



**RAYMOND HELTSLEY**  
**1969-1970**

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**Vietnam Memoirs:**  
**The War at the Grassroots**  
**Ray Heltsley**

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**Photo taken at Fire Support Base Concord, Cong Thanh District, Bien Hoa Province, III Corps Tactical Zone, April, 1969.**

## Foreword

My story is not unique, I'm sure. During the year I spent in Southeast Asia, I was only one of over a half-million American servicemen. I was born in 1945. That was the same year that a struggle commenced in Southeast Asia that would become one of the most controversial military conflicts in our Nation's history. At the close of World War II, nationalist forces in a little known country called An Nam, in what was then known as French Indo-China, sought to establish a free and independent nation after resisting the invading Japanese forces with guerillas trained by American O.S.S. operatives. The people of An Nam admired the Americans, and even patterned their Constitution after ours. As they celebrated their victory over the Japanese, American warplanes flew overhead in salute, and U.S. Army O.S.S. Officer Major Patty stood side by side with the new leaders, Ho Chi Minh, and his military commander, Vo Nguyen Giap. Minh appealed to his former American allies to convince the French to grant them their independence. Unfortunately, France desired to continue their colonial hold in Indo-China, needing the natural resources of that area, and using it as a training ground for their diplomatic corps. Due to complicated issues and alliances stemming from the recently concluded war, the United States was forced to refuse Premier Ho's request, and side with France in the ensuing struggle.

In the following years, nationalist Viet Minh forces fought the French Foreign Legion for control of An Nam, and eventually, Giap's army prevailed in the final battle of Dien Bien Phu. Ho had turned to the Communist nations of China and Russia for support when none had been forthcoming from the Free World. America, now firmly entrenched in "The McCarthy Era" saw the Communist-backed Viet Minh as a part of the world-wide threat of monolithic Communism, and attempted to prevent An Nam, now called Viet Nam, from adding itself to the world's map of Communist nations. An agreement was reached to split the nation into a Communist North and a democratic South, with elections to be held at some point in the future to determine the ultimate course of the nation. The elections never happened, and soon a military struggle began between the two new nations. Inevitably, U.S. forces entered the war on the side of the democratic South.

It was during this conflict that I and those of my generation came of military age. Many of our fellow Americans chose to join the protest movements, or flee to Canada to avoid the draft. Long-haired protesters burned their draft cards, chanting "Hell no, we won't go!" Those of us who clung to the philosophy of "My Country, Right or Wrong" soon found ourselves involved in the war in Southeast Asia that was to last thirteen years, and take over 58,000 American lives.

For whatever reason, I played my part in this chapter of our Nation's history. This is not a blood-and-thunder tale of daring-do. I was no hero, but I had some interesting and intense experiences that probably did much to shape the course of my life. And, I hope that what I did added to our nation's course in a positive way.

The United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was established on February 8, 1962, as a unified command subordinate to the Commander in Chief, Pacific. MACV has the mission of assisting the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to maintain internal security against subversion and insurgency and to resist external aggression.

With headquarters in Saigon, MACV controls all of the United States Armed Forces in Vietnam. MACV is involved in two basic activities. Its forces constantly seek to engage the enemy in combat on the ground and territorial waters of South Vietnam, to provide assistance to the constitutional government of Vietnam in building and maintaining a free society capable of defending itself.



**This story is dedicated to the Soldiers of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and to my Comrades-in-Arms in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, especially Major Thuong, Lieutenant Phuoc, and Sergeant Dung.**

## Chapter One The Beginning

I didn't know much about my Dad's military service, or my Grandfather's. Dad had been in the Army in World War II, and I knew he had served in Alaska. He was involved in the retaking of the Aleutian Island chain from the Japanese. I knew my Grandfather Owens had been in the Army, too, because there was a picture in his home of him wearing an army uniform. I didn't know until after he died that he had served with the cavalry in the Punitive Expedition, when Black Jack Pershing had pursued Pancho Villa into Mexico, and may even have been in on the United States Cavalry's final engagements at the Battle of Carrizal, Chihuahua. He fought in Europe with Pershing in the War to End All Wars. But neither of them said much about their experiences, and I didn't really know what they did, or even how they felt about it. It seems to be an age-old question; *"What did you do in the war, Daddy?"*

Well, just for posterity's sake, here is my story...

I attended Seattle University from 1963 to 1967, where I majored in Journalism. The school had a mandatory Army ROTC Program. It seemed to me that, since my involvement in the war taking place at the time in Southeast Asia was inevitable, it would be preferable to do my military service as an officer, and I enrolled in the full four-year program.

In 1965 I received a scholarship through the ROTC that came with the stipulation that, if offered, I must accept a commission in the Regular Army. I enjoyed my membership in the various military associations available to the cadets, and early on I joined a "counterinsurgency" unit trained and led by Special Forces personnel recently returned from Southeast Asia. I eventually became the cadet commander of the unit, and earned the designation "Distinguished Military Cadet" during ROTC Summer Camp training. Our unit song at Summer Camp was "The Draft Dodger's Rag." (I will append the lyrics of this amusing ditty to this manuscript.) Upon graduation, I was offered a Regular Army commission, and entered service in December of 1967 as a Second Lieutenant of Infantry, with orders to attend training at Fort Benning enroute to my first unit, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Oh, and I also received my degree in Journalism.



Here, we are, The Wild Bunch, caught sitting still at Summer Camp, Fort Lewis, 1966.

I signed into The U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, on December 15, 1967. The post was closed for Christmas, but my orders said I had to be there anyway. That gave me a few weeks to get used to being there, and work on getting in shape for what was to come.

I started my parachute training in January. It was a three week long school where you basically learned the art and skill of falling down after leaving an airplane. People seem to think it's funny to ask me why I would have jumped out of a perfectly good airplane. But actually, I had my doubts about how perfectly good they were. The planes we jumped out of to earn our wings were the same ones the very first American paratroopers used to jump into D-Day in World War II. They were the "flying boxcars" that belonged to the Arkansas Air National Guard. Their crews were not in the best of moods anyway, since they had come to Fort Benning just to provide training aircraft for the Jump School, and had then been told they were being put on Federal active duty for service in Viet Nam. So, I have to say, I wasn't really reluctant to leave those venerable aircraft, and trust to my own rigging for my safe return to Terra Firma.

At Airborne School, I met another lieutenant who had recently graduated from the Naval Academy. Ben Anderson was kind of a rebel. His father was an Army colonel, and Ben went to the Naval Academy to irritate him, I guess, but then he went ahead and took his commission in the Army. After Airborne School, we went on to Infantry Officer Basic together, and eventually partnered up for Ranger School.

When Ben and I reported in to our Officer Basic Course, we were wearing our new silver Jump Wings. There was an Army policy in place at the time that required Regular Army officers assigned to combat branches to attend either the Airborne School or the Ranger School. Our basic course was composed of new Regular Army officers that would be taught the basics of leadership. The plan was to then send the entire class through Ranger training. This was to be the first time this sort of thing had happened (lucky me...) Ranger School was rated as about the toughest military training in the Free World, it lasted 9 weeks, and it didn't pay you an extra dime. All they gave you was an inconspicuous little black and gold cloth tab to wear on your sleeve that said RANGER. You got an extra \$110 a month for being Airborne. Also, I remembered that, back at Seattle University, there had been a number of promising cadets that had gone into the Army and had shamed themselves by failing to pass the Ranger training. I did not want to become one of those failures.

Since I had already completed Airborne training, I pointed out to the *powers that were* that it would not be necessary to include me in the Ranger thing they had planned for the rest of the class. That was when I learned that the Army is free to change its policies at any time. Ben and I were going to Ranger School, like it or not, so we agreed to become "Ranger Buddies."

One good thing about the situation was that, since we already had our wings, we kept getting put into leadership roles during our officer training, and I think we got a lot more out of the training because of it. That stood both of us in good stead going through Ranger training, and later on while serving in our more serious assignments.

As promised, on graduation day, our class reported in to the Ranger School at Harmony Church. There were a number of sergeants that were also slated to undergo the training with us, and the cadre took all the students that were already parachute qualified, and put them together in one squad, which they called the Airborne Lurp (short for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol). That was back in the days when the Army had no real Airborne Ranger units. The Army had deactivated the Ranger Regiment during Korea, and at the time the only actual Airborne Ranger units in existence were the four companies of cadre that provided the Ranger training for the rest of the Army. Anyhow, it worked out that there were only six of us in the entire company that were jumpers, so we got to do a lot of "special" training, and also got a lot more harassment from the cadre, because we were so special. Ben got even more harassment, because of being a Naval Academy graduate, and of course, I shared in the fun, being his Ranger Buddy. Again, I think it worked out for the best, because we ended up putting a lot more into the training, and getting a lot

more out of it. That may also have had something to do with the fact that I later received orders to return to the Rangers to become one of their cadre members.

We spent our first three weeks of Ranger Training at the Harmony Church area of the famous "Benning School for Boys." We were taught the basic Ranger skills, such as how to organize, prepare for, and lead patrols, how to conduct raids, ambushes, point and area reconnaissance missions, counter-ambush techniques, map reading, survival, hand-to-hand, knife, and bayonet fighting, field engineering and demolition, identification and use of enemy weapons, and, of course, endless hours of physical training and harassment designed to push us beyond what we thought were our limits.

I got extra points for my performance in bayonet training. Then Ben and I almost cleaned up in "The Bear Pit" that was the final exam for our hand-to-hand combat training. The entire company was put into a roped-off arena, and began fighting on signal. We got down to Ben, me, and a big Sergeant. I just naturally figured Ben and I would throw the Sergeant out of the pit, then I could throw Ben out. But he foxed me, and the two of them threw me out, then Ben threw the Sergeant out.

The survivors of this first part of the course were then sent on to the Mountain Phase, located at a quaint little facility nestled in the Smoky Mountains at the southern terminal of the Appalachian Trail. It was then simply known as M.R.C., the Mountain Ranger Camp. It has since been named Camp Merrill, in honor of the leader of the World War II Ranger force that served in the China-Burma-India Theater.

During this phase we learned mountaineering skills, water crossing techniques, and techniques of moving and patrolling in mountainous terrain. Most of our movement was at night, and always off the trails. We learned to enter and leave an area unseen by taking the most impossible and unpredictable routes, to move quietly without disturbing the foliage or using our flashlights, even on the darkest of nights, and to always "drive on" against any and all adversity. It was also during this phase that we got a block of very interesting instruction on how to pick up a weapon on any battlefield in the world and figure out how to use it.

We had been fed three meals a day during the First Phase of Ranger Training back at Ft. Benning, and got to sleep about four hours a night. In the Mountain Phase, we were well fed in base camp, but probably only averaged about one meal per day in the field, and only averaged an hour or two of sleep a day. Later, in the Florida Phase, we got fed less than that, and I don't remember any actual scheduled sleeping time. It was all part of what they called "stress training." We learned that a soldier could be cold, tired, wet and hungry, and still be able to continue the mission. We learned to pay attention to each and every detail of the mission, since any one of us could suddenly be placed in charge. Performance of leadership duties was evaluated by the instructors, and eventually dictated who would graduate from the course with the coveted Ranger tab.

The instructors were all combat veterans who brought to our outdoor classroom the benefit of their experience. They continually pointed out to us that if we did not learn our lessons, we would die in Viet Nam. Our class tactical officer, Captain Payseur, was already an Army legend. He had been featured in Bernard Fall's book, *Street Without Joy*, as Fall described the activities of the Rangers, or Lurps, in the early stages of the Viet Nam war. Sergeant Davy Lockett, our knife-fighting instructor, like to quote colorful phrases like, "You too can be brave and bold, if you wear the Black and Gold." (Sergeant Lockett can now be seen on the Army Ranger web site's Hall of Fame, along with a couple of the people I served with later in 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company, and my classmate from Ranger Class 11-68, Steve Doane, who died in Viet Nam March 25, 1969, receiving a posthumous Medal of Honor.) Our tactical sergeant, SFC Voyles, continually told us things like "Somedays you get the bear, somedays the bear gets you." I didn't know what that was supposed to mean, but we figured he was the bear. I don't think we ever got him...

The Mountain Phase put us into the field at first in squad size units, and as the training



progressed, our missions became more complex and the size of the patrols grew until the final exercise, which involved the entire company. Like I said, we were not fed regularly. This was supposed to help provide the stress, along with things like sleep deprivation, which would weed out those Ranger students with no stamina or staying power. Outside of base camp, our meals arrived in a number of unpredictable and ingenious ways. We would each be given one C-Ration meal to begin an operation, then any further supplies would have to be requested, and may or may not ever make it to us. Sometimes requested supplies would be air-dropped for us to find if we could. At other times we would eat only if we found rations belonging to “the enemy,” or negotiated for them with a “friendly partisan” encountered in the training area.

Those of us who had not quit, been injured, or recycled eventually made it to the third phase of training. Base camp was at Field Seven of Eglin AFB in the Florida Panhandle, on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp. After a brief orientation at the base camp (and a trip to the PX to gorge ourselves on the junk food available there) our little 6-man Airborne Lurp made a midnight jump into the swamp to locate and secure a landing zone (LZ) for the rest of the company. Their arrival at first light commenced the final phase of our training, which proved to be an endless succession of missions as the student leaders tried to urge their exhausted and hungry comrades on to new feats of endurance in order to accomplish their missions.

Finally, the night before the final patrol, Ranger Cadre members came to our base camp and called out a group of students. Those students were told to pick up their gear and go with the Cadre; they were being sent on to their assigned units with a certificate of completion for Ranger training, but without the Ranger tab. They had made it to the end of the course, but had not earned enough points to win the tab. We never saw them again. The rest of us, inspired by new confidence, now knew that if we could survive one last mission and perform satisfactorily, we would be allowed to wear the Ranger tab as a permanent part of our uniform.

I did survive my final patrol, and the forced march back to Field Seven. I was 38 pounds lighter than I had been just nine weeks earlier. All I could think of was how glad I was that the training wasn't going to last another day. I was afraid they may have found my limits. We marched onto the airstrip, grounded our rucksacks, and our Ranger tabs were pinned onto our shoulders. We were then faced left, and double-timed once more around the grinder in lieu of a graduation parade. Captain Payseur then led us to a steak cook-out that signaled an end to “starving time.”

I was now a full-fledged Airborne Ranger, and ready to get on with my service.



This is the “RANGER” tab that is awarded for successful completion of the Ranger Course. The crest was worn only by the members of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and “O” Ranger Companies. It displays the Powder Horn & Tomahawk representing Roger’s Rangers from the French & Indian War, the Confederate Battle Jack representing Mosby’s Rangers from the Civil War, and the Spearhead, representing the role of the Ranger Battalions as the Allies re-took Europe from Nazi Germany in World War II. A few years after I earned this, the Army reorganized the old 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (Airborne Ranger) and it still exists. They wear the old-style 75th Ranger Scroll on their sleeves, and they have a new crest that commemorates Merrill’s Marauders, a WWII Ranger Unit. The “Rangers Lead the Way” crest is still displayed at the entrance to the Ranger training area at Fort Benning.

## Chapter 2

### My First Unit

I said goodbye to the Benning School for Boys, and reported in to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where I was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. It was May of 1968. I purposely wore my “saltiest” set of fatigues, with my new Ranger tab prominently displayed on the shoulder. I figured, now that I had gone ahead and done it, I might as well try for some kind of an assignment that would continue to hone my combat skills before I reported for the inevitable tour of duty in Viet Nam.

The Brigade Commander barely even looked up at me as he scanned my personnel records. He commented on my Journalism degree, and allowed as how he was desperately in need of a PIO (Public Information Officer). It looked like I was going to be a “chairborne Ranger.”

The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade was a brand spanking new unit. It had just been created to fill the big hole left in the division by the departure of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade for Viet Nam. The surprise Communist offensive of Tet in 1968 had necessitated their deployment in a big hurry to Vietnam. They went first to Pleiku, then to Saigon to defend the capital.

I served briefly as the Brigade PIO (Public Information Officer), then they moved me to a battalion as the new troops started arriving. I became the Adjutant of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion/504<sup>th</sup> Airborne. Ben was assigned to the S-3 (Operations) Office. We were part of a confusing unit numbering system that involved designations derived from our Regimental association, but the Army was no longer actually using regiments. The old regimental system had been somewhat confusing, since a regiment could contain any number of units depending upon when and where it had been organized, and it no longer fitted in with the Army’s structured unit numbering system. The Army had gone through a reorganization called R.O.A.D. (Reorganization of Army Divisions) that simply made Divisions composed of three Brigades of three Battalions each. But they still used the old Regimental number designations for the individual battalions within the current brigade structures. It’s got something to do with heraldry, where the regimental colors have to be passed on to some unit or they get retired to a dusty old archive somewhere in Alexandria, Va. Anyhow, we were the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, when you drew it on a chart, but we were the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 504<sup>th</sup> Airborne Infantry Regiment, when you looked at the crests on our epaulets and the streamers on our guidon. Our Battalion wore the crests of the old 504<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, which featured a flaming sword on a blue shield, and a scroll beneath bearing the motto “Strike, Hold!”

And we were the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of our Division, which was unique in itself in an Army where Divisions were only supposed to have three Brigades. Our Brigade only existed until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was sent home from Viet Nam, then it was deactivated. Any future reunions of my old Brigade would probably be awfully small.

Our mission was to create, fill, equip and train three battalions of Airborne qualified troopers as quickly as possible to bring the 82<sup>nd</sup> back up to full strength in case it was needed anywhere else in the world, since it was the country’s only Airborne Division that wasn’t in Southeast Asia. I did end up learning a lot about what has to be done to put a combat unit together, since I was actively involved in the process of staffing and training, including the Combat Readiness Testing we passed before the end of the year. By late Fall of 1968 we had assigned and trained enough paratroopers to qualify as the Army’s newest Airborne Brigade.

I not only learned a lot during this period, but I met a lot of interesting and colorful people. We had a young soldier sign into the unit one night while I was on duty at Brigade Headquarters. He had just come back from Viet Nam, and was wearing the Medal of Honor mixed in with the other ribbons on his uniform. He was a medic, and he was not fooling, he did earn the medal in Viet Nam, but apparently no one had shown him where it was supposed to go



on his ribbon slide. He was one of many reluctant heroes I would meet during my stay in the Regular Army. I think they were called “draftees.”

We had a Staff Sergeant named Roy Hulsey in the unit, who had an interesting story about what happened to him when he was wounded. It was a story that was to influence my future thinking about the people who happened to be serving on the other side in the conflict. Roy said he had been shot in the chest, and ended up cut off from the rest of his unit. He crawled into some elephant grass and tried to hide. He was trying to lie still and not breathe too loudly, because he could hear the North Vietnamese soldiers moving through the area searching for him. Then he saw the grass part, and an NVA private was bent over looking right into his hiding place; he knew he was going to die. The enemy soldier then looked around quickly, and held his finger up to his lips, signaling Roy to keep quiet. He pulled out a first aid dressing and pressed it over the wound in Roy’s chest. He then pulled the grass over him, straightened up, brought his rifle to the ready, and continued on as if he was still looking for him. When they were gone, Roy was able to make his way back to rejoin his unit, where he told his comrades about how it seems that the guys on the other side might be people just like them.

The young Captain that commanded C Company in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion/504<sup>th</sup> was a West Pointer named Alec Hottell. He was a very exceptional gentleman, who had been sent to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. While in Europe he had competed two years running in the European Diving Championship, and had taken first place. He had also gone through the West German Parachute School, and wore their jump wings on his uniform, along with his American wings. He was a man who was going places in the Army, and I was destined to see him again a couple of times before he met his tragic end in July of 1970. His story is one of the appendices to this memoir.

There were many young (and some not so young) soldiers and officers in the unit that had already served one or more tours in Southeast Asia. One company was commanded by a 20-year old Captain who had already commanded a company in combat in Viet Nam, and was still not even old enough to vote (the voting age in those days was still 21). There was a trooper working in the battalion mail room named Parvis Kobrah. He was an Iranian (he called himself a Persian) who had come to the United States to go to school, and then enlisted, became a paratrooper, and deployed to Viet Nam with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade. He wasn’t even a citizen, but there he was, sorting mail for the troops and wearing the same jump wings and Combat Infantry Badge his fellow troopers wore.

Our Battalion Commander’s driver, Carlos Leguas, was a Peruvian and the son of the Peruvian Ambassador. Our Brigade S-3 (Operations & Training Officer) was a very personable New Yorker named Anthony Broullian. He had made even my dull assignment at Brigade Headquarters fun, and I was sorry to hear later that he had died in Viet Nam at the hands of his own “bodyguard.” Tony had been sent to advise a Vietnamese Ranger Battalion when he got to Viet Nam, and at some point one or both of the soldiers assigned by his counterpart to be his bodyguards had turned out to be VC infiltrators, who shot him the first opportunity they had to get him alone.

Our Battalion supply officer was a lieutenant named James J. Jordan. He was kind of a cut-up, who wasn’t above slipping a blank supply document into a pile of papers to see if he could get you to sign it, then fill it out for things like television sets, jeeps, or whatever. Then he’d go demand the item back, and let the unfortunate butt of his prank (one of whom was me) sweat for a while before he’d destroy it. I had a neat little Puma knife that I had bought at the PX at Field Seven and used at Ranger School, and I loaned it to Jim when he got his orders to attend Ranger School before leaving for Viet Nam. I should have known better than to do that, since he lost it somehow. But, oh well, what are friends for. Jim got shot up in the A Shau Valley when he commanded a platoon in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, got medevac’d to Japan, and he stopped in to visit me in Bien Hoa on his way back from the hospital. He spent a couple of days with me, but after encounters on both of those days with some of our local Viet Cong, he decided he might as well

go back to the 101<sup>st</sup>.

We made regular parachute jumps while training our newly organized units. On my first jump into Salerno DZ (drop zone) I found a penny lying on the ground where I landed. Knowing what they say about good luck and finding pennies, I picked it up, and still have it. On my next jump, darned if I didn't land right on a nickel. I picked it up too, and it's still in my coin collection. I was looking forward to my next jump, figuring eventually I was going to be a wealthy man. Unfortunately, I broke my streak. On my next jump I lost my wallet, and had to spend the rest of my life working for a living...

Shortly after we successfully completed our Army Training Tests and got our combat-ready designation from STRATCOM, I received my orders for Viet Nam. I was being assigned to the Military Assistance Command Viet Nam, with orders to report to Sa Dec Province in IV Corps as an Assistant Operations Officer. That meant I would be spending my year in Vietnam actually living and working with the Vietnamese military forces. En route I was scheduled to attend training as a guest of the "Green Berets" across the post at the U.S. Special Warfare School.



This is the shoulder patch worn by soldiers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Activated in 1917 for service in World War I as an Infantry Division, they were known as the "All Americans." During World War II when the concept of dropping soldiers onto the battlefield by parachute was born, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division was one of the first to adopt the new concept, and it added the "Airborne" tab above their red, white and blue "All American" patch. Soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade who had served in Vietnam were entitled to wear this patch on their right shoulder for the rest of their career. This is an Army tradition that originated, I believe, in World War II. Since I served in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division only in the U.S., I never wore this patch again once I left the 82<sup>nd</sup>. The "combat patch" that I wore on my right sleeve was a red and gold shield-shaped patch with a sword displayed vertically over a battlement – the patch of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). That patch is the one shown on the Table of Contents page.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Back to School**

In January, 1969, I reported in to the John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare. Our class was composed of officers and NCO's (non-commissioned officers, i.e. Sergeants) who were being assigned to tours with Vietnamese military units as Advisors. This was to be a "gentleman's course" in which most of the training took place in actual classrooms. We learned the Vietnamese language, the Order of Battle of the South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, and Viet Cong Armies, and the history and socio-political philosophy of Southeast Asia. We were taught how to organize and run an Advisory Team, how to deal with culture shock issues, and so on. We were being prepared to take the field in small teams of Americans living and fighting with the Vietnamese. I was to get a unique and unforgettable look at the War in Vietnam at the *grassroots* level.

It was now eight years into our nation's direct involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict. Since the big Communist offensive of 1968 during the Chinese New Year (called Tet) there had been a significant increase in the groundswell of public dissatisfaction with the war. Sure, the hippies and the draft dodgers had been whining for a long time, but now much more of the general public was wondering what would be the chances of prevailing in the face of such an intense and determined foe. You must realize that Ho Chi Minh considered himself to be Viet Nam's counterpart to George Washington, as did many of his people. He had started out simply to establish a unified nation free of French colonial influence, and had originally sought help from the West before turning to China and Russia. He was not about to be deterred simply by the kind of limited warfare that our nation's politicians had decreed.

As General Westmoreland, the Commander-in-Chief of all U.S. forces in Vietnam at the time, had stepped up the magnitude of America's military presence in South Viet Nam, so had Ho Chi Minh. The nation-wide simultaneous Communist attacks during Tet 1968 had signaled to the American people that they were not even close to winning the war. It was a very contradictory turn of events. Massive attacks had been launched, but they had all failed. North Vietnamese Army General Vo Nguyen Giap was actually in disgrace for such a complete failure to achieve his objectives, and yet, in one of those strange twists of History, it proved to be the turning point in the war. Even though the attacks had all ultimately failed, the enemy had shown that, even with the immense pressure put upon it by the South Vietnamese/American war machine, it was fully capable of launching large scale coordinated attacks on nearly every major population center in the country. The resulting change in the attitudes of the people at home began to spell the doom of America's war effort. Our politicians, ever sensitive to the mood of the voting public, were beginning to talk about how it was time to let the South Vietnamese stand on their own against their aggressive Northern cousins. They called it "Vietnamization" and achieving that goal would fall, in a large part, on the shoulders of the soldiers of the Military Assistance Command Viet Nam (MACV), my new unit.

I was keenly aware that as I entered this phase of my short military career, I was one of those commodities (a lieutenant) whose life span in the combat zone was supposedly measured in minutes. This was not a pleasant thought when one considers all the time, effort, sweat, and even blood already expended in reaching my current status; an even less pleasant thought was that someone was soon going to be the last American soldier to die in a war that the nation no longer wanted.

## Chapter 4

### Off to the War

I flew into Viet Nam at Tan Son Nhut air base to be processed in at the MACV Headquarters located there. As I left the plane I hurried to get out of the blast of hot air I felt as I passed behind the jet motors. I hurried all the way in to the terminal, and was no farther away from the hot air. It was the air of Viet Nam. Called “The Pearl of the Orient” by the French, they treasured it not only for its natural resources, but for vacationing in the warmth of its lush tropics and the sandy beaches of the South China Sea. I did not think that same warmth was going to be as pleasant for fighting a war.

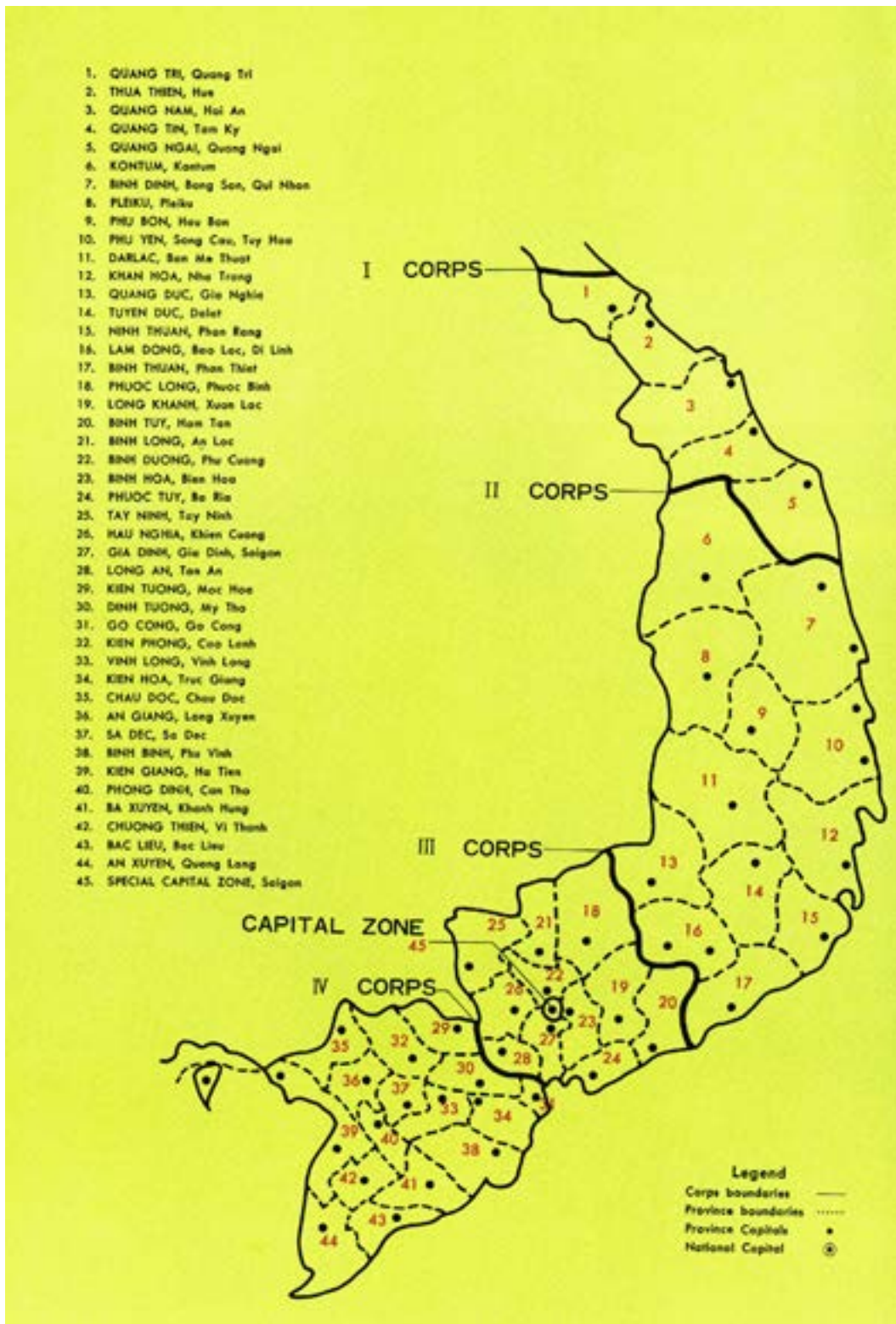
As I eventually learned concerning military orders and assignments, one does not necessarily end up where one’s orders say they are going, and I never made it to Sa Dec to serve on their Province advisory staff. The MACV Personnel Office in Saigon sent me to the III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa.

The Chinese New Year had just ended, and the enemy had attempted to replay the offensive strategy of 1968, again staging assaults on major population centers. On my way to Bien Hoa, aboard a bus modified to stand off rocket attacks, I saw grim evidence of the recent combat. While U.S. and Vietnamese forces continued to clean out pockets of resistance around the towns, a huge number of NVA bodies had been carried down to the highway (QL-1 or Vietnamese National Highway 1) and lined up along the shoulder of the road as a demonstration to the local population. As we approached Bien Hoa we passed the row of bodies that extended at least a quarter of a mile along the west shoulder.

The bodies were dusted with lime, lending a kind of Gothic gruesomeness to the display. These were mostly Viet Cong Main Force soldiers that had been caught by American gunships (nicknamed “Puff the Magic Dragon”) as they attempted an assault on the American logistical base at Long Binh, east of Bien Hoa. A pathetic note to this scene, someone at III Corps HQ told me that night, was that each dead soldier was found with a P-38 (folding can opener) on him. They had been given those can openers as they prepared for the assault and had been told they could have as much to eat as they wanted after they had taken the American base. Little did I know at the time, that this unit, the 274<sup>th</sup> Regiment, would be rapidly rebuilt, mostly with new arrivals from North Viet Nam, and be back in the field soon to become one of our major adversaries while I operated with my South Vietnamese counterparts.

Remember how I told about reporting in at Fort Bragg hoping for a field assignment so I could sharpen my combat skills before heading for Viet Nam? All they cared about at Fort Bragg was my Journalism degree, and I couldn’t beg, borrow or steal a field assignment. By the time I got to Viet Nam, I was thinking maybe the whole idea of being a “Chairborne Ranger” and working in a nice safe office wasn’t a bad idea, so I made sure to mention to the personnel staff at III Corps Headquarters that I was a fully qualified Public Information Officer. The jungle fatigue uniform I reported in didn’t even have my Jump Wings and Ranger Tab sewed on it yet, but it didn’t really matter. One of the realities of military assignment policy seems to be that the people making the decisions work with some criteria other than “what are your qualifications?” They told me at III Corps that there were no openings in the Corps level PIO office, maybe there would be one in Xuan Loc, where they were sending me the next morning.

Just to put things into perspective, you can see a map of South Vietnam on the next page. All of my assignments were within the III Corps Tactical Zone. I was on each of the borders of the Zone at various times during my tour, but never made it beyond them.



This map shows how South Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones, numbered from north to south. The smaller subdivisions are the Province boundaries, equivalent to our counties in America. My primary areas of operation are shown as 23 (Bien Hoa) and 19 (Long Khanh) provinces.

## Chapter 5

### MACV Team 87

Xuan Loc was the capital city of Long Khanh Province, which lay east of Bien Hoa. My travel from Saigon to Bien Hoa had been by bus. On the following morning, I flew by helicopter to Xuan Loc. As I looked down at the jungle, I remember thinking how beautiful it looked, with all its shades of green and what appeared to be delicate lacy foliage. As I was soon to learn, for all its beauty, the jungle is also a beast. Deceptively beautiful from above, it becomes a nearly impenetrable labyrinth where no breeze blows and the dying vegetation rots to feed the teeming insect life, and fertilizes the vines and thickets that impede foot passage and mask from view anything but one's immediate surroundings. It was a dangerous and deadly classroom for learning the lessons in the art of war begun for me at Fort Benning.

The Vietnamese Infantry division that I was assigned to was the 18<sup>th</sup> Division. Until recently, it had been designated the 10<sup>th</sup> Division, but the soldiers of that unit had grown tired of being the butt of Southeast Asian humor over belonging to the "Numbah Ten" Division. In Vietnam, the number "10" was associated with anything bad or unfortunate. And being an Oriental culture, I don't suppose it impressed anyone that one of the most famous military units in the history of the world, Caesar's "Immortal Tenth" Legion, shared that same designation. At any rate, it was the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division now, and would so remain until it passed into history on May 25, 1975. But more about that later.

The Colonel who served as the Senior Advisor to the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, and as the Commanding Officer of MACV Team 87, gave me a hearty handshake and told me how lucky I was to be assigned to his team. He said he'd been in command nearly a year, and had not lost a single advisor. I'd like to not think that a black cloud followed me into the country, but as I recall, by the time I left Vietnam, about half of my teammates had been either killed or wounded. It may have had something to do with the timing of my arrival. About that time in the war was the shift to "Vietnamization" in which the U.S. was trying to delegate a more active role in the fighting to the Vietnamese units as part of Nixon's "Peace with Honor" withdrawal program. 1969 was the time of peak military activity for the war, with the most American soldiers in country than before or after, and the most casualties.

As had been the case in Saigon and Bien Hoa, I was told that headquarters did not need any journalists or PIO's, and after one night in the Team 87 compound, I again boarded a helicopter and was flown to Fire Base Concord in Cong Thanh. There I was to become the Assistant Senior Advisor to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion/48<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Division. The 3/48<sup>th</sup> was currently "standing down" at the fire base after the grueling combat they saw during Tet. A battalion's advisory team consisted of a standard compliment of four persons; two officers and two non-commissioned officers. The Senior Advisor was a West Pointer named Captain Richard Catlin. His duty was to accompany the Vietnamese battalion commander, advising him on tactics and acting as a liaison for the coordination of U.S. combat support in the field. My duty was to accompany the Vietnamese officer leading any element smaller than the battalion itself on operations away from the main unit, providing tactical advice and coordinating the U.S. combat support during enemy contact. That included any time the battalion divided for a movement or an operation; I would then accompany the battalion's Executive Officer, who would usually be in command of the second element. I noticed this was a different arrangement than in American units, where the Executive Officer normally stayed in the rear to supervise administrative and logistic support.

The senior of the two Sergeants, Sergeant First Class Ray Burton, served as Captain Catlin's enlisted assistant, and advised the Battalion Sergeant Major. The remaining team member, Staff Sergeant Fagatogo L. Brown, drew the job of being my assistant, by default. Sgt. Brown was a Samoan who had already distinguished himself while serving in the Korean War with the 187<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regimental Combat Team, and was currently serving his fourth combat



tour in Vietnam. He had broad shoulders and huge biceps, criss-crossed with napalm scars from an airstrike that hit his unit when he was serving with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade (the details of that incident are related in the book “The Hill”). He was a calm person, very self-assured, and not at all impressed with my rank. He also was willing to teach me as I blundered through the usual young lieutenant routines and transitioned from training mode to THE REAL WAR. After leaving Vietnam, I found a picture of Sergeant Brown in “Tour 365 Magazine” taken as he carried a wounded Vietnamese child from a bombed building. This man, who was one of the most impressive men I ever met, was to be my Sergeant and Mentor.

Sergeant Brown guided me through my first night ambush, which we conducted my second night with the team. He simply told me to stay close and take my cues from him, since this had been a pretty risky business lately. He told me the last time they had set up an ambush in this spot they had been very lucky. They were using a night scope, and when they detected enemy movement they observed carefully before making any decisions about shooting.

He said they detected movement to their front, and turned on the night scope. They were looking at so many Viet Cong, that they just turned off the scope and laid back down. It turned out to be an entire regiment of Main Force VC. They were the same ones whose bodies I had seen lying along Highway 20 a few days before. They had simply reported the enemy troop movement, and wisely held their fire so they could live to pick on someone their own size later...

My first night in the field passed quietly, I’m happy to say. I was not to actually experience combat for several more days, but I was getting used to the idea that training was over, and that everyone here had real bullets, even me. I had been given a choice at the MACV Headquarters supply room at Tan Son Nhut of drawing either an M16 rifle or a .45 pistol. I asked if I could have both, of course, but they said I could only have one or the other. I opted for the rifle. While I’ve always preferred pistols to rifles, you just didn’t want to get caught on the battlefield without one. I had a little Browning .25 automatic pistol that I had brought with me, and I would try to pick up something bigger at my first opportunity.

I was also learning things that they must have forgotten to tell me about in training, such as how to co-exist with the local insect life. I spent my first couple nights on the ground, and had an impressive collection of insect bites to prove it. On my first chance to make it in to the local market, I procured a hammock like the ones all my counterparts carried, and learned to use it whenever the tactical situation allowed.

When Captain Catlin took me into town to get my hammock, we rode in a jeep that “belonged” to our advisory team. The jeep’s very appropriate name, “Pucker Factor” was painted across the windshield. They had procured it from Bien Hoa Air Base through a supply acquisition program I was to come to know as “comshaw.” They also had a little trailer they got that way that they towed behind the jeep and carried their supplies and equipment in.

We drove “Pucker Factor” into a MACV District Team compound in Cong Thanh, where Captain Catlin knew one of the District Team’s advisors from his West Point days. The compound was built around a typical Southeast Asian villa composed of buildings with long central hallways. The hallways opened into numerous rooms with no door, but simply hung with long strips of plastic designed to discourage entry by the local winged insect life. As we followed the Captain’s classmate down the hall, I tagged along at the rear. I noticed as we passed on room that there was an old treadle sewing machine set up just inside the doorway, and they appeared to be engaged in the manufacture of North Vietnamese battle flags, obviously for use as trading material on the “comshaw” market. Trying not to miss a step, I flashed my arm into the doorway and snatched the topmost flag from the stack on the machine, crumpled it and slid it into the cargo pocket of my fatigue trousers. Counterfeit though it may have been, I had just scored my first “war trophy.” I never mentioned it to Captain Catlin. When we got back to the compound, I stowed it in my footlocker, where it reposed until I returned home.

*(Note: About a year later, I was attending the Instructor Training Course at Ft. Benning,*

*where I met a very interesting Major named Robert Woodsen. Major Woodsen and I became friends, and among the stories he told me over dinner one night was one about how his team used to make NVA flags to trade to the rear echelon people. It turned out that Major Woodsen had actually been the Senior District Advisor at the very same compound where I had stolen my flag. When his wife commented that it was too bad he hadn't thought to bring one home, he sadly agreed. In a fit of generosity, I dug out my purloined treasure and the next time I saw Woody I presented it to him as its rightful owner.)*

I was issued a tan colored beret that was the uniform standard for the ARVN Infantry. I thought it looked pretty cool, and I guess it was, because a few years later all the U.S. Army Rangers were wearing them.

Within a few days, the battalion's "stand down" was over, and they were ready to resume their normal mode of operation. The 3/48<sup>th</sup> was commanded by Major Thuong, a North Vietnamese native who had come south when the country divided some years earlier. Thuong was an excellent field commander, and a gentleman to boot. Major Thuong (who's Vietnamese rank was "Thieu Ta) was a consummate soldier. He wore his steel helmet and carried his own rucksack and rifle just like the Privates that he led into combat. This had the double effect of causing his soldiers to identify with him, and also making it difficult for an enemy sniper to pick him out (and/or off) as a leader. He was in his fifth year in combat with this same unit, having served as its Executive Officer for two years, and it's Commander for three. Prior to that he had been an instructor at the Vietnamese Military Academy at Da Lat, their equivalent of West Point.

Being one of the 18<sup>th</sup> Division's most effective battalion commanders, Thuong consistently earned the honor of conducting missions known as Bomb Damage Assessments (BDA's). The idea was that, when intelligence reports or radar readings, etc, indicated the movement or presence of large bodies of the enemy, a bomb strike would be launched, followed up quickly by the insertion of Thuong's battalion to see what happened. The strike was usually made by a flight of three B-52's dropping 500 pound bombs in a pattern about three kilometers long. Our mission would be to get in there and report on damage and casualties, and engage any survivors. There would always be another battalion or more standing by back at the Division base or a nearby fire base in case Thuong bit off more than he could chew (which happened often enough, I discovered). It was amazing what the enemy could survive, and often they would simply be a little deaf and a lot feisty.

I heard after the war that Thuong had not surrendered his battalion, but had escaped with them into the jungle. I had always hoped that they made it. At that point he would have been fighting for another six years after I left. If any soldier of South Vietnam deserved a statue in town square, it was Major Thuong. *(Note: In 2006, The City Prosecutor for Oak Harbor, Anh Kiet Ngo, told me that one of his uncles knew Thuong. He said Thuong survived the war and now lived in California.)*

Thieu Ta Thuong's Executive Officer, Captain (or Dai Uy in Vietnamese) Long, on the other hand, took full advantage of the privilege of rank by disdaining to carry his own rucksack, or even a rifle. Dai Uy Long's burden consisted of simply a pistol belt holding a .45 and a canteen. His "bat boy", a tough looking little Nung, struggled daily through the jungle in Long's footsteps bearing his own load of combat gear and the remainder of Long's equipment. He also dug Long's foxhole at night before digging his own, prepared his meals and tea, and probably had instructions to stand in front of him during firefights. At least he was comforted by knowing he was exempt from the nightly ambush details that most of his fellow soldiers drew as part of the routine.

I was assigned a young private named Tham as my "bat boy", but I liked the way Thuong did things, so I continued carrying my own rucksack. I did let him carry the radio, but I dug my own foxholes and prepared my own chow (not that difficult with field rations).

Most of the company commanders in Thuong's battalion were like him, only younger. They were in their mid-30's (all of them pretty much ten years or more senior to me) and the

quiet confident types. Before going to Vietnam, I had heard people talking about the poor quality of the Vietnamese soldiers. Other, more perceptive people had told me that Vietnamese soldiers were quite capable as long as they had proper leadership. Major Thuong and his command group (even Captain Long, actually) were thoughtful, fearless soldiers who inspired the confidence and loyalty of their men. They led by example and from the front. His best company commander was 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Phuoc, who led 3<sup>rd</sup> Company. We came to be good friends, and when I left he took the wrist compass off that he wore, and gave it to me, asking me not to forget him. I still have it, as you can see in the picture on page 56.

The soldiers (chien si') of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion were mostly average citizen soldiers. I saw them doing their jobs cheerfully and resolutely, although they were not as prone as the American soldiers to engage in "John Wayne" style heroics. One must remember that these people had been born during this war, and were not serving with the knowledge that after a year they could go home. Yet, in my entire year with the Vietnamese, I only saw a single act of unsoldierly conduct, and that was a private who managed to shoot himself in the foot while moving through some pretty tough tanglefoot during one of our jungle marches. I don't believe the commander ever proved for sure that it was a self-inflicted wound, but that's as close as I ever saw a Vietnamese soldier come to disgracing himself.

They bore their daily burdens stoically, kept their areas neat and clean, built their cooking fires quickly, and visited quietly and cheerfully during their meals. They seemed to appreciate just being alive. They also seemed to feel no need to prove their masculinity. They had no problem demonstrating their affection for friends and family. It was not even uncommon to see a Vietnamese soldier walking hand in hand with another male friend. Like their leaders, the men were quieter than the average American soldier, but no less friendly. They smiled and laughed a lot among themselves, and braved the language barrier to joke with their American advisors. "Noi choi" was what they called it – literally, "making fun." Whenever I would meet one or a group of them, they would always have a smile and a greeting for me.

Often their first question would be to ask me my age. They would then express amazement that I was so young to be a First Lieutenant (Truong Uy). Even more often, their first question would be about how much I weighed, since it was quite obvious that I had regained all the weight I lost during my rigorous Ranger training. The conversation would go something like this:

*Question:* "Truong Uy co bao nieu kilo?" Literal translation: (How many kilograms does the Lieutenant have?). Actual meaning: (How much do you weigh?).

*Answer:* "Toi co mot tram kilo." Literal translation: (I have one hundred kilograms). Actual meaning: (I weigh 220 pounds).

*Response:* "Choi, duc coi. Buku kilo!" Literal translation: (My, my! Many kilograms). Actual meaning: (Holy Shit!).

I became known affectionately to my Vietnamese friends as "Truong Uy Map" (the Fat Lieutenant). I found no fault with this bit of humor, as it was bestowed upon me by men on the average about half my size and carrying the same amount of weight or more as I on our strolls through the jungle.

This may be a good place to explain rank structure of the Vietnamese Army. As I recall, it went something like this:

Private	Binh Si'
Private First Class	Binh Si' Nhut
Corporal	Ha Si'
Sergeant	Ha Si' Nhut
Staff Sergeant	Thuong Si'
Sergeant First Class	Thuong Si' Nhut

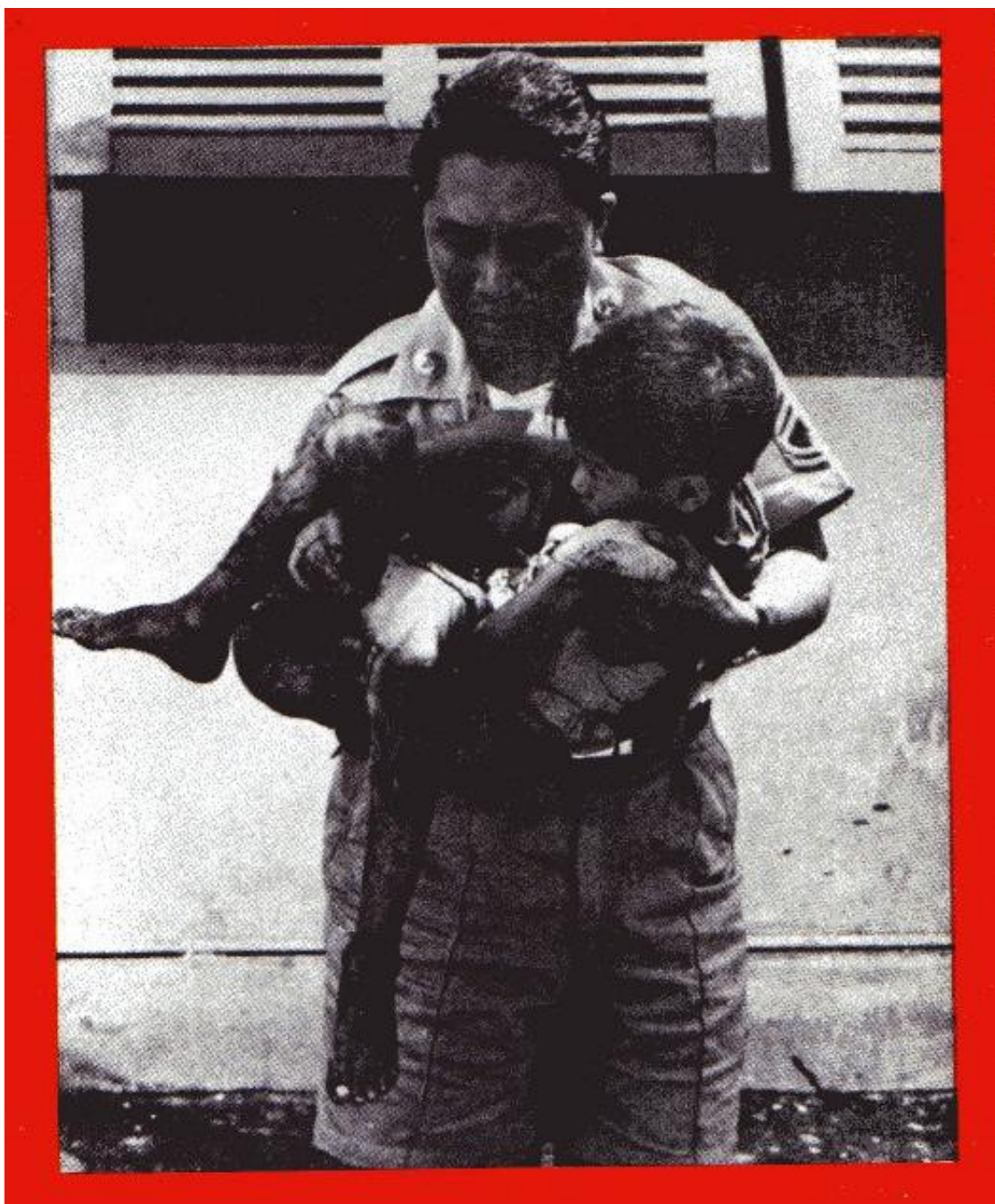
Master Sergeant	Truong Si'
Sergeant Major	Truong Si' Nhut
Warrant Officer	Chuon Uy; The Vietnamese also called this rank "3 <sup>rd</sup> Lieutenant"
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant	Thieu Uy
1 <sup>st</sup> Lieutenant	Truong Uy
Captain	Dai Uy
Major	Thieu Ta
Lt. Colonel	Truong Ta
Colonel	Dai Ta
General	I only saw one of these one time, and I can't remember what they called them.

A squad was a thieu doi, a platoon a truong doi, and a company a dai doi. The battalion was called a thieu doan, a regiment was a truong doan, and the division was a su doan. Our unit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 48<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN Division, was called in Vietnamese Thieu Doan Ba, Truong Doan Bon Mui Tam, Su Doan Mui Tam Bo Binh. The term "bo binh" refers to the Infantry, translating literally as "foot soldier." The companies within the battalion were designated by number, rather than by letter. What would be "A" Company in an American battalion was "1<sup>st</sup> Company" in a Vietnamese battalion.

Major Thuong's battalion operations sergeant was Thuong Si Nhut Nguyen Van Dung (pronounced "Zoomg" in Vietnamese. The "Nguyen" part was actually supposed to be pronounced "Ngwen" but Americans were allowed to say "Nooyen." Dung was a very friendly, obviously well-educated NCO, who became my constant companion and guiding light in all things Vietnamese, much as Sergeant Brown was for the American side of the war. Between the two of them, I learned how true it was that the non-commissioned officers are the backbone of any military organization. It was during my discourses with Sergeant Dung that I discovered that the Vietnamese I had learned at Ft. Bragg worked best with the enlisted men and the NCO's. My language instructor had been the Vietnamese wife of a Special Forces Sergeant, and she spoke the dialect of the common people of the South. It appears that many, if not most of the officers were from the "upper crust" of Southeast Asia, and they generally preferred that I communicate with them in English, which they found more understandable than my "gutter" Vietnamese.

I reckoned that this situation was similar to the United States of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, where we had an industrial North populated by city dwellers, and an agricultural South populated by farmers and hill folk of quite different cultures. South Vietnam was also agricultural, with a large population of farmers and mountain people (many of whom were barely out of the Stone Age.) At any rate, I believe Major Thuong was not unique in being a native of North Vietnam. Many of the northern citizens of the country moved south when the nation split over Communism, and most likely the majority of those who made the move would have been the ones wealthy enough to do so. This would account for the tendency for the Officer Corps to speak the more Patrician dialects.

I considered myself fortunate to have this "slack" time to get to know my new counterparts, and continue my acclimatization to the humid environment of Vietnam. Our nightly forays from base camp for ambush patrols and trips around the District on administrative duties helped me matriculate into the war without the shock that I would have experienced if I had joined the unit either a few days earlier or later...



*This photo appeared in "Tour 365", a U.S. Army publication. The caption read: "An Army Sergeant aids a wounded Vietnamese child during a savage VC terror attack." Now you know what Sergeant Brown looks like... I recall that he was being promoted to Sergeant First Class (E7) when he transferred out of Team 87, which would account for the extra stripe on his sleeve.*

## Chapter 6

### Into the Jungle:

Soon the unit was ready to return to the field. We were ordered to conduct a “Search and Destroy Operation” in the jungle to our northeast. The stand-down was over, and our battalion marched to the air strip and loaded onto helicopters for an “air assault” into Indian Country. Once back on the ground, we were to move through the area north of the village of Trang Bom. We deployed in two columns and moved through a rubber plantation surrounding a quaint, bullet-scarred villa just off Highway 1. We moved north and crossed the Suoi Ret, a stream that flowed generally southwest out of War Zone C, and eventually joined the Dong Nai River near War Zone D. I had watched our backup force assemble on the air strip behind us as we lifted off – a grim reminder that we may soon be in need of reinforcement. I wondered how much could happen during a battle while you waited for your backup to file onto helicopters in groups of 5-6 per aircraft, and cover the distance from base to the field of combat.

There is a part of warfare that no amount of lectures and training can prepare you for. An honest soldier will call it what it is – “*Fear*.” In training, I feared that I would fail, and disgrace myself and my alma mater. I feared that I would not measure up to the expectations of my superiors or my comrades. It was now apparent to me that that was only the beginning of this emotion that was, for a good long time, to now become my constant companion. In war, and, at least in my experience, particularly in jungle warfare, fear permeates every aspect of your being. It hangs in the stifling air beneath the jungle canopy, where no breeze blows it away. You take each step not knowing if it will be your last. The fearsome reputation of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers, their mines and booby traps, the natural dangers of an inhospitable jungle, the unbelievable misery of a hot and humid environment full of poisonous snakes and insects and impenetrable foliage, all contrive to produce that awful feeling in the pit of one’s stomach as he labors through each step en route to what fate he knows not.

While the jungle foliage made it difficult to see any reasonable distance ahead (or behind and to the side, for that matter), it was the rubber plantation with its neat rows of trees that I found even more frightening. You would move from row to row of trees, and could not really see what lay beyond the next row, but when you stepped into it, you got some idea of what a bowling pin must feel like when placed into the alley. Rice paddies were no fun either, since the only cover (and dry access) were the little dikes between the open fields. And the dikes also provided hiding places for the enemy, so they worked for you and against you. I guess there just really wasn’t a lot of ideal terrain in Southeast Asia for taking relaxing nature walks. This fact may have accounted for the presence of all the old French tri-cornered forts. The French had tried to hold the country by occupying a series of small fortifications and sowing mines in the rest of it. It was obvious how well that had worked. So now, the U.S. forces and their Allies were scouring the jungles, rice paddies and rubber plantations on their mission of “finding, fixing and destroying the enemy.”

I found that fear of the unknown dangers of war were worse to deal with than the actual dangers. You spent most of your waking hours (and even at night you were awake much of the time) trying to anticipate the next danger and plan for them. That included each step taken outside of a secure fortified area, each crossing of a stream, trail, field, road or ridgeline, whether to go around a tree on the right or left, or light a fire to cook a meal. Each step had to be taken while scanning the horizon, if one was available, and remaining aware of the nature of the ground you were about to put your foot on. You didn’t want to upset a trip wire, step on freshly dug earth or vegetation that did not match its surroundings, step in front of a booby trap, or expose yourself to a field of fire without knowing what available cover could be taken if the shooting started. Those sorts of concerns while walking in the woods can lead to a very frayed set of nerves. Knowing that even if you did everything right, you were moving among dangers that could result in your death, injury or, even worse, capture, made it difficult not to let fear become an overriding



emotion. I distinctly recall that it was a relief from these feelings during actual contact with the enemy. At least when you were involved in the realities of combat, and doing the things you had been trained and sent here to do, you didn't have time to worry about what else might happen to you. Yet, as soon as the short, sharp gun battles with the elusive enemy were over, the feeling of impending danger closed back in, as now, once again, you did not know where the enemy was or what dangers they had left behind for you.

I felt that I needed to find a way to accustom my mind to the constant numbing input of fear the same way that my body needed to adapt to the new and hostile environment of heat, humidity, insects and fatigue that it was dealing with. Yes, it was going to be a long year...

I can still remember the feeling of panic as I sprang from the helicopter onto the landing zone (LZ) on my first combat assault, and faced toward the jungle line. We didn't ride in helicopters with a round chambered in our rifles, so the first order of business was to load my M16 while moving toward the tree line. Of course, when my rifle jammed itself with a double-feed from the magazine, I was too petrified to remember the drill. I somehow ended up with the offending rounds clear of the action, but with the bolt locked to the rear, and as I drew closer to the edge of the LZ, I still had no round in my chamber and couldn't seem to remember how to unlock the bolt. My training had been mostly with the M1 and M14, with only a short qualification course fired with the M16. I know it actually takes longer to tell about it than it took me to actually do it, but it seemed like forever before I remembered the spring loaded catch on the side of the receiver and pushed it to send the bolt forward. The sound of the bolt snapping into place provided at least a second of relief until I stepped into the jungle and began worrying about what was going to happen next.

I guess I could have asked Sergeant Brown to help me. But I guess I probably didn't think of that. Or actually, I probably wouldn't have wanted him to think I started our first operation by going brain dead. As it is, I hope he never reads this. By the time we parted company, he actually seemed to like me, and I wouldn't want that to change now, wherever he is.

Everyone should have a hero in his life. Mine will always be Sergeant Brown. How can I explain the many times he despaired for me before we became friends? He reminded me of a math teacher I had in high school for whom things came so easily that he didn't understand why it should be hard for his students. I can only guess how many lieutenants Sergeant Brown had suffered through during his many years of distinguished service. Possibly, his reason for being as patient with me as he was could have been the fact that he found me amusing.

For instance, on that first night in the jungle (following my "on-the-job" malfunction clearing self-training) as the shadows deepened and the jungle beyond our perimeter fell quiet, I heard the unmistakable sound of an American G.I. cursing. It sounded like he cleared his throat, then said "Fuck You!" I was surprised that Sergeant Brown paid no attention, since we both knew there were only two other Americans on this operation, and neither one of them would be out there. I mentioned my concern to him, and as if to emphasize my point, the curse was repeated loudly and clearly.

"See?" I said, quite inappropriately, since what I meant was "Hear?" "Yessir" replied Sergeant Brown, "but there's still nobody out there. It's just a lizard."

"Sergeant Brown," I replied, "I know I'm only a Lieutenant, and I just got here and all, but are you asking me to believe that we're fighting a war in a place where the animals curse in perfect English?"

"Yessir" he says again. And of course, he was correct as usual. I don't recall Sergeant Brown ever being wrong about anything anyway. At his first opportunity the next day, he pointed one of the profane little critters out to me. I have since believed that some of these animals should be kept handy in places like the Pentagon war rooms, or on the Senate floor somewhere near the podium, as a constant reminder of what may be the opinion of the masses. The sound that I took to be throat-clearing was the result of the lizard taking in air to fill a sac hanging under his jaw. He would then expend most of the air with a series, generally three, of a call that

perfectly approximated the Anglo-Saxon epithet “Fuck You!” To provide a little added entertainment, a little air always remained in the sac, which the lizard would expel resulting in a “Pfffttt!” similar to the old “Bronx Cheer.” Later research told me that this was the “tokay” lizard, known for its size and aggressiveness. Apparently it felt that entitled it to talk any way it wanted.

I came to know and love the profane little fellows, feeling that they added a little charm of Americana to these remote tropics. Through the years since coming home, whenever I’ve discussed the war with fellow veterans, I’ve noticed that most of them never heard of the “Fuck You” lizards, unless they, as I, had actually sojourned in the jungle’s depths.

Anyhow, our first day in the jungle had passed relatively uneventfully. I did get a start when we crossed the stream that afternoon. I was already safely on the far side when I heard an explosion behind me. I took cover and prepared for my baptism of fire, which turned out to be an unnecessary precaution. It turned out to be some of the soldiers collecting their dinner by throwing a grenade into the water upstream and scooping up all the dead and stunned fish as they floated down to them. This was not one of the survival techniques I recalled from Ranger training, but I suppose when you have a whole battalion of Infantrymen looking for the enemy, you don’t mind making some noise, since you want them to find you anyway. Major Thuong didn’t have a problem with it, so I didn’t either.



This section of map shows the general area of our first couple of operations. We caught our first prisoner somewhere southeast of the Suoi Ret. Our toughest campaigns still lay ahead, and were located to the northwest and northeast of this area.



Here’s one of the little “Tokay” Gekkos. They weren’t all as colorful as this one, and some were a lot bigger.



Several of the chien si's found a "truoc" hanging in a banana tree as we moved through the terrain around the old Michelen rubber plantation at Trang Bom. When they pulled him out of the tree, he rolled up like a hedge hog. Two of them tried to get him to unroll, but couldn't, and they left him sitting on the ground glaring at us as we moved on. Here is what the "truoc" looked like. This one was walking around in Xuan Loc. Still don't know what else to call them, apparently no one else has these fellas hanging around...

## **Chapter 7**

### **My First “Shots in Anger”:**

My actual baptism of fire finally took place the following evening. I can't actually say my shots were “in anger” it was actually more like “in surprise.” But, that's what the Hollywood People like to call these sort of things, so it looks good for a Chapter heading...

We had continued our search all through the second day of the operation. I again spent the day sweating and struggling under my load of rucksack, rifle, ammo, water, equipment, radio batteries, etc. It just hadn't seemed that hard in training. Maybe it was because then the only thing I had been afraid of was not getting a good evaluation...

I had set up my gear the same way we carried it in Ranger training. The idea had been to “layer” our equipment, so we had things on our web belt that we absolutely did not want to have to do without, and other things in our rucksack that we could drop and leave if we had to run. The only problem with carrying a lot of things on my belt and suspender setup (see photo near front of this memoir) was that there were things exposed on my web gear that could get entangled in the vines and foliage of the jungle. That hadn't been a problem in Georgia, even among the mountain laurel and rhododendrons of the Smoky Mountains. I eventually stopped doing that, and got rid of the web gear altogether. I carried my pistol, knife and spare magazines on the belt that held up my pants, my map and one canteen in a cargo pocket, and everything else in my rucksack. After that I was able to work my way through the jungle fairly smoothly. But, I digress. At this point, I was still carrying lots of things out in the open, and struggling through each day step by step.

We stopped prior to dark and started forming our perimeter. I had already grounded my equipment and started digging my foxhole when gunfire suddenly erupted to our immediate front. Since Sergeant Brown and I were right there where the shooting was going on, we naturally joined in. It was over almost as soon as it began. We found ourselves in possession of a live enemy soldier, and some that weren't so lucky. He dropped his AK-47 and was walked into the perimeter by a couple of chien si's.

He was already looking a little nervous, and when he saw me, he immediately became very obviously frightened. I said “Hello” to him, in Vietnamese, then asked him if he was a Viet Cong or North Vietnamese soldier (“Chao, chien si', ong bi Viet Cong hai Bac Viet?"). He calmed down some at that point, and began answering my questions, never taking his eyes off of me. He said his name was Nguyen Van Dung. I looked quickly toward Sergeant Dung. “No, Truong Uy, we're not related,” he said, “Dung is a very common name in Vietnam.” Sergeant Dung then began speaking with Private Dung, who now was apparently at ease enough to take his eyes off me and participate in the conversation.

Our prisoner told Sergeant Dung that he was a member of the I & R (Intelligence & Reconnaissance) Platoon of the 95 Alpha Regiment of the North Vietnamese Army. Dung told me that the 95<sup>th</sup> Division had been the one commanded by Vo Nguyen Giap at Dien Bien Phu, and that, as far as he knew, it had been the Palace Guard unit in Hanoi for years.

Nguyen told Sergeant Dung that they had just made the trip down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and this had been his first fight. By now he was calmed down, and told me that he had been told in his training that American soldiers were savages that tortured their prisoners, and that he had been frightened when he thought they were turning him over to me.

It took us several more days to reach a place where there was a clearing large enough to get a helicopter in to fly Nguyen out to a P.O.W. camp. We continued our mission, but apparently the enemy was not ready for us to find them yet, as we had no further contacts on that operation.

After our initial introduction, Nguyen stuck pretty close to me. I shared my C-rations with him, and he told me about his trip down the trail, showed me pictures of his family back home, and admitted that he was glad that the war was over for him. He said the trip down from

the North on the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. At one point we were getting ready to start moving again after a break, and as I reached for my rucksack, Nguyen put his hand on it first, and smiled at me. “I carry,” he said, and picked it up and put it on right over his own rucksack. He was observant enough to notice that I wasn’t yet accustomed to the Southeast Asian heat and humidity, and apparently felt like helping out. I was glad he wasn’t afraid of me any more.

I consider myself lucky to have had this experience early in my tour. When Nguyen boarded the helicopter that would take him to his new home, he turned back and smiled and waved goodbye. It was my first contact with the enemy, and a timely lesson that even the people on the other side were still just people. I genuinely hoped that Nguyen would have good care and treatment where he would be held, and was glad for him that he was done fighting, and for the rest of my tour I was keenly aware when I saw the enemy that they were as human as I was.



This Viet Cong prisoner was typical of the enemy soldiers we faced. They were mostly youngsters in pretty good shape and highly motivated. They were good soldiers, and, as I discovered, people just like us. Even though the Viet Cong units were supposedly made up of volunteers from the population of South Vietnam, there were a lot of North Vietnamese in the Viet Cong units. As the VC units took casualties, it was often a quicker fix for the NVA to simply assign replacements to the Viet Cong than for the VC to go through the process of pressing more locals into service and getting them trained and equipped. I believe this practice only extended to the Main Force VC units, and not the local guerrilla forces.

## Chapter 8

### We Take a Hill:

I'm sure the jungle has reclaimed it by now, but there's a hilltop just below the border between II and III Corps where a drama played out that the survivors will never forget. When I last saw it, the burned and blasted summit was still littered with the ruins of battle, a bloodstain marking the spot where a valiant Vietnamese Sergeant gave his all to silence the last enemy machine gun. There a classic battle took place complete with row upon row of neatly aligned Infantry marching steadily toward their objective, reminiscent of what my forefathers must have watched at Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. I can only say that I'm very grateful that I'm here to tell about it. It was my first fight with the Viet Cong, and my first big battle with the North Vietnamese...

After combing the designated portions of jungle in search of the elusive enemy, we returned to base camp to rest up and re-supply. But our break didn't last long. We were called to a briefing where we learned that a Viet Cong unit had taken up a position on a hill commanding the southern approach to the village of Dinh Quan on National Highway 20, or QL-20 as it appeared on Vietnamese maps, north of our location.

Dinh Quan was the last town along QL-20 before the border between II and III Corps. It was a picturesque little settlement built mainly on a hillside composed of huge rocky outcroppings on the north side of the highway. It put me in mind of the Indian cliff dwellings in America's Southwest.

The Dong Nai River flowed generally southward to the west of Dinh Quan, and separated Bien Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces from War Zone D. We moved out from Xuan Loc in a convoy, and crossed the La Nga River to approach our objective. We found all traffic north and south at a standstill in that area, as everything that approached the hill came under fire. There appeared to be about a platoon of VC in position on the hill, designated Hill 122 on the map (based on its elevation).

Major Thuong divided the battalion into two forces, designating one group as the fire support element, and the other group as the maneuver element. We had a total of about 120 soldiers for the job. Sergeant Brown and I accompanied the maneuver element. Our mission was to move as close as possible to the base of the hill while the support element kept the enemy's heads down with their suppressing fire, then make a rapid ascent and dislodge the enemy from their position. We would have to approach the hill from the south along the left flank of the highway across some terrain cleared by Roam Plows and Agent Orange. The plan was to overrun the position and stop, dig in, and prepare for counterattack. There were lots of potential hiding places for the enemy in the hilly jungle terrain behind our objective.

I remember looking up that hill as we got ready to carry out our mission, and thinking how thankful I was that we would be wearing uniforms that blended in with the terrain, and wouldn't be marching up the hill shoulder-to-shoulder carrying single shot muzzle loaders like soldiers in past wars had to do. Instead, we were going to soften them up with air power, and then move toward them, crawling if necessary, armed with fully automatic rifles, and moving behind a wall of fire and steel to get at them. Do I sound like I was being pretty cool about this entire affair? Please do not be misled. I was petrified. But, I also remember thinking "There's no music. In the movies, they always play stirring music when this stuff goes on..."

We ordered up some air support from Bien Hoa Air Base. While we waited for the Air Force to arrive, we dropped some artillery onto the hilltop. When the Air Force FAC (Forward Air Controller) advised us by radio he was on his way to the area, we shut off the artillery, and in short order, the Air Force had put in a couple of napalm strikes on the hill. I had seen a demonstration of a napalm strike at Fort Benning, but seeing the real thing for the first time was simply awesome. I couldn't imagine anyone would be left alive on that hill. When the smoke cleared, our fire support element began working over the enemy positions. When the support group had made it hot enough for the survivors of the air strike, we charged.

As we swept across the top of the hill, I saw nothing but smoke and desolation. The VC who survived the air strikes waited until the last minute in a group toward the rear of the crest of the hill, then fired a fusillade to cover their withdrawal. One machine gun team had apparently



been chosen to fight to the end, and it took a direct assault and some grenade work to silence them. We lost some chien si's in that charge, but we took the hill. MACV HQ awarded a posthumous Silver Star to the Vietnamese NCO who led the charge; small consolation, I'm sure, to his widow.

As the surviving Viet Cong withdrew into the jungle to the northwest, Major Thuong ordered the unit to dig in. Sergeant Dung designated someone to handle the job of making sure casualties were taken care of, and then saw to it that the troops deployed into a perimeter around the military crest of the hill, making sure that all the crew-served weapons had enough ammunition left to handle a counterattack. Sergeant Brown and I began to move to join Major Thuong and Captain Catlin in the center of the perimeter. My attention was momentarily distracted by a metallic clang, as one of the nearby chien si's struck a buried stockpile of Communist mortar shells where he was digging in. Sergeant Dung began moving toward this new development, when suddenly Sergeant Brown yelled "Here they come!" and pointed with his M16, already spewing empty cases as he directed a stream of automatic fire at a line of khaki-clad North Vietnamese soldiers rapidly closing on our position from the jungle below. "Damn, Sir," yelled Sergeant Brown, "Those are Regulars!" (I only thought later to wonder if he knew he was repeating a famous quote by a British officer when confronted by the Continental soldiers of the American Revolution, after their training by Baron Von Steuben).

It looked to me like Sergeant Brown had the right idea, so I joined in on the shooting. We were firing at a very long assault line of enemy soldiers dressed in what appeared to be fairly new khaki uniforms, pith helmets, green nylon and canvas web gear, and all armed with the most modern assault weapons. These were not the ragtag Viet Cong we had just chased from the hill. They were arrayed in perfect order, and moving resolutely toward us employing "marching fire." As more of the chien si's on our side of the perimeter took up the fire, it began to look like we might be able to stop the advance. But about that time, a second wave appeared from the jungle across the road, and they also began to close on us. We were looking at a huge inverted "V" with our position at the bottom of the opening. I estimated their numbers at about 400-500, and it looked like they intended to try to either overrun us or push us into the jungle where their Viet Cong friends had just gone.

Sergeant Dung and Tham worked their way over to me, and Tham handed me the radio. When we had taken this hill, we used a series of pre-planned artillery target designations, and that data was probably still on the guns back at the fire support base. I got on the radio and contacted the Fire Support Center, and got some artillery rounds into the air. In short order, 155 mm artillery shells were screaming down into the advancing lines of NVA, and behind the spouts of dirt and smoke I could see the assault lines breaking. Between the exploding shells and the incessant chatter of M16's on full automatic all around me, I don't recall hearing anything, but it was a welcome sight to see the NVA running for the cover of the tree lines. They continued firing on us from the jungle, but now we had some breathing room.

Once they were no longer in plain sight, I remembered that I had a small camera in my pocket. I could have gotten some very impressive photographs of the enemy in action. I guess the reason I hadn't thought of it before that, though, had been that I needed both hands to keep shooting anyway. My chance to gain fame as a combat photographer had come and gone...

Major Thuong pointed out that we were still not out of the woods (literally). He knew there were Viet Cong to our northwest, and these NVA had come from the south and east. He called the 18<sup>th</sup> Division TOC (Tactical Operations Center) and got some reinforcements cranked up. There was a squadron of Vietnamese Armored Cavalry holding the bridge across the La Nga River to our south, and some Regional Force Infantry with them. Meanwhile, the Air Force arrived back on station. The NVA were still trying to get at us, but the artillery and air strikes kept them from ever forming up like they had in the beginning. They briefly took a hilltop across the highway, where they set up a 57 mm recoilless rifle. Just as our reinforcements arrived, they fired their first shot, and knocked out one of the arriving armored personnel carriers. As it burned

on the roadway below us, Lieutenant Phuoc and Sgt. Burton and Sgt. Brown took 3rd Company across the road and dislodged them.

Just before Phuoc's company made their charge, I noticed an NVA soldier as he broke cover and ran toward the recoilless rifle position. I snapped off a burst at him, and he went down. Then I noticed he wasn't carrying a weapon. I remember actually feeling bad, that I had shot someone who may not have even been a combatant, although he probably was at least an ammo bearer, and could have been carrying more shells to the rifle. At any rate, he got up again and ran back into the jungle, and I felt a little better. I had either just wounded him, or maybe only scared him enough to throw himself to the ground. After that I tried to make sure that I only shot at people that were at least armed. I think it made me feel better about my overall experience with the war, both then and in the future.

I don't actually recall how long all of this took to unfold, but I know it was late morning as we started for the hill, and it was late afternoon when the Cavalry arrived. How many movies had I seen in which the hero had been saved by the timely arrival of the Cavalry? Okay, maybe I wasn't exactly a hero, but I sure was glad to see the Cavalry. They punched through the surprised North Vietnamese from behind them, and as Phuc's company returned from their foray, we came down off the hill and all fell in with the relief column of armored personnel carriers and Infantry. The APC's wheeled around, the guns faced outward, and we made our move. We had two helicopter gunship teams on station at the time, and each team took a flank of our column and covered us from above as we rolled through the NVA unit that stood between us and the bridge at the La Nga River. We literally shot our way through them. The enemy lines began fading back into the jungle, unable to stand against the devastating firepower of the two gunship teams and the heavy firepower of our combined force of Infantry and Armored Cavalry.

The shadows were deepening, and it looked like it was going to be a close thing. Suddenly, I realized with horror that I didn't have my radio code book. I had been using it from my position on the recently vacated hilltop, and I feared that I must have left it there. Not wanting it to fall into the enemy's hands, I turned and began running back up the hill. "Where are you going, Sir?" yelled Sergeant Brown. "I left my SOI up there," I replied, and kept running. Sergeant Brown came pounding up behind me. "You stay with the column, Lieutenant, I'll get it." "No, I left it there, I'll get it" I retorted, and kept going. We argued all the way back up the hill, with darkness, and probably a Hell of a lot of NVA closing in on us.

Once atop the hill, I located my former position, and was appalled to see that the code book was not there. Again checking my pockets, I discovered that I had apparently, in my haste, stuck the book into a pocket other than the one I normally carried it in. "I found it Sergeant. Let's go!" I yelled, and we took off.

As we caught up on the column of our comrades, Sergeant Brown said to me "Where was it?" If I had been thinking more clearly, I could have lied to him, but I blurted out "It was in my other pocket." Sergeant Brown fell silent. He remained silent for a long time. Our column made it across the bridge, the APC's spun around and pointed their guns into the purple darkness over the La Nga River, and the jungle fell silent. Even the lizards held their tongues. We consolidated our new position, and began preparations for the counter-offensive operation that would be sure to come in the morning.

Later that evening, Sergeant Brown approached me. "Do me a favor, Sir?" he said. "Certainly" I agreed, glad to see that he was speaking to me again. "Don't F ---ing talk to me for a few days, okay?"

Thus ended my first day of intense combat. We had all but annihilated a Viet Cong platoon, won a hill, lost it, conducted a successful "retrograde" operation (military euphemism for "retreat."), and inflicted severe losses on an apparently well-disciplined and well-equipped North Vietnamese Army unit. And I had managed to earn Sergeant Brown's severe disapproval. Again I thought "It's going to be a long year..."

Remember what I said about fear? I had been too busy during the battle to bother being afraid. I was automatically doing the things I had been trained for. I was also, to a certain degree, back in control of my own destiny, since I was dealing with real events that were actually happening, and actual danger that could be seen and counteracted. That seems to be easier than moving along not knowing what is ahead and trying to imagine what and where the dangers are.

The next morning, we formed up to return to the scene of the battle. We now knew there was a large body of Regular Army Infantry somewhere ahead of us. As we entered the jungle, the dense foliage closed in around us, and we were back in a world of dark curtains and thorny barriers, where sight and sound had to be augmented by straining all the senses. No breeze stirs on the jungle floor, and the sweat forms on your body and remains. We walked through terrain capable of hiding entire armies, to say nothing of the multitude of booby traps that were accepted as part of the colorful tapestry of this war. And, it was not wise to forget that this jungle was also the home of many types of crawling, flying and biting insects, leeches, snakes, tigers, and even crocodiles. Into these hostile conditions and unseen dangers we marched.

This time we moved with the strength of two battalions of Infantry. Our mission was to locate and engage this new enemy unit that had so audaciously attacked us the previous day.

18<sup>th</sup> Division Intelligence believed that they had moved off toward Gia Ray Mountain, which rose from the jungled valley to our southeast. The valley was split by the La Nga River, and our force split into a two-pronged formation with Thuong's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion north of the river, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to the south. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was itself split into two columns of march. Major Thuong and Captain Catlin led the right hand column, closest to the river, and I accompanied Captain Long in the left hand column, which made us the exposed left flank of the movement. I imagine that my counterpart (Junior Officer) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was moving with the exposed right flank on the other side of the river. Our column entered the jungle right at the scene of yesterday's battle. I took my place in line, fully aware that I was now a genuine combat veteran, and ready to face whatever came. Or was I? I felt that hollowness in my stomach that reminded me I was still a fragile human being, and not a bulletproof machine.

And then, a new distraction reared... I glanced beneath a bush to my right, and noticed an NVA pith helmet lying right side up on the ground. From its position, it very likely belonged to the soldier that I had shot trying to reach the 57 mm recoilless rifle position. Now, wouldn't that be a first class souvenir? Would you believe it; Sergeant Brown read my mind. I'm sure it pained him to speak to me, considering he had only the night before warned me not to talk to him for a few days, but, being the Professional Soldier that he was, he overcame his little grudge, and stepped back into his role as my Mentor. "Don't even think about it, Lieutenant. It's probably booby trapped. And what are you going to do with it anyway? Carry it with you for God knows how long until we come back out of the jungle?" He always made so much sense.

I got back to the business at hand, not even looking back at my lost treasure. It dawned on me that the fellow who had worn that helmet was probably still lurking somewhere ahead, along with a few hundred or thousand of his buddies, all armed to the teeth and serious about wanting to make us go home. Oh well, at least Sergeant Brown was talking to me again.

Off into the murky, sweltering jungle we trudged. Pick 'em up and put 'em down. Watch *where* you put 'em down. Watch ahead and around you for likely ambush sites. Plan carefully how to get across danger areas. Try to pierce the jungle curtain and visualize where the bullets can come from. Try to decide when it's important enough to get a drink that it's worth taking your second hand off your rifle to get at your canteen. Try to figure out why you can't drink enough water to slake your thirst. Why was I thirsty? Because it was hot? Or could it be simply that my body fluids were leaving me at an alarming rate? Or maybe that I was just as scared as I had been the day before. You'd be surprised what that does to one's respiratory rate and how it dries out one's mouth. Did I mention before that it felt like this was going to be a very long year?

## Chapter 9

### An Enemy Base Camp

After several hours of careful movement, we halted as our point element reached a clearing. Even from my position with Captain Long's command element in the column I could see the daylight filtering through the trees ahead. Phuoc's 3<sup>rd</sup> Company was, of course, in the lead. Phuoc gave the signal for a scouting party to clear the danger area. We got down and waited, rifles pointed to the flank. Almost immediately, an excited member of the scouting party returned. Phuoc brought him up to Captain Long. There were bunkers, fighting positions, and buildings ahead. We had reached the edge of a very large enemy base camp.

Captain Long radioed Major Thuong, and the unit consolidated before entering the base camp. The scouting teams reported them to be unoccupied. We moved in and secured the perimeter of the camp, then began investigating it. Solidly built wooden buildings stood in rows in the center of the complex, surrounded by fortifications and bunkers. The buildings were painted gray and equipped with wire mesh mosquito barriers over all the windows and vents. Discarded dunnage from ammunition stockpiles lay partially consumed in fire pits. Supply containers with Chinese and Russian writing on them were found in some of the buildings. Neatly constructed sleeping platforms were present in great numbers, some of them with blue tarping that was beginning to fade and tatter.

This had been the home and base of operations for a fairly large Viet Cong unit. Major Thuong surmised that it probably had been the camp of the 274<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Main Force Regiment, as that was the largest enemy unit known to operate in this area. Also known as the Dong Nai Regiment, they were among the soldiers who had perished outside the Long Binh burm in the failed Tet '69 attacks. They had probably staged out of this camp, and never returned. I thought of those long rows of bodies that I saw the day I reported in to III Corps Headquarters. This had been their last home.

"Destroy it," ordered Major Thuong, "but do it quietly. No explosives. Pull down the buildings, and cave in the bunkers. Fill them in with shovels. We must move on, but I do not want to leave this behind us." The chien si's went to work, and by noon, the camp was no longer usable to the enemy.

After destroying the camp, Major Thuong decided that we should move at least a short distance away from it before taking a break. We formed back up into the double pronged column, and I again went with Captain Long on the left flank. We moved about half a kilometer farther up the valley, then went into a perimeter and broke for lunch. As per standard practice, each company sent a squad to the flank to take up a security position. No fires were allowed; the men ate their rice balls and drank water, and I don't recall what I had, but it came out of a little green can.

The meal break ended, and we prepared to resume our operation. Sergeant Brown and I had grounded our equipment against a large fallen tree, and I had just put my rucksack back on and was picking up my rifle when I heard voices in the jungle. I looked that way and saw a line of soldiers moving directly toward me. The one at the head of the line was talking with his head turned back toward the second man in line. We had put out a security element, but as far as I knew, they were already back in the formation. And these fellows were wearing funny uniforms.

I turned toward Captain Long and gestured toward the approaching line. Long gave a shrug of his shoulders and frowned, indicating he did not know who they were. Sergeant Brown stood immediately behind me, and Sergeant Dung to my right. I saw the lead soldier turn his head back to the front, and suddenly stop short as he looked right at me. He got a puzzled expression on his face, for obviously I was an American soldier. He looked to my right and left, still obviously trying to figure out what he was looking at. I could almost tell what he was thinking. Sergeant Brown, beside me, was a Samoan, so he did not necessarily have the immediate appearance of an American, and of course, Sergeant Dung and Captain Long were

Vietnamese. We were standing just a short distance outside of what he probably assumed was a safe base area for the Viet Cong, and perhaps I was a prisoner. The log in front of me probably kept him from noticing the M16 in my left hand, which I had picked up only seconds before.

Sergeant Brown's M16 was now pointed toward the approaching line of soldiers. The man in front made his decision. He was armed only with a pistol, and he pulled up the flap of his holster and began to draw. Heads bobbed behind him as the soldiers following him attempted to see what was going on. I could see the AK47 rifles and B40 rocket launchers they held, but the man in front was blocking them from getting a clear shot.

I raised my M16 to waist level, reached across to the pistol grip with my right hand, and flipped the safety off. I remember thinking as I did this, that I needed to start firing as soon as possible, and the logical thing to do would be to pull the trigger as soon as the selector reached the "fire" position. But that would drop the first man in the line, and then all those fellows with rifles and rocket launchers would get a chance at me. I knew I wanted the selector switch to be on full automatic before I pulled the trigger. It seemed like it took a lifetime to think this out and do it. Everyone around me seemed to have gone into slow motion. My opponent was slowly raising the pistol from his holster. The muzzle had not yet cleared his holster when I felt the second snap of my selector, and knew I was set for full automatic fire. My shots blended with Sergeant Brown's as we both let loose a stream of .223 caliber bullets at the soldiers lined up before us. In my peripheral vision it looked like Sergeant Dung, Captain Long, and Tham were moving in slow motion, but I could now hear firing up and down the line. The muzzle of the pistol that was the focus of my attention was just clearing the top of the holster when the man jerked sharply and the pistol flew from his hand and into a nearby bush.

The enemy soldiers to my front dropped in a neat line, none of them getting off a shot. It was over that quickly. Sergeant Brown and I stood amid a pile of expended cartridge cases. He began changing magazines. I saw no one else standing to my front. I looked at the pistol, which looked like a Russian or Chinese 7.62 Tokarev, and took a step to cross over the log and pick it up. Suddenly my whole body seemed to be paralyzed. I stopped moving forward. Then, mysteriously, I was drawn backwards.

With his hand firmly grasping my pistol belt, Sergeant Brown finished dragging me back behind the log, and calmly told me "Leave the pistol alone, Sir. Get on the radio and get the artillery cranked up, these guys have got a lot of friends out there..." I almost instinctively said "Yes, Sir!" but I at least remembered my rank enough to simply quietly follow his instructions from behind the safety of the log. You would think that after the pith helmet incident of earlier that morning that souvenir hunting would be the farthest from my mind, but I guess my battle instinct just hadn't quite become that deeply instilled yet. I signaled Tham to bring the radio, and changed the magazine in my M16. One of Phuoc's Lieutenants led his platoon on a sweep to our front to make sure there was no one else out there.

That was the end of the shooting for a while, however. If there had been other enemy soldiers in the area, they chose not to reveal themselves, and we began checking the bodies. They wore uniforms similar to the ones I had seen the day before. Sergeant Dung turned over the man who had been walking in front. He was a fairly large man for an Asian, and had the high cheekbones and narrow eyes more characteristic of the Chinese than the Vietnamese. As Dung turned him over, the man's rice bowl, now cracked and bloody, fell from his tunic and rolled to one side. He had obviously just finished his lunch himself. His uniform and equipment looked fairly neat and new. Dung removed a small notebook from his pocket. It was wrapped in green plastic. Dung opened it up and began reading.

"This man was a Captain," said Dung. "According to this diary, he was the S-3 (Operations Officer) of the 95Alpha North Vietnamese Army Regiment. This regiment has just come south; they've been on "palace guard" detail in Hanoi most of the war. They are the core of Vo Nguyen Giap's original 95<sup>th</sup> Division that took Dien Bien Phu from the French. And look here." Dung stood up, extending the diary toward Captain Long. "This is an account of

yesterday's battle." Long accepted the diary, and began reading. Then he chuckled. It says here "When the enemy saw us, they ran like chickens. He forgot to say we ran right *through* them."

Long's radio cackled, and he reached for the handset. Then he turned to Phuoc. "The Major wishes to know what is going on. He's on his way here. Go ahead and put the perimeter back out."

I stood there with Sergeant Brown and Long's command party as Major Thuong and Captain Catlin joined us. Long briefed Major Thuong, and they began going over the diary. I wondered how many other soldiers had ever had the opportunity to read the enemy's account of a battle they had just fought. After just a few minutes, Thuong looked up, and said that it would be best if we put some distance between ourselves and that base camp, and they would finish looking at the diary later. It appeared that he gathered from the battle account that the Viet Cong platoon had been sacrificed to draw in a larger unit of the ARVN. The NVA that had attacked us were only a small portion of the force at hand. Apparently the other two battalions were waiting behind our position where they supposed we would have gone if the attack had not failed. He determined that we were in close proximity to what was most likely a very superior force. He would feel better, he said, if we got moving so that we would not be so far away from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which was still moving up the valley on the south side of the river.

Sergeant Dung directed the collection of the weapons from the enemy bodies. Thuong tucked the diary into his pocket, and returned to the right flank. I looked back at the bodies lying quietly on the bloodstained jungle floor, and turned to Sergeant Brown. "Isn't anyone going to bury them?" He glanced over at them as he shrugged into his rucksack. "No, Sir. Their friends will find them. Maybe now they won't think they own this jungle." As we formed up and moved out, I contemplated on this new reality of warfare that was no longer fought by gentlemen. A knot in the pit of my stomach reminded me for the rest of the day what could have happened to us all if the NVA plan outlined in their captain's journal had succeeded.

The afternoon wore on as we struggled through the jungle toward the distant Gia Ray Mountain. Suddenly I heard a shot. We rapidly deployed into our defensive perimeter, but it turned out that the shot was fired by one of the chien si's. He had put a rifle bullet through his foot. Apparently I wasn't the only scared one in the group. This fellow just figured out a different way to deal with it. Medics fixed him up as well as they could, and we carried him along until we reached a place the next day large enough to get in a helicopter to take him back to whatever punishment awaited him at the Division Rear. It was the only instance I ever saw of one of their soldiers doing anything less than commendable in the field.

We moved on again, wanting to put more distance between us and the place where the rifle had been fired. Thuong pulled the columns together, and we finished the day's movement at full strength. I watched Thuong as he hacked at the jungle with his bayonet just like one of his binh si's. His face was always calm, and his eyes never stopped moving. He was very clearly not a martinet, yet his officers and men followed and obeyed him without question or comment. He was one of them, and the best one.

By nightfall, we were tightly circled up, security forces and claymore mines in position. It had been a long day. A long two days. I got ready for a long night. I dug my foxhole, rigged my hammock, had my little green cans of food, and settled in for the night. The weather changed, thunder rolled, and lightning struck. I discovered there were many ways to die in a war. One of the chien si's was killed by the lightning. His body was taken into the center of the perimeter. It would be taken out the next day along with the shamed soldier with the foot wound.

The night wore on. Sergeant Brown and I took turns with radio watch. Someone had to answer the status checks each hour – short transmissions to prevent the enemy intelligence specialists from getting a fix on our location. It was still a good while before dawn, when an explosion lit up the area beyond the perimeter. One of our claymore mines had been tripped. A little while later, I heard machine gun fire. The security position reported movement where the claymore had gone off. A short period of silence ensued, then I heard more explosions. The



security position had again heard movement, and this time silenced it with hand grenades. The rest of the night passed quietly.

In the morning, we had to wait for the medevac helicopter. Our security patrol came in, bearing the body of a rock ape. It had been the ape that tripped the wire on the claymore. He had apparently only been stunned, but when he regained consciousness and started thrashing around, they had opened up with the machine gun, assuming it was enemy movement. The grenades had obviously done him in. Without further ado, the chien si's, who were not prone to be wasteful, dressed the ape out, and divided him among several cooking fires for breakfast. The ape was gone before the medevac even started. They cooked him, like everything else, in their steel helmets, placed upside down over the fire. Yankee Doodle had only stuck a feather in *his* hat; my ARVN friends had stuck a whole ape into theirs. Even at Fort Bragg I hadn't learned that I might experience this aspect of Gorilla Warfare.



This section of map shows National Highway 20 as it heads northeast from Xuan Loc toward the II Corps/III Corps border. Hill 122 hill showing on the map just east of the La Nga River rapids was the scene of our daylong fight with the NVA 95A. Our objective was the end of the hill mass with the dot on it. According to what we learned the next day, most of the NVA were set up on the other high point at the north end of that hill mass, waiting for us to pull back that way when their assault forces hit us from the south. We ended the day in a defensive position on the west bank of the river, then followed the 95A south from there in the morning. We found the VC 274<sup>th</sup> base camp about a kilometer south of where the La Nga river flows off the bottom of this map section.

## Chapter 10

### A B-52 Strike

As the sound of the beating helicopter blades faded away, we faced upriver and resumed our journey. It promised to be more of the same; struggling through dense vegetation, sweating in the heat and humidity, and trying to watch everywhere when you could see practically nowhere.

I was learning to carry my M16 by the balance in my left hand. If I kept it tucked fairly close to my body, I could keep it from tangling too often in the vines and bamboo as we passed through. When it did get stuck, keeping it close in like that allowed me to reach forward to the muzzle with my right hand and clear the foliage from it. If I needed it quickly, all I had to do was thrust it forward and grab the pistol grip with my right hand, like I had done the day before, and I was ready to fire. I found that I almost always fired from waist level, since it took too long to acquire a sight picture, and considering the ranges we generally engaged at, sights were a moot point.

Sergeant Brown had shown me how to take my sling off the rifle, and rig it so that it was actually above the rifle instead of below it. That way, when we felt the need to carry our rifles slung, we could get still them into action very quickly. We carried them muzzle down over our left shoulders, and all that was required was to raise the muzzle to horizontal and again reach across with my right hand.

That also allowed me to keep a hand free to brush vegetation aside, remove and replace my canteen, pick offensive insect life off my exposed body parts, and wipe the sweat out of my eyes. I was becoming quite the efficient jungle fighter...

It was after mid-morning when Major Thuong answered a radio call. He raised his hand to halt the movement. "We are ordered to stop immediately and take cover. The B-52's are coming!" Enemy activity to our east had been detected, and the Air Force was going to put in an "arcflight" (B-52 air strike) on the suspected location. The strike zone was about three kilometers directly east of our current position. A flight of B-52 Bombers would fly along a north-south line and carpet the jungle with 500 pound bombs in a pattern about 3,000 meters long and about 500 meters wide.

When the bombs started dropping, I was glad to be already on the ground. The jungle floor rolled like jello, and it would have been difficult to remain standing if we had wanted to. The deafening thundering and crunching of the 500 pound bombs hammering into the ground a full three kilometers away gave some idea of how terrifying it must be to whoever was in there. That crunching sound was something that always gave me the shivers, knowing it was the sound of all that metal fragmenting and sending out showers of hot pieces of sharp steel.

As the thunder stopped and the ground settled down, we formed up again. Our mission would now be to locate the target area and conduct an assessment of the damage. It was easy to tell we were getting close when we started seeing the vegetation all pointed towards us, and finding the ground littered with dead birds and animals. I looked sadly at a giant lizard that would speak no more profanities. Then we started finding craters about thirty feet across, surrounded by nothing but dirt and devastation. The vegetation was stripped back so far that a helicopter could actually hover down into these spaces if necessary to accomplish a medevac. We had actually used an old crater like these the day before to get our two casualties out. It took a pilot with nerve, and there had to be enough soldiers standing on the lip of the crater to handle the litter from one end as they handed it up into the helicopter. Then it took a long time for the aircraft to get enough lift to rise almost vertically out of the space.

We moved among the craters, alert now for signs of any enemy casualties. I walked over an NVA rucksack, and reached down to pick it up. It was still attached to its owner's torso. I recognized the smell as exactly the same one that had immediately assailed me the day before when we shot into all those NVA at close range. It was what people call "the smell of death" and

once you've smelled it, you never forget it. Our hilltop back along QL-1 had smelled the same way. I don't think it's anything you ever get used to. I know I didn't.

And then I began learning about the "Body Count" game. Being right there on the ground where you could look the situation over first hand, we were able to turn in pretty accurate casualty reports. Of course, you can only report a dead enemy if you are looking at him. The VC and NVA made an effort to remove all their wounded, and as many of their dead as possible as they pulled back from enemy contact. It was a common thing to also report "blood trails" at least as indications of another enemy casualty. But it seemed that the numbers we reported from the field were never enough for the gentlemen in "The Rear" posting those numbers on briefing boards. Captain Catlin told me that if we found any more major pieces of the fellow who owned the rucksack, we might as well report them as more casualties, since that would be what the people higher upstairs would do with the numbers. They would figure there had been more casualties, and just go ahead and estimate them. I guess it was kind of like playing "Password." By the time what you said got all the way around, it didn't sound like what you said anymore.

That was only one of the games they played "Upstairs." Besides numbers games, they also liked word games. Besides our Bomb Damage Assessment missions, one of our most common missions was called a "Search & Destroy" mission. The idea was that we took a military unit into an area where enemy concentrations may be located, and we tried to find them and destroy them. Or we may have just picked an area for no other reason than we hadn't been there for a while, and go in there to see what we could find, and then destroy it (or them). But as my tour progressed, the American public's dissatisfaction with the war began to wear on the politicians, and the White House and the Pentagon began looking for new, less aggressive-sounding names for some of the things we were doing. Our Search and Destroy missions became "Reconnaissance in Force" missions. And then, believe it or not, before my year ended, we had to stop calling them that, because they decided they didn't want to use the word "force" to label our operations. When I left we were calling them "Ground Reconnaissance" missions. But we were still doing exactly the same thing. I guess they really thought the Press would then believe we were just taking our hardware and going out for a look around the countryside.

Likewise, we were no longer allowed to set out booby traps. We had to call them "mechanical ambushes." They were also using a lot of creativity with names for strategic programs, using words like "neutralization" and "pacification." When the public found out how the Phoenix Program was "neutralizing" the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) they made the U.S. Advisors stop participating in the program. I have to admit I had some questions myself about that one anyway. More about that later.

But these aspects of my tour still lay ahead of me. I was slowly transitioning from my status as the new kid on the block. Without realizing it, my mind was beginning to compensate for the state of constant, numbing fear. The days and nights and weeks began to blend together, and at some point fear ceased to be the overriding emotion.

After experiencing the unrelenting heat and humidity, the misery of exhaustion, aching muscles, dehydration, bad water, insect and leech bites, moving through a world of dirt, mold and blood, it began to seem like there were worse things to endure than worrying about stepping into the path of a bullet. A bullet could mean a ticket home, or at the very worst, an end to the misery of the subhuman existence that seems to define war in the jungle. To this day, I do not understand what kind of a human being can freely choose to participate in this sort of existence for simple monetary gain, as mercenary soldiers do. But, for me, at least, the voice of fear became smaller and smaller, until at some point, it went unwisely away, over ridden by a state of constant primordial misery.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Massacre of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/48<sup>th</sup> Infantry**

Apparently the largest body of the enemy thought to have been in that area had already passed through. We reported the bodies and equipment that we were able to find, and went back into the “Search & Destroy” mode. We were moving ever deeper into Indian Country. I was beginning to feel like I had never been anywhere else. For me the entire world was a humid and moldy tapestry of green and brown where everyone played a deadly game of hide and seek.

The game ended suddenly for 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. We were still holding to our double pronged advance up the valley, when we heard the roll of gunfire across the river. Although the distance between our two units did not look that great on the map, by the time we reached the scene of the fight, it was over. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was gone. They had finally found the enemy we had been sent to locate.

It was a well-executed ambush that caught them on the move, and began with the killing of two of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion’s advisors. Lieutenant Colonel Anderson, whom I had just met at Xuan Loc before the operation, was due to go home and get out of the Army in a few weeks. He told me when we met that he was resigning from the Army, in spite of his recent promotion. He had decided this was no life for a civilized human being. Now his body lay alongside the river, his arms and legs severed. His genitals had been cut off as well, and were left stuffed in his mouth. His Sergeant’s body lay nearby, both of them riddled with multiple gunshot wounds. The other two Advisors, a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant and a Sergeant, were wounded. Dead and dying ARVN soldiers were strung all along their route of march. All but about ten percent of the Vietnamese had been killed or wounded. The enemy had struck savagely, done their work quickly, and left the area completely. The NVA 95Alpha Regiment had done here what they had failed to do to us on Hill 122.

We began a massive medical evacuation. The dead waited quietly while we got out the wounded that could be saved first, then the more questionable ones, and finally, the ones for whom the war was over. It was an unspeakably grotesque scenario, and one which I will never forget. That unmistakable smell of death on the battlefield could never be adequately described to those that never participated in the madness. I felt guilty to think how lucky I was to have been assigned to the battalion that formed the other prong to this operation. I knew it was due to luck, and not to any amount of training or skill, that I was still alive at that time. I prayed for my luck to continue.

We had a short stand-down after the tragic end of the La Nga Valley campaign. We were soon inserted back into that brown and green world of hide and seek, and we found ourselves in War Zone D, assigned to confirm the presence of more suspected enemy forces. Confirm it we did. We lost some good men crossing a stream at the Dong Nai River, and again found ourselves in contact with a force much larger than our own. It was the 274<sup>th</sup> VC Main Force Regiment, back in operation after a quick infusion of North Vietnamese replacements. We found their base camp, and this time they weren’t considerate enough to leave it empty. We called for reinforcements.

We pulled back with our dead and wounded as elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry began arriving to take up the fight. This time the Cavalry was led by none other than my friend Captain Alec Hottell, from my Fort Bragg days. I didn’t get to see him because his Company was at the point as they replaced us in contact with the Viet Cong. As I reached the edge of the landing zone where the helicopters were taking out our casualties and bringing in the Sky Troopers I ran into Chaplain Cherry, who had gone through Airborne School with me. He asked me if I had seen Alec. I told him no, but that I was damn glad he was there. I told him to thank Alec for me, and then Chaplain Cherry was caught up in the swarm of the relief column and was gone. Sadly, the

next thing I heard about him was that he had lost both legs in an a mine explosion later in his tour.

I did get to see Alec again. I was in Hawaii on R&R and ran into him and his wife in the International Market Place. We had a nice visit with, and he told me that he was very excited about his next assignment. He had extended, and was going back to Vietnam to be the Aide to General Casey, the Division Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry. Alec told me that once you've been a General's Aide, the rest of your career is virtually guaranteed to be a success. Knowing Alec, I believe his career would have been a success anyway, but it was not in the cards. Alec went back to Vietnam and was aboard General Casey's helicopter with him in July of 1970 when it was shot down. General Casey was the only General Officer to die in Vietnam, and he took Alec with him. It was a severe loss to his friends and to the Army. Alec was an amazing man. His obituary, which Alec had written himself in anticipation of just such a turn of events, appeared in "Soldiers" magazine in 1971. You will find a copy of it in the appendices of this memoir.

***Post Script: I came across this information about Alec recently when I put his name into Google; it actually makes reference to the combat action I referred to in which Alec brought his company in at the point of the 3/48<sup>th</sup> ARVN's rescue at the Dong Nai River.***

In the First Cav Alex took over B Company, First Battalion, Eighth Cavalry, the "Pigirons," a unit of mostly draftees. His first reaction was, "By God, they're all CIVILIANS!" But, it didn't take long for him to realize that they were fine, young, red- blooded Americans who were also answering their country's call. He wrote, "People know what they should do and they have the courage and confidence in each other to do it. ... They will do anything even though they feel that life and society have dumped all over them; they can still drive on and fight like demons, march like Jackson, and soldier like the very dickens when they have to...it fills me with inspiration. They are truly the great people of this war...the forgotten civilians who will probably never receive their due for their valor on the fields of battle." The company flourished and on one of its numerous successful operations Alex won the Silver Star for leading his company in a counter-attack rescue of a friendly ambushed unit. In addition to freeing the beleaguered unit, he personally carried three wounded men through the heavy fire to the rear. The only low point of Alex's command tour came when he received a letter from Linda stating that she had had a miscarriage.

Taken from the story of Alec Hottell's life found at <http://www.west-point.org/users/usma1964/24930/>.

## Chapter 12

### Time and Space Unfocus

I don't think "unfocus" is actually a word, but it seems to explain how the following weeks and months impressed themselves on my memory. Time marched on, and so did we. When I heard people talk about "The World" it was a vague, elusive memory of someplace that I may have been once, but it didn't seem real. Nothing seemed real but the rucksack and rifle and the days of sweat and grime and the nights of exhaustion and trying to stay awake for radio checks. It always looks so easy in the movies as the heroes recite their lines and look so resolute. But watching movies and dreaming of the glories of war can't prepare one for the real thing. Actors don't ever seem to have to reload their weapons, and somehow don't seem to get dirty and smelly. They don't portray how vulnerable one is just trying to perform normal body functions, or how abjectly miserable one can be trying to stay awake or find someplace to sleep where you won't get eaten alive.

Over 35 years later, I have lost the sharp memory of the order in which my adventures unfolded, but they lie jumbled in the corridors of my mind, stark and real memories of an experience that I wouldn't have missed for the world and would never want to repeat.

I remember the day our jungle trek was cut short by an order to rush to an improvised clearing that was being blasted out of the jungle for us with a 10,000 pound bomb called a "daisy cutter." There was another unit about to be set upon by a superior force, and we were needed to reinforce them. We could expect an insertion into a hot LZ. Just hurrying through the jungle was an experience in itself. It wasn't hard to find the clearing. For one thing, we heard it being made. Compared to this one, I now saw the 500 pound bombs as being more like big firecrackers. This bomb was designed to detonate just above ground level, and blow everything away from it. We arrived at the giant clearing and almost immediately heard the incoming helicopters. I guess it was the quickness of the whole thing that caused what happened next. The battalion just formed up at the edge of the clearing, instead of arranging itself in a perimeter around it. We picked our way through the litter of matchsticks that had once been trees and began boarding the aircraft.

As usual, I was to accompany the first group of soldiers into the fight. Sergeant Brown and I loaded onto the first flight of Hueys, with Lieutenant Phuoc and his best platoon. Captain Catlin remained behind with Major Thuong's command staff, and would be coming out on the last lift. As we lifted off, I was thinking of how the old Roman gladiators must have felt as they filed out of their cells and marched on to the field, saluting the Emperor with their famed "Morituri Te Salutant!" (*"We Who Are About To Die Salute You!"*)

Then, I heard the now familiar crunching sound of incoming mortar fire. I was already in the air, and clear of the devastation that was being visited on Major Thuong and the rest of the unit. I hoped we weren't anywhere between them and the closest artillery, because I knew Thuong would shortly be working over the VC mortar men. We had other things to think about. We were on our way to be fed into a big fight somewhere to the south...

We arrived at our destination, and rushed to the tree line. The troops we were sent to save greeted us, and apologized to be disappointing us, but the enemy had never showed up. We got to cool our heels and wait for the rest of the battalion to finish being lifted out of the hell back in the jungle. That was the way it was in Vietnam; you just never knew.

Not all my memories were traumatic. Even as a college student, I had never cared for beer. Yet one of my fondest memories of those times was the day we stepped out of the jungle onto a dirt road, and heard the rumbling of an approaching vehicle. And ancient bus hove into view, and Sergeant Dung smiled at me and Sergeant Brown. "Watch this," he said, and stepped into the roadway with his M16 held above his head, waving the bus to a stop. He got onto the bus. "Oh great," I thought. "That's one way to get out of here. Just get on a bus. What am I



going to tell Captain Long? “Uh, Sir, your Operations Sergeant just went home...”

However, in short order, Sergeant Dung got back off the bus, carefully carrying his steel helmet in both hands, upside down. A large chunk of ice floated in a helmet full of Ba Mui Ba, a favorite Vietnamese beer. We made our way back into the jungle, and the three of us shared that beer under a bush. I kept waiting for the police to come along and tap us on the shoulder. I don’t think I could ever have another beer as good as that one was!

I remember watching the chien si’s pull a funny looking animal out of a banana tree one day. It was hanging by its tail, like an opossum, but it was covered with armor like an armadillo. I asked Phuoc what it was, and he said it was a truoc. The men were thinking about cooking it, I guess, but they couldn’t get it to unroll. They ended up leaving it there on the ground under the tree, staring indignantly at them from eyes on either side of his tapered armored tail wrapped across the front of his body.

I marveled at seeing the “air plants” that grow in the trees under the jungle canopy. They draw their moisture from the air, and don’t need roots. I noticed with interest that the scorpions turn black in the rainy season, and red in the dry season. I learned not to kill scorpions with the butt of my M16 the way I had killed them at Ranger School with my M14. I used to just drop the butt of my rifle and smash straight down on them without missing a step, but I discovered in Vietnam that the M16 is different from the M14 in many ways. One of them is the recoil buffer spring assembly in the butt of the M16. When you smash something with the butt, it gives off a loud, hollow “Sproin-n-ngg!” – a noise that you probably don’t want to be producing in the middle of Indian Country.

I learned to eat monkey meat, and other suspicious forms of protein that could have been someone’s puppy. You *never* saw old dogs in Vietnam. I stopped short at eating fish soup with the eyes floating around in it looking back at you. I did learn that nuoc mam sauce made duck eggs more palatable. They seemed to cut the greasiness. I tried not to think about the ingredients and process involved in the making of nuoc mam. Some things were best left unknown. I slept very uncomfortably one night as the “guest of honor” in the home of a village chief. He relinquished to me his bed of plywood with wooden block pillow. As in a story Mark Twain once told about a man being run out of town on a rail, who said “personally, if it weren’t for the honor, I’d just as soon walk,” I would just as soon have slept outside.

I watched a praying mantis crawling on a leaf one time when I sought the shade of his bush. We were practically nose to nose, and he surprised me by jumping on mine. Apparently that was his way of teaching me not to invade his space. Sergeant Brown thought it was funny, and I was always glad to be able to provide him with some amusement.

I had a never-ending battle with thirst. I carried at least two and sometimes three canteens. I tried to make them last by sipping the water a capful at a time. Sergeant Brown told me he didn’t understand how I could do that. He would hold his canteen above his mouth and pour the water into it in a stream. He carried a huge bladder style water carrier in his rucksack though. I just wasn’t up to that.

I would sometimes strain swamp water through my neck scarf to make it at least look more drinkable. We tried not to drink anything that didn’t have something alive in it. I learned this after scooping some crystal clear but totally undrinkable water out of a bomb crater once. I found out the reason it was so clear was because it was poison to living organisms. It was probably pure acid from bomb residue.

I tried the old trick of cutting a length of vine to get the water out of it. It actually worked, but the water was awful. It always tasted very woody. I guess that made sense though. I resorted to that measure from time to time, maybe even just to justify the expensive Gerber Commando Knife I was carrying. I had bought the knife at Frederick & Nelson’s sporting goods department with the express intent of taking it with me to Vietnam, and I didn’t want it to go unused. Sure, I used it to slice the C-ration bread that came in the green cans, but it needed some kind of a survival application to earn its keep. Those knives are serious collector items now, and

worth a lot of money. It was one of the early production models that had the 5 degree cant to the blade. I fervently hoped I'd never have to use it for its actual intended purpose, and I didn't. When I found out those early Gerbers were worth \$1000 if you could connect them with Vietnam service, I put it in the shadow box that holds my unit patches and medals, along with my other commando knife and the compass that Phuc gave me.

I was very glad to see the rainy season come (the ARVN called it mua mua). When it started to rain, we would stop and get out our ponchos. It would come down so hard that in just a minute the ponchos would be washed clean of all the dirt and dust, and then we could catch the rain water running off of them into our canteens.

Whenever I could find them, I carried "fizzies" that I could drop into my canteen, and it would almost be like drinking a warm soda. One night I actually found a coke at the bottom of my rucksack. I had forgotten it was there. That was almost as good as the beer with the ice chunk.

Our normal daily fare consisted of standard issue C-rations. I actually liked them, having come to appreciate them when they were all I could get to keep body and soul together at Ranger School. They came in cases of twelve meals, each meal containing a main entrée, some type of fruit or dessert, a can with either cookies, candy, or crackers and peanut butter, and an accessory pack with coffee, cream sugar, salt, and chewing gum. Earlier versions of C-rations had packs of four cigarettes in them, but I didn't miss them with the current issue stuff. I traded them for something edible at Ranger School, after I discovered you absolutely could not eat them. But I guess they didn't figure you should be smoking in the woods in Southeast Asia, so there weren't any in these. Sometimes instead of C's we got a new type of field ration that was all freeze dried items. They called them "Lurps" because they were initially adopted for use by the Long Range Patrol teams. They didn't come in cans, they came in plastic bags, so they were lighter. You didn't have to cook them; you could just pour water in their container and they'd just reconstitute themselves into a meal. Actually, they weren't bad either. If you poured the water in and rolled the bag back up and stuck it in your pocket for a while, you had a warm meal.

Sometimes we would eat the "indigenous" rations. The ARVN got their chow through their own supply system, and it looked more like the kind of cans you got sardines and anchovies in. One time we got stuck in an area where Major Thuong refused to allow re-supply drops because he didn't want the enemy to know we were in the area. We had gone out that time expecting to be gone for about three or four days, and it stretched out to about twelve, so we were getting mighty hungry. We all got to where we would pool what food we had with everyone else, and stretch it out by adding grass and watercress to the rice. Yum!

When we were in the field, I took little white pills that were designed to keep us from having bowel movements. They kept you from getting caught in a compromising position, but it sure was painful when you got back out of the field and stopped taking them. I'm sure my insides suffered some because of them. I caught a VC in that position one time late in my tour, and I just let him run off, because I knew how miserable he probably was.

Normally, I slept above the ground in a hammock, due to my experiences the first few nights in the jungle. I learned to sleep on my stomach in the hammock. Try it sometime if you think that's an easy trick. But I couldn't stand sleeping on my back, because it was constantly a mass of welts from insect bites. It seems like every time you bent over to get under a bush or a vine, something would drop off and climb down into your shirt to bite you in the back. I also learned that if you ate something in your hammock, you didn't just drop the can on the ground underneath with the idea of picking it up in the morning. That can would attract all kinds of vicious little things that would eat whatever put its foot down into them.

I remember one incident where I sustained multiple fire ant bites on Ho Chi Minh's birthday. We were standing down because the VC had declared a truce to observe the birthday, and we were camped alongside a river. Sergeant Brown and I decided to go for a swim. We got into the water, and I stepped on an M1 Carbine magazine lying on the bottom. I looked around,

and saw a little island out in the river with what looked like a trail leading up onto it out of the river. I told Sergeant Brown I was going to go see if there was a supply cache or something on the island. I got my M16 from where I had hung it on a branch over the water, and with Sergeant Brown covering me, I climbed up onto the island. I was wearing only my boots. I patrolled that trail the nearly the entire length of the little island. Suddenly I noticed that I was in severe pain in the vicinity of my ankles. I looked down to see swarms of fire ants working their way up my leg. I did a right angle turn and launched myself back into the river, surprising the dickens out of Sergeant Brown. Luckily, he was cool headed enough not to blow me away. But I decided whatever was on that island could stay there. By the way, that truce was a bunch of hooey. We got mortared that day just like it was any other day of the year. Or maybe that was just the VC version of a fireworks display.

At night I practiced getting out of my hammock and dropping into my fox hole by just spinning upside down. Major Thuong especially liked to set up a night position along trails that we could tell were being used by the bad guys. He showed me how they marked their trails, and whenever he could, he'd put his perimeter right on top of them. That often made for an early morning wake up call that got the day off to an exciting start.

I saw lots of odd and interesting wildlife. Besides the "truoc" there were crocodiles, tigers, elephants (I saw them only once) and even wild turkeys. And of course, the monkeys and apes. Birds and reptiles abounded as well. I've already mentioned the lizards. Besides the nasty little poisonous snakes that everyone is afraid of over there, there were also the impressive and amusing boa constrictors. I remember walking alongside one that had just finished getting something down its jaws, and was lying alongside the trail (all 25 or 30 feet of him) in a stupor trying to digest it. I got quite a kick out of the little fish they called mud skippers. They were also known as "walking fish." They had developed their little fins to the point where they could also use them like legs. When their water holes dried up, they'd just pack up and hike off to another one. You never knew when you were going to be skulking down a trail and run into a fish strolling towards you. Not that we spent a lot of time on the trails. Unless we were in a big hurry, Major Thuong made it a point to stay off roads, trails, and easy-looking routes through the jungle. It was just good military sense.

The critters that I really didn't appreciate were the leeches that left purple rings around my legs where my boot tops ended that didn't go away until years after I got home. The scorpions seemed to like blood too. Anytime we had someone lying on the ground that had been wounded, we'd have to watch them because they seemed to attract scorpions. They were tough to spot in the rainy season too, since they'd turned black.

I watched the coming and going of Captain Catlin's replacement, and then his replacement's replacement. I can't even remember either of their names now. I said goodbye to Sergeant Burton when he got dusted off one day. Before they put him on the helicopter, he handed me his Smith & Wesson .38 Special Military & Police revolver, saying he wouldn't be needing it anymore.

I moved on through a world of unthinkable misery and unspeakable depths of emotion, short, sharp firefights in places with no names, and yet in an atmosphere of such detachment, and maybe even denial, that the civilized world of clean sheets and cooked food began to seem like only a fading memory...

## **Chapter 13**

### **MACV Team 98**

Eventually I received orders for the next phase of my tour. I was finally to be assigned to the original job for which I had been slotted, except in a different Province. I was sent to MACV Team 98 in the City of Bien Hoa to become the Assistant Operations Officer. My primary duty was to run the American side of the Province Tactical Operations Center, and I was also to assist with Operations and Training of the Vietnamese Regional Force and Popular Force units assigned to Bien Hoa Sector. The team was responsible for the Advisory effort at Province level, and within the six Districts that comprised the Province. War Zones “C” and “D” were also part of our AO (Area of Operation) as they butted right up to the Province borders. The Dong Nai River flowed through Bien Hoa diagonally from northeast to southwest, and divided the district of Tan Uyen and the War Zones from the rest of the Province. To the southeast lay the Rung Sat Special Zone, named for the huge swamp it encompassed. “Rung Sat” was Vietnamese for “Killer Swamp.” Beyond the Rung Sat was Vung Tau, a town that sat on the coastline. The beautiful beaches there provided for excellent R&R centers, and the VC generally left that area alone, since apparently they used it themselves. A regiment of Australian Infantry was stationed near Vung Tau at Nui Dat. There was also an Australian medical mission in the Province at Di An, where the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division had a base camp. The Royal Thai Army Volunteer Forces operated a base at Bear Cat, in Long Thanh. Tay Ninh and the border country known as “The Parrot’s Beak” lay to our west, and to our southwest, the landmark known as “Nui Ba Den” (The Black Virgin Mountain) rose from the otherwise flat terrain that became the Mekong Delta.

Saigon was due south, and the gateway to the IV Corps Tactical Zone and the Mekong Delta. Navy Seals operated out of a base at Nha Be to the southeast, and claimed the Rung Sat as their AO.

The team members lived in a walled villa that had been converted into a little fort. It stood inside the City of Bien Hoa, and fairly close to the Bien Hoa Air Base and Long Binh Depot. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division maintained their rear base camp there. New arrivals were processed into the country there, and most were then sent north to where the Division’s troops were operating. The Air Force staged their close air support aircraft out of this field, and I saw one of the U-2 spy planes there once. There was a Special Forces C-Detachment on the base, and some American armored cavalry and mechanized Infantry units. There was also a separate compound near Bien Hoa for a company of ROK (Republic of Korea) Engineers. Long Binh was a U.S. Army supply depot, and also housed the Headquarters unit for II Field Force Vietnam. There were two hospitals there, one for U.S. wounded, and a more secure one for enemy wounded.

A village called Ho Nai was between Long Binh and Bien Hoa. It was populated primarily by transplanted North Vietnamese that had elected to move south when the country divided over government styles. They were mostly Catholics, and their Popular Force military units were some of the most motivated and effective government forces in the area.

There were several other major Allied Commands in the area, Bien Hoa Special Zone, Bien Hoa Tactical Area Command, and Capital Military Area Command. There were two Vietnamese Regional Force battalions, a Province level special group called the PRU’s (Province Reconnaissance Unit) and numerous Regional Force companies and Popular Force platoons. These were referred to as “RF/PF’s” and were the military forces at the disposal of the Province Chief.

A Province Chief in Vietnam was roughly equivalent to a state governor in the United States, and the RF/PF’s were the equivalent of the National Guard and State Militia. Districts were the equivalent of American counties. The RF battalions were the Province level unit, the RF

Companies would be found at District level, and the PF Platoons at village level. At the very bottom of the structure were the People's Self-Defense Forces (PSDF) and the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) that were basically the "firewatch" people in the hamlets and rural areas. This whole area was a mind-boggling mixture of Vietnamese and Allied forces with my new home at the center.

Until now, I had only experienced the Big Picture, getting my information from high level headquarters and operating with Federal level forces. Now I was at the Grassroots of Vietnam. I was about to experience a new and very different side to this conflict.



This map shows most of Bien Hoa and parts of Long Khanh and Phuc Tuy Provinces. The ambush of the 2/48<sup>th</sup> took place on QL-15 just above the border between Bien Hoa and Phuc Tuy Provinces.

The La Nga Valley Campaign, where we fought the NVA 95A Regiment, took place in the area just off the upper right corner of this map sheet. War Zones C and D, where we encountered the VC 274 Regiment, lie to the west and north. Tan Uyen just barely shows in the northwest corner. Nhon Trach in the left center area was the scene of my encounter with the VC C-240 Company. Saigon is to the west. The Rung Sat (Killer Swamp) is the watery area at the bottom right.

## Chapter 14

### The Grassroots

As I pointed out, my experience to this point had been with Regular Army units operating far away from the population centers. Now I was living with the people, and instead of dealing with career soldiers, my counterparts were the “Home Guard” and their civilian leaders, at the various levels of government within the Province.

The Province was composed of six districts: Duc Tu, Cong Thanh, Di An, Long Thanh, Nhon Trach, and Tan Uyen. Each district was supervised by a civilian representative of the Vietnamese government. The Districts were divided further into Villages, and then into Hamlets. Village and Hamlet Chiefs reported to the District Chief. As I recall, the Hamlet Chief was the only member of the system that was elected by the people. It was also the most dangerous of all government jobs. If the hamlet happened to be in one of the contested, or “unpacified” areas, it was not uncommon for pro-government chiefs to mysteriously disappear. Sometimes they would even be publicly executed by Communist forces in a demonstration to the people of the futility of resistance.

My assignment was now going to be to live and work with these people, in an environment where only the older Vietnamese could recall a time when they weren’t at war.

Team 98 was not at all like Team 87. On Team 87, our mission had been strictly to act as advisors and combat support coordinators for the Vietnamese Regular Army as it operated against the enemy. On Team 98, we interacted with more than just the military elements in the Province. One of the most important components of the team belonged to MACCORD (which I believe stood for Military Assistance Command for the Civil Operations and Rural Development.) These were the Advisors that were helping the people at Vietnam’s grassroots develop their programs and systems that would eventually allow the Americans to go home. Their programs included civic action efforts, medical assistance visits, agricultural development education, reconstruction projects, and, when all else failed, relocation programs for the populations of threatened or contested areas. Under this program, whole hamlets had been pulled out of troubled territory, and settled into new homes in “pacified” areas. They were called the “Ap Doi Moi” or New Life hamlets.

One of the team’s advisors for the MACCORD operation was Captain Al Rambo. In light of the role played later by Sylvester Stallone in the “Rambo” series, I find it highly amusing to recall that the real Captain Rambo’s mission had nothing at all to do with the exploits of Rambo on the big screen. Al Rambo was obviously not the role model for Hollywood’s Rambo. He was a loud mouthed obnoxious Texan who claimed to have put himself through college by running guns to Cuba as a youngster. He was eventually sent home with a disabling wound which he inflicted on himself demonstrating to someone how you could keep a VC from shooting you with a K54 pistol by pushing against the slide with your hand. I can only imagine what stories he must tell now of his Vietnam exploits in which he lost the use of his hand.

Rambo and Captain Gene Mallot and their protégé, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Beard, who were Military Intelligence officers, also spent some of their time with Vietnamese counterparts at the Van Phong Phai Hung, (the Phoenix Program). This program investigated intelligence information about members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). It was a common practice for important members of the VCI to actually be members of the local populace, or to at least pose as such, so that they could carry out their assignments undetected. Once the Phoenix Program people identified these VCI, they used the Province Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) to neutralize them. They generally tried to do this by conducting an ambush that would catch the person either coming or going to, or actually involved in his military activity. The idea was that this would put a crimp in local guerrilla activity, and hopefully discourage participation by other civilians in that sort of thing.



Due to the unconventional nature of this war, the Phoenix Program made sense in a way. But it had its down side. The PRU had a wide range of latitude in their operations, and were accountable only to the Province Chief. The nature of the operation made it possible for someone with a grudge to get a person targeted that may have been guilty of only offending the wrong people. And, of course, no matter how you describe it, the method of neutralizing VCI suspects amounted to assassination. The program was getting a lot of bad press, and at some point in late 1969 or early 1970, the word came down from MACV that Americans could no longer participate in Phoenix operations. Probably from the same office that said we couldn't conduct "Search & Destroy" missions any more.

This policy change came too late to help Lieutenant Beard, though. After Rambo went home with his crippled hand, it fell to Bill to take up the slack with the Phai Hung people. As time went by, I noticed that he was beginning to act a little strangely. He would make odd comments, and mutter to himself, and in general became quite morose. One day as he was preparing to participate in a briefing for the Province Chief on the Phoenix Program's accomplishments, he just seemed to lose it. He acted like he was expecting to be severely punished for some reason, and began talking about taking the responsibility for a lot of wrongdoing. He went rapidly downhill from there, and before long he seemed to be talking nothing but nonsense. The medics took him to Long Binh for an evaluation, and that was the last we saw of him. I heard that he was flown back to the States and given a disability release. Maybe the Headquarters boys called "foul" on the program for good reasons.

Fortunately, my job was a little more clearly defined and conventional. I assisted the Province S-3 Advisor in overseeing the Province Tactical Operations Center, and with tactical training and operation programs for Provincial military forces.

This may be a good time to point out that, while I was no longer dealing with the professional soldiers of the Regular Army, my new counterparts were no less enjoyable. I missed Sergeant Dung, but I spent a lot of time with a Sergeant named Ly Tac Si' who did a commendable job of filling in for him. While not as scholarly and experienced as Dung, Si' was very intelligent and fun loving, and proved to be excellent company in a somewhat stressful environment. I also had an interpreter who was blessed with a sharp dry wit. One day he told me that he was glad the Americans wore name tags on their uniforms. I asked him why that was, and he told me, maintaining a completely innocent expression, that until he got to know us, he couldn't tell one of us from the other. He was, of course, just kidding, but he made his point.

Team 98 advised all the military units of the Province between RF Battalion and PSDF levels. The CIDG belonged to Special Forces, who administered them from their nearby camp. At each level, the training, equipping and organization of the units became less and less formal. The older style uniforms, less modern equipment, and obsolete weaponry would filter down to the lower levels. By the time the system got down to the black pajama clad CIDG troops at the bottom level, I figured they operated more like the Mafia than the Army, so I figured the Special Forces was welcome to them. On the other hand, maybe I should have paid more attention to those folks. Considering they got all the outmoded ordnance, a lot of their weapons and equipment probably rated as genuine collector's items.

Even though I was now serving in a "rear area" assignment, I soon discovered that I was not going to be bored. It had often been said during training that this war had no real "front." It would follow that there was no real "rear." If our mission was to actually win the war by winning the "hearts and minds" of the people, I was at the front. Besides my duties at the Tactical Operations Center, I was kept busy moving all around the Province, and interacting with the American advisors and Vietnamese commanders at the various levels. I continued to find myself back in the field, the main difference being that our objectives were closer to home and our operations generally began and ended on the same day.

When I first received my orders for Bien Hoa, I thought I had it made. The city of Bien Hoa was a little less than 40 miles north of Saigon, along the country's major highway. I figured

it was going to be one of the most peaceful areas around. As it turned out, I was only partially correct. The country farther south toward Saigon rated higher pacification marks. Of the six districts comprising Bien Hoa Province, Di An district, immediately adjacent to Saigon, was the quietest. Duc Tu, where Bien Hoa Air Base and Long Binh Depot were located, were the next most peaceful. Everything else was pretty much "Indian Country," as they called it.

There were North Vietnamese Army units in and around the area, a Viet Cong Main Force Regiment, as well as a number of Local Force Companies and Platoons. There was even one Company of VC that operated east of Long Binh that prided themselves in wearing nothing but U.S. uniforms, and using nothing but U.S. arms and equipment. They wore a bright red scarf around their necks to identify themselves. I learned years later that there was actually a very sophisticated underground complex in that Company's area. This was definitely a very crowded piece of territory.

At the Tactical Operations Center, Vietnamese and American officers and NCO's worked side by side providing communications and combat support coordination for military forces and MACV personnel operating within the Province. The room was divided in two, with a bank of radios and telephones on each side. One side was manned by U.S. personnel in touch with the District Teams and the Mobile Advisory Teams, as well as all the fire support bases and other combat support centers and military units in the area. The other side was for the Vietnamese who were in direct contact with all levels of the Province government and military forces.

In the bunker immediately next to us was another bank of radios with an Air Force communications team that was in touch with Bien Hoa Air Base operations center and any Airborne Forward Air Controllers (FAC's) that were flying over the Province. The FAC's were all Air Force pilots whose duty was to fly over operations in the field, provide them with air cover, and communicate with close air support aircraft during contact with the enemy. On the walls of the operations center were acetate-covered maps of the Province that were used to track operations in progress, enemy intelligence information, and troop movements and locations. You could look at that map any time of the day or night and see what was going on, including up to date information on the results of each enemy contact.

Any unit planning a field operation was required to notify us of their mission, route, size of unit, and time frame of the operation. The unit would coordinate locally for fire support, based on their location within the Province and proximity to indirect fire support elements. We provided them all other support, including but not limited to: aerial reconnaissance and transportation aircraft, medical evacuations, helicopter gunship teams, close air support aircraft. If a situation required additional tactical or logistical support not immediately available through Province assets, we could call on any of the other operations centers in the area for help. We got most of our backup support from the BHTAC Center (Bien Hoa Tactical Area Command) which was an operation equivalent to ours that accessed all the U.S. installations and units in the area.

Thus, a unit that made contact with enemy forces anywhere in Bien Hoa Province could simply tell us what they needed, and we would get it for them from somewhere. At least that's how the plan was supposed to work. Usually it worked well.

When a unit engaged the enemy, the pace in the Tactical Operations Center would rapidly escalate as available support would be channeled to the site of the battle. Communications had to be maintained through both the U.S. and Vietnamese frequencies as artillery fire and air strikes were coordinated and adjusted, orders and situation reports passed up, down and sideways, and additional troops were moved as required. As soon as the fight ended, there would be immediate requirements to debrief higher headquarters, update situation maps and record statistics. It was not nearly as exciting as being there, but, like I said, I didn't mind. I have to admit it was a nice feeling to be the one *sending* the support to the field instead of the one *asking* for it.

At each of the six District Headquarters there was a smaller version of the Province Advisory Team. District Advisors worked directly with the local government officials at District and Village level. Wherever there was a Regional Force unit, there would also be a Mobile

Advisory Team (MAT). Some of the MAT's were assigned to forces that had a continuing mission, such as guarding a bridge or a key installation, but others would be constantly shifted with the Regional Forces as the missions changed. None of these teams had tactical operations centers; they depended on the Province T.O.C. for their field support coordination.

I spent a lot of time in the air during this phase of my tour. It was a general policy to try to take the Vietnamese unit commanders on an aerial reconnaissance to get a look at their routes and objective areas prior to an operation. Since there were quite a few units in the Province, and only so many available aircraft, it was necessary to schedule the various unit commanders for their air time in turn (usually about 20-30 minutes), then drop them back off and move on to pick up the next one in line. I would start the mission by meeting the helicopter either at the field or at a pre-designated LZ, and act as aircraft commander as we worked through the day's agenda. I saw a lot of terrain, had many interesting experiences, and was lucky enough to always make it back from each mission.

Many of the air crews in our area weren't so lucky. The enemy made a practice of shooting down an aircraft, and then simply staying around so they could shoot down whatever aircraft and rescue missions responded to the scene. One enterprising group of Viet Cong even stretched their luck by waiting around long enough to shoot down the rescuers coming to the aid of the first rescuers.

One day I was waiting on an LZ for a helicopter to pick me up for a recon mission, and I was surprised to see a flashy blue and white chopper dropping down. I ran out to it as it touched down, assuming it was some kind of a civilian rig that had gotten lost or something, and spoke to the two civilians in the cockpit. Painted on the side of the helicopter in white was an "AA" logo. I figured they probably weren't on their way to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and asked them if I could help them. They told me they were there to pick me up for my recon. They claimed they were working on contract for the military, and would be happy to take me wherever I wanted to go. I have to admit I was more than a little nervous getting into a helicopter with a couple of very heavily armed civilians that I figured must be crazy to be doing this for a living. I felt much better later when I learned the secret of "Air America" and that these guys were working for the same Uncle Sam that signed my pay vouchers.

There were a number of occasions when we saw VC or NVA troops during these flights. As the aircraft commander, it was my call as to whether we would engage them or not (within the limits of the "rules of engagement"). The rules allowed us to return fire if fired upon, but after that it got complicated. Bien Hoa Province was a checkerboard of zones with different rules of engagement, and many Allied and government units whose troops' appearance didn't necessarily make for instant identification. There were "free fire" zones, "no fire" zones, and "by permission only" zones. I found that it did not generally pay to waste the effort to try to get permission to engage a suspicious force on the ground, simply because they would normally be long gone before the wheels of local government cranked out our permission to fire. This was actually in line with my already established practice of only firing at troops that posed an immediate threat, however. If I had to ask permission to shoot at them, that meant they weren't shooting at me either. And, I remembered, they were all just folks who just happened to be born somewhere else.

I'm sure that somewhere in Vietnam there are some veterans who tell this story to their kids (or grandkids). We were flying low along a stream just below the southern boundary of War Zone D one day, and I saw a group of about 7-8 NVA soldiers crossing the stream. I was in my customary position seated on the floor of the helicopter with my feet on the skids and my M16 across my lap. We were close enough that I could see the sick look on their faces as we passed over them with the usual complement of automatic weapons bristling from the fuselage. They were in the middle of the stream, and not a one of them was holding a weapon in his hands. Their gear was all bundled and balanced on top of their heads. They knew we had them cold.

The door gunner looked at me with arched eyebrows, but I just shook my head, and looked the first man pretty much right in the eye. I leaned out just a little bit more, and simply

waved at them. The point man broke out into the biggest grin you ever saw, and waved back. We flew on, and I reported the sighting. I suppose they thought that I was a stupid American that couldn't tell the good guys from the bad guys, but when you get right down to it, it doesn't matter what they thought. To me, they were no threat, and shooting them down just because they happened to be wearing the wrong uniform would have simply been murder.

There was another time when we caught a VC literally with his pants down. That was a situation I remembered well enough from my field days, and had no problem holding my fire as he struggled off to safety. I wouldn't have wanted for that to be the way I got it either.

Not all of my air time was spent in helicopters. I went up fairly often with the Air Force FAC's. They used the radio call sign "Kenny" in our area, so to us "ground pounders" they were the "Kenny FAC's." They were a bunch of great guys; typical Air Force people who did their jobs without making a big show of being military. Once in a while they would let me try to fly the planes. Usually, each pilot would only try that one time. The wings I wore on my uniform were for jumping out of planes, not flying them, and it showed. I never wanted to be a pilot anyway.

I did manage to fly one Air Force plane pretty straight for a while. I was in the co-pilot seat of a dive bomber (I could never remember the official names and model numbers for those things, but it was a little two-seater that carried its bombs slung underneath). We took off from Bien Hoa Air Base and dropped the bombs on a VC position just below the Mekong River. On the way home the pilot asked me if I wanted to fly. He turned the stick over to me, and as long as we only had to go in a straight line, I was fine. It seemed a lot easier than those things the FAC's flew that had propellers facing front and rear. Even though I enjoyed the experience, I was gracious enough to let him have the stick back when the runway came in sight.

Besides my visits to the Province forces for recon missions and data gathering, I would often be sent to accompany the units on their missions. I found myself back in the jungles, paddies, and rubber plantations often enough to keep my field skills from going stale, and plenty enough to keep from becoming bored.

I was already an avid shooter and gun collector before I was sent to Vietnam. I wondered before I left if my experiences over there might change the way I felt about guns. Apparently, my experiences didn't sour me on the idea. Sergeant Brown did discourage the addition of one Chinese K54 pistol to my collection, but other than that I actually got to dabble quite a bit in the field.

In our team house at Bien Hoa there was a large rack containing just about every type of military firearm you could imagine. They were available for general use by team members, who were free to simply pick one that would suit their purpose for whatever mission they were involved in. While I examined each of them at length, I generally opted for my trusty M16 if I was going anywhere that I felt I might actually end up in a fight. I did habitually add to my gear an M79 grenade launcher, which fit nicely onto the frame of my rucksack. With a basic load of HE (High Explosive) rounds and buckshot rounds (nasty 40mm shells holding a gigantic charge of round lead balls) I felt adequately armed to deal with most situations. I found it much simpler to stand back and blow up suspicious-looking objects along jungle roads and trails with the M79 than to try to identify and defuse them.

I also acquired as my very own a Winchester Model 1897 12 gauge pump trench shotgun. It was an awesome weapon, that would spit out shotgun loads as fast as you could work the pump. They were adopted originally for use in the trenches of World War I, hence the name. I actually bought it from a fellow advisor for \$30 before he went home. I used it primarily for my "town gun" since it put out a lot of firepower, but didn't endanger civilians at any great distance. I brought it home legally with federal registration paperwork, and it now hangs on my "military wall" at home.

I even had my own Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) that I had found somewhere. I never took it to the field, since it was so big and heavy, and fired hard to find .30-06 ammunition.

But it was fun to actually own a piece of history like that for a while, and then I gave it to one of our Mobile Advisory Teams. I think they eventually traded it for a generator.

I tried carrying a Thompson .45 caliber submachine gun for a while. It fired the same ammunition as the .45 service pistol, so ammo was no problem, but the magazines were very big and heavy, as was the gun itself. I only used it for a while, and then put it away as impractical.

When I joined Team 98, I was still carrying the Smith & Wesson .38 M&P revolver that Sergeant Burton had given me when he was dusted off. One day I was with our team Sergeant Major, SGM Valdrow, on some kind of a data gathering project. He decided to stop for lunch at a medical mission run by the Australians in Di An. SGM Valdrow was kind of like a long haul trucker that way. He always knew the best places to eat. One time he even got us an invitation to lunch with the Captain aboard a Danish freighter in Saigon Harbor.

Anyhow, we went inside, and someone said we had to leave our weapons outside the mess hall. They pointed us to a room used like a coat room, where there were rifles and pistols hanging from pegs on the wall. I didn't like it, but I went ahead and left my weapons there. Sure enough, after lunch, my pistol belt was hanging there with an empty holster. Someone had stolen my .38! I was deeply chagrined to think that one of the Americans in that mess hall had the audacity to steal another one's sidearm in a combat zone. The only people I had seen leave before us were from a nearby Aviation unit, and I made an attempt to get the commander to try to locate my revolver, but I never did see it again.

I returned to the team compound minus my sidearm. Then I found out who my friends were. Sergeant MacDonald, who worked with me at the Tactical Operations Center, gave me his .45 pistol. It was a 1911 Colt with a serial number on it that showed it to be vintage of 1918. I told Mac that this was a serious collector item, and he only replied that he did not want to be responsible for anything that valuable then, and insisted that I keep it. I went looking for another pistol that I could give Mac to replace it. Captain Mallot, who was then working with the PRU's came up with a brand new 1911A1. He gave it to me, no strings attached, because he said the PRU's did not have to account for their equipment. I gave it to Sergeant MacDonald, who was very pleased with it, and planned to pass it on to his replacement, which was how he got the old 1911 in the first place. I think someone must have brought Mac's original pistol to Vietnam earlier in the war when you could still do that. My research has since shown that the pistol was sold by the DCM (Director of Civilian Marksmanship) sometime during the late 50's. I carried it for the rest of my tour, and brought it home legally also.

I have a sorry looking French Model 36 bolt action rifle hanging on my wall under the Trench Gun. The Model 36 was the standard Infantry rifle of the French Foreign Legion, who left a lot of them lying around Southeast Asia after Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Cong used them for a long time, until they got their hands on enough SKS rifles and AK47 assault rifles to retire them. We dug this one out of a cache in Nhon Trach. Our team First Sergeant presented it to me in commemoration of a fight I had been in with the VC Company that it belonged to.

It was the C-240 Viet Cong Local Force Company; they attacked a Regional Force compound in Nhon Trach one night, and the RF's shot up all their mortar rounds to hold them off. The fight lasted all night, and the VC finally retired when "Puff" arrived and unlimbered its bank of 7.62 mm electric gatling guns. I went with Lieutenant Larry Pierce, our team Supply Officer, the next morning, on an emergency re-supply mission. We hooked a trailer load of mortar ammo to a jeep, and took off down QL-15 to get it to the RF compound.

Riding along with us was my friend from Fort Bragg, Jim Jordan. Jim had been commanding a platoon in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne up in the A Shau Valley, and got shot up some. He had just come back into Vietnam from a hospital stay in Japan, and stopped by the Team 98 compound to visit me. We made an unusual team – three Lieutenants, armed to the teeth and pulling a load of a whole bunch of high explosive mortar rounds.

We were just approaching the outskirts of Phu Mi Hai, when the world blew up. As it turned out, the C-240's chien si's hadn't been all that discouraged by the events of the previous

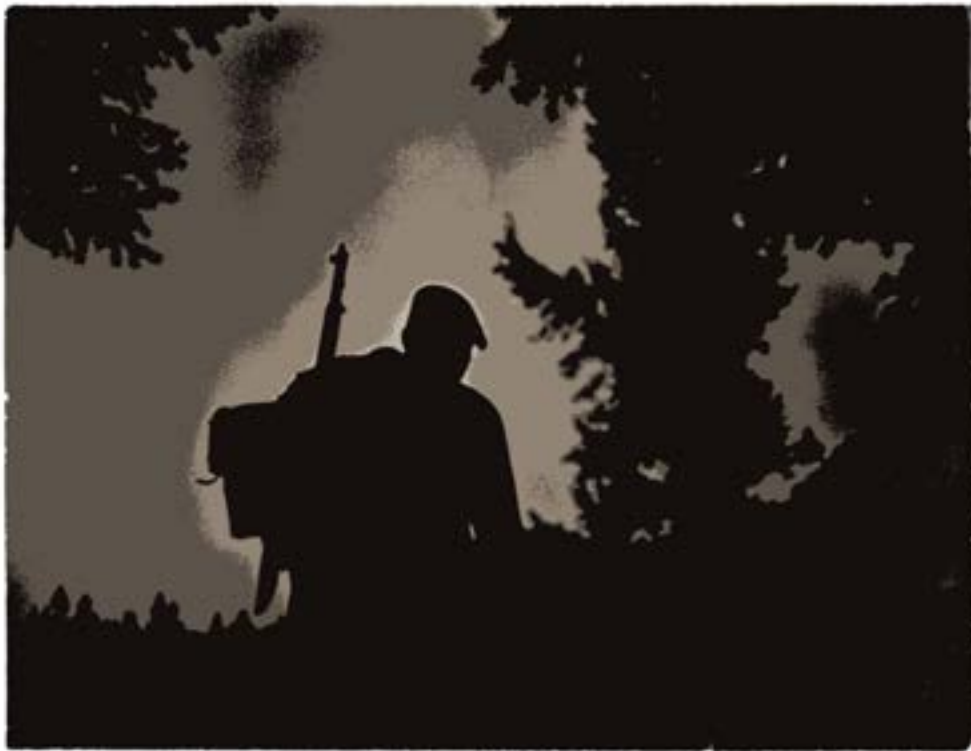
night, and were still in the area looking for targets of opportunity to pick on. We pulled to the side of the road, leaped for cover and returned fire, just as a company of Thai Infantry soldiers from Bear Cat came running up the road. Jim looked over at me, and yelled, over the ruckus, "Heltsley, if you get me killed, I'm going to come back and haunt you!"

The Thai's deployed and with our combined firepower we repulsed the VC in fairly short order. The Thai unit had been conducting a sweep in the area, and it just happened that we had entered the kill zone of an ambush the VC had set up for them just at the wrong time. Actually it probably saved the Thai's, since we threw the VC's timing off. I picked up a Purple Heart in that one, but it wasn't any big deal. I bled a little, and walked funny for a few days, and that was it.

The worst thing that happened was that I lost my little Browning .25 automatic. I didn't realize it until we had formed back up on the road with the Thai's and were getting ready to go about our business. I noticed the pistol missing, and, (shades of the Hill 122 incident) went heading back to the scene of the fight to find it. I hadn't gone to all the trouble of smuggling it into the country to let some darn Viet Cong make a souvenir out of it! Jim and Larry went with me, Jim again promising to haunt me if I got him killed. We found it and got the hell out of there, and continued our mission.

I remember thinking, when the Sarge presented me with that old French bolt-action rifle, "too bad the VC didn't have these that day; they would have had a whole lot less firepower."

So the 1911 .45 and the Browning .25 pistols are now family heirlooms, and the old MAS 36 and the Winchester 1897 keep company with Phuoc's wrist compass, a couple of plaques, my beret and medals in my "Den of Antiquity."



I'm just putting this photo in here because there happens to be room on this page; I thought it was a very artistic shot taken by a Seattle Times photographer at Ft. Lewis in 1964 while we were doing some "Raider" training. The Times published a fairly long article about the training; I wish I still had the article, but I did get the original copy of this photo from the photographer, Sean Mallone, a fellow Seattle University grad.

## Chapter 15

### Afield With the Regional Forces

In my previous assignment, my Vietnamese counterparts had all been members of the Regular Army. I was now involved with the soldiers of the “Home Guard” and their leaders – Vietnamese citizens who were trying to lead their lives like anyone else. Unlike the career soldiers of the Regular Army, these people had farms to work, stores to operate, or jobs to go to. When they mustered as a military unit and headed for the field, their uppermost thought was to do what they had to do, and then get back to the business of living their lives.

Given this fact, it was easier for me to understand that they took a little more motivating than I was used to. They understood the importance of their missions, but they also saw things from a different perspective than I. Most of them had been born after this war began. They did not know what it was like to live in a peaceful land, and had no expectation of being able to do so in the foreseeable future. American GI’s tended to operate with a sense of urgency that the Vietnamese local forces lacked. After all, they weren’t going home in a year.

I do not say these things to be critical. It was not for me to tell my counterparts how they should feel about the way things were in their own country. I simply had to operate within the limitations of the standards and philosophies of the people we were trying to help. Many of them, quite frankly, had no preference for Communism *or* Democracy; their preference was more for being left alone. But the reality, unfortunately, was that there was a very large force of military people backed by the Communist Powers of the world that wasn’t planning on leaving them alone, so we had to get on with business.

Sometimes all it took was the firm and confident presence of the American Advisor, and his access to the vast combat support resources of the United States, to cause a field operation to begin and end smoothly and successfully. Sometimes the situation called for the Advisor to actually take the lead and hope the troops followed.

One of the greatest disgraces for my former counterparts would have been the loss of his American Advisor. Sometimes the local force people seemed to feel no such need for concern. One day, for example, I was with another Lieutenant, Dave Farmer, with a Company of Regional Force Infantry north of the Dong Nai River in Tan Uyen. We were moving along well enough, when we came across a VC bunker complex. The Company Commander called a halt, and put his men into a perimeter. “We stay here,” he said. I pointed ahead, and reminded him that our mission was to conduct a sweep of the area to our north. “We stay here,” he repeated. He waved his hand to the north, and said “Very dangerous, buku VC. We stay here.” And that was that.

Dave and I picked up our gear, and made a show of moving on without them. The tactic had worked before. This time it backfired. We moved on, they stayed. We moved through the bunker complex, at least knowing that the RF Company was right behind us watching. I put my M16 selector on full automatic, and, being careful not to point it at Dave, did all my searching with the muzzle pointed where I was looking and my finger poised just over the trigger. Dave and I searched each of the bunkers, and fortunately found them empty. At the other end of the complex, I gestured to the waiting soldiers to come on. They didn’t. Sighing, I faced north and began to move. Dave followed me. We reached a stream, and I looked back. The RF Company was nowhere in sight. Across the stream, I could see the opening of a bunker above the water level. It seemed to be at the end of a long line of bunkers that followed the stream bank and disappeared around a bend.

I waded into the stream. “I think we’ve gone far enough,” said Dave. “I don’t like the looks of this. We ought to go back to the Company.” “I just want to have a look over here,” I said. “You go ahead back if you want.” With Dave watching me from the bank, I pulled myself up on the far side, and began investigating these new bunkers, again with my selector on full auto.

I rounded the bend and lost sight of Dave, moving upstream from bunker to bunker. This



was turning out to be the biggest bunker complex I had seen since the one we found in the La Nga Valley. It began to dawn on me that I was now beyond sight and hearing of any covering forces, including Dave. So far I had found all the bunkers empty, but what if somebody *was* home. Was I going to just take them all prisoner and march them back across the stream? Or maybe was it going to be the other way around. Unwise though it was, I had developed a certain lack of concern about getting shot, as I mentioned earlier. But it began to dawn on me that being taken prisoner was a very likely possibility as well, and not a nice one to think about. Getting shot ended the war for you, one way or the other. Getting captured would be only the beginning of who knows what. I began to get nervous. Maybe it was time to be getting back.

Just then I heard the beating blades of an approaching helicopter. I looked up as it flew over, and there was Dave leaning out the door, waving. The chopper set down in a nearby clearing, and I fought my way through long grass pointing at me like knife blades in the chopper wash, to get aboard. Dave had decided to go back and call for a helicopter to get us out of there. As I boarded the helicopter, I don't know who was more relieved; me or Dave. I reported the enemy positions to headquarters and had some ordnance dropped on them. My relief was a wake-up call for me, and it was the last time I played John Wayne like that. It was getting too late in my tour...

For all his preaching to me about it by Dave, he forgot to practice what he preached once too often. He ended up going home with his face re-arranged by a booby trap that he set off while he was out ahead of his counterparts on another operation.

Although I never went on another one-man patrol again, I did engage in one more bit of foolishness. I was headed down QL-15 on the way to Vung Tau one day with another Lieutenant, Tom Shephard, when we saw a helicopter gunship team working the jungle to our south. We got on the radio, and found that an RF Company was in contact with some VC in that area. We figured they might push the VC toward us, so we pulled off the side of the road, hid the jeep, and set up a 2-man ambush position. We happened to have an M60 machine gun with us, as well as our M16's and my M79 grenade launcher. What we didn't know was how many VC we might have to handle if they needed to run through us.

We never found out. I guess the VC didn't figure it would be a good idea to head for the roadway, so we never saw them, and eventually packed up and continued on to Vung Tau. Lucky for us, I'm sure. I think that was the last *really* dumb thing I did.

That trip was quite an adventure, by the way. We were actually going on a 3-day pass to an R&R site at Vung Tau. After our fight in Phu My Hai, they were going to give me a medal, and I told them I already had some medals, I'd rather have a 3-day pass. That's why we were going to Vung Tau. It was a beautiful little town on the seacoast in Phuc Tuy Province that the VC left alone, because they liked to go there too. We got there with only the one delay, and had a nice stay there. We met some Australians and had a lot of fun partying with them. If they fought like they partied, I was glad they were on our side.

We slept in real beds instead of cots. We basked on the beach instead of sweating in the jungle. We swam in the warm ocean instead of wading in nasty swamp water. We ate in fancy restaurants instead of mess halls.

We went to dinner one night and ran into Captain Payseur, my Tac Officer from Ranger School. He told me he was about to get out of the Army, and he was going back to Florida to open a restaurant. The last I heard, he actually did it, and made a go of it.

When our time was up, we headed back, but didn't get very far. It seems the VC had blown up a bridge behind us on our way down, and it would be some time before it was repaired. We could have probably called for a chopper to come and take us back to Bien Hoa, but what would we do with our jeep? We had to go back to Vung Tau for a few more days until the bridge was fixed. War, we decided, was Hell!

## Chapter 16

### More Lost Comrades

Have you ever heard the term “Friendly Fire?” It’s used to put a name to being accidentally fired upon by your own side. I think it’s one of the more inappropriate oxymorons used by the military. When the bullet or shrapnel rips through you, it doesn’t seem to matter any more where it came from. The result is the same. The only difference is that you don’t get a Purple Heart for it. The wound has to be the result of “unfriendly fire.” One of my team mates, Lieutenant Franklin, from Spokane, WA, took home some scars on his scalp from “friendly fire,” but at least he lived to tell about it. Our friend Tom Buddi wasn’t so lucky.

Thomas Buddi was with a Mobile Advisory Team that went out one night on a patrol just south of Bear Cat. Tom called in his patrols route and schedule in to the Bear Cat TOC, but the Thai that took the car neglected to plot the information on the situation map. When the radar on the perimeter picked up the movement of Tom’s patrol outside the base, it was reported as possible enemy movement to the Fire Direction Control Center. They looked on the map, found no friendly forces showing in that area, and laid in a fire mission. 40 mm Duster rounds started raining on Tom and his Vietnamese counterparts. One of them hit Tom square in the back. Survivors of the disaster reported that Tom, even though he’d been blown in half, managed to get on the radio, and convince the FDC to turn off the artillery before he died. He saved most of his counterparts, but never got a medal for his heroism, because it was “friendly fire.”



*This is the Purple Heart, the medal a soldier gets who is wounded in action against hostile forces. If he is killed it is awarded posthumously.*

For being in such a “pacified” area, it seems like we lost an awful lot of people. On Team 87 with the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN, we had already lost two of the four Advisors with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 48<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Then the Lieutenant that had taken my place with the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 48<sup>th</sup> got killed while I was with Team 87.

We had a Lieutenant named Leo Caamano, an American Indian, assigned to one of the Mobile Advisory Teams. He had been doing such a great job, he decided to extend for six months. After extending, he was allowed to go to Thailand on R&R. He had just come back from R&R, and on the first day after he got back, he took a bullet between the eyes in a helicopter assault operation. He had been the first one off the chopper, and the RF’s picked him up and put his body back aboard. When they brought the body in to Long Binh, they thought at first he was Vietnamese, since he hadn’t been wearing dog tags that day. Then they found his name painted on the back of his belt at the morgue, and called the Team 98 Headquarters. I had to go and identify him. It was easy to do, since I’d just had dinner with him. It was also hard to do, because I liked him. His mother got a Silver Star to remember him by.

Another trip I made to Long Binh was even tougher. Two members of a MAT down in

Long Thanh, Captain Billy Jake Smith and Sergeant James Cooney, drove their jeep over an artillery shell that the VC had buried in the road. One of them was killed, and the other one, though severely wounded, was able to call for help on the radio. The dustoff chopper brought them in to the hospital at Long Binh. They called the Team Headquarters to send someone over, and said they didn't know which one had been killed, since neither one had any identification on them when they were brought in.

When I got there, they immediately took me to the morgue. There was a body, wearing what was left of an American uniform. The arms were gone, the legs were turned around backwards, and the remains of the head were behind the torso, held on only by a flap of skin at the back of the neck. I wasn't sure which one it was. There just wasn't enough to tell. They said the other one was on the operating table, and in pretty bad shape. There was enough left of him for me to tell that it was Sergeant Cooney. The dustoff pilots said they had found him crawling around the wreckage of the jeep, and Smitty's body was behind the wheel. Apparently the shell had gone off under the steering wheel, which accounted for his missing arms. It was a wonder Cooney was alive at all.

It was Smitty's second tour. Staying beyond the end of your first twelve months was starting to look like a very bad idea.

They got as much of the shrapnel out of Cooney as they could, then sent him to Japan, where the reports were initially that he might make it. He had punctured lungs, and was blind, but was otherwise mostly intact and alive. He actually started recovering, then developed pneumonia, and died. Cooney, who would have been finished with his tour in two weeks, was posthumously promoted to Staff Sergeant.

We lost another Lieutenant that I had just barely gotten to know. Randy Turner, from Spokane, Washington, arrived at Team 98 and spent just a couple days with us before heading out to his assignment with a mobile team in Long Thanh. I think he may have actually been sent as Smitty's replacement. He was with a Regional Force Company at their compound on QL-15 close to the Province border of Phuoc Tuy.

I was on duty in the Tactical Operations Center, and started getting word that a battalion from the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, on a convoy headed down QL-15 toward the National Training Center at Vung Tau, was in trouble. The convoy was north of Randy's compound when it started taking fire from the north side of the road. In classic ambush style, the VC destroyed several of the lead vehicles immediately, blocking the road. They then went to work on the rest of the column. Based on the intensity of the enemy fire, it appeared to be a very large Viet Cong unit, possibly a battalion or more, conducting the ambush. The ARVN were calling urgently for help.

There were several efforts at reinforcement made almost immediately. Randy's team headed out with their Regional Force Company, but were hit by a large security force just south of the ambush site. The RF's never made it all the way to the ARVN position, but they were trapped in the kill zone, and Randy was killed. His Sergeant got a finger or two shot off, and the rescue effort ended.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment sent a reaction force down from the north, but they got stopped cold at a bridge just north of the ambush. The 18<sup>th</sup> Division put a battalion into the air at Xuan Loc, and inserted them into a field somewhere north of QL-15 to try to engage the ambush forces from their rear. The fire from the VC unit securing the rear of the ambush was so intense that the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN forces never got off the LZ. Finally a couple of V-100 armored personnel carriers from Bear Cat were able to penetrate into the kill zone, and get Randy's body and his wounded Sergeant back out and onto a medevac chopper.



1LT Randy V. Turner, MACV Team 98, Long Thanh District, Bien Hoa Province

The ARVN troops in the kill zone hunkered down and slugged it out for hours with the VC. We sent them all the air support we could get ahold of. As I recall, we had two Air Force air strikes put in on the main ambush force, and a total of seven helicopter gunship teams on station at various times during the battle. The Viet Cong showed their stuff by taking the pounding until the ARVN battalion was pretty much destroyed, then collected as many of their dropped weapons as they could carry before they withdrew.

When survivors conducted a sweep of the area after the VC pulled back, they found a total of 52 bodies, but only two weapons. There were a lot of blood trails, showing that the VC had taken their wounded with them, as well as almost all the casualties' weapons. It had been a well-planned and well-executed ambush, with the VC showing their willingness to take heavy casualties and continue with their mission. As near as we could tell, it was again the work of the 274<sup>th</sup> VC Main Force Regiment. No other VC unit in the area had the manpower to set up that large a kill zone and still have enough people left to man Company and Battalion sized security positions. It was the same spirit and determination these enemy soldiers had shown during the Tet Offensives of '68 and '69.

The VC operating in that part of Bien Hoa Province were so good, one time they were even able to inflict casualties on the government forces without firing a shot. I sent a dustoff chopper down to a Popular Force Platoon one day after they spotted some Viet Cong in the tree line beyond their compound. One of the PF's got nervous, and he took out a grenade and pulled the pin to be ready in case the VC attacked. The VC went back into the jungle, but the PF with the grenade was so rattled, he muffed the job replacing the pin. Then he dropped the grenade. He tried to run, but the shrapnel caught up with him.

I never saw him in person in Vietnam, but Don Ide was a Seattle University grad that attended Ranger School with me. He had a deformed wrist, with the hand facing the wrong direction. He could have been draft exempt due to his deformity, but he chose not only to serve, but to go all the way and become an Airborne Ranger. I picked up a copy of Life magazine one day, and it had an article in it showing pictures of all the American soldiers killed that week in Vietnam. There was Don's picture looking back at me. He was killed leading his platoon in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Hau Nghia in May of 1969. I remember how determined Ranger Ide had been to make it through Ranger training. The mountaineering was especially difficult for him, due to his backward hand. He always seemed to end up coming down the ropes upside down or sideways. But he did what he had to do. I was sorry to see that his determination had eventually cost him his life.



Don Ide, 1LT, 3<sup>rd</sup> Plt, Co C, 2/27 Infantry, 25<sup>th</sup> Division.

Duane Cordiner was a year behind me at Seattle University, and a member of the Raider Company. He was one of my students at Ranger School, and I was sorry to hear that he also did not make it back from Vietnam. Duane was killed by small arms fire while serving with MACV Team 96 in December of 1970.



Duane Cordiner, 1LT, MACV Team 96, Kien Hoa Province, Republic of Vietnam.

I mentioned Steve Doane earlier in this memoir. He stayed on with the Ranger Training Command when I went on to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, and then Steve went to Vietnam as a Platoon Leader in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. He is now in the Ranger Hall of Fame. He won the Medal of Honor saving his platoon from a situation in which they were pinned down by machine gun fire from several bunkers. Unable to perform a unit maneuver against them, Steve made a one-man approach and took out the first bunker, was wounded, but continued on to the next one, took another wound, this one mortal, then entered the bunker and killed the occupants with a grenade.



Photo taken of Steve Doane while assigned to 3<sup>rd</sup> Ranger Company, TSB, Ft. Benning, GA.

Tom Hewitt, was another classmate from IOBC and Ranger School, then he was my neighbor when we served in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne at Ft. Bragg. Tom had a twin brother that was seriously wounded while serving in Vietnam with the Marines. Tom advised an ARVN Ranger Battalion, then went to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, where he was leading a company at Fire Base Ripcord when he was killed by a night time sapper attack on their position.



Tom died with four of his troopers in the attack on Ripcord.

## Chapter 17

### The End

While all these events were transpiring, the United States government was already implementing its plan to withdraw America's troops from the conflict. It was never a popular war, and the Public was tired of it. Other things were taking precedence over the war. Man walked on the Moon while I was walking in the jungle. President Johnson saw the war effort as a serious roadblock between him and his dream of The Great Society.

Cooney and Smitty, Buddy, Randy, and a lot of others died *after* the U.S. troop units started pulling out. I watched the U.S. troop strengths dwindle, and heard the concern voiced by my counterparts as they became increasingly aware that the time was coming when they would be on their own in dealing with their aggressive northern cousins. But my year was coming to a close.

As it began to look like I might actually beat the odds, I started wearing my flack vest and steel helmet. I chose my steps with more care, and refrained when possible from volunteering for field operations. There were new Lieutenants on the team eager to test their mettle, and I was now a Captain with many important things to do...

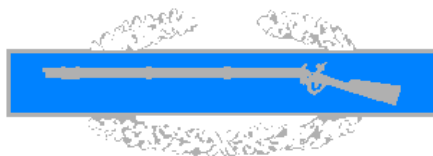
My orders came through with the news that I would be returning to the Benning School for Boys. I was reassigned as an instructor at the U.S. Army Mountain Ranger Camp in Dahlonega, Georgia. I would spend two more years on the trail with a rucksack and a mission, but this time the bullets wouldn't be real. I would be training the men on their way to Southeast Asia, and I would do my best to give them the benefit of my knowledge and experience to help them perform and survive.

About March 18, 1970, I packed up my gear and returned to Tan Son Nhut. I reluctantly left behind enough ordnance and equipment to outfit a small army, or maybe equip a museum, but I was bringing home a few things. More importantly, I was bringing home my memories, and something to sit down on that was still in one piece. My "Freedom Bird" lifted off on March 20<sup>th</sup>, and cleared the end of the runway without drawing fire. I was on my way back to The World.

Major Thuong fought on with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion for five more years. He showed the world what he and his soldiers were made of when they resisted Giap so valiantly in April of 1975. The 18<sup>th</sup> Division earned its place in History by forcing Giap to divert so many invasion troops to Xuan Loc that it took 40,000 NVA to finally take the town. George Herring, the author of "America's Longest War," wrote that if all Vietnamese units had been so well-led, the war may have turned out differently.

Everyone knows that the returning veterans of that war were met with mixed emotions by the American public. It was not as popular as previous wars had been, and its veterans were not America's heroes. A lot of Vietnam veterans watched bitterly as the soldiers from the Gulf War came home to ticker tape parades and adoring crowds. Personally, I have tried not to dwell on it, and am proud of what I did. I believe I followed my conscience as I took part in a conflict that admittedly was questionable in many ways. I hope that History will show that there were more reasons for our involvement than not. I hope that there are people who still think about my departed Comrades-in-Arms.

I still do.







**My “Military Wall”**

*There's Phuoc's compass, hanging next to the blue “Follow Me” patch in the shadow box. Also in the picture is the Winchester Model 97 12 gauge trench gun I carried in Vietnam, and brought home with me legally. The rifle below it is a French Model 36 bolt action rifle. The Viet Cong had a lot of these that the French Foreign Legion left there in the 50's. We took this one from the C-240 Local Force VC Company that I fought at Phu My Hai in Nhon Trach. The tan beret was issued to me by the 18<sup>th</sup> ARVN Infantry Division. The black one I got from 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company. The boonie hat was on it's second tour when I wore it. I got it from a friend who came back from Nam before I left. He was in the Marines in I Corps, and he won the hat for taking 2<sup>nd</sup> Place in the Da Nang Surfing Championship Competition in 1966. It had “SURF” embroidered on it in yellow thread, making it a perfect match to the RANGER tab I put on it. The Gerber Commando Knife on the left is the one I carried in-country, the Fairbairn-Sykes on the right was my backup, but it stayed in the foot locker all year. Those 3 black spots are the Vietnamese rank designation for Dai Uy (Captain). We didn't wear our rank on our collar; we put it about center chest on the shirt. Now everybody's doing it. Same thing with the black berets...*

Appendix 1  
**The Obituary of Major John "Alec" Hottell**  
 "Soldiers" Magazine, June, 1971

# IT IS ONLY JUST

John Alexander Hottell was graduated from West Point in 1964, 10th in a class of 564. He was a Rhodes Scholar in 1965. In Vietnam he earned two Silver Stars, the third highest combat award, as commander of Company B, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). He later became aide to the 1st Cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. George W. Casey. Both were killed in the crash of a helicopter on July 7, 1970. Maj. Hottell was 27 years old at the time of his death which occurred about one year after he wrote his own obituary.

• • •

"I am writing my own obituary for several reasons, and I hope none of them are too late.

"First, I would like to spare my friends, who may happen to read this, the usual clichés about being a good soldier. They were all kind enough to me, and I not enough to them. Second, I would not want to be a party to a perpetuation of an image that is harmful and inaccurate: 'glory' is the most meaningless of concepts, and I feel that in some cases it is doubly damaging. And, thirdly, I am quite simply the last authority on my own death.

"I loved the Army: it reared me, it nurtured me, and it gave me the most satisfying years of my life. Thanks to it I have lived an entire lifetime in 26 years. It is only fitting that I should die in its service. We all have but one death to spend, and no matter as it can have any meaning it finds it in the service of comrades in arms.

"And yet, I deny that I did FOR anything—not my country, not my Army, not my fellow man, none of these things. I LIVED for these things and the manner in which I chose to do it involved the very real chance that I would die in the execution of my duties. I knew this, and accepted it, but my love for West Point and the Army was enough—and the promise that I would some day be able to serve all the dead that meant anything to me through it was great

A Soldier Writes  
 His Own Obituary



enough—for me to accept this possibility as a part of a price which must be paid for all things of great value. If there is nothing worth dying for—in this sense—there is nothing worth living for.

"The Army let me live in Japan, Germany and England with experience in all these places that others only dream about. I have killed in the Alps, killed a scorpion in my tent camping in Turkey, climbed Mount Fuji, visited the ruins of Athens, Ephesus, and Rome, seen the town of Gordium where another Alexander challenged his destiny, gone to the opera in Munich, plays in the West End of London, seen the Oxford-Cambridge Rugby match, gone for pub crawls through the Cotswolds, seen the night life in Hamburg, danced to the Rolling Stones, and earned a master's degree in a foreign university.

"I have known what it is like to be married to a fine and wonderful woman and to love her beyond bearing with the sure knowledge that she loves me; I have commanded a company and been a father, priest, income-tax adviser, confessor, and judge for 200 men at one time; I have played college football and rugby, won the British national diving championship two years in a row, boxed for Oxford against Cambridge only to be knocked out in the first round and played handball to distraction—and all of these sports I loved. I learned at West Point. They gave me hours of immense happiness.

"I have been an exchange student at the German military academy, and gone to the German jumpmaster school. I have made 30 parachute jumps from everything from a balloon in England to a jet at Fort Bragg. I have written an article that was published in Army magazine, and I have studied philosophy.

"I have experienced all these things because I was in the Army and because I was an Army brat. The Army is my life; it is such a part of what I was that what happened is the logical outcome of the life I loved. I never knew what it is to fail. I never knew what it is to be too old or too tired to do anything. I lived a full life in the Army, and it has exacted the price. It is only just."

Appendix 2

“The Draft Dodger’s Rag”

Platoon Song of 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, D Company, TSB, Ft. Lewis, Washington, 1966

**DRAFT DODGER’S RAG**

Well, I’m a typical American boy, from a typical American town.  
I believe in God, and Senator Dodd, and keepin’ ol’ Castro down.  
But when it came my time to serve, I said “Better Red than dead”  
And when I got to the ol’ Draft Board, this is what I said:

**Chorus:**

Sarge, I’m only eighteen, I gotta ruptured spleen  
And I always carry a purse.  
I’m blind as a bat, and my feet are flat  
And my asthma’s getting worse.

Buddy, think o’ my career, and my sweetheart dear,  
And my poor old invalid Aunt,  
‘sides, I ain’t no fool, I’m agoin’ to school  
And I’m working in a Defense plant.

I gotta dislocated disc and a wracked-up back  
I’m allergic to flowers and bugs.  
When a bombshell hits, I get epileptic fits,  
I’m addicted to a thousand drugs.

I got the weakness woes, and I can’t touch my toes,  
I can hardly reach my knees,  
And if the enemy ever came close to me,  
Well, I’d probably start to sneeze.

Now, I hate Chou En Lai, and I hope he dies,  
But there’s one thing you gotta see.  
Someone’s gotta go over there, and that someone isn’t me.

So I wish you well Sarge, give ‘em Hell  
Yeah, kill me a thousand or more.  
And if you ever get a war, without blood and gore  
I’ll be the first to go.

**Chorus:**

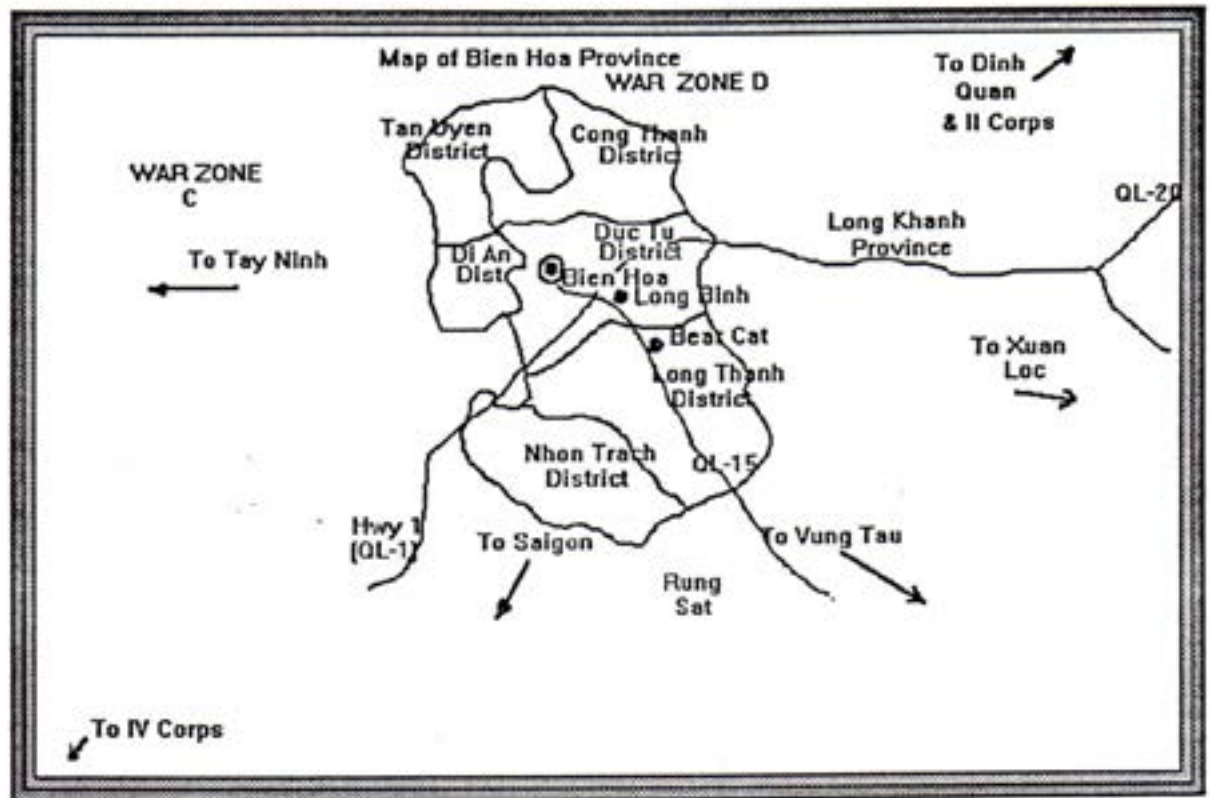
Sarge, I’m only eighteen, I gotta ruptured spleen  
And I always carry a purse,  
I’m blind as a bat and my feet are flat  
And my asthma’s gettin’ worse.

Buddy, think of my career, and my sweetheart dear,  
And my poor old invalid Aunt,  
‘sides, I ain’t no fool, I’m agoin’ to school  
And I’m workin’ in a Defense plant.

That’s the Draft Dodger’s Rag!



Appendix 3  
Sketch map of Bien Hoa/Long Khanh area



This map roughly represents the main areas in which I operated with the 18th ARVN Infantry Division and the Bien Hoa Regional Forces. The main highways were: QL-1, which joined all four of the Corps Tactical Zones, QL-15 which left QL-1 at Long Binh and went to Vung Tau on the South China Sea, and QL-20, which split off of QL-1 and swung north through Dinh Quan to Da Lat, where the Vietnamese Military Academy was located. The La Nga Valley lies in northern Long Khanh Province, south of Dinh Quan along QS-20, following the La Nga River on its way to the Dong Nai River. Dinh Quan, a picturesque village built largely on high rocky outcroppings north of the highway, was the last town before entering the II Corps Tactical Zone. The Dong Nai River provides the southern border of War Zone D, and separates the District of Tan Uyen from the rest of Bien Hoa Province. Westward lies Tay Ninh, and beyond that, the Cambodian border. South of Bien Hoa was the Capital Military Area Command, which contained Saigon and all its suburbs. To the southeast was Rung Sat Special Zone, Operational Area of the Navy Seals working out of Nha Be. South of Saigon lay IV Corps Tactical Zone and the Mekong River.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Note: Not all of these terms appear in the memoirs text. Some of them are listed because I recall them being used frequently, and thought I'd share them.

An Com	Eat, sup, dine; "an" means "eat", "com" means "cooked rice"(VN)
An Com My	American food(VN)
An Com Roi?	Did you eat yet?(VN)
Ap	Village, hamlet(VN)
Arclight	A B-52 air strike
Artillery	Term used to denote the branch of the service that provides indirect supporting fires for troops in combat
Airborne	A military soldier or unit trained and equipped to reach the combat zone by parachute.
Air Strike	The delivery of military ordnance, bombs, napalm, etc. either in support of ground operations, or for the purpose of destroying a ground target
AK, AK-47	The 7.62mm (.30 caliber) assault rifle which was the standard Infantry weapon of the Communist forces
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
Armor	Term used to denote the branch of the service that operates armored vehicles, such as tanks and armored personnel carriers, to support and supplement the Infantry in combat operations
Arty	Artillery
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam; also denotes a Vietnamese soldier
Bac Si'	Doctor, medic(VN)
Ba Mui Ba	VN for the number 33, a Vietnamese beer
Battalion	A military unit consisting of four companies
B.A.R.	Browning Automatic Rifle, a U.S. .30 caliber Infantry weapon that predated the assault rifle. They were large and heavy, firing from a 20-round box magazine. They were no longer a standard issue U.S. weapon in Vietnam, except for the Marines, but there were still some of them around.
BDA	Bomb Damage Assessment
Bear Cat	Base camp of Royal Thai Army Volunteer Forces in Long Thanh District
Binh Si'	Infantryman, soldier, private(VN)
Bien Hoa	Capital city of Bien Hoa Province, Republic of Vietnam
BHSZ	Bien Hoa Special Zone
BHTAC	Bien Hoa Tactical Area Command
BMOC	Big Man On Campus
Bo Binh	Infantry(VN)
Brigade	A military unit consisting of 3 battalions
Buku	Vietnamese colloquial for French "beaucoup" (many, lots)
Bunker	A fortified position normally constructed by digging into the ground and

Note: since producing this glossary, I recalled that the actual word for soldier was **chien si'**. Bien Si' just means "private".

B-40	building a camouflaged bomb-resistant roof or cover over it A rocket launcher used by Communist forces, like the RPG, capable of being carried by the individual soldier
Cav	Short for Cavalry; in modern military usage, Cavalry was Infantry mounted in Armored Personnel Carriers
CCN	Command & Control North (Special Forces command headquarters)
CCS	Command & Control South (Special Forces command headquarters)
Charlie	Another name for the VC
Charlie Mike	Slang using military radio procedure words for CM, Continue the Mission, or Drive On...
Cherry	A U.S. soldier newly arrived in-country
Choi Duc Coi	Wow, holy cow, etc...(VN)
Chopper	Slang for helicopter
Cho Lon	Also Cholon; the Chinese "suburb" of Saigon
Chieu Hoi	Literally "open arms", a program fostering the surrender of VC and NVA
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group (Vietnamese militia)
Claymore	An electrically detonated mine used for perimeter defense or booby-traps (mechanical ambushes). It fired a charge of steel balls using a propellant base called C-4, in a fan-shaped kill zone. Originally claymores were Scottish 2-handed swords reputed to cut wide swaths in the enemy
Click	Slang for kilometer, 1000 meters, .6 mile
Cobra	A specially-armed attack helicopter
Company	A military unit consisting of four platoons
Concertina	Barbed wire strung in coils to prevent or slow enemy assaults
Counterpart	The military person to whom an Advisor was assigned
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone (Vietnam was divided into 4 of these)
CMAC	Capital Military Area Command (Also known to historians as Capital Military Assistance Command)
CO	Short for Commanding Officer
CO	Short for Conscientious Objector, not to be confused with Commanding Officer...
Co Van My	American Advisor(VN)
C-Ration	Military issue meals put up in olive-drab cans consisting of a main entree, a fruit or pastry-type side-dish (or can), crackers or candy, and an accessory pack containing coffee, cream, sugar, salt, toilet paper, and matches. Yum.
Crunchie	Another name for a footsoldier. Also called groundpounders, grunts, etc.
Dai Doi	A Company (VN)
Defcon	A (usually pre-planned) artillery defensive concentration
Dien Bien Phu	The last French fortress to fall to Viet Minh forces, ending French domination in Indo-China
Dinc a' dau	Crazy in the head(VN) (also called Dinky Dow)
Division	A military unit consisting of three brigades (US) or three regiments (ARVN)
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone (No-Man's Land between North and South Vietnam)



Domino Theory	A popular belief that if one country fell to Communism the other countries around would continue to fall like dominoes
DROS	Date of Return from Overseas
Duster	40mm multi-barrelled weapon usually employed for perimeter defense and convoy protection
Dustoff	Medical evacuation by helicopter
DZ	Drop Zone for parachutists or air-dropped supplies
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal; military unit specializing in the emplacement, retrieval, and disposal of explosive items
ETS	Estimated Time of Separation (Discharge date from Service)
FAC	Forward Air Controller (a pilot who adjusted supporting artillery and air strikes from his airplane over the combat zone)
FAO	Forward Artillery Observer
FDC	Fire Direction Center; an Artillery control center
Fire Support Base	A military installation consisting of Artillery pieces protected by a berm, bunker, and concertina perimeter placed where it could provide Artillery support to the Infantry
FNG	Fuckin' New Guy
Frag	Fragmentation grenade. Also used to describe the practice of using grenades, normally by U.S. soldiers on unpopular leaders
Free Fire Zone	A kind of No-Man's Land where it was not supposed to be necessary to obtain permission to fire if anyone was seen in it
G.I.	Originally stood for "Government Issue"; came to be used as a nickname for the American military personnel
Green Berets	Popular term for the U.S. Special Forces, who wore green berets
Gunship	A term normally used to denote a helicopter fitted with assorted weapons designed to provide fire support from the air to troops on the ground
Hanh Quanh	Military Operation(VN)
Hanoi	Also known as Ha Noi. Capital of North Vietnam
Ho Chi Minh	The father of the Vietnamese Liberation movement, leader of North Vietnam, also known as Nguyen Ay Quoc (Nguyen who hates the French)
Ho Chi Minh Trail	Route from North Vietnam down into South Vietnam for troop infiltration and supply movements
Hoi Chanh	A VC or NVA soldier who has "Chieu Hoi'd" (surrendered)
HQ	Headquarters
Huey	Nickname for the main workhorse group of helicopters, the UH-1C and UH-1D. A Huey could carry about 6 men and their equipment. They could also be armed and used as gunships.
Hunter-Killer Team	Also known as a Pink Team; a Huey gunship or Cobra gunship teamed up with a Loach. The Loach located a target and/or drew fire as the gunship stayed back out of sight, then engaged the enemy when they fired on or were located by the loach. The gunship was "red" and the loach was "white", thus the two together were a "pink team"
In-country	In Vietnam
Infantry	The term used to denote the branch of service composed of units of foot-



	soldiers; the term was coined by Napoleon, who referred to his footsoldiers as his "Enfants" or "his children"
Intelligence	Designation for military personnel whose job is to collect and correlate data about the enemy. It is important to remember to preface the use of this word with "military" so that people don't confuse it with actual intelligence.
Jump Wings (Parachutist Badge) Indo-China	A silver badge depicting stylized wings sprouting from an inflated parachute canopy. These wings were worn by soldiers who completed the Airborne (or Parachutist) Course at the U.S. Army Infantry Center Name given to that portion of Southeast Asia comprised of An Nam (North and South Vietnam), Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand
KIA	Killed in Action
Kill Zone	The area of an ambush or in front of a mine where the heaviest casualties would be inflicted
Loach	An unarmed observation helicopter, usually used for reconnaissance or for command and control operations
Luc Luong Dac Biet	Also known as LLDB's, Vietnamese Special Forces(VN)
Lurp, LRRP	Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol
Lurp, Lurps	This term was also used to denote the freeze-dried military rations that were to eventually replace C-rations
LZ	Landing Zone; usually used to denote an area where helicopters could land troops or supplies
MACCORD	Military Assistance Command for Civil Operations & Revolutionary Development
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MACV-SOG	Studies & Observation Group (Cover name for the Special Operations Group that operated in Southeast Asia under CCN & CCS) on in Southeast Asia by Special Forces)
MAT	Mobile Advisory Team
MIA	Missing In Action
Mini-gun	An electrically-driven 7.62mm (.308) six-barrelled Gatling gun used primarily by aircraft to engage enemy troops on the ground
Medevac	Medical evacuation
Mua Mua	Southeast Asia monsoon season(VN)
M-16, 16	The 5.56mm (.223) assault rifle that was the standard Infantry weapon of the U.S. and allied forces.
M-60, 60	The 7.62mm (.308) light machine gun used by U.S. and allied forces.
M-79, 79	A 40mm hand-held single-shot weapon designed like a top-break single-barrelled shotgun. It fired a high-explosive grenade, an incendiary round, or a charge of buckshot. It was used by Infantry to fill the gap in indirect support fire between hand-thrown grenades and mortar fire
Napalm	An explosive mixture of gasoline and ammonia or naphthalene dropped by air onto enemy targets and troops
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer (Sergeant)
Nguyen	This is probably the most common Vietnamese first name, similar to "John"

	in Western society. It is pronounced by Americans "nooyen" and was often used to refer to a North Vietnamese, the same way "Charlie" was used to denote a VC. Vietnamese pronounced it "nwen".
NLF	National Liberation Front, the shadow government of Communism in South Vietnam
Noi Choi	To joke; literally to "talk fun"(VN)
Nui	Mountain
Number Ten	Vietnamese term for something bad or useless
Nuoc Mam	A pungent sauce made from fish by-products that Southeast Asians seemed to think made their food taste better(VN)
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OCS	Officer's Candidate School
OIC	Officer-in-Charge
Ong	VN for you, Mr., or sir(VN)
Ong Charles	Mr. Charles, the VC, Charlie
OSS	Office of Special Services, the WWII forerunner of Special Forces. They wore berets with a silver chesspiece-style knight insignia. SF adopted the beret as their official headgear, but their insignia bore arrows crossed over a commando knife in a scroll with the legend "De Opresso Liber"
Pacification	The concept of making an area safe by insuring that it was no longer under the control of the NV or NVA
Partisan	A non-military or civilian person who was friendly to U.S./Allied forces and willing to assist them
Phao Binh	Artillery(VN)
Phao Kich	Ambush(VN)
PF	Popular Forces (platoon-size locally-based Vietnamese military units)
Phoenix	A program designed to eliminate members of the Viet Cong shadow government through intelligence-gathering and covert operations.
PIO	Public Information Officer
Platoon	Military unit consisting of four squads
POW	Prisoner of War
PRU	Province Reconnaissance Unit (military arm of Phoenix)
PSDF	People's Self-Defense Forces (village/hamlet level home guards)
Puff	"Puff the Magic Dragon" along with "Spooky", were propeller-driven aircraft equipped with banks of mini-guns and searchlights designed to inflict mass casualties on enemy troops in the open
PZ	Pickup Zone; usually denotes area for troop extraction by helicopter
P-38	The little folding pocket can opener supplied with C-rations (Also a WWII vintage airplane and a German 9mm pistol, but that's not important now)
QL	VN abbreviation for National Highway
RA	Regular Army
Ranger	Light Infantry trained and equipped to conduct operations within enemy lines for the purpose of gathering intelligence or carrying out limited combat operations, such as raids and ambushes, POW liberation, etc. Like Special Forces, Rangers wore a beret, and their crest bore the

	tomahawk and powder horn of Roger's Rangers from the French & Indian War, the Confederate flag under which Mosby's Rangers fought, and the spearhead representing the Ranger battalions that led the assaults into Europe in WWII. The Rangers have since then re-constituted the old 151st Infantry designation, a Regiment containing four Ranger battalions, and the crests we wore are now collector's items.
Ranger Tab	The black and gold cloth insignia worn by soldiers who completed the Ranger Course at the U.S. Army Infantry Center. (You could also buy one in the PX for 11 cents, but this was not a good idea...)
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment (an Infantry Regiment stationed at Nui Dat)
R&R	Rest & Relaxation, a furlough
RDC	Revolutionary Development Cadre
Recon	Short for reconnaissance
Regiment	A military unit in the ARVN consisting of 3 battalions
RF	Regional Forces (company and battalion-sized locally-based military forces)
ROK	Republic of Korea, also used to denote a Korean
ROTC	Reserve Officers' Training Corps
RPG	Rocket Propelled Grenade (used by Communist forces)
RPG-7	The rocket launcher that fired the RPG
RTVAF	Royal Thai Army Volunteer Forces (A Separate Brigade of Infantry located at Bear Cat in Long Thanh
Rung Sat	Large swampy area east of Saigon; name means "killer swamp"
RVN	Republic of Vietnam, also known as Viet Nam.
Saigon	Also called Sai Gon. Capital of South Vietnam. Now known as Ho Chi Minh City
SEAL	Navy Special Warfare Unit; stands for Sea, Air, and Land. They were the USN equivalent of Rangers
SF	Special Forces; a branch of the Special Warfare Program whose mission was to assist "third world" nations with the training of their military and paramilitary forces in the counterinsurgency role
SOI	Signal Operating Instructions (radio code book)
Song	River(VN)
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
Squad	Military unit consisting of about 12 men
Su Doan	A Division(VN)
Sui	Stream(VN)
S-1	Staff officer in charge of personnel and administration
S-2	Staff officer in charge of intelligence
S-3	Staff officer in charge of training and operations
S-4	Staff officer in charge of supplies
S-5	Staff officer in charge of civil affairs
Tac Air	Tactical Air Support
Tan Son Nhut	The air base near Saigon where MACV Headquarters was located
Tet	The Chinese New Year, also celebrated in Southeast Asia

Note: Another correction. The Vietnamese word for a stream is spelled "suoi".



Thi Kieu	Province or Sector(VN)
Thieu Doan	A battalion(VN)
Thieu Doi	A company(VN)
TOC	Tactical Operations Center
Truong Doan	A regiment(VN)
Truong Doi	A Platoon(VN)
Turtle	One's replacement, so termed because it seemed to take so long for him to arrive
Van Phong	Office or work center(VN)
Viet Cong	South Vietnamese Communist forces
Viet Minh	Early Southeast Asian Communist guerilla forces, pre-dating the Viet Cong
Vietnamization	Government program designed to allow the Vietnamese to carry on the fight after U.S. forces had "honorably" withdrawn
Vo Nguyen Giap	Ho Chi Minh's military commander-in-chief, began as second in command of Minh's forces, the Viet Minh, after WWII
West Point	The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York
WIA	Wounded in Action
XO	Short for Executive Officer, 2nd in command
Xom	City or town(VN)
Xuan Loc	Capital city of Long Khanh Province, Republic of Vietnam

#### **Note on Vietnamese language:**

The language of Vietnam differs somewhat from most of the Asian languages. In written form, they do not use the typical calligraphics (or picture words) of the Oriental. The Vietnamese people did not have a written language prior to their becoming "civilized" by French missionaries several hundred years ago. The French used European letters to spell out the words spoken to them by the Vietnamese, and then taught them how to use those letters to write down their words.

In speaking Vietnamese, the use of inflection is critical, as many of their words are spelled the same, and they draw their shades of meaning from the location of the accent mark or in which syllable the speaker raises or lowers his voice. For instance, ba' means "cow" and ba` means woman. You can imagine the problems that would result from improper use of inflection in this case...

When Vietnamese is written, the meaning is made clear by the use of diacritical marks added in the appropriate place to the word. Obviously, where I have written Vietnamese words in this manuscript, the word processor and computer have no provision for adding these accent marks, except when they appear in the final syllable of the word. Therefore, a Vietnamese reading the words that I have written in his language on these pages would have problems determining their exact meaning. I used them anyway, as I feel that including some of the Vietnamese language in the manuscript helps to provide some of the flavor as I try to describe these events of nearly thirty years ago.

Final note: at the time of this writing, it has now been over thirty-five years since my departure from Southeast Asia. It still seems like yesterday...

*Ray Heltsley*

## **Afterword:**

### **Post-Vietnam Experiences: The Rest of my Active Duty, and Some Short Comments on my Subsequent Civilian Life.**

18. USAMRC and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company	Page 70
19. Aberdeen Proving Grounds and the U.S. Army Pistol Team	Page 71
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#### **1971-1972: USAMRC and 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company:**



When I left Vietnam, I was sent to the U.S. Army Mountain Ranger Camp at Dahlonga, GA. There I joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company, TSB. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Ranger Company ran the first phase of Ranger Training at Ft. Benning, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Ranger Company ran the last phase at Field 7, Eglin AFB, FL. The other Ranger Company, 0 Company, ran the Cold Weather School at Ft. Richardson, AK. I became the Team Chief of A Team with 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Company, and we provided instructors for 3 of the 4 phases of Mountain Patrolling training. Then, in the 4<sup>th</sup> phase we ran the training and controlled the “Aggressor” forces against which the student Rangers conducted their operations. My Team Sergeant, Mike Martin, can be found on the U.S. Army Ranger’s web site, in the Ranger Hall of Fame. He was a very colorful former Green Beret who did a great job of keeping our team standards high.

It was a very rewarding assignment, as almost all of our graduates were on their way to Vietnam. It was two more years of “sky diving” and woodland adventures, all set in the beautiful Smoky Mountains of North Georgia. I think I climbed every mountain in North Georgia at least once, and usually in the dark. The mountains were gentler than the craggy peaks typical of our Northwest ranges, and really made for a pleasant atmosphere for conducting training.

The Army put me through an intensive training course that turned me into a qualified classroom instructor, which was to stand me in good stead in later years when I became a mild-mannered college professor. I discovered that, as an Instructor, I learned a lot more of what I should have learned as a student, and apparently my survival in Vietnam had

been more as much due to luck as it had been to my skills acquired during training.

I eventually decided that I needed to try something more technical within the Army organization. I had always been interested in firearms – not just their use, but also their history and development, and in December of 1971, I transferred to the Ordnance Corps and was sent to Aberdeen Proving Grounds for training.

### **1972- Aberdeen Proving Grounds and the U.S. Army Pistol Team:**

I attended Armament Maintenance Officers Basic between December of 1971 and March 1972. We learned how to maintain, and also supervise the maintenance of, Army weapons systems ranging all the way from small arms up to and including the Sherman Main Battle Tank. It was a fun and informative course, of which I became the Honor Graduate.

I then signed in to the Ordnance Officers Advanced Course, which was also held at Aberdeen Proving Grounds. This was a 9 month long course designed to prepare Army officers for the challenges of senior command and administrative positions. It was located right next to the Marksmanship Training Unit, which consisted of an indoor pistol range and a gunsmithing operation. I had acquired a Browning Medallist .22 target pistol during my stay in Dahlongea, and I decided to take advantage of the nearby range and develop my shooting skills. I would go to the MTU's range on my lunch breaks pretty much every day, and one day the Sergeant in charge, Mike Timberlake, asked me if I would be interested in joining the post's pistol team. From that day on, I spent my week days in class, my lunch hours on the range, and my weekends travelling all over the Eastern Seaboard competing in NRA 2700 Outdoor Pistol Matches. In my final match, which took place on Staten Island, I won a small box full of trophies indicating that I had moved to the top of my class (Marksman) and was ready to compete against the Experts.

As the year progressed, and I saw more and more of what it would be like to be part of a "peace time Army" I developed the notion that there may be some better way to make a living. Upon graduation from the 9-month long school, I separated from Active Duty in November of 1972, and returned home to Washington.

### **1973-1976 - Bendix Corporation:**

It was now time to seek gainful employment in the real world. I at first sought positions where I could utilize my Journalism degree, but when none were forthcoming, I opted for what turned out to be a very interesting job making machine parts out of metal at the Skagit Steel & Iron Works in Sedro-Wooley, WA, which had recently been taken into the family of Bendix Corporation. I had learned something about metal working machinery at the Ordnance School, so I was able to get a job in Skagit's machine shop. My job was to operate a 42" Warner & Swasey turret lathe making parts for machines used in the logging, construction, and offshore drilling industry. My specialty became making those parts that were made out of metals other than normal steel. I learned to machine brass, bronze, cast iron, stainless steel, ampcoloy, and nylatron, each of which required slightly different treatment than normal steels.

## **1974-1990 – Washington Army National Guard**

I did this for two years, then a strike by the Machinists' Union made it possible for me to answer a call to return to Uncle Sam's service. I had joined the Washington Army National Guard after returning home, and was given a Reserve Commission as a Captain in the state's organization. Since I had been a Regular Army officer during Active Duty, I had never held a Reserve Commission before, so I became the lowest ranking Captain in the state. I was initially assigned to the Headquarters Detachment in Olympia, where I became their PIO, and then later, their commander. The Guard sent me to yet another training school, Public Information Officer School at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN, where I picked up another MOS (military occupational specialty) designation to add to my resume'.

So when the Machinists' strike struck, I responded to a call from the Pentagon for a Captain with writing skills. I was sent to Washington, D.C., where I became what was called a "Systems Analyst" officer for the Army National Guard Bureau. My primary job was to examine the organizational structure of all existing National Guard units, and provide them with instructions for reorganizing in order to conform to recent changes in the Army's Table of Organization & Equipment (TO&E). This required in some cases the de-activation of some units, and the activation of new ones, or combining some units with others. In each case, the unit's lineage and honors (basically their history of military accomplishments) had to be examined, in order to pass those honors and battle flags & pennants on to their descendant units.

While occupied with this task, I was given a number of side jobs which needed to be accomplished. I did a study of Special Forces Reserve drop zones in New England, and scrutinized the availability of meteorological support for Field Artillery Battalions in the Southwest.

I also managed to intercept an order coming down from Army Headquarters requiring the National Guard to turn in their bayonets. The Big Thinkers decided that since the Guard was involved in dealing with so much civil unrest throughout the country, they wanted to minimize the chance that a Guardsman would embarrass them by sticking a citizen with one of them when he maybe shouldn't have. I pointed out to Colonel Coffee, the Chief of the Guard Bureau at the time, that if they did that, our use of force options would jump directly from batons to loaded rifles. I told him that at Kent State, the students had not believed that the Ohio National Guard soldiers would shoot them, and the Guardsmen did not have bayonets on that occasion, so when the time came to defend themselves from a group of students that became agitated when cornered against a fenceline with no escape route (strictly against best practices in civil disorder operations) someone fired a shot, and the rest was history. I told Colonel Coffee that if they had been using their bayonets, the students would have been less willing to move against them. It's easy to be brave against possible gunfire when you don't believe it will happen, and most people don't know what it feels like to get shot anyway, so they don't respond to that threat as readily as they do to the fear of being stuck with a bayonet. Everyone knows what it feels like to be cut, and they will avoid it if they can. The Colonel asked me to write a response to Department of the Army requesting that the order be rescinded. In that response I detailed not only the Kent State experience, but the manner in which



the Union left flank was saved on the second day at Gettysburg by a college professor who ordered a bayonet charge against advancing Southern forces that would have otherwise taken that position.

Confederate Infantry had twice assaulted the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Infantry Regiment in their position on Little Round Top, and been repulsed, yet they were willing to form for a third attempt. Lt. Col. Joshua Chamberlain, who was not a Regular Army officer, but a college professor from Maine, knew that the troops had exhausted their supply of ammunition, and had requested a resupply, but it was not going to arrive soon enough. Rather than to simply hold in place and allow the rebels to overrun their position, Chamberlain ordered the regiment to fix bayonets, drew his saber, and led them in a charge against the approaching Alabama troops. Those brave Confederates, who had no problem marching into Federal gunfire, saw those Maine boys approaching with fixed bayonets, turned and ran. The charge produced very few actual casualties, since no one wanted to stick around and experience a bayonet wound. Lt. Col. Chamberlain did capture a Confederate Lieutenant, who refused to run, and marched him back uphill at the point of his empty revolver. Apparently my point was made clear to the Department of the Army, who rescinded the order and allowed the Guard to keep their bayonets.



*This was the “Chain of Command” photo that was on the wall at the 116<sup>th</sup> Support Center where I commanded the Headquarters Detachment.*

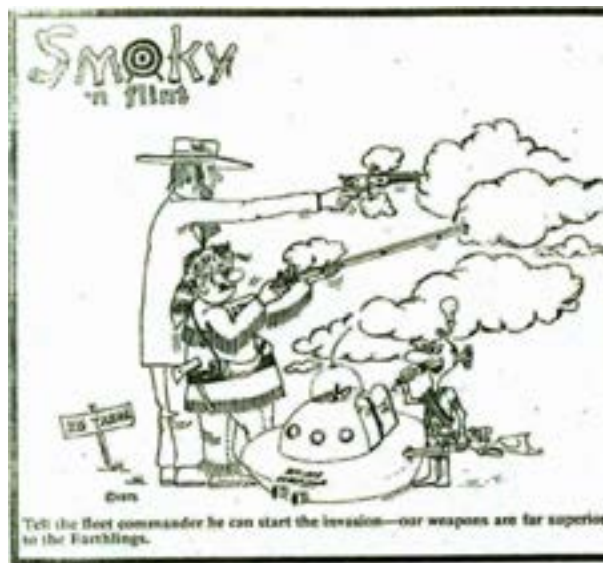
*Note: I remained in the National Guard until 1980, then chose to go into Inactive Reserve status as my employment at OHPD was beginning to conflict with a commitment to the Guard. During my time in the Guard I served as Commander of the Headquarters Detachment in Olympia, then became the Assistant Adjutant General, and subsequently Adjutant General of the 81<sup>st</sup> Mechanized Infantry Brigade in Seattle. I was detached from the Brigade twice to take command of failing companies within the Brigade structure. Each time I commanded the company until it successfully made it through an Army Training Test or IG Inspection, then returned the company to the former commander and went back to my Brigade staff position. When Mt. Saint Helens blew, I was put in charge of a relief force that went to Douglas County to help restore order and public services to the area.*

*Serving in the Guard was not the fulfilling experience that active duty had been for me, and after I had been a police officer for several years, I felt that it was time to put my military activities behind me, and concentrate on my new law enforcement career.*

### **Back to the World again:**

Within 3 months, my mission at the Pentagon had been accomplished, and I returned home to the other Washington. The strike had been settled in the meantime, and I went back to work at Skagit. But this time they put me into the Technical Publications Department, where I spent the next two years writing Operation & Service Manuals for the equipment built at the Skagit plant. I was finally going to get to use my Journalism degree to make my living.

I wrote technical manuals for the next two years, as well as doing articles and illustrations for the company's newsletter. My boss's boss, Fred Holder, was the editor and publisher of the Black Powder Times, a monthly publication devoted to muzzle loading and black powder enthusiasts. I became friends with him, and soon I was writing articles for Fred. He also asked me to do a monthly cartoon feature, and I came up with a series about a couple of "buckskinners" named Smoky and Flint. I ran single panel cartoons about them for several years, even for a while after I had moved on to police work.



April 1975

*Here is one of my Smoky 'n Flint cartoons, as it appeared in the Black Powder Times in April, 1975.*

In 1976, all three of the major industries upon which Skagit depended upon for equipment sales were in a serious slump, and I found myself on the list of employees to either be transferred or laid off. I was offered a position with a Bendix company in Green Belt, MD, but I declined, and started putting in applications to law enforcement agencies in the Northwestern part of the state. Of the agencies for which I tested, the first one with an opening was the Oak Harbor Police Department on Whidbey Island, and on April 1, 1977, I was sworn in, with Badge #13 pinned to my chest. Fortunately, I do not believe

in omens...

### **1977-1998 Oak Harbor Police Department:**

I spent about 9 months as a Jailer/Dispatcher, which was then the typical method of breaking in a new police officer. In December 1977 a patrol officer resigned, making room for me in the Patrol Division, and I began doing actual police work right after New Year's Eve.

Oak Harbor was a small city with a small police department. It had a population of about 10,000 at the time, and was about three miles long and two miles wide. There was one stop light in town, and no one-way streets. Nothing was open at night after the bars closed. There were more churches in town than there were bars, and most of the population was relatively conservative and law-abiding. There were enough of the other type, however, to keep the job interesting and unsafe enough to get the adrenaline flowing on a regular basis. The night shift could usually count on a bar fight or a car chase. Being a Navy town, where a certain percentage of our citizens were regularly absent from their domiciles for long periods of time, we could also count on more than our fair share of domestic disturbance calls to spice up the action.

OHPD didn't have training officers back then; they just put you out on the street with a badge and a gun and let you figure things out. I knew this ahead of time, though, and prepared for it by riding for endless hours during my off time from the Jailer/Dispatcher job, and taking Law Enforcement classes at Skagit Valley College. (Little did I know that one day I would be teaching those classes.) OHPD didn't even send their new officers to the Academy until they were sure that they were going to stay with the department. Apparently they got tired of wasting the money to send people to the Academy who would then go look for a bigger, higher paying agency. Speaking of pay, I was earning a little over \$1000 per month writing tech manuals for Bendix. When I started with OHPD, they started me three rungs up from the bottom, and I was still only making \$730 per month, and only taking home \$510 of it. I even qualified for food stamps.

At any rate, by January of 1977 I was officially fighting the forces of evil in a blue suit, and spending one weekend a month and two weeks every summer back in the green one.



*Photo taken on April Fools' Day, 1977, OHPD Badge 13*

For the first few years I spent there, most shifts were worked by a single officer. If backup was needed, it would come from the Island County Sheriff's Office, or the

Washington State Patrol. There was usually only one of each around somewhere, and we would respond to their calls for assistance as well. The troopers went home at midnight, and the deputies at 2 AM, and until about 8 AM, the Oak Harbor guy was the only cop on duty between Deception Pass and Clinton. If anything urgent happened between the Pass and San de Fuca, the Oak Harbor officer would head that way to get started taking care of things while the trooper or the deputy was roused out of bed and sent to the call. Those were some exciting times, but after the experience of Vietnam, not too traumatic for me, and it was usually only 8 to 10 hours at a time, instead of 24-7.

I went to Emergency Medical Technician school so that I could be more comfortable handling the trauma calls by myself, and eventually ended up getting drafted by the EMS people at Whidbey General Hospital to work my days off on the ambulance. But that's another story entirely; well, not really I guess. Sometimes there was a lot of overlap between the two jobs. It was amusing to watch the look on people's faces when the cop at the scene of a medical call would take the patient's vital signs and set up the IV for the paramedic, then go out to the ambulance and bring in the gurney to begin the patient transport.

The weeks and months went by, and about the time I hit the three year mark I was actually sent to the police academy. By then there wasn't much in the way of police work that I hadn't already been involved in, but it was still necessary to pick up the credentials at some point. At 34, I was also the second oldest cadet in the academy, being topped only by a retired Marine Sergeant, who was about 38. I enjoyed my time at the academy; it was like being back in college, but in a law enforcement oriented fraternity. The classes were interesting, the gym sessions were much tamer than Airborne Ranger training, and I left the shooting range with the Marksmanship Trophy. I think the only downside to the whole thing was that I learned how dangerous police work could be, and after I graduated and returned to work it took me a few days to work up the nerve to even make a traffic stop...

A year after graduation, my academy class held a reunion. Of all places, they chose Deception Pass Park. I was on duty that day, so I arrived at the festivities in my patrol car. I had been promoted to Sergeant a few months after graduating from the academy, which made for kind of a "grand entrance" to the party, as I was sporting my Sergeant chevrons on my uniform sleeves. To keep things in perspective though, I did have about three years experience over most of my former classmates.

Having made Sergeant fairly quickly, I got to spend a good deal of my time working with the administrators in the office. Before long, it became clear to me that the same problems existed for police commanders that I had observed in the Army. The higher up the ranks you went, the less fun you had on the job. I had initially thought that I would pursue my police career by rising to some level of command, maybe even be a Chief of Police. After seeing the world of paperwork and bureaucracy that the administrators of even our small department dealt with, I had a change of heart, and from then on declined to seek any further promotions. I had found the perfect rank for a law enforcement career. Being a Sergeant in a police department is a lot like being a Captain in the Army. You have enough rank so that you are taken somewhat seriously, but not so much that you can't get out on the front lines and mix it up with the troops. Instead of rising to higher ranks and more frustrating work conditions, I chose to seek additional skills to be applied to the world of real Law Enforcement. Over the years I performed not only the

duties of Patrolman and Patrol Sergeant, but became a Field Training Officer, a Firearms Instructor, with an additional rating as a Submachine Gun Instructor, a Police Armorer, a Bomb Scene Investigator, and a Composite Sketch Artist. I was still able to actually spend most of my time on the street with my troops, but I had plenty to do to keep me constructively occupied when the streets were quiet. The degree of satisfaction that I received from such a varied menu of job options far exceeded anything that I could have hoped for as a manager or administrator. I held the rank of Sergeant until my retirement from OHPD in 1998, then became a Deputy Marshall in the town of Coupeville as a commissioned reserve officer.



*Here is a clipping of an article published in the Whidbey News-Times about my job as a Police Sketch Artist. When I picked up this job, computers were too limited to produce a life like looking sketch of a suspect; they tended to look more like cartoons. A sketch artist could blend and shade and erase and fill in details until the witness was looking at something as close as possible to what they remembered seeing. Now that computers have gotten more sophisticated, I don't get many calls for this service...*

Sometime around 1983 or so the PD sent me and a couple of other officers to a school at Ft. Lewis called "SWAT For Small Agencies." After that we put together a small emergency response team. Then about 1985 I attended a school sponsored by the

National Tactical Officers Association designed to help police supervisors handle tactical emergencies. The instructor was a SWAT Lieutenant from Los Angeles that had co-founded the NTOA, and one thing that he made clear was that modern law enforcement agencies were neglecting their responsibilities if they did not have a response team big enough and well trained enough to deal with the kind of tactical situations that were becoming common involving well armed high tech bad guys. He met with me after the class and offered to help OHPD improve its response team. He suggested that, since we were a small agency, it would be best if we combined forces with the Sheriff's Office and formed a joint team. He said that the team would have to conduct training at least monthly to be considered certifiable by the NTOA. We ended up doing just that. I was placed in charge of the team, and we began training once a month. An interesting side note here; we had a little fun when we took the team to Ft. Lewis for training. We arrived in a van with our team designator artfully displayed on a window banner. It read "Whidbey Island Mutual Police & Sheriff's Fast Action Response Team", underscored by the acronym "WIMPS FART". You have to understand the sort of humor that prevails among the constabulary – we were an instant hit with our fellow SWAT officers.

#### **Dec 8, 1984 – Robert Matthews Standoff at Greenbank:**

The team was formed too late to participate in the FBI's takedown of the Robert Matthews gang in Greenbank. That took place in December of 1984. FBI agents had shown up on Whidbey Island following the clue of a gas slip from Oak Harbor left in the waste basket of a motel in Alabama where some Neo-Nazi's were attending a mercenary training school. The FBI found a small group of Neo-Nazi's led by Robert Matthews occupying a couple of rented houses near Greenbank, and brought in the big guns to take them down. Matthews was wanted in Colorado for the murder of a disc jockey, and had recently been robbing banks and armored cars in the Seattle-Everett area.

There were five complete FBI SWAT teams involved in the operation, commanded by Jake Jay, the SAC from the Seattle Office that had conducted the SWAT training that I had attended previously. His team was joined by agents from Washington DC, Boston, San Francisco, and I believe Los Angeles. The Island County Sheriff's Office was involved in the operation with them, but it was outside of OHPD's jurisdiction, and we weren't involved. Jake wanted some armed medics to go in with his SWAT guys, though, and since Harry Uncapher and I were trained EMT's that worked our days off on the Whidbey General Hospital ambulance, he asked us to join the operation.

On December 8, 1984, Jake's supervisor set up a field HQ at the NAS Outlying Field south of Coupeville, Harry and I brought an ambulance down and moved to the assembly area just off SR525 across from the Greenbank Farm with the FBI team, and the Sheriff's Office secured an outer perimeter. The agents made their move on the Matthews gang at sunrise. They took the first house down quickly, took several people in to custody, and recovered a bunch of money.

Matthews and another person were at the second house, a cedar A-Frame on the beach on Smuggler's Cove Road. Matthews was more prepared than the first group. He had the house "hardened" with Kevlar panels, and was wearing a full suit of ceramic body armor. Two attempts to put him down with entry teams failed, and the siege was on. Jake was able to get a "throw in" phone to Matthews, but there wasn't a lot of negotiating going



on. Matthews did let his partner get out of the house and surrender, but he refused to come out himself. At one point he told Jake over the phone that he'd better instruct one of the agents (he referred to the agent by last name, since he said he was reading his name tag through his rifle scope) to take better cover. Matthews told Jake that if the agent was black, he would have already shot him. At one point, Jake turned to his supervisor, who had joined him on the perimeter, and jokingly said "He won't negotiate; can I have an air strike?" Jake, by the way, had been a Marine Platoon Leader in Vietnam, so he was pretty familiar with this sort of scenario.

The entries failed to bag Matthews because both times they moved in, Matthews ran upstairs and was protected by the Kevlar-line floors and walls of the upstairs bathroom. He also had a gas mask and a bathtub full of water, in addition to his ceramic armor. One of the deputies told me afterward that during one of the entries he had made a number of direct hits on Matthews with his MP5 9mm, and it hadn't phased him. After the second entry attempt, the house was filled with tear gas and that didn't flush Matthews out either.

As the siege wore on, a couple of the deputies on the perimeter started getting hypothermia. I hadn't been needed so far to do any first aid, so I volunteered to replace one of them. At about midnight, Deputy Tom Ridley and I replaced Jim Covert and Al Morris in their security position on the perimeter. They were guarding the access trail that went from the beach up to Matthew's A-Frame. Matthew had bragged that if the police tried to take him, he had friends that would come to his rescue. Our mission was to secure our portion of the perimeter and guard against rescuers coming from the beach.

The feds had brought in a couple of M60 machine guns then, and set them up on tripods. They closed down the shipping lanes offshore, and tried stitching through the house with machine gun fire. Matthews was still shooting back. Our position was situated on the beach side of a low bank, so that, even though we were downrange in the beaten zone of the M60's, the fire was going over our heads. I think it was the closest I ever came to flashing back to my Vietnam days. The cold December night dragged on with no end to the siege, and the next day, I got a message from OHPD that I was going to have to extricate myself from the operation and come back to work. I pulled out in the late afternoon and headed north to report to work. Later that night I got the word that it was over.

After dark, the Fire Department had brought in some lights to illuminate the A-Frame, and Matthews had shot them out. Jake had the agency's helicopter hover overhead and drop flares so they could keep Matthews under observation. Matthews fired at the helicopter with his Ingraham MAC 10, popping the A-Frame's door open and closed with a setup he had rigged to work like a bus door. Maybe it had unnerved the helicopter's crew, and made them less careful with the flares, but one of them apparently landed on the roof of the house and started it on fire. Imagine a cedar two-story building burning down around you; Matthews tried to sit it out in the tub full of water, and was found in the wreckage in the morning in the form of ashes, teeth, and pieces of ceramic armor in the scorched tub.

We had our joint SWAT team together by the first anniversary of the Matthews incident, in time to go down to South Whidbey State Park and maintain order when the Arian Nation sent a contingent to hold a vigil commemorating their martyr, Robert Matthews. Protestors arriving by the busload to confront the Neo-Nazi's provided a recipe for disaster, so we positioned ourselves between the park's group camp where the



Nazi's were assembled, and the protestors at the park gate. This went on for several years every December 8, until people finally lost interest.



*This was one of the photos from an article that appeared in the Whidbey News-Times when they covered one of our SWAT operations. That was in the early years when the PD still just turned out in coveralls for emergency call-ins. Next to me is an Island County Deputy, Ray Tash, in green coveralls. Ray was a Marine Reservist, and was wearing his jarhead field cap. We later all went to more sophisticated military style uniforms and equipment. Even though our joint SWAT team was several years into the future, the deputies from the Sheriff's Office did do some tactical training with us a few times. Note the revolver in my right hand; we switched to semi-auto pistols in the early 80's.*

We fielded the combined SWAT team for a number of years, conducting training once a month. The criminal activity on Whidbey Island was not at nearly the level as most of the rest of the state, and the actual number of times the team was employed as intended were few and far between, but when we did go out, we were a smoothly functioning and effective group. The day came when the administration of both the city and county agencies no longer felt that they could afford to spend the money on the necessary training time to keep the team up to standards, and it was disbanded. This happened not too long before my retirement, and to this date, both agencies simply utilize a basic emergency response team that makes no claim to being a full-fledged SWAT organization.

It was relatively easy to sum up the 12 months of my Vietnam experience. But 22 years on the streets of Oak Harbor, followed immediately by another 7 in Coupeville as a Deputy Marshal, is a different story. People tell me all the time about things that I was involved in that I don't remember any more. I have a copy of the little farewell note that I wrote to my fellow officers when I retired from the PD in 1998. I will add that to the appendix to give an idea of some of the highlights of my career. Also, in 1993 I joined

the faculty of Skagit Valley College to teach Criminal Justice classes. As of 2014 I am still doing that, teaching one class per quarter. I teach Intro to Law Enforcement on campus in the Fall, and the rest of the year my courses are offered on line.

**Friday, JULY 31st, 4-7 p.m.**

**No Host "HAPPY HOUR"**

# Retirement Party!

**Mi Pueblo Restaurant LOUNGE**  
**916 S.E. Bayshore Drive**  
**Oak Harbor**

**Sgt. Ray Heltsley**  
**April 1, 1977 -**  
**July 31, 1998**



Oak Harbor Police Department  
860 S.E. Barrington Drive  
Oak Harbor WA 98277  
(360) 679-5551  
Fax: 675-4842  
ohpd42@whidbey.net  
Contact: Martha Folsom



*Sgt. Ray Heltsley is retiring from the  
Oak Harbor Police Department as of July 31, 1998.*

*Please stop by between 4 and 7 pm on  
July 31st and help us bid Ray "Farewell".*

Here is the bulletin advertising my retirement from OHPD





#### Ocean 4 – Out of Service

I suppose it should have dawned on me when I was hired in 1977 on April Fool's Day that this was not a good sign. Possibly I should have been alarmed when Badge #13 was pinned on my new uniform. Maybe I should have wondered about being turned loose on the streets of Oak Harbor with a badge and a gun, and still not knowing how to spell "FTO". They didn't spend any more money on training back then than they had to. They waited to see if you were going to stay before they sent you to the academy. I had been on the road almost two years before I got to go. But I imagine if I had been smart enough to be alarmed at these things, I would still be laboring at some mundane task or another, like writing operator's manuals for Sedro-Woolley Stump Pullers, Inc., or reporting the exploits of the Skagit Valley migrant workers' softball teams, and dreaming of the far-off retirement still ahead.

There's been a little fun and excitement on this job. I met a few characters over the years, like Rupert Euphoria, Fried Clyde, Thor the Thunder God, Parnell Jones, and given enough time to remember, scores of other blots on Whidbey Island society. Car chases, foot chases, kicked-in doors, building searches, close calls, real and false alarms, all start blending together after twenty years. But a few things stand out. I still have the scars on the backs of my hands from scooping an unconscious woman out of the broken glass in front of her car and leaping with her to safety seconds before her car was struck in the rear by another drunk driver. And of course, the scars from Haddon Furniture's picture window. That was when Frankie Orr invented the "Gold Brick Award." Pete Gailema always said that when they named the pool after John Vanderzicht they should have named the diving board after me... I guess over the years I've left more blood on the streets and bar room floors of Oak Harbor than I ever left on the jungle floor in Vietnam.

I remember the stiff neck I had for a week after losing a wrestling match with a horse during the Holland Happening parade in 1981 (I believe the original Mongo won his bout with the horse). And the sore back from the time I actually caught a person who had jumped from the roof of Skagit Valley College, by grabbing her from above and dragging her back onto the roof. I remember what a literal pain in the ass Quanto was for me when I tried to take the bad guy before he did. I didn't turn the other cheek for him either. I'll never forget how Charlie Varano went to church for almost a whole year after surviving the wreck I got us into trying to get back to the jail to back up Sean one night.

There were some dramatic moments. The FBI cookout at the Matthews incident off Smuggler's Cove Road. The stand-off in Parkwood Manor when Frankie Orr arrived as my first back-up minus his revolver, which had just been stolen from him. Recovering Frankie's gun from the burglar that same evening, on the way back to the PD from the totally unrelated stand-off. The day Pete and I confronted the man who had just finished smothering his wife in the car, her body still in the front seat with him. The guy who tried to kill me with a pool cue. The not at the Odd Fellows Hall. The guy who was stabbed in the heart at the Cathay Palace that came back to show me that he was not only still alive, but back to work. The rare few times when CPR actually worked, including one baby. The homicide in Navy housing where the drain pipe came off in my hand sneaking up to the back door. The night I had to quietly straighten out the trailer door I almost had off after the Captain told me over the radio not to try to force my way in. The armed robbery suspect who Steve Johnson and I caught for ICSSO in his stolen car. The three burglars I stumbled across at the Island Cafe. The car thief I caught because he couldn't find reverse in a VW beetle. It was always gratifying when someone identified a suspect from one of my sketches. And of course, the hot tub party that Dave Burnett never forgave me for getting to first.

There were tragedies to deal with, too. Like the little girl who hit an electric fence on Rt. Nugent Road. I did CPR on her for 45 minutes, but she never came back. The little baby at the Cove Apartments who died right in my arms. Before the EMS system got so sophisticated here, there were only two Paramedics on the entire island, and the OHPD guys all took the EMT course. Chances were always high that the ambulance was going to already be on another call, or at the hospital when you went to a medical call, and we did a lot of CPR and Basic Life Support stuff waiting for them to arrive. I think my record for CPR was a one hour and 20 minute session on a hard tile floor. I didn't walk very well for a while after that. I mean, worse than usual. A man stopped me in Safeway the other day and asked if I remembered him. Of course I didn't, but he showed me his fingers and reminded me of the time I made a speed run to Whidbey General with them after I found them in his workshop. The docs were able to put them back on and make him fully functional again. That reminds me - a woman approached me on the ferry one day and told me she was the one I grabbed off the roof at the college. And a guy I talked out of committing suicide brought me a pecan pie to the police station one Christmas Eve. Things like that make it worthwhile, even if they didn't let me keep the .45 I took away from him.

Some of the fun I had in police work didn't even take place in Oak Harbor. I used to ride with the local gendarmes a lot when I was out of town for training. I was riding in Tacoma one night when we went to a hostage situation before they had a SWAT Team. I ended up at the back door, and the TPD guys looked at my Model 629 .44 Magnum, then they looked at their Model 10 .38 Specials, and elected me to do the shooting if the suspect came out. Fortunately for me, the shooting took place at the front door. A TPD patrolman got shot before they subdued the suspect, and Tacoma formed a SWAT Team right after that incident. I rode one night in Pasco where every call we went on involved trauma, either due to assaults or accidents. I went to five "shots fired" calls in one night in South Seattle, ending the night in a high speed chase, recovery of a stolen car and arrests of six suspects who were tracked down by K-9 teams. It was a real pleasure when I got to work in uniform with the Port Moody Police in British Columbia. I worked three shifts with them, handling calls just like I belonged there, and not one citizen ever questioned my right to be there telling them what to do.

When I was a rookie things were different here. People could hear us coming from across town in our Dodge Monaco patrol cars with the 440 magnum hemi-head engines. You always had to check the car if you were replacing Ken Montoya, because he'd turn the air cleaner cover over to make it sound even louder. We worked alone for the first few years of my career, dealing with bar fights, family beefs and everything else like the old Texas Rangers ("One riot-one Ranger"). You used your siren on the way to fight calls not just for safety, but hoping the antagonists would be gone when you got there. Back then the State Patrol and the County all went home about 0300, and OHPD got to handle all the hot calls on the north end of the island. And people call them "the good old days." I wish it had been the good old days, because maybe then I could have kept all the guns I took away from people over the years; I'd really have a collection now. I consider myself extremely fortunate that in all these years I never had to shoot anyone. There was always something else that could be done to resolve the situation. And the reports were easier to write when it was over...

I had a friend from the academy come to ride with me one day shift, and as he was nearing town he saw me go past northbound on the highway to back Trooper Kennedy on a pursuit of a biker who had dumped it and run into the woods. He turned around and followed me, and we helped Kennedy find his suspect, then came back to town. My friend only lasted about five or six hours, and left because he said we had to earn our money here. We came back from the WSP assist, went to a construction site theft where we chased the suspects through the woods and caught them, and from there to a boating accident where someone fell out of a boat and got run over, getting his chest sliced and his penis shortened by the propeller. I forget now what the other calls were that we went on that day, but when Ken went home he told me that he had his gun out more that day than he had for the whole year before that. I didn't think we were all that aggressive myself, just kinda busy.

Well, it's been fun, but I'm getting older and wiser, and I'm thinking maybe I can find better ways of amusing myself. This was just going to be a short goodbye note. You youngsters go ahead and keep up the pressure, and I'll keep the coffee pot on for you at M&L. Drop by if you want for the rest of the story... See ya.



And here is the farewell address that was on the back of my retirement bulletin.



## 1998-2005 Coupeville Marshal's Office



*Coupeville Officers wore the old fashioned circular badges with a star cutout, just like real Western Marshals...*

When I retired from OHPD, My friend Lenny Marlborough was the Marshal in Coupeville. He invited me to take a commission as a Deputy Marshal. Lenny was aware of the conflicts that I had with the administration at Oak Harbor PD, who did not appreciate my style of policing, and he informed me that I was free to practice law enforcement in his department any way I wanted. I spent another seven years on the street, but only on an “as needed” basis. I filled in for sick officers, people on vacation or at school, and special events. With my Deputy Marshal commission also came a commission as a Deputy Sheriff with Island County. The Coupeville Marshal's Office had an agreement with the Sheriff to handle calls for them out in the county when the Sheriff's Office was too busy to respond in a timely manner. I thus ended up with more badges and commissions than I had ever had before, and was working for people that actually appreciated what I was doing.

Coupeville was a pretty quiet place, and most shifts passed uneventfully. In the daytime, probably one of the most important things to remember was to watch for people waving at you. In Coupeville, they generally used all their fingers, and you didn't want them to think you were ignoring them, so I tried to always see them in time to wave back. At night I spent most of the shift trying to be sure to check every business in town at least once, and to take a walk around all the houses on the vacation watch list.

Our most common type of call was actually the “220” variety. Coupeville was where all the mental health treatment facilities in Island County were located, and since most of their clients didn't drive, they found it convenient to live in town. Hence, I frequently met special people, like the Emperor of China, who lived, oddly enough, in government subsidized housing and appeared to be curiously Caucasian in appearance. There was no shortage of people being watched by the FBI, or aliens, nor were tin foil hats in any short supply in our pleasant little town. It was an uncommon shift if we were not called at least once to the hospital emergency room to deal with a disorderly patient – usually a mental case or someone high on drugs and/or alcohol.

After about seven more years of this kind of activity, along with the occasional domestic disturbance, bar fight, burglary and runaway, I found myself re-employed with the City of Oak Harbor. They had decided that it was finally time to enforce the City's civil codes, and needed a Code Enforcement Officer. I tried doing both the Code Enforcement job for Oak Harbor, and the Deputy Marshal job for Coupeville, but by January of 2005 I deemed it advisable to bring my law enforcement days to a close, and concentrate on code enforcement, which, believe it or not, was harder than real law enforcement. But that's another story.

P.S.

I was invited to a reunion of Vietnamese Army Officers in Seattle a while back, and there I ran into Colonel Len. He was the Chief of Staff of the ARVN 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and the one who wrote the final battle report on the “Battle of Xuan Loc”, the last official military action before the fall of the Saigon government. That battle is mentioned elsewhere in this memoir...it brought final glory to the 18<sup>th</sup> Division!

Seated to Len’s left is Anh Kiet Ngo (who let me call him “Kit”). Kit was a Prosecutor for the City of Oak Harbor, and the one who got me the invitation to the reunion. His father commanded a Vietnamese Ranger Battalion, then became a Navy officer.

Meeting and visiting with all those Vietnamese heroes was a humbling and unforgettable experience.

