

"Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's Great Grandson"

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The authors of the 1968 U.S. government handbook for North Viet Nam proclaimed that reptiles were seldom seen and that deaths from snakebite were rare.¹ Vietnamese, French, Japanese, British, and American soldiers who have "humped" the jungles and paddies of Viet Nam (or inhabited its base camps) are probably a bit more aware of the dangers of the native Vietnamese reptile population. In fact, one authority has stated that there are thirty-eight species of poisonous snakes plus twenty-three species of poisonous sea snakes to be found in Indochina and its coastal waters and that, "the state of Tonkin is considered one of the most snake-infested areas of the world."² What is true for Tonkin (North Viet Nam) is true in spades for Annam and Cochin-China (Central and South Viet Nam). Indeed, most of Viet Nam is infested with a variety of very nasty reptiles including cobras and kraits.

In 1967, the former French Navy seaplane base on the Song Dong Nai River at Cat Lai near Saigon was no exception. During my time as Adjutant of the 11th Transportation Battalion (Terminal) at Cat Lai in the first half of 1967, we encountered a number of the more dangerous of Viet Nam's serpents.

The 11th Trans Battalion provided its own security for that part of the Cat Lai base that we occupied. Part of my duties as Battalion Adjutant was to review the daily reports of the Officer of

¹ Harvey H. Smith and others, *Area Handbook for North Vietnam* (DA Pam No. 550-57; Washington: USGPO, 1968), 22.

² *Joint Army-Navy Intelligence Study of Indochina* (Washington: Joint Intelligence Study Publishing Board, October 1945), I, 23.

the Guard who recorded all significant incidents from the preceding night. On many occasions, I read the cryptic entry in the log: "Cobra spotted on trail to Post No. x." In fact, there was a perimeter wall around the base, and to reach the guard post on the far corner one had to walk on a narrow path through an area of "jungle," which was quite grown up and tangled. There lived Mr. Cobra, probably either *Naja siamensis* (the Indo-Chinese spitting cobra) or *Naja kaouthia* (the monocled cobra), both which are frequently found in populated areas in South Viet Nam.³ Men going to and from the guard post often encountered him/her, although to my knowledge no one was ever bitten or even attacked. The more prudent soldiers going on guard would walk atop the wall to the guard post, a path not to be recommended if the bad guys were lurking outside the wall.



Indo-Chinese Spitting Cobra (*Naja siamensis*)

³ For details on the snakes and other fauna of Viet Nam, see the pertinent *Wikipedia* article. All photos are from *Wikipedia* and are in the public domain.



Monocled Cobra (*Naja kaouthia*)

Mr. Cobra's relatives were found within the confines of our camp as well. One was reputed to frequent the HQ bunker. Being really afraid of snakes, I always preferred to take my chances with the odd VC mortar round or RPG rather than enter the bunker. Fortunately, during my time at Cat Lai (before TET 1968), I did not have to make that choice very often.

Cobras were not the only poisonous critters at Cat Lai. One evening I returned to my room on the upper floor of the HQ building (an old two-story French masonry barracks) from the first floor shower room. I shared a good sized room with another officer who was "out" at the time. Upon entering the room clad only in my fashionable olive drab GI shorts and a pair of jungle boots, I found a small, but very nasty looking snake on the tile floor in the middle of the room. Without thinking (REALLY WITHOUT THINKING!) my immediate reaction was to jump on the snake with both boots and do a fair imitation of a fandango on its writhing body. Fortunately (for me, not for the snake) my dance moves were successfully executed: the snake died and I was unbiten. But I was fairly scared to death and needed more than a few minutes (and a bit of Mr. Daniels' distilled

product) to get over the experience.⁴ I must say I didn't sleep very well that night or for several nights thereafter. Our local snake "expert" identified the unfortunate stompee as a krait, perhaps the banded krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*), a very poisonous customer indeed, but one not often aggressive or found in well-lighted BOQ rooms. About the time of my personal encounter with the krait, another one was killed in front of the battalion HQ near the laundry tent run by an Indian concessionaire.



Banded Krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*)

As noted, I was (and remain) very afraid of snakes. My fears of them while at Cat Lai were allayed a bit by my pal and personal protector, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's great grandson. As many of you may recall, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was the heroic young mongoose that saved the British family in India from two very nasty cobras in a short story by Rudyard Kipling in his 1894 work *The Jungle Book*. The small Asian mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*) is a noted snake killer, fast enough to bite most any poisonous snake without being bitten in return. They are found throughout Asia from Afghanistan to Viet Nam and have been introduced in other places to reduce the number of both snakes and rodents in sugarcane fields. The small Asian mongoose normally weighs about 1.5 lbs. and

⁴ This is how I now remember the incident, but, to tell the truth, I am not sure whether I or someone else stomped the offending critter. And frankly, I don't care. However it happened, the snake got dead.

eats mostly insects, but also likes an occasional snack of fish, fruit, rodent, reptile, bird's egg, frog, slug, or snail.



Small Asian Mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*)

Cat Lai had its very own resident small Asian mongoose. As far as I can remember we never gave him/her a name, but we did give him/her numerous cheers whenever he/she appeared. I generally saw the mongoose every day. Sitting behind my desk in the battalion HQ I had a clear view out the front door and across the veranda to a ditch that was about thirty yards away. Almost every morning the mongoose would slink up the ditch from right to left, and every night it would slink back down the ditch from left to right. In between, I hoped that it had been killing numerous snakes and other unwanted critters. Otherwise, I would have a lot more snake stories from Cat Lai. Three belated cheers for Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's great-grandson!!!