



My Army Adventure in the Canal Zone

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Fort Clayton was my first Army duty station as a Platoon Leader in the 4th Battalion (Mechanized)/20th Infantry in January 1964. I remember bivouacking for weeks at Pier 18 in Balboa after the riots so we could respond quickly, and “swimming” our armored personnel carriers (“tracks”) in the Canal without sinking any! While living in the converted WWII hospital (now Panama’s Social Security HQ) with its organized roach races, Kathleen McConaghy (Campbell) “fixed me up” with Andy Nash (CHS ’60) who had recently graduated from U. of Tennessee for a Sunday party in La Boca. Later under Thatcher Ferry Bridge, Andy told me wide paths in the grass were made by ants! I’m from The Bronx, but ants made those paths?! A few months later we were dancing to Lucho at the Tivoli New Year’s Eve party when she was back down from U. of Virginia.

I eventually moved to the primo Ft. Clayton BOQ known for its Sunday afternoon roof top frozen daiquiri parties (now an upscale condo). One morning, our battalion jogged to Miraflores Locks to witness the old Battleship Alabama squeeze through. Another time, we drove our “tracks” past Balboa Theater with .50 caliber guns mounted on our way to board Navy craft at Rodman for transport to Rio Hato training area. Word later came down from Ancon Hill to encase guns when moving through town! Escorting Sadie Spence (Price), a member of Canal Zone Queen Nancy Morency’s Court during Carnival week and driving my red Cutlass convertible in the Panama City parade with Court members in polleras sitting on the trunk was unforgettable. Later, my platoon was ordered to Fort Davis for three months. While there, Gatun Locks leaders approved and supervised me moving my four “tracks” across (to get to a firing range at Pina Beach) when the mesh bridges across the lock chambers were still angled in the middle! But despite all this, most of my time was spent in the infamous jungle wearing gloves to protect against the dreaded Black Palm.

Andy and I married “stateside” in Virginia in August 1965. Her mother, Peggy Nash, had retired from the Commissary Division and returned to her hometown of Norfolk. Peggy had been well known as the Atlantic Side Society columnist for the Panama American newspaper. I smile when I think of her meeting the train at the Gatun station in the afternoon to transport her column to the newspaper in Panama City. Andy’s father, Lee Nash, retired as a Lockmaster for Gatun Locks and passed away during the riots in January 1964. Sadly, I know him only through pictures and stories, a famous one being about him gingerly removing a sloth which had taken up residence under their house.

Fort Davis was my second Army duty station where I served as commander of the 531st Light Truck. My key missions were support of 4th Bn/10th Infantry and the Jungle Operations Center at Fort Sherman where I dined on sloth and monkey kabobs. Andy drove the Isthmus in our red convertible to work as a

Speech Therapist on the Pacific side. We started housekeeping in Woodruff's vacation quarters in Coco Solo where I impressed my bride by "re-plugging" a new 110 volt AC to fit into a 220 V outlet. Cleverly, I had the burned motor rewound, not realizing that's where our host worked when not stateside. The PCC shop did a great repair job so I survived. Then it was on to Staats' vacation quarters in Margarita where I learned Christmas trees arrive dried out but make excellent bonfires, not to mention the grand old clubhouse and my first taste of Johnny M! Next came a PCC apartment in Gamboa (today housing Smithsonian scientists) where a huge roach flew up from the shower drain "surprising" Andy. Only Panamanian roaches are as big as birds! This is where I came to better appreciate Gatun Lake, Hercules and the Chagres (also our sailboat's name). My daily 5 A.M. train ride to Gatun is an indelible memory. We finally acquired Army quarters (now a private home) across from the pool at Fort Gulick where Andy's CHS classmate Ruth Anne Himes had lived a few years earlier in Quarters # 1.

Andy introduced me to corbina at the Tarpon Club, Front Street treasures in Colon, and great times at the Cristobal Yacht Club. I have a rare Club burgee! She helped me understand her eternal love for all that was, and at least partially still is, Gatun. Vietnam orders shortened our CZ adventure. In 1966 we drove up the Pan American highway to Virginia, meeting Andy's CHS biker classmates Bill Weigle and Jack Sanders near the Costa Rican border. Bill and wife Sandy graciously hosted us 20 years later when we brought our three sons to show them the neat place where Mom grew up.

Revisiting in 2007, Andy introduced herself to the new ACP chief of Gatun Locks who invited us to walk the gates to the Control Tower and turn the chrome handles closing and opening the gates for the Coral Princess to transit. What a thrill! Andy's three Gatun homes are only treasured memories, having been sacrificed for the larger 3rd locks. So during that visit I "saved" the access door to the broken street light that still stood in front of her home on Limon Circle. We also scampered up the rise overlooking the gas station and locks to watch and listen to the magical sounds and sights of ships locking through at night. It made us feel happy and sad. Happily, her elementary school where the bell still hangs; the pool where she learned to swim; and the locks where her Dad proudly served as a Lockmaster (where she worked the summer of 1960) live on! Here in Williamsburg, Virginia where I retired as a colonel and she as a school librarian, she continues to proudly announce her heritage with her license plate that shouts out GATUN CZ.