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Editor's Comments

The Year 2000: Challenges and How to Meet Them

We're heading off onto the last lap of the millennium--trivialized to Y2K in what I assume to be a last-ditch show of bravado--facing a pot-full of self-generated challenges and expectations that are hard enough to catalog, much less meet or achieve. Among the most daunting are the diversion mandates that become due when the last bell tolls to ring out the century. As some sage of yore is bound to have said, we have named our poison, now we must sleep in it. But before you haul out your ceremonial sword and review the procedures for falling on it, let me tell you of a success story that is particularly relevant as we enter the eleventh hour.

When I returned to Vietnam in 1969, I was immediately assigned the title of "Base Development Officer" for the Marine portion of the sprawling Chu Lai Airbase--a hastily constructed enclave on the South China Sea 100-or-so miles south of the city of Hue. What was I to do in this new assignment? Well for starters, I was told by the air group commander that I should figure out what to do with a 12-acre compound containing almost three year's worth of accumulated trash that threatened to overwhelm its boundaries. Uncoordinated piles of shipping containers, dunnage, cannibalized vehicles and construction equipment, unserviceable aircraft parts, the barely recognizable carcasses of wrecked aircraft, and ton-upon-ton of every imaginable kind of trash made further dumping all but impossible. In fact, it was common practice to send a bulldozer in to clear enough space by the gate to allow for a few more truckloads to be dumped. The sergeant-in-charge of the bomb dump figured we were down to about three-day's capacity.

Filled with misgivings that my first assignment was going to end in dismal failure, I returned to the headquarters to find that what I had deduced to be a trash pile in the corner of the S-4 tent was actually my newly assigned desk, complete with unanswered correspondence--some of which bore the date/time stamp of the previous year. "Oh, well," I figured, "maybe I'll get smothered by the pile and someone else will have to worry about the dump."

But sometimes you find buried treasure in the strangest places, and barely had I started than I came upon a memorandum stating that all material and equipment not essential to US operations were to be made available to the Vietnamese for their use in what was termed the "Vietnamization process." Then (as well as now) grand strategies go right past me, but whatever impact this process was going to have on the outcome of the war, I recognized it was--so far as I personally was concerned--my passport to salvation.

Access for our contribution to Vietnamization was afforded by the simple expedient of bulldozing a hole in the perimeter fencing to the trash dump and planing off a path parallel to the main service road all the way out to the gate. Before I had time to develop an action plan to help the Vietnamese move some of the heavier items, I was informed that there was nothing left in the dump but shards of useless wood and packing material. The Vietnamese had removed far and away the lion's share of the material with virtually no effort on our part. When the group commander asked at the next morning's staff meeting, "What are you going to do with the remaining 15%?" I hadn't a clue. But here again I was going to get a lesson in divine providence. That night we were treated to a rather spectacular rocket attack launched from well within the base's outer defense perimeter. Three of the dozen or so missiles landed smack in the dump, reducing the remains to a very acceptable mulch--Ho Chi Minh Tooth Picks was the proper designation for the material--that was easily scooped up and used as a road stabilizer.

But with the dawn came the realization that while mulching and recycling were grand results, the element of reuse had been present as well. Among the goodies the North Vietnamese had acquired were several four-shot 5-in. Zuni rocket pods that while unsuitable for flight were well up to the task of holding and providing initial guidance to a raft of 122 mm rockets. While I'm not sure medals were quite in order, the NVA were certainly to be congratulated on their observance of the hierarchy.

The moral, of course, is never give up hope. But I, however--suspecting that future ventures into the world of waste-diversion might not meet with such spectacular success--took the credit and wangled my way into a cockpit as quickly as possible.