunk during World War II is visible at low tide.

According to an elderly Vietnamese gentlemen from the village of Cat Lai, the French Navy fliers once used what is now the 11th Battalion's headquarters building for an officers club. About once each week, usually on Friday nights, the Frenchmen, dressed in their military best would escort their ladies to the grande ball.

Just south of the large headquarters building is a similar structure now housing the battalion noncommissioned officers club. The NCO club building and an adjacent structure are the basis for a local mystery.

According to a Vietnamese elder (who worked at the compound for the Japanese and the French), the Japanese also used the building as an officers club, and the other structure housed a kitchen and servants quarters. Under the building was a wine cellar.

The tale is that just before the area was taken from the Japanese in 1945, seven French officers, including the former commanding officer of Cat Lai, were sealed in the wine cellar by their captors. Apparently the cellar was sealed so well that no trace of an opening remained. But recently there appeared one small hole, which caused Cat Lai's senior NCO a sleepless night.

According to battalion Sergeant Major U.J. Perry, an occupant of one of the rooms directly over the wine cellar, "There definitely was something under there when I moved in here in October 1967."

The sergeant major's story is confirmed by others who saw the peculiar occurrence. While sitting quietly in his room one evening, he thought he saw an upward movement of a thin carpet in the middle of the room.

He also remembers a hissing sound similar to air escaping. "I wasn't concerned at first because I thought I had been watching too much television," said the veteran sergeant major. "But then the carpet lifted again, and there was another hissing sound, and I acted." Perry removed the carpet and saw a hole which measured about two inches in diameter. The hole appeared to "breathe," exhaling and inhaling air. Perry could hear water dripping under the concrete floor.

He called in another man who lived in the quarters. By this time the air had stopped coming out of the hole but its mouth was covered with large red roaches. The sergeant major killed most of the insects with a stick.

The next day he used a water hose to kill the remaining roaches by flooding the area beneath the hole. Hundreds of gallons flowed through the opening for more than an hour. The water emptied somewhere below, and when a light beamed into the opening revealed nothing, Sergeant Major Perry was puzzled even more.

Finally in desperation, he had the hole filled with concrete. He then began to investigate the local area for historical facts about the compound, and the old Vietnamese former employee of the French and the Japanese proved to be a prime source.

Sergeant Major Perry still sleeps in the same room and is still intrigued by the story of the wine cellar beneath his quarters. "By the way," exclaims Sergeant Major Perry, "I can still hear the water dripping, and once in awhile I can hear it running, as though there's a stream under there."

In addition to the quiet mystery of Cat Lai is the excitement generated by the battalion's mission. Responsible for unloading the majority of the ammunition for III and IV Corps Tactical Zones, the battalion is literally sitting on a powder keg. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel R. Thompson Jr., the battalion and subordinate units discharge about 94,000 tons of ammunition per month from ships anchored in Cat Lai harbor. Sergeant Major Perry says, "We know what would happen to us and the terminal if one of those ammo ships ever went." Adding, "We know we're sitting on a powder keg, but we soon learn not to worry about it."

