

CHINA LAKE

By John F. Hall

Several years ago, I wrote a story titled “The Rock.” it was mainly about a paperback book that I found under a rock in the Mojave Desert in California back in 1963. I knew absolutely nothing about the military base where I found the book. It was only a few weeks ago that I realized that it was the Navy's largest land base located on a dry lake in the desert.

What caused me to update “The Rock” story was Mother Nature. During the first week of July, 2019, two earthquakes, a 6.4 and a 7.1, caused the Navy to close this massive base. The Navy had to move all nonessential personnel to a location over 100 miles away for safety reasons. Over 2,100 buildings are on the base and each building must be inspected for earthquake damage.

When I was there in 1963, I thought it was an Army base. Since they transported us immediately after we landed, into the desert, I never had the opportunity to go on Post. The name of this Navy base is China Lake. This story is a mixture of the past and the present and it is exactly how I love to write. It is about Native American Indians, Chinese workers, rock art, a Presidential visit, and my three days living in the desert. As found in most of my stories, I end with a spiritual message.

China Lake is a dry lake. Its name comes from Chinese men harvesting borax from the lake bed, located approximately 1.5 miles south of the Paxton Ranch. The operation was known locally as “The Little Chinese Borax Works.” This location was originally settled by the C050 Indians. They were prolific artisans in creating rock art and they traded with other Native American tribes.

In June of 1963, China Lake-was referred to as the Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS). My former unit, the 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, was flown by a commercial airliner out to one of China Lake's three airstrips. The longest is 10,000 feet. This is what I wrote about that trip. “ Orders came down that B Company, 327th Infantry, 1st Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division and other units, would have a field exercise in the Mojave Desert in California. I was instructed to sign out my M-60 machine gun and 45 caliber hand gun from the arms room. Formation would be held again, after chow. Two Army trucks would transport us to the Fort Campbell Army airfield. I was surprised when we reached the airfield to see commercial jet planes waiting for us.”

I will stop at this point in the story to explain a little history. One year earlier, Russia and the United States had faced each other on the brink of nuclear war over the Cuban missile crisis. The Cold War was on. It seemed rather odd to me, with no prior notice, that after breakfast, a commercial airliner would fly us out to train in the desert. Who else would be coming to China Lake? Was this really a security detail to fool the Russians?

“The Army hired the commercial jet liner to fly us to California. Here I was in my combat gear with my M-60 machine gun, walking into a civilian jet plane. I was greeted

by a stewardess who told me to store my machine gun in the back of the plane. I removed my combat gear and stored it in the overhead compartment over the seats. We landed at a military base in the desert. I walked to the back of the jet plane to retrieve my machine gun. I thanked the stewardess for the beverage and snack that I was served during the flight. I wondered why the Army did not use C-130 military aircraft to fly us to California.” Someone wanted us there in a matter of hours.

“I walked down the portable plane steps. The hot air felt like I had just walked into an oven. Our platoon was instructed to get into a five-ton military truck. I called it a cattle truck because we were bunched together like cattle and we had to stand up during the drive out to the desert.” China Lake Naval base has 1.1 million acres of desert and mountains. I made my first first desert parachute jump in that desolate, dry land. This is what I wrote about that parachute jump.

“The company supply clerk issued us sleeping bags. It gets cold at night in the desert. I was having a good sleep when someone began kicking my sleeping bag. That soldier yelled and told us to get up. He said we had a mission right after morning chow. I got up and put on my boots that I kept in my sleeping bag. I rolled up the sleeping bag and turned it in to the supply sergeant and went to chow. After chow my platoon was loaded into the cattle truck to be transported to the military airfield. We were issued parachutes and told to report to the Jump master. He told us to get into the military aircraft that was called a Caribou. We flew for what seemed like just a few minutes and the Jump master yelled out and told us to stand up and get ready to jump. I checked the soldier in front of me to ensure that his parachute was on properly. We hooked our static line to the overhead wire. As we jumped, this static line pulls out our parachute. I came to the door and the hot air of the Caribou's prop hit me as I jumped.”

“Parachuting in the desert was a different experience for me. I had packed my machine gun in a protective container. I would then lower this container by a 20—foot strap. The purpose of this is to prevent the container from hitting me when I hit the ground. I made a correction and pulled two of the parachute lines so that I could travel in a rightward direction. In stead of going to the right, I went straight down. I guess the hot, dry air made directional travel impossible. I was lucky that I did not land on the container. After making a parachute landing fall (PLF), I rolled up my parachute and joined the other soldiers in my platoon.”

I remember standing around in that hot sun. I began to wonder what we were doing in the middle of no-where. We had had no vehicles. As far as the eye could see was just flat desert and tall mountain ranges. This is what I wrote about standing around and doing nothing. “ We stood around and I got the impression that our platoon leader did not know what was going on. Suddenly, a Huey helicopter came over the horizon and landed near where we were standing. It was kicking up a lot of sand and dust. A full bird Colonel stepped out of the helicopter and walked over to our platoon leader. He asked our Lieutenant if he knew what was going on. Our Lieutenant came to the position of attention and said, NO! Sir!”

The Colonel was in a starched uniform and spit shined boots. He was wearing a new pistol belt with a 45 caliber automatic hand gun and new holster. This is what I wrote about the Colonel's conversation to our Lieutenant. The Colonel smiled and said, "The scenario is this. Your plane developed engine trouble and your men had to jump. I want to know how long it will take to fast march your men the 30 miles where the trucks are waiting for you. He handed our Lieutenant a paper that contained the grid coordinates for the trucks. The Colonel smiled again and told the Lieutenant to carry on. Our Lieutenant saluted. The Colonel walked away, got into his helicopter and flew away."

I stood there in disbelief. My machine gun weighs 23 pounds. I had two canteens full of water and two cans of fruit from my C-Rations. I was not sure that I could fast march for 30 miles without passing out from the heat.

China Lake has a lot of military history, secrets and interesting artifacts. It has the country's largest amount of Indian rock art called petroglyphs. One has to fill out an application in advance and pass security screening. Individual and vehicle inspections are made prior to entering the Naval base to meet with their tour guide. Non US citizens are not allowed on the base. The Coso Indians made the rock art, one to three thousand years ago. Historians don't seem to know why the Indians made the rock art in the first place. The art is protected from vandals because it is inside the Naval base. The technological discoveries that came out of China Lake these past 50 years, include the first to patent new biofuel (renewable plant) specifically designed to convert butanol into high — performance jet fuel; the first subject search by a digital computer-43 years before "Google search"; the first to manage the Navy navigation satellite system "Transit", predecessor to today's GPS; the first body scanning technology- predecessor to today's MRI; the first air-bag sensor for automobiles; the first stop-action video; the non-nuclear components testing for the first atomic bomb; the first plastic bonded explosive; the first air-to-air guided missile ever used in combat-Sidewinder missile; the first successful anti— radiation missile-Shrike- predecessor to today's Harm missile; the first sea-based ballistic missile intercept; the first U.S. Aircraft rockets; the first satellite launch-Notsnhc, and the first Lunar Lander and Mars Lander subsystems, to mention just a few accomplishments at China Lake.

What I remember most about China Lake is being on that hill a few miles from the air strip. I was overlooking the valley. Sitting behind my machine gun, this is what I wrote about that day on that hill in the desert. "Our platoon reached its destination and we exited the truck. My platoon sergeant told me to set up my machine gun on a hill high above the desert floor. I selected my field of fire and looked for rocks to serve as visual aids for night firing. I found several rocks for the field of fire. I needed one last rock to complete the job. I spotted a good rock that I needed. When I picked up the rock, I noticed that it was covering a small hole in the ground. DoWn in the hole was a small paperback book."

"If I remember correctly, I believe the name of the book was Dune. It was a SciFi book written by Frank Hubert about this far away desert planet called Arrakis. Deadly sandworms, with mouths larger than a house, menaced the planet. The human inhabitants

wore a mask that captured moisture from their nose and mouth. Water was more precious than gold. The hero of the book managed to tame one of sandworms and he rode it like a cowboy standing on the front of the sandworm. I finished the book and put it back under the rock.”

Our platoon was never told that on June 7, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was there at China Lake. He was the first American President to visit the base. He came for a briefing and to watch a 90-minute air show. Seven months earlier, the Soviet Union and the United States nearly started World War III over the Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Soviets blinked and moved the missiles out of Cuba. I sometimes wonder if that three-day exercise in the desert might have been to mislead the Soviets.

“Finally, our training came to an end. Word came down to clean up all the trash in our unit's location before we exited the site. I scattered the rocks from my field of fire. There is a place in the Bible where the word rock is mentioned. It is found in Matthew, Chapter 16, verse 18.” Jesus said, “And I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.”

“Our platoon loaded into the cattle truck which transported us back to the military air field. The civilian jets were waiting for us. The flight back to Fort Campbell was a relief from the desert heat. I was tired and dirty from the three-day field exercise. The stewardess gave me a beverage and a snack. The air conditioned jet nearly put me to sleep. I thought about the book under that rock in the desert. Jesus is my Rock and nothing can prevail against that Rock.”

Kris Kridtofferson wrote the song “Why Me Lord.” Some of his lyrics are: “ Why me Lord, What have I ever done to deserve even one of the pleasures I've known. Tell me Lord, what did I ever do that was worth loving You or the kindness You've shown. Lord help me Jesus, I've wasted it so help me Jesus I know what I am. Now that I know that I've needed You so help me Jesus, my soul's in Your hand. Tell me Lord, if You think there's a way I can try to repay all I've taken from You. Maybe Lord, I can show someone else what I've been through myself on my way back to You.” My soul has always been in Jesus' hand. From my time in the East China Sea to the few days in China Lake. I've tried to share stories that show my faith in Christ.

John F. Hall

*Read more stories written by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>