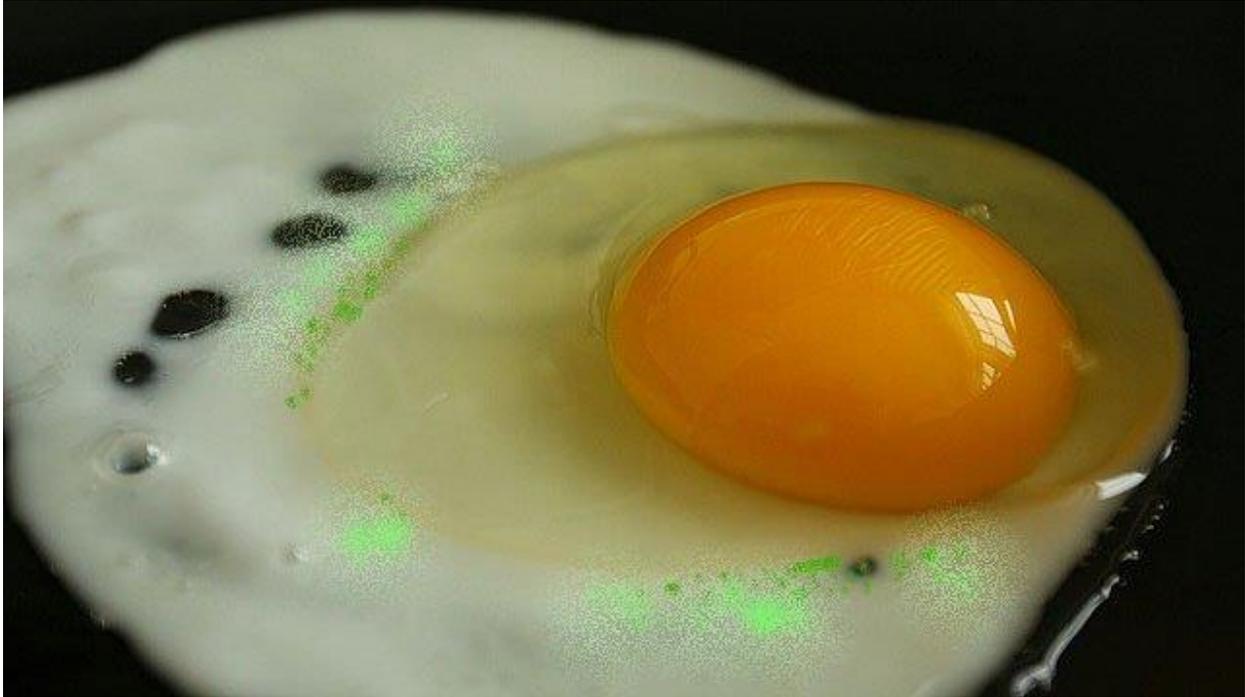


First Breakfast

By Peter "PJ" Brown, 110 Sig Sqn, South Vietnam
(18 Dec 1967 - 19 Dec 1968)



For all new arrivals in the war zone there is always a first of everything. This is the story of a first breakfast at the Vung Tau all ranks mess. Well it was the Other Ranks mess but we let the Sergeants and Officers have a feed as well. There were signs, if we were looking for them, that something was amiss. However, the whole living in country thing was new and we trusted our comrades (silly us). It is unusual for a whole camp to be able to keep a secret however if one was to be kept this was it.

Reville was 0600 (Mickys big hand is on twelve and his little hand is on six for any officers reading). We were roused out of bed by some turkey turning Armed Forces Vietnam (AFVN) Radio on full blast. A silly yank starts the day with the American revile bugle call and a rousing 'Gooooood moorning Viet Nam'. Every body leaps energetically from bed. Up – piss - shit - shave and then shower using the 'put n take' -- a petrol drip heater (choofer) provides hot water at the shower points.

Strangely enough, although there was sufficient hot water, there was no cold water; it was still warm never cooling in the tropical night. Isn't it odd the tiny things that stand out? There were many signs that something was up, the veterans (vets) were all up before us

reinforcements/replacements (reos) and were hard at the morning routine. They were careful to allow sufficient hot water for us, which I now recognize, was all part of a fiendish plan to keep us unsuspecting. (In our Defence we did suspect something was up however not inkling as to what it was.)

There is a long line up in front of the mess and the final warning sign. All the vets were at the front of the line and the reos were at the back. This was engineered so that the vets could all be seated watching our first breakfast. We however followed meekly and unsuspectingly behind. Those that questioned this procedure were assured by kindly and caring types that we would not miss out, as there was plenty for all.

There were about six reos left in the line and when we finally got to the serving point. There was a tantalising, unidentifiable, but mostly pleasant odour. It smelt and sounded like bacon and eggs cooking. We were impressed 'bacon and eggs' we had been expecting fried Spam and biscuits soaked over night in condensed milk. Wow how was this we asked? And were told by smiling cooks and mates that rations were exchanged with the yanks, they were but in this case '*lying bastards*.'

Sure I said to the mess orderly 'two eggs bacon and a piece of toast taa muchly' head off to the mess table and sit down. Almost down to the endgame by now there was still one final and humiliating maneuver by our hosts; we were manipulated into sitting down together. All the vets were contriving to watch us but maintain an impression of being busily engaged in the task at hand.

Looks good, a few of us butter our toast and break into the eggs. There was that smell again. Now stronger it sort of reminds you of a hospital. There was if you looked closely a faint green tinge in the egg white but that was easily overlooked.

"Oh well down the hatch" I thought. "This'll be good". We more or less bite in together.

"*Bloody hell*" everyone spits chewed bits of egg and toast across the table. "The bastards are trying to poison us" we chorus, where's the water. "Oh shit, chlorine" they're trying to finish the job. (The water has been heavily chlorinated for our health or course). One unlucky sole, who managed to find an extra beer or two last night, is chucking his guts up out through the window. Our wonderful and supporting mates are lying around laughing their heads off. The cooks are wedged in the doorway enjoying the spectacle, which was rather brave of them.

'*Ether*' we finally identify the smell as well as the taste. "The bloody eggs are off".

No they explain, gleefully, they have been treated with ether to enhance storage on the sea trip up. 'Who would do such a thing,' Our Defence food scientists that's who. I am reliably informed that some of these eggs had been stored for years.

When we finally settled down we ate the food although with much revulsion. We were sworn to secrecy and promised that we would perpetuate the joke on successive reinforcements and replacements, as they made the transition from new comer to veteran. To my recollection every

newcomer got the same treatment and, in nearly all cases, was never told prior to the first breakfast.

PJ Brown
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