

## *Memoirs of A Second Grade World Traveler*

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The year I turned six was magical. I had grown a whole inch, I had completed my first year of school and now I was a second grader. This, however, was not the highlight that made that year so special. I am the daughter of a career Navy man. Dad had just received new orders. We were moving. Our conversation about the move was a typical adult to six year old dialogue. It went something like this-

“We’re moving? Where are we moving?”

“To Gitmo.”

I wrinkled up my cute little six year old nose, scrunched up my tiny little face and asked, “What’s a Gitmo?”

“It’s a place, a military base on the island of Cuba.”

“Oh, ok.” I walked away feeling very excited but still as confused as ever. I asked a few more questions later and then went to bed.

The next day I told all of my second grade classmates about my impending move. I told them how I would have to get on a real airplane and fly over the ocean to an island named Cuba and I would live at Gitmo. I said there would be palm trees, and sand, and other stuff that islands have, though I wasn’t quite sure what that was.

They asked, “Why?”

“Because my dad has orders.” I said. They were in awe of me, though mainly I think it was because they had never heard of Gitmo or Cuba either. Never the less I was having my fifteen minutes of fame and enjoying every minute of it.

In September dad had to leave us at grandma’s house and go on to Cuba. He would be getting our housing arranged and beginning his new assignment. Boy did we all find that hard. We would join him on December 17<sup>th</sup>. Mom said we couldn’t go yet because we had to get processed. I would find out later that “processed” was the grown up word for “get shots.” No one hates a needle more than me so this was an extreme feat for my mom and quite a comical sight for onlookers. Picture it- me being carried, kicking and screaming, by my mother and three nurses. It was a very traumatic experience for me but I survived and I was now officially ready to fly. That night I wrote my dad a letter:

Dear Dad,

I miss you. Mom and Trish and Greg miss you too.  
Don’t worry, we will come to Cuba soon because now

I am processed.

I love you,  
Sharon

P.S.- Will you have the Christmas tree up? Did you give Santa our new address? We will be there by Christmas so I was just checking.

The evening of December 16<sup>th</sup> we boarded a plane in Charleston to fly to Roanoke, Virginia. It was dark outside. My baby brother, Greg, cried until the plane was in the air. The roaring engines finally soothed him and he was happy, so was everyone else on the plane. We made it to Virginia and went to a hotel. Mom was nervous because the door to the adjoining room wouldn't lock. I remember she carefully wedged a fingernail file in the door in hopes that it would keep out any would be intruders.

The next morning was very busy for us. We gathered our things and checked out of the hotel. We made it to the airport and boarded our plane. I noticed that this plane was much larger than the last one. Everyone laughed when I said, "I didn't know planes came in sizes."

What seemed like hours later we landed at Guantanamo Bay. Dad was eagerly waiting for us. He couldn't help but laugh when I exited the plane wearing my too big sunglasses and a winter coat. No one told me it wouldn't be cold in Cuba. Dad and mom retrieved our luggage and we loaded up to go to our new home. I just knew we were beginning a new adventure.

I thought Cuba was a child's paradise. There were palm trees, sandy beaches, and dad said the temperature never got below seventy degrees. Although our part of the island only covered seven miles, it was more than enough space for this tiny, blonde, world traveler.

A short time later we pulled into a driveway. I would quickly come to realize that living in a foreign country was going to take some getting used to.

"Where are we?"

"Home."

"Where, I don't see any houses."

"Right here." dad pointed.

"That looks like the building we saw at the airport." My parents laughed. You see, temporary housing at Guantanamo Bay was a remodeled quonset hut. It was small but cozy.

After we had settled in my dad took us to meet another family stationed on the base. While the adults talked, my sister and I played at the playground with their daughter. It was a lot of fun except for the part where I almost got beat up by a little deaf girl because I didn't know how to sign. Apparently she didn't understand my

greeting. Lucky for me, my new friend was able to smooth things over. It really does pay to know the right people. Later we went back to our quonset hut and settled in for a good nights rest. This was a good thing because I'd had enough excitement for one day.

The next day our family decided to get ready for Christmas. Our first task was to tackle the tree. My siblings and I were so excited. Mom pulled the tree out of the box. My sister and I looked at each other. It was at that moment I discovered that tropical islands don't produce Christmas trees, even green artificial ones.

"I've never seen a silver tree before, it looks like tin foil." I said.

"At least we have a tree." mom replied.

Mom let us help put the ornaments on the tree.

"Where are the lights?" Mom reached into the box and came out with a weird looking object. It was a large bulb with a plastic, pie shaped wheel attached to it. The wheel had been divided into four colors - red, blue, green, and yellow.

Again I asked, "Where are the lights?" Mom proceeded to plug in the strange contraption and the colored wheel began to slowly turn. She sat the odd light on the floor in front of the tree. Suddenly, a stunning rainbow of color engulfed the strips of tinsel that made up the tree and magically brought it to life. I stared amazed.

"They'll never believe this back home." In the end, we had a wonderful holiday.

I would have many other new experiences during our stint in Cuba. There would be trips to one of the three beaches almost every weekend and holiday, even in the winter. There would be new and exotic foods to try like Creole Rice and Cantanese Style Fried Rice, and even fresh coconut from our very own tree in the back yard.

I'll also never forget the morning ritual of seeing how many crabs had made their way under our lawn mower. Once a crab actually got into our house and hid under the laundry. You should have seen my mom chasing it down the hall and out the door with the broom. I grew to love this little slice of paradise.

We lived on the island for two years. In that short time we created many fond memories and made a multitude of new friends, some whom we still keep in touch with. Living in Cuba was an experience I feel blessed to have had and I'll keep those days in my heart forever.