

CITIZEN SOLDIER

**AN ARMY OFFICER
IN THE VIETNAM ERA**

BRIAN WALRATH

CITIZEN SOLDIER

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INTRODUCTION

For some time now, I have been urging – pestering, some would say – members of my generation to write down their life experiences for their children and future generations. This was prompted by others my age regretting that they didn’t know what their fathers had done during “the war” – World War II, that is. They attributed this to the fact that “dad never talked about the war”. In many cases, I suppose, this was because dad thought that no one who had not shared the same experiences would understand. Or, he may have seen or done things that he didn’t particularly want to remember, or to talk about – war is full of such stuff. On the other hand, perhaps he just stopped talking when he realized that no one wanted to listen. Whatever the reason, dad’s experiences had been lost and were now irretrievable.

While most of those to whom I have given this advice are veterans, they are not the only ones who have stories that their descendants would like to know. Everyone who lives to a reasonable age has done things, or at least lived through times, that ought to be of interest to those who come after.

The popularity of Internet sites that enable the tracking of one’s ancestors seems to indicate an interest in learning about the past. However, a collection of documents outlining a forbearer’s history can provide only a shallow understanding of their life. It is the stories that accompany such documents that tell what that person actually experienced. But when the person dies, their stories too often die with them. With this in mind, I thought it was about time for me, for once in my life, to follow some of the advice that I so readily give to others. I was finally motivated to start writing when, in the Spring of 2015, I learned that some of my classmates from Army Officer Candidate School were getting back together through Facebook and email. One of them urged me to put together a collection of my OCS recollections to share with everyone. Well, one thing led to another, my stories grew beyond OCS and the result is this book, which covers my time in the

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Army from Basic Training through my return from Vietnam.

Since I have no children, I won't have descendants to pass these stories on to. But on the off chance someone may be thinking "Gee, I wish Brian had told us more," or that someday far in the future a great, great grandnephew or grandniece might discover this manuscript in a musty trunk, I thought it was time to jot a few things down. The "few things" quickly turned into a torrent of memories, and with no editor to separate the wheat from the chaff, I'm afraid there may be plenty of chaff in what follows. It is all interesting to me, of course, but may not be to the individual reader, who can decide which parts to read.

I soon discovered that I was writing as much for myself as for some indistinct future generation. I found that it was both enjoyable and beneficial, helping me to better understand how my military service has influenced my entire life and to explore and clarify thoughts over which I have been puzzling for going on half a century.

My initial manuscript was written for my family and friends; thus, the reader will notice some personal information about family members or other such references that only those close to me would understand. When preparing a version for general publication, I considered removing this information; however, I ultimately decided to include it, in the belief that many readers could relate to it. I hope this will be the case.

While I have followed a general chronological approach from enlisting in the Army to coming home from the war, what you are about to read is a compilation of recollections rather than a strictly chronological narrative. This is partly because the chronology of many events has gotten blurred after all these years and partly because, within broad subject areas, the chronology isn't very important.

Let me also warn the reader that, although this is an account of my time in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War era, it is not a compelling chronicle of hair-raising wartime adventures – you will find few thrilling war stories and no tales of heroics on my part.

I did spend my share of time "in the field" and received the Combat Infantryman Badge. However, to answer a question that many VN vets

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(including me) have been asked, I did not kill anyone; in fact, I never fired my rifle in Vietnam except for practice. I hope that does not disappoint any readers; it sure doesn't disappoint me.

Instead of classic war stories, you will find plenty of circumstances that are much more universal among soldiers than actual fighting: misery, fear, confusion, boredom and fatigue. While I endured my share of these in Vietnam, I cannot emphasize enough that I had it relatively easy, at least compared to many Americans who served there, including a lot of my OCS classmates. Above all, of course, my coming home unscathed underscores the fact that whatever prices I paid were far less than the prices paid by many Americans in that war and in previous and later wars.

I must apologize in advance for forgetting the names of many of the people who appear in these pages. I kept no notes while in the Army and have had to rely on memory, plus valuable input from others. Although many events and even faces still seem clear, too many names have faded, leading to my referring to some of my comrades as "the captain" or "the major" or "the NCO", or making up names which seem to fit them, such as Sergeant "Signal." This, I'm afraid, does a disservice to many a good man. On the other hand, I have also used false names for some individuals who are presented less than positively.

Since only about eight percent of living Americans have served or are currently serving in the military, I have written this for readers who have very limited knowledge of the military and the Vietnam War (the Glossary at the end may be of some help). A few readers may find certain parts to be overly elementary. Others may actually learn some things about the war, certainly more than they teach in school.

Let me add one more caveat: First, other than where I have noted, this book contains *my* recollections of what I experienced. Others who were with me may remember things quite differently. This is not to say that one person's remembrances are correct and the other's wrong; it is simply an acknowledgement that what and how each of us remembers may differ.

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Finally, in the words of Mark Twain, “When I was younger, I could remember anything, whether it happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now, and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the latter.” While I, no doubt, am close to this stage myself, I’ve tried my best to make sure that what you are about to read really did happen.

Brian Walrath
Chagrin Falls, Ohio
October 2018 and June 2021

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to several others whose contributions helped immensely in writing this book.

Many of my Officer Candidate School classmates have recalled events that I either did not witness or have forgotten, greatly enriching the section about OCS. Their names appear in *italics* throughout these pages. A number of them also shared experiences from Vietnam, giving a much broader picture of what it was like for a young lieutenant serving there.

George Ikeda and Casey Gresey, both of whom worked in my unit's Personnel Office in Vietnam, remember many more names than I. Hal Meinheit, who was a civilian United States State Department Foreign Service Officer serving on the same Province Advisory Team, provided valuable insight into the team and the whole advisory mission in Vietnam. I did not know Hal in Vietnam, even though we were both there at the same time, but I luckily came across him on the Internet in 2015. George, Casey and Hal also sent me many pictures of places and people in Vietnam.

Jim Roberts graduated from OCS about a year after I did, and served in Vietnam in 1971. I strongly recommend his YouTube video *A Very Lonely War* and his recently released book *MAT III Dong Xoai, Vietnam 1971*, which served as reminders of my own time in Vietnam and brought back even more memories. I have been fortunate to get to know Jim, and he has been a strong voice in convincing me to have *Citizen Soldier* made available to the general public.

The books of Sir Max Hastings, the eminent and award-winning British military historian, have provided me with inspiration and enlightenment for many years. His latest book, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975*, has been hailed as the definitive history of the Vietnam War. As Mr. Hastings was preparing his book, Hal Meinheit referred him to me, so I sent him an early manuscript of what was to

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become *Citizen Soldier*; I am honored that I was briefly quoted in a couple of places. I quoted from several of Mr. Hastings' books in the initial manuscript, and this final version cites his works even more liberally.

Dedication

To my wonderful wife, Dace. Although we were separated during most of my time in the Army, we were always together in our hearts. My greatest supporter, she has long urged me to write a book like this. She finally got her wish, then had to suffer through endless hours with me hunched over my laptop, communicating in unintelligible grunts, if at all. Plus, she proofread numerous versions of this book as I made additions and changes. Any remaining errors, either factual or grammatic, are solely my responsibility.

And...

To my classmates in U.S. Army Infantry Officer Candidate School Class OC 24-69, with whom I shared one of the most important experiences of my life.

A Brief Chronology

June 1968

Graduated from Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, with a Bachelor of Business Administration.

September 1968 – January 1969

Basic Training (8 weeks) and Advanced Individual Training (8 more weeks) at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

January 1969 – August 1969

Infantry Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.
Commissioned Second Lieutenant, Infantry.

August 1969 – May 1970

Stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado.

June 1970

Jungle Operations School in Panama (two weeks).

July 1970 – May 1971

Vietnam. Assigned to MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) as an advisor with Province Advisory Team 16 in I Corps.

May 1971

Returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the Army.

FORT BENNING, GEORGIA – October 2017

The big, white Trailways buses roll along the streets of Fort Benning under the bright Georgia sun. With their plush seats and air conditioning, they are a far cry from the stark, cramped, olive-green Army buses that carried many of the same passengers almost fifty years earlier. The passengers themselves are also a far cry from the men who rode those old buses. Their backs are no longer ramrod-straight. Most have thickened around the middle. Some limp from arthritis or knee replacements or, in some cases, old wounds. A few walk with the aid of canes. Their hair is gray, and some have even less than they did decades earlier, due now to the passage of time rather than the work of Army barbers.

Unlike the silent bus rides of an earlier time (“No talking on the bus!” they had been ordered), a constant chatter fills the air. “There’s the Airborne towers,” says a voice. “Which one was our barracks?” another asks. Was it this one, that one over there, or maybe one down the street? Many are not sure. Things seem familiar, but somehow very different. The building in which they had lived is now unrecognizable, completely remodeled and looking brand new. Others in the same complex are abandoned and falling apart, missing windows and surrounded by orange fencing to keep away the curious – derelicts awaiting destruction, a vivid contrast to the days when the lawns were closely manicured and even the rocks in the drainage ditches were swept.

The old men on the buses are here for a reunion, their first in forty-eight years since they had been thrown together for the most rigorous six months they had ever known. Almost all of them are accompanied by their wives and a few have even brought along their grown children.

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Over the course of three days, they learn much about the “new Army”, visit areas that bring back memories, dine on Army chow, salute fallen comrades, listen to the reading of a statement honoring them that was placed in the Congressional Record*.

Mostly, they talk. They talk about the old days, they talk about what they did in the Army after they parted, they talk about how they had lived their lives in the decades since. And they laugh – a lot. They laugh about things that weren’t funny when they happened but seem hilarious in the telling. They spin stories about each other and about themselves. They remind their comrades of events that many have forgotten. Some of the stories may stretch the truth a bit, but no one cares.

The wives watch in amazement as the old men seem to pick up exactly where they left off decades ago and are transformed – as much as the years would allow – into those young, boisterous, thin twenty-somethings who had served together.

They have a wonderful time. One will even write later that the reunion was “truly one of the highlights of my life.” Strong words from a man who had seen many highlights in his almost three-quarters of a century. When they part, they agree that they must do this again before too long, before time runs out.

So what had brought these men together five decades earlier – and why was I among them?

*See Appendix Two

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY, OHIO – The Late 1960's

One day in late 1967 or early 1968, I was walking through the Kent State Student Center with Dace Magons, my first and only girlfriend, whom I would marry before the next two years were up. Spying a Marine recruiter, I (jokingly, I thought) said something to the effect that maybe I would join the Marine Corps. I found out years later that she didn't know I was joking and it scared the hell out of her.

The very idea that there was a Marine recruiter on the Kent State campus in 1968 clearly shows that KSU was not yet the hotbed of anti-war sentiment that it was destined to become. During my two years on campus there were a few small demonstrations, mostly composed of just a handful of students (at least it was assumed they were students) carrying anti-war signs. Such demonstrations were tolerated – one could easily assume that they were even encouraged – by the liberal university administration and faculty who, like other academicians across the country, liked to tell students to “rage against the system”. Little did they know that in a couple of years *they* would be viewed as part of the system against which the students were raging.

Hanging over every young American male was the Vietnam War. Or, more specifically, what was hanging over us was the Selective Service System, referred to by one and all as The Draft. Drafting young men to serve in the armed forces has a long history in United States, dating back to at least the Civil War. It had been a very accepted means of providing enough men to fill the needs of the military when the quantity of volunteers fell short. Interestingly, the percentage of soldiers drafted was higher during World War II (over 60%) than in the Vietnam Era (about one-third). However, the way the draft system worked was different for these two wars, so one must be careful to not read too much into this.

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One thing about the draft that had not changed in all those years was that women were exempt. Only men needed to register and only men were force into the service, often against their will. The draft was a form of gender discrimination that is conveniently forgotten today. It would seem that none of the thousands of demonstrators, marchers and rioters of the period demanded that women be equally drafted with men and sent to fight alongside their brothers-in-arms.

At any rate, a lot of draft-age young men – including me – had been granted college deferments from the draft, that is until they graduated or until they dropped out of school. In 1964, the year I graduated from high school, Lyndon Johnson doubled the draft, increasing the odds that those who were eligible would face military service. In the early 1960's a number of factors might affect one's eligibility – going on to graduate school, getting married, fathering children or even pursuing certain occupations. But by late in the decade exemptions were getting harder to come by and the college deferment was pretty much limited to completing a four-year degree. Exemptions and deferments were even more sharply curtailed when the infamous Draft Lottery was instituted at the end of 1969. In an attempt to be “fairer”, the Lottery established a system based on the year and day of birth. By the way, I had a lottery number of 266, which would have almost certainly saved me from the draft since the highest number that was affected under the lottery was 195. This is assuming that I wouldn't have been drafted between my college graduation in June 1968 and the institution of the Lottery eighteen months later.

To put the U.S. draft into perspective, objections to a draft have existed around the world for centuries, so they were not suddenly born in the Vietnam Era or, for that matter, in the United States. Also, all three major participants in the Vietnam War – North Vietnam, South Vietnam and America – had their own draft issues. Many in the U.S. claimed that the draft unfairly targeted the poor; in South Vietnam, families paid bribes for draft exemptions; in North Vietnam, children of high-ranking communist officials were often sent abroad for education rather than serving, further proof of the hollowness of “equality” under

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communism. The Viet Cong's version of a draft was forced recruiting, in which young South Vietnamese men would be dragged, often brutally, into the VC ranks.

Thus, the specter of the Vietnam War loomed over all the males in our generation, and I was no exception. In January of my senior year, we watched the news every night as the famous "Tet of '68", when the Viet Cong attacked virtually every major city in South Vietnam, shocked the entire country. All of us guys wondered how the war would affect us.

With all this mind, during my senior year Doug Huey, a high school friend and college roommate, and I hatched a plan to join the Air Force together. We would attend officer training, then get some sort of interesting administrative assignments. At least that was the plan. But, like most plans, some snags appeared along the way. First, Doug failed to pass the physical (due to a hitherto undetected heart murmur, as I recall), so I was on my own. I passed the physicals and all the tests and waited for them to tell me I was in. My recruiter told me everything was going fine so I continued to wait for months. Then I finally talked to a different Air Force recruiter who told me the Air Force would never call me because I wore glasses and they were taking only fellows who could qualify as pilots or navigators. So much for the Air Force. Then I turned to the Army (somehow, the Navy had no appeal, and the Marines...well, they're the Marines, for goodness' sake).

What drove me down this path toward the military? In my senior year, when a student is supposed to start thinking about life after college, I realized that I had no real of idea what I was going to do after I graduated, other than maybe get married. I only knew I was supposed to "go to work". As I watched classmates go on interviews with corporate recruiters who were visiting campus, I started to come to grips with the idea that I didn't feel ready to find a position in the corporate world, despite being a business major. The military seemed somehow "safer", perhaps because it offered a structured culture where many decisions would be made for me. A few years in

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the service would be good for me – a sort of rite of passage for a young man who had so far done little but go to school. It would also satisfy the sense of duty that many of us felt, even in the jaded late 1960's. I was not oblivious to the likelihood that it would be my fate to serve in Vietnam. But, like most young men who march off to war, I had no clear idea of what I was getting into. Plus, there was some wistful hope that maybe I would be sent to somewhere other than Vietnam or that the war would be over before it was my turn to go.

So off I went to discuss the Officer Candidate Program with an Army recruiter. Since my major was Industrial Relations (and I wasn't necessarily eager to be in the Infantry), I was hoping that I might get into the Adjutant General Corps, the Army's "personnel" branch. The recruiter told me that there was no specific AG OCS, but since Infantry OCS offered more branch transfers than the other officer schools, that would be the logical program for me to attend (that much was true, but he could have been more forthcoming about this, as I was to learn later). Based on all this, I decided that I would join the Army under the "college option program", which would allow me to delay my enlistment until the end of the summer of 1968, with the intention of going to Infantry Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. I enlisted as of May 15, 1968, while still in my senior year, and was considered to be in the United States Army Reserve, but "not on active duty" until September. In order to attend OCS, I would first have to go into the Army like any other recruit and complete Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training.

Toward the end of my senior year, it was required that I meet with my academic advisor, a crusty old prof who had taught a few of my classes, to ensure that I was on track for graduation. His primary interest was to convince me to go on to grad school. When I told him that I had already enlisted in the Army, he just harrumphed and shook his head in disgust. That was the only advice he had to offer.

Upon graduating from Kent State in June of 1968 I took a factory job to earn the money for an engagement ring. Dace and I had been

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going together since right after high school, but I think my proposal took her by surprise. Luckily, she said yes. We decided that we would marry after I graduated from OCS. Many might question the wisdom of getting married when there was a great likelihood that I would be going to Vietnam. But we did not hesitate, and we have never regretted our decision.

The summer of 1968 flew by and before I knew it, it was time for me to go. In the late afternoon of September 10, Dace, Mom and Dad and I were saying our goodbyes at the bus station in downtown Ashtabula, Ohio. We were all tearful, me most of all. I was having terrible doubts about my decision and about what awaited me. The Army had provided me with a bus ticket, a voucher for a hotel room in Cleveland, and orders to report at the intake station bright and early the next morning. Other than my papers and a little money, I carried only the clothes on my back and a small gym bag with a few toiletries and a change of underwear and socks. My civilian identity was already being slowly stripped away. It would be the first time that I would really be off on my own, having been around people I knew all the way through high school and college. It was also the first time that I had committed myself to something that I could not just back out of if I didn't like it. I was a couple of months short of my twenty-second birthday and scared to death.

After our last hugs, I boarded the Greyhound and set off on my journey. Once the bus started moving, I dried my eyes and told myself that it was time to quit mooning about leaving home and face up to what was coming. My life, like my bus ride to Cleveland, was now in someone else's hands. God help me.

FORT DIX, NEW JERSEY – September 1968

Basic Training

The hotel where the Army had arranged for me to stay was a seedy dive near the Cleveland bus terminal, surrounded by strip joints and porno shops. I checked in and tried with not much success to get a decent night's sleep. The next morning, September 11th, I reported to the intake station in the Federal Building to begin my Army "career". I had been in the Federal Building several times before for military physicals – for the draft, when I tried to enlist in the Air Force, and when I signed up for the delayed enlistment program. For each event, I had to undergo a new physical since apparently these records were not shared. I went through another physical on September 11, just to make sure that I was still in acceptable condition. Anyone who has experienced these examinations is left with indelible memories of moving endlessly from one station to another clad only in underwear and socks. The most memorable moment is that of lining up and being ordered to "drop your shorts and bend over and spread your cheeks," while a doctor strode down the line peering into each man's rear. During one of these exams, the doctor stopped at the man a couple of places down from me, inspected his spread cheeks and exclaimed, "Jesus Christ! Get him out of here!" I don't know what the doctor saw in there, but I'm sure some of the draftees wished they could duplicate the condition.

I also had my first of many experiences in being "processed" by the Army – standing in line with countless others to answer endless questions, fill out forms, watch clerks type up information which they transferred from one form to another.

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The feeling that my life was in the Army's hands was reinforced by another phenomenon: At each point in my Army career I would have little idea of where I was heading – I was just being told where to go next, which line to stand in, where to sign my name, and on and on. Finally, I learned that I would be going to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for Basic Training; until then I had no idea.

By mid-afternoon, I stood in a room with dozens of others as we were sworn into the U.S. Army: "I, Brian Walrath, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God." I was now out of civilian life for sure. Then, our processing over, at least at this stage, we were sent off to our various Basic Training posts.

For me, that meant a flight – my first ever – to Philadelphia, then a bus ride to Fort Dix, where we arrived in the middle of the night. Others have told me that the Army intentionally ensures that recruits arrive in the dark in order to increase the intimidation factor. Whether or not this is true, it certainly worked in my case. In the eerie glow of streetlights, we passed row after row of what seemed to be identical wooden buildings painted white with green trim. It looked more like how I would envision a POW camp than an Army post. I once again wondered why in the world I had chosen to get into this.

My first stop, like all recruits, was the Reception Center. Here we got our first taste of Army life. Several dozen of us, still in civilian clothes, were lined up inside a large room, where we were told to "count off". After the sergeant in charge made a series of announcements, we were ordered to exit the building when our number was called. As the sergeant called out "One, two, three...", each man would yell "Here, Sergeant", then hustle outside to take his place in formation. Part way down the list, the sergeant called out a number and there was no

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answer. The sergeant, who seemed to be perpetually grumpy, became even grumpier as he once more called out the number. Again, no answer. Scowling, the sergeant continued on the down the list until everyone was outside, everyone except the poor recruit who had forgotten his number. As we stood at attention in the cool night air, we could all hear the sergeant inside screaming, “Come here, dickhead!” After making it clear that this unfortunate fellow was the stupidest man on the face of the earth and the sorriest recruit the Army had ever seen, the sergeant ordered him to drop and do pushups until he couldn’t raise himself off the ground. “Now get out of here!” yelled the sergeant, and the panting, red-faced recruit joined us in formation. In addition to learning the importance of never forgetting our number – or anything else – we had also learned that some of the meanest NCOs in the Army were assigned to the Reception Center. I don’t know if they were just naturally nasty, or if working at the Reception Center brought this out in them, since they had to deal with ill-disciplined, shambling, unmilitary recruits. Whatever the reason, we felt their wrath.

The cooks were also pretty ornery. All the new recruits pulled KP (kitchen police), which no one liked. KP duties ranged from dining room orderly (filling salt shakers, lining up tables and chairs, and other such easy but boring tasks), to slaving over steaming sinks of dirty dishes, to the worst of all – cleaning the grease trap, which required descending into a hole in the ground where grease collected. The cooks seemed to relish assigning grease trap duty over all else and picked some poor recruit who had somehow screwed up, or whom they just didn’t like.

There was also more of that Army pastime of being “processed” at the Reception Center, plus we were introduced to another favorite activity that would be repeated over and over: Shots. “Shots” of course meant being poked with needles or injected by air guns (which, if you moved while the shot was administered, could slice open the skin; more than one recruit had a rivulet of blood pouring down his arm because he moved or the medic administering the shot was clumsy). We each

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had a “shot card” that we carried with us from post to post. Considering that before immunizations were developed as many soldiers died from disease as from wounds, all these shots were a good thing. But nobody looked forward to them.

We also took lots of tests. I still have a record of my test scores in fifteen different areas, although I don’t know what those areas are (everything is abbreviated and/or coded) or what my scores mean. I do remember that we were all given a written driving test, since a certain number of recruits would become truck drivers. I must have done well on the written exam, since I was then sent for an over-the-road driving test. The vehicle was a large panel truck with a standard transmission. That was my downfall. The only stick shift I had ever driven was in Dace’s parents’ VW Beetle, which had a transmission that even I could operate. After I jerked the truck through a couple of shifts, the testing sergeant growled “Why the hell did they send *you* here?” All I could answer was “I don’t know, sergeant.” My truck driving days were over before they even started. Which was just as well. Those fellows who were picked as truck drivers had to get up before everyone else to go to the motor pool, get their trucks, and come back to the company area in time to drive the rest of the company to wherever we needed to go that day.

At the Reception Center we were issued our uniforms and equipment. To be more efficient, we were told to test the fit of our thin, black dress socks, and then put on our thick wool socks, which we would wear with our boots, without removing the dress socks. Some recruits misinterpreted this to mean that we should always wear the dress socks under the “boot” socks. It took a while for the message to get through that this was unnecessary. This confusion is more understandable when one considers that we were given plenty of other instructions which did not seem to make a lot of sense, and who were we to question them?

We were very quickly introduced to yet another Army tradition – the GI haircut. We were marched to a barbershop where half a dozen smiling barbers took just a few seconds to remove one of our last

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connections to civilian life – for which we had to pay the barber out of our own pockets.

During our week or so at the Reception Center, we met one of the Drill Sergeants who would be overseeing us in Basic. Tall and straight, with his uniform perfectly creased and not a hair out of place, Sergeant Richardson looked like he had just stepped out of a recruiting poster. He was quite soft-spoken and had dropped by to give us some advice about what we could expect in Basic. Without even trying, he was intimidating. The fact that he bore a striking resemblance to famous movie tough guy Lee Marvin didn't help any. I imagine he went back and told his fellow Drill Sergeants what a sorry-looking bunch we were. And he was right. Our uniforms were wrinkled and baggy, our boots, though new, lacked the shine that we would soon learn to give them, our attempts at standing at attention were lackluster. We may have worn the uniforms of soldiers, but we sure didn't look like soldiers.

It was a relief when we finally left the Reception Center and were bussed a few miles to our Basic barracks. The relief disappeared when we exited the buses and were met by yelling Drill Sergeants. Loaded down with duffle bags stuffed with gear and with voices screaming in our ears to “move! move! move!” we staggered into formation, an overweight, sloppy, confused collection of former civilians. I was now a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Basic Combat Training Brigade.

One thing I learned at the Reception Center that continued in Basic was that being tall had its drawbacks. Not only was it difficult to get uniforms with sleeves that were long enough, the taller men in any formation tend to stand out. A sound piece of advice for those entering the service is to blend in, try not to attract attention in any way. Many was the time that a sergeant would need a recruit to oversee a squad for police call (picking up trash from the surrounding lawn and parking lot; in those days, the most common trash was cigarette butts) or some other duty, and he would point at one of us taller fellows – sometimes me – and put him in charge.

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This may also have led to my being designated trainee platoon sergeant in Basic. Mostly the job of the platoon sergeant was to simply pass along information such as the appropriate uniform or equipment for the day's training, hand out letters at mail call, or get everyone out of the barracks and into formation on time. But it occasionally meant that I was responsible for maintaining discipline, for instance when we were standing in the chow line. Each recruit was supposed to stand silently at parade rest, looking only at the back of the head of the man in front of him. The platoon sergeant's duty was to ensure that there was no talking, looking around or other such lapses of discipline. I realized before long that I was taking this duty far too seriously and was being a pain in the ass to my fellow recruits, so I backed off. This, however caught up with me when I was put in charge of a half-dozen recruits going to the dispensary, which was several blocks away. As soon as we left our barracks area, I let them relax and talk together as we strolled along. Suddenly a car pulled to a halt next to us and a captain jumped out. As a trainee platoon sergeant, I wore a helmet painted with blue and white stripes around the circumference. Spying this, the captain demanded, "Are you in charge of these men?" "Yes, sir," I gulped. "Well get them in formation and move them like a military unit!", he ordered. So we marched the rest of the way to the dispensary and back, with me counting cadence the whole way.

Since my role as platoon sergeant kept me busy in the evening, I was often the last one to get to bed. Sometimes after lights out, I would sneak into the stairwell, which was always kept lighted. Here, I could read, or often re-read, letters from Dace and think about whether joining the Army had been a big mistake. Idle time is not good for soldiers.

It was in my role as trainee platoon sergeant that I had to do something that might very charitably be described as "brave" – probably my only instance of this in my entire time in the Army. One evening, an argument between two trainees got out of hand. One of them finally picked up his entrenching tool – the little folding shovel

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that the civilian world calls a “foxhole shovel” – and smacked the other trainee in the face with it. Fortunately, the tool was still in its canvas cover and the swing wasn’t very hard, so no real damage was done. But the shock was enough to send the victim and six other trainees in the room rushing out the door. One came to me and told me I had to do something, since it was apparent that no one else was going to. The whole platoon had gathered in the hall, afraid to enter the room where the shovel-wielder was now alone. I peeked in the door and could see the offending trainee sitting on his bunk, looking very calm. It didn’t seem to me that this was a situation where we wanted to involve a Drill Sergeant, which might result in severe punishment for both participants in the argument and perhaps the entire platoon. However, no one, especially his roommates, was willing to go into the room and get the trainee to give up his shovel. That would be up to me.

I called to him through the door and told him that I was coming in. He warned me not to and raised the shovel slightly, but he still didn’t seem all that menacing. I just kept talking, went into the room and sat on a bunk a couple of yards away. I don’t know what we talked about, but he finally agreed that he wouldn’t try to hit anyone, especially the trainee with whom he had been arguing. He handed over the entrenching tool and everyone came back into the room and went about their business. No more was ever said about the incident. Was I in any real danger? Probably not. It was just a matter of a couple of recruits letting the pressure get to them.

Basic gave me my first taste of barracks life, which is one of life’s “interesting” experiences, to say the least. Our barracks was in a complex of modern, three-story brick buildings which had been built just a few years earlier during the Army’s expansion for the Vietnam war. The barracks had both eight-man bays and two-man rooms; and I had the luxury of the latter. We were assigned alphabetically, so my roommate was a fellow name Larry Witherbee. He was one of the rather large contingent of Enlisted Reserve or National Guard troops in our Basic company. After their initial Army training, these fellows

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would go back home to serve several years drilling on weekends and going to annual summer camps. Even as the fighting in Vietnam continued, it was necessary to keep these units manned and trained as a bulwark against the “real” war that America’s military leaders feared – against Russia in Europe. It was a common joke among our instructors and us trainees to refer to them as “No-Goods” after their NG (National Guard) designation. They would answer back – to their fellow trainees, not the instructors – “Call me anything you want, but call me at home.” Although he was a pleasant fellow, Larry, like many of the NGs, was not very enthusiastic about our training. Most of them seemed to view it as an imposition and just something that they had to go through so they could get back to their lives. This must have really galled our Drill Sergeants and instructors.

Even with my two-man room, there was still an almost complete lack of privacy. The closest I came to having time alone, other than my afterhours reading in the stairwell, was when sitting on the john, but even then, the latrine was always a busy place.

At meals, we ate hurriedly in silence surrounded by others who all looked and acted alike; we marched together, exercised together, stood in lots of lines together, even got chewed out together (although there was plenty of opportunity to get chewed out individually, too). All this is done not so much in an effort to eliminate one’s individuality, as many anti-military folks insist, but to make individuals think and act as part of a unit, to become part of a group that is more effective working in concert than they would be as individuals, and to become someone who could be counted on by his buddies. The Army is the classic example of “synergy”, that term so beloved by the corporate world.

Basic Training is just what it sounds like – training in the fundamentals of being a soldier. We learned marching, military courtesy, rifle marksmanship, the bayonet, first aid, hand grenades, map reading, tactics, plus the maintaining of neat and orderly barracks and uniforms. All this was done under the watchful eyes of our Drill Sergeants, the fellows in the Smokey Bear hats and the backbone of

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Basic Training. By the way, the uninitiated often refer to Army Basic Training as “Boot Camp” and call Drill Sergeants “DI’s” (Drill Instructors). Boot Camp and DI are strictly Marine Corps terms. In the Army they are Basic and Drill Sergeant.

And, of course, there was physical training (PT). My Army recruiter had told me that I shouldn’t have any problem with Basic since it is really geared toward the lowest common denominator. I had tried to get into some sort of decent shape by jogging during my senior year in college. But my natural limited athletic ability made Basic a challenge. PT ranged from the classic “drop and give me ten” pushups, through long marches, mile runs, obstacle courses, and even “rifle PT”. Rifle PT doesn’t sound that difficult – how hard can it be to exercise with a ten-pound weight? Pretty damn hard when you hold that weight at arm’s length and do repetitions until your arms fall off.

Maybe the most unpopular exercise in PT was the “low crawl”. When they said low, they meant *low*. This was not hands-and-knees crawling. Instead, the chest and belly had to touch the ground, which meant the arms were out to the side like a turtle. To make it even more difficult, this was a timed event. Low crawling is hard enough. Low crawling *fast* is a sort of torture. We not only endured low crawling during PT, but it was often used as punishment when someone screwed up.

There was another exercise called the “man carry”. To make it equitable, each recruit had to carry a man about the same size as he. No one will ever convince me that it is as easy for a big man to carry another big man as it is for a small man to carry someone his own size. This got me to thinking that if I were wounded, I would be damned lucky to have a man my size around to carry me – instead, I would likely be dragged off the battlefield.

The only trainee I ever met who seemed to like PT – at least the running part – was *Bob Arnold*, who would become a classmate in OCS. Bob had been a long-distance runner in college and he could outrun all of us. In fact, he complained that he wasn’t running enough and he was putting on weight. The rest of us felt we were running plenty. One

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time when the company was practicing the mile run, a group of us were waiting our turn when Sergeant White, our Senior Drill Sergeant complained, in his usual fashion, about what a sorry-ass bunch of trainees we were. “I could beat any of you in the mile run,” he challenged. One of the recruits pointed to Arnold, who was speeding around the track, and asked, “Do you think you could beat him, Drill Sergeant?” Sergeant White watched Bob for a few moments and finally replied, “No, I don’t believe I could.” It couldn’t have been easy for Sergeant White to admit this, and it was the only time I ever saw him display even the slightest degree of humility.

Another unpopular form of PT was bayonet training. The last U.S. Army bayonet charge was in Korea in 1951, but bayonet practice was integral to Basic Training until 2010. It supposedly instilled aggressiveness and a willingness to close with the enemy. But mostly bayonet training is hard physical exercise. The movies like to show bayonet training as running up to a straw dummy and poking your bayonet into it. In actuality, the basic thrust move is much more difficult. Plant the right foot, reach forward with the left leg as far as possible until you feel like your crotch is being torn apart, bend the left knee so your butt is only about eighteen inches off the ground, thrust the bayonet-tipped rifle forward as hard and as far as you can into the target. Follow this up by bringing the right foot up under you, yank the bayonet out of the target, then perform a series of slashes and rifle butt strokes. Then repeat again and again until your legs feel like rubber. No wonder American soldiers as far back as the Civil War preferred to bash an enemy over the head with a rifle butt to sticking a bayonet in him.

After a couple of weeks, we were allowed the privilege of calling home. Each company was allotted a time slot during which they could make their calls. When our turn came, we dutifully reported to the phone building, a low wooden structure with dozens of telephones lining the walls. Following the Army tradition of standing in line, we all waited a lot longer than the few minutes allowed for our call. With all

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these trainees talking at once, it was so noisy that we had to practically shout, which added to the noise. There was little to say except “I’m alright” and the lack of privacy hardly lent itself to anything more intimate. Many of us came away with an even greater feeling of separation.

An integral part of Basic was learning to handle weapons, primarily the M14 rifle and the hand grenade. Although by 1968 the Army was transitioning from the M14 to the M16, virtually all of our training was with M14s. This held true through AIT and OCS. In the late 60’s, demand for M16s for the troops in Vietnam plus the Army’s desire to use up old stocks of ammunition and rifles meant trainees would use M14s. We would get only scant familiarization with M16s.

Many new recruits have absolutely no experience with rifles, so, as with everything else in the Army, training started with the most basic elements: nomenclature, fieldstripping, cleaning, lubricating, reassembly. Then on to how to sight correctly and adjust the sights. We finally went to the range where we first got our rifles “zeroed” (sighted in so they hit the target at a particular distance), then we learned to shoot at various distances and from a variety of positions – standing, kneeling, prone and squatting (facetiously called “rice paddy prone”). While the initial sighting-in was done on bullseye targets, most of our training and qualification was fired at electrically-controlled man-sized silhouette targets which fell when hit, then rose back up. When qualification time came, our Drill Sergeants gave us some helpful advice: aim low rather than high. A high shot meant a clean miss. But a low one might ricochet or at least kick up some dirt which would cause the target to fall. One way or another, our instructors got even the least experienced shooters to qualify.

Most of our hand grenade training was with dummy grenades; considering how dangerous they are, that’s a good thing. Grenades are actually lobbed rather than thrown like a baseball, since they are a lot heavier than a baseball. After quite a bit of practice with the dummies, trying to get them into a relatively small circle at a certain distance (I

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don't recall how far, but it required a pretty good arm) we were driven out to the grenade range. There, each of us was allowed to throw one live grenade. All firing ranges put great emphasis on safety, but the grenade range was even more so. Everyone huddled behind a large bunker and, one at a time, we were brought forward to toss our grenade. The trainee would stand facing downrange behind a wall of dirt and heavy wooden timbers. Right next to him stood an instructor sergeant. The instructor explained the procedure that the trainee was to follow, with special emphasis on getting down behind the wall as soon as he threw the grenade.

The trainee was handed a grenade and, on command, he would pull the pin, still holding down the small metal "spoon". Then, also on command, the trainee would bring his arm back, then lob the grenade downrange. This caused the spoon to fly off, igniting the fuse, which would burn for a few seconds while the grenade flew through the air. If the trainee did not get down quickly enough (I didn't, and my guess is neither did most of the others) the sergeant would come down on top of him and flatten him on the ground. The grenade would explode, and the next trainee would move up to the wall. The grenade range was a pretty scary place, and we were told stories of trainees who had been injured when they dropped too slowly after throwing their grenade. There was also a story of a trainee whose grenade bounced off the inside of the wall, plus accounts of other grenades which barely made it over. These may have been tall tales designed to frighten us, and they did the trick.

A bit of comic relief in Basic came from our visit to the tear gas hut. To familiarize recruits with the effects of tear gas, everyone was required to get a "taste" of it. As we lined up outside the hut, I could smell the faint odor of gas and feel a slight sting in my eyes. When ordered, I donned my gas mask, and waited for the signal to enter.

Once inside, I felt disoriented, due partly to the thick fog of the gas and partly to the mask, which required slow, methodical breathing and severely limited peripheral vision (plus, I wasn't wearing my glasses).

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Twenty or so men were lined up along the walls of the hut. One at a time, we were called to report to the instructor. When my turn came, I stepped in front of the instructor, dreading what was coming. I was then ordered to removed my mask and state my name and service number. Then I tried mightily not to breathe. Holding one's breath was counterproductive, since the longer one kept from breathing, the bigger the breath he would take when he finally gave in. Before long, I gasped for air.

Tear gas is much more effective in an enclosed space than in the open air, so when I finally took a breath it was like a near-death experience. Everything from the neck up burned. My eyes felt like hot pokers had been thrust into them. Tears streamed down my face. My lungs nearly burst. I couldn't see, I couldn't breathe, and I could barely think. Finally, the instructor dismissed me and I staggered out the door. Outside, the recruits who had preceded me hooted and howled at each of us as we exited. When I finally recovered a bit, I joined them in laughing at those who followed.

Toward the end of Basic, we were put through the Night Infiltration Course – the classic crawl-under-barbed-wire-with-machine-guns-firing-overhead exercise that has appeared in so many Hollywood movies. This took place at night, which enhanced the fright factor. We started by crouching in a trench downrange, waiting for our turn to advance by squads. We could hear machine guns firing from the direction in which we were going to advance and see tracers going over (every sixth round was a tracer, so there were even more bullets whizzing past than it appeared). They seemed close.

At a signal from the instructor, we clambered out of the trench and started crawling toward the guns. Explosions went off all around (in sandbagged holes, so they weren't really presenting much danger – we had been instructed not to crawl into these holes). We crawled what seemed a long way through barbed wire entanglements, stopping now and then to unsnag ourselves. Finally, we reached the end where we crawled past the guns and could finally stand up. This is when we

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realized that the guns were firing from raised platforms and the bullets had been going high enough overhead that we probably could have stood up and walked the whole way. But they seemed low enough that none of us would have chanced this. If nothing else, the assault course exposed us to what it is like to be on the receiving end of fire, plus it also brought home another point: The loneliness of the battlefield. Even though other men were going through it at the same time, we couldn't escape the feeling that each of us was all alone out there.

I celebrated my twenty-second birthday in Basic. Mom and Dad sent me a small transistor radio. I could picture them puzzling over what they could get me, since there isn't really much an Army trainee can use from the outside. Somehow, this made me feel more cut off from the rest of the world and even more homesick. My brother Barry was stationed at McGuire Air Force Base, which borders on Fort Dix, and on a couple of weekends off, I was able to have dinner with him and his family. It was nice, but it was also a reminder that I wasn't home anymore.

One surprise that I did get in Basic, and a bit of a disappointment, was when a few of us had some time off on a Sunday and hitched a ride to the main PX with a sergeant who pulled up and asked "Need a ride, men?" We gladly scrambled aboard. At least we thought we were hitching a ride. When we arrived, the sergeant turned around and stuck out his hand, waiting to be paid. He, like quite a few other NCOs, was operating his own private taxi service on his time off. We had to pay another sergeant for a ride back to the company area.

After eight weeks we went through proficiency tests to determine whether we had mastered the basics of being soldiers. Some failed and were "recycled", sent back to a Basic company that was coming along behind ours to repeat part of the program. Sometimes recycling was due to health or even mental problems. My platoon picked up one trainee who had been recycled. Pretty soon he was complaining of

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stomach aches and throwing up blood. Turned out that he was eating glass so he could keep going on sick call. He soon disappeared, either recycled to another company or discharged from the Army.

Those who passed the proficiency tests went through a brief graduation ceremony where we were congratulated on successfully completing Basic Training. We would now move on to Advanced Individual Training – AIT.

AIT

While Basic taught what every soldier needed to know, in AIT the training focused on the soldier's specific branch – Infantry, Armor, Signal, and so forth. Those of us who were assigned to Infantry stayed at Fort Dix for Infantry AIT. About mid-November we left our nice new, brick, three-story barracks and were bussed further out in Fort Dix to our AIT barracks – old, two-story, World War II era, wooden “three-minute” buildings (that's how long they would take to burn down), where I joined Company E, 4th Battalion, 1st Advanced Individual Training Brigade. Gone was my two-man room; now open bays filled each floor of the building, except for the latrine at one end. Because the danger of fire was real, red, sand-filled “butt buckets” were placed strategically throughout the building, and a fire watch was mounted each night – two-hour shifts were manned by soldiers who prowled around making sure that no fires were breaking out. I never heard of any cases where the fire watch found a fire and kept it from spreading, but maybe it helped us sleep better (except for the poor souls on watch, of course).

Lots of emphasis was placed on weapons beyond M14 and M16 rifles. We spent a couple weeks on the machine gun range learning the ins and outs of the M60. We lived in big twenty-man tents adjacent to the range. This saved considerable time since the ranges were way out in the farthest reaches of Fort Dix, and we didn't have to be trucked back and forth to our barracks each day. Winter had arrived and we relied on coal stoves for heat. Every day when we returned from

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training, we'd have to fire up the stoves and wait for the tents to warm up. At night, someone was always on duty to stoke the fire. Even then, only the side of our bodies facing the stove would be warm while the side toward the tent wall was protected from the elements by just the thin canvas. When the toasty side got too warm, we would roll over to thaw out the frosty side.

One day on the machine gun range twenty or so of us were lined up behind M60s, eagerly aiming at targets downrange. My finger was nervously poised over the trigger, and the safety was off. Over the loudspeaker came the usual announcement we heard on all firing ranges: "Ready on the left...ready on the right...ready on the firing line. Is there anyone down range? Is there anyone down range? Is there anyone down range?" The NCO in charge added his own twist, "If there is, God be with you!" Then came the order "Ready...Aim..." Just before "Fire", I could hold off no longer and my finger came back, sending a torrent of bullets downrange. Of course, there were nineteen other nervous fingers poised over nineteen triggers, and when I fired every one of them fired, too. Almost immediately, I felt rap-rap-rap on my helmet, as the range officer smacked me with the steel cleaning rod he carried. "What are you doing, private?" he yelled. "Don't you know to wait for the order?"

We had a bit of a thrill early one morning when someone stuck his head into our tent and shouted, "Your tent's on fire!" That got us out of bed – and fast. Some sparks from the stove had gone up the chimney and ignited the roof. The fire was quickly extinguished, but it left the roof with a big hole that wasn't patched for a few days. In the meantime, snow and cold air crept in.

There was no mess hall, per se, just a chow line where we filled up our metal trays, then stood around trying to gobble down the food before it froze. At least eating in the cold was better than eating in the rain. Many a time when hot chow was trucked out to the field on rainy days in Basic and AIT, we tried to gulp down our food before the compartments in the trays filled with water.

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Going to the latrine at our tent bivouac was an adventure. It was a large multi-hole outhouse with the bottom couple of feet screened in. In summer, I'm sure this went a long way toward alleviating odors while keeping bugs out, but in winter it was the wind, not bugs, that needed to be kept out. It felt like an arctic blast whistling through that latrine and swirling around our bare bottoms. Nobody lingered.

One December evening after dinner, we were lined up and marched to a building a short distance from our bivouac. It was a beautiful, clear night and as we hiked along in the crisp winter air with stars twinkling in the blackness above and snow crunching under our boots, I was foolishly lulled into the hope that maybe we were going to be treated to a Christmas program of some sort. What a nice thing for the Army to do, I thought. There would be carols and laughter and reminders of home. Not so, I soon found out. What awaited us was not a celebration, but a class on the nomenclature and operation of the M60. Apparently, I had not yet been in the Army long enough to get my thinking straight.

After two weeks on the machine gun range, we moved back into our barracks, which seemed a little cozier than they had before. Soon after that, we were given Christmas leave. I flew home for a brief few days with Dace and our families, then it was back to Fort Dix. As soon as I got back, I was assigned to stand night guard duty. Bundled up in all the warm clothing I could find, I waddled around outside the headquarters building as my comrades trickled back from their short days at home. To pass the time and try to keep warm, I practiced marching and executed the proper manual of arms as I rounded each corner.

We learned how to shoot the infantry's "portable artillery", the M79 grenade launcher, the 3.5-inch rocket launcher, and the M72 LAW. The M79 is a stubby little single shot, break-open weapon which fires a 40mm grenade up to several hundred yards – a huge improvement compared to how far a GI could throw a grenade by hand. My most

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memorable experience with an M79 was watching another trainee fire it into the ground not far in front of him. This poor guy had such terrible vision that we all wondered how he had passed the physical – and he had signed up to go to OCS! When his turn on the M79 came he aimed at *something* downrange (who knows what), pulled the trigger and – Blunk! – the projectile hit the ground about fifteen yards ahead of him. We all ducked, but the round didn't go off. It hadn't travelled far enough to arm itself. The Army knew what it was doing when it designed that one. Soon after that, this fellow became one of the many “OCS drops”. It seemed that when the First Sergeant made announcements at every morning formation, there was some new instruction for “you OCS drops” – come to the office to complete another form, or some such thing. More and more men who had signed up to go to OCS had seen enough of the Army to change their minds.

The 3.5” rocket launcher is the famous “bazooka”, a descendant from those used in World War II. This is probably the most difficult weapon to fire I encountered the whole time I was in the Army. It's heavy and poorly balanced with a horrendous trigger pull, so trying to keep its very rudimentary sights lined up on target is almost impossible. To make matters worse, in training we had to wear gas masks when firing it to protect our eyes, so we could barely see the sights or the target. Each of us had one turn to fire a round at an old shot-up tank placed close enough that there was at least some likelihood that we might hit it. My hat is off to those old troopers who actually had to use that thing in combat.

At this time the Army was transitioning from the bazooka to the M72 LAW (which, when we first heard the name, we all supposed was a legal term, but, as it turned out, it stands for Light Anti-Tank Weapon). The LAW was, for its time, a high-tech wonder – a light, collapsible fiberglass tube with a rocket inside. To fire, you yanked the covers off both ends of the tube, extended it to its full length (which also caused the front and rear sights to pop up), and squeezed a rubber-covered trigger which laid flat along the top. After firing, the fiberglass tube was

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thrown away. In concept, it was nifty idea – the whole weapon was not much bigger or heavier than just a single rocket, and no one had to carry the clumsy bazooka. In Vietnam, the LAW was a pretty effective bunker buster (there was very limited opportunity to use it against enemy tanks). However, it had a couple of shortcomings. It was supposed to be waterproof, but it soon became evident that it did not hold up well in the swamps and monsoons of Southeast Asia. Plus, what was billed as one of its greatest assets – its disposability – worked against us. The VC would police up the used fiberglass tubes, fill them with whatever explosives were at hand, and turn them into booby traps. Eventually, standard operating procedure was to destroy the tube after use.

We were also familiarized with the .45 pistol. To say we were “trained” would be an exaggeration, since we were given the opportunity to fire only a few rounds without a whole lot of regard to accuracy. However, we were tested on our ability to field strip and reassemble the weapon within time limits. We may not have been able to hit much with them, but we sure could keep them clean.

Along with this training in how to operate weapons, we spent a great deal of time on tactics – the actual usage of the weapons on the battlefield. We learned things like “fire and movement” (one group of soldiers shooting while another group advances; then the second group shoots while the first advances). We gradually learned do this first by fire teams (usually four men), then by squads (two fire teams), and finally by platoons (four squads). Many of these exercises were live fire, so the instructors had to keep a close watch on us so we wouldn’t shoot each other.

We did our best to conduct “jungle warfare training” at Fort Dix, which required a bit of imagination. Even in the fairly thick New Jersey scrub land, foliage could not come close to duplicating what we were going to encounter in Vietnam, especially in the dead of winter with no leaves on the trees and snow on the ground. But we tried, setting up ambushes, going on patrols, and at least learning some fundamentals.

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Despite the winter cold, we continued to do our share of PT, especially running. Our Drill Sergeants were convinced that the best way to prevent colds and the flu was regular runs through the snow. Our training schedule kept us busy, but the atmosphere was a little more relaxed than in Basic, and we got some time off on weekends for movies or sleeping in. We soon learned that the best way to avoid snow shoveling detail on Sunday morning was to get out of the company area – to church, the PX or anywhere else. At one Monday morning formation, our head Drill Sergeant announced that he had come looking for men for a snow detail and found none – “not one swingin’ slygolus”, as he put it. He made it clear that this would not happen again, which made us try even harder to disappear.

In Basic we had been driven to the outlying training areas in large semi-trailers with bench seats and windows, sort of like buses pulled by a semi-tractor. They were universally known as “cattle cars”, since that’s what they looked like and that’s exactly how they made us feel. In AIT we still often rode in cattle cars, but we were also introduced to riding in two-and-a-half ton trucks with canvas covers on the bed, what everyone in the Army calls a “deuce-and-a-half”. This made us feel more like real soldiers, since it was the basic transportation used in every infantry unit. They were noisy and uncomfortable, and the thick, black diesel exhaust rolling up from their tail pipes would choke those sitting in the back. Plus, with their open beds, travelling over the dirt roads to our destination coated us with a layer of dust. But we learned that during the ride we could sleep despite all this, which was one more step to becoming soldiers.

When we completed AIT after eight weeks, those of us heading to OCS said good-bye to the fellows who would remain on active duty as enlisted men and to those who were going back home to their National Guard or Reserve units. Then we were bussed to the airport for a ride to our next Army challenge – which awaited us at Fort Benning, Georgia, the “Home of the Infantry”.

FORT BENNING, GEORGIA – January 1969 – OCS

Three statements remain burned into my memory about Officer Candidate School (OCS). The first comes from my dad's brother Dan, who had completed OCS during World War II when the program was just three months long, producing the famous "ninety-day wonders". He liked to tell about the welcoming speech the commanding general, a West Point graduate, gave to the new arrivals. "You're going to get in three months what took me four years," the general growled, referring to a commission as a second lieutenant. "And BY GOD you'll earn it!" Earn it, he did. And so – somehow – did his nephew.

The second statement was made by First Lieutenant Dennis Czekaj, my Basic company commander, who was a graduate of Artillery OCS at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Meeting with a group of us who were planning to attend OCS, he advised "It's an experience worth a million dollars, but I wouldn't take a million dollars to do it again."

The third came from some OCS senior candidates who were nearing graduation just as I was starting the program. "Cooperate and graduate," they advised. We soon learned that this was an OCS mantra.

Mike Eberhardt, who was in my platoon in OCS, adds another piece of advice that he heard from a senior candidate soon after our arrival at Fort Benning: "The advice of one of those guys stayed with me throughout the ordeal of OCS. He told several of us in a chat session, 'Never take anything personal. The TACs are doing their job and they will yell and call you names. But never take it personally or you will not survive OCS.' It was good advice."

At the peak of the Vietnam War, eight branches of the Army operated their own Officer Candidate School – Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Engineer, Signal, Transportation, Ordnance and Quartermaster

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– each based at a different Army post. Infantry OCS at Fort Benning was by far the largest, with three battalions of six companies each, turning out 7,000 second lieutenants each year to meet Vietnam’s insatiable appetite for junior officers. By the time I attended in the late ‘60’s most of these schools had been closed, leaving just three: Artillery, Engineer and Infantry.

The Fort Benning OCS complex where I was housed included sixteen three-story brick barracks, each one holding one company of over two hundred “Candidates”, as we were called. We were also called “smacks”, a derogatory term taken from the Army’s standard five-paragraph field order: Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration/Logistics, Command/Signal.

This is how our class book (roughly equivalent to a high school yearbook) describes the mission of Infantry OCS: “To develop selected personnel to be Second Lieutenants of the Army of the United States who will be capable of performing duties appropriate to their grade.... To accomplish this mission, the OCS system is designed to place the candidate under physical, mental and emotional stress to simulate, as closely as possible, the stress and fatigue of combat. Only in this way can the candidate receive an evaluation as to his ability to work and react under such pressure.”

Since the stress of combat cannot truly be simulated, the closest the Army can come is to create and maintain an atmosphere of constant pressure, unpredictability and insecurity, coupled with physical and mental fatigue, under which candidates are expected to achieve high levels of performance.

In short, OCS was the opposite of the way my recruiter had described Basic – rather than being geared toward the lowest common denominator, it was designed to weed out those “who were not officer material”. And weed us out it did. Unlike the three-month OCS of WWII, the program was now six months long – six months of unrelenting pressure and hard work – and, on average, over a third of the candidates left the program, either by their own choosing or against

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their will. In either case, this meant returning to the ranks to serve out the rest of one's time as an enlisted man. The rumor was that all "OCS drops" would be sent to Vietnam, and, later in the program, some of us received letters from former classmates who had indeed been sent to Vietnam, so the rumor had at least some truth to it. Even worse, not long before we graduated, we learned that one of our classmates who had dropped out had been killed in Vietnam. The concern about being sent to Vietnam as an enlisted man was a strong incentive to tough it out.

Each candidate also had his own personal incentive, whether it was not letting down people back home or just not letting down himself, or maybe something else. Along with that was the incentive to not be viewed as a quitter by our classmates, whom we grew to like and respect.

I don't know what percentage of those attending OCS had enlisted in the Army versus being drafted, but every one of them had volunteered for OCS – you could not be forced to go. There were also many chances to change their minds before they even arrived at Fort Benning – all through Basic and AIT they could have joined those "OCS drops" and simply served out their two years as enlisted men. So those who finally showed up *were* volunteers, whether or not they had enlisted in the Army voluntarily.

I mentioned in the Introduction the rather convoluted path that led me to joining the Army, and many of my classmates had similar experiences. Here are some examples:

Wayne Ferrentino felt "that dropping out of school meant almost certain draft, four months of training and off to VN as a rifleman, which was not very appealing. Going to Canada to evade the draft was never really considered. Like many, I felt a duty to serve and thought being a leader versus a follower was the route to go." Several of Wayne's college friends were in ROTC, which did not seem all that difficult, and he assumed OCS must be much like that program. "I figured how big a deal could OCS be?" Wayne would soon find out.

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Brian Flora was the son of an Army career officer who had served in WWII and Korea. Brian had felt the pressure of the draft as much as anyone. Since junior high school, he had wanted a career in the State Department, serving his country as a diplomat rather than a soldier. Soon after receiving his undergraduate degree, he enrolled in grad school. On the third day of classes, after spending \$200 on books, he received his draft notice (another example of how the education deferment was being shrunk to just a four-year degree). He volunteered for OCS because “I thought becoming an officer would allow me a chance to control my own destiny.”

Scott Davis, a self-described California “beach bum”, recalls “I was in graduate school at UCLA when I got my 1A draft classification. When I called the draft board about a deferment, they told me if I wasn’t in the service in 2 months they were going to draft me. So I asked, ‘Does that mean no deferment?’” We can all imagine the answer. He then “tried to get into Air Force and Navy OCS but everything was filled. That left the Army and Marines. Obviously, I signed up for Army OCS.”

Mike Eberhardt, whose goal was to become a minister, had been considering attending seminary immediately after receiving his undergraduate degree. Several friends encouraged him to do this as a means of avoiding the draft. “Well,” Mike told me in his Georgia drawl, “I wasn’t going to do that.” Instead, his path led him into the Army and to OCS.

Bill Thoroughgood agreed that “going into the military was a safer option” since he “was not ready for a grad school effort.... So OCS offered some attraction; i.e., become an officer and play for time if you weren’t sure about the next step, a safer bet.”

Jim Roberts was not a classmate of mine, but his story is worth telling since he represents a category of enlistee that was relatively rare during the Vietnam Era: One who leaves a secure, comfortable professional job to enlist in the Army. Jim had completed his four-year degree and was a high school science teacher. He had received four annual draft deferments during college and a fifth when he became a

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teacher. But Jim, as the son of a career Air Force Master Sergeant, says, “Regardless of how the country felt about the Vietnam war, I felt it was my duty to serve. So, I chose to walk away from my sixth deferment and enlist in the Army.” The rarity of such a decision was impressed on Jim when he went to the nearest Armed Forces Entrance Examination Station to enlist. The staff there was bemused when they learned that Jim was enlisting rather than being drafted, and he specifically wanted to go to OCS and be in the Infantry. He was passed up the line from a sergeant, to a captain and, eventually to a doctor whom Jim quickly determined was a psychiatrist. Adds Jim, “It seems that when a man with a college degree and a deferment from the draft walks in cold off the street and asks to enlist in the Infantry and volunteers for OCS, all kinds of alarm bells go off – to the Army, sane men do not do this! So I had to convince them I was not insane.” He succeeded in this, and eventually graduated from OCS about a year after I did.

Whatever their reasons, I don’t know of anyone who had joined just so they could experience what George Patton liked to call “the sting of battle”, or to have the opportunity to kill some of those “lousy commies.” Nor was I aware of anyone who was looking forward to going to Vietnam so he could win medals, although in a group of over two hundred men, there must have been at least a few.

Some of our motivations, of course, are not unlike those felt by young men throughout history. But one thing was certain for the men during the Vietnam Era: Unlike earlier wars, they were not carried along by the patriotic fervor sweeping the country – for in the sixties, there was no such fervor. Fort Sumpter had not been fired upon, the Maine had not exploded in Havana harbor, Pearl Harbor had not been attacked. Males of all ages – from sixteen to sixty – were not overwhelming recruiting stations. Brass bands were not accompanying uniformed formations as they marched off to war to keep America safe. No one was joining up because “everyone else was”; if anything, everyone else was avoiding the service or even actively questioning the sanity or intelligence of those who were joining. Instead, the men in this story were motivated by very personal reasons – mostly, to do their

duty, to test themselves, or, in many cases, to simply make the most of a bad situation.

Arrival at Fort Benning

In late January 1969 a whole planeload of us fresh out of AIT at Fort Dix flew down to Fort Benning. Other than some feelings of trepidation about what awaited us, the plane ride was an enjoyable and relaxing break from the constant supervision we had known since the day we entered the Army. When we stepped off the plane at Benning's Lawton Army Airfield, we were struck by two things: the warmth (at least compared to the frozen North) and a heavy, pungent smell that hung in the air. "The swamps!" blurted a few of us, with visions of being sucked into a bottomless morass. Turned out it wasn't swamps at all. It was a pulp mill several miles away. Whenever the wind was right, this added to the special ambiance of what we would come to know as "Benning's School for Boys".

At the airfield we were loaded onto buses and driven a short distance to the OCS area. We had arrived a couple of weeks before our classes were to start, and it was evident that no one was expecting us. The senior candidates on duty seemed puzzled about what to do, then they hit on a solution: In the best Army tradition for filling idle time, they put us through PT. This included a lesson in leadership – one of us was selected to order the others to low crawl back and forth over the grass, making him the most unpopular man in the company, at least for the moment. Better to suffer through the agony of PT than to be the one who put his comrades through this torture. Finally, the word came down about where we should go. Panting and sweating, we retrieved our duffle bags and fell into a ragged formation to await the next step in our transformation into officers.

Our barracks were not ready, so we were marched to a building housing a company of senior candidates who were just a few days from graduation. Attrition had left enough empty bunks to house us new

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arrivals. A few of these seniors thought it was great fun to harass us a bit, but in general they were very laid back (much more so than my class would be right up to graduation – the pressure for us never let up). These were the fellows who gave us the helpful advice that I mentioned earlier: cooperate and graduate. *Ken Beatty*, who would become one of my roommates, got a different sort of advice when he arrived for OCS just a day early: A candidate advised him to leave “and enjoy what freedom I had left.” Sounds like the sort of advice one would give a condemned man.

After living with the seniors for a few days, we moved to the barracks that would be our home for the next six months. For a couple of weeks, we had to be kept busy while we waited for the rest of our classmates to arrive from Army training posts all over the country. We were busy, alright, doing menial tasks like sweeping debris from the rocks in the drainage ditches in front of the barracks and trimming the grass with our little sewing kit scissors. But I was happy to learn that in OCS we were not required to do certain things that we had to do in Basic and AIT, such as pull KP and guard duty. Two small consolations.

OCS would be different from Basic and AIT in two other, much more important, respects: expectations and *esprit de corps* (actually, the two are inseparable). In both Basic and AIT, the Drill Sergeants’ overall attitude seemed to be “we need to get this group of recruits qualified in the required areas in the short time we have.” The expectation was that each recruit should be brought to at least a minimum standard, and minimum was good enough. As a result, I do not recall any real emphasis on being part of the “best” company, or that we should feel prouder of our company than any other recruit was of *his* company. If there was *esprit de corps*, it was related to successfully completing the training and being part of the U.S. Army. This was not to be the case in OCS.

50th Company Cadre

We were now in 50th Company in the 5th OCS Battalion. Of the three OCS battalions – 5th, 6th and 9th – 5th had the reputation of being the best and toughest. 50th was the “first” company in the battalion, which also included companies 51 – 55. We would soon learn that we had to live up to the honor of being “first”. Since company designations were used over and over as classes graduated and new ones started (there had been many 50th Companies before ours and more would follow) each OCS class was given a class number; for us it was OC 24-69. But to this day we think of ourselves as 50th Company rather than OC 24-69.

We would soon learn that in OCS – and in 50th in particular – expectations were infinitely higher than in Basic and AIT. Minimum performance would not do, and anyone suspected of slacking off to just get by was drummed out of the program. Maximum performance all the time in everything was the rule. Sure, we each did better at some things than others, but we were all expected to do as well as we possibly could in everything. As a company, we were clearly expected to be better than other companies – to be the absolutely best company in our battalion, if not in all of OCS. This standard paid off both in how well 50th ultimately did do, and the pride we all felt in it – we would earn our *esprit de corps*.

Like most Infantry OCS companies, 50th Company was structured into six platoons of almost forty men each. None of us got to know every man in the company. Even today, the names and faces of some are not familiar, and I’m sure many would have difficulty remembering me, but we all got to know our platoon-mates well. We roomed together, marched and ran together, showered together, cleaned our barracks area together, and basically were around each other twenty-four hours a day. We were also punished (the Army might prefer “disciplined”) together when one or more of us screwed up. In short, we had to learn to understand each other, accept each other’s weaknesses and take advantage of our individual strengths, to help each

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other out for the good of both the individual and the platoon. While much the same also took place at the company level, it was the platoon that was the core of our daily life.

Rather than the Drill Sergeants of Basic Training and AIT, each platoon had a Tactical Officer (a “TAC”). All of our TACs were second lieutenants who had recently graduated from OCS. The TACs’ responsibilities were basically the same as those of Drill Sergeants, only this time their goal was to turn out qualified second lieutenants, not just privates trained to meet minimum standards. This meant we got a lot more individual attention than we had in Basic. This usually amounted to a red-faced TAC singling out a particular candidate and forcefully letting him know that because he had screwed up something he was clearly not officer material. Sometimes this berating reached such ridiculous levels that it was hard to take seriously; nevertheless, we could not reveal what we were thinking. *Scott Davis* remembers, “Having to keep from smiling when your TAC officer was screaming at you, three inches from your face. It was hard not for me to laugh, and it cost me a lot of pushups.”

At the top of 50th’s chain of command was our imposing commanding officer, Captain Thomas J. Smith, who had served with the famous First Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam. A number of my classmates still have extremely negative opinions of Captain Smith, as illustrated by these posts on our 50th Company Facebook page:

First candidate: What were you thinking on July 31, 1969 [the night before graduation]? Was Thomas J. Smith, CPT INF, going to throw another temper tantrum, and restrict us all to the company for the evening?

Second candidate: I remember his temper but not sure now that it wasn't just all an act.

Third candidate: Act or not, Smith was a real SOB. Even on graduation day, he had no kind words for me, and to this day, I have none for him. A real sadist.

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Each candidate's feelings are probably heavily influenced by his personal interaction with the captain. My view of Smith is not so harsh, which may be influenced by my having very little individual contact with him other than through the regular inspections that he conducted. Generally, my side of the conversation would consist of one-word answers to his questions (actually, two- or three-word answers, since whatever any of us said always began or ended [or both] with "Sir"). I tried very hard not to attract the captain's attention throughout the entire cycle. Based on this, he seemed to me a rather remote authority figure. He was tough and demanding, but at the same time he didn't seem to engage in the extreme game playing that often went on in OCS.

There were certainly instances when Captain Smith took out his ire on candidates who had apparently gone too far. *Richard Bardsley*, one of the few former enlisted men in 50th, was a Special Forces (Green Beret) sergeant whom we viewed with respect because of his Vietnam service. During the third week of the program, when the time came to elect class officers, we chose him to be class president. Richard served for about a month, then the captain decided that we should choose a new president. We figured that Smith was playing a game with us – testing us to see if we would show solidarity as a company. So, we took another vote and reelected the Green Beret. But the captain was serious. "This man is not going to be the president of your class. Elect someone else." This time we caught on and elected a candidate who met with the captain's approval. Smith's problems with Richard were never clear – he wasn't in the habit of explaining himself. But they may have been influenced by Richard's penchant for, as he put it, "pissing off Captain Smith as much as possible, for instance, asking if his Purple Heart was from friendly fire." Richard was also instrumental in convincing the entire company to fall out "with subdued combat belts and buckles so we didn't have to shine the brass buckle" (a gross violation of one of the underpinnings of OCS – the daily shining of anything brass). In the best tradition of the Army, the entire student chain of command was punished for this stunt. Recalls *Rod Seefeld*, "I

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was then the company commander and attempted an explanation of our actions to Captain Smith before moving to the rear of the formation for extra pushups. Shortly thereafter, the XO, first sergeant and some platoon leaders joined me to do pushups while CPT Smith 'gently' explained that HE would let us know when we could switch out of the brass buckles."

Don Huskins was another candidate who felt the captain's wrath. During one of our class entertainments, Don had the courage to imitate the captain. From then on, whenever Don encountered Smith, he was ordered to "drop" and do pushups. Captain Smith may have seen some humor in it, but Don doesn't think so. Says Don, "I enjoyed making fun of Captain Smith. [He] got me in the end." Upon graduation, Don was supposed to join the Old Guard, the famous unit that performs military funerals at Arlington National Cemetery and guards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. But a few days before he was commissioned, Don was called to the office of the First Sergeant, who suggested that Don sit down. The First Sergeant handed Don new orders rescinding the Old Guard and assigning him to serve as a TAC in 5th battalion. Don is convinced that Captain Smith was behind the change in orders. "I'm not sure if it was worth all of the laughs I got at his expense," he says. "I'd say I'm sorry, but it is too late and it would be a lie."

Years later, I asked Don for his perspective on whether 50th Company was tougher than other OCS companies, based on his observations after having been a TAC in another company. Says Don, "54th [where he was a TAC] was not nearly as tough as 50th. I thought they were a little slack. Not nearly the stress. The CO was too nice and kind. Any similarities between him and Captain Smith stopped at the uniform. In hindsight, Captain Smith was doing us a favor by being so tough. He was getting us ready for Vietnam. Over there we couldn't take a timeout out and say, 'Now wait just a damned minute. This is too hard. I might get hurt or killed. Besides it's hot and I'm tired and dirty.' We were taught to pay attention to detail and to persevere. ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION!"

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It's clear from Don's account that one's OCS experience was highly dependent on the company's commanding officer. In the case of 50th, our beloved Captain Smith's drive, competitive nature, and no-nonsense personality seeped into everything we did.

Ken Sutton was one of the few in 50th Company who could say, "In OCS I had a good time for the most part. Having had four years of ROTC...I was fairly well prepared for it." He, like *Dick Bardsley*, enjoyed rankling Captain Smith and "tried to mess with him every chance I got." He had plenty of opportunity during his stint as Assistant Mess Officer. One of his primary duties was to prepare, in triplicate, the daily menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Smith was a stickler for making sure each menu was absolutely correct and in line with what was served. At one time the menu stated limeade, but the ration breakdown point substituted lemons, so lemonade was served. "Sutton," growled Captain Smith, "where is my limeade?" Ken uprooted a small tree in a nearby field, painted some lemons green, hung them on the tree, and placed the tree, dirt and all, on a plate on the officers' table. The captain was not amused, and punishment was meted out. This sort of stuff went back and forth for some time until Ken went too far. The ration breakdown point substituted vanilla ice cream at one evening meal when the menu stated maple nut. Smith stormed, "Sutton...where are the nuts in my ice cream." Ken made the mistake of replying, "Sir, perhaps the nut is on the end of the spoon." This was too much for the captain, who screamed, "WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY? Tomorrow morning by 0800 I want on my desk a 5,000-word military letter on why you shouldn't have said that." Well, Ken was not about to let this chance go by, plus he didn't have the time to write 5,000 words about anything, especially his foolish mistake. With the help of his wife, who lived off-post, he created a letter titled "Why I Shouldn't Have Said That" composed of a series of pictures cut out of old magazines to which he added captions like "This is ice cream, possibly maple nut", "This is a spoon with which you eat the maple nut ice cream", "This is my big mouth", "This is one of the possible

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outcomes [a picture of a man behind bars] when you let your big mouth overload your ass.” On page six he wrote, “Sir, at first glance this paper may seem somewhat short of 5,000 words, but, sir, you have to remember that a picture is worth a thousand words.”

At the evening meal there was much laughter at the officers’ table. Then came “STUDENT MESS OFFICER!” Certain he was about to be dismissed from the program, Ken hurried to report to Captain Smith. Instead, he was met with a huge smile, something few of us had ever seen. “Okay, Sutton,” said Smith. “You got away with it this time. That showed a lot of initiative and it was funny as hell.” Few of us would have had the balls to do what Ken had done, but he somehow managed to survive.

Wayne Ferrentino recounts a typical interaction with Captain Smith, “After mess one evening, CPT Smith decided it was time for some PT and low crawling across the field close to us. I believe it was Candidate *Johnson* that was having a very difficult time, probably some heat exhaustion, and was about to pass out. He was close to me so I crawled over to help when a boot kicked me over and asked what I was doing. After I expressed my concern, Smith got in my face and told me to let the candidate die and we would name the field after him.”

Craig Bigg’s wife had just delivered a son at the base hospital and Craig requested permission to visit them. Smith’s response was that “the Army had all kinds of doctors and nurses who were more than capable of taking care of both of them.” Fortunately, Craig’s TAC was more sympathetic and allowed Craig to sneak off to the hospital without the captain’s knowledge. Quite a risk for the TAC to take, since, had he been found out, he undoubtedly would have been subjected to even more of the captain’s ire than Craig.

Our first student company commander (we would regularly be rotated through various command positions) was *Clarence Kugler*, who was, and remains to this day, a real character. On the train from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Basic Training at Fort Dix, Clarence had

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convinced a fellow recruit that it would be a great idea to shave their heads before they arrived. Fortified by some contraband liquor, Clarence had the good sense to talk the other guy into being shaved first. Clarence wielded the razor with all the skill of someone who had never shaved a head before, inflicting several scrapes and cuts. Upon seeing the results of his amateur barber work, Clarence then decided that he liked his hair just as it was, at least until the Fort Dix barbers could ply their trade. The poor bald recruit would face the wrath of the Drill Sergeants, who were convinced that he was some sort of wise guy, and he ultimately end up in front of his Basic company commander. This actually paid off for the recruit. Because he was a law school graduate, he was soon transferred to the Judge Advocate General Corps, thus ending his chances of going into the Infantry.

Soon after we moved into our 50th Company barracks, Clarence was made student company commander. After a few days of supervising us in such important duties as waxing floors and trimming grass, Clarence went to see Smith in his office, where the captain was conferring with his TACs. We had quickly learned that we should never appear to be meek, so the proper technique when calling on a cadre office was to pound very hard on the door jamb with the open palm, then shout “Sir, Candidate So-and-So requests permission to enter” (candidates not speaking loudly enough were rebuked “Sound off like you’ve got a pair!”). Clarence forcefully announced himself and Smith, in his usual manner, growled “What do you want, candidate? We’re having a meeting.” Kugler describes what happened next:

I told the captain that I thought since we were meeting all the standards set for us it would be a good idea to reward the men by taking them to a movie. Suddenly, I had four TACs three inches around my head yelling to the point that veins were sticking out of their foreheads. When they finished, Captain Smith remained silent and I remarked to him, “Does this mean no movie?” More yelling from the TACs ensued and Smith then jumped up from his desk and ripped my commander epaulette off and sent me double-timing out of his office.

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Meanwhile, *Mike Eberhardt* was taking advantage of having nothing to do at the moment by taking a nap in his room upstairs. Little did he know that because of Kugler's visit to the captain, cadre had been dispersed throughout the barracks to ensure that everyone was busy. Mike recalls, "All of a sudden I hear this voice. I open my eyes and there is the company exec leaning over me, yelling at the top of his voice. We were told to get up and were assigned some of those ridiculous duties which candidates are given to make us into good leaders."

So what became of Clarence? Later he asked his TAC if his "performance in front of Captain Smith was the death knell" for him. "No," replied the TAC. "Captain Smith said you have balls, you will be OK."

Sometime in those first few days, *Bob Winship* and a few other candidates assigned to 6th Platoon were sitting around talking in one of their rooms with the door closed. Suddenly, "the door crashed open and 2LT Hook, our TAC, walked in and commenced to chewing us up one side and down the other. How were we to know that all doors were to remain open all the time, that we were lower than whale shit at the bottom of the ocean, etc.? Welcome to OCS. When he left we all looked at each other and wondered what the hell we had gotten ourselves into."

I was in 2nd platoon, and our TAC was Second Lieutenant Anthony J. Travaline (at least for the first sixteen weeks – then Trav moved on to a different job and was replaced by Second Lieutenant Dick Dent; but Trav will always be remembered as the 2nd platoon TAC). Like all TACs, Lieutenant Travaline was supposed to play the role of both a father figure and tough task master. But it was a little difficult for us to take him seriously as the latter, since he was a really nice guy who stood only five feet four inches tall. In fact, our nickname for him was "Boo Boo," after Boo Boo Bear, a popular cartoon character of the time. *Bob Winship* recalls following Trav on the way out to formation and mimicking his walk. "Never got caught at that, thank God," says Bob.

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An even more elaborate parody of Travaline came during the variety show that all companies are required to stage several weeks into their cycle. Two candidates walked on stage, one of them carefully placed a highly polished pair of jump boots on the ground; on top of the boots the second candidate placed a helmet liner with a gold bar. Everyone immediately recognized this as Lieutenant Travaline and roared with laughter.

Such ribbing is an OCS tradition, and the TACs were expected to display a certain degree of good nature about it (but that didn't necessarily keep them from making the perpetrators pay some prices). But now and then things got out of hand. Later in the cycle, a group of mischief-makers decided to pull a prank on our good lieutenant. In the middle of the night, they crept into Travaline's office and removed the furniture to the basement of the barracks. They then taped a miniature basketball court onto the floor, complete with baskets just a couple of feet off the ground. All in good fun. Unfortunately, they dragged the office furniture through the company day room, making a mess of the floor. (A "day room" is a room set aside where soldiers can relax, watch TV, read, and so forth. Just about every Army company has one. The day room in our barracks had to be kept in perfect condition at all times, even though we almost never used it.) Captain Smith could not see any humor in this stunt, which had evidently stepped over the line from the good-natured horseplay that was a hallmark of OCS into some dark territory.

Traveline was not the only TAC subjected to such stunts. *Kief Tackaberry* and his twin brother *Burt* were the sons of an Army career officer (a colonel at the time; he eventually rose to lieutenant general). Being Army brats did not diminish the Tackaberry boys' penchant for getting into trouble. In one incident, Kief relates how "a group of us got together one night and lined Lieutenant Cross' desk drawers with tinfoil and filled them with water, fish and various aquarium gravel and ornaments." Undoubtedly, if the actual perpetrators could not be

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identified, the whole platoon felt Cross' wrath.

Another famous incident with Lieutenant Travaline had to do with "the rock." It seems that when Trav was an OCS candidate, he had such trouble with the hand grenade throw that he was in danger of failing the final PT test. His TAC's solution was to have Trav constantly carry a rock about the size and weight of a hand grenade, and to practice throwing it whenever there was a break in training. This must have worked, since Trav graduated and went on to become a TAC himself. Boo Boo decided to pass on this tradition by having the student platoon sergeant of 2nd Platoon carry the rock and care for it at all times. At one point when *Bob Hines* was in the role of platoon sergeant, he either became fed up with lugging the rock around or temporarily lost his senses. Says Bob, "My memory of that afternoon is quite vivid. I can still see that rock leaving my hand, sailing over the platoon, and into a dry creek bed" near our barracks. Traveline vowed to have Bob shot if we didn't find it, so the entire platoon was forced to crawl around the creek bed searching for the precious stone. According to Bob, "there were about a million rocks of that size, shape and color." Whenever a candidate would hopefully take a stone to Trav, he would pronounce it not to be THE rock. Ultimately, the rock was never found and Bob was restricted to the barracks while the rest of us got one of our few weekend passes, plus he was rewarded with three hours of walking tours.

Bob was also required to write a sort of "confession." It is a classic example of how candidates could maintain their sense of humor even in those trying times:

ROCKS (and how to lose 'em) by OC Bob Hines

And I remember "the rock", a symbol of purity, honesty, integrity, and stracness*. Yes, it seems like only yesterday that I, Bobby J. Hines, hurled that treasured object into Ranger Creek, Fort Benning. How anyone could commit such a heinous crime as this leads me on occasions to doubt my own sanity. The

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thought of this precious stone lying on the bottom of Fort Benning's largest outdoor latrine, amidst all that slime and mold and all those common everyday stones, causes me to awaken in a cold sweat in the middle of the night.

When I think of the international crisis this performance of mine could have created I wring my hands in anguish and despair. However, I do feel that the disposal of the platoon rock did illustrate one important facet of modern life. No matter how ridiculous it may seem, you cannot take a platoon rock for granite.

[*From the urbandictionary.com: "STRAC – A 1970's era US military acronym, meaning: Strategic, Tough, and Ready Around the Clock. To be labeled 'strac' was considered high praise."]

In every military unit, junior officers are assigned a multitude of responsibilities in addition to their primary assignment – things like Morale Officer, Fire Marshall, Pay Officer, and even less vital duties. OCS was no exception to this, so our TACs had much more to do than simply supervise us candidates. One of Trav's responsibilities was Area Beautification Officer. Naturally, this trickled down to members of the 2nd platoon, and *Paul Kochis* was made the candidate Area Beautification Officer. *George Hatfield* has clear memories of this, since, as he put it "We used my car on one of the 'beautification' sojourns [George's wife had an apartment near the post, where she kept the car – no candidates were allowed to have cars on post.] I remember going into a wooded area and Paul selecting some plants for us to bring back to plant in the company area. The main thing I remember is Lieutenant Traveline accusing Paul of bringing back 'weeds' to plant!! Typical TAC officer stuff!" Despite all this, Paul does have some good memories of his area beautification assignment: "I volunteered for it because I knew we would have to go off base to find plants and materials. So what, you say. Well, it meant a diversion to a MacDonald's to get a Big Mac, fries and a big, cold coke. We must have had to make five trips for 'essential'

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supplies. We did build a pretty nice, curved cinder block wall with some colorful plants.”

All in all, Travaline looked out for us. It was forbidden to keep food in our rooms overnight, supposedly to prevent insect infestations. Whenever one of us received a box of goodies from home, we had to share it with the rest of the platoon and even with other platoons so it would be eaten up before lights out. On the day before one of our many PT tests, at least six of us got goody boxes – too much to eat, especially since we had to be in top shape the next morning. Rather than make us throw away the leftovers, Trav was nice enough to let us store our booty in his office overnight.

All the TACs interacted with every platoon, not just their own, so we became familiar with each and every one of them. In general, they were OK, but they certainly did their job of keeping things tough for us. Probably the worst was Lieutenant Eric Toolson, who particularly stays in my mind because of something he said while I was student company commander. We were lined up in formation ready to march off to class (actually, to *run* off to class) and Toolson was the TAC in charge that day. Standing before me, he glared into my eyes and said, “There’s a VC sniper on that building who is aiming an AK-47 right at your head. He’s going to kill you. You’re going to go to Vietnam and die.” I suppose that was his way of putting us under stress. I wonder how he would have felt if he had said that to one of our OCS classmates who *did* die in Vietnam.

Wayne Ferrentino adds a comment about Toolson: “Quite a weird guy. He was enamored of an exotic dancer at a club just off base. After 18 weeks, we were allowed weekend passes. *Brooks Doyle*, *Rich Goodman* and myself went to the club and while they distracted the bartender, I jumped over the bar and stole the scarfs she used in her act – quite a show. Draped them around Toolson’s office and not sure I want to imagine what he did with them.”

Wayne also has a story about Lieutenant Cross, the TAC whose desk was turned into an aquarium by the *Tackaberrys*. Cross wasn’t happy

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with something Wayne did when he was student company commander: “I think I earned some candidate respect when we were out running around the Airborne track and I halted the company. Cross came running over and asking in many expletives what I was doing. I told him it was a rough night for us and I thought the candidates deserved a rest. Cost a few tours but was worth it.” [We will hear more about both the Airborne track and “tours” later.]

John Foote tells of an experience that illustrates what all of us may have felt at one time or another – the TACs always seemed to be one step ahead of us:

I was terrified of them all, and one day my platoon TAC ordered me to appear at his office. I braced myself against the wall until called, and I started thinking: “What if I salute with my left hand? What if I salute with my LEFT HAND?” I heard my name and swung into his office and immediately saluted — with my left hand. He NEVER LOOKED UP as my left hand slid down my side and my right hand slowly replaced it. But, head bent over whatever he was writing, came “Foote. You THINK too much.” Now how in Christ’s name did he KNOW I had been thinking too much? I was mortified.

Bob Fullmer struck a blow for all of us smacks in this story which might be titled “The Candidate’s Revenge”:

One afternoon doing the usual weapons inspection one of the TAC Officers was standing so close to me that our helmet liners were touching. He ordered me several times to do “inspection arms” and each time I informed him that I could not do so due to the position of our noses.

I thought that this was one of those tests the TAC Officers put you through to test your mettle, your judgement under pressure. I thought I could step back and do the movement or do the movement slowly as not to hit him with the flash

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suppressor of my M14.

Then I thought since this was a direct order he was testing me if I could follow direct orders in tense situations. I knew that I was not going to back up or back down so I brought up my M14 smartly, clipped him under his chin and he fell over backwards, helmet liner and sunglasses flying, with a small cut under his chin. I knew I was in deep trouble but I was following a direct order.

This cost me 500 immediate pushups and I thought possible charges for attacking an officer but my platoon members came to my aide and said that I had warned him several times. Many others said he was asking for it and that I did the right thing. This included my own TAC Officer who shook my hand and said he had it coming to him.

Nothing else happened other than the 500 pushups.

Bob's comment that his TAC said the other TAC "had it coming" illustrates a dynamic of OCS that never occurred to me at the time and I have come to appreciate only recently: As in any organization, the cadre did not always interact smoothly with each other. I, and I suppose most of the rest of us, were convinced that Captain Smith and the TACs functioned as a well-oiled machine with the single goal of making life hard for us. But in reality, they were all dealing with their own issues and priorities.

Bill Thoroughgood, one of my roommates, was better able to observe this than most of us in his role as Student Mess Officer, for which he had volunteered early in the program. While his classmates ate silently in the mess hall, focused on not violating the rules of etiquette, Bill was busily supervising the civilian kitchen workers and ensuring that things were running efficiently. This involved catering to the officers' table, where, as Bill puts it, Captain Smith "lorded over" everyone, including the TACs, who, "vied for his favor at his left and right."

At dinner one evening came a loud "Student Mess Officer! Where's

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‘Thoroughgood?’ from Lieutenant Cross. Bill trotted over to the table, where Cross demanded “Get me some cherry pie!” This put Bill in a quandary. As part of our leadership training, we had recently taken a class on moral courage, and this seemed to Bill to be a situation in which his moral courage was being tested. Refusing to carry out an order could be viewed as insubordinate, but fetching pie hardly seemed appropriate for someone in training to be an officer – and Bill was determined not to do so. What to do? Bill stole a glance at Captain Smith, who was undoubtedly evaluating both him and the TAC, but gave no hint of support for Bill. He was stuck for a moment, then a solution popped into his head. “Sir,” he said resolutely to Cross, “this is not a job for an officer candidate. I will have the kitchen help bring you out a piece of cherry pie.” At this, he wheeled and retreated to the kitchen, leaving the TAC glowering at the table.

The next day Bill was called to Cross’ office, where he endured “the best chewing out I ever received in the Army,” the point of which was that Bill should never make the lieutenant look bad in front of Captain Smith again – or else. Satisfied in learning that he had embarrassed Cross for his inappropriate demand, Bill kept the smile off his face until he was dismissed and marched out the door.

Kief Tackaberry also saw friction among the cadre first hand. He felt that his TAC, Lieutenant Reid, had unfairly gigged him during an inspection. To Kief, this was the last straw in what he believed was an undeserved pattern. Kief, not being one to back down easily, confronted Reid in his office and explained the unfairness of the situation. Reid responded that he didn’t care. This prompted Kief to tell Reid that if “I caught him alone, I was going to beat the living crap out of him.” Reid marched him off to Captain Smith, who asked the TAC if he had a witness to the confrontation. When he learned there was no witness, “Smith called him a dumb ass and threw Lieutenant Reid out of his office.” The captain then asked Kief to explain what had led up to the confrontation. Upon hearing Kief’s explanation, Smith said, “He really is a dumb ass.” One can only conclude this did not enhance the captain’s evaluation of Reid.

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Kief was involved in another instance of friction among the cadre. 50th Company included a number of college-level basketball players, including Kief and his brother Burt. Captain Smith, being the competitive fellow he was, put together a team and challenged the post champions, to which they lost by only three points. Then the captain went a step further and decided that a candidate vs. cadre game would be a great idea. The TACs were unhappy with this, since none of them were very good basketball players (it must be remembered that Lieutenant Travaline was just few inches over five feet tall). Kief and Burt even went to the captain and offered to let him score a few points if he would take them off restriction, which was their almost-constant state because of their ongoing antics. Smith, of course, refused. So they double-teamed him the whole game, leaving their team-mates to handle the TACs, which presented no challenge. Smith got madder and madder, elbowing and shoving, but he never scored a point. The candidates celebrated our lopsided victory over the cadre, who didn't seem quite as imposing after that.

One of the players on the basketball team was *Doug Cannon*, who was also a pitcher on the company softball team. Not content with forcing the cadre to play the candidates at basketball, Captain Smith did the same for softball. To even the odds, he forced Doug to carry a bat "held high above my head for the however many mile march to the field. I started with the bat above my head but soon the bat was being passed among fellow members of my platoon. The bat was never lowered and always visible to the Captain. The crowning moment was then crushing the cadre in the game."

Captain Smith's obsession with sports held other benefits for us candidates. He arranged for the entire company to be bussed to Atlanta to watch the Braves play. Being from Northeastern Ohio, I was accustomed to the gigantic, old Cleveland Municipal Stadium the Indians called home. Atlanta was my first exposure to the smaller stadiums of the '60's, and what I remember most from the game was the feeling of being inside a soup bowl. But it was a nice break from our usual routine.

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We also were taken to a minor league game in Columbus. For years, I had a vague memory that we had seen the legendary Satchel Paige pitch, but I couldn't be sure that I wasn't having one of those Mark Twain moments of remembering something that hadn't happened. Other candidates were equally unsure until almost fifty years later when *Peter Nowlan* reported what his research had found:

“In August, 1968, the Atlanta Braves signed Satchel Paige to a contract running through 1969 as a pitching coach / pitcher, believed done primarily so Satchel Paige could accrue sufficient service time to receive a major league pension. Paige did most of his coaching from his living room in Kansas City, but he did pitch in at least one preseason game in April, 1969 (from Wikipedia). The Atlanta Braves played a series of exhibition games against its triple A affiliate Richmond before the season opened. The first was in Savannah, where Satchel pitched, and the second was in Columbus, where Satchel pitched a scoreless inning [he would have been 69 years old] (Fox News ‘Remembering Satchel Paige’).”

This apparently took place sometime before our ninth week, when I'm sure a break like this was especially welcome.

Lest the reader get the impression that Captain Smith's emphasis on sports was unique among Army officers, it must be kept in mind that this was hardly unusual. Most Army posts have fielded teams in a variety of sports, and it was common for some soldiers to be assigned to play on what amounted to a full-time basis. LTC Herron, the 5th Battalion commander, was also supportive of athletics and took a hand in organizing battalion-wide competitions. *Rod Seefeld*, a former track and cross-country runner who found “trips around the Airborne field much easier than for most other candidates”, recalls that after a ten-mile race in the heat of July, “the Battalion Commander congratulated me and I had to tell him I needed to keep walking to avoid cramps. He accepted my demand.” One of the few occasions when a colonel

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acquiesced to an officer candidate.

The 50th Company staff also included a cadre of NCOs including a First Sergeant, Supply Sergeant, and various other NCOs and clerks. We didn't have much contact with them, since they were busy doing the behind-the-scenes work of making things go smoothly. The one NCO who stood out was our First Sergeant, Carlee Steed, a "three-wars" man – a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Tall and spare, he was a man of few words. But when First Sergeant Steed spoke, we all listened. His praise, though hard-won, meant a lot to us young, eager candidates.

Sergeant Steed was adamant about one thing: No one was to call him "Top", the nickname often used for a company's "top" sergeant. "A top is a child's toy," he would growl.

One of the things that stands out about OCS is how isolated we were, how cut off from the rest of the world. Basic and AIT were also like this, but it seemed worse at Benning. At least in AIT we could play radios in the barracks in the evening (I am transported back to winter at Fort Dix whenever I hear Glenn Campbell's "Wichita Lineman"). I've been told that some candidates had radios, but I don't remember hearing them. I suppose I had brought along the transistor radio that Mom and Dad had given me as a birthday present, but I don't recall playing it.

For the first several weeks, the only people we interacted with outside of our fellow candidates and the cadre were instructors, senior candidates who harassed us, barbers, civilian mess hall workers (to whom we virtually never spoke) and the medics who gave us shots, which we continued to get regularly. Some of the married guys' wives lived nearby, but they were seen only on laundry runs. With each minute of the day tightly scheduled, there was no time to wonder about what was going on in the rest of the world. The only time I remember the television in the day room being turned on was once when, for some forgotten reason, I was rewarded with TV privileges. I sat alone in front of the set watching shows that were completely unfamiliar to

me, having watched virtually no television since I had started Basic many months earlier. Feeling a little guilty that I had gotten a break, I eventually drifted back upstairs to join in getting the platoon area ready for the next day.

Bill Snodgrass offers an interesting take on our isolation. We often held platoon meetings in the latrine, since it was the only place large enough to hold everyone, plus this kept us from messing up the hallway floor. During one meeting, a runner from the cadre offices came in and asked, "Is there a Candidate Snodgrass here?" He handed Bill a telegram from the Red Cross telling him that his wife in California had delivered a baby girl. When Bill went to First Sergeant Steed to ask for leave, Steed's reply mimicked Captain's Smith response to *Craig Biggs*: "Candidate, women have been having babies for thousands of years without your help. The Army needs you here." Bill did not meet his new daughter until six weeks later.

The OCS Program

The six-month OCS program was structured in three "phases": Basic, Intermediate and Senior. In the Basic phase, which lasted the first eleven weeks, we were under the constant supervision of the TACs, with very little positive feedback and plenty of negative. It was during this stage that the pressure and the physical demands were the greatest. It seemed that everything we did, we did wrong. Here the emphasis was on weeding out those who were not holding up under stress. The pressure let up slightly during the Intermediate phase, from weeks twelve through eighteen, and there was greater emphasis on technical training and somewhat less hovering-over by the TACs. This is not to say that things became easy, but we felt a little more like human beings and a little less like complete idiots. After eighteen weeks, we became senior candidates, where along with more technical instruction in infantry tactics, we got more training in leading other men who were

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carrying out those tactics. There was still plenty of stress and physical training, and candidates were still either dropping out or being dropped against their will, but in fewer numbers.

Through this process, OCS had six months to turn us into officers. To appreciate the difficulty of this, it must be kept in mind that we were products of the '60's. Until we had entered the Army just eight weeks before starting OCS, most of us were generally rebellious to the point of being contemptuous of authority, independent and carefree. Prior generations would have viewed us as anarchists. We had to be quickly conditioned to do things "the Army way", which often seemed to defy logic, at least to young men with all the logic skills that four years of college could instill. Used to being convinced and persuaded, we now had to be whipped into shape to obey orders immediately and without question, just as we would be expected to do in combat, and as we would expect those under our command to do. Now we would have to be more than just soldiers – we would have to become *leaders* of soldiers.

Not wanting to produce simple automatons, while OCS strove to instill discipline it also needed to maintain in us some of the independence we so cherished. The Army wanted officers who could think, analyze situations and take initiative. Overlaying all this was the necessity to create men with the physical and mental toughness to function on the battlefield. It was a tall order.

The curriculum of Infantry OCS had several different components upon which each candidate was evaluated: academics, leadership and teamwork, physical training, and, for lack of a better way to say it, adherence to military standards.

Academics

Like every profession, the Infantry has its own body of knowledge, including subjects such as weapons, tactics, military organization and procedures, military law, land navigation and much more. We were

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issued three dozen Army manuals – which we were required to place in the correct spot and in the correct order on our desks – covering in detail the myriad of issues an officer should know. Training typically began with classes in an academic setting. We spent many hours in indoor and outdoor classrooms, listening to lectures, watching training films, being called upon to answer questions – like we were still back in college. Well, not quite like we were still back in college...

For one thing, our indoor classrooms seemed to have only two temperature settings: ninety-five degrees or what felt like just above freezing (the latter was an attempt – unsuccessful – at keeping us awake). Since we were soaking wet from running to class, we would sit in either a hot box getting even sweatier or an ice box shivering from the cold. It's a wonder we didn't all catch pneumonia. But we were young and tough.

We were also tired. Any chance to sit down was an invitation to fall asleep, and this coupled with the generally boring nature of the classes (and, unfortunately, the tendency of some of the instructors to simply recite verbatim pages out of the subject manuals) made keeping awake a real challenge. One reasonably effective technique was “the ripple.” Every few minutes the man at the right end of each row would poke the man on his left, who in turn would jab the next fellow, and so on down the row. All this was dependent, of course, on the man on the far right staying awake so he could start the ripple, so it was far from one hundred percent effective. Looking around the room, one could always see heads bobbing, candidates slumped over their desks, and at least a few sprawled back in their seats, mouths agape. The instructors must have been used to this and were generally pretty tolerant. But every now and then they would single out a sleeping candidate, jolt him awake and have him do pushups, run around the room, or some such thing, just as a warning to others.

Fortunately, not all of our instructors were dull and unimaginative. In fact, a number of them were far better than many of my college profs. The best were a couple of JAG (Judge Advocate General) lawyers who taught us about the Uniform Code of Military Justice

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(soldiers fall under the UCMJ rather than the civilian justice system). These JAG fellows were witty and interesting, and managed to keep the attention of two hundred tired candidates. They even had us stage a mock trial, where the defendant was – not surprisingly – candidate *Clarence Kugler*. I believe we found him guilty of whatever his offense was.

Most of us dreaded being called upon since we never quite knew where that might lead. There were two candidates named *Smith* in 50th Company, *James* and *Robert*. Says Robert, “The instructors had a tendency to bark out a last name to get a candidate to answer a question. Since they didn’t know the names of anyone in the class, they would call a common name such as Johnson or Brown or Jones or Smith. Odds were in their favor that there would be someone with that name. When the instructor called on Candidate Smith, neither of us moved. Finally, I stood up and asked if he wanted Candidate Jim Smith. When the instructor said yes, I sat down and the other Smith had to stand and answer. (Sorry, Jim.) It only worked once. After that, when the instructor was asked which Smith they wanted, he would reply, ‘Which one are you?’ And when you said your name they would say, ‘You’ll do.’”

Now and then, we were able to earn certain “privileges” as a company. It was never clear what we had done to earn them. My guess is that it was simply a matter of having reached a certain point in the program. One of the biggest privileges was being allowed to buy snacks from civilian vendors during class breaks – things like ice cream or honeybuns. Even on the coldest days on outdoor classrooms or ranges, candidates would gobble down ice cream whenever we got the chance. The vendors seemed to know when we would get these privileges (either they had been tipped off or else they knew enough about the system that they could predict it). But now and then a vendor’s truck would pull up just at break time, only to be turned away because the TAC in charge had gotten a “case of the ass” about something we had done or failed to do. I don’t know who was more

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disappointed, the poor vendor who had driven miles to get to where we were only to turn around and go back empty handed, or us poor, starving candidates.

Many of our classes were held in Infantry Hall, an imposing six-story edifice built in the typical unattractive '60s style. Infantry Hall was the home of the U.S. Army Infantry School, and it was a bustling place. Inside were dozens of large, auditorium-style classrooms, where classes were held for not just officer candidates like ourselves, but also for newly-commissioned ROTC lieutenants and West Point graduates who had been assigned to the Infantry, plus senior officers taking advanced classes. It may sound prejudiced, but we officer candidates in our spit-shined boots and heavily starched fatigues certainly looked sharper than most of the other students there, especially the ROTC grads, who we all agreed were the sloppiest of the bunch.

While the other officers attending classes in Infantry Hall enjoyed a relaxed atmosphere, officer candidates had no such luxury. We arrived outside the building disheveled and sweaty after our run from the barracks. After a few minutes of straightening our formation and, hopefully, catching our breath, we marched into the building in a "column of twos" and were guided to our classroom by one of our TACs. We filed into the classroom, then stood at attention – eyes looking straight ahead, motionless and silent. When we were all at our desks, the student company commander saluted the instructor and said loudly, "Sir, Candidate So-and-So, Student Commander 50th Company (OC) reports XX men present, XX men absent." After the instructor acknowledged the salute, the student commander did an about face and gave the command "Ground equipment, take – SEATS!" Everyone chanted "50th Company First and Best," then placed their helmet liners on one side of the desk and their clipboards on the other and plopped into their seats in unison. At the end of class, the Student Company Commander would call the company to attention, ask the instructor for further directions and relay them to the students. The company would then be marched out of the building and form up for the run back to

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the barracks.

If we had performed well in class and not too many of us had fallen asleep, we were given breaks and the opportunity to buy items from the many snack bars scattered about Infantry Hall. However, we had to wait our turn as those more senior to us (meaning everyone else!) bought their goodies. The snack bars and the air conditioning made Infantry Hall the most bearable of all our classrooms. We missed these luxuries when we had classes in small, remote buildings which offered no relief from the heat or cold.

In front of Infantry Hall stood the famous “Follow Me” statue. “Follow Me” is the motto of the Infantry, and the “Follow Me” insignia was on our shoulder patches and helmet liners. The motto is also reflected in the OCS Alma Mater:

Far across the Chattahoochee
To the Upatoi [*two rivers near Fort Benning*]
Stands our loyal Alma Mater
Benning’s School for Boys.

Forward ever, backward never
Faithfully we strive
To the port of embarkation
Follow me with pride.

When it’s time and we are called
To guard our country’s might
We’ll be there with head held high
To lead in Freedom’s fight.

Yearning ever, Failing never
To keep our country free
The call is clear, we meet the task
For we are Infantry.

The “Follow Me” statue was intended to epitomize the aggressive spirit of the Infantry. It depicts a 1950’s-era soldier leaning forward as though advancing into a hail of bullets. In his left hand he clutches an M1 rifle with fixed bayonet. His right hand is raised over his head in

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the classic “follow me” gesture. The statue was created in 1959 by two Army privates, and the model who posed for it was an officer candidate at the time. The statue was made of cast resin held together with a framework of steel rods. Originally placed in a different location on Fort Benning, the statue was moved to Infantry Hall when the building opened in 1964.

Every evening when we were not on a field exercise we were expected to study to prepare for the next day’s classes. This was especially challenging since we were already worn out from a full day of training and PT, plus there were a myriad of tasks to perform, from polishing brass and shining boots to cleaning the latrine. Nevertheless, we had to be at our desks studying between 7:30 and 9:00, and woe betide the candidate who was caught by a prowling TAC doing anything but – such as reading letters from home, or, God forbid, napping.

I managed to get lucky during one of these study periods when I was student company commander. Rushing up to my room after tending to some the CO’s many administrative duties, I stripped off my shirt, since the study period uniform was t-shirt and fatigue pants. Without thinking, I absent-mindedly tossed the shirt on my bunk instead of hanging it up. I had just settled down at my desk and my two roommates were studying busily away – evidently, so busily that they had not noticed my failure to hang up my shirt – when the duty TAC strolled in. It was the infamous Toolson. We all snapped to attention. Casting his eyes about the room Toolson spied my shirt and cried “What’s this?” I cringed and stammered that the offending garment was mine. He just growled, spun on his heel (grinding it into our linoleum floor) and stomped out. Whatever possessed him to take mercy on me, I don’t know, but I got off with no punishment.

These study periods were one of the few times when our barracks were quiet. Except when we slept or stood silently at parade rest in our rooms awaiting Captain Smith’s inspection team as it moved down the halls, the barracks hummed with activity. In the evening, candidates were busily cleaning rooms and equipment, shining boots and brass,

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hustling to and fro from various special assignments, and engaging in the horseplay typical of young men who have been thrown together; orders were being shouted out regarding the next day's training schedule and uniforms, and pogeys from home were passed around. In the mornings, we hit the latrine to shave and shower at lightning speed so we could be in formation on time. There was almost no time to relax or engage in personal activities like letter writing. Virtually every moment of the day was tightly scheduled, which was just as well since it made the time go more quickly and allowed less opportunity to get into trouble.

For almost every subject there was a field training exercise that accompanied the academic component. This was where we were supposed to demonstrate our mastery of the subject by actually performing what we had learned, whether it was employing weapons, conducting a tactical exercise or getting from point A to point B over hill and dale.

Much of our "classroom" training actually took place in bleachers out on ranges. Here we learned about the practical application of weapons and were sometimes treated to impressive firepower displays. These included things like tanks firing their main guns, artillery bombardments, attack helicopters and C-130 gunships – all designed to show us what was available to support the Infantry, and, I think, make us feel more comfortable that such firepower would be there for us when we got to Vietnam. Of course, not everything would necessarily be available at the same time, if at all.

The "mad minute" was a firepower demonstration that duplicated a tactic that was actually used in Vietnam. If a company commander felt an enemy attack was imminent, he might order a mad minute to break up the enemy's plans. When the order was given, everyone would open up and keep firing for a minute or so – rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers. In OCS we actually got to do this once at night, which was even more impressive than in daytime since tracers were flying by the thousands and explosions lit up the sky. I was in a two-man foxhole with a candidate whose rifle was not working, so he gave me his magazines to shoot along with my own. All in all, I must have had ten

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or fifteen twenty-round magazines. Plus, my M14 rifle was capable of firing full automatic. An M14 on full automatic is almost uncontrollable, so after a few rounds, the barrel would be pointing way up in the air. I just pulled it back down and let off another burst. The other candidate wasn't much interested in shooting, so I fired up all the magazines. By the time I was done, we were both giggling away. I don't know if I would have hit anything, but it left no doubt that I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of the U.S. Army at its most lethal.

There were a number of other weapons we also trained with. One of the most fascinating was the "recoilless rifle", which isn't anything like it sounds. Recoilless rifles are not shoulder-fired weapons, like most of us would picture a "rifle". Rather, they are crew-served anti-tank weapons that fire armor-piercing projectiles. What makes them recoilless is that both the cartridge case and the breech are perforated, so that a certain portion of the explosion that sends the projectile downrange blows out the back of the barrel, exactly counterbalancing the force that goes out the front, thus cancelling out recoil. In effect, it is much like firing a rocket.

Recoilless rifles came in two sizes: 90mm and 106mm. The 90mm is man-portable, but at almost forty pounds and over four feet long, "portable" is a relative term, as I learned during at least one training exercise in which I had to lug the darned thing. The 106mm version weighs over four hundred sixty pounds and is eleven feet long, so it is meant to be mounted on a vehicle or tripod. We got to fire one round apiece from a 106, which was plenty. To this day, it is still the loudest thing I've ever heard, with a backblast you could feel right through your fatigues (and which could cause injury or death if you stood behind the weapon when it was fired). Although recoilless rifles of a wide variety of sizes are still in use around the world today, they were pretty much phased out of the U.S. military, having been replaced by modern wire- or laser-guided weapons; although, I read recently that the Army has adopted a new Swedish recoilless rifle weighing only fifteen pounds. Now that's an improvement.

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An interesting field exercise was known as “Escape and Evasion.” This was designed to give us experience in what to do if we became separated from our unit and were trying to get back to friendly lines. We were trucked out to a remote part of the post and dropped off one at a time just as it got dark. Our goal was to travel several miles to a friendly camp, all the while avoiding enemy patrols. This required a combination of land navigation and stealthy movement. Any unfortunate candidate who was captured was taken to an enemy camp and subjected to “torture”, which usually consisted of being locked inside a wall locker that had been placed in the ground like a coffin. Instructors would beat on the wall locker and throw dirt on it to convince the captive that he was being buried alive. There was a rumor (there were always rumors) that this “torturing” had gotten out of hand and some candidates had been hurt, psychologically if not physically, so the torture had been toned down. Whether or not there was any truth to all this, none of us wanted to find out first-hand. For the rest of the night, I, like most of the others, crept through the woods, pretty much lost. A few actually made it to the objective and some others were taken prisoner. About 3 a. m. all of us who remained in the woods were to head in a pre-designated direction, which would bring us to a road where trucks were patrolling to pick us up. That’s how most of us made it to the friendly camp. If nothing else, we got our first real lesson in how easy it is to get lost as hell in the woods after dark, and how lonely it is out there.

There were exams for almost every subject we studied. Exams on Leadership, Small Arms, Anti-Tank and Missiles, Map and Aerial Photo Reading, Communications, Engineer and Nuclear Weapons, Mortar, Artillery and Air Force, Tactics, Counterguerrilla Patrolling, Staff Subjects, and others. They were graded from I (superior) to V (failing). A candidate could accumulate a total of 1000 academic points; anyone achieving less than 700 points was considered academically deficient and was subject to review by a Faculty Board, which would recommend

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their “disposition”, as the Officer Candidate Program Manual phrases it. More will be said about such dispositions in the section titled Panels, Recycles, Drops and Drop Outs.

Although some candidates were washed out of the program because of poor academic performance, I don’t believe there were many. Since 50th Company was composed almost entirely of college graduates, we pretty well knew how to learn enough to get through the classwork.

Leadership and Teamwork

Since the primary goal of OCS was to turn out leaders, leadership training started in the very first week. One of the first subjects covered was the Honor Code, the set of ethical precepts which each candidate agrees to uphold. Basically, it states that an officer candidate will not lie or make equivocal or evasive statements; will not steal; will not cheat; and he will not tolerate others who do. Violations of the Honor Code typically resulted in dismissal from the program. It was impressed upon us that minor rule-breaking (such as having Kool Aid rather than plain water in one’s canteen) made the candidate subject to relatively mild punishments; but *lying* about the Kool Aid would get him kicked out of OCS. As far as I know, although there was plenty of rule-bending in 50th company, no one went so far as to lie about it when questioned (or, at least, they didn’t get caught lying).

Leadership had both a classroom component and field exercises. In the classroom we listened to lectures and watched training films that depicted various leadership situations. In one memorable film, several soldiers had been seriously injured on a firing range when a mortar round blew up while still in the tube. Once the problem had supposedly been corrected, the lieutenant’s challenge was to get his men to resume firing despite having witnessed what had happened to their buddies. The lectures covered many different aspects of leadership, from gaining the respect of soldiers to exercising moral courage.

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One of the most interesting of the field exercises was the Leadership Reaction Course, which came during our first few weeks. This entailed having one candidate supervise a group of other candidates performing a physical challenge, such as getting a loaded wagon across a simulated river (the water itself was *not* simulated, and the weather was cold, so anyone who fell in was wet and miserable for the rest of the day). The leader had to analyze the situation, formulate a plan, and direct the squad as they carried out the plan. We weren't graded so much on successfully accomplishing the goal (some of the exercises were designed so that success was virtually impossible) as on how we approached it.

Bill Thoroughgood has vivid recollections of the Leadership Reaction Course and how meaningful it was. Awaiting his turn "in sort of a fog", he suddenly heard "Thoroughgood, you're next. Come with me." Bill's leadership challenge was to have his squad move a heavy round log eighteen inches in diameter and two feet long from one side of a thirty-foot-wide pool to the other over thick chains strung over a series of posts. Bill reports that he "could see the evaluator looking at me with pencil at the ready and clipboard with my name at the top. This situation was not like college where you had five days to prepare for a big test next Thursday. In college you could even ask to make up an exam you missed on account of 'sickness'. That's how the boy always had a failsafe. Not here. This Army was for young men being groomed to be leaders. I could feel the uneasiness welling up inside. My stomach was in knots." Then Bill had an inspiration – he would have his men lay across the chains to form a roadbed over which one man could drag the log. Says Bill, "I'm sure more bark came off the backs of each of them who lay across the chains than came off the log that day. Yet no one complained." It worked.

Bill's story gives a pretty accurate impression of the self-doubt, worry, and fear of failing that surrounded much of the program, followed – finally – by the learning and growing that comes from finding out you could solve problems and meet challenges for which you were unprepared. Exactly what the Army intended, I

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suppose.

There were also many tactical field exercises conducted throughout the program in which candidates were put in leadership positions, testing both their understanding of the tactical principles we had learned in the classroom and their skill in commanding other men. Many of these exercises involved either attacking or being attacked by “aggressors”, which were troops from a regular Army unit stationed at Fort Benning. We soon found out that controlling a group of soldiers in combat, even simulated combat, could be very difficult.

In addition to being evaluated by the class instructors, we were evaluated by our cadre of TACs and also by each other. In the 10th and 17th weeks of the program, each of us completed a Leadership Rating Form on his platoonmates and put them in rank order from top to bottom. We referred to the forms as “bayonet sheets”, since that was what we felt we were doing to each other, and to the entire system as “screw your buddy”.

These evaluations were based on the Leadership Traits which the OCS program emphasized, such things as Adaptability, Ambition, Appearance, Attention to Duty, Cooperation, Dependability, Enthusiasm, Ingenuity, Initiative, Intelligence, Judgement, Loyalty, Moral Courage, Self-Discipline, Self-Improvement, Stamina, Tact and Understanding. TACs also used these factors to rate candidates in their platoons.

Inevitably, candidates placed a lot of emphasis on cooperation and teamwork in rating each other. There were many unpleasant duties that needed to be performed, from cleaning latrines to polishing floors to policing the drainage ditches. We were also expected to help out each other, even when we were burdened with our own work load, and to take orders from peers who were temporarily holding student command positions. While the few candidates who weren’t team players consistently received low ratings, we mostly rated lowest those we knew the least. A valuable part of the program was regular switching of rooms and roommates so we each got to know everyone in our platoon.

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As we became more familiar with each other it got harder to give anyone a poor rating. But it was a forced rating system, so there was no way to rate everyone highly. Nobody liked the “screw your buddy” system, and we all thought it was unfair. It may not have occurred to us that part of the purpose of this system was to condition us to evaluate the performance of others, plus, to make decisions which could drastically affect another person – and that as Infantry officers we could very likely be making decisions that literally involved life and death, decisions even more serious than whether a fellow candidate would stay in OCS.

Interestingly, *Bob Hines* gained some insight into the bayonet sheets. He was on a crew with two other 2nd Platoon candidates who cleaned Lieutenant Dent’s office (this must have been after sixteen weeks, since that is when Dent replaced Traveline as our TAC). Things got pretty informal with Dent during these cleaning sessions, and he allowed the candidates to see the bayonet sheets for the platoon. Reports Bob, “Everyone in the platoon received at least one back stab, but no more than two. Nobody stood out as lacking the right stuff, all of us ‘good guys’ had made it.” Boy, I wish I had known that at the time – maybe I would have relaxed a little.

Another method of measuring leadership was to twice weekly rotate candidates through positions of student company commander, company executive officer, company first sergeant, platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and squad leaders. Performance in these positions was carefully scrutinized by the TACs and could play a major role in whether a candidate would continue in the program.

I had always wondered why some were chosen for these positions while others managed to avoid them for the entire six months. It wasn’t until 2016 that classmate *Gary Zittlow* shed some light on this when he wrote that in our third month he went to his TAC and “complained to him that I wasn’t getting on the chain of command enough and he looked at me and said ‘Zittlow – you just don’t get it. We don’t need to look at you, we need to look at others.’” Whether or not a candidate

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needed to be “looked at” was a combination of the TACs’ evaluation of the candidate, his fellow candidates’ ratings, feedback from instructors and, of course, the opinion of Captain Smith. My guess is also that Smith would sometimes state that a certain candidate should be dropped from the program just to see if a TAC would stand up to him and defend the candidate. Our TACs were in their first command positions since graduating just a few weeks earlier, so they had to prove their competence to their commanding officer – in this case, Captain Smith, who was a hard man to please. So, they worked diligently at emulating the captain, pushing us hard and evaluating our performance rigorously.

I watched as, one after another, candidates were placed in leadership positions. When my turn finally came, it was the most dreaded of all – the top job, student company commander. Evidently, I needed to be looked at even more than some others. This was the role with the greatest responsibility, plus it was highly visible to all the TACs AND Captain Smith. It was not only visible, it was also very time-consuming. Every evening it was necessary for the student company commander to make sure dozens of details were taken care of, from communicating the next day’s training schedule (including times for different events, the required uniform and equipment, and what to review during that evening’s study period to prepare), finding men for various work details, making sure those who had been ordered to walk punishment tours actually did so. Mornings were just as busy, getting the entire company to fall out for morning runs or PT and again when it was time to go to class, communicating the almost-inevitable changes in the schedule, uniform or equipment. All day long the company commander was responsible for getting the company where it was supposed to be on time, making changes on the fly, and being accountable for everything anyone did or didn’t do. The ability and willingness to delegate was critical to performing as the company commander, as I soon learned. So was the willingness to have people do things they didn’t necessarily want to do. All this would be part of being an Army officer, and if we couldn’t do it in OCS, we sure wouldn’t be able to as officers.

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Even when in student leadership positions, candidates still had to do the many little things required of all – shine their boots, make their beds, get their rooms ready for inspection. The only respite from this came if their roommates helped them out. But if there were any slip-ups in any of these areas, the TAC's wrath came down on the poor candidate, not their roommate.

For all candidates, leadership potential was also tested by keeping us under severe, unrelenting stress to see if we could maintain our composure and continue to function effectively, and being in leadership positions only increased the stress. Everything was done under pressure, especially during the first few months – getting up in the morning, using the latrine, preparing our rooms for inspection, eating, running to class, physical training, studying – everything. The pace was fast, orders were to be obeyed immediately and without question, and the slightest hesitation or mistake were grounds for being singled out.

Adherence to Military Standards

Military standards could include anything from personal appearance, to maintaining an orderly room and barracks, to infractions of various rules. Failure in any of these areas resulted in demerits. Theoretically too many demerits could get one dismissed from the program, but to the best of my knowledge no one in 50th was dismissed specifically because of demerits. What demerits did result in, however, was walking “punishment tours”. The offending candidate would have to march back and forth for fifty minutes per tour (it was not unusual for a candidate to be saddled with more than one) with a heavy M14 rifle on his shoulder. Tours took place on Saturday afternoons, Sundays or Holidays – what was usually time off. The idea was to give the candidate an opportunity to contemplate the error of his ways and learn from his mistakes. It was very boring and tiring, but it did let us practice our marching and manual-of-arms skills.

Our barracks had two- or three-man rooms, and as soon as we

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moved in, we had to arrange everything in a uniform manner. The TACs gave selected candidates instructions about what things should go where, then these candidates hustled up and down the halls shouting out instructions to the rest of us. Some of these instructions were conflicting, which may have been an intentional ruse to confuse us; if so, it worked, and we kept moving our socks, underwear and toiletries from one drawer to another until we finally got things straight. To add to the confusion, a candidate with a strong New England accent went down the hall yelling “Put your kaw-kees [khakis] in your wall locker!” Then came a reply from another candidate with an equally strong southern accent, “Why should we put our *car keys* in our wall locker?” We were off to a good start.

Anything out of order in our rooms was grounds for demerits. Beds must be made perfectly – tight enough for a quarter to bounce off, with “hospital corners” folded at forty-five-degree angles. Socks rolled tightly and neatly, placed in the correct order in the drawer. Uniforms hung in the precise order in the wall locker. *Bill Snodgrass* recalls, “All the items in each candidate display had to be exactly the same. Someone changed the brand of toothpaste and everyone had to change the brand of toothpaste to match the one that the Candidate used. I wonder if he is still using that same brand (Crest)?”

One pair of boots was left on display in our room for inspection while we went off to training each day. We were supposed to rotate our boots daily, ostensibly for health reasons, but I have the sneaky feeling it was just another way to catch us breaking the rules. To keep us from cheating, we had to lace one pair with the laces in the bottom eyelets coming from the inside out, and the other pair, from the outside in. If the wrong boots were on display – more demerits and more tours to walk.

Even the windows had to be uniform – either closed or open exactly six inches. We quickly learned that a dollar bill is six inches long, and it was a handy measure. One day I clumsily dropped my dollar while I was measuring a window and had to rush downstairs to retrieve it. Not only was I littering, but back then a dollar was a dollar.

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Every morning when we left the barracks to go to training, we had to leave them “standing tall” and ready for inspection. Each platoon was issued a big electric floor buffer, and after we had polished the floors in our rooms, two men from each platoon were designated to be the last to leave and to buff the hall on their way out. In their stocking feet, they would start at the far end of the hall and work backwards to the storage closet, then go to the staircase end of the hall and work their way back to the closet. With the entire hallway buffed, they would stow the buffer in the closet before returning to the stairway to don their boots and rush out to get into formation.

And every day we returned to the barracks to find the same thing: The TACs had conducted “inspections”, which amounted to tearing apart our carefully staged rooms and dragging their feet on our beautifully buffed floors. The aforementioned Lieutenant Toolson was the worst offender, either out of meanness or having particularly big feet. This went on especially during the Basic Phase, but we were not immune to it even as intermediate and senior candidates. We had to maintain perfect barracks throughout the six months.

Beyond the daily room inspections, there were also regular formal inspections, these often conducted by Captain Smith himself. If the captain wanted to find something wrong, he would, and he almost always wanted to. For our first formal inspection, we slaved to get everything in perfect order, and we were pretty sure we had succeeded. But, of course, we were wrong. As the captain and the trailing TACs moved down the hall, we all stood at parade rest in our rooms, ready to snap to attention when the officers entered. Pretty soon whispers started to flow down the hall ahead of the inspection team. “They’re checking entrenching tools!” We immediately knew we were all sunk. No one had thought to remove our entrenching tools, which we almost never actually used, from their canvas covers to make sure they were clean and rust-free. In every room the captain pounced on these little shovels and cried “Dirt!”, “Rust!”, “Filthy!” They had us, as they knew they would. There was always *something*.

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Demerits were also awarded for failing to maintain a neat personal appearance (“military bearing”) which conformed with military standards, from the highly polished helmet liners on our heads to the spit-shined boots on our feet – and everything in-between. We spent a good portion of our meager pay on laundry. We had to put on fresh fatigues every day, sometimes twice or even three times if our morning training was especially strenuous. Our fatigues were heavily starched, so much so that we called donning clean fatigues “breaking starch” – it was literally necessary to force our way into our pants and shirts. A few of the married candidates’ wives lived just off the post, and they had a lively business conducting laundry runs. Now and then they would throw in some snacks with the laundry. I can’t imagine that the TACs didn’t know what was going on, having just gone through OCS themselves, but they usually turned a blind eye, especially if some of this booty turned up on their desks. *Terry Hummel* provides a good description of a “laundry run” that wasn’t at all about laundry:

Wanda (my wife) started out as a "camp follower" for the platoon, as she faithfully hauled laundry for me, *Mansky*, *Sutton*, *Tackaberry*, *Pascua* and four or five others for the entire six months of OCS. She drove a metallic blue, 1964 two-door hardtop Ford. One of my favorite memories is the night I called her and asked her to go to McDonalds and buy something like 60 or 70 cheeseburgers and hamburgers with half as many large orders of French fries and other junk food for her to deliver at the parking lot south of the 50th Company barracks. The pogeys were to be deposited in an empty (somewhat clean) garbage can. Two guys from the platoon smuggled the garbage can up to the top floor where the 6th platoon lived. We would have got away with it, but the greasy smell of McDonalds lingered in the barracks all night [tipping off the TACs, who dreamed up some punishment to teach the platoon the error of their ways.]

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While sneaking pogeys into the barracks was generally overlooked, sometimes the TACs stepped in if candidates pushed the limits. Tony Incorvia, a high school classmate of mine, was in a different OCS company at Fort Benning the same time I was there, and he presents a good example of what could happen when candidates abused the pogy tradition. His platoon had figured out a clandestine means of getting food into the barracks – they would stop the blades of the huge fan built into the wall at the end of the hall and hoist up the contraband with a rope. This was all well and good, and if the TACs knew about it they didn't interfere. But then someone got the wise idea of ordering a couple of hundred Big Macs with attendant fries and Cokes. This was too much to bring in through the fan and had to be delivered. Of course, the word got out to the TACs, who looked the other way when the food arrived. But then they swooped down on the unsuspecting candidates just before they could enjoy their tasty repast. The candidates were ordered to stand at attention along both sides of the hall and forced to watch while the TACs dumped the mouth-watering burgers, along with the fries and drinks, into garbage cans. Like the witches in *Macbeth*, they used broomsticks to stir this into a disgusting swill. Then down the line they went, ordering each candidate to “open wide” while they stuffed in a mouthful of the slop. If any of the goo dripped onto the candidate's pristine white t-shirt – and it usually did – the TACs would rip holes in the garment and “gig” the candidate. This ended Tony's platoon's pogy runs, at least for a while.

Historically, sneaking food into barracks has always been about more than just eating. As author Robert L. O'Connell puts it in *Fierce Patriot*, his biography of Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, such activities were actually an integral part of the soldiers' training. He is describing Sherman's days at West Point, but his explanation certainly applies to OCS:

Elite military training establishments frequently set up conditions that encourage initiates to play fast and loose with the rules and then punish those maladroit enough to be caught.

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Not exactly a war game, but definitely a parable about war and its consequences.

Traditionally this often played out in terms of food. Sparta, perhaps the West's most thoroughly militarized society, incentivized trainees to steal from subject Helots by starving them and then savagely beating those found with purloined consumables. West Point managed a parallel set of circumstances – keeping the cadets hungry on a miserable cuisine of boiled food and mealtime harassment, then forbidding, on penalty of dismissal, forays to nearby Benny Haven's tavern, the home of roast turkey, shellfish and beer.

While the food at OCS was much more palatable than that at West Point in Sherman's day, the same principle applied – we were always hungry, in part because we often had little time to eat, and what we did eat we worked off through constant exercise. As platoon-mate *Howard Wright* put it upon seeing our gaunt frames and shaved heads in pictures from those days, "My God! They really did starve us. We look like POWs."

Of course, the risk-taking of breaking the rules would have been meaningless if there was no punishment – sometimes severe – when the transgressor was caught. Tony Incorvia's tale of being forced to eat garbage is a good example. The real threats of extra PT, walking tours, and dismissal or recycling loomed over us all the time. While I don't recall a single instance of anyone being dismissed just for breaking rules, that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Overall, this rule-breaking was just another example of how candidates faced the conundrum of being encouraged – even expected – to engage in activities for which they could be punished. As O'Connell pointed out, this is another attempt by the military to create an atmosphere similar to war to condition soldiers and see if they could handle the stress.

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Another source of demerits, and a favorite of the TACs, was a candidate's "gig line" – the straight line formed by the shirt flap lined up with the edge of the belt buckle, and down through the flap covering the trouser zipper. Before falling out for inspection each morning we had to inspect ourselves in the mirror, then hope that nothing got out of line before the TACs checked us out. If a TAC really wanted to find something wrong, he could always nail a candidate for a less than perfect gig line – and who could argue?

Part of the gig line was the shiny brass belt buckle which was a standard part of the uniform. Being brass, they would tarnish, and on top of that, they took a lot of abuse from exercises like low crawling. A couple of buckles had to be kept on display in our footlockers. These were for show, but they tarnished just sitting there, so they needed occasional polishing. The buckle we wore each day needed to be polished every evening. So out came the Brasso and rags, and we polished the buckles along with the brass OCS insignias on our collars. Whoever designed the insignias had a sadistic streak, since they had numerous nooks and crannies from which Brasso had to be removed with toothbrushes or pipe cleaners.

Being always pressed for time, we constantly sought ways to save a few moments here and there, especially in the mornings, when things were particularly rushed. One trick was to shave in the evening rather than the morning. The TACs were familiar with this, undoubtedly having tried it in their candidate days. One morning as we stood in formation, the TACs went down each line, looked every candidate in the eye and asked "Did you shave this morning or last night?" We were bound by the Honor Code to tell the truth, so, one at a time, candidates admitted that they had shaved the night before and went back into the barracks to shave again. Except me. I had shaved the night before, but my beard was so light that when the TAC stepped in front of me and stared into my face he just paused for a moment, said nothing and moved on. It was back to morning shaves for us, including me, since I knew I might not be that lucky again.

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When I was student company commander I would rise and get cleaned up before reveille to gain a little extra time. One day a TAC came across me while I was shaving. “What the hell are you doing?” he screamed. “Get back in your bunk!” I had to lay there with shaving cream all over my face until the bugle sounded.

Some of us bought snappy Corcoran Jump Boots, while others stuck with what the Army issued. Either way, they had to be spit shined. “Spit shined combat boots” is as much of an oxymoron as “starched fatigues”, but that’s what we wore every day. While we sent our fatigues to the laundry, the boots we had to do ourselves. We experimented with concoctions of shoe polish, floor wax, alcohol and who knows what else in our never-ending quest to get a perfect shine. Perfect, that is, until we went out in the hot Georgia sun. Then the polish melted and the dust from the red Georgia clay turned our beautiful shine into something resembling jeweler’s rouge, plus the dust worked its way into every crevasse of our boots (not to mention our bodies). By the end of the day, they were a mess, so the polishing started all over again.

At some point during the Intermediate Phase, we were allowed the privilege of getting our boots shined when we went to the barber shop. Those fellows would slap on the polish with their bare hands and in no time could produce a pair of boots that would make us proud. Another privilege was that of “boonie boots” for field exercises, which we did not have to polish.

Strict rules determined our behavior in the mess hall. Basic Candidates had to sit at attention with their chests four inches from the table, looking straight ahead and talking only for official business. The official rules stated that Intermediate Candidates must sit at attention but could talk with each other, but Captain Smith was very stingy in allowing this. Senior Candidates could sit at ease and talk. Basic and Intermediate Candidates should cut off a single bite at a time then replace the knife just so on the plate before putting the morsel in their mouths. All this was done under the watchful eyes of the TACs, who would descend on any candidate sloppy enough to commit some

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infraction like placing the knife so the sharp edge faced out rather than in (“Are you trying to cut your buddy!!???”) or glancing around the room (“Are you eyeballing me??”); answering either “yes” or “no” to such questions inevitably led to more screaming and disruption of the candidate’s meal.

Although we were being trained to become “officers and gentlemen” there were times when we had to forgo the “gentlemen” part. On those occasions when we were running late, we were given “pig privileges”, meaning we were supposed to eat as fast as we could. Being in a constant state of semi-starvation, the challenge was to stuff ourselves as much as possible in just a few minutes. Otherwise, it was a long time until the next meal.

Pig privileges were rare, and most of the time meals were a combination of attempting to satisfy our growling appetites and enduring various sorts of what the TACs viewed as entertainment and we smacks considered harassment. Offending candidates would be singled out for special attention, which might entail rattling off important information that we had learned (“Sir, the first general order is: ‘I will guard everything within the limits of my post and quit my post only when properly relieved.’”); since there was an endless list of what we had to learn, the TACs could be quite creative in their questions. On occasion, there were more elaborate performances, such as when *Clarence Kugler* was forced to stand on a chair and repeat a line from “Three in the Attic”, a film in which he had a small speaking part: “Man what a bummer, she could have been the daughter of Dagwood Bumstead.” One of the TACs had seen the film and, of course, reported this to Captain Smith, and the captain delighted in making Clarence repeat his performance, especially when higher-ranking officers were visiting.

But rushing us through meals and interfering with eating apparently backfired on the captain. A rumor went around that one of the mess sergeants became angry over the wasted food and complained to the Inspector General’s Office. If this caused any let up of pressure in the mess hall, I didn’t notice.

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And then there were haircuts. The Officer Candidate Manual states that hair will be “neatly trimmed according to prescribed regulations.” The “prescribed regulations” in OCS (or at least in 50th Company) were “sidewalls and landing strips” – we were pretty much bald on the sides and down the middle on top, with just a fringe of hair on either side of the bald swath. On the other hand, shaved heads were prohibited, as were mustaches. We went at least weekly to the barber shop, where, of course, we paid out of our own pockets. On at least one occasion, several of us got two haircuts in one day because some wag had spread the word that we could grow our hair a little longer since we had become Seniors, so we had told the barber not to take so much off the top. Captain Smith made it clear at company formation that those of us who had believed this had better get our rears back to the barber shop ASAP.

Physical Training

We may have thought that Basic and AIT had gotten us into good shape, but when we arrived at Fort Benning, we found that in OCS Physical Training was taken to a higher level. Now the purpose of PT was not simply to get us into top condition; it was also intended to keep us tired and stressed out, the better to test our commitment to becoming officers. Grueling PT was one of the major tools used to get candidates to wash themselves out of the program.

There were regular PT sessions every morning and every evening, plus plenty of exercise in between. We ran obstacle courses, were put through bayonet training, practiced for the PT test (low crawl; dodge, run and jump; grenade throw; horizontal ladder; and mile run). We endured PT as individuals (the most common being the classic “Drop and give me ten” for even minor infractions), by platoon and by company. Basic and Intermediate candidates double-timed everywhere they went in the OCS area.

It is my understanding that in today’s army PT is performed in athletic shoes. Not so back in the day. We wore combat boots all day

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every day. And since we did some sort of PT (usually a LOT of PT) every day, we did that in boots, too. I don't know what they actually weighed, but by the end of each exhausting day my guess was about ten pounds apiece.

In addition to regularly scheduled PT, we ran. And we ran and ran and ran. Across the street from the OCS complex was the Airborne training area, with its three 250-foot “drop towers” which loomed in our skyline. Around the perimeter of the Airborne area ran a cinder track nearly a mile long. Virtually every morning we would run from our barracks *to* the track, then run *around* the track, then run back *from* the track. If there was time, we would run around the track twice. On those occasions, as we reached the point where we were supposed to leave the track to head home after one lap, a groan would go up from the entire company as we started around again.

After returning from our run, we cleaned up, had breakfast, prepared the barracks for inspection – then, unless we were being trucked to some location beyond running distance, we ran to class. Infantry Hall was several blocks away – clearly within running distance – and by the time we got there we were sweating heavily, our nicely starched fatigues were soaked and sagging and our boots had lost their perfect shine. At noon, we ran back to the barracks for lunch, then again ran to Infantry Hall for afternoon classes, then back for dinner. On top of this, there were often after-dinner runs.

We were fortunate on the mornings when our schedule was especially tight; then we would do PT on the lawn outside the barracks rather than run the Airborne track. Since it was still dark in the morning, we could slack off a little and hope we didn't get caught. But the TACs were always prowling and ready to pounce on any unsuspecting candidate who wasn't giving one hundred percent.

Captain Smith was a burly fellow (when he was an Officer Candidate himself a few years earlier he was forced to sit at the “fat table” in the mess hall, right in front of the company commander's table, where he

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was subject to extra attention and hazing) and he was constantly battling his weight, so he often ran with us after dinner. He wore a funky plastic sweatshirt, so he could sweat off even more weight. We were sweating plenty and didn't need any silly plastic shirts. Of course, during our runs we would also stop periodically and do PT. The captain did not join us in this.

Paul Kochis recalls "how Smith would finish a run with us, then pull up the plastic sweatshirt, banded at the bottom, and a pool of sweat would fall out. It used to amaze me, even if it was revolting."

And *John Foote* remembers "that stupid plastic sweatshirt.... He did it to punish himself." John may or may not have been right about the captain's self-punishment, but one thing is for sure – he was certainly punishing *us*.

Our company softball team went undefeated and won the Battalion Softball Championship. For one game the entire company ran to the baseball stadium, a couple of miles away, to lend our support. After we won the game, some of us hoped that Captain Smith would reward us by letting us march back to the barracks. But this was not the captain's way, of course, and we ran back from the stadium just as hard as we had run to it. One wonders what he would have made us do had we lost.

We even had to do PT in order to enter the mess hall. In front of the mess hall steps was a chin-up bar. We stood at parade rest forty inches apart as we waited our turn to enter the mess hall. Then each of us would step up to the bar, do several chin-ups then sound off to the TAC who was glowering at the door, "Sir, Candidate So-and-So requests permission to enter the mess hall." One day early in the cycle, *Bob Arnold* was a few places ahead of me in line and must have had a flashback to Basic since he shouted "Sir, Private Arnold requests permission to enter the mess hall." "WHAT?" screamed the TAC. "Sir, Private Arnold requests..." "WHAT?" This went on several more times. The rest of us caught on right away, but could say nothing. Finally, poor Bob realized his mistake and said "Sir, CANDIDATE Arnold requests permission..." and the TAC let him through. None of us who heard this exchange ever made that mistake again, which was

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the whole idea.

Upon receiving permission to enter the mess hall, we would each run inside then stand at parade rest awaiting our turn to sign the mess book (the Army may have been wasteful in many ways, but it was meticulous when it came to accounting for rations). We would fill our trays, hustle to a table, and stand waiting at attention. When there were enough candidates to occupy all the seats at the table, the last to arrive would give the command “Take Seats!” Then all would sit down in unison to eat in silence. When we finished, we would return our trays and dishes, hustle back to the barracks and prepare to run off to class or go for our after-dinner run.

Twice during the program, we took two Physical Combat Proficiency Tests for the record, plus numerous practice tests. So all of our PT and running weren’t just to get us to drop out – they also helped us prepare for the tests. Captain Smith’s unrelenting emphasis on PT paid off: 50th Company set the highest PT average by an OC company since 1962.

Whenever we didn’t run to get somewhere, we marched, and we got pretty darned good at it. But marching well and being able to give the commands to efficiently move a large body of troops are two different things, as I soon learned as student company commander. One morning 50th was formed up in our u-shaped formation on our company blacktop area. I called them to attention, gave the appropriate “right face”, then “forward march”, and the First Platoon marched off the blacktop and down the sidewalk. I watched with satisfaction as the following platoons passed by me but neglected to keep my eye on the lead platoon, which was heading straight down the sidewalk between our barracks and the barracks opposite ours, toward an area in which we were not allowed. Having failed to order the appropriate left turn to head in the correct direction, I was now in a predicament. In a near panic, I realized that I had to do *something* and do it quickly. There were no good alternatives – I could stop the whole company, order “about face”, return to our blacktop and start over; or I could keep going through the forbidden territory and try to find a different route to class,

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which would probably result in marching all over the place until we got there – late. Instead, I chose what seemed to be the simplest option, although it also was fraught with consequences: I ordered “column left” followed by another “column left” to make a big u-turn. Unfortunately, this caused the entire company to tramp through the lawn of the senior company next door. TACs were yelling “Walrath, what the hell are you doing” and the senior candidates were shouting “Hey you stupid...”, but I pretended not to hear and we just kept right on going. A couple of the seniors demanded that I report to them that evening when we got back. Eventually, we arrived at our destination without further ado. When we returned to our barracks later that day I reported to the seniors, certain that I was about to suffer grievously for my stupid mistake, but by then things had calmed down and they just told me I was an idiot and to not let it happen again.

I wasn’t the only one who managed to mess up marching commands. The ceremony when we became senior candidates was a big to-do with several other companies and a band lined up with 50th on the parade ground, all under the watchful eye of the battalion and brigade commanders and other high-ranking officers. We stood at parade rest while speeches were given, then we were supposed to march in front of the reviewing stand where the officers sat. Student company commander *Craig Biggs* ordered “attention...right face”, then “forward...” But he had forgotten to order “right shoulder arms”, so it was impossible for us to start marching. What to do, what to do? Before he could say “march” several of us near the front banged our rifle butts on the ground to call Craig’s attention to his mistake. “As you were”, he cried out, then “right shoulder arms; forward...march”. We figured Captain Smith would be livid at this breach of military protocol, and we would suffer for it. But, luckily for us, the reviewing stand was far enough away that no one had heard the commands or the banging of rifle butts, and we suffered naught.

Ironically, while marching in immaculate formation was a critical skill in OCS, it had no importance thereafter. There were occasions at Fort

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Carson when we formed up as a company for reveille, but we never marched anywhere. In Jungle School we had a couple of morning runs in very ragged formation and stood at parade rest and attention during graduation but, again, no marching. The closest I've come to marching was in 2016, when I was in a group of vets who tried, with questionable success, to keep in step as we walked in a Memorial Day parade.

Panels, Recycles, Drops and Drop Outs

At the start, 50th Company had 224 candidates. But the nature – and in some ways, the purpose – of OCS meant that not all of us would make it to the end and become officers. There is a reason that it is called Officer *Candidate* School rather than Officer *Training* School: Those in OCS were *aspiring* to become officers, which they would have to earn by meeting the high standards set by the program – they were not there simply to be trained. The components of the OCS program – Academics, Leadership, Physical Training, Adherence to Military Standards – combined to create conditions that severely tested candidates. 50th was unusual in that it was made up almost entirely of college graduates, one of the first classes in the Vietnam Era to be so composed. Until then most classes had a large contingent of men with prior service. The OCS academic demands in and of themselves were not particularly difficult for us college grads, but studying, learning and applying what we were supposed to learn in the high-pressure environment of OCS was, in its own unique way, significantly more difficult than college. Plus, most of us had held few real leadership positions, so being put in situations where our leadership skills were being evaluated was an entirely new and very stressful experience.

As for PT, many in the class were former college athletes and the rest of us were in decent shape from Basic, but OCS demanded more than just physical fitness – it demanded *toughness*, the capacity to function effectively after being pushed to our physical limits. There were those in the Army who questioned whether a bunch of soft college

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boys were tough enough to make it through.

Adherence to military standards demanded a level of discipline and attention to detail that had heretofore not been expected of us. Heck, most of us had never even made our beds in college, let alone maintained a room – or physical appearance – that could pass inspection. Along with PT, this was an area where it was easy for the TACs to ramp up the pressure. They could always find something that we had not done right, even if they had to make it up.

Traditionally, most OCS companies experienced an attrition rate of between one-quarter and one-third. While there were a few unique situations, like the law school grad in 50th who left early in the program to join the Judge Advocate General Corps (and receive a direct commission as a captain!), most attrition fell into one of two categories: those who chose to drop out, and those the Army decided should either be recycled or dropped from OCS altogether.

Choosing to drop out of OCS did not necessarily, in my opinion, reflect poorly on the individual. There were certainly some who “couldn’t take” the pressures of OCS, although that did not mean they were not admirable people and would not be good soldiers. Some simply decided that they did not want to be officers, or that it was not worth the extra commitment in time (our commitment was to serve two years after being commissioned, rather than two years from the time one entered Basic). The time to learn that you didn’t want to be an officer was during OCS, not after graduating, so the screening process of OCS did what it was supposed to do, at least in that respect.

In theory, candidates were not allowed to quit the program for seven weeks, which was long enough for them to have given OCS a fair try. Week seven was known as “Drop Week” or “Quit Week.” This was the time when the pressure was notched up even more in order to push “marginal” candidates to the point where they would give up and drop out.

While the TACs were tough and demanding, the senior candidates could be even worse. Their job was simply to make our lives miserable, or at least some of them thought so. One OCS tradition was “shock

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reveille”, which took place during Drop Week. A group of senior candidates would storm into an underclass barracks before reveille, roust the miserable smacks out of their bunks and proceed to give them hell. This would entail various forms of PT, piling a whole platoon into the shower while still in their underwear, emptying footlockers onto the floor, bracing candidates against the wall and screaming in their faces, and on and on. Senior candidates could be very creative in finding ways to harass us.

During one shock reveille, several of us (including *Mike Eberhardt* and me) were made to crawl up and down the hall inside either our sleeping bag cover or our mattress cover shouting “I am a worm” at the top of our lungs. *Steve Roeder* was one of those who were forced to lay on their backs, arms and legs in the air, and yell “I’m a dying cockroach”, worms and cockroaches being how underclassmen were supposed to view themselves.

Mike also recalls something called “Ping-Pong”, which “required two candidates to stand across from the other, backs against the wall. When the senior candidate shouted ‘ping’ they had to step forward, turn around, and slam up against the other wall. ‘Pong’ was a repeat of that.”

At one point, *Joe Marbury*, a former Navy enlisted man who had decide to try Army OCS, was braced against the wall and ordered to sing the Infantry OCS Alma Mater. Joe was several years older than the rest of us, and that may have accounted for his very calm, steady demeanor. No matter how tough things got, he remained unflappable, and usually had a faint smile on his lips. He spoke in a low southern drawl, so low that I believe he may have been incapable of raising his voice. His soft voice and slight smile really irked the senior candidates, and no matter how much they yelled at him he never sang any louder. They finally gave up in frustration – a minor victory for an underclassman.

Bill Thoroughgood had an experience that demonstrates, hard as it may seem to believe, senior candidates could have a heart (it also is a good example of those odd coincidences that can turn up in the

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military). Sometime in the weeks leading up to Drop Week, a senior had stopped Bill on the sidewalk in front of our barracks for a minor infringement – he had a "rope" (actually, a thread) hanging from his uniform. As has appeared in scores of war movies, the senior asked, "Where are you from, candidate?" It turned out that the senior was from a town near where Bill grew up. Bill told the senior that he used to date a girl from that town and the girl had mentioned a guy from there named Pakradooni. Bill asked if the senior knew this girl and the guy. The senior "breaks into a smile and points to his name on his uniform – 'Pakradooni'. He's the guy she talked about! Now what are those chances?"

A few days later, Pakradooni was among the seniors who stormed into 50th Company's barracks for shock reveille. As Bill reports it, "He asks, 'Where's Thoroughgood?' Just as the other senior candidates start to tear my stuff apart, he steps in and says, 'Leave Thoroughgood alone. He's OK.' He then looks over and winks at me. Pretty amazing coincidence. I have never seen him again, but was always thankful for that rope on my uniform!!"

Traditionally, each OCS class got one shock reveille. But apparently Captain Smith was not satisfied with our progress as a company and arranged for three shock reveilles for 50th Company during Drop Week. Maybe the captain knew what he was doing, for, in the end, we turned out to be a hell of a good class.

The pressure of Drop Week was not limited to shock reveilles. Inspections, PT, harassment from TACs – everything – reached a new peak. I'm sure quite a few of our classmates chose to drop out at this point, but, strangely, my memory is very vague about this. So is *Mike Eberhardt's* memory, although he recalls one well: "The only candidate I remember quitting was a guy named Solomon. He was overweight and had a hard time with PT. I remember one experience in particular. We were in the field across from the barracks doing low crawls and pushups, etc. It was during that week when things were tough. Solomon was close to me. Three TAC officers gathered around him, yelling at him. They called him names and continually told him that he

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needed to drop out. I remember him crying. He was no longer with us following that week. I am sure others left because we had fewer in the company.”

Being “paneled” was the process that could lead to a candidate’s being dropped from the program involuntarily (what the Army liked to call “relief from the program”). There were many reasons why a candidate could be relieved: disciplinary reasons like insubordination toward a commissioned officer; lack of motivation; lack of adaptability; Honor Code violation; misconduct such as committing acts of “moral turpitude”. A candidate who fell into one of these categories would be required to appear before a panel of officers who would examine his performance and determine what the next step would be. He might be dropped from the program altogether and returned to the enlisted ranks. If the panel determined that the candidate was worthy of saving, there were other options. He could be allowed to continue with his company; in some cases, this might require that he be placed under extra scrutiny to determine whether his performance improved – this could mean being given additional opportunities to perform in command positions. Or he might be recycled back to an OCS company that started after his in order for him to repeat parts of the training.

The threat of being recycled constantly hung over us, since nobody wanted to be in OCS any longer than absolutely necessary and the thought of going through any part of it again struck terror in our hearts. *Ron Stryker* recalls how determined a candidate could be to avoid being recycled: “I believe it was sometime during our 20th or 21st week [only a few weeks from graduation] when, as a result of a minor infraction, *Clark Yokley*, *Paul Mansky*, and I were ordered to do 50 pushups. Paul was recuperating from an injury at the time [and was threatened with being recycled to a 12th or 18th week company if he could not do the required number of pushups]. Paul’s response: ‘I wouldn’t take a recycle back to breakfast!’” Paul managed to talk himself out of the situation and graduated on schedule with 50th Company.

Being recycled offered the candidate an opportunity to prove that he could live up to the standards of the program. If he failed a second

time, he was usually dropped from OCS. How many of these recycles eventually graduated, we never knew.

Field Exercises

The deeper we got into the OCS program, the more time we spent on field exercises, applying what we learned in the classroom. A few memories stand out from these exercises.

Very early in the program we studied land navigation. Then came field exercises to practice what we were supposed to have learned. We were trucked out to some remote part of the post, where we lived in tents for a few days while we went through various exercises. These tents were simple “pup” tents, made of two shelter halves snapped together and barely big enough for two men. This was in late February or early March and even though Georgia was very hot in the summer, it was pretty damn cold in the winter. Trying to crawl out of a sleeping bag and get dressed inside a pup tent before going out into the cold would tax the dexterity of Houdini. Inevitably, I would brush my back against the inside of the tent, causing the moisture on the outside to wick through onto my tender skin. Brrr! Then, chilled to the bone, I would crawl outside and stand by the smoky fire barrels trying to warm up.

Another time when we just about froze was during Command Reveille, which was held weekly. The entire brigade would turn out and await the morning bugle. As one would expect, the most junior companies had to line up first and stand waiting, while the senior companies stayed in their barracks until the last minute. Since it was still winter when 50th Company started, a number of us got frostbite as we stood at parade rest for a half hour or more, waiting for reveille. In fact, I saw more frostbite cases at Fort Benning than at snowy old Fort Dix. At least at Dix the army saw fit to issue caps with ear flaps, plus wool uniforms, warm boots and other cold weather gear. There officially was no cold weather in Georgia.

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Another equipment issue showed up on a particularly muddy exercise. I was wearing a pair of my original issue boots from Basic, which had become my boonie boots, and at one point I sank several inches into an especially thick, gooey puddle of mud. With a mighty heave and a loud “sluuurrrp” I managed to extricate my foot. Upon taking my next step, I realized something was amiss. The suction had pulled the heel right off my boot. For the rest of the exercise, I limped along on the nails sticking out where the rubber heel had been, slipping and sliding on every rock, log or hard piece of ground. When I got to Vietnam, the remembrance of this made me appreciate one of the best new pieces of equipment the Army had developed – the “jungle boot” with its sole and heel molded in a single piece.

On one of our first tactical exercises, we set up an ambush along a road down which an “aggressor” column was supposed to pass. For some reason, I was unlucky enough to get stuck with carrying a twenty-three-pound M60 machine gun. A machine gun is always a key to an ambush, so my role was especially important. Being in our usual state of exhaustion, we all promptly fell asleep. The next thing I remember was getting kicked in the back by a heavy boot and hearing very angry instructors screaming obscenities about how we had let the entire enemy company go by unmolested. “You’re all dead, dead, DEAD!” they yelled. Well, we felt dead anyway.

Later during the same field exercise, we were given the experience of flying in Huey helicopters. We had been in the field without much sleep for a couple of days, and the droning rotors lulled me into a stupor. Sitting in the right-side door as we zipped along, I looked down at the ground several hundred feet below and fantasized about how interesting it would be to drop the M60 that I had been lugging and watch it fall slowly to Earth. Luckily, I did not indulge my fantasy. That would have been grounds for an Article 15 (company level punishment) and, probably, the end of my OCS experience. Plus, the cost of an M60 would likely have come out of my pay, such as it was.

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On one particular field exercise, the instructors and aggressors were especially fond of harassing us with tear gas. Whenever we would hear the “pop” of a gas grenade, someone would cry out “Gas!!” and we would scramble to rip our gas masks out of their bags and get them on before being overcome. This was not easy, since the masks are inherently clumsy and need to be put on just right to gain a tight seal. One evening after we had set up our perimeter, we heard a “pop” from just outside our lines. Cries went up along the line and we grabbed for the masks. One unfortunate candidate a few yards from me yelled the warning then instinctively took a big breath to fill his lungs before he started to put on his mask. With the big breath of air came a big breath of gas. For a long time, he lay gasping and coughing inside his mask until the cloud cleared and he could get some fresh air.

When there was going to be an enemy “attack”, we were sometimes tipped off in advance by the behavior of the local civilians. These “brass pickers” seemed to know our schedule and would show up just before the battle so they could salvage the fired blank cartridge cases, which they would sell for scrap. Interestingly, we should have paid more attention to this lesson – when we got to Vietnam, we found that civilian behavior would sometimes indicate enemy activity, usually by vacating the area if the VC were around.

It seems like it rained just about every time we went out on a field exercise (Captain Smith must have had an in with Mother Nature). I got to be so wet and miserable on one exercise that on the last night I got the bright idea of stripping off my wet clothes and wrapping myself up in my sleeping bag cover. It worked and I actually got some sleep. But what the heck was I thinking – I’d have been running around naked trying to find my clothes if we had gotten attacked that night. The ribbing from my classmates would have been worse than any punishment the TACs could mete out.

But field exercises were not all misery. Our longest and most trying exercise was known as the Ranger Problem, since it was taught by instructors from the U.S. Army Rangers. *Steve Roeder*, who was in the

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second platoon with me, tells of an incident that typifies the sort of horseplay that went on, especially after we had become loopy after a few days in the field:

I don't know if it is my favorite memory of OCS, but I certainly remember the Ranger problem. Everyone knew I was afraid of snakes. We were wading through the swamp and someone killed a snake. They snuck up behind me and threw it around the back of my neck, draping it down on both sides of my face. I had no idea the snake was dead. I think I screamed like a little girl. Everyone else died laughing.

The Ranger Problem came toward the end of our six months in OCS, and platoon-mate *Mike Thornton* recalls, “My favorite OCS memory is of the last day of the Ranger Problem. When we got off the truck at the assembly area the cadre were popping smoke grenades in celebration. The colors mixed, yellow, purple, white, and the combination made me think that we were nearly done. It was a time to celebrate.”

Turning Black, then Turning Blue

No, turning black and blue does not mean we were beaten regularly, although we sometimes felt like it. Turning black refers to becoming intermediate candidates after twelve weeks. Once we turned black, we wore a small piece of black felt under the brass OCS insignia on our collars. Until then, we wore the insignia with no backing. As intermediate candidates, we had more privileges and a few weekend passes, plus the pressure let up – at least a little.

At the eighteen-week point, we turned blue – we became senior candidates. This was also the point at which we started marching to class rather than running. We still ran plenty, but that was for exercise, not to get somewhere. Instead, we marched, and one of our members got to carry a heavy bass drum to keep us in step. It was an

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improvement for the rest of us, if not for him. Our belt buckles and the OCS insignias on our collars were now chrome silver instead of brass (they no longer needed to be polished, a huge improvement) and the felt tab under the insignias was light blue (“Infantry Blue”). We also now wore white dickies with the OCS emblem, a mixed blessing, since the hot Georgia summer had arrived, and wearing what amounted to a scarf did not help to keep us cool. But we *looked* cool. We were tall (even those not blessed with great height *felt* tall), thin, and straight. To paraphrase “Like a Rock”, Bob Seger’s magnificent paean to lost youth, “We were somethin’ to see.”

As senior candidates, our classwork did not let up and our field exercises became even more intense and complicated. We still got plenty of PT, but now the intent was to keep us in shape rather than wear us down.

Basic and intermediate candidates were expected to salute us seniors and treat us as superior officers. We, in turn, were expected to do our part to keep up the pressure on lower-level candidates. This included conducting the sort of shock reveilles we had undergone, plus “bracing” candidates as they stood in formation outside their barracks. I didn’t go on any shock reveilles, but I did go check out the company next to ours once. I simply talked with a couple of candidates and didn’t do anything to particularly harass them, but even then I can’t say that I enjoyed it very much. Years later I read in Dwight Eisenhower’s book *At Ease* his account of “crawling” a Plebe (first year cadet) when he was at West Point:

I demanded, with all the scorn and sarcasm I could muster in my voice. “Mr. Dumgard, what is your P.C.S. [previous condition of servitude, or occupation]?” And added, “You look like a barber.” He stood up, said softly, “I *was* a barber, sir.” I didn’t have enough sense to apologize to him.... I just turned my head and went to my tent where my roommate was... sitting.... I looked at him and said, “...I’ve just done something that was stupid and unforgivable. I managed to make a man ashamed of the work he did to earn a living.” And never again,

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during the remaining three years at the U.S.M.A., did I take it upon myself to crawl a Plebe.

Of course, not many of us possess the insight of a Dwight Eisenhower, but I suspect there are at least a few OCS grads that can look back on how they treated other candidates and feel the same way.

When we turned black and again when we turned blue, we had parties. The Intermediate Party was held in the company day room in the barracks – just about the only time this room was put to any real use. The theme of the party was “Scarborough Fair”, borrowed from the popular Simon & Garfunkel song of the day. Reading the lyrics of “Scarborough Fair” today causes one to appreciate the almost schizophrenic nature of those times (several of our classmates have commented that this was just our way of protesting the Vietnam War):

Generals order their soldiers to kill
And gather it all in a bunch of heather,
And to fight for a cause they’ve long ago forgotten.
Then she’ll be a true love of mine.

Regardless of the incongruity of this, the party was supposed to be our introduction to the military protocol to be followed at social events on Army posts. There was a reception with cocktails, entertainment, dancing and a dinner that included appetizer, entrée, dessert and wine. Committees were established for everything from protocol to decorations to the printing of formal invitations. There was even a committee of Date Coordinators, who were charged with finding local young ladies with whom the candidates could dance. On top of all this, “Special Arrangements” (whatever they were) were handled by The Wives’ Club. This was a chance for the few candidates’ wives living nearby to start learning what it would be like to be a member of the Officers’ Wives Club at their husband’s next duty station.

When we turned blue, we had another party – the Senior Status Formal. This one was at the big Fort Benning Officers’ Club and was

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much more elaborate than the Intermediate Party. I had been at the Officers' Club only once before, when as an intermediate candidate I was chosen, along with several others from 50th, for the dubious honor of supporting another company's senior formal. We served as waiters, gofers and the like. I was in some sort of honor guard that had to stand at parade rest for what seemed the entire evening.

The theme of our senior party was "The Impossible Dream," based on *Man of La Mancha*, the Broadway hit about the "knight errant" Don Quixote. As *Colin Grey* described in the party program, the knight errant "is the epitome of the stalwart defender of justice and the true defender of freedom... The Officer Candidates of 50th Company continue in the tradition of this Knight Errant... We shall fight unceasingly until we stand unchallenged and victorious, having realized our impossible dream – peace in our time." While this may sound corny these days, it speaks much to our sincerity as young Americans.

Once again, our widely talented classmates produced artwork and entertainment even more elaborate than they did for the intermediate party. Some of the class artists had prepared large drawings of scenes from Quixote's time. And *Burl Wyatt*, who had a remarkable singing voice, performed a version of "I, Don Quixote", reworded to "I, Senior Candidate."

The primary entertainment was a play, "This is Your Life, Candidate Smack," produced, directed and co-written by our old friend *Clarence Kugler*, the fellow who had gone to Captain Smith with the movie request 'way back when our class was just getting started. Just as it sounds, it was a parody of OCS, with candidates playing the roles of various officers with whom we were all acquainted. Everyone roared with laughter, even the officers who were the butt of the jokes. There was also an eleven-man chorus of candidates, some of whom had surprisingly good voices. I don't remember what they sang, but I'm sure we all loved it.

Turning blue was also honored by a parade – the same parade where *Craig Biggs* failed to order "right shoulder arms". Before the parade, 50th Company was awarded a special orange "Tiger Tactics" streamer

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granted “on the basis of enthusiasm, attitude and performance in class throughout the cycle.” It would be carried at the head of the company wherever we marched. For many of us, including me, this was a very proud moment, one of the high points of our OCS experience. It showed that we had not only excelled individually, but also as a unit. Few companies were recognized in this way. Soon after, our artistic classmates painted a tiger on the 50th Company emblem which adorned the blacktop area where we formed up every morning.

As senior candidates we enjoyed more privileges, including a few more weekend passes. A favorite pastime was going to the movies. I recall seeing *The Wild Bunch* and the original John Wayne version of *True Grit* (to our disappointment, these two weren’t about 50th Company), and *Good-Bye Columbus*, which we were looking forward to saying – but to Columbus, Georgia, not Columbus, Ohio. But mostly, we just got out from under the TACs, caught up on sleep, and relaxed.

On one of our first passes off post, we took the bus to Columbus, which nestled up against the post. Most of us had no real plans about where we would spend the night, but we heard that someone had gotten a motel room. A dozen or more of us ended up there, sleeping on the floor in our khakis, which were starched as heavily as our fatigues. With our rumpled uniforms and lack of showers, we must have looked a sight when we returned to the barracks the next day.

During one of these few sojourns off the post, I called my brother Terry back in Ohio. What we talked about I don’t remember – undoubtedly the sort of brotherly banter one would expect. Two things I do recall. First, it was a long call, maybe close to an hour. And, second, I called collect. He just recently had graduated from law school, and was in no position to be spending money on frivolities. But he bit the bullet, accepted the charges, and never tried to rush me off the phone. To this day, being the gentleman he is, he has not brought up the dent I must have made in his budget.

On Sunday, July 20, 1969, twelve days before we were to graduate, a group of us were staying at the Ramada Inn in Phenix City, Alabama,

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just across the Chattahoochee River from Fort Benning. Why we were able to stay off post on a Sunday night escapes me, since this meant that we didn't have to be at morning formation on Monday. Several of us shared a room and we watched on TV as the Apollo 11 Lunar Lander sat down on the moon about 4:15 p.m. We waited anxiously as Neil Armstrong made his preparations for man's first moon walk. This dragged on so I was "volunteered" to go down to the bar for more drinks and food. I was sitting in the bar waiting for my order and watching the grainy black and white picture being broadcast from the lunar surface, when Armstrong finally opened the hatch and slowly made his way down the ladder. Then, at 10:56 p.m., came the historic moment when his foot touched down and left its impression in the dusty soil. It was a great time to be an American, and I can't imagine that anyone who witnessed it has forgotten it to this day.

A week or so before graduation, 50th Company gathered around the back door of our barracks while one of the staff stood on the steps and read out where we would be assigned as new lieutenants. As was the standard practice of the time, none of us would be sent directly to Vietnam. Instead, we would be given assignments that would give us some experience in leading real soldiers, not just our OCS classmates. Twenty-four of my classmates got branch transfers (to Armor, Finance, Signal, Medical, Chemical, Adjutant General and Military Intelligence – despite that old joke, the latter is not a contradiction in terms), so they would spend the next few months getting more training in their specific branch. Unlike me, some of them had been given a written a commitment for a specific branch other than Infantry by their recruiters. The remaining eighty-five percent would be Infantry officers. A handful were sent to Korea or Europe. For most of us, our next assignment would be with an Infantry Division at one of the many Army posts scattered across the country. Those who would eventually ship out to Southeast Asia would first spend about a year in the States.

Being toward the end of the alphabet, it took a while for my name to be called. But when it was, what I heard was music to my ears:

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“Walrath – Fort Carson.” What luck! Fort Carson is located in Colorado Springs, Colorado; I had visited there in 1963 when my brother Barry graduated from the Air Force Academy. I loved it and was very happy to be going back. After hearing the news, I immediately rushed inside to get in line to use one of the few pay phones in the barracks to call home.

Graduation

The big day finally came. After six solid months of stress and hard work we would be rewarded with the shiny gold bars of second lieutenants. One hundred and sixty-one of the two hundred and twenty-four who started had made it. Sixty-three had dropped out, been dropped, or were recycled to, hopefully, graduate with their new class. Several of our classmates learned in the last week that they would not be graduating – probably victims of a Faculty Board which met in the 23rd week to identify those who were “academically deficient”. One of them was *Herman Bowden*, who says, “Three days before graduation I was sent to panel with two other members of the company. They were recycled into other companies. I was turned out of the OCS program, which left me hugely disappointed, bitter even. The resentment has remained with me all my life. I needed my commission to fulfill my dream of flight school, for which I had already qualified. After 30 days leave (the most they would allow me) I was on a plane to Vietnam.”

At twenty-eight percent, 50th Company’s attrition rate was somewhat lower than other classes of our era. This is rather surprising considering Don Huskins’ observation that 50th had it tougher than most OCS companies. Despite Captain Smith’s best efforts, more than the usual percentage of 50th’s candidates had managed to tough it out. On the other hand, maybe this was a result of the captain’s high standards – we knew our company was something special and were determined to be part of it.

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We were actually sworn in as officers shortly before the graduation exercise, in a meeting room near our barracks. There is a tradition in the military that a new officer has to give a dollar to the first enlisted man who salutes him. After we repeated the oath of office, each of us stepped up to First Sergeant Steed, who gave us our first salute, and we each gave him a dollar in return. This worked for a while but went too slowly and we were running behind schedule. So most of us got a group salute from the sergeant and we handed him our dollars as we filed out the door. Good old Army efficiency.

The graduation ceremony took place in Infantry Hall on August 1, 1969. As our names were called, each of us walked across the stage and shook hands with brigade commander Colonel Piper, who handed us diplomas stating that we had “successfully completed the Infantry Officer Candidate Course.” Mom and Dad had driven down from Ohio for my graduation. I’m sure they looked upon this occasion with a mixture of pride and trepidation, for, as part of the Greatest Generation, they had seen many friends and relatives go off to war.

Among the proud graduates was *Mike Gilpin*, who had wrenched his knee on the Ranger Problem during the last few weeks of the program. It was so swollen and stiff that he visited the post hospital, where a doctor recommended surgery. Knowing this meant at least a recycle, Mike refused. The doctor wrapped him up in a hip-to-ankle cast. Upon seeing this, Captain Smith didn’t want to settle for a recycle – he wanted to dismiss Mike from OCS altogether. His TAC, Lieutenant Cross, intervened and convinced Smith to let Mike remain. For the next few weeks, he hobbled along on crutches beside our formation as we marched to and from classes, with another candidate carrying his clipboard and books. During graduation practice, Smith read out his name as “Lieutenant Michael Gibley,” which got a big laugh. But Mike was there on graduation day, with his crutches.

We were now the freshest, greenest second lieutenants in the United

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States Army. OCS may have *made* us officers, but we still had much to learn about *being* officers. But none of us were worrying about that on graduation day. Instead, we were filled with both relief at having survived OCS and pride at having triumphed over its challenges. Perhaps no one was prouder than *Jim Zack*, who remembers “when my widowed mother pinned my father’s 2nd Lieutenant bars on me – bars he had earned in a field promotion while serving in the USAAF in the South Pacific during World War II.”

In a fantastic mental lapse, I had forgotten to get the results of the blood test I had taken a week or two earlier so Dace and I could get married as soon as I got home on leave. Immediately after graduation, I had to spend a couple of hours rushing around Fort Benning tracking down my results and convincing a reluctant but sympathetic doctor (who must have been thinking “*This* guy made it through OCS?”) to release the necessary paperwork. This only added to the stress and strain we had been under right up until the last minute. When we finally drove through Fort Benning’s gate, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders, but Dad told me several years later than he didn’t see me really relax until later that day when we stopped at a gas station and I changed into civvies in the men’s room. Then, OCS was finally over.

Reflections on OCS

If you asked an assortment of OCS graduates what they thought of it, you would probably find at one extreme several, including some of my classmates, who have nothing good to say and who just want to put those six months out of their minds (to one classmate, it was “intimidating, frustrating and humiliating”). At the other end of the spectrum would be those who say it was the best thing that ever happened to them. I’m closer to this extreme. While OCS may not have been THE best thing that ever happened to me, I’d put it very near the top.

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It was also, with the exception of Vietnam, the most difficult thing that ever happened to me, which, not surprisingly, greatly accounts for why it is so meaningful.

There were probably several in 50th Company who found various aspects of OCS to be not all that difficult. While I would never claim that OCS was easy for anyone, it was certainly harder for some than for others. I would rank myself with those who found it *very* hard.

Many, even most, of the attributes that OCS tested were not in my limited set of assets. Rather than being extroverted and possessing strong social skills, I was introverted to the point of being painfully shy and had never been required to work effectively with a wide variety of others. Instead of being blessed with natural athletic abilities, I was generally uncoordinated and had never excelled at sports. Being fairly analytical, I liked to study a situation and weigh information carefully before making decisions; OCS, and being an officer, often demanded decisiveness and quick action. Up to this point, I had scrupulously avoided leadership positions; the essence of OCS was to test leadership ability in challenging situations.

There undoubtedly were a number of my classmates who would have made splendid officers with just a few weeks of technical training; they may have felt that much of OCS was wasted time – bullshit activities with no useful purpose except to entertain those whose job it was to torment us. As for me, I benefited from every bit of those six months at Fort Benning.

I, apparently, was one of those who needed to be “looked at”, as Gary Zittlow’s TAC had described. We were never told on what basis these decisions were made. In my case, there may have been a particular reason, or it may have been simply because I had succeeded in not calling attention to myself, unlike *Kugler*, *Huskins*, *Bardsley*, the *Tackaberrys* and many others. At any rate, I spent my stint as student company commander. I got no real feedback afterwards, other than I wasn’t recycled or dropped from the program. Who knows, maybe my decision to march 50th Company through our neighboring company’s lawn actually impressed the TACs, since it demonstrated those

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important leadership traits of adaptability and decisiveness. Or maybe not.

I do know that one thing I had going for me was enthusiasm (another of the leadership traits emphasized in OCS), plus the willingness to push myself. And, of utmost importance, I managed to keep my sense of humor. This seemed to be an attribute of just about everybody who made it through. *Brian Flora*, who says OCS was a “pretty grim period for me”, was nonetheless able to laugh at things like the time a when a “group of hapless candidates...were required to give an according-to-the-manual funeral service for a dead cockroach found in a bathroom. They were condemned to re-start the service every time someone giggled.” In contrast, one of my classmates recalls a candidate with whom he had gone through Basic and AIT and was also in 50th Company. For some reason, soon after starting OCS this candidate lost his sense of humor, which up to that point he had maintained. It wasn’t long before he dropped out. The importance of keeping a sense of humor cannot be overrated, nor can the boost of being surrounded by others who also were able to laugh during times that were remarkably unfunny and which, when you explain them to anyone who wasn’t there, almost always elicit a “that’s awful!” instead of a laugh. Had we not been able to pull this sort of strength from our classmates, I have no doubt that a number of us, myself included, probably wouldn’t have made it.

So, for many of us, completing OCS was one of the greatest individual achievements we had known – perhaps THE greatest. In my case, it demanded that I reach deep inside to find strengths I didn’t know I had (or, perhaps, to create some that did not exist before – I guess it doesn’t matter which).

But it was much more than just an individual achievement. 50th Company was the first – and maybe only – time in my life which demanded not only tremendous individual effort, but also that I contribute to a larger endeavor. It was an opportunity to be part of something bigger and better than myself. We were all expected to do our individual best so the whole company would excel; but, more

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importantly, we were also expected to make sacrifices of ourselves in order to help our classmates.

A simple – but telling – example of this comes from platoon-mate *Bill Snodgrass*:

I learned that I can do things beyond my physical and mental abilities, I learned leadership abilities that I would use throughout my career and most of all I learned team work. I AM ETERNALLY GRATEFUL FOR MY OCS CLASSMATES THAT CARRIED ME (LITERALLY) THROUGH OCS. I had problems with my knees and with all of the running they started hurting bad, but I would not go to sick call. I remember my knees being so bad I could not bend them (I learned to run stiff-legged) so I was having trouble walking up the stairs, you guys took turns carrying me up the stairs. I was not at the top of the class in PT but after 6 months I finished the mile in the top 10. Thank you, guys.

Peter Nowlan has a similar recollection. As he was starting his stint as student Executive Officer, we went through one of our periodic room changes, and Peter found himself rooming with a candidate he barely knew, having had little interaction with him. On their first evening together Peter, as was always the case with the XO position, had to spend several hours in the company office attending to administrative details, so he arrived back at their room after lights out. Says Peter, “I gathered my boots, brass and polish and headed to the latrine [which remained lighted] to prepare for the next day. Inside the latrine I discovered that the boots and brass had a shine better than I could ever give. [His new roommate, a virtual stranger] had given true meaning to ‘Cooperate and Graduate.’”

Every one of those candidates who carried Bill up the stairs was already bone tired. They were all preoccupied with their own personal priorities and concerns, but, nevertheless, gave of themselves for a comrade. It would have been easy to just let Bill be dropped from the program, but no one wanted to see that happen. Peter’s roommate already had his hands full shining his own boots and brass plus doing

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his share of the evening chores. But he made time to take care of his roomie. The truly remarkable thing is that these stories aren't remarkable at all – they were routine. Such unselfish acts occurred hundreds of times during the life of 50th, to the degree that, while the recipients remember them well, those who pitched in to help seldom do. That's the sort of teamwork we learned in OCS.

Another important lesson that would benefit us throughout our time in the Army and whatever careers we followed afterward was this: we didn't necessarily all have to like each other (and I'm sure not all of us did), but we had to put that aside and work with each other. There was no time for petty disagreements, personal agendas, or selfishness.

If, dear reader, even once in your life, you have the opportunity to experience something that demands all you can give while at the same time making sacrifices for the good of a team, you can count yourself fortunate. I certainly do. I am forever grateful to have attended OCS and to have made it through. And I know that, even today, I will never fully appreciate the positive impact it has had on my life.

FORT CARSON

Leave

Five days after graduation Dace and I were married. It was on a Wednesday, oddly enough, because I was afraid that I might get only one week of leave (I actually got two weeks, so we didn't have to rush to Colorado right after the wedding). Many of our wedding guests were asking each other, "Wednesday? Who gets married on a Wednesday?" Selfishly, I have to say that being in OCS right up until the wedding had its advantages: I was completely left out of the wedding planning and the accompanying headaches. All I had to do was show up, stand where I was told to stand, and say the vows. It worked out great.

While home on leave, Dad and I went to see Uncle Dan, the fellow who had attended OCS during WWII. My brothers and I thought the world of Dan and, when we were kids, had had a lot of fun playing with his two boys, Craig and Bart. Unfortunately, because of his wife's mental issues, our families had grown apart, so I had seen hardly anything of Dan through my high school and college years. He had, however, come to our wedding and gave us a fancy silver chafing dish for a wedding present. I had the feeling that it expressed his regret for all those missed years. Dad and I had a nice visit with Dan and as we were about to leave he asked us to wait a moment and left the room. When he returned he handed me a knife. It was the combat knife he had carried during the war. While I had some inkling of the significance of this, I have to admit that in my youthful callowness, I didn't fully appreciate that he was giving me a cherished artifact of his military service, a link between two generations of lieutenants who were serving their country in wartime. Only in my later years have I begun to understand.

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My leave over and our honeymoon behind us, Dace and I packed the car and started the long drive to Colorado. Her dad had been seriously injured in an auto accident during my senior year in college, and was not yet driving, so they loaned us their car – a little blue Opel coupe. Like most European cars of the time, it had some quirks. Every now and then it suffered some sort of vapor lock and the engine would die. Letting it sit for a while cured this, and it would start right up as though nothing was wrong. The other quirk was that occasionally the lining inside the roof would collapse, requiring that we fiddle around with the braces that held up the fabric until we managed to get them back in place. Nevertheless, it got us to Colorado and back, and served us well while we were there.

My previous trip to Colorado, to attend my brother Barry's 1963 graduation from the Air Force Academy, was done in one long drive of about twenty-four hours. Mom, Dad, my brother Terry, my aunt Deloris and I would take turns driving while the rest of us slept, or at least tried to. When dawn broke somewhere out on the plains I groggily looked around and, not finding anything of interest, slipped in and out of sleep for the next couple of hours. We finally made it, but the last part of the trip seemed like it would never end. The drive back to Ohio was a repeat of the drive out, only longer, since we were delayed by a flat tire.

The drive with Dace was much more pleasant. How could it not be for two newlyweds? Everything was new and exciting. We took a couple of days, so there was no long night of endless staring through the windshield. As we passed Fort Riley, Kansas, which, I am told is a very nice post, I was thankful that I had been assigned to Fort Carson rather than to this place which seemed to be in the middle of nowhere.

Colorado was as nice as I had remembered it, and our time there gave us a chance to really enjoy ourselves, a sort of extended honeymoon. At least for a while. All this was under the looming shadow of knowing that I would probably go to Vietnam, but we put that out of our minds as much as possible.

We were also fortunate that my brother Barry's in-laws lived in

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Monument, Colorado, just a few miles north of Colorado Springs. Barry was serving as an Air Force Forward Air Controller in Vietnam at the time and his wife Nancy and their two small children were staying with her parents. We spent many pleasant hours at their house, and they were kind enough to lend us a TV for our tiny apartment. How tiny? Well, for one thing, when we put snow tires on the car, we had to store the summer tires in the hall just inside the front door.

We arrived at Fort Carson a few days before I had to report in, and the first thing we had to do was look for housing. A military post is a sort of “company town”, where everyone lives and works together, and pretty much knows what their neighbors and co-workers are up to. This has never appealed to me, and I was relieved to find that there was no post housing available for junior officers. We started looking for furnished apartments that we could afford on a new second lieutenant’s pay, which wasn’t much. In the meantime, we stayed on post in the facility which provided temporary housing for new arrivals, the Red Diamond Inn, a red diamond being the unit patch for my new outfit. The inn was a very old wooden building with creaking floors that undulated when we walked across them, but we didn’t mind.

These last couple of days of leave let us see some sites around Colorado Springs. One thing we decided to do was take a drive along Rampart Range Road, a rustic winding road that ran along a ridge a few thousand feet above the city. The view was terrific, but it began to seem that there were no intersecting roads that would lead us back to town. Then it started to get dark. With the lights of Colorado Springs shimmering below us, we began to wonder if we would have to spend the night stranded on that blasted mountain. At last, the road started to descend and we made it back home, with a story that we have laughed about ever since.

The morning I was to report to the post headquarters, I was a nervous wreck. The only experience I had in being an “officer” was commanding some of my fellow OCS candidates, who had a strong

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incentive to be cooperative. We new lieutenants especially lacked experience in leading sergeants, who clearly knew a LOT more about the Army than we did and were usually older than we were. Throughout military history sergeants may have accepted that new lieutenants outrank them, but they also know that, at least for a while, it is the sergeants who will be doing the leading. I also had no idea what sort of job I would end up in at Fort Carson. I only knew that I was to report to the headquarters of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), and they would send me wherever they needed a new lieutenant.

At the time of the Vietnam War, a mechanized infantry division was a unit of about 15,000 men who were equipped with armored personnel carriers (APCs), tracked vehicles with light armor plating that was intended to protect the occupants from small arms fire (rifles and machine guns), grenades, and shrapnel from artillery rounds. This is in contrast to a non-mechanized division, whose only transport were trucks and jeeps.

Early on the morning of my first day at work, I walked with trepidation into the nondescript brick building that housed the division headquarters clutching a copy of my orders. After passing through a series of clerks and sergeants who processed me – yet again – I found that I was being assigned to the 137th Infantry Brigade. The 137th was a Kansas National Guard unit that had been nationalized by President Johnson (I often wondered if some Kansas politician had upset LBJ). By the time of my arrival, many of the original guardsmen were now gone, some to Vietnam, and had been replaced by new recruits. Most of the officer corps were either fresh lieutenants like myself or “regular army” fellows who had no connection with the original NG unit. But there were still a number of senior NCOs and a few officers from Kansas, and they were not very happy about being on active service. They had given up their civilian jobs – a number of them had worked at Leavenworth Federal Prison as tradesmen, electricians, plumbers and such – when their unit was activated. It was a challenge to get them to take their Army duties seriously.

There were quite a few new men coming into the 137th at the same

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time, include new officers straight out of OCS and ROTC. Among them were several of my OCS classmates, including *Mike Eberhardt*, *Pete Golka*, *Mike Hasselberg*, *Paul Kochis*, *Royal Tyler* and *Bill Yacola*. We were seated with a few dozen other new arrivals in a large meeting room while the brigade commander, an older colonel who was one of those from the Kansas days, told us the two most important things we needed to know about serving in his brigade. First, woe betide anyone who was picked up for drunk driving. This applied especially to officers, whose careers would be ruined. There had been a spate of serious accidents, some fatal, involving soldiers who had driven down to Pueblo, a notorious den of iniquity in those days, drank too much and crashed on the way back. This was a black mark on the records of the victims' commanding officers, and the colonel did not plan to let this happen to him.

Second, and pretty ridiculous compared to auto accidents, there was only one proper way to "blouse" trousers in the 137th. There were two basic ways that GIs could handle the hems of their pants when wearing combat boots. One option, the most popular, was to use "trouser blousers", small elastic bands that fit around the legs just above the boot tops; the soldier would fold the bottoms of his pants legs up inside this band to make a very neat bottom edge. The other option, the one demanded by the colonel, was to insert the trouser bottoms into the top of the boot. This was hard to do neatly and was much more trouble than blousers. Nevertheless, this was the only acceptable way, according to the colonel. He was so serious about this that he climbed up on a table to demonstrate. The OCS grads in the group were already used to this, since no blousers had been allowed at Benning's School for Boys.

Mike Eberhardt remembers the colonel's welcoming remarks, plus another aspect of working for the colonel that I had forgotten: in his civilian job, he had been a restaurant supply salesman. As a result, he was fanatical about the company mess halls, which he visited regularly, especially at breakfast. Mike recalls that "there could be only so many pancakes in the pan at a given time so they would be hot. After every

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meal, the salt and pepper shakers were refilled to the same amount. He had a habit of coming in the back door during meal times. Once I was the officer on duty in the mess when he came in. Since my job was to watch the line, I had my back to the backdoor. No one called the mess to attention, which was apparently my job, so I was told [by the colonel] to report to Lieutenant Colonel Gibbs, the battalion CO [for some sort of punishment appropriate to this breach of military courtesy.] After the meal I reported to Gibbs, who I happened to have a good relationship with. His comment was, ‘Okay, you’ve reported. Now go about your duty.’” Gibbs must not have been too concerned that a green lieutenant didn’t snap to attention just because the regimental CO walked into the mess hall.

After the colonel’s greeting, several of us were told that we were being assigned to the regiment’s 2nd Battalion, so our next stop was battalion headquarters. The battalion was housed in old wooden two-story barracks and one-story administrative buildings in one of the farther reaches of the post. A half-dozen of us new lieutenants met the battalion S-1 (personnel officer) and went through the usual checking of orders and completion of forms. We were then told that we needed to report in to the battalion executive officer, Major Sellen, since the battalion CO was not in the office that day. This presented a bit of a problem. Typically, replacement officers report to their new CO singly, not in groups. But the S-1 decided that it would be cumbersome to have us report to the major one after another, so we might as well do it as a group. The issue then became what we should say when we saluted Major Sellen. Traditionally, the reporting officer salutes and says, “Sir, Lieutenant So-and-so reports.” But if we all saluted and then said our names, the S-1 knew that the major, who was a bit of a stickler for matters such as this, wouldn’t like the cacophony of a bunch of lieutenants calling out their names at the same time. So, it was decided that we would enter the major’s office together, come to attention, and all of us would salute, but only one of us would say “Sir, Lieutenant So-and-so reports.” It was also decided that I would be “Lieutenant So-and-so” because – you guessed it – I was the tallest. So, *Mike Hasselberg*,

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Royal Tyler, Bill Yacola and I, plus several other fresh second lieutenants, whom I presumed to be ROTC, marched neatly into the major's office, made a "right face", and reported. The major found this to be satisfactory.

After our processing into the 2nd Battalion, we were then sent to our various companies, which would be our homes for the next several months. I went to Company A. So, after working my way down through the chain of command of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), I was now assigned to Company A, 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Brigade, or in military parlance, A/2/137.

Platoon Leader

The typical first job for a new second lieutenant in an infantry company was as a platoon leader, and that's what I became. A platoon at full strength consists of about forty men. Reporting to the platoon leader is a platoon sergeant (a Sergeant First Class, or E-7), who generally does much of the day-to-day work of running the platoon, plus keeps the lieutenant from screwing up too much – if the lieutenant is lucky enough to get a good sergeant. The platoon is broken down into three "rifle squads", made up, as the name implies, of riflemen who are generally privates first class. There is also a "weapons squad" armed with machine guns and mortars. Each squad is supervised by a staff sergeant (E-6). The platoon also includes the platoon leader's radio telephone operator (RTO) and the platoon medic. As one can imagine, being responsible for forty men can be quite a challenge for a young lieutenant. While the sergeants might be experienced, the privates are often teenagers right out of AIT and in need of a lot of close supervision.

Although the 5th Division was a mechanized unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 137th was a "straight leg" battalion, the only one in the entire division. That meant we walked on the battlefield rather than rode in

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APCs. While the disadvantage of this is obvious, there were a couple of positives. First, APCs are very uncomfortable for the passengers, who either sit on benches in the back or stand in the open hatches; either way they are thrown about by the lurching vehicle as the driver seeks out the roughest terrain to prove the capabilities of his powerful “track” (or so it always seemed). For some, APCs can also be claustrophobic, which is compounded by the stuffy, un-airconditioned passenger compartment and the constant noise – the clatter of the steel treads and the roar of the engine. Most GIs are perfectly happy to exit these chariots whenever they get the chance, unless of course that means going out into inclement weather or, much worse, enemy fire.

The second, and more important, positive of being in a “leg” outfit is that all armored vehicles require a high level of maintenance. They constantly need cleaning, inspecting, adjusting, and replacing of their almost infinite variety of parts. An army spends much of its time in garrison, where the emphasis is on maintenance of equipment and inspections. This means that in a mechanized platoon there are a myriad of issues that the lieutenant need worry about that don’t come up in a “leg” unit.

The job of a platoon leader involves doing a lot of troop training and spending quite a bit of time in the field on maneuvers. It was not easy to get the former National Guardsmen, and even a lot of the GIs who didn’t come from the Guard, to take training exercises seriously. They often viewed going to the field more like camping trips than military maneuvers.

Before my first field exercise Dace suggested that she could make me some cookies to take along. I was aghast. “This is the real Army,” I stammered. “We’ll be eating C-rations and roughing it.” That foolish assumption didn’t last long. Making my rounds of our platoon position on the first night out, I stuck my head into the back of a truck and found a bunch of sergeants chowing down on all kinds of snacks and goodies they had brought from home – pogey, just like in OCS. Plus, I’m pretty sure they had a bottle of whiskey in there somewhere. I wished I had brought my own cookies.

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That is not to say that the exercises weren't serious from the Army's point of view. The biggest training exercise I participated in at Carson was a huge operation involving an airborne parachute drop by a unit flown in from across the country, plus our battalion and several others which were flown from Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs to a temporary field that had been built in the southern part of the post. This was my first ride on a C-130, a big, four-engine cargo plane. At the airfield, I settled into the passenger seat of a jeep that sat on the rear ramp, ready to drive off as soon as we landed. Everything went fine until the plane started to taxi and then took off. That's when I learned that the crew toilet on a C-130 was a small barrel that folded down from the wall just a couple of feet from my head. Once we were in the air, I could hear stuff sloshing around in there, and soon a familiar odor filled the air.

I was relieved when the flight ended, but then we ran into another problem. As soon as we touched down and taxied to a stop, the rear ramp lowered and we were supposed to drive the jeep out of the plane – ASAP. My driver hit the starter and...nothing. The blasted thing picked this moment not to start. A white-haired Air Force lieutenant colonel who was overseeing the ground crew rushed up to my side of our jeep and started pushing. There I sat, a fresh-face second lieutenant doing nothing, watching this old senior officer huff and puff his guts out. Then the motor sprang to life and we drove off the ramp.

We immediately got off the runway and went to our assembly area a few hundred yards away. From there, I had a ringside seat to watch one C-130 after another touchdown, unload its cargo, and roar away, hardly even stopping. Suddenly one of the big birds came in wagging its wings like it was barely under control. BAM! It hit the runway hard and bounced several feet in the air. Then BAM! It hit and bounced again, and again a third time. Then it settled down and taxied to a stop. A little while later I noticed one of our medics sitting in a jeep, groaning like he was in pain. "Are you sick?" I asked. "Nooo," he moaned. "I was on that plane that almost crashed." He survived the experience, but I'm sure he never forgot it.

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There were a couple of other close calls on this exercise. We had set up our night perimeter and settled down when, in the middle of the night, a group of APCs came tearing through our lines, scattering men in all directions. How they avoided running over anyone, I'll never know. On another night a couple of GIs from a different company drove up in a jeep, completely lost. We pointed them in the direction where we thought their unit might be and sent them on their way. This part of Fort Carson is made up of rolling countryside broken up by deep ravines, and they went tearing across this landscape in the dark. It wasn't long before we heard a crash and then all was quiet. Before long we heard the jeep start up and go clanking off, but this time more slowly. Evidently, the men weren't hurt, but their jeep sure was. Many activities in the Army present the opportunity for injury beyond being wounded in combat.

The company commander of A/2/137 was a fellow I'll call Captain Brash. An OCS graduate and Vietnam vet, he was not much older than me, maybe younger, and had attended OCS when he was perhaps nineteen or twenty. He was still extremely immature in many ways. For one thing, an enthusiastic bicyclist, when he first reported to Fort Carson, he drove around with his bikes in a rack on the top of his car for weeks, for no good reason except to show off in some way. This got to the point that people all over the post wondered who the goofy guy was who never took his bikes off his car. Even worse, he liked to show us lieutenants pictures of his wife – naked. This was especially embarrassing since we had met his wife. He also liked to play games with the troops and NCOs, as though this was his view of leadership. On top of all this, he was terrible at the administrative tasks of running an Army company and was eventually relieved of his command.

In contrast, I spoke with several enlisted men who served with him in Vietnam, and they had nothing but good things to say. His platoon was in plenty of action, but not a single one of his soldiers was killed. He was a classic example of that sort of soldier who performs well in combat but is lost in a stateside assignment.

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I also have to give Captain Brash credit for taking the initiative to give our company extra tactical training. I had just returned from being an evaluator on another company's field exercise, where I got to grade them on their performance in various situations, plus do things like set off "flash-bang" grenades to simulate incoming artillery rounds. After several days in the field, all I wanted was to go home, shower, and get some sleep. But as soon as I got off the truck at our company area, I learned that the captain had dreamed up a night exercise for our company. What a disappointment. Just beyond our company area was a complex of hills and gullies. Our "mission" was to sneak through the gullies and assault an enemy outpost on one of the hills. In almost complete darkness, the company wound through several gullies, trying to find the right hill. Finally, seeing a hill faintly silhouetted against the night sky, we aligned our platoons for the assault. When the word came to attack, we clawed our way up the steep hillside, only to find that we were attacking the **WRONG** hill. In our after-action debriefing, Captain Brash thought we had done well, but I was pretty disconcerted over how easy it was to get disoriented among those hills which all looked about the same.

Brash was not the only company commander who managed to get relieved. There was a captain whose ambition was to become an FBI agent. He figured a few years in the military would give him an advantage in becoming a G-man, but he exercised extremely poor judgement that doomed his aspiration. First, he took along some live ammunition for an M14 rifle on a field exercise, a very serious violation of safety rules, which permitted only blank ammunition. He then proceeded to shoot a deer and have a barbeque in an attempt to endear himself to his men. At least one of his troopers didn't find this endearing and reported the captain. To make matters worse, it was suspected that he had misspent some money from the company fund, which was supposed to be used only for things which the entire company would enjoy. Thus ended the captain's chances of getting into the FBI.

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Another goofball was a first lieutenant who was one of the original Kansas National Guard officers and held a staff position at battalion headquarters. He was the only officer I met in the Army who actually carried a “swagger stick”, the short stick that was once in vogue among officers as a symbol of rank, but which had pretty much fallen out of favor by the mid- to late-sixties. Nevertheless, this lieutenant liked to strut around with his swagger stick in hand or tucked into his belt, looking like someone from a different era. No one took him very seriously.

Then there was the case of Lieutenant Eric Toolson. Yes, that Lieutenant Toolson, the big-footed TAC from OCS. While most of our TACs went on to serve in Vietnam soon after their Fort Benning assignments, Toolson was posted to Fort Carson and he ended up in my brigade. The story was that he had gotten this “hardship” assignment because his father in Utah was extremely ill at the time. Thankfully, I didn’t see much of him at Carson, but I did hear that he received an Article 15, a company-level punishment which is less than a court martial. He had taken a rifle from the arms cage to go on a training exercise and didn’t bother to sign for it. A stupid mistake, but a serious one. Those of us who had known him from OCS got a good chuckle over this.

This is not to say that the Army was full of oddball officers. Far from it. Most of those I served with were competent, fair, hard-working, serious about their duties, and deserving of respect. Lieutenant Colonel Rockhold, the battalion commander, was highly respected. Though tough and demanding, he showed no false bravado and hardly ever raised his voice.

At one point I was appointed the battalion CBR (Chemical, Biological, Radiological) officer. This put me in charge of the battalion’s training related to such nasty threats as poison gas, germ warfare and nuclear fallout. One of my assignments was to hold CBR classes for the battalion officers, with the emphasis on arcane subjects like the different sorts of tear gas grenades, their identifying markings, effective ranges, and so forth. Unfortunately, these classes were

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scheduled for right after lunch, and despite my best efforts to make the subject matter interesting, it was obvious that the attendees were struggling to stay awake. In the back of the room, Lieutenant Colonel Rockhold dozed intermittently, much like the tired candidates from my OCS days. When the first class ended, he complimented me in front of the other officers – but he did not return for subsequent classes. I supposed the only way I could have livened up the class was to set off a live tear gas grenade, but the downside of this would have far outweighed the fun of watching everyone jerk awake and scramble for the exits.

Another fine officer was First Lieutenant Garoot. He was a former NCO who had achieved a commission – I'm not sure how, perhaps through a direct promotion – so he was older and far more experienced than most men of his rank. As a result, he was a company commander, a position that was supposed to be held by a captain. Garoot was a no-BS sort of fellow who ran a tight ship, yet he also displayed a nice sense of humor – the antithesis of the National Guard lieutenant with his swagger stick.

Because of the civil unrest that was wracking the country, our brigade, along with units at other Army posts, trained regularly for riot control and was periodically put on stand-by riot duty, ready to move out at a moment's notice. Even in the dead of winter, if on riot duty we had to keep our trucks and jeeps running all night so they wouldn't freeze up.

We even had our own sort of riot on the post. For some reason, there were troubles in the stockade (the post jail) that came close to getting out of hand. Actress Jane Fonda, in all her wisdom, decided she needed to visit there as part of her anti-war (or, more accurately, anti-U.S. military and pro-North Vietnam) campaign. She was ushered around the fort by the commanding general, who must have been grinding his teeth the whole time, and even talked with the prisoners in the stockade. Then she flew off, probably thinking that her magic touch had solved everything – or at least she had gotten the sort of

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publicity that she craved. Well, as usual, she hadn't solved any problems, and the troubles continued. It got so that every night an infantry company would have to surround the stockade in case of a breakout. This was undoubtedly for show, since there was never any real attempt at a breakout, but for those of us who pulled this duty it was an unwelcome burden. It was boring duty that kept us from getting any sleep, but there were occasional incidents that livened it up. For instance, one of my troopers managed to lose his bayonet while he was fooling around with it to pass the time. Just what we needed, a lost weapon knocking around right outside the stockade. After quite a while of searching in the dark on our hands and knees, the offending weapon was found and returned to the embarrassed trooper, along with a heated reprimand.

I got to go inside the stockade only once, and that was to pay a soldier in my company. We didn't actually give him his money, of course; I just got his signature on his pay voucher. He was a bit of a trouble maker and had been incarcerated, not for the first time, for some relatively minor infraction and I was the pay officer that month. When the gate and the cell doors closed behind me, it made me realize more than ever that jail was a place I wanted to avoid.

Acting as pay officer, which I did twice at Fort Carson, was an interesting and rather unsettling experience. In those days, officers were paid by check, but enlisted men were paid in cash. On payday, I would draw a .45 automatic pistol and one magazine of ammo from the arms room. I was accompanied by an enlisted man with an M14 rifle with one magazine, which contained only about five rounds, not the full twenty. The magazines were inserted in our weapons, but we were not authorized to chamber a round unless there was an attempted hold-up (in which case, the robbers undoubtedly would have gotten the drop on us, so I doubt there was much we could have done to stop them, even had we had full magazines and rounds in the chamber). A driver with his jeep would take us to the pay office. After my ID was checked I was ushered into a room along with dozens of other pay officers, seated

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at a table and brought a box with the correct amount of cash for the men in my company along with their pay vouchers. I don't remember the amount, but it must have been over ten thousand dollars, maybe fifteen thousand. A lot of money to carry around in cash. With all those bills stacked in front of me on the table, it looked like I had hit the jackpot in Vegas. I would then proceed to count it – every twenty, ten, five, one, and all the coins – to make sure it was the correct amount before I signed for it. Once I had signed, it was mine, or at least the Army held me personally accountable for it. Then my armed guard and I would be driven back to the company area. At the same time, a hoard of lieutenants and captains (anyone above these ranks having long since passed on this duty to the lowest officer in the unit) would be doing the same thing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash was being carried all over Fort Carson and every other military base in the country on payday.

Back at the company, the enlisted men formed up in front of a table set up in one of the barracks. One at a time, they would step up to the table, identify themselves, I would give them their cash and they would sign for it. By the end of the day, I felt relieved and the troops were either gambling away their pay, heading downtown to party, or grumbling because they had gotten stuck with some sort of duty instead of speeding off for a good time.

One duty that I personally got stuck with, and which didn't make me happy, was battalion duty officer on Christmas Eve. All of us lieutenants were anticipating the duty roster for the holidays, because we knew a few of the most junior officers – meaning us – would be assigned. When I saw the names on the list, my heart sank. Instead of spending Christmas Eve with Dace, I would be sitting around the battalion headquarters with an NCO who had also drawn the short straw. Christmas Eve on an army post can be a very quiet time, and this one was no exception. We got a couple of phone calls from enlisted men who were going to be late returning from leave because of car problems or cancelled flights, but that was about it. After a long night,

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I was relieved by the unhappy lieutenant who had gotten stuck with Christmas Day duty, and I went home tired but happy. I got a few hours of sleep, and then Dace and I enjoyed our Christmas.

Assistant S-4 / Property Book Officer

After several months as a Platoon Leader, I became Assistant S-4 (supply officer). My major responsibility was to act as the Battalion Property Book Officer (PBO), a job traditionally held by a Warrant Officer. (Warrant Officers of this sort were usually former sergeants who had many years in the Army and knew all the ins and outs of their specialty area. Warrant Officers rank between NCOs and commissioned officers.) Whenever the Army expands like it did during the Vietnam Era, there are never enough qualified officers, Warrant Officers or NCOs to fill the available positions. While the Army was able to create thousands of new lieutenants, there was no way to quickly create the experienced Warrant Officers needed for jobs like Property Book Officer. The simplest solution was to take a new lieutenant and hope he would learn enough on the job to get by.

Being Property Book Officer meant I had to maintain several large binders (literally, “property books”) listing all the equipment of our infantry battalion – trucks, weapons, radios, everything – right down to the tools in the motor pool. Millions of dollars’ worth of equipment. I had to sign for it all and I was supposed to be able to account for it. Fortunately, the company commanders also had to sign for everything in their companies, so the responsibility of “owning” all the equipment was passed on to them. Nevertheless, it was a big job for what an old NCO in our battalion liked to call “a snot-nosed young lieutenant”.

Initially, I didn’t want to leave my job as platoon leader and move to S-4. It’s not that I loved Captain Brash, it was just my ingrained aversion to change. But, for whatever reason, the decision was made and it was off to the Supply Room for me. My predecessor, Second

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Lieutenant Reid, had gotten orders for Vietnam and was leaving in just a few days, so after a very cursory overview of my new job, I got a handshake and a “good luck”, and the next thing I knew I was the battalion PBO. Anything I had to learn would come through on-the-job training. All the answers were supposedly somewhere in the dozens of three-ring binders stuffed with Army regulations and procedures filling the bookcase behind my desk. If I only knew which ones to look in.

Fortunately, Captain Ploederer, the battalion S-4, was an especially conscientious officer and a good guy to work for. He ran a relaxed shop, but we also got the work done. He also appreciated that a second lieutenant could be overwhelmed by the complexity of the PBO job. Fortunately, he understood the supply function well and was a great help to me.

On top of trying to understand a myriad of rules, regulations and procedures, one of my great challenges was “finding” equipment that had somehow been lost. The worst case was that of the captain who commanded the battalion’s headquarters company. It was standard procedure for a new company commander to take inventory before signing for his company’s equipment. This was especially important in the headquarters company, since, because it supported the battalion’s command group, it was larger and had even more complex equipment than a regular rifle company. This captain was a West Point grad with a very good record, but he certainly wasn’t thinking when he didn’t bother to take inventory before signing. Thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment was missing – tents, stoves, beds, tools, you name it. All of us in the supply office spent many hours trying to find replacements for this stuff through a combination of scrounging, trading, bribery and even a little larceny.

Captain Ploederer and our supply sergeants were good scroungers and we came up with just about everything, plus extra items to have on hand for future trades. But one item was a real stinker – a dog tag machine, a sort of oversized typewriter used to emboss information onto steel dog tags. The trouble was it had a serial number, and the

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serial number appeared in our books. After weeks of looking, we had just about given up when, lo and behold, one of our sergeants announced that he had heard of an “extra” machine in another battalion clear across Fort Carson, and he had managed to find out the serial number (unfortunately, it was not our lost machine). Recognizing the importance of plausible deniability, I didn’t ask how he found out all this. Then came the tricky part, which I can now confess to since the statute of limitations has long expired.

We made up a new Property Book page with the new serial number, copied the appropriate information from the old page (including some forged signatures), crumpled it a bit and rubbed it on the floor to age it, stuck it into the book in place of the original page, hustled across the post with Property Book in hand, walked into the supply office and announced that we had heard they had an extra dog tag machine. I flipped open our Property Book and asked nonchalantly, “Is this the serial number on your extra machine?” I never knew whether the PBO in that battalion was in on our little charade, perhaps due to some bribery or horse trading, but if he was, he played it as innocently as we did, and we drove off with our new machine. Not exactly high treason, but probably a serious enough offense to warrant some sort of punishment if we had been found out. Maybe I would have joined those rioters in the stockade.

Mike Eberhardt, my OCS classmate, was in the same brigade with me, but a different battalion. Not long ago he reminded me of something that I don’t remember – but it meant a lot to him. When he took inventory of his platoon before leaving for Vietnam, he found he was missing several items of equipment. His supply sergeant had a simple solution: If Mike gave him \$100 the problem would go away. As Mike put it, a hundred dollars was a lot of money to a second lieutenant. Plus, it was pretty evident that the money would end up in the sergeant’s pocket, not at the supply office (in fact, it was not within procedures to give money directly to the S-4 to pay for lost equipment). Instead, Mike contacted me, the only friend he had who might be in a

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position to help. He recalls that I came up with the gear he needed, thus both saving him the money and giving him the satisfaction of handing over the actual equipment rather than cash to the stunned sergeant. All that scrounging we had done paid off with lots of extra equipment that we could use for trading, some of which went to bailing out Mike.

Mike has another memory from Carson, which most young officers can relate to. He and his wife Robin found an apartment in the same complex as some other recently arrived second lieutenants, including *Paul Kochis*, who was rooming with four bachelors. Being married meant Mike was “the only one living with someone who knew how to cook”. One day he dropped in on Paul and his roommates and found them eating out of cans. Robin and Mike had them over occasionally for a real meal, a rare treat for these fellows who had been living like college students.

Part of my job as PBO was to keep after the companies in the battalion to follow supply procedures and meet deadlines. This was not easy, especially when all the company commanders outranked me. To offset this, I would sometimes invoke LTC Rockhold’s influence to gain the companies’ cooperation. In one instance I sent out a memo implying that the colonel needed something done by a specific date, which was stretching it a bit. Not long afterward, Captain Ploederer took me aside and told me that he had a message from Rockhold. “Tell that young lieutenant,” the colonel had told the captain, “to stop saying that he needs something done in my name.” Captain Ploederer assured me that the colonel laughed when he said it, but his point was made. The colonel may have been tough, but he must have had a soft spot for inexperienced young lieutenants.

It wasn’t all work in the S-4 office. It is part of military courtesy that when a field grade officer (a major or above) enters the room someone should call “Attention!” and all present should respond. One of the little jokes among us lieutenants was to walk into the S-4 office and shout “attention”. Everyone would jump to attention and we would

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laugh when they saw it was only a measly lieutenant. One day *Royal Tyler*, who was serving as the Motor Pool Officer, thought it would be funny to pull our joke. He strode in and called “attention”, not realizing that Major Sellen, the battalion Executive Officer, was already in the room. Sellen snapped to attention, thinking that LTC Rockhold or some other higher-ranking officer had walked in. Seeing that it was just Lieutenant Tyler, Sellen, who didn’t have much of a sense of humor, proceeded to give him a long lecture on military courtesy, especially emphasizing that majors didn’t come to attention for lieutenants.

I had another opportunity to end up in the stockade, or at least get a major blemish on my record, and it goes back to our brigade commander’s welcoming warning about drunk driving. We worked five and a half days a week, including Saturday morning. One Saturday at noon, Captain Ploederer invited a few of us lieutenants to go to the officers’ club for a beer. In those days I seldom ate breakfast and I wasn’t much of a drinker, so having a beer on an empty stomach was not the brightest of ideas. But since I was in no position to say no to my commanding officer, I went along. Well, after one beer, things started to get a little fuzzy. I think I had the good sense to excuse myself after just one (although I can’t swear to this).

At any rate, I was able to make it to the car and start my drive home. It was only a few miles to our apartment, but it was just about the longest drive of my life. All I could think of was the old colonel virtually threatening to shoot any officer who was picked up for DUI. I spent my drive back to our apartment hunched over the steering wheel, driving as cautiously as I could, and praying that I wouldn’t be pulled over. Somehow, I made it home. I staggered into our apartment, started to take off my fatigues with my boots still on, stood there with my pants down around my knees and announced loudly “I’m drunk!” Dace thought it was about the funniest thing she had ever seen. She still does.

The Changing Army

One of the things I learned at Fort Carson was that the Army was changing. But many of the old traditions were still there, like the Officers' Wives Club. This club was headed by the battalion commander's wife, Mrs. Rockhold. She was actually quite understanding and didn't make a big deal of it, but the unwritten rule was that the wives of all the officers in the battalion were supposed to attend regular meetings. Being averse to these sorts of things, Dace found a job so she could get out of the meetings, which were held during the daytime under the assumption that officers' wives would not have jobs. This was a pretty safe assumption, since many businesses refused to hire soldiers' wives because they were all transient and would soon be moving elsewhere. Nevertheless, Dace managed to find a position with a company that printed posters on the outskirts of Colorado Springs. Not only did that get her out of the wives' club meetings, but it also got her out of our small apartment, where there really wasn't anything to do all day long. She took the bus to and from work every day.

Mike Eberhardt's wife, Robin, had the same idea, and found a part-time job at Colorado College. As Mike put it, "She also was able to miss those 'gatherings'". He adds that it helped financially and "I actually believe our CO's understood that second lieutenants didn't make a lot of money."

In OCS we had been advised that it was important for us to get "calling cards", which we were supposed to leave at our commanding officer's quarters at our first duty station – there would be a little silver tray in the foyer onto which we would be expected to drop our cards the first time we visited the CO's home. Taking this to heart, as soon as I got home on leave after OCS, I rushed to a local printer and asked him to make up a supply. This wasn't cheap, since I also had to pay for the small engraved copper plate from which the cards were struck. "Brian Riley Walrath, Lieutenant, United States Army", they read. They

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looked pretty impressive; unfortunately, I never used any. I never visited Captain Brash's home, and on my single visit to Captain Ploedrer's home, nothing was said about calling cards, nor was there a silver tray in the foyer.

However, Robin Eberhardt attended a "tea" hosted by Mike's battalion commander's wife, and there actually was a basket into which she was told the wives should leave their husband's card. This is the only card Mike recalls using out of the supply that he had printed, but at least it saved Robin some embarrassment.

Other classmates had varying experiences with their cards. *Howard Wright* bought one hundred and used only one. Just as we were advised, there was a table in the foyer where Howard could leave his card, but there was no basket or silver tray. He threw his lieutenant cards away when he was promoted to captain. *Steve Roeder*, on the other hand, got more use out of his cards. He was invited to several of his commanding officers' homes where there actually were little silver trays in which to leave them. When he left Fort Hood to go to helicopter flight school, his going away gift was one of those little silver trays into which, one day, *his* subordinate officers would drop their cards when they came calling. Unfortunately, Steve left the Army before he got a command of his own, but at least he now has a nifty memento of his service days. As for me, I still have the tarnished printing plate as a memento of my naiveté.

Bob Hines and *Paul Kochis* (and, I assume, most others) did not bother to follow this (as Paul puts it) "ridiculous advice" and never had a need for the cards.

Another tradition that was still in place was having formal parties. These required that officers wear their "dress blues". We OCS grads had been fitted for our uniforms in the last couple of weeks at OCS, when we were about as thin as we ever would be. It was required that we have these uniforms, for which we had to pay out of our own pockets. Quite a few of us had put on weight since graduating, so it wasn't easy squeezing into them. But at least we got some use out of

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them. Several OCS classmates have told me that they never got a chance to wear their dress blues, so their money had been wasted. I managed to get extra use out of mine, since I was married in it.

One of our battalion parties really brought home the bewildering times in which we were living. Our after-dinner entertainment was a local high school choir. The room was filled with several dozen officers in their dress blues and their wives in gowns or fancy dresses. As we sat sipping coffee the choir regaled us with a selection of songs from *Hair*, the most famous anti-Vietnam War musical of the time. Virtually every one of us lieutenants would be in Vietnam in a few months, and most of the officers above lieutenant had already been there. The lyrics from *The Age of Aquarius*, considered profound by many of the deep thinkers of the time, filled the air:

When the moon is in the seventh house
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars.

The irony of this was not lost on me, and, I'm sure, many others in the room when we contrasted it to *The Song of the U.S. Infantry*, which we had learned in OCS:

You can hear it in the heat of the jungle;
You can hear it across the sea;
It calls to every freedom loving man;
The cry of the U.S. Infantry;
Follow Me! Follow Me!

From Concord Bridge to An Khe Ridge
Through the swamps and mountains and sand
They fight and die where brave men lie
Against all tyrants they stand.

You can hear it in the heat of the jungle;
You can hear it across the sea;

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It calls to every freedom loving man;
The cry of the U.S. Infantry;
Follow Me! Follow Me!

It's just as well that most of us didn't spend a lot of time puzzling over the incongruousness of things we were exposed to. The times were tough enough without having our heads spinning.

All in all, being assigned to Fort Carson was one of the best things that happened to me in the Army. It was a chance for Dace and me to start off our marriage on our own. On top of that, we were in a place where there was much to see – we made trips to Cripple Creek, the Black Forest, Garden of the Gods, Cave of the Winds, Pikes Peak, Royal Gorge, and all the other sites nearby. We got a lesson in just how big Colorado is when we thought we could make a day trip to Dinosaur National Park in the northwest corner of the state. I had apparently missed something during one of my map-reading courses. After driving half the day, we were still a long way from the park, so we turned around and headed home.

Our biggest trip was a great circle route down to the Grand Canyon and up into Idaho to see my Aunt Deloris. We had a great time, but we also learned budgeting: I had cashed my monthly paycheck of a little over \$400 the day we left. Somewhere in Utah I looked in our suitcase where we kept our extra cash and found that the envelope was empty. I was certain we had somehow been robbed until we started adding up what we had spent so far – it totaled almost \$400. We limped along on what we had left, and still had fun.

The saddest thing that happened while we were at Fort Carson is that in December of 1969 Uncle Dan died. He had had several heart attacks over the years, and finally, at the age of only 59, he was stricken with a fatal attack. I wonder if part of the reason he had given me his knife just a few months earlier was that he somehow could see this coming. We were saddened by the loss of a good, good man.

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Then the inevitable happened – orders for Vietnam. We always expected this, but it was still a bit of a shock (or maybe a wake-up call) when the orders finally arrived. I would have jumped at the chance, like virtually every lieutenant in the Army, for a stateside assignment. Such an assignment became available at Fort Carson about the time we lieutenants were getting our Vietnam orders, and most of us applied. I don't know who, if anyone, actually got it, but it wasn't me.

I had also heard more than one of my fellow lieutenants half-jokingly (but perhaps more than half-hopefully) say that they were going skiing, and maybe they would break a leg, keeping them from Vietnam. But there were no broken legs, self-inflicted wounds, AWOLs, or other actions to avoid going. We bit the bullet and did what we were supposed to do.

As my OCS classmates at Fort Carson and other posts around the county started getting orders for Vietnam, another Army tradition came into play – the farewell party. Since so many of us would be leaving at about the same time, our battalion party honored several of us at once. We were each given a small cast-plastic plaque embedded with the crossed rifles insignia of the Infantry, the battalion crest, and a brass plate with our name. While these parties were well-meaning, they were also somber affairs, reflective of the fact that everyone knew where we were headed.

One of the departing lieutenants being feted was OCS classmate *Mike Hasselberg*. I recalled walking tours with Mike on at least one occasion. For some reason, Mike always had a problem with marching. Try as he might, he just couldn't seem to keep in step, even when was marching by himself. The whole time we marched our tours, a TAC walked right beside him, yelling in his ear about what a screw-up he was and that if he couldn't learn to march, he would be recycled. Well, Mike must have learned to march well enough, since he graduated on time with the rest of us. He ended up in the same battalion as me at Fort Carson, and now there we were listening to our superior officers give speeches praising our performance and wishing us luck. Mike's

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company commander singled out Mike as the best second lieutenant he had ever worked with. This was the highest of praise coming from a West Point graduate! I've often thought about what a loss it would have been if Mike had been booted from OCS because of his marching skills. Another example of the difficulty of predicting one's performance as an officer based on criteria that were deemed important in OCS.

Unfortunately, Captain Ploederer was caught up in the reduction in force as the Vietnam War slowed down. He had been in the Army for several years, and although there was still a need for second lieutenants, there was a surplus of senior captains. Because of an AWOL problem in his platoon way back when he had been a young lieutenant (ironically, at Fort Carson) the Army decided not to place him on the promotion list for major, despite having served two tours in Vietnam. He really wanted to make the Army a career, and even flew to Washington to state his case, but to no avail. He was scheduled to be rifted soon after I left for Vietnam.

His last act for me was to conduct my Officer Efficiency Report. He rated both me and classmate *Royal Tyler* at 94 (on a scale of 100). He apologized for not rating us higher, his reasoning being that he knew we didn't plan to become career officers. At the time I didn't understand the OER system. I later found out that an officer has to be really incompetent to be rated lower than 90, and 94 was more or less average. Understandably, the captain was saving ratings in the high 90s for careerists – and not wasting them on lieutenants like me.

A final act that we all had to perform before leaving Fort Carson was preparing our wills. This was an Army requirement, and a good one. Left to our own designs, I imagine a lot of us young fellows would have neglected this, only adding to their families' grief if something happened to them. As important as it was, it served as a grim reminder of where we were going, and what might await us there. Dace and I packed up our few belongings, arranged for the Army to ship what we couldn't fit in the car, and headed back east to Ohio for a couple of weeks of leave.

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After our first day's drive we stopped at a motel in Salinas, Kansas. I turned on the TV and was shocked to see the lead story on the evening news – the shootings at the antiwar demonstrations at Kent State University, our alma mater. The quiet university of my memories had, in just a couple of years, become a symbol of the antiwar movement. One wonders if this incident could have been avoided if the National Guardsmen had received the training and discipline that was instilled in us during our riot training at Fort Carson, or if the Kent State administration had taken action to control the demonstrations when they first got started.

VIETNAM

Jungle School

Off to Panama

Before I could go to Vietnam, I had to go to Panama to attend Jungle School, along with many others who were destined for Southeast Asia. Once again it was time to drive to the airport and fly off to somewhere I didn't want to go.

Jungle School – officially, the U.S. Army Jungle Operations Training School – was a two-week program conducted at Fort Sherman in the Panama Canal Zone. Panama's latitude is close enough to Vietnam's that its weather conditions roughly duplicate Southeast Asia's. Not everyone who served in Vietnam was first sent to Jungle School, and, like many of the Army's decisions, it was something of a mystery how I, or any other soldier, was selected to attend. I ran into several other 50th Company grads there, and there were others who preceded and followed me.

The Jungle School curriculum included a variety of subjects that would better prepare us for conducting operations in Vietnam. There was very little classroom instruction – we spent most of our time outdoors in hands-on learning. A number of things stand out from my time in Panama.

River Crossing Techniques: We learned several ways to cross water obstacles, from hand-over-hand on ropes to paddling rafts (“Caiman in the river!” was called out to warn us whenever one of these alligator relatives was spotted; or, more likely when an instructor wanted to have some fun, since none of us ever actually saw a caiman). The most thrilling technique was the “slide for life” across the Chagres River. The

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Chagres is a couple of hundred feet wide, so the trip across is no minor thing. High on a hill towering over the river, we gathered around the instructor for a briefing about what we were supposed to do, then waited in line to ride the rope slanting down to the other side. When the instructor asked for volunteers, I, in the best tradition of the Army, stepped forward (had I learned nothing in OCS?). He looped a heavy rope under my arms and fastened it to the metal slide which rode on the rope spanning the mighty Chagres. He then explained that the rope would sag when I got toward the middle, so I should swing my legs to build up enough speed not to get stuck. Then, with a yell of “Geronimo”, or something like that, I was off, swinging my legs with gusto. In short order I was going about a hundred miles an hour. The advice about swinging my legs was the instructor’s little joke and I had fallen for it. My worry quickly changed from being stuck in the middle of the river to how was I going to stop. I needn’t have worried – the Army had taken care of this. On the other side of the river, the rope was tied to a large tree, and not far in front of the tree was a huge knot in the rope. The knot slowed me from a hundred mph to zero in a fraction of second. But not all of my body parts stopped at the same time. That night, as I tried unsuccessfully to sleep on the ground, I was convinced that my breast bone must be broken, and this continued to bother me for a couple of weeks.

Rappelling: Rappelling is actually fun, although the first time you lean out over a precipice supported only by the trust you place in the rope suspending you can be pretty disconcerting. We practiced on wood towers of increasing heights until we became comfortable and our instructors were satisfied that we could go on to something more challenging without killing ourselves. The final exercise required rappelling down the almost vertical face of a “dry” waterfall. While it was dry in the sense that no water was gushing down it, parts of the waterfall were covered with a slimy moss that made it as slick as a greased pig. It was my good luck to be assigned to one of these parts. I proceeded very carefully and things went OK until I was about half way down when suddenly my feet shot straight up and I found myself

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dangling upside down. My hat went one way and my glasses another. I was saved by my harness from falling to certain death (well, almost certain bruising, anyway) but I was now stuck, with little idea of how to get upright. The instructors, who had certainly seen this sort of thing before, offered little help, believing that experience is the best teacher. They just yelled at me to get myself upright, which, through a combination of twisting, lurching and swearing, I finally managed to do.

Helicopter Assault: We took one ride in Huey helicopters. As we hovered a few feet over the landing zone, I thought the crew chief signalled us to exit, so I poked the man next to me and yelled “Let’s go!” He and I went, but everyone else stayed on board, unbalancing the bird and causing it to teeter precariously. The instructors were not amused.

There were also various classes in knot-tying, living off the land, and first aid. I was especially struck by one captain who told a story from his Vietnam experience: One of his men had been shot in the head and everyone presumed him to be dead. But, even though the captain believed it was futile, he called in a helicopter medevac anyway. The soldier, in fact, was not dead and survived because of quick medical attention. The captain drilled into us how grateful he was to this day that he had done everything he could to save the man, and he cautioned us to do the same.

We spent quite a bit of time in the field practicing ambushes, setting up perimeters and hiking through the jungle. One of our instructor sergeants was, to put it mildly, an odd duck. He carried a huge backpack, but we never found out what was in it; it wasn’t food, since he was constantly mooching something to eat from the students. He regularly warned us not to fall asleep when we were conducting night exercises, lest he “get” us. One night we set up our perimeter and fought to stay awake in the pitch dark. Then I heard movement in front of me. Convinced it was the sergeant and determined not to let him take me by surprise, I would jerk myself awake whenever I started to doze. This went on all night. When dawn broke, I found out what had been making the rustling noises – the man next to me. I had somehow

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gotten turned about ninety degrees and was facing perpendicular to our line, so it was one of my comrades (I think it was my old 50th Company platoonmate *Tom Edgren*) whom I had heard squirming around all night. As far as I know the sergeant never “got” anybody, but he talked a good game.

On the weekend we got time off, and many of us went into Colon, the nearest city. It sat at the Caribbean end of the canal (which, interestingly, is actually west of the Pacific end). We went from bar to bar and for the first time in this young, naïve lieutenant’s life, were surrounded by prostitutes, plus street vendors selling all sorts of junk and who-knows-what sort of meat grilled on sticks over wood fires. This was my first exposure to a third world country, and I have to say that I didn’t care for it.

Something Panama had that Vietnam didn’t was land crabs. It must have been mating season, because these little reddish/purplish creatures were everywhere – on the lawns, in ditches, underfoot. Hordes of them swarmed across the roads and were squashed by the hundreds. Just another exotic “flavour” of life in Panama.

If nothing else, Panama did give us a taste of what Vietnam would be like. There was incredible poverty, with the people in the countryside living in grass shacks, and the city alleyways piled with three or four feet of trash. There was also the unbearable heat and humidity; my uniform mildewed just hanging in my wall locker. We experienced impenetrable jungle, strange smells, swarms of mosquitoes and other bugs, and rain that came down in buckets. Over the years I’ve met several vets who attended Jungle School, and their universal reaction was: “If they had been shooting at us in Panama, it would have been worse than Vietnam” – it was that miserable. At least when the monsoons came in Southeast Asia, it wouldn’t be the first time we had to struggle through a jungle in torrential rain. Also, although I didn’t realize it at the time, the two weeks in Jungle School counted as time in-country in Vietnam. It may have allowed me to come home a couple of weeks earlier. That, in itself, made Jungle School worth it – after all, bad as it was, they

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weren't shooting at us in Panama.

Jungle School also taught me how well I could sleep if I was tired enough. On one of our patrols, we carried M14 rifles with blank ammunition. We did not have blank adapters, a device on the end of the barrel that causes the rifle to fire semi-automatically despite the low pressure of the blanks. Without blank adapters, we had to pull back and release the rifle's charging handle after each shot to eject the empty and load a fresh cartridge. As we set up our perimeter for the night, we were warned to expect an attack from "aggressor" forces. Nevertheless, I dozed off. When dawn broke, I looked down and was surprised to find fired brass all around my position. "Were we hit last night?" I asked the man next to me. He looked at me like I had two heads. "Yeah," he said. "Don't you remember? You were standing up firing your rifle." Still dead asleep, I had been madly firing away, working the action for each shot, and must have fired off at least a full twenty-round magazine while comatose.

Ready for Vietnam?

It must be rare for a soldier to feel he is truly ready to go off to war for the first time. It is only recently that I have reflected on whether the training provided by the Army prepared us for Vietnam. My observations about this are, once again, based on my personal experience, and my classmates may have different views.

In Basic and AIT, we had undergone some "jungle warfare" training in which we pretended that we were tramping through rain forests instead of the bare trees and snow of New Jersey. But most of the training was literally in the "basics" of being soldiers, including general infantry tactics, with no particular kind of fighting in mind. In OCS one of the few exercises that I recall which was especially oriented toward Vietnam was the Ranger Problem, which emphasized small unit patrolling, plus at least one instance in which we entered and searched a mock "Vietnamese village".

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There were no exercises at Fort Carson that were specifically relative to Southeast Asia. Instead, most of our field operations seemed to emphasize preparation for fighting the Russians in Europe, including a simulated nuclear blast during one exercise. Even Captain Brash's night exercise involved assaulting a treeless hilltop. I don't suppose the open plains of Colorado lent themselves to practicing jungle operations any more than the sand and scrub growth of Fort Dix. Much of our time at Fort Carson was spent in garrison, where duties were of an administrative nature – everything from record keeping to being Fire Control Officer or Pay Officer.

While Jungle School was specifically oriented toward the sort of conditions we would meet in Vietnam and some of the training was relevant, other parts of it seemed to be designed simply to show off the skills of some of the instructors. For instance, they demonstrated how to kill and eat chickens and snakes, and we partook of a variety of exotic edibles, like insects. While interesting (and entertaining for the instructors, who got to laugh at our “yuck” reactions), I doubt that many of us actually did this sort of thing once we got to Vietnam.

Major Ronald Beckett served his third tour in Vietnam in 1969 – 70, this time as a District Senior Advisor. I never met Major Beckett, but I can relate to his observations about being prepared to “advise” the South Vietnamese, as presented in his book *Jack of All Trades*. Before leaving for Vietnam, he had attended the six-week Military Assistance Training Advisors course at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg. Training included communications, explosives, survival, counterinsurgency warfare, psychological operations, and weapons. Despite receiving much more extensive preparation than most of us who were destined to become advisors, he still felt that “The training, which was supposed to prepare officers and NCOs for advisory assignments in Vietnam, was for the most part superficial, lacking both substance and depth. There was also a crash course in the most rudimentary elements of the Vietnamese language. My assessment at the end of the course was that I was ill-prepared to be an advisor and

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even less to speak the language.” If Major Beckett felt unprepared after all this training, one can imagine how I felt after just a couple of weeks in Panama.

Many of my classmates had been given post-OCS assignments which had nothing to do with leading men in combat – in Vietnam or otherwise. My stint as a Property Book Officer, which was much like working in a large corporation, is an example. Other classmates ended up commanding a Basic Training company, supervising the motor pool, overseeing sports and recreation programs, supervising clerks at a Reception Center, or being an OCS TAC officer. Little of this was similar to serving in Vietnam.

In addition to this lack of training, it also seems that Vietnam was seldom discussed, even though many of us lieutenants would be going there. I don't recall that our superior officers or NCOs with Vietnam experience took us young guys aside to offer much advice about what to expect. Nor did I personally seek them out for helpful insight (shame on me!). It was almost as though Vietnam was like sex – everyone knew it was a part of life, but it was never discussed in polite society. One of the few things Captain Brash told a couple of us lieutenants about Vietnam was that the only thing that kept him alive for his first few months was his Ranger training (he had attended Ranger School right after OCS) – but in the 1970's only a small percentage of Army officers went to Ranger School. Life at Fort Carson existed in a sort of dream world separate from the reality that many of us were going to face. This seems particularly ironic since the 5th Mechanized, the unit I served in at Carson, had at least one brigade actually fighting in Vietnam.

I don't suppose there is any way the Army could have truly made us “ready” for Vietnam. Maybe they recognized this; plus, Vietnam wasn't the only war they needed to worry about – they also had the missions of defending Europe against a potential Soviet invasion and protecting South Korea from communist North Korea. So, they did their best to fight both a hot war and a cold war at the same time.

American Unit or MACV?

Of the 161 who graduated with 50th Company, I have been able to identify seventy-four who served in Vietnam; there are quite a few classmates whose service record is not clear, so I would estimate that the number would actually be over eighty. Our orders for Vietnam specified whether we would be assigned to a U.S. Army unit, where the most likely role would be as an Infantry Platoon Leader; or to MACV, in which case we would likely be in an advisory role to the South Vietnamese.

American Army Unit – Infantry Platoon Leader

At least thirty-five men from 50th served in American units. Their positions ranged from piloting helicopters to running signal, helicopter maintenance or chemical units. The top academic graduate in each OCS class was allowed to choose his branch, and our top grad, *Tom Lankford*, picked Finance. At graduation, General Berry, Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School, told him, “You can’t make a career in this man’s army without a CIB [Combat Infantry Badge, given only to those in the Infantry.]” Tom, who had no interest in making the Army a career, replied “Yes, Sir!” Ironically, I ran into him in Chu Lai, where he was overseeing a finance office – not being an Infantry officer was no guarantee of staying out of Vietnam.

The majority of 50th grads who served in American units – at least eighteen – were Infantry platoon leaders, the primary position for which OCS had trained us. As the title implies, the platoon leader was responsible for leading a forty-man platoon of riflemen and machine gunners “in the bush” on combat operations. Historically, this has always been one of the most dangerous jobs in the U.S. Army, and Vietnam was no exception.

About half way through his one-year tour, it was not unusual for a platoon leader to be reassigned to a rear-area job at company or battalion headquarters. There were legitimate reasons for this

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assignment to a “safer” job. An Infantry officer in combat is often under more stress than his riflemen, and if this starts to impair his judgement, he could easily put his men in even greater danger. Getting him out of the bush before this happens benefitted his men as well as himself. Additionally, these rear-area positions were vital to the functioning of the unit; officers who had field experience generally could perform their duties more effectively. Nevertheless, it was often difficult for the “grunts” – the Infantry privates, specialists, and junior sergeants who usually spent their entire one-year tour in the field – to view this as anything but an example of cronyism among the officer fraternity, and they weren’t always incorrect in this.

Two 50th Company classmates were killed in Vietnam and both were serving as platoon leaders with American Infantry companies.

One of them was *Jim DuPont*, who served in the 1st Cavalry Division, along with *David Doe*, *Ken Knudsen* and *Mike Thornton*. Jim and Ken ended up serving as platoon leaders in the same company and went on operations together for a couple of months. Ken explains Jim’s last patrol:

Around 7 A.M. on September 18, 1970, Jim came over to me and said that he had been assigned to go into Saigon to pick up the company’s pay that day, but he had never been a pay officer. He knew that I had, and asked me to switch places with him. I readily agreed to go into Saigon for two days. I flew out with the re-supply birds, and Jim and the 1st Platoon led the company out for the day’s operation. Around 9 P.M. that night I was at the Officer’s Club when a fellow lieutenant asked me what unit I was with. I told him and he said he thought a lieutenant had been killed that day from Charlie Company. I remember thinking that I hoped it was the 3rd Platoon leader, who was a real jerk. The next morning as I was walking out to the chopper, I saw Doc Evans, the 1st Platoon medic, getting off. He told me Jim had been hit by a sniper. Doc had tried to save him, but he had died on the way to the hospital. He was leading

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his troop and going into harm's way as we were taught at OCS. He took my place that day, and every September 18th I remember, and say a prayer for, my good friend Lieutenant James C. Dupont.

Not long before this book was written, *Clair Palmer*, a 50th Company classmate, learned that his wife's cousin served as Jim's RTO (radio-telephone operator) in Vietnam, and he shared additional details of Jim's death. On what seemed to be a routine operation, with no contact expected, Jim was walking a couple of men back from the front of the column. There was a sudden burst of six or seven rifle shots, hitting Jim twice and wounding another man. Jim's men heard the VC run away but never saw him – a typical frustrating occurrence. They performed first aid and Jim was still alive when he was medevacked, but he died on the helicopter.

Our other classmate to die in Vietnam was *Tom Edgren*, whom I knew well since we were in the same platoon in OCS. Tom went to Vietnam on June 4, 1970, and became a platoon leader in the 23rd Division, which was headquartered in Chu Lai and operated in the same province where I would later be assigned. In 2015, I corresponded with a Vietnam vet named Jimmy Morrison, who was a squad leader in Tom's platoon. Jimmy was kind enough to give me an account of Tom's death.

In the summer of 1970, their platoon was operating out of a firebase known as Mary Ann (we will hear much more about Mary Ann later). On July 30, the platoon left Mary Ann to sweep the nearby hills. Since he was nearing the end of his tour, Jimmy Morrison was trying to get out of going on field operations, but Tom told him that he needed him since they had mostly new guys. As Morrison put it, "He was new and I was an old timer. We had trouble getting on the same page. He had just come from officer school and I had been there 11 months." Of course, Tom had been an officer for close to a year, but I imagine most of the enlisted men thought all of us lieutenants had been

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commissioned about a week before we arrived in Vietnam – we were that green.

Tom's platoon was ambushed on August 5, with four men killed in action. They were stuck on a ridge for two days and nights waiting for helicopters to get out the bodies. Tom told Jimmy that he would try to send him out to escort home one of the bodies, which struck Jimmy as a "very unselfish thing to do". They were hit again on August 8 with many casualties, including a machine gunner. Tom picked up the unmanned M60 and started firing but was then seriously wounded himself. As he was lying on the ground waiting to be medevacked, Tom called for Jimmy Morrison, who went over to talk with him. Tom told Jimmy he had not realized how bad things were in the field and that he was sorry that he had made Morrison go on the operation. He also said he was trying to do his job to the best of his ability. This was all typical of Tom, who was known in OCS as one of our most enthusiastic and sincere candidates. Said Morrison, "He had a tough job and he was a hero. I found out only a few years ago [2011] that he died. I only knew him a short time, maybe 14 days, but in this short time these were two amazing, unselfish things he did. Tom was exposed to more in eight days than a lot [of men] were exposed to in a year. This was most likely the worst four days we had and the sad thing is that he was in charge so quickly that he did not have the time to get his feet wet."

Jimmy's ending comment underscores a challenge that virtually all of us faced in the latter years of the Vietnam War – being the new man in a unit. There were many names for us – newbie, cherry, fucking new guy (FNG), or even raw meat. They meant the same thing: Someone who had to gain experience and prove himself before he could be counted on. Many of the troops who deployed to Vietnam early in the war had come as members of units which had already trained together for months. They knew each other, liked each other, looked out for each other, and could be trusted. Even as late as 1970 there were a few units that were sent to Southeast Asia together, but this had become increasingly rare. Most of us arriving in Viet Nam were destined to be assigned individually to units where we would be FNGs, most likely

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replacements for someone whose tour had ended or who had become a casualty. We were truly “strangers in a strange land”, with much to learn about our new unit and new comrades, and much to prove about ourselves.

Tom Edgren’s death, in particular, seems to epitomize exactly the sort of thing young lieutenants feared about being sent to Vietnam – being suddenly thrown into a situation for which we were ill-prepared, with other’s lives, as well as our own, depending on our actions and decisions. An eerie aspect of Tom’s death was that he may have foreseen it. At our OCS Eighteenth Week Party, he was seated at a table with *George Hatfield* and his wife, Beverly. Even years later, both George and Beverly remembered how Tom had said that he knew he would not make it back from Vietnam. And at Jungle School, Tom and *Peter Nowlan* were walking back from the post theater, where most of us had gone to see the movie *Patton*, when Tom wondered aloud how many of us would survive the war. Peter didn’t know what to say.

MACV – Advisor to a South Vietnamese Unit

The Infantry lieutenant’s other likely alternative was to be assigned as an “advisor”, rather than as an officer in a regular U.S. Army unit. This meant being assigned to MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, referred to by all as “mackvee”). MACV commanded all U.S. forces in Vietnam, plus was responsible for advising the South Vietnamese forces. At least forty men from 50th served with MACV – including me – and almost all of us spent time as advisors to South Vietnamese combat units. Even though this often entailed considerable time in the field accompanying their assigned Vietnamese units on combat operations, an advisor position was generally felt to be less dangerous than serving as a platoon leader in an American Infantry unit. Whether a lieutenant was to be assigned to MACV or to an American unit was pretty much beyond his control (although, I suppose, if someone requested an assignment with an American unit, he may likely have gotten it). When the lieutenants that I knew at Fort Carson started

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getting their orders for Vietnam, most of us were relieved if we were assigned to MACV. I know I was. However, while our two classmates who died were with American units, several who served as advisors were wounded, some seriously enough that their wounds could easily have been fatal.

The deaths of Jim and Tom and the wounding of other classmates illustrate the role of something else that always figures in warfare: luck, fate, chance – whatever you wish to call it. I have no disagreement with those who say that surviving goes beyond luck, that there may be some higher power involved – divine intervention, angels on our shoulders.

Whether or not one even goes to war is very much a matter of when that person was born (and, for almost all of our country's history, the person's gender). Age also helped to determine exactly when in the course of the Vietnam War my OCS class would be sent "in country". Most of us had a college deferment from the draft until we completed school and that time delay plus our months in Basic, AIT, OCS and our stateside assignment, kept us out of the war until the middle of 1970, when things were "cooling off", at least compared to earlier times like 1968. The exact assignment each of us got was also often a matter of chance. Some, of course, never went to Vietnam, serving in Europe, Korea or the U.S. Even among those assigned to Vietnam, there was a world of difference among the positions we held. On top of all this, living or dying, being wounded or unharmed, was often a matter of millimeters or milliseconds. In my case, I can make no claim that coming home unscathed was in any way influenced by some superior soldierly skill on my part. If anything, I might have possessed a higher degree of caution, but even that cannot be verified. Whatever the reason, I can only thank God that I am writing this today, going on fifty years after I came home from Vietnam, unharmed.

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Quang Tin Province is the fourth one down from the “Demarcation Line” between North and South Vietnam, also known as the Demilitarized Zone or DMZ.

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QUANG TIN PROVINCE IN 1970

American firebases in bold italic.

FSB Mary Ann is near center.

Districts in grey, such as Thang Binh.

Cities in bold, such as **Tam Ky**.

Off to Vietnam

After Jungle School, it was back home for a few days, then it was time to head to Vietnam. Dace, her parents, and my Mom and Dad saw me off at the Cleveland airport. It was a scene that hasn't changed throughout history as young people go off to war – whether from the dirt streets of ancient cities or from today's soaring steel and glass terminals. As always, none of us could hold back tears.

Upon landing in California, I found that several of my OCS classmates would be on the same flight across the Pacific. It was good to see some familiar faces, especially under those circumstances. We flew in a chartered civilian jet (somehow, I had expected to be on a military plane, but I later learned that chartered jets were a common way to transport troops to and from Southeast Asia). The flight seemed to take forever, maybe a little longer. Actually, it took us just about twenty-four hours, including a couple of stopovers. We were crammed into that jet like sardines and the space seemed to shrink by the hour. I swear we ate three meals on one leg, but it may have been only two – I could have been hallucinating by then. One thing I didn't hallucinate about was an incident where we were cruising along in the middle of the night with all the lights out and just about everyone asleep. I was half awake and thinking about getting up and taking a blanket from the overhead, so I unbuckled my seat belt. Suddenly the plane dropped. I ended up in the lap of the guy next to me – *Mike Eberhardt*, my old OCS classmate, who had credited me with “saving” him at Fort Carson. At least one stewardess bounced off the ceiling and twisted her ankle pretty badly. Every light in the plane came on and we all looked at each other in alarm. We had hit an air pocket and fallen six or seven hundred feet. But everything was OK after that and our trip continued without further excitement.

We finally arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base just outside of

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Saigon on July 6, 1970. The heat that welcomed us was worse than Fort Benning, or even Panama. As soon as we exited the plane we were soaked with sweat. Then came a few days of processing, being issued equipment and sitting through endless briefings and lectures about Vietnam, the war, and a myriad of other important subjects that I have since forgotten.

Since I was being assigned to MACV, the following couple of weeks were spent in a school for advisors at Di An (pronounced “Zee-On”, leading some vets to refer to it as “Zion” to this day), a village a few miles north of Saigon. There, we studied Vietnamese language, customs, food and other helpful information. In the class were several Australian soldiers, also being prepared for their assignments as advisors. They seemed to be good-natured chaps and were rather fascinating to us Americans. According to them, they took the war very seriously, since Australia was in the path of the Asian spread of communism, just as it had been in the path of Japan’s attempted conquest of the Pacific in World War II. Over 50,000 Australian military members served in the Vietnam War.

Part of our training included being issued our M16 rifles and going to the firing range to zero them. Another six or seven pounds had been added to the gear I would lug with me as I travelled to my final assignment.

We had time off nearly every evening and would often have dinner at the large Saigon officers’ club or a nice French restaurant. Saigon was always busy. There didn’t seem to be an American-style rush hour. The streets were a constant swirl of motor bikes, scooters, bicycles, buses, motorized rickshaws, and relatively few cars, all blending in an overpowering amalgam of sounds, and, at night, lights. I don’t know where they were going, but everybody was sure in a hurry to get there. In addition to the sounds and lights, the air was filled with exhaust fumes from the traffic – especially military diesel trucks – plus the aroma of meat sizzling over the vendors’ grills that occupied every street corner.

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Despite its civilized demeanor, Saigon had another side – it was a city at war. For the first time I appreciated the peace we know in the U.S. Buses, especially those carrying Americans, had wire grating over the open windows to keep the VC from tossing in grenades. There were tanks parked on street corners, soldiers with automatic rifles, and sandbagged machine gun bunkers. On every street there were beggars, many of them amputees – either wounded vets or civilian refugees who had been caught up in the fighting. The double amputees would scoot along on their buttocks, those with one leg would hobble on crutches, all interested in one thing – bumming money or cigarettes from passing GIs. It was all rather disconcerting, especially when I realized that there are many places like this in the world. It made me miss home even more.

While I was at advisor's school, I received a letter from Dad. Dad was never one to express his emotions very much, except when revealing his temper, which could be fiery. But he could put into writing what he found uncomfortable to say. Dad wasn't religious in a conventional way and was never much of a church goer, but in this letter he told me how much he loved me and my brothers and how he prayed for us every night, and that he was praying for me now even more. I'm sure he had written a similar letter to each of his three boys. I don't recall what I wrote back to Dad, but without doubt it was clumsy and inadequate. True to the Walrath way, we never discussed this after I returned home.

On our last night in Saigon, about half a dozen of us had supper at the officer's club, including *Mike Eberhardt*, *John Curley* and probably some other 50th alums. Since in the next couple of days we would be heading "up country" to our assignments, we decided that a celebration was in order. We started with one bottle of wine, which was quickly followed by another. Before long, each of us had bought a bottle of Mateus and passed it around, so we were feeling pretty good. Our boisterousness attracted the attention of an American Army captain

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seated nearby. He came over and introduced himself and invited us to his office, which was nearby. He wanted to tell us a few things about Vietnam. What position this guy held was never clear, but it must have been some sort of staff job that existed by the hundreds, maybe thousands, in Saigon.

His office walls were covered with maps on which he used a pointer to indicate important goings on. At least they must have been important, but we weren't paying much attention. We tried to look attentive, but every time he faced toward the maps, we rolled our eyes and made faces, and somehow kept our giggles quiet enough that he wouldn't catch on. He evidently didn't, and I'm sure he felt he had done these green lieutenants a big favor by getting them up to speed. I'm also sure that we could have learned something useful had we bothered to listen, but it was lost on us. Once we got out his door, we all burst into laughter. What made it even funnier is that one of our comrades had stolen the captain's pointer. Just like a bunch of frat boys pulling a trick on the prof.

My schooling completed, I found that I was being assigned to I Corps (officially "One" Corps, but everyone referred to it as "Eye" Corps), the northernmost of the four Military Districts in Vietnam (I, II, III and IV; the last three were referred to by their numerical designation of two, three and four). My next step was to catch a ride on a C-130 to Da Nang, where the headquarters of MACV in I Corps was located. As we were sitting on the tarmac with the rear cargo ramp open, one of the crewmen told us that we were going to see something interesting. A C-130 parked behind us was having trouble starting one of its engines, so we were going to use our prop wash to get the balky engine's propeller turning until the engine caught. This was evidently a fairly common practice. Our pilot gunned the engines until it felt like the whole plane was shaking apart. The propeller of the reluctant engine started to turn slowly, then faster and faster until it finally started. After this bit of a thrill, we sprawled on top of our duffle bags in the cargo compartment and tried to get as much sleep as we could during the one- to two-hour

flight to Da Nang.

In Da Nang there were a couple of days of the customary processing. As for my assignment, it seemed like someone simply looked at a list of places where they needed a replacement lieutenant, poked his finger at one opening and said “Let’s send him...there.” One way or another, I was to be assigned to Advisory Team 16 in Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province, which was in the southern portion of I Corps, roughly half way between Da Nang and Chu Lai.

Quang Tin Province

From the mid-1850s through the Second World War, what we today call Vietnam was a French colony known as French Indochina, which also included Cambodia and Laos. Immediately after WWII, communists led by Ho Chi Minh waged a war of independence against the French, in which the French suffered over 90,000 deaths. Ho had been born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890 and used many different names until finally settling upon Ho Chi Minh (“He Who Enlightens”) about 1940. Following the disastrous (for the French) battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Vietnam was split in half, with the northern half controlled by the communists and the southern half supported by the French until their withdrawal in 1956, and by the Americans thereafter. The dividing line between North and South Vietnam was called the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a ten-kilometer-wide border in which military activity was – theoretically – forbidden.

South Vietnam was not a large nor particularly populous country. While nearly as long as California, it is much narrower, with an area slightly under half of that state. Its population in the early 1970s was less than 20 million. At the time of the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was composed of forty-four provinces, roughly analogous to U.S. states. Each province was headed by a Province Chief, who typically was a South Vietnamese army colonel and was responsible for both

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military and civil affairs in his province.

Quang Tin Province was about 120 miles south of the DMZ. It was roughly fifty miles north to south and seventy-five miles east to west, stretching from the South China Sea to the Laotian border. If Quang Tin were overlaid on a map of my native Ohio, it would be barely larger than the area from Cleveland to the Pennsylvania border and running south to Canton. Most of the population was concentrated in a strip of flat land along the coast, with rich soil for farming a variety of crops, primarily rice and peanuts. There were also a few rubber plantations, most of which were run down because of the war. West of this flat land, the geography rapidly changed to foot hills rising into the Que Son mountains, with the highest elevation of about 7,500 feet near the Laotian border.

Provinces were made up of districts (sort of like counties), which in turn contained villages and hamlets. Quang Tin had six districts: Along the coast were Thang Bin, Tam Ky (which included the province capital city of Tam Ky) and Ly Tin. Further west were Tien Phouc and Hau Duc. The western half of the province, bordering on Laos, was a mountainous, sparsely-populated, unnamed district that was administered out of Tam Ky. This was, in effect, an area where the North Vietnamese and VC were given virtually free reign. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces ventured there periodically but set up no permanent bases. Our Air Force Forward Air Controllers who flew over this area told me they often saw bulldozer tracks where the North Vietnamese had cleared roads as part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Tam Ky city was the center of the civilian government plus the military headquarters. It was a bustling place, but most of the bustle was by bicycles or motorbikes. Few civilian cars passed through, but in the center of town a traffic cop was ensconced in a slightly-elevated kiosk. The tallest building was a very ornate Cao Dai temple, whose pagoda-like roof stretched up four stories. There was also a Catholic church with a steeple that rose three stories. Next tallest was the Province headquarters, just about the only two-story building. The only paved road, except for a couple of short side streets, was Highway One,

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which ran north and south almost the length of the entire country. Everything else was gravel or just dirt. Even Highway One had been a dirt road until the U.S. Army Engineers blacktopped it less than a year before I arrived. Running parallel to Highway One was an old railroad line, which dated back to the days of French rule. It had been destroyed years earlier and just the rail bed remained with remnants of tracks and ties, most of which had been salvaged and put to other uses.

Except for a few officials who had private homes, all the Vietnamese lived in shacks (“hootches”) pieced together from corrugated metal or one-story strip apartment complexes. The newest of these were occupied by civilians who had been displaced by the war. There was nothing west of Tam Ky that would be considered a town in American terms – just widely scattered villages and hamlets. Here, the populace lived in grass hootches, with a few tin-roofed, wood-framed buildings, usually put up by U.S. or South Vietnamese soldiers. Generally, there was no electricity or running water in the villages, although there were battery-powered boom boxes in abundance.

Like Saigon, Tam Ky was a city caught up the war, with a continuous parade of military convoys, army units bivouacked outside town, and men in uniform everywhere. But life went on. Students studied, teachers taught, doctors treated the ill and injured, farmers brought their wares to market, usually on overloaded bicycles and motorbikes. The civilian population tried their best to carry on despite the war; in many cases, they got along better than they had before the Americans arrived, since many of them were able to cash in on the millions of dollars the U.S. was pumping into the country. Construction, especially, was booming, but even the maids, barbers and maintenance workers – and, I suppose, prostitutes – were making more than they ever had.

The Enemy

Most Americans at the time, and still today, assumed that the only enemy we were fighting in Vietnam was what everyone called the “Viet Cong”, those black-pajama-clad peasants who farmed all day and

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skulked around at night laying ambushes and setting booby traps. This assumption caused considerable frustration among American citizens and their leaders – why couldn't the U.S. Armed Forces, the most powerful in the world, simply crush this ragtag, illiterate bunch of amateurs? This frustration still lingers to this day. In actuality, the Viet Cong were only one part of the large, complex – and, to Americans, confusing – armed forces of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the official name of what we called North Vietnam.

For the purposes of this narrative, the North Vietnamese forces fighting in the South consisted of two groups: First, the North Vietnamese Army (technically, it is the People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN, but it was universally referred to as the NVA); and, second, the Viet Cong (VC). The NVA was the North's "regular army", full-time soldiers who either joined or were drafted into the armed forces. Most were North Vietnamese, supplemented by individuals who had moved to North Vietnam when the country was divided. The NVA was a strong, effective fighting force, with many of the higher-ranking officers having fought against the Japanese and French armies for almost three decades. Many analysts considered it to be among the best "light infantry" in the world. They were highly trained, brave and disciplined soldiers. Their "fieldcraft" – camouflage, light and noise discipline, etc. – was outstanding, and their capacity to get along on just a ball of rice a day was legendary. While the NVA troops in South Vietnam may have lacked the air support, armor, and heavy artillery of industrialized nations, they were extremely well-suited for the type of fighting that took place there. As the war progressed, the NVA took over more and more of the fighting from the VC. And by the end of the war, the NVA fought less as light infantry and more as a conventional army, as shown by the tanks that rolled into Saigon in 1975.

The Viet Cong (from the Vietnamese words for "Vietnamese Communist") was the military arm of the National Liberation Front, a political organization founded in 1960 with the purpose of overthrowing the government of South Vietnam and reuniting the country. The Viet Cong were guerilla forces recruited primarily from

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the South Vietnamese, although there were often NVA officers serving among them. To American GIs, they were known as the VC, or simply “Charlie”, from the military phonetic alphabet for VC – “Victor Charlie”. While many of them wore black “pajamas”, this was not so much a uniform as it was simply the typical garb worn by many Vietnamese peasants. Even though these were irregular soldiers, they were highly organized and closely controlled by the North (there was actually a VC “shadow government” which paralleled the South Vietnamese government at every level from President down to hamlet chief) and were given little leeway for independent action. The VC were not intended to engage in stand-up fights with American or South Vietnamese regular army units, although they sometimes did. Instead, they concentrated primarily on such classic guerilla activities as infiltration and hit-and-run raids. They also engaged in propaganda activities, the murder of local officials, recruiting (often forced), and the collection of “taxes” (actually, a form of extortion). A good example of the latter comes from *Jim Fields*, who served as an advisor in IV Corps. The Vietnamese unit he was with “destroyed a camp holding kidnapped boys, who had been locked in cages. They were being held for ransom for food and supplies, etc. from area hamlets. Some were in very bad condition and one had to be carried.” Jim adds an interesting observation that the U.S. wasn’t the only one providing advisors in Vietnam: on the same operation “I saw two dead bodies laid over a paddy dike, who I believe were probably Chinese advisors. They were tall and well-conditioned, with pale yellowish skin and no markings or insignia on their green uniforms. They were the only ‘uniformed’ enemy I saw in my 12 months.”

The North found the VC to be an effective tool in convincing world opinion and American anti-war activists that the fight in South Vietnam was a civil war or an indigenous revolution by dissatisfied citizens, rather than an effort by the North to take over the South. Later in the war, the North no longer felt the need to maintain this façade, and the VC were sacrificed in actions like the 1968 Tet Offensive. After the fall of the South in 1975, the VC were pushed aside, having little place in

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the government of a united Vietnam.

U.S. Forces

The primary U.S. forces in Quang Tin Province in 1970 belonged to the 23rd Infantry Division headquartered at Chu Lai, the huge American base twenty miles south of Tam Ky. The 23rd, also known as the Americal Division, was the outfit involved in the infamous 1968 My Lai massacre. Although the massacre was carried out by troops from just a single company and was hardly typical of the division, it had tainted the Americal's reputation almost beyond repair.

By the late 1960's the Americal had taken over much of the fighting in Quang Tin from the Marine Corps, which had been engaged in heavy combat against both North Vietnamese Army regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas. A major branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail came out of Laos in the west and passed east through the province toward the coast. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had battled for several years to shut down the passage of men and supplies along this branch of the trail, while the NVA and VC had fought equally hard to keep it open. Much of the fighting had taken place in the mountainous areas in the middle and western regions of the province, but there had also been considerable fighting in the foothills around an outpost known as Fire Support Base (FSB) Young, along the coast, and even in the city of Tam Ky itself during Tet of 1968. There was additional serious fighting in 1969, when the NVA once again threatened Tam Ky. NVA/VC numbers were so high that the Americal Division declared a "tactical emergency", prompting MACV to quickly send in a brigade from the famous 101st Airborne Division. The 101st suffered severe casualties during a two-month operation southwest of Tam Ky city involving fighting, sometimes very fierce, virtually every day before the North Vietnamese forces withdrew.

Through aggressive offensive operations the Americal Division had by 1970 made great inroads against the enemy. But there was still considerable NVA activity in the remote far western area. And in the

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more settled eastern districts, the VC continued to intimidate the local population. While the VC had been heavily damaged by their losses in the 1968 Tet offensive, they remained a dangerous enemy.

U.S. military personnel (and, I think, most American civilians) always went armed. While Tam Ky and the area along the coastline were safer than they had been in the previous years and we felt secure enough to drive alone along Highway One north to Da Nang or south to Chu Lai, all the bridges were guarded by South Vietnamese soldiers in sandbagged bunkers, and it wasn't unheard of for the VC to stage hit-and-run attacks. I came across the results of a night attack on a drive up Highway One to Da Nang. At the end of a bridge was a South Vietnamese sandbagged bunker with the entire front blown out by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). A few yards away by the side of the road lay the bloated corpse of one of the VC attackers. In the usual fashion, the body would be left for a few days as a warning to other VC, much like the corpses of pirates were hung at harbor entrances in the days of sail.

Any feelings of security were pretty much limited to daytime. Once night fell, no Americans wandered alone outside our compounds unless they were on specific operations. A couple of our Air Force Forward Air Controllers were returning just before nightfall from the Tam Ky Airport, a couple of miles outside of town, when their jeep broke down. They dismounted and started pushing the vehicle down the rutted, dirt road. The darker it got, the harder they pushed – each with one hand on the jeep and the other clutching a .38 revolver, jumping at every sound from the bushes. We all had a good laugh the next day, but they hadn't been laughing as they stumbled along the road, certain that every noise was an attacking VC.

Body Count

In World War II, Americans could sit at home and follow our troops' progress as they moved inexorably closer to Japan and Berlin. But there was none of this in Vietnam. We weren't trying to conquer

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North Vietnam; we were only attempting to stop them from taking over South Vietnam. American newspapers did not feature maps showing huge areas being “liberated” by our boys overseas – there was no territory being taken; in fact, the same tracts of countryside and jungle were often cleared of enemy forces repeatedly, then the enemy would creep back in once the American and South Vietnamese troops had moved on to clear other areas. All kinds of statistical studies were conducted to somehow measure progress in a war that almost defied measurement. Although Robert McNamara resigned as Secretary of Defense in 1968, the culture of statistical analysis that he had established lingered. Every Province Advisory Team was required to submit over sixty monthly reports detailing progress in various areas including the construction of “strategic hamlets”, land cleared for farming, schools built, refugees relocated, and on and on. These reports were compiled in Saigon and sent on to Washington; they were deemed critical to winning the war.

One of the most important of these was the Hamlet Evaluation System Report (HES). Each American Province Advisor completed this report monthly, which involved filling in check boxes on a computer form. The forms were scored, and each hamlet was given a grade from A (totally secure) to D (completely under VC control).

The experience of OCS classmate *John Foote* illustrates the importance (and, sometimes, the frustration) of the HES. Soon after arriving in Vietnam, John reports, he was assigned to a province headquarters in III Corps...

...and was given the task of filling out the Hamlet Evaluation System Report. I talked around... and dutifully filled it out and submitted. The next day I was back with the Colonel... and in a somewhat elevated tone he asked what the fuck I thought I was doing. Did I know that in one fell swoop I had “lost one-half of the goddam Province to the goddam commies?” I realized that the HES Reports that had been filed by someone before me were false, because they said that we had pacified places that we KNEW were not, and where none of us could have, or would

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have, spent a lonely night without a perimeter in place. I don't know that I was under many illusions before I got there, but there were few left thereafter. And my modest command of Vietnamese let me ask people what they thought of us, and they were most kind to tell me that they had a pretty good idea that one day we wouldn't be there, *and they would*.

Whether or not these sophisticated reports and computer models produced accurate and meaningful information may be a moot point, for only one statistic seemed to stick in the minds of the American media and populace: Body Count. How many of the bad guys were we killing, and was the ratio of U.S. deaths to NVA/VC deaths "acceptable". While "acceptable" was never clearly defined, it was apparently agreed by all that we needed to kill a *lot* more of them than they killed of us. Unfortunately, body count was often exaggerated, since a commanding officer's career could be affected by a low count.

Inflated body count was not an exclusively American phenomenon. The communists also overstated the number of American GIs killed in almost every engagement, figures which linger today in the North's official war histories. They also grossly under-reported their own casualties, something Americans could not do because of the extensive press coverage. NVA and VC soldiers had only to count noses to see that the official reports were lies. Especially after Tet of '68 this had a deleterious effect on the morale of Northern soldiers and led to increased desertions. But the folks back home in the North had only the official numbers to go by. Thousands of families lost members and never knew their fate until the soldiers did not come home when the war ended.

We were still concerned with body counts when I was there in 1970 – 71. I got to see first-hand how the body count was routinely pumped up. Whenever I was asked by the Vietnamese to call in artillery, they almost always reported that some VC had been killed by the barrage. I never saw the bodies myself, which led me to doubt there were any. The Vietnamese's reasons for doing this were attributable less to careerism than to simple cultural standards – they would have lost face

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had they asked me to call in artillery on a position where there turned out to be no enemy.

The One-Year Tour

For the GIs, one of the most positive policies, established early in the Vietnam War, was the “one-year tour of duty”. This declared that the standard tour for most American servicemen would be twelve months (it is my understanding that the standard tour for Marines was thirteen months; a Marine acquaintance of mine confirmed this and said it was just to show that the Marines were tougher than the Army). At any rate, the outcome, as one might expect, was that everyone knew if they survived for a year, they would be going home. It wasn’t a matter of serving until the war ended, just until one’s *personal* war ended. While this made the war more palatable to both the GIs and their folks at home, the negative impact on the effectiveness of our military was significant. One issue was that, at any given time, a large percentage of American soldiers were inexperienced troops who had little idea of how to fight or even how to survive; it took several months to gain enough experience to operate effectively. This should have come as no surprise to anyone with any knowledge of military history, since the problem was hardly new.

Upon arriving in Vietnam, an American soldier knew his DEROS, his Date Eligible for Return from Overseas. Nearing the end of one’s tour was referred to as “getting short” and the troops themselves were known as “short-timers”. It was a common practice for them to create short-timer’s calendars, upon which they would cross out each day as they crept closer to the end. These calendars were often very elaborate renditions of helicopters, maps of Vietnam, or other icons of the war. I never bothered with such a calendar, in part because I didn’t need one to remind me of my DEROS, and also because of concern that such a thing might jinx me. But however we treated it, we all loved the one-year tour.

As the last few months of their tours approached, many short-timers

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became increasingly reluctant to take risks in the field; some sought safer jobs in the rear. They felt they had paid their dues and that dangerous jobs should be given to the new arrivals. Jimmy Morrison, who provided the account of *Tom Edgren's* death, typifies this when he tried to talk Tom out of making him go on another operation. Some would negatively contrast Jimmy with the soldiers of WWII, who were “in for the duration” and were thought to have fought valiantly to the last moments of the war. However, there are many vets of the Good War who honestly admit to becoming less inclined to take risks as they sensed the end of the war nearing. It doesn't matter which war they are fighting, no one wants to die when it's almost over. Upon arrival in Vietnam, men like Jimmy – and me – could see the end in sight. While the WWII GIs couldn't see the end, they could certainly *feel* it; and they often acted just as short as the troops in Vietnam did.

Not surprisingly, the negative repercussions of the one-year tour went beyond the individual soldier's reluctance to take chances and dragged on the professionalism of the entire American armed forces in Vietnam. It is difficult to overestimate the impact on an army's effectiveness of having soldiers and leaders with combat experience. The one-year tour worked directly against this. In their 1979 book *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army*, Army officers Major Richard A. Gabriel and Lieutenant Colonel Paul L. Savage argued that “The rotation policies operative in Vietnam virtually foreclosed the possibility of establishing fighting units with a sense of identity, morale, and strong cohesiveness....Not only did the rotation policy foreclose the possibility of developing a sense of unit integrity and responsibility, but it also ensured a continuing supply of low quality, inexperienced officers at the point of greatest stress in any army, namely in its combat units.”

By “low quality, inexperienced officers” the authors undoubtedly meant the recent products of Officer Candidate School, ROTC, and even West Point. During the Vietnam War the Army also operated a Noncommissioned Officer Candidate School – NOCS – that graduated sergeants; these green E-5s were typically belittled as “shake and bakes” after the popular chicken coating introduced in 1965. Often

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inexperienced officers were leading inexperienced NCOs who, in turn, were leading inexperienced privates. “Low quality” may seem a bit harsh to OCS grads like myself. However, it is difficult to dispute the point that their ability to lead soldiers in combat was limited until they gained some experience. By the time they had the experience to become fairly effective, many of these lieutenants had either completed their tour, had been reassigned to non-combat roles – or were dead or wounded. Since it has often been estimated that in the civilian workforce it may take up to a year for new employees to truly be worth their salary, it should come as no surprise that the same would apply in a field as complex as combat leadership.

A critical factor that may have influenced posterity to view these officers as low quality, particularly those of us who arrived in the early 1970s, is the unprecedented culture of the U.S. armed forces, particularly the Army, in Vietnam. Much emphasis has been placed on drug use, racial strife, and “fragging” incidents (tossing of fragmentation grenades into the quarters of unpopular officers and NCOs, or attempting to harm them by other means, such as shooting), which supposedly ran rampant in Vietnam. I checked with three of my OCS classmates who served with American units to get their perspective on this. They all agreed that, while these issues caused some problems, sometimes serious, they were not as bad as presented by the media, especially Hollywood. They also emphasized that problems of this sort were much more common in base camps than in the field, where the “troops policed themselves,” as *Mike Dunn*, who served as a platoon leader with the 101st Airborne, put it. *Mike Thornton*, who was with the 1st Cavalry Division, explained, “...frontline troops were keen to keep themselves alive and an impaired soldier might put his squad or the entire platoon in danger. Therefore, drug use was not accepted and was enforced by the troops themselves.” An additional factor here may have been that both the 101st and 1st Cav were very professional units which spent a great deal of time in the field, sometimes six weeks at a time, which made access to drugs more difficult. However, there were men in the 101st who got hooked on a very pure form of heroin that

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was known locally as “coke”. The local Vietnamese, even the children, would regularly approach the GIs and try to sell it to them. *Mike Dunn* tells a humorous story about a new Artillery forward observer who was attached to his platoon. A small Vietnamese boy came up to him and asked “You want coke?” The American innocently replied, “No thanks, I already have a root beer.” The experienced men around him had a good laugh.

Bob Hines served with the 77th Armor Regiment, and points out that “Tanks have a lot of hiding places, so it was quite impossible to shake down all the troops before heading to the boonies” – so there were some drug problems in the field, but less so than at base camps.

To me, the primary question is whether drug use impaired the effectiveness of American soldiers when in the field, and I haven’t been able to find a great deal of evidence of this. Much the same can be said of racial strife. As *Mike Thornton* says, “In the bush, the troops were part of the same team.... [At base camps] they paired off along racial lines. Trading insults was common, but fights were rare.” *Mike Dunn* saw the same sort of thing: blacks and whites had their own groups, music, culture and even language.

Bob Hines was the only one who was aware of a “fragging”, and it was tragic. One evening at base camp, his battalion S-3 and the battalion XO, both majors, “told a group of black troops to turn down their stereo, and both were shot from behind as they were leaving the barracks. The XO was shot in the head, but managed to survive, while [the S-3]’s heart was penetrated.... [T]he kid who fired the weapon was sent to prison, though I don’t recall how many years he got. The others should have been tried, but they weren’t.”

While the media may have overplayed the drug, racial and fragging incidents, there seems little doubt that these issues placed extra burdens on the junior officers in Vietnam. *Mike Dunn* quoted to me a telling statement that goes, “An army in a democracy is a reflection of its society.” Certainly, American society in that period had massive problems with drugs and race relations, plus a generally rebellious generation of the right age for military service. It should come as no

surprise that these issues trickled down to our armed forces. When you couple this with the reluctance of many young soldiers to risk their lives in what seemed an increasingly questionable – and probably losing – cause, it is easier to appreciate that the disciplinary problems heaped on the young leaders in Vietnam were greater than those faced by their predecessors in earlier wars.

The Army did little to prepare junior officers to lead men in these circumstances (this certainly was not part of the OCS curriculum), partly because they had never occurred on this scale. In my mind, it's no small wonder that our officers, and the soldiers under them, performed as well as they did.

Arrival in Tam Ky

My processing finished, bright and early one August morning I reported to the Da Nang airfield for my flight to Tam Ky, which is about forty air miles to the south. The airmen at the base seemed surprisingly casual, at least to a new arrival like me – there may or may not be a flight that day and, if there was one, no one was sure just when it might leave. After a couple of hours someone decided that there would be a flight (I figured the pilot had finally dragged himself out of bed). The plane was operated by Air America, the famous CIA cover operation, which also functioned as a legitimate airline. Finally, I loaded my duffle bag, rifle, and the rest of my worldly goods into a little twin-engine plane and off we went.

After a short flight we landed on what passed for an airfield on the outskirts of Tam Ky. In large red letters on the small, open-air cement building that had once been the terminal, someone had painted “Alice’s Restaurant”, in honor of folk singer Arlo Guthrie’s anti-war song of the same name. The pilot said “Here we are”, I hopped out with my gear, and he took off. There I stood all alone without a soul in sight. This struck me as odd – to be abandoned in a war zone with no idea of what to do next. I had sort of expected someone to be there to meet me,

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although I don't know why, since I certainly had not radioed ahead and evidently neither had anyone else. Looking around, I spied a small, antennae-bedecked, sandbagged bunker at the far end of the airstrip. I strapped all my gear about my body and trudged over, assuming it to be occupied by friendlies. It was. The bunker was staffed by a couple of Air Force enlisted men, who were part of a Forward Air Control unit that operated from the field. They, like their brethren back in Da Nang, were also surprisingly casual. "Yeah, we'll be going back into town in a little while," they said. "We'll give you a ride." They were my welcoming party.

The casualness of the enlisted men in Da Nang and Tam Ky soon proved to be universal. They would often address a lieutenant as "L.T." (as in "Good morning, L.T." or "Hey, L.T., did you want to see me?"); with captains, it was usually "*Dai Uy*" ("dye wee", Vietnamese for captain). While this practice was not discouraged, I think it was a sneaky way of not having to call junior officers "sir."

At this time in the war promotion from second lieutenant to first lieutenant was pretty much automatic one year after being commissioned. My one-year anniversary occurred just before I arrived in Da Nang after completing advisor school, so I decided to "promote" myself rather than wait for written orders. My motivation was twofold: first, I didn't want to arrive at my new unit as a lowly second lieutenant and, second, I was stingy. Traditionally, when an officer is promoted, he's supposed to buy drinks "all around" at the officer's club, and I didn't feel like shelling out. I had bought a couple of sets of 1st Looney bars at the PX in Saigon (flat black to wear with fatigues, bright silver for dressier uniforms) and pinned them on before I flew to Tam Ky. I reported to Team 16 as a first lieutenant. No one questioned my rank until a week or two later when my orders finally caught up with me in Tam Ky. Lieutenant George Ikeda, our Assistant S-1 (personnel officer) said "Your promotion orders are in" while he looked askance at the black bars on my fatigue shirt. But there was nothing anyone could do about it. As we used to say, "What are they going to do – send me to Vietnam?"

First Assignments

Nobody at Team 16 headquarters seemed to be expecting me, but they found a place to put me up for the night. The next day I was again processed in and found that I was to be assigned to something called a Mobile Advisory Team (known as a MAT, pronounced “mat”).

I was now the newest lieutenant on Team 16, as green as the jungles of Vietnam. Captain Bell, who was in charge of the MATs, showed me the ropes and introduced me around. One of the first things he did was to sit me down and tell me, “You will see combat.” This should have come as no surprise, but I’m sure the look on my face belied the sinking feeling in my stomach. Much later in life, when I was working in the “outplacement” field (assisting people who have lost their jobs) I often saw that same look on the face of a victim of “downsizing” when they were told that their job had been eliminated. Even when they knew it was coming, the shock still hit them. The captain had undoubtedly seen that look before, and he saved me the embarrassment of acknowledging my dismay.

A couple of months later Captain Bell was replaced by Major Whitmeyer as the Senior RF/PF Advisor. I liked him and enjoyed working with him. He treated his job professionally, but he kept his sense of humor and was not prone to the bullshit sort of things that some officers (especially majors, it seems) liked to indulge in.

He was tall, square jawed, slightly graying at the temples, and resembled a combination of movie stars Clark Gable and George Clooney – the sort of good-looking type they put on recruiting posters. He had the odd habit of keeping notes about everything on small pocket notepads that he carried all the time – a sort of diary. I once joked with him (in a manner more familiar than a lieutenant should use with a major) “I’ll bet you wrote down what we had for lunch in the mess hall last Tuesday.” Sure enough, he pulled out his little notepad and rattled off everything that had been on the menu, including dessert.

Major Whitmeyer also had another distinguishing habit. He was a tremendous burper who could let go an incredibly loud belch on

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demand. His burps were one of the few sounds that could be heard over the noise of a helicopter. Once when the good major was a passenger on a Huey, he expelled a burp so loud that both pilots and the two door gunners turned around to look, thinking they might have been hit or the engine was blowing up.

Before I could join my MAT, I was given a special assignment. A couple of days after I arrived in Tam Key, a Vietnamese unit had engaged a group of Charlies and killed a number of them. Our intelligence officers had determined that some high-ranking VC might be among the casualties. Night had fallen and the MAT accompanying the Vietnamese had been told to secure the area where the bodies were so the VC could not spirit them away, which was their usual practice. Our Senior Province Advisor was determined to fly to the site the next morning to personally oversee the recovery of the bodies, and he needed a couple of troops to accompany him. Being available, I was volunteered to go along. I slept that night in the guest room at the colonel's quarters, which was called "Embassy House" for reasons unknown, a nice villa with whitewashed walls, ironed sheets and air conditioning. We had a leisurely breakfast while we waited for the helicopter, and I got more and more nervous, since we didn't know exactly what we might get into. For all I knew the VC might be waiting to spring a trap when we flew in. Even if there was to be no shooting, I wasn't exactly looking forward to poking through a gaggle of ripening bodies. Then came word that the area had not been secured and the VC had made off with the bodies. The colonel, to say the least, was quite upset. I tried to hide my relief.

Right after that came my second special assignment. There was some sort of incident in downtown Tam Ky which threatened to develop into something serious, and an officer was needed immediately. Since I was the only one free at the moment, I was told to get down there and see what was going on. I grabbed a radio, jumped in a jeep, and headed downtown. I barely knew where "downtown" was, but with only one main road it didn't take me long to find it. In a bizarre

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incident, an American convoy and a Vietnamese convoy had been passing each other in opposite directions when, for some inane reason, one of the Americans threw a boot at the Vietnamese, striking a soldier in the head. By one account, he was killed, although no one produced a body. Both sides had grabbed their guns and now there were several dozen armed men facing off with each other. The hope was that someone from our advisory team could get the Vietnamese calmed down. The American captain in charge of the GIs took one look at me and said something to the effect of “No offense, but we’re going to need somebody above a lieutenant here.” I couldn’t have agreed more. I radioed headquarters and explained that we urgently needed an officer with some influence. Pretty soon a major showed up and I took my leave. The situation got resolved without any shooting.

This was my first taste of the relationship between American and Vietnamese troops. I would come to find out that many American GIs had nothing but contempt for the Vietnamese in general and for Vietnamese soldiers in particular, calling them things like slopes, dinks, zips and gooks. This often went far beyond simple disrespect or racism, for many Americans felt that they were sacrificing much more to stave off the communist threat than were most South Vietnamese, including those in uniform.

On top of that, a lot of GIs felt that the Vietnamese couldn’t be trusted, and that many of them were communist agents or at least sympathized with the North. An illustration of this attitude comes from Keith William Nolan’s book *Sappers in the Wire*, about an American infantry battalion fighting in Quang Tin province. On November 27, 1970, an American company left their fortified hilltop outpost and passed through the village at the base of the hill which was occupied by South Vietnamese troops (ARVN, “arvins” in GI slang).

Passing the guard position at the break in the perimeter wire, point-man [Specialist Jeff] Parks had just started into the tall grass when he unknowingly snagged a trip wire attached to a U.S.-made frag secured to a stake.... Five grunts had been wounded.

“On the way out, we talked about how we were going out to the jungle to fight the ARVN’s war, while they just sat there,” recalled [Sergeant Andrew] Olints. “When I was heading back [to the outpost] to get the medics, they were just laughing at us. I came so close to shooting ‘em.”

Meanwhile, Specialist Parks had furiously swung his M16 on the grinning ARVN at the guard post after discovering more [booby traps] in the tall grass. They were part of the perimeter defenses. “Them fucking ARVNs let us walk right into it,” said Parks. “It was my fault. I wasn’t looking because I thought if the ARVN had set something out there I thought they would have told us! The ARVNs and I locked and loaded. I told ‘em to shut the fuck up, or I was going to waste ‘em. I was ready, and I had every right in the world, buddy.”

Such incidents added support to a common joke among Americans serving in Vietnam: The only way to win this war was to round up all the “good” Vietnamese and put them on an island in the South China Sea, then bomb the country from end to end until all the remaining Vietnamese had been killed. Then sink the island.

Province Advisory Team

The entire subject of advising the South Vietnamese armed forces has gotten relatively little attention, and Mobile Advisory Teams have been even more neglected. So let’s first discuss what a Province Advisory Team is, then we’ll look at the role of a MAT. It is important to note that Province Advisory Teams and MATs were relatively late innovations in the Vietnam War and that from the start of American involvement, many different sorts of advisors served in a variety of roles – Green Beret A-Teams working with Montagnard tribesmen; U.S. Army officers attached to ARVN Infantry, Artillery and Armor units;

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American civilians working with a broad range of Vietnamese government functions – the list goes on. Since my experience is limited to the Province Advisory Team and Mobile Advisory Teams, I won't address the activities of the other advisors.

Two of America's major strategies in Vietnam were "Pacification" and, later, "Vietnamization". The Pacification strategy had been in place since virtually the start of American involvement and focused on creating a secure environment for the South Vietnamese population by driving out the VC and NVA from increasingly larger areas of the country and keeping them out. In this phase, American combat troops would do much of the fighting to reduce the presence of both the NVA and VC from selected areas, and the South Vietnamese would be tasked with keeping them out once the area had been secured.

In 1969, the administration of newly-elected President Richard Nixon maintained the Pacification program and added the strategy of Vietnamization, which was designed to eventually withdraw all American combat troops from this increasingly unpopular war. The great challenge was to keep up or increase the pressure on the VC and NVA while, at the same time, reduce America's investment of lives, money and material. The intent of Vietnamization was to improve the armed forces of South Vietnam and give them an ever-larger role in combat, to the point where the South Vietnamese were responsible for all combat operations, and American combat troops had gone home.

To the myriad of advisors already in Vietnam, Vietnamization added the creation of a Province Advisory Team in each of South Vietnam's 44 provinces. The teams were made up of both military and civilian personnel, who were responsible for advising the Vietnamese on military issues *and* on a host of civilian issues – everything from refugees to agriculture to engineering projects. Province Advisory Teams were headed by a Senior Province Advisor. If the province had been classified as "pacified" the senior advisor would be an American civilian; if not, an American colonel or lieutenant colonel held the job. By the way, the Senior Province Advisor in Quang Tin Province was a U.S. Army colonel, indicating that it was not considered "pacified".

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Additionally, Hal Meinheit, a State Department Foreign Service Officer, arrived in Vietnam in Fall 1970 with a group of other FSOs after spending a year at the Vietnam Training School, where “we were told that we would most likely be assigned to province advisory teams in III or IV Corps [in the middle or south of the country], the more ‘pacified’ part of Vietnam. It came as a surprise, therefore, when several of us would go to the more adventurous, northern part of I and II Corps.” Hal ended up on Team 16, where I was.

On the military side of a Province Advisory Team, there was a complete staff structure – personnel (S-1, in Army jargon), intelligence (S-2), operations (S-3) and logistics (S-4). Each of these staff officers was a major or a captain. Reporting to the Senior Province Advisor was also a Deputy Province Advisor, typically a civilian, who was in charge of non-military affairs.

Below the Senior Province Advisor there were District Advisors, one for each of the districts in the province. The District Advisor was usually a U.S. Army major, who commanded a District Advisory Team, with much the same responsibilities as the Province Team, but on a lower level.

At every level, advisors worked with what we called “counterparts” – the Vietnamese officers and civilians whom we were advising. The Senior Province Advisor’s counterpart was the Vietnamese Province Chief, the District Advisors’ counterparts were the District Chiefs. Each of Team 16’s staff officers also had counterparts – Intelligence, Operations, and so forth.

Mobile Advisory Team (MAT)

At the bottom of the military component of the Province Advisory Teams were the Mobile Advisory Teams, like the one I was assigned to. Over thirty of my classmates also served on MATs throughout Vietnam, while only eighteen were platoon leaders in American units, a sign of the emphasis on Vietnamization by this point in the war. These

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co vangs – advisors – were the fellows who accompanied the Vietnamese troops on field operations, the ones who “took the fight to the enemy”. Although it was possible for anyone on the Province Team to be shot at or rocketed on occasion, only the MAT members were assigned specifically to combat jobs. There were probably about half a dozen MATs in Quang Tin Province. Even if each MAT had its full complement of five advisors, that meant maybe thirty of the several hundred members of Team 16 were expected to go out into the field on operations. At any given time, there might be up to about ten MAT members actually on field operations, usually less.

[NOTE: By now the reader may be having some difficulty sorting out the use of the word “team”, so some clarification may be in order. “Team” as used in this book can refer to three different entities. First, there is the Province Advisory Team – in Quang Tin Province, that was Team 16. This is a large unit of three hundred or so members, both military and civilian, who are responsible for advising the South Vietnamese in a particular province on a wide variety of military and civil issues. Second is the much smaller District Advisory Team, which is much like the Province Team, but working at the district level. The last team is the Mobile Advisory Team (MAT), which is made up of less than half a dozen U.S. Army personnel responsible for advising South Vietnamese Territorial Force units – RFs, PFs and PSDF. The MATs are part of the overall Province Advisory Team. By the way, the phrase “MAT team” is redundant, since the “T” in MAT stands for “Team”; however, a lot of former MAT members use it, as may I here and there.]

To understand the role of a MAT, it is first necessary to understand the South Vietnamese Territorial Forces which the MATs were advising. The Territorial Forces were made up of three distinct groups: Regional Forces, Popular Forces (RFs and PFs, nicknamed “Ruff Puffs” by the Americans), and People’s Self Defense Forces (PSDF). By the late 1960’s the Territorial Forces constituted about half of South Vietnam’s military strength, the other half being the regular South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam – the ARVN), plus the relatively small Air Force and Navy.

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Regional Forces (RFs): Regional Forces were soldiers under the control of the Province Chief and operated only within their particular province. While the Regional Forces were part of the armed forces of South Vietnam, they were not viewed as being on the same level as the ARVN. This was true in many respects. They were not as well armed, depending on the ARVN or Americans for artillery and air support. They were strictly “leg” infantry, with no APCs or tanks. Being not as well equipped – nor as well trained – as the ARVN, they were not generally capable of taking on the NVA, nor were they expected to; their mission was to go after the Viet Cong. RFs were full-time soldiers, not simply units that could be called up in emergencies. Between 1967 and 1973, Vietnamization had grown the number of RF companies from 888 to 1,810.

Popular Forces (PFs): Unlike Regional Forces, the Popular Forces were, according to *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, “part-time, volunteer, village militia...whose members held regular jobs in the community.” They were under the control of their District Chief, but the Province Chief might supersede this in emergencies. Their focus was on protecting “their home villages, hamlets and districts from VC attack.” They were viewed by the ARVN as being of even lower quality than the Regional Forces.

People’s Self Defense Forces (PSDF): At the very bottom of the Territorial Forces were the PSDF, created as part of the General Mobilization Law of 1968, in response to the Tet attacks of that year. Their role was to defend villages and hamlets, and they seldom conducted offensive operations. All physically fit males ages 16-17 and 39-50 not already in the armed forces were required to join. *Craig Biggs* was one of my classmates who was assigned to the PSDF, and it was quite an adventure. Craig reports,

The Vietnamese colonel in charge saw me one time, told me good luck and whatever I wanted to do was fine with him, just make sure he controlled the payroll. They had no training, no weapons, no organization. I had me, two E7 NCO's who had been in the army longer than I was old and an interpreter named

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Ban...who was actually a refugee from North Vietnam. Finding weapons was a challenge. I finally found a Coast Guard supply sergeant, who got me two deuce-and-a-halves full of WWII surplus weapons. Where they came from, I have no idea, but for the PSDF they were a godsend...albeit almost all of the guns turned out to be crew-served. Imagine a 15 or 65 year old, 70 pound Vietnamese with an M1 Garand rifle [weighing 10 pounds]! Or better, a BAR [20 pounds]! The carbines, Thompsons and grease guns were all they could handle. The six months actually went by fast and we got the Province PSDF in some semblance of order and they started their 'night watchman' jobs...and promptly got targeted by the VC. I spent my last month running around the province acting like a damned homicide detective trying to figure out who was killing my kids and old men.

One effect of Vietnamization was to place more responsibility on the Territorial Forces to reduce VC activity and increase security for the local populations, thus, theoretically, freeing the ARVN to handle the NVA. It didn't quite work out that way – while the Ruff Puffs actually did a pretty good job of taking on the VC, in the long run, the ARVN couldn't stop the NVA. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* sums up the role of the Territorial Forces as follows:

Regional and Popular Forces took on a new importance [in 1968] as U.S. forces began to withdraw. As a result [MACV] sought to improve the Territorial Forces' capabilities. MACV now recognized that the war could not be won without providing security to the hamlets, a role that Regional and Popular Forces could adequately perform if properly supported.... The number of men in the Territorial Forces units increased from 300,000 in 1967 to over 530,000 by 1971. Major improvements were made in training. Starting in 1967 MACV created more than 350 mobile advisory teams (MATs)...who trained and advised the Territorial Forces while

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living among them for months at time.

After 1969 Territorial Forces received larger quantities of M16 rifles, M60 machine guns, light antitank weapons, M79 grenade launchers and modern radio sets [to replace the WWII-vintage weapons with which they had been armed]. Nevertheless, they remained dependent on the ARVN for their ground and air transport, heavy firepower, and artillery support.

The improved Territorial Forces took on an increased combat role between 1968 and 1972 as U.S. units withdrew. During this period the ARVN lost almost 37,000 soldiers killed in action compared to Regional and Popular Force losses of more than 69,300. The Territorial Forces were often subject to a higher rate of attack by Communist units than regular ARVN formations, and, except for 1968, it was always more dangerous to serve in a Regional or Popular Forces unit than in the ARVN. [In 1970, the year of my arrival in Vietnam, Ruff Puff deaths were almost three times greater than ARVN deaths – 15,783 vs. 5,602. In 1971, the proportion of Ruff Puff deaths was even greater.]

Still charged primarily with local defense tasks after U.S. withdrawal, and too lightly armed and equipped to withstand massive and sustained attacks from regular People's Army of Vietnam units, Territorial Forces were overwhelmed and largely destroyed during the final 1975 Communist offensive.

Overall, Regional and Popular Forces performed well while surmounting many obstacles and handicaps. In most areas in which they operated, they markedly improved rural security efforts. Although they received less than 20 percent of the total South Vietnamese defense budget, they accounted for roughly 30 percent of the Communist combat deaths inflicted by South Vietnamese Armed Forces (depending on the year).

In retrospect, it is evident that neither Richard Nixon nor his

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national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, believed that the South would be able to carry on the war alone. Vietnamization was the means by which Nixon could make the American people happy by bringing their boys home while Kissinger carried on secret negotiations with the North that might allow America to exit the war without appearing to have “lost”. The Americans serving in Vietnam, both the regular combat units and advisors like the Mobile Advisory Teams, were playing for time by keeping the South Vietnamese armed forces propped up while the negotiations played out, which would take years.

On paper, a MAT consisted of five Americans: A Team Leader (a captain, who, hopefully was on his second tour and had combat experience), an Assistant Team Leader (a first lieutenant), and three sergeants (E-6s or E-7s), with one of them being a medic. There was also a Vietnamese interpreter who spoke reasonably good English attached to the team. As the war went on, however, attrition and a shortage of replacements caused many MATs to have only one officer (usually a lieutenant) and a couple of NCOs.

The intention was for a MAT to live with their assigned RF or PF unit. This was often in an isolated outpost accessible only by helicopter or on foot. From there, the MAT members would accompany their Ruff Puffs on operations in the surrounding area – ambushes and “search and engage” missions to break up VC operations, uncover weapons or food caches, and generally keep the enemy off balance. This made for an austere and lonely life. Often, MATs lived in cramped, stuffy, primitive, vermin-infested, sandbagged bunkers. When not on operations, MAT members were responsible for training the Ruff Puffs, improving defensive capabilities, assisting their counterparts in getting needed supplies and equipment (both military and otherwise), and a myriad of other activities to improve the lives of the local populace. During downtime, life could be boring. There was little to do but write letters home, play cards, and read (paperback books, especially dirty ones, were traded back and forth and consumed with enthusiasm). MAT members generally had little face-to-face interaction

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with other Americans, unless they were fortunate enough to be co-located with District or Province teams. They might get regular helicopter resupply of food, beer, and other necessities, and would sometimes be able to rotate one member back to a larger base for a chance to relax and talk with other GIs.

My MAT experience turned out to be somewhat different than the theoretical description above, and I will get into that later. First, some comments from other classmates who served as MAT leaders.

One of my OCS classmates who lived the life of the “typical” MAT was *Peter Nowlan*, who led a team in II Corps. As Peter tells it:

My team served with an RF company and the team lived with the RF company in its compound. There were no American units near our district; hence, no American fire bases [thus, no American artillery support].

Because we were not near a PX, each month the advisory team would receive a “sundry pack” from province headquarters. This pack would contain personal items such as soap, razors and blades, and toothbrushes and toothpaste that were otherwise unavailable to us. It would contain paper and envelopes so we could write home, and candy, cigarettes, and similar items.

Each team would also receive a modest monthly allotment (I think around \$30) because we would purchase our food on the local economy. There was no greater source of entertainment in the small hamlet near our compound, than to watch this American attempt to purchase staples and produce at the local market. Vietnamese is a mono-syllabic language, the meaning of each word changes depending upon the inflection given when spoken. I would ask for a cucumber, there would be a chorus of giggles and laughter as the different stall vendors would try to understand what I requested and each would offer any variety of goods, none of which would be a cucumber.

There was also a three-tier price structure. One price for the locals, one price for the interpreter attached to the American

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team, and one price for the American himself. So I always brought my interpreter to the market with me and after I had sufficiently entertained the shop keepers, Toan would make the purchases.

Mike Eberhardt served on a MAT in the Mekong Delta, where they lived in the same compound as the district government. Except for occasional rocket attacks, they felt fairly safe and comfortable, with a refrigerator, electric lights, movies, showers and a cook. Outside the compound, however, it was a different story. The surrounding countryside was a dangerous place.

Sandy Carter “was assigned to a Mobile Advisory Team which consisted of two LT officers, two staff sergeants and one Vietnamese interpreter. We were attached to various Montagnard villages in Kontum Province with the local ARVN forces that provided protection for the villages. The Montagnards were friends of the Americans as they seemed to dislike the Vietnamese, who treated them with little respect. I did learn to get by on bamboo shoots, rice, *nuoc mam* and fish and rice wine.”

Bob Hines, who commanded an American tank platoon in Quang Tri Province near the Demilitarized Zone, was probably one of the few 50th Company grads not in MACV who had an interesting encounter with Territorial Forces. One day his tanks were ordered...

...to pick up an RF platoon and set up a defensive position with them for the night. Frankly, I had absolutely no idea of what to expect, since I'd never even heard the expression Ruff Puff, but I really could have guessed. When we linked up outside their village, just as the American advisor (a major) was explaining what a real fighting force they were, someone took a shot at us from one of the houses. Not a real good start. Anyway, we made it through the night, the sun is coming up, and I'm sitting on top of my tank, when I hear singing. Not just singing, but a Christmas carol, “Silent Night”, being sung in Vietnamese! Now I really wasn't in the mood, but the little guy did a pretty

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good job. So I took his picture, which I've kept all these years. Most people who look at the picture think that he must have been in the process of getting dressed. But no, it shows him in his complete uniform: boxer shorts and fatigue shirt. Only the platoon leader wore pants. Good Times!

The Vietnamese's uniform makes me wonder if he wasn't a PSDF rather than RF or PF, since all the Ruff Puffs I saw had complete uniforms. On the other hand, maybe the Province Chief and District Chiefs in Quang Tri Province were skimming from their troops' uniform budget.

The Role of MAT Advisors

Advisors had no command authority over the Vietnamese. They could not issue orders – anything they accomplished had to be done by suggesting, requesting, urging or offering advice (not surprisingly, I do not recall any classes in OCS that covered advising foreign soldiers). MATs advised their counterparts, the commanders of the RF or PF unit to which the MAT was assigned, in two broad areas: training and operations. This is only my observation and I know that some of my classmates who served on MATs faced different conditions, but by the time I arrived in 1970, the Ruff Puffs in Quang Tin were about as trained as they were going to get, and there wasn't much time devoted to the typical military training issues of marksmanship and the like. Most advising time was spent on subjects such as techniques for building and defending their outposts or on actual field operations. The amount of "advising" that took place on field operations varied. There were occasions when a counterpart might actually ask his MAT for advice, but, most of the time, they either knew what they were doing and didn't need advice or they weren't very receptive to any advice the advisor offered. So, in many instances we advisors just sort of tagged along, with our main role being to call for artillery or helicopter support or to coordinate our operations with American troops who might be in the area so we didn't shoot each other.

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This left some of us wondering why we were there. *Peter Nowlan* recalls that during his tour on a MAT, “I was bothered that I did not have a clear understanding of our mission nor my role as an advisor. I often wondered if I slept through an important class during OCS or during our short indoctrination at Di An [advisor training].” (If so, I must have been snoozing right beside him.) He was processed, but not actually briefed, at II Corps headquarters and his province headquarters. Then he was put on a helicopter to his district HQ, where it was apparently assumed that “I had been told something somewhere”, so he was sent on to his MAT. He was fortunate to be able to spend a few weeks with the team leader he was replacing, “who was very careful and patient in making sure I knew the area and personalities.... But he also had no clear understanding of the mission [despite having been there for almost a year].”

If the people in Washington who dreamed up the Mobile Advisory Team concept intended that our mission was to instill in our counterparts the *will* to fight as well as the skill, that seems like asking a lot of American junior officers with no command authority over the Ruff Puffs and, except for captains returning for a second tour and some of the NCOs, no combat experience. Nevertheless, Peter was able to do this in at least one instance. After convincing his counterpart to cross an open field (a classic danger zone) a few men at a time rather than simply having the entire company amble across all together, Peter found himself half way across with two squads of RFs when suddenly they started taking fire. Everyone flopped down into a shallow stream bed. Command authority or no, Peter knew if he didn't take the initiative and give direct orders to the RFs, they would simply lie there and take casualties. Recalling the fire-and-maneuver tactics he had polished in OCS, he hurriedly explained, in his limited Vietnamese, that one fireteam from each squad would jump up and run ten or fifteen meters while the other two fireteams would provide covering fire. When the first two teams hit the dirt, they would open fire and the second two teams would jump up and leapfrog past them, then drop. And so on across the field. Peter numbered the teams one, two, three,

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four, in Vietnamese. Peter would go with the first two teams – they would jump and run when he shouted “*Didi Mau* [go very fast]!” Peter leaped from the stream bed and yelled for the men to follow. Then it occurred to him – what if nobody did? A quick look showed him that the RFs *were* obeying his order, and off they went. Everyone executed the fire-and-maneuver tactic perfectly, and they all made it safely across the field.

When I arrived in Tam Ky, the Senior Province Advisor was Colonel Melbane Stafford. My contact with Stafford, like that of most MAT members, was limited. However, Case Gresey, who worked in the Team 16 S-1 office for a couple of tours, had arrived in Tam Ky at the same time as the colonel, and saw quite a bit of him. Case felt Stafford put emphasis on minimizing casualties among Team 16 members. As Case recalls, by mid-1970 there had been just one Team 16 casualty due to enemy action, a MAT lieutenant who jumped off the back of an APC to go relieve himself in the brush and stepped on a mine (I found out much later that this was the lieutenant that I actually replaced).

Other than our aborted attempt at recovering the VC bodies mentioned earlier, my strongest memory of Colonel Stafford came on one of my earliest operations. I had been tagging along with my RF company for a couple of days when the Tactical Operations Center radioed to let me know that the colonel was flying to my position with a visitor. Who could that be, I wondered? They explained that a journalist wanted to accompany us for a few days. Why my operation had been chosen, I had no idea. Maybe there were no other MATs in the field at the moment. A few minutes later, the colonel’s helicopter touched down in a clearing and a bearded young fellow festooned with cameras hopped off and scooted away from the chopper. Stafford beckoned me over and shouted in my ear, “Tell him anything he wants to know.” This was rather surprising, since relations between the military and the media had been worsening for some time, and reporters were often viewed with suspicion. Nevertheless, the colonel’s instructions were in line with MACV policy, which placed little

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restriction on the movements of reporters and often gave them rides on military aircraft; nor did the Americans censor anything the reporters wrote. Nevertheless, while Stafford may not have been worried about my putting my foot in my mouth, I was not so cavalier. I decided to be at least a little guarded if I were pelted with any probing questions.

The journalist was a freelance photographer hoping to get some shots worthy of coverage back home. He asked me and my sergeant for our names and hometowns, and we both entertained the fancy that we might show up on the front page of our hometown newspapers – or maybe the cover of *Newsweek* or *Life*. The outcome was anticlimactic. He didn't ask any probing questions, or much else beyond our names. Although he took a number of shots of the Ruff Puffs, he evidently had enough pictures of Americans. After a few more boring days on patrol, he flew off, taking our fleeting chance at fame with him.

Several months after I arrived, Stafford's tour ended and he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Wagner, who had a much different management style and started making changes right away. As Case Gresey put it, "He had a campaign to get rid of anyone on the team who had been there for several years. There were some guys who just stayed on the team extension after extension." Two of them were the cooks who ran the mess hall in the main Team 16 living compound in Tam Ky. The first, Sergeant "Cookie", was grossly overweight and had both drinking and hygiene problems. He had found a home in Vietnam and could not possibly have survived in an Army assignment back in the States.

The other, Sergeant "Cookie Jr", had been there at least five years, and had a wife and children in Tennessee whom he had basically abandoned. Case, from his time in S-1, knew there was a thick sheaf of letters in Cookie Jr's file that his wife had written over the years begging the Senior Province Advisor to do something to make the sergeant support his family.

While LTC Wagner was probably right in ridding Team 16 of these sorts of long-timers, Case was concerned that the colonel might also crack down on him because he had volunteered for two six-month

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extensions. He had enlisted for three years rather than the usual two because at the time the GI Bill provided for a month of college benefits for every month of service up to thirty-six months, but by extending his time in Vietnam he could knock five months off his commitment. At any rate, Case managed to complete his two extensions and make it home after two years in Vietnam.

Our Deputy Province Advisor was a retired Army colonel whom I will call “Mr. Pompous”, since, in my limited contact with him he struck me as being self-important. These sort of high-level government employees were always addressed as “Mister”, since they did not have a military rank. He was a man about whom there were many rumors. One NCO told me that back in ‘Tet of ‘68 then-colonel Pompous’ artillery unit had leveled a section of Saigon, either by misdirected fire or upon the colonel’s orders. Soon after that he was transferred to Germany, where he retired rather suddenly, supposedly because of a corruption investigation. Before long, he was back in Vietnam, this time as a civilian employee of the U.S. government.

It was in this role that Mr. Pompous became the Team 16 Deputy Province Advisor in charge of all the non-military assistance that we were providing to the province government. The job entailed the distribution of large amounts of money and supplies – food, building materials, vehicles and much more. If the rumors about Pompous’ past corrupt activities were true, he had found the perfect role in which to continue his proclivities. If, on the other hand, the rumors were unfounded and he was an honest man when arrived in Tam Ky, it apparently did not take long for him to yield to the temptation presented by the rampant corruption among the Vietnamese officials. Hal Meinheit reports that Pompous “lived in a very comfortable house and had a fine chef. His lavish entertaining was a source of some resentment with his boss, the Province Senior Advisor, who was an active-duty army colonel and a man’s man [the aforementioned LTC Wagner]. It didn’t help that the Vietnamese Province Chief...preferred [Pompous’] table to eating army chow with his formal counterpart.” All

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this may have contributed to Pompous' once again retiring sometime after I came home.

There were a large number of American civilians in Vietnam, and Mr. Pompous may have been typical of the sort who cashed in on the vast amounts of money the U.S. pumped into the country during the war (a phenomenon hardly unique to *this* war). Although he had been briefed on this during his training and was expecting it, FSO Meinheit's first exposure caught him "completely off guard" when he filled in for an American on leave "whose duties included approving routine expenditures for the CORDS compounds." Fluent in both spoken and written Vietnamese, Hal quickly spotted some unusual expenses; for instance, charcoal was supposedly being purchased in large quantities from a local company which did not deal in charcoal, and locks and chains "bought" for the motor pool had actually been gotten free from the Americal Division. Mr. Pompous had been submitting false claims for personal expenses which were "not eligible for reimbursement". Hal refused to approve the expenses and instead went to his boss, who saw that Pompous was confronted. Says Hal,

I later learned that [Mr. Pompous] said I was a young, immature officer who did not understand how the system worked. Months afterwards, I was interviewed in Saigon by an inspection team investigating [Pompous], but as far as I know he was transferred but never disciplined.

The incident left a strong impression on me. I had expected Vietnamese corruption, but had not expected a well-paid American advisor to twist the system to his own benefit, setting an example to the Vietnamese that undermined the ideals we were trying to promote through CORDS.

It would have been difficult not to be drawn into the corruption which ran rife throughout the Vietnamese hierarchy. Retired Brigadier General Philip Bolté, then a Lieutenant Colonel, was the Senior Province Advisor in Quang Tin in 1968. In a 1994 interview with *historynet.com*, Bolté described some of the forms this corruption could

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take. A low-level example was his jeep driver. “I had a Vietnamese assigned to me as an interpreter-driver,” said Bolte. “I discovered that when I was away, he would sell rides in my jeep. In essence, he provided a taxi service in town using my jeep!”

Moving up the chain, Bolte’ noted, “We had an ARVN engineer unit assigned to Tam Ky whose duties included maintaining Highway One. However, they didn’t do anything! There was a U.S. unit already doing that. Instead, this ARVN engineer unit was selling its services to the highest bidder.”

At the top was the Quang Tin Province Chief, Colonel Haung Dinh Tho (the order of Vietnamese names is Surname – Middle Name – First Name, and the person is called by his or her first name; thus, he was referred to as Colonel Tho, pronounced “Tah”). Says Bolté, “I was told once that the position of province chief cost 16,000 U.S. dollars. So if someone wanted to be one, he had to pay the Vietnamese corps commander that sum to get the job. Then, to get a return on his investment, he had to be involved in corruption somehow.” Bolté never bothered asking Tho if this was true. “He probably would have laughed and told me that’s the way life is. Why else would someone want to be a province chief? It’s their way of operating. Maybe they just have it more structured than we do in this country.”

Colonel Tho was still the Quang Tin Province Chief when I arrived in 1970 and was there when I left in 1971.

The three hundred Americans on Team 16 were an extremely wide-ranging collection of military and civilian personnel. There were advisors for public works, agriculture and land reform, refugee relocation, health, logistics, public affairs, communications (in effect, propaganda), and much more. A couple of examples stick in my mind. First was Lieutenant Commander Roger McMillan, a U.S. Navy doctor who both advised on medical issues and provided medical treatment to Vietnamese civilians (his signature also appears on my shot card for injections that I received in Vietnam). He viewed being in Vietnam as a great opportunity, since it gave him the chance to work with diseases

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that he would never encounter in the States. On one occasion I was a passenger on a helicopter with Dr. McMillan, who had a stainless-steel bowl covered with a paper towel on his lap. The rotor blast lifted the paper towel enough for me see what looked like a human liver in the bowl. He was headed to a lab in Da Nang to have it analyzed. Lord knows what the poor soul's malady had been.

Another member of the team was an Army Engineer lieutenant who was an agricultural advisor. He took me on a tour of a peanut farm, including a visit to the peanut oil factory. The "factory" was just a long hollowed-out log. The peanuts were ground into a coarse powder, steamed for several hours, then wrapped in round, three-inch-thick baskets made of some sort of plant leaves. These were stacked into the hollow log, then squeezed down by driving in a wedge using a sledge hammer. Before long peanut oil was flowing out the end of the log. Ultimately, the baskets had been reduced to a thickness of about half an inch and were now hard as rocks. Primitive, but ingenious and effective.

The Team 16 members who worked in Tam Ky lived in a handful of compounds scattered around town. The largest, where most of the military personnel lived, was known as the Payne Compound, named after Captain Lloyd A. Payne, an American advisor who had been killed by rifle fire in Quang Tin Province way back in 1963. It was a ramshackle collection of one-story, tin-roofed, white-painted buildings surrounded by a cement wall topped with barbed wire and guard towers. NCOs and enlisted men lived in long barracks-like buildings, company grade officers (captains and lieutenants) had two-man rooms, and majors had trailers. The majors' trailers were air conditioned; the other quarters were not. There was an open-air movie theater, mess hall, latrines and showers, helicopter landing pad, a volleyball court, small officers' and NCO clubs, several huge generators whose drone could be heard everywhere in the compound day and night, plus various supply and administrative buildings and a mail room. Everyone had maid and laundry service. In all, it was a messy collection of buildings

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and equipment thrown together over a few years without much regard for esthetics, but the accommodations were reasonably comfortable, if spartan. They were infinitely better than conditions in the field. As one would expect, living conditions grew considerably fancier as one moved up the chain to I Corps Headquarters in Da Nang and then to Saigon, where there were swimming pools, tennis courts, at least one golf course, and plenty of air conditioning. It should be kept in mind, however, that this sort of arrangement was typical of all of America's wars (maybe of all wars, period).

One of the most striking differences between serving on a Province Advisory Team vs. a regular U.S. Army unit was the lack of a spirit of cohesiveness, of *esprit de corps*. The Province Team was made up of a broad variety of men (military and civilian, young and middle aged) doing many different jobs. Most team members interacted with only a few other members, and interplay between military and civilian personnel was limited. Military and civilians, for the most part, even lived in different compounds. Some military personnel had jobs that required that they always be in civvies, so it was difficult to know that they were actually soldiers. All in all, we just did our jobs, but it was difficult to see where we fit into the "big picture".

MAT I-24

I was assigned as the Assistant Team Leader on MAT I-24, which was stationed in one of those remote outposts atop a tall, steep, rocky hill named *Nui Loc Son* (Loc Son Mountain) fifteen miles west-northwest of Tam Ky. This area was the scene of severe fighting between American Marines and the VC in 1967 and between the U.S. Army and the VC in 1968. When I was there, "pacification" was nowhere near completed, and the VC were still causing trouble.

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Our Team Leader was a captain who was suffering from some sort of medical condition which kept him in Tam Ky while he waited to go back to the States, which he soon did, making me the senior (and only) officer on the team. The team also included three NCOs: Sergeant Mallot, Sergeant Pitts and Sergeant Malave, our medic. All three were on their second tour in Vietnam, and Mallott and Pitts had both served in Quang Tin Province before. Apparently, they felt it was a reasonably safe place and had asked to be assigned here on their second tour. Sergeant Mallot was black and was from Cleveland; Sergeant Pitts was white and from Georgia; “Doc” Malave was Hispanic. It seems unlikely that such “diverse” men would have been friends back in the U.S. but, as was generally the case in the armed forces, they were professionals who worked well together and looked out for each other.

Undoubtedly, these three experienced sergeants looked upon me with the mixture of apprehension and tolerance with which NCOs viewed all inexperienced lieutenants. Their job would mostly be to keep me from doing too much harm while at the same time trying to teach me the ropes.

A few days after my arrival in Tam Ky, I hopped on a helicopter for a ride out to *Nui Loc Son*. As the chopper whumped along, I gazed through the open side door for a look at the terrain in which I would be operating for the next nine or ten months. In the east, brush-covered sand dunes stretched inward from the white beaches along the South China Sea, with small clusters of houses – mostly just grass shacks – here and there. A little way inland the dunes quickly gave way to flat land with rich soil where most of the population lived. A few more miles inland the patchwork of rice paddies became dotted with steep, rocky hills covered with dark vegetation, like small isles rising out of a lighter green sea. The isles soon turned into foothills and these in turn grew into mountains near the middle of the province. Except where the land had been cleared for rice paddies, virtually everything was covered with thick vegetation.

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Peering out the helicopter door, I didn't know it yet, but I would operate in virtually every kind of terrain in the province, from sand dunes to mountains, from rice paddies to almost impenetrable jungle. I would leave my footprints in widely scattered places from the coast to half way to Laos, which was about as far west as friendly troops went during my time there.

But at this moment, the helicopter was nearing *Nui Loc Son*. The former Marine outpost was now occupied by a Regional Forces company manning bunkers which had been built around and into a series of huge, round stone outcroppings crowning the hill. Our MAT lived in a dark, dank, poorly ventilated bunker that was crowded with equipment and munitions. Each of us had a cot and a small area for our personal gear. I was not destined to be on *Nui Loc Son* for long, so only a couple of incidents remain in my memory:

- That first evening as I unpacked my meager belongings from my duffle bag, it really struck me that I was in Vietnam – a long, long way from home in a country that was completely alien to me – and there was a war on, and I was part of it. I looked longingly at some pictures of Dace that I had brought along and once again questioned the wisdom of joining the Army. What the hell am I doing here, and what is going to become of me, I wondered.
- My first operation was a short patrol into the fields, rice paddies and villages surrounding the hill. Having been only in the urban areas of Saigon and Da Nang, I now got my first exposure to the poor, agricultural countryside, where the people lived in widely scattered hamlets connected by footpaths and a few dirt roads. Although this area was reasonably “pacified”, there were certainly VC around. From somewhere far off a few rounds were fired in our general direction. “AK-47,” said Sergeant Mallott. He seemed completely unruffled, and it was clear that this was all in a day's work. To me, it seemed that the rounds were specifically aimed in my direction, which is every soldier's reaction when they hear bullets fly for the first time. My

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“baptism of fire” was very minor, which was certainly OK with me. After a few hours of patrolling followed by the long, hot climb back up the steep side of *Nui Loc Son*, I was ready for a couple of beers, with which we kept our propane-powered refrigerator well stocked.

- A couple of days later, I got a radio call from the District Advisor telling me to meet him at the bottom of *Nui Loc Son* in the morning – we would be having lunch with the chief of a nearby village. Not knowing exactly what to expect, I hiked down the hill the next morning and before long a small convoy of motorbikes came roaring through the jungle and stopped in a cloud of dust. The District Advisor was seated on the back of one of the bikes, and motioned me to get on another one. Soon I was hanging on for dear life as we careened down a narrow jungle path. All I could do was hope the driver was familiar with the trail, since he never bothered to slow down for the sharp turns. Upon arrival at the village, we were seated at the village chief's dining table, a long, rough wooden table like Americans would use for a Sunday picnic. The only beverage was some sort of moonshine which could double as paint remover. There was a small portion of meat cooked, as usual, on skewers over an open fire, plus a bowl of rice flavored with *nuoc mam*, the fish sauce which is a staple of Vietnamese cuisine. I've seen various recipes for *nuoc mam*; our locals made it by filling a barrel with alternating layers of dried fish and salt with perhaps a few spices thrown in – the dark, salty liquid that drains out the bottom is *nuoc mam*. In the rice bowl there was also a tiny red pepper. Thinking I was being polite, I ate the pepper along with the rice. It was red hot. Washing it down with the moonshine turned out to be a big mistake, leaving me gasping for breath with tears running down my face, much to the amusement of everyone but me.

The District Advisor who whisked me off to this lunch seemed to be a good man. He was easy-going, funny and at the same time

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enthusiastic about his job. I couldn't understand why he, as a lieutenant colonel, was a District Advisor, a job normally held by a major. I encountered him several times during the first part of my tour and noticed that he seemed to consume a lot of liquor. Then someone told me the story of how he had been serving in an American unit in a job appropriate to his rank. Unfortunately, he got very drunk in the officer's club one evening and stood up on a table and urinated all over it. This was too much for his commanding officer and he became *persona non grata* in American units. My impression was that this pretty much ended his chances for promotion and he had been put into the District Advisor's job to serve out his time until he could retire. Unfortunately, his drinking had not subsided, and I've heard he was eventually relieved from that job, too.

One evening just a week or two after I arrived on the mountain, we were in our bunker preparing barbequed chicken for supper when we heard a strange POP from the direction of our propane-powered refrigerator. Looking around, I saw flames leaping from it. With no firefighting equipment, and a bunker full of grenades and ammunition, there was only one reasonable course of action – get the hell out. There was myself, Sergeant Mallot and Sergeant Malave, and I don't remember which of us was quickest out the door – it may have been a tie. Luckily, we all had on at least our pants and boots, but everything else was left behind, including rifles, radios, personal belongings – literally everything but the clothes on our backs. At least we had survived; however, Sergeant Malave had gotten some nasty burns on his back as we exited our former abode. The bunker was a total loss and ammunition and grenades cooked off for several hours. We spent the night with an American Signal Corps unit which had a small bunker on the hill and the next day a helicopter picked us up and flew us back to Tam Ky.

The most important things I lost in the fire were pictures of Dace, which she was able to replace, and Uncle Dan's knife, which was irreplaceable. I acquired a new knife but have always regretted losing the original. Maybe it is still there, a rusted bit of metal buried in the remains of our bunker on *Nui Loc Son*. My assumption is that I

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probably would have brought along Dad's letter to *Nui Loc Son*. So, even had I meant to keep it, it certainly would have been lost in the fire.

We soon found that it wasn't going to be simple to replace our lost equipment, especially our rifles. We would have to fly to Saigon to get new ones (had no advisors ever lost rifles before?). This was fine with us since it meant a few days out of the field and some time in the big city.

Most of the group, which included us MAT I-24 members plus a few other Team 16 personnel who had some reason (or excuse) to visit Saigon, planned to get drunk and stay that way as long as possible – or engage in even more earthly pursuits. Instead, I decided to look up an Air Force Academy classmate of my brother Barry, John Roush. John was also from Ohio and he had stayed at our house a couple of days one summer when Barry was home on leave. This must have been between their junior and senior years, since both of them had purchased cars – Barry, a green Porsche and John, a light-colored Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. John worked at MACV headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and he had conducted one of the countless briefings I attended upon arriving in country. Being just one of many in an auditorium full of new arrivals, I never got a chance to speak with him then. But now I dropped in on him at his office and he was nice enough to put me up in his quarters, plus he took me on a tour of MACV headquarters, even the top-secret situation room where the big brass held briefings. On one wall was a huge map that looked like something out of the movies. It made my role in the war seem very small.

When I arrived back in Tam Ky, I found that the nature of MAT I-24 had changed. Instead of going back to *Nui Loc Son* or being assigned to another RF/PF unit in a fixed outpost like most MATs, we would become a sort of reaction team, being sent to any place in the province where we were needed and working with whatever Ruff Puff unit that was available. Unlike other MATs, which worked directly for the District Advisor in whose area they were stationed, I-24 was under the direct control of the Senior RF/PF Advisor, first Captain Bell then

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eventually Major Whitmeyer. Sergeant Pitts found a job with the Tam Ky District Advisory Team, which meant he no longer went on field operations. Sergeants Malave and Mallot went on several more operations with me, but they eventually went off to other assignments and finally rotated back to the States when their tours ended. After that, several different NCOs went with me to the field, often for only a single operation. In effect, although I was officially the Team Leader of MAT I-24, I no longer had a team per se – there was me and one NCO.

The good part about this change in assignments was that I got to make the Payne compound in Tam Ky my home base, where I could enjoy a two-man room with clean sheets, maid service, hot-water showers, mess hall food, drinks at the officers' club, and movies and volleyball every evening. No longer would I be residing in a dank, crowded bunker with almost no amenities. Instead, I could live like the rest of the REMFs when I wasn't out on an operation. REMF is a term that dates at least to WWII but, in concept, must go back to the beginning of warfare. It stands for Rear Echelon Mother Fucker. That would be anyone who is removed even slightly further than you are from the "front line". When we were on *Nui Loc Son*, everyone back in Tam Ky was a REMF. To those in Tam Ky, the REMFS were the lucky SOBs in Da Nang, Chu Lai, Saigon and all the other big American bases. And those REMFs could compare themselves favorably to the REMFs clear back in the U.S. No soldier believes that REMFs can appreciate how tough it is for those closer to the action, nor do they care.

One feature of my new status was that I really had nothing to do when I wasn't in the field. Unlike a regular MAT, I had no Vietnamese unit to which I was assigned, so there was no requirement that I spend time training the Ruff Puffs, inspecting fortifications, or the other duties that MATS typically performed when not actually on operations. The up side of this was that I had plenty of free time. The down side was the same thing – I had plenty of free time. I read a lot, chatted with others when they were off duty, generally tried to stay out of people's way. I probably could have volunteered now and then to go out and

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seek some action, but, frankly, I couldn't see sticking my neck out any more than it already was through the operations that I did go on.

Another bad part of my new status as a "reaction team" leader was that I got to spend plenty of time in the field. I was never able to make direct comparisons, but my impression was that I probably went on more operations than most of the Team 16 MATs, who spent much of their time in their outposts, and I certainly made more helicopter assaults. In fact, Major Whitmeyer suggested that I put myself in for an Air Medal, which could be awarded for making a certain number of flights. It didn't seem important to me at the time and I never bothered to keep a record of how many helicopter flights I was on, so I didn't pursue it.

A third downside was that my work took me all over Quang Tin Province and I never went on operations in the same place twice. I was not able to develop a familiarity with the terrain over which I tramped. Most MATs got to know their relatively small area of operations, but I always went to places which were completely new to me.

A fourth – and more serious – drawback was that I worked with a variety of Vietnamese counterparts – the Ruff Puff company commanders. Most MATs were assigned to a single Vietnamese unit for a long period so they got to know their counterparts well. I often had never met my counterpart until the day of an operation, so in addition to the usual communication problems, I would be working with a stranger. I didn't give much thought to this at the time since I had nothing to compare it to, having never worked with a single counterpart over a long period. Recently, however, communicating with former MAT member Jim Roberts and reading his book *MAT 111 Dong Xoai, Vietnam 1971*, I gained new insight into my situation. For most of his tour, Jim's MAT was intact – two officers and three NCOs – and they worked with the same RF company and the same counterpart. Jim and his counterpart developed a strong working relationship and learned to trust and respect each other. For the last month of his tour, however, Jim's "team" was reduced to just him as other members were promoted or DEROSed home. So Jim was

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assigned to different RF companies and counterparts for his operations. As Jim puts it, “Rapport with a Vietnamese counterpart, such as a Company Commander, takes time to develop. Working with a different Regional Force company on each mission did not provide time to develop that rapport. What was always a lonely war had become much lonelier.” For example, on one operation, his counterpart was a Vietnamese major who was so insulted “to have a mere Lieutenant as his advisor” that he would hardly acknowledge Jim. The counterpart even went so far as to literally kick Jim away from his raft when they crossed a river, leaving Jim and couple of very scared (and almost useless) RFs stranded on the wrong side. Maybe it is just as well that I hadn’t been “spoiled” by working with a single counterpart before being assigned to my “reaction team” role – with nothing to compare it to, I was able to take my situation pretty much in stride. Ignorance really can sometimes be bliss.

One of the first problems I faced upon returning from Saigon was, strangely enough, finding a place to live. The sergeant who oversaw the Payne compound in Tam Ky, whom I’ll call Sergeant “Snorkel”, was both a stickler for regulations and a jerk, and he seemed to have a problem with MAT members in general. He specifically didn’t like the idea of my living in the compound, since no MAT members were authorized permanent living quarters there. On short stays in town, they bunked in the MAT hootch, a long, open, barracks-like structure. This was fine for a couple of days when someone was taking a break from their outpost, but it would not do on a permanent basis.

Fortunately, my guardian angel was looking out for me – in the unlikely form of another sergeant that I had gotten to know. I have, unfortunately, forgotten his name, so I’ll just call him Sergeant “Signal”. He was a Sergeant First Class, or perhaps a Master Sergeant, who headed up a powerful Signal Corps station in the Payne compound. The unit wasn’t actually part of Team 16, so Sergeant Signal didn’t feel bound by the rules. He was a cranky old lifer (in his 40s I think), and he pretty much did as he damned well pleased. Sympathetic to my plight,

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he invited me to move in with him, since his quarters had plenty of room for two. Actually, I think he did this mostly to rankle Sergeant Snorkel, since the two did not get along. Snorkel was irritated by the fact that he had no control over Signal but had to put up with him. Signal like to rub this in whenever he could. Whatever the reason, I now had pretty nice quarters (well, pretty nice for Vietnam), with even a water cooler and a room air conditioner that Signal had scrounged from somewhere. We also had a small TV, but hardly ever watched it. We could get only one station, the armed forces station in Da Nang. The reception was poor and the programming was mostly news with a few Bonanza reruns.

Sergeant Signal's wife was having troubles back home. My impression was that she may not have been entirely stable mentally, and the sergeant fretted about her. Mostly, he was convinced that either she was having an affair with someone he knew, or the man was forcing himself on her. This reached a boiling point when the sergeant went home on leave. When he returned from leave, Sergeant Signal told me with great satisfaction that he had shot the man in the thigh with a .38 revolver. That seemed to settle things.

After a few weeks my housing got straightened out and I moved into the officers' quarters, much to the chagrin of Sergeant Snorkel, I'm sure.

My new roommate was Captain Mann, the Team 16 supply officer. I didn't really see much of Mann since he was working all day, and I was often out in the field. In the evenings, there was usually some activity going on like volleyball, or just sitting around in the officers' club. But what I did see of the captain, I liked. He was intelligent, witty, self-deprecating and easy going. When Lieutenant Colonel Wagner took over as Senior Province Advisor, one of the first things he did was to change our headgear, a clear signal that there was a new boss in town. Under LTC Stafford, MAT members wore the same headgear as our Territorial Forces counterparts – a blue beret with the Vietnamese symbol for our American rank (two flowers, in my case). We had to purchase our berets locally since they were not available through official Army channels. Like all berets, they certainly were not practical; lacking

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visors, they didn't protect from the sun or rain. But we all thought we looked rakish and liked them. The other Team 16 members – those not serving on MATs – wore the standard Army baseball-type cap. Colonel Wagner's choice of headgear for everyone on Team 16, including MATs, was a floppy jungle hat – but starched stiff, with the left side of the brim pinned up and our Vietnamese rank in the center front. Captain Mann's reaction to this was, "I'm ugly enough and sloppy enough already. And now we have to wear this stupid hat that makes me look even worse!" I could not disagree with the captain, who was not the handsomest nor neatest of men.

In addition to being our supply officer, Captain Mann had a side job. Every now and then he would be called to Da Nang to defend some poor GI who was being court-martialed. I don't know whether the captain had a law degree and, if he did, why he ended up in supply instead of the Judge Advocate General Corps, but he was a heck of a defense attorney. Everyone he defended got off. He brushed it off by saying "The Army didn't really have a case against the poor guy." But I have the feeling that it wasn't as simple as that.

Unfortunately, not everyone liked Captain Mann. When I returned from my stateside leave, I noticed a gouge in the cement wall above my bed that looked suspiciously like a bullet hole. I asked the captain about it and he rather nonchalantly told me that one of his supply sergeants had gotten drunk, grabbed his rifle and came to our room in the middle of the night. He woke up Captain Mann and said something like "I'm gonna teach you what it's like to load those damned helicopters. Now get out to the chopper pad."

The captain responded with "I don't believe that weapon is loaded and I'm going to take it away from you and shove it up your ass." At that point, the sergeant pointed the rifle at the wall over my bed and pulled the trigger, proving that the rifle *was* loaded. The roar of the shot must have shocked the sergeant back to his senses, for he became subdued and handed over his weapon. I don't believe any charges were ever brought against him.

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For the next several months my life was a series of operations interspersed with stretches of sitting around with nothing to do. Then would come the call that I should gear up and get ready to go out – maybe that afternoon or the next morning. There had been a VC attack or at least some intelligence that showed potential enemy activity, and they needed a couple of Americans to accompany the Ruff Puffs that were being sent out to deal with it. Then would come the tightness in the stomach that always preceded an operation.

The worst case of “the tightness” was on Thanksgiving Day 1970. I went to the mess hall, loaded up my tray with turkey, gravy and all the trimmings, and sat down to enjoy this repast when our operations sergeant walked in and started looking around. I was certain he was looking for me and it could mean only one thing – time to saddle up. Sure enough, he spotted me and came over and said, “When you’re done eating Major Whitmeyer wants to see you.” He didn’t need to add “Enjoy your meal”, since he knew I wouldn’t. My appetite lost, I nibbled a bit at what otherwise would have been a delicious dinner, then went off to see the major. A few hours later an RF company, an American NCO and this young lieutenant were loaded on trucks and hauled a few miles out of town to conduct another search and engage mission.

My ritual before an operation was usually about the same. First, came a briefing (although “briefing” endows it with an unwarranted air of formality) on where I was going, what Ruff Puff unit I was going with, which NCO would go with me, how we would get there (it was usually by helicopter, but sometimes we rode out on trucks or armored personnel carriers); I’d make sure I had the appropriate maps, check radio frequencies, get call signs of American units in the area, and take care of other details.

Then I had to get my personal gear together. Since my operations lasted only a few days or maybe as long as ten, I usually travelled light. There was my M16 rifle and a loaded magazine, a bandolier of seven more magazines, a few smoke grenades for signaling (never any

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fragmentation grenades, which I didn't like handling), a bag slung over my shoulder with a few C-rations, my poncho, extra socks, pistol belt with two canteens of water, knives (a sheath knife and a folding pocket knife), wrist watch, compass, maps, strobe light for signaling helicopters, code books and coding device, boonie hat (we advisors never wore steel helmets, although I don't know why, since the Ruff Puffs generally did; nor did we wear the heavy "flak jackets" that were required in many American units), mosquito repellent (also good for removing leeches), toothbrush and toothpaste, toilet paper, first aid pack, butt pack to hold my sundries, flashlight, and, I'm sure, other stuff that was vital but has now been forgotten. Both the shirts and pants of jungle fatigues have lots of pockets, and all of mine were stuffed. Like Teddy Roosevelt, who took along a dozen pairs of spectacles – including two sewn into his hat – when he went to Cuba with the Rough Riders, I had a fear of losing my glasses, so I always carried an extra pair.

Even with all this, my load was still much lighter than most American GIs, who often carried close to one hundred pounds of gear, munitions and supplies. *Mike Thornton* explained to me years later that his troops in the 1st Air Cav were often on operations for three, four or more months at a time, and trying to get them to carry less was a constant problem.

The GI's reacted by bringing all sorts of things with them and despite the additional weight they stubbornly resisted giving up what they considered "their" stuff. It is also important to note that when we came in, the "rear" for us was an LZ, which was often little more than a battery of 105's with a berm pushed up in a circle around them. Each LZ was in place for a limited time. One of the adaptations we made to this environment was to carry all our gear to a Patrol Base, and then run patrols from there. From the PB we moved out with a lighter load of weapons, ammo, water and one meal. This was described in GI argot as "going light to fight with a picnic lunch."

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I always went “light to fight with a picnic lunch” – another advantage of being in an advisory capacity rather than an American unit.

After I had checked my gear, I checked it again, especially my rifle and magazines. If the operation was to start the next day, I’d try, often unsuccessfully, to get a night’s sleep.

One of the Vietnamese soldiers would be assigned to carry my radio, so he was always within a few yards of me. Plus, there would be an interpreter who had reasonably good English skills, since most counterparts’ English was as limited as my Vietnamese. Our standard radio was a PRC-25 (“prick 25”, we called it), a backpack radio weighing over twenty pounds. Even on short operations, it was necessary to carry extra batteries, which weighed a couple of pounds each and were spread out among the troops.

The operations I went on fell into several types: First, and most common, “search and engage” missions in response to some sort of enemy activity or intelligence that indicated a weapons or food cache. On these missions we would spend a few days tramping through the jungle and sleeping on the ground, sometimes getting shot at and killing a few VC (at least everyone killed was proclaimed to be a VC). Second, manning a hilltop outpost to watch for VC activity. Third, providing security for an American Army Engineer unit. Plus, there was one operation in which I accompanied an American Armored Cavalry unit. When an operation ended, it would be back to Tam Ky, and after a few days or a week in town, I’d do it again, usually with a different Ruff Puff unit in a different part of the province. I didn’t keep count of the number of operations I went on. My best guess would be somewhere around twenty.

After all these years, these operations have run together in memory and trying to sort them out chronologically is impossible – so I won’t try. Let’s just lump together some memories into subject areas:

Helicopters

The most common way my Ruff Puffs and I went to the field was by

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helicopter. We would perform what was known as a “combat assault”, although that term may be misleading since, thankfully, there was never any actual combat going on when we disembarked. “Helicopter insertion” would be a more accurate description, but I will use “combat assault” or “CA” since that is what everyone called it.

The helicopter we rode on for our CA’s was the Bell UH-1, the single-engine copter which has become a virtual symbol of the Vietnam War. Although its official name was the Iroquois (the Army named its choppers after Indian tribes – Chinook, Apache, etc.), everyone called it a “Huey”, after its “Utility Helicopter” designation. It was also called a “slick”, meaning it had no external armaments like gunships did – only the M60 machine guns in the side doors. I spent considerable time riding in Hueys, and to this day I always feel compelled to look up whenever I hear a helicopter flying over, even though I can tell just by the sound of its rotor blades whether it is a Huey (it almost never is anymore).

To start a mission, someone would drive my NCO and me over to an airstrip not far from the Payne compound. The Ruff Puffs would arrive and we would stand around killing time and checking equipment, waiting for the choppers to show. Our helicopter support was provided by an American aviation unit in Chu Lai. Whether or not we would get birds on any given day was iffy. Sometimes none were available and, on a few occasions, they were diverted *en route* for more important missions, so our operation was scrubbed.

But usually the birds showed up. We would squint into the distance and finally pick up the little dots heading our way, then would come the distinctive “whop-whop-whop” of the Hueys’ blades.

A combat assault is thrilling, much more so than, say, an amusement park ride, since the dangers are real; and they are a lot less fun than an amusement park ride, for the same reason. Conducting a CA in a Huey is almost nothing like the sort of flying most people have experienced – traveling by commercial jet, where extreme efforts are made to ensure a smooth, comfortable flight. Jet liner passengers are insulated as much as possible from noise, wind, cold, heat, even from the pilots and

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cockpit noise – from everything that is going on outside the passenger compartment, reducing the sensation of flying to a minimum. In a Huey, the passengers are in the thick of what is going on and there is no escaping the feeling of being propelled through the air – of *really* flying.

When the choppers make their landing approach, there is a scurry of activity as the troops put on their gear and line up. In they come, looking big yet fragile at the same time, like huge insects. They touch down, engines whining and rotors whopping, stirring up huge clouds of dirt, so we start each operation with grit in our mouths and every other orifice in our bodies. We run to the birds, crouched down to avoid the whirling blades (well, the Vietnamese didn't have to crouch much, but I always did) and scramble on. There is no comfort on a helicopter crowded with soldiers. The official capacity of a Huey is 13 American GIs, but we could cram in more of the smaller-statured Vietnamese when necessary. The sweaty men push up against each other; equipment pokes and chafes; the bare metal floor is hard through the seats of our thin fatigues. The pilots are just a few feet away, not sequestered in a locked cockpit as in an airliner, removed physically and symbolically from the passengers. There is a closeness, a feeling that we are in this together, as we watch the pilots at their work. I glance at the pilot, hidden behind aviator sunglasses or the dark visor of his helmet – I don't recall ever seeing a pilot's eyes, and I have no idea whether the same pilots flew us over and over, or if we got different ones every time. I signal the pilot that everyone is aboard, the tail of the aircraft lifts slightly, the nose edges down a little, and we're off, a handful of Hueys loaded with a few dozen South Vietnamese soldiers and a couple of American advisors.

We're propelled forward and up at the same time. A few seconds later, my stomach catches up with me, and soon we are at our cruising altitude of several thousand feet. We are overwhelmed by noise. The 1,100 horsepower engine throbs above our heads, the gearbox whines as it transfers power from the engine to the main and tail rotors, the rotors whop away, and, since we always flew with the side doors open, the wind whistles past our ears. The open doors seem to beckon us to

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fall out, for there are no seatbelts for passengers on a combat assault.

Conversation is virtually impossible, and much communication is done through gestures and hand signals. There really is not much to say, anyway. We are in the pilot's hands now, defenseless against any determined enemy who wants to take a shot at us. Except for some armor plating around the pilots' seats and various thick metal structural elements, a Huey is just a thin aluminum shell that can hardly slow down bullets.

Getting us to the landing zone (LZ) is the pilots' job. They have already been briefed on where we are going, so they need no instruction from me. Somehow, they are always able to find the little grassy spot where we are to be dropped off. Very impressive, since, to me, it all looked about the same.

The view from a chopper is unparalleled. We can see past the pilots out the front windshield and out the open doors on either side. Below, the crazy quilt of rice paddies and fields flashes by, soon to give way to denser foliage as we head west toward the mountains. It would be pretty country if...but, there are other things to think about.

The furthest my operations ever took us from Tam Ky was maybe twenty-five or thirty miles, so it doesn't take long to get where we are going. Sometimes "prep fires" have been placed on our LZ – artillery rounds which are fired on the target to chase off any bad guys that might be there. Of course, these could also alert the enemy that we were coming, but artillery fire on likely targets went on regularly, and it wasn't usually followed by a troop landing, so the odds are the VC gave the firing little mind.

As we near our LZ, the sounds of the engine and rotors change and we start to drop. Unlike takeoff, my stomach now jumps up into my throat instead of falling into my bowels. This is it, there's no going back now. The choppers swoop down quickly and as soon as the skids touch the ground, we exit fast – helicopters are at their most vulnerable on the ground, so there is no dawdling lest they attract fire. Crouching to avoid the rotors and to make a smaller target, we quickly scurry a few yards away, our eyes constantly searching the surrounding trees, rifles at

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the ready, prepared to engage immediately if necessary. As soon as they have disgorged their human cargo, the slicks are off, engines roaring and blades stirring up dust or whipping the grassy surface of the LZ. Suddenly, an eerie quiet settle over the countryside. Since the units I work with are generally company-size or less, we sometimes can all be inserted at the same time. But if we don't have enough choppers, we set up a perimeter to secure the area and wait for the birds to make their round trip, which might take half an hour or more. This is a nervous time, since any VC in the area know exactly where we are, and we are not yet up to full strength. Once the second flight of choppers arrives, we move off into the jungle.

Luckily, I never went into a "hot LZ" where there was fighting going on as we landed. On one assault, for reasons unknown, the door gunners opened up with their M60s just before we touched down. I don't know whether they thought they saw something or were just bored, but it scared the hell out of me. "Oh shit, here we go," I thought as I hit the ground in a crouch and looked around for incoming fire. There was none, so we breathed a sigh of relief and moved out.

After leaving the LZ, operations generally followed the same routine – hour after hour of tramping along narrow trails, cutting our way through thick foliage, climbing up and down hills, fording a river here and there, slogging through rice paddies, all the while anticipating an explosion or the sudden snap of rifle fire at any moment. Except for the jangle of equipment and an occasional grunt when a soldier slipped or tripped, there was little sound but for the droning of insects. Now and then the silence was broken by a voice crackling over the radio – our Tactical Operations Center (TOC) would be calling with new instructions or asking for a situation report.

We had much in common with the paratroopers of old, dropped off in a remote location where the enemy could be in any direction and the closest friendlies were miles away. At least my Ruff Puff operations always took place within range of an artillery battery, but this was not the case with some other MATs. It was hard to believe that any of the

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places we went had real strategic value; they were just spots on the map – thick jungle, paddies, swamps – that hardly seemed worth fighting for (in fairness, this seems the view of many of those serving in all wars, since they have no insight into the “big picture”, in which they play the most minute of roles).

Fairly regularly, we would come across signs of enemy presence – a few rusty weapons, small caches of ammunition or rice, one-man caves dug along trails into which the bad guys could scuttle upon the approach of American aircraft. But we seldom encountered the enemy himself. If there were VC about they could easily disappear into the jungle or hide in plain sight among a group of villagers, then reemerge as soon as we had moved on. It was impossible to tell how many of the people in any given village might be VC posing as innocent noncombatants. Were they the ones who scowled at us? Or maybe the smiling ones? Or even the women or children?

Prowling the countryside looking for VC was hot, tiring work, boring and nerve-racking at the same time, with a few moments of unwanted excitement thrown in here and there. Hour after hour of trudging in the hot sun or pouring rain dulls the senses and can lull one into a semi-comatose state. We had to constantly struggle against this, lest we lose our footing or, worse, not be able to react quickly should a firefight erupt.

In Basic Training we had sung lyrics while double-timing like “I wanna be an Airborne Ranger, I wanna put my life in danger” or “If I die in a combat zone, box me up and ship me home.” In those days it was easy, even exciting, to display such bravado. Now that we *were* in a combat zone and putting our lives in danger, the prospect of being boxed up and shipped home was much more real and much more forbidding. Ever since then when I hear young people say they want to do something exciting, my reaction is, “I’ve done some of the most exciting things you can imagine. Excitement is overrated.”

I eventually developed a sort of love/hate relationship with helicopters. I sure didn’t like them when they arrived to take us to the

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field, and I would have been perfectly happy if they hadn't shown up. But when they were coming to pick us up *from* the field, I loved 'em. Once the Vietnamese had determined that our operation was ending, my counterpart would tell me "*Toi đi Tam Ky*" (literally, "We go Tam Ky"; Vietnamese verbs have no tense, so past, present or future are indicated by the inflection given the words. These inflections are usually too subtle for the American ear to pick up. But subtleties didn't matter in this case. "We go Tam Ky" was good enough for me.). The TOC would call me with an approximate ETA for the choppers. As the time approached, we would watch the skies apprehensively – one never knew if the VC were waiting to spring a trap and catch us just as the loaded birds struggled to take off. Then came the pilot's voice – shaky from the whipping of the rotors – crackling over my radio, "This is Conger 26 [or whatever his call sign was] about one and a half clicks [kilometers] out from your position. Prepare to pop smoke." When I figured he was close enough, I would toss a smoke grenade and call him back, "Conger 26, I have popped smoke." When he saw our smoke, the pilot would answer back, "Roger, I see your red [or green, etc.] smoke." It was standard procedure that the troops on the ground would never announce the color of the smoke grenade we threw, just in case the enemy was listening in on our radio frequency; if so, they could ignite a grenade of the same color and lure the choppers into an ambush. If the pilot identified the correct color of smoke, I would confirm that he was indeed coming to the right place. The birds would come roaring in and we would scramble on board, tired and dirty and happy to be going back home – at least as close to home as I was going to get for a while.

One day it was my job to fly all over the province to every district headquarters to pick up some sort of report (perhaps the infamous Hamlet Evaluation System). One of the off-duty Air Force Forward Air Controllers wanted to go on a helicopter ride. The two Army Warrant Officer pilots decided to give this Air Force jockey the ride of his life – and they did, swooping up hills and down the other side,

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climbing almost straight up then dropping like the engine had failed, hovering in mid-air, and all kinds of risky flying that would have gotten them a good ass-chewing by their superiors. Looking back, I'm sure this is the sort of stuff that got more than one helicopter crew killed. But the FAC and I just held on and laughed our heads off. Ah, youth.

It was not all fun and games for helicopter crews. Classmate *Mike Gilpin* (candidate "Giblet" on crutches at graduation) flew Hueys in the Mekong Delta, where the monsoons were so bad that crews had to wade barefoot to their choppers then don socks and boots after clambering on board. But that wasn't the worst of Mike's experiences. On one mission, just as they lifted off from the LZ after dropping off a load of ARVN soldiers, they started taking ground fire. Mike reports, "Suddenly, the aircraft shuddered violently from left to right and began a nose-up, left roll almost to the point of going inverted. There were loud bangs of sheet metal ripping from the aircraft." Mike and his crew didn't know it, but the helicopter behind them had veered to avoid the ground fire and its main rotor blade had chopped off Mike's tail rotor and vertical fin. The Huey began to autorotate toward the ground as Mike and his co-pilot struggled frantically to regain control. Behind them, they heard one of the door gunners praying in Spanish. "I'm gonna die," thought Mike. "I hope someone tells my mother how it happened." The chopper slammed into the ground and rolled onto its right side. All four crew members were injured but had survived the crash and were evacuated by another Huey. The crew of the helicopter that hit theirs was not so fortunate. As their rescue chopper took off, Mike could see the other helicopter's burning remains sticking up from the rice paddy. No one had survived the crash. At the hospital, it was discovered that Mike and all of his crew members had cracked spinal columns, plus various other injuries. Mike was temporarily paralyzed from his neck to his waist but recovered enough to continue flying.

Over four thousand helicopter crew members died in Vietnam, about seven percent of the total deaths. They often flew over and into very dangerous places; in fact, every helicopter flight in Vietnam was over enemy territory, for there was no place that could be considered

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free from the possibility of VC fire. Among my pictures from Vietnam is one I took of a Huey about to take off from the Payne compound in Tam Ky. It was loaded with cases of Coke, beer, probably some toilet paper and frozen chicken or beef. This would be a simple resupply mission to a remote MAT outpost or a district headquarters out west in the province – a “milk run”. Nevertheless, the two door gunners sit behind their loaded M60s and the pilots undoubtedly have pistols strapped to them and probably an M16 or submachinegun handy. They never knew when a simple “administrative” mission might turn into something much worse.

I was riding in a Huey on one such administrative mission (where I was going and for what reason I have long forgotten, but I know I wasn’t heading for a combat assault with a load of RFs) when, as we passed over a village, I heard a faint noise that sounded like gunshots followed by a metallic sound like something had struck the skin of the chopper. At the same time, I could have sworn I felt something strike the side of my knee very lightly, without breaking the skin or scratching my fatigues. When we landed the crew, who also seemed to think we had been hit, checked over the ship, but could find no damage. They shrugged it off and went on flying.

Even when they were flying non-combat missions helicopter crews often put in long hours. And on particularly taxing days, the pilots often barely had time to unlatch their seat belts and stretch their legs for a few minutes. The grunts out in the field envied the warm beds and mess hall chow the chopper crews enjoyed in the evening, but they had to admit that the work these men did was not easy, nor risk-free.

Of course, one of the great things about helicopters was their ability to get wounded soldiers to hospitals in the fastest possible time, saving many, many lives. I saw this first hand when the chopper on which I was a passenger picked up a wounded American captain. I was escorting Colonel Tho, the Quang Tin Province Chief, while he visited various units in the field. One of the units was an RF Company, which was accompanied by two MAT advisors, Captain George Kenny and an NCO. Actually, this was my old MAT, and Captain Kenny had

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replaced me when I became Assistant S-3 Advisor. We flew into a clearing so Colonel Tho could talk with the RF company commander, who was accompanied by Captain Kenny.

A few minutes after we took off, we heard a radio call for a medevac. As Kenny and his counterpart were returning to their perimeter after the conference with Colonel Tho, an RF soldier walking ahead of Kenny tripped a booby trap, seriously wounding both Kenny and the soldier. Our Tactical Operations Center suggested that we evacuate the wounded rather than wait on a medevac chopper, which would take some time. This would be up to me rather than the pilots, who were just there to fly the machine. I said "OK", and we found the closest outpost where we could drop off Colonel Tho and a couple of his staff who were with us. Mindful of the policy that Americans operating with the Vietnamese should always work at least in pairs, I made the decision that we would also bring out the MAT NCO who was with the captain, even though he was uninjured. We flew back to the same clearing and dragged Kenny's limp body onto the chopper along with the wounded RF, who was conscious and grinning that embarrassed grin characteristic of the Vietnamese when they thought they had screwed up. I saw only two wounds on the captain: one near his neck and another in his chest. Neither was bleeding very much, and the hole in his chest was not the sort of "sucking chest wound" that we had learned to bandage in Basic Training. But he was unconscious and appeared to be in bad shape. There was not much we could do to help except get him to a hospital as fast as possible. We flew the wounded to Hawk Hill, the nearest American base. I later learned that as soon as the medics assessed the severity of Kenny's wounds, they immediately transferred him to the big American hospital at Chu Lai. I wish now that I had ordered the chopper to take him directly to Chu Lai rather than Hawk Hill, even though Hawk Hill was closer.

Because of the quick evacuation, Captain Kenny survived. Major Whitmeyer and I visited him in the hospital a few days later. It was very sad. The major kept up a one-sided conversation, the sort of jocular, good-humored talk I had seen in a dozen war movies. I wasn't so good

at it. On the bed stand was a picture of Kenny's new daughter, born after he arrived in Vietnam. The only word he could say was "well". He would struggle to form a sentence, but only "well" came out. Although we had seen little blood coming from his wounds, he had been bleeding profusely internally, and this had interfered with the blood supply to his brain. However, the nurse said his prognosis was good and she thought he might make a full recovery. It was not lost upon me that if I were still on MAT I-24, I would have been the advisor accompanying that RF company, and it could very possibly have been me in the hospital bed.

Misery, Rain...and More Rain

If asked to describe my impressions of serving in Vietnam in one sentence, it would be this: I was homesick *all* of the time, I was physically miserable *most* of the time, and I was scared far more often than a man should be in his lifetime. Homesickness is pretty much universal among soldiers, and I am more prone to it than most. Heck, I've been known to get homesick on overnight business trips. To be literally half way around the world in a very foreign land and, on top of that, having to face all sorts of scary situations is a recipe for a type of homesickness that I've never known before or since. Sure, there were little bits of home (or at least things that were supposed to be like home) like entertainment troupes which would pass through. These were often Korean bands who performed popular American hits – "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" and "Leaving on a Jet Plane" got the loudest cheers.

There were also the Donut Dollies – American Red Cross volunteers, all young women, who provided a touch of home to the boys over there. They worked in hospitals and recreation centers and also flew out to visit troops in the field. They were always upbeat and attractive (hell, being American and female was enough to make them attractive) and were good for morale. But, try as they might, they still

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couldn't make Vietnam seem like home, at least not for me. I met some of them when they made a visit to one of those remote hilltop MAT outposts, where they played games like having us try to guess the names of perfumes by giving us a whiff or complete lyrics from popular songs. One of the latter was from the musical "Camelot" – "how to handle a woman is..."; the answer is "to love her". I'm afraid this just made me more homesick.

Holidays were another time of particular homesickness. I've already discussed Thanksgiving of 1970, so that leaves Christmas and New Year's. Except for the days following the receipt of my orders home, my only "happy" day in Vietnam was Christmas Eve of 1970. I was fortunate enough not to be on an operation, so I lolled around the Payne compound. The officer's club opened early that day, and by evening everyone was roaring drunk. The door separating the officer's and NCO clubs was unlocked (a rare event) and both groups intermingled, buying drinks and wishing each other well. I felt a glow of conviviality from my first drink until I collapsed into bed early on Christmas Day. When I finally arose late in the morning, I shuffled along feeling miserable, hung over and missing home as much as ever.

New Year's Eve was, for some reason, much more subdued than Christmas Eve. Perhaps we had exhausted ourselves a week earlier and just couldn't recreate the magic. There was still plenty of drinking, but that was more to dull the senses than to have fun. Mostly, I thought about the fact that I was a long way from home and only half way through my tour.

The "physically miserable" part came in many forms. First, there was the heat. It was almost inescapable, from the moment I stepped off the plane at Tan Son Nhut to the moment I boarded my flight home. There were a few air-conditioned offices, clubs and quarters, but I never spent much time in them. My room at the Payne compound had only a large fan for ventilation and the hilltop outposts were cursed with just a few tiny windows, if any. We would sweat just sitting still. It was even worse in the field, where the tropical sun would beat down like a weight,

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or the jungle stillness was so stifling hot you could hardly breathe. I didn't fully appreciate how bad the heat and humidity were until I read Ed Sherwood's book *Courage Under Fire – The 101st Airborne's Hidden Battle at Tam Ky*, about the previously-mentioned fight in 1969. Sherwood points out that the 101st, a toughed outfit that had already seen plenty of action, had been used to operating in the cooler and drier weather of the A Shau Valley in northwestern I Corps. When they made their "emergency" move closer to the coast at Tam Ky, the "body draining heat [well over 100 degrees] and humidity" caused numerous heat casualties.

On the other hand, when I wasn't hot, I was cold. A friend of mine served in the Air Force in Alaska and often talks about how cold it was. I once asked him if he was ever so cold that he cuddled up with another man to stay warm. Heck no, was his response. He didn't believe it when I said "Well, I have, and it was when I was in Vietnam." This was one of my most miserable operations. It had rained almost the whole time and one evening my counterpart wanted to set up for the night on top of a small hill. In the torrential downpour, we tried more than once to get up that hill, but just couldn't do it – it was too steep and overgrown. Finally, we gave up and the entire company just plopped down in the high grass at the bottom. I was accompanied by a "Shake and Bake" NCO I'll call "Sergeant Tex". He was a tall, lanky, laconic fellow, whom I had never heard complain. He carried a huge Bowie-style knife with a ten- or twelve-inch blade, which fascinated the RFs, who borrowed it to cut firewood for cooking every chance they got. But there would be no fires this night. We spread one of our ponchos on the ground, put the other one over us, and snuggled up back-to-back to keep warm. We were only modestly successful as the rain continued unabated all night. Puddles of water pooled on the bottom poncho, and every time we shifted position it would trickle down our backs or collect along our legs. As the sky slowly lightened Tex mumbled in his Lone Star State drawl, "I gotta be the most miserable dude in Vietnam."

I never did figure out which was more miserable, sleeping in my boots and waking up with cold, numb feet, or sleeping barefoot and

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pulling on cold, stiff, wet boots in the morning. It's really a moot point, since I almost always slept with my boots on in case there was action during the night.

The rain wasn't always a bad thing. During the rainy season, helicopters were often grounded, which was OK with me. Since I had the good fortune of living in Tam Ky, I could wait out the rainy season in relative comfort. But the MATs on their outposts were cooped up in their cramped, unventilated, vermin-infested bunkers for days on end. Causing the cancellation of operations is about the only good thing I can say about the rain. To the Vietnamese, of course, the rain was part of nature's cycle that made the ground fertile. But to me, it was just a pain in the ass. Of course, it wasn't always rainy enough to cancel operations, and I spent many a time in the field soaked to the skin.

The Army-issue poncho could do a reasonably good job of keeping the rain off. But by the time you took it off your pistol belt and got it over your head, you were probably already soaked. And the poncho's waterproof feature worked both ways – it both kept the rain out and the sweat in. Before long it was darn near as wet inside the poncho as it was outside. Plus, the neck hole acted like a chimney, channeling warm, moist, rubber-smelling, sweaty air up past your mouth and nose.

Even when it wasn't raining, the jungle could be a dank, muddy, forbidding place. Insect noises filled the air, which was thick with moisture and the odors of rotting vegetation. Before long every piece of bare skin, and some that wasn't bare, was stained by orangish, sticky mud and equipment became covered with the crud. Boots would slip on slick jungle trails, men would go crashing down, someone would pull them to their feet, and on we would go, one plodding step after another.

Our lightweight jungle fatigues were much better than the heavier cotton fatigues we had worn state-side, but they never quite dried out, especially under the various straps and packs we toted. After only a couple of days in the field we began to look and smell like Old West mountain men reeking with a combination of body odors and dirty clothing. We had an unpleasant, heavy, yeasty smell that struck me as something like moldy bread. The only thing we lacked that mountain

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men had was beards. The army required that soldiers be clean-shaven, ostensibly to make it easier to treat face wounds (I have my suspicions that the real reason was simply fashion). So on most mornings we would indulge in the special pleasure of a cold shave.

Leeches were particularly disgusting. When we waded across streams or through rice paddies, big, fat ones – sometimes three inches long – would crawl up pants legs and inside socks, to be found only when clothing was removed. Even in relatively dry areas, small, skinny ones would drop from the trees and sneak under collars and shirt sleeves. Pulling off a leach left an ugly, gnawed hole which bled for a long time. The Vietnamese would burn them off with cigarettes. I preferred to squirt them with GI insect repellant, powerful stuff that felt warm on the skin and made them drop off in short order. The insect repellant was also necessary to fend off the swarms of malaria-bearing mosquitos that were everywhere.

The jungle itself was its own source of misery. Vines of all sizes and varieties snagged any protruding piece of equipment, making even a simple walk down a trail difficult. And when the vines were thicker, the jungle was almost impenetrable. A new-in-country sergeant and I sweated and swore as we followed the Vietnamese through small tunnels cut through a heavy thicket – crawling uphill at the same time. “Is it always this bad?” gasped the sergeant when we emerged. “No,” I assured him. But it *was* this bad plenty of times.

Sleep – or Lack of It

As I had learned in Jungle School, trying to sleep in the field carried its own type of misery. Rain at night is even more miserable than during the day, when you can at least keep moving and try to ignore it. But at night there is not much to distract you from the misery of being wet, cold, smelly and tired – but not tired enough to sleep. One particularly rainy night I tried to seek out some shelter under a bush, sitting up with my head hanging down between my knees. This offered

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almost no protection from the rain and succeeded only in making various body parts go numb.

Even when it didn't rain, the ground was seldom comfortable, with no padding except maybe a poncho liner. And there were always various sorts of creepy-crawlies buzzing around or dancing across my body. It was even worse trying to sleep on the side of a hill, which happened often in rugged country. Inevitably, the slightest movement would result in a slide down the hill and onto the man just below. There would be swearing, a short uphill crawl, and it would start all over again.

On one operation with a U.S. armored cavalry unit I had the luxury of sleeping up off the ground. Except that meant trying to sleep on the top of an APC, which is not only hard metal, but also has all sorts of sharp, knobby projections to poke you in all the right places. So, tired as I was, I didn't get much sleep.

The American GIs in that unit were glad to have me along, because it meant there was one more person to stand watch at night (lieutenants not being exempt from that duty). Every evening they would circle the APCs wagon-train style just before dusk. At least one man on each APC stood watch at all times. Generally, we would set up in a clearing dotted with shrubs of various sizes. For my two-hour watch I stared into the night, convinced that the bushes were slowly creeping toward us. Of course, when morning came the bushes were still right where they were at nightfall. But you couldn't have convinced me of that when I was peering into the almost pitch-dark night.

Food

At the Payne compound the food was just the same as in any army mess hall – good old American cooking, and plenty of it. Our mess sergeant, the aforementioned Sergeant Cookie, must have weighed well over three hundred pounds, so he certainly took advantage of his own

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good cooking. One did not want to think too much about his lack of hygiene, however.

Every Friday when it wasn't raining it was steaks on the outdoor grill, followed up with ice cream – very often pumpkin-flavored, which I enjoyed then but have never had since. There was plenty of beer, both American and Vietnamese, of which the most popular were *Ba Mui Ba* (“Beer 33”) and *Biere Larue*. Because of the challenge of water purification in Vietnam, their beer had a slight taste of formaldehyde. The American beers, though popular brand names, were probably not at their best – they typically had been stored for days on end in the blazing sun at the many open-air storage depots around the country. But the beer – both Vietnamese and American – was cold, and that was all that mattered.

Although the pull-tab beer can was introduced in the U.S. in the early sixties, they had not yet made it to Vietnam. Even the top American brands still required the use of a “church key.” GIs often cut a combination can-opener in half, riveted the two halves together, and suspended this handy tool from their dog tag chain, so they were ready for beer in any format – cans or bottles.

In the field, of course, the food was much different than in a mess hall. I always carried a few days' worth of C-rations when I went on an operation. In those days a typical C-rat contained a canned main course which might be something like beef stew or chicken, or the one everybody dreaded, ham and lima beans (derisively referred to as “ham and motherfuckers”). Ham and mothers was a concoction of grease, limas with the consistency of chalk, and some sort of ham. Most of us found it a virtually inedible unless we were really, really hungry. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, loved it, as they did all C-rations. U.S. rations were high in fat and calories, pretty much the opposite of typical Vietnamese fare.

As one would expect, canned C's are heavy, plus there is the problem of heating them in the field. You couldn't just toss them unopened into a fire or hot ashes, since this would make them explode.

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It was possible to heat an opened can over a Sterno tablet or a chunk of C-4 explosive, but you usually ended up with food that was burned on the bottom and cold on top. The recommended method was to immerse the unopened can in boiling water, which was fine in camp, but who had a tub of boiling water in the field? I either dumped the contents into my canteen cup and heated it over a low fire, or more often just ate them cold out of the can. Delicious.

On our dog tag chains we all carried one of the niftiest gadgets ever devised by the U.S. Army: the P-38. In typical Army jargon, the official designation is “OPENER, CAN, HAND, FOLDING, TYPE I”, but no one ever called it anything but “P-38”. It’s a flat piece of metal one-and-a-half inches long with a little blade that folds out, enabling the user to “walk” the blade around the outside of a can to remove the lid. These days P-38s are becoming harder to find, since canned field rations have been replaced by the MRE – Meal, Ready to Eat, which is a lightweight, packaged ration that can be eaten cold or warmed.

In addition to the main course, a C-rat box also contained a can of fruit (canned peaches were worth their weight in gold; applesauce was at the bottom of the list), crackers and maybe some jam, instant coffee, plus other sundry items. My breakfast was usually some fruit and crackers, while I slowly tried to get the kinks out of my body after sleeping on the ground. C-rations also contained a few cigarettes. Many GIs smoked back then, and those who hadn’t had the habit before, often started in Vietnam. Luckily, I managed to abstain.

The Ruff Puffs carried bags of a fluffy, dried, precooked rice, which they could eat either as a snack or warm up as part of a main meal, using the small pots that they all carried slung from their belts. They would often go marching down a trail, munching away on their rice. Sometimes they would live off the land, finding various edible plant life. One of their favorites was banana tree. The very top of a young banana tree yielded a soft, whitish pulp that, when cooked, tasted – believe or not – like chicken. Whenever they found banana trees, they took advantage of it. I don’t imagine it was very good for the tree, but in wartime, environmental concerns are not high on the list of priorities.

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One evening when we camped along a river, the troops went fishing – with hand grenades. They tossed a few grenades into a deep part of the river and – boom! – up floated enough fish to make a stew. The trouble was, it tasted terrible. When the chopped-up fish was ready my counterpart held out the pot to me, and I spooned some out. One bite was enough. It had a musty sort of taste, and the look on my face gave me away. “Not very good, is it?” said my counterpart. I don’t believe even the always-hungry Vietnamese ate it.

In addition to living off the land the Ruff Puffs also lived off the villagers. Often when we passed through villages the troops would collect a few vegetables or a chicken or two. Sometimes the villagers knew some of the troops, or were even relatives, and there was great conviviality. Other times we were met by glares from locals who were unhappy to see heavily armed men tramping through their villages and farm fields. Many of these villagers probably viewed the Ruff Puffs and the VC in the same light – men with guns who made their lives more difficult.

I didn’t eat much of the Vietnamese food, since it wasn’t that appealing. For instance, when we entered one village my counterpart confiscated a chicken (or maybe he paid for it, it was hard to tell) and one of the troops plucked it, hacked it into rough chunks and tossed them into a soup pot. After a while the captain reached his chopsticks into the pot and pulled out the chicken head with all the guts still attached. Smiling, he offered it to me like it was a great delicacy. Maybe it was, but I passed as politely as I could.

In addition to the local food’s lack of appeal, I was suspicious of what passed for sanitation in the preparation of most Vietnamese food. The last thing I wanted was to be stricken with the GI trots when I was on an operation. Just before I was to go on yet another helicopter assault, Major Whitmeyer suggested that we get something to eat at a nearby Vietnamese shop, a sort of deli. As usual before an operation I wasn’t especially hungry, plus I didn’t want to get a dose of germs just before I headed out. But I couldn’t very well say no to the major. Also, I was mindful of the Army adage to “never pass up the opportunity to

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sleep, go the bathroom, or eat – you never know when you’ll get another.” We jeeped downtown and got our sandwiches – some sort of meat stuffed in a bun with a little lettuce. I found it interesting that the Vietnamese, always great recyclers, had wrapped the sandwiches in old computer print outs from our Tactical Operations Center. Hopefully, they didn’t reveal any secret information. Most importantly, the food must have been clean and I suffered no ill effects.

The same can’t be said of former OCS roommate *Peter Nowlan*, whose MAT, as mentioned earlier, was dependent on local markets for their food supply. Unfortunately, in November of 1970 Peter was stricken with severe hepatitis from contaminated food and had to medevacked all the way back to the States. That ended his tour in Vietnam.

Another downside of Vietnamese food was that it often sat uncomfortably on American stomachs. Out of boredom or to get a different view of the war, some Team 16 members liked to ride along with our Air Force Forward Air Controllers as they prowled the skies over Quang Tin Province. On one occasion, an American civilian, probably a refugee advisor or some such, convinced a FAC to take him along. Almost immediately after takeoff, the passenger vomited all over the inside of the cockpit, then proceeded to moan and upchuck for the rest of the flight, which still had hours to go, since a puking passenger was not grounds for aborting the mission. The hapless advisor admitted that he had shared breakfast with the Vietnamese – cat, mouse and eel.

Brian Flora, who served on a MAT in the Mekong Delta, was invited for meals in Vietnamese homes three or four times a week; fortunately, he suffered few ill effects. In fact, says Brian, “I enjoyed my various encounters with Vietnamese village cuisine... and was amazed by the variety of protein: basically, anything that walked, crawled, hopped, slithered or swam. I ate frogs, water buffalo, crabs, fish, eels, snakes, snails, dogs, crawdads, rats (fruit rats, not sewer rats), grasshoppers and other things I couldn’t identify. And it didn’t all taste like chicken. When you put some good *nuoc mam* on whatever found its way into your

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bowl, most of it went down pretty well.” I’m afraid Brian had more guts than I did.

Having enough to drink when in the field is another issue. The water problem has vexed armies throughout history, just as Rudyard Kipling wrote in *Gunga Din*, “But when it comes to slaughter, you will do your work on water, and you’ll lick the bloomin’ boots of ‘im that’s got it.” My two canteens of water were never enough to get me through but carrying more would have just added a lot of weight. The answer, for me and all the GIs in Vietnam, was iodine tablets. A couple of tablets in a canteen of water would make it safe to drink. The tablets meant we could fill up from any brown stream or murky rice paddy, no matter how well the water might fit Kipling’s description: “It was crawlin’ and it stunk.” The iodine took care of the “crawlin’” part, but it couldn’t get rid of the muddy grit, and now a heavy iodine flavor was added to the stink.

On my operation with an American armored cavalry unit, I didn’t have to settle for iodine-laced water. They had cases of Fresca stashed in their APCs, so for the entire operation I had as much as I wanted – warm, of course. I haven’t had a can of Fresca since.

One thing I learned from this joint operation is that many American units made it a practice to get hot chow to the men in the field every day for dinner. The food would be prepared in the company mess hall, put into large insulated cans, and flown out by helicopter. While a hot meal can do wonders for a soldier’s morale, flying in the food certainly let the enemy know the unit’s position every night.

Mail Call

Soon after I reported to Tam Ky, I celebrated my first wedding anniversary. Then in November came my twenty-fourth birthday. Dace sent me a card for our anniversary (I don’t remember whether I was able to find an anniversary card for her at the Chu Lai PX – I doubt it). On my birthday, she sent a cake, which arrived in surprisingly good

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shape. I shared it with some MAT comrades and others I had gotten to know. In return, I sent her a picture of me blowing out the candles. While my anniversary and birthday were reminders of how far I was from home, and how different Vietnam was from the life I had known and desperately wanted to get back to, at least I was grateful for good memories and a bright future to look forward to.

One of the greatest morale boosters in the Army is mail call. Any contact with the States is helpful, but a letter from a loved one ranks right at the top. I was surprised, and somewhat dismayed, that many soldiers never got any mail, not just in Vietnam but even in Basic and OCS. Maybe not having anyone that cared about them was one of the things that drove them to join the Army. I, on the other hand, was one of the lucky ones who got plenty of mail. Most importantly, Dace wrote to me every day. Every day, no matter how little there was to say. Just hearing from her was what was important. She even sent pictures of her cat Jinx sitting in her lap as she tried to write. Of course, even though she sent a letter every day, I didn't necessarily get one every day. Even when I was in training in the States, the mail didn't always get through exactly on schedule. And in Vietnam, I usually got letters in batches of several at a time. Plus, when I was out on operations, the mail would pile up until I got back.

I would read each letter over and over, digesting every part of it and hanging on every word. It was just wonderful to have something that would bring us closer together. On top of that, her letters were slightly perfumed, even after traveling half way around the world.

In return, I would write as often as I could. If there was time, I would try to jot off a note before I went to the field to let her know that I wouldn't be able to write for a few days. I tried to avoid discussing military matters, since there was no sense telling her about fighting or people getting hurt. Instead, I would write about other things I might be doing or just about how much I missed her. I never fully appreciated that "mail call" was just as important to her as it was to me, as she writes here:

Letters were my only real link to Brian. They would arrive in

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spurts – nothing for a few days and then a couple of letters. Somewhere along the way, we began to number our correspondence to each other so that we could at least read them in sequence. When the letters did arrive, they were read and reread and then reread again. And then when I wrote back I would reread them just to make sure I responded to everything he said.

Brian became very efficient in his letter writing. He would write in the first part of his letter for the others in the family to read then he would write me a special personal page at the end. How sweet! I'm sure my letters to him were dull and redundant. How many ways can you write someone that you love him and you miss him and hope that he would stay safe?

I can answer that question: It didn't matter how she said it or how many times she repeated it, reading it meant the world to me.

Dace also sent me a box of homemade cookies about once a week. She and her mom became experts at packing them so they arrived in good shape. There was only a single box that was so badly smashed that it was inedible, but the rest came through OK. She also sent a few boxes of Girl Scout Cookies, which I shared with my compatriots in the TOC. When he saw the boxes Major Whitmeyer declared "Ah, Golf Sierra Charlies" (the military alphabet for GSCs) and dug in. While they went over well, they weren't nearly as good as Dace's homemade ones.

Like many others, I bought a camera and took quite a few pictures, and I would often send them home. These would usually be shots of me posing in front of an interesting building or scene. I still have that old 35mm camera, hopelessly obsolete now, but a keepsake from those days. GIs got good deals on cameras, stereo equipment and thousands of other items through the PX system. I ordered a complete stereo system, a set of good china, and some oriental vases through a catalog and had them shipped directly home. The stereo is long gone, but the fifty-year-old china is still our "good dishes". In those pre-credit-card days, we had to use checks for catalog orders, so I set up a checking

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account, just as though I were still back in the States. I even got a notice that I had overdrawn my account, for which I paid a fee. As though I didn't have enough on my mind! There wasn't a whole lot to spend money on in Vietnam, so I felt pretty flush with my first lieutenant's pay plus Hostile Fire Pay, what everyone calls "combat pay", which, I believe was \$65.00 per month – a little over two bucks a day for risking one's neck.

Today, U.S. soldiers around the world can keep in touch with folks back home through email, texting, Skype and, by the time you read this, who knows what else. In the 1970s the only thing we had other than mail was something called MARS, which stands for Military Auxiliary Radio System. This is a civilian program sponsored by the Defense Department through which amateur radio operators assist the military with communications. One of the services that MARS provided in Vietnam was enabling servicemen to speak to loved ones in the States via radio. These amateur radio operators volunteered their time to relay the signal from Vietnam through a series of operators all the way back to the U.S. Sergeant Signal's unit in the Payne compound was hooked up to the MARS system. I spoke to Dace only a couple times via MARS, for there were some shortcomings to the system. One was that the service was available only during the night, so someone would have to roust me out when it was my turn to talk. Another was having to say "over" when either party was done talking, so the radio operators along the way would know to "flip the switch" to reverse the conversation. On top of that, conversations could not be private, what with all these radio operators listening. So my talks with Dace were clumsy, to say the least. Nevertheless, a lot of credit goes to these volunteer radio operators, many of whom stayed up all night to provide this morale-building opportunity for soldiers to actually hear the voice of someone back home.

Risks and Dangers

There were all kinds of ways that members of Team 16 could be injured. Here's a sampling:

Enemy Small Arms Fire (Rifles and Machine Guns)

Although I and other MAT members received enemy fire fairly regularly, I don't recall that anyone on Team 16 was actually wounded by bullets. The only Ruff Puff who was hit by a bullet on one of my operations was a fellow who had his thumb shot off.

However, the experience of the MATs on Team 16 is not necessarily representative. Classmate *Doug Cannon* served on a MAT in the province just north of Quang Tin. They were very active and set up ambushes almost every night. Doug says, "Sometimes the VC got caught in them and sometimes we did. The area was heavily mined, so we had more casualties from that than actual exchanges of gunfire." Doug managed to avoid the mines, but, in April 1971, just a month or so before his tour would likely have ended, he and an American NCO were accompanying an RF company in pursuit of an NVA platoon. A sniper shot Doug in the chest. Fortunately, his teammate got him evacuated in time to save his life.

The scariest small arms fire I encountered was on an operation in the sand dunes along the coast. It also taught me one of the great life lessons I learned in Vietnam. The area had a reputation for harboring VC, so we were sent in to check it out. This time we rode in on ARVN armored personnel carriers rather than choppers. We dismounted from the APCs just before dark and moved through the dunes and scrubby bushes taller than our heads. After we hiked through the dark for quite a while, my counterpart, who was a pretty savvy fellow, told us to stop and dig in. "Dig in?" I wondered. It had never occurred to me that I would be digging in in Vietnam and I never carried an entrenching tool, nor, to my knowledge, did any other Team 16 MAT members. Not only that, how were we supposed to dig foxholes in the sand, which flowed back as fast as you could push it aside? I scraped a shallow hole

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a couple of inches deep and just long enough for me to lay down in – not much in the way of protection. But my counterpart was proved right. From somewhere in the distance a machine gun opened up. How the gunner could see in the dark, I don't know, but his bullets were coming pretty darn close. The only thing he got wrong was the range. I laid there watching tracers go over and hearing the zip-zip-zip, not sure just how far above my head they were.

After this went on for some time, the American sergeant with me crawled over and asked, "L.T., are you going to call in some artillery?" This put me on the spot. Being an officer, I was expected to be proactive, to lead, to know what to do and to do it. However, after trudging through the sand in the dark for several hours with virtually no recognizable landmarks, I had no real idea of just where we were or where that machine gun was. If I called in artillery, it was incredibly unlikely that I would have placed it anywhere near the VC position. It could have just as likely landed right on top of us or on some poor, innocent Vietnamese civilian asleep in his hootch. Either of these were not desirable outcomes. At the least, it probably would have hit somewhere far off in the bush, and I would have been a laughing stock among both the Vietnamese and my comrades for blowing up a few thousand dangerous grains of sand.

Unfortunately, I did not have the presence of mind to tell the sergeant that I wasn't going to call for artillery because I was lost. Instead, I took a wild guess at the coordinates of the machine gun nest and dutifully got on the radio to our Tactical Operations Center. "This is [whatever my call sign was]" I said. "Fire mission, over." Their response crackled back over the radio, "Wait one." They must have been busy at the moment, which was OK with me.

Then I laid there getting more and more frustrated. "I'm sick of this shit," I thought. I was sick of being in Vietnam, of being hot or cold or wet, of being scared, of being tired and worn out, of being put on the spot to make life and death decisions – sick of everything. The thought crossed my mind that a "million-dollar wound" – one that is not life-threatening but severe enough to send a soldier home – could get me

out of this. All I had to do was reach my hand up just far enough for one of those bullets to hit me and – bingo! – the next thing I knew I would be medevacked to a hospital and before long I'd be back in the USA. It seemed a perfect solution.

Fortunately, this unworthy thought left me as quickly as it had come. The TOC never did call back about my fire mission; evidently, they just forgot. After a while, the shooting stopped, we moved on, and we spent several more days among those miserable sand dunes, then went back to Tam Ky. Once again, a crisis had passed.

The great life lesson I learned from this? People will do some awfully stupid things to get out of a situation they think is intolerable – and their “solution” to the problem often creates a worse problem. If I *had* reached up and taken a bullet, it could very well have crippled me for life or left me to bleed to death in the sand. But at the time, it almost seemed like a reasonable thing to do. I saw this sort of thinking over and over throughout my career in the civilian world.

Enemy Rockets and Mortars

These were used mostly to harass us and keep the civilian population uneasy. A few days before I arrived in Tam Ky a mortar round had hit the Payne compound, wounding a Vietnamese civilian employee. It came right through the corrugated metal roof of the officers' quarters and exploded on the cement floor. Either a good shot or a lucky one.

As far as I know, we had only one team member wounded by mortar fire. A sergeant I had met at the advisor training school (he was on his third tour, so everyone referred to him as “Old Five Tours” – but not to his face) was assigned to another MAT in Quang Tin. Just a few days after he arrived on his outpost, the VC decided to harass them with some mortar rounds. He was just slightly wounded and his medic patched him up. The VC were so close that the noise of the rounds sliding down the tube could be readily heard, but it was never determined exactly where they were, so the fire was not returned. A common occurrence.

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The large 122mm rockets fired by the VC were notoriously inaccurate – they were just aimed in the general direction of a city or large military compound and were primarily used to keep people on edge and show that the VC were able to fire them whenever they wished. I recall only one rocket attack on Tam Ky. Early one morning a few rockets hit at widely scattered points on the outskirts of town; they did manage to kill one Vietnamese woman, though. I'll say one thing, they sure woke us up. I was taking a nap while on night duty in the TOC and the "whoosh" of the rockets coming in brought me right out of my slumber. I think my feet hit the floor before the rockets hit the ground with a "BANG!!"

Rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) were another matter, and everyone respected them. Armored units knew they could slice right through their aluminum-skinned armored personnel carriers, so only the driver sat inside. They were also good bunker busters and anti-personnel rounds. I don't believe any of the Quang Tin Province MATs suffered RPG fire in the field during my tour, but MATs in other provinces did, and American and regular ARVN units took many casualties from them. All in all, they were probably more effective than American LAW rockets.

Friendly Fire

Actually, there is no such thing as "friendly fire" – all fire is dangerous and definitely unfriendly. "Friendly fire" means that it came *from* friendlies – soldiers who are on your side. It has been a problem throughout warfare. Stonewall Jackson is one of the most famous examples of someone who was mistakenly shot by his own troops, and there have been thousands of other instances; Vietnam was no exception. Although I know of no one on our team who was hurt by friendly fire, we were all subjected to it – in my case a number of times. Sometimes it was a soldier with an itchy trigger finger who fired in the general direction of noises. In a couple of other instances, it was American artillery rounds that came too close.

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On one operation my NCO and I accompanied an RF battalion on a large sweep of a suspected area. One evening we set up our perimeter in a forest of tall trees. The Vietnamese, as was often their habit, strung hammocks between the trees, while I, as usual, slept on the ground fifteen or twenty yards away from my counterpart and his headquarters staff. Sometime in the dark of night my counterpart must have gotten a report of suspicious activity, and I could hear him talking on the radio. I couldn't hear what he was saying and wouldn't have understood it anyway, but within a few minutes, I heard cannons shooting. Based on the direction of the sound, I was sure they were the American guns at the District Headquarters at Hau Duc, just a few kilometers away. They were big guns – 155mm howitzers. In a few seconds we could hear the rounds coming and they sounded close – real close. Bam! Bam! Bam! We could see the flashes and the ground shook. Stuff was flying through the trees, either shrapnel or tree branches or both. Then came plop, plop, plop as the Vietnamese troops fell out of their hammocks and sought cover on the ground.

“Goddammit!” I muttered to no one in particular, and crawled over to my counterpart. “Did you call in artillery?” I asked through an interpreter. “No, no,” he protested in an attempt to save face. “OK,” said I. “But, just in case you *maybe* did call it in, you might want to call it off.” Then I crawled back over to my little spot as more rounds landed and more crap flew through the air. I shortly heard him on the radio and soon the firing stopped. We had suffered no casualties. Whew. That was too close for me.

On another occasion, I was working with a sergeant new in country. He had been stationed in Europe for several years and this was his first tour in Vietnam (as an aside, he seemed old to me – he must have been at least thirty). Our RF company's job was to sit on a little hilltop outpost and watch for VC infiltrators who had been coming through the area lately. This was near one of the branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran through Quang Tin Province, and it was still quite active. Since I was getting fairly experienced at being in the field, I was now the

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old hand who was breaking in the new guy. Every evening, as was standard procedure, we would set up our “defensive targets”. This entailed giving an artillery unit the coordinates of several likely places from which the enemy might attack during the night – gullies, gaps in the heavy jungle, footpaths and such. The gunners would fire one round on each target so we could verify that it landed in the right place. Each target was then given a number. If there was enemy activity during the night, all we had to do was radio the artillery boys and tell them to fire on target number such-and-such, or say something like “drop 100 [yards] from number four,” saving considerable time if things got hot.

For several evenings I set up the defensive targets myself while the sergeant looked on. Then one evening I asked him if he wanted to handle it to get the experience. He readily agreed and called in the coordinates of the first target, asking for one round to be fired. The guns were stationed at an outpost named FSB Young, only about a thousand yards from our hill. As soon as the gun went off, I could tell there was something wrong. “Jesus, that sounds low,” I said to the sergeant, and low it was. Whoosh, we could hear the round coming. Then it slammed into the side of our hill – the side toward Young – maybe a hundred yards from where we stood, but still very close to the RFs on the far end of the hill. “Give them a check fire”, I told the sergeant, meaning the artillery should stop firing. “Check fire, check fire,” yelled the sergeant into the radio. “You hit my hill!” No more rounds were forthcoming, and we decided to forgo setting up defensive targets for the evening. I asked my counterpart about casualties and found that luckily (I didn’t yet realize just *how* luckily) no one had been hurt. A few minutes later a couple of RFs walked past chattering and literally shaking. My interpreter told me they had been near where the round had hit.

The next morning, I took a walk outside the barbed wire that surrounded the crest of our hill and found where the round impacted. The two trembling RFs had been patrolling outside the wire in almost exactly this spot. By the grace of God, they were saved by a crumbling

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stone wall a couple of feet high that had been built sometime in the distant past. They had been standing just uphill from the wall and the round had hit at the wall's base, directing the blast downhill. Two feet higher and they would have been goners. A day or so later I hiked back to FSB Young to point out to the artillery guys how close they had come to killing friendlies. They looked at their maps and only then realized that our hill was between their guns and the target, and they had used low trajectory fire when they should have shot over the hill. As Tennyson put it in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, "Someone had blundered." The gunners just shrugged it off as one of those things that happen. We remained leery about calling in artillery for the rest of our time on that hill, lest someone blunder again.

Many things must work correctly when calling in an artillery fire mission. The soldier calling for the mission must have an accurate map and be able to read it, he has to know where both he and the target are, and he must communicate firing instructions correctly to the artillery fire direction center (FDC). The FDC personnel must then interpret the instructions correctly, the guns must be given the proper powder charge and must be laid with the right elevation and deflection. For all this to work, everything has to be done right, and there is much opportunity for error.

In *Sappers in the Wire*, which I mentioned earlier, there is an account of another friendly fire incident that took place, interestingly, in Quang Tin Province while I was there. It may very well have involved the same artillery unit that fired the round that hit my hill. On February 12, 1971 (several months after my incident), near FSB Mary Ann an American soldier was killed and several wounded when a round landed too close to their patrol. The fire mission had apparently been called in correctly, but the crew in the FDC had failed to notice that if a low trajectory round passed over the target it would hit where the Americans were; and that's exactly what happened. The artillery battery commander later said "If we'd fired high angle [it wouldn't have happened.] I was responsible because I had not brought that lieutenant [running the FDC] to that level of sophistication. I didn't have a

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procedure to look at the map and determine what kind of terrain we were shooting on. I did after that, but big f---n' deal – we'd already lost a guy." I wonder – if I had made a bigger stink after my hill was hit, maybe the procedures would have been changed earlier and the second incident could have been avoided. We'll never know.

Booby Traps

They're called Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) these days, but they amount to the same thing: an explosion set off by pressure, a trip wire, electronic signal or some other means. In Vietnam they could be anything from hand grenades to dud American bombs or artillery rounds salvaged by the VC. There were also non-explosive booby traps like *punji* stakes, sharpened bamboo coated with human excrement to increase the severity of infection. Booby traps were one of our greatest fears, especially since they could get you even when there was no enemy around. We had one Team 16 member killed by a booby trap. An American sergeant, a medic on a MAT, leaned down to examine a piece of suspicious equipment in an abandoned VC camp; when he picked it up, a device buried beneath it exploded, killing him instantly.

Although he was the only death, there were several injuries and close calls. In addition to Captain Kenny, whom I mentioned earlier, another MAT officer was wounded by a booby trap. He was a lieutenant who had been sent out alone with a group of Ruff Puffs, violating the standing rule that American advisors should never go "solo" – they should operate at least in pairs. The importance of this was brought home to me some time earlier on a joint operation with an American unit, when I commented on how much worse they had it than I did. These fellows were often in the bush for weeks at a time with no break, lugging eighty to one hundred pounds of equipment. One of the GIs said "Oh, no, L.T.; we're the ones who feel sorry for *you*. At least if we get hurt, we know we're with other Americans who will help us. You advisors are stuck with just these fucking Vietnamese." This gave me a little different outlook on things. And

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his point was driven home further when the above-mentioned MAT lieutenant stepped on a mine while on that solo patrol with his RFs. Fortunately, the mine was not very powerful and his leg was only broken, not blown off. He had to call in his own medevac, the Vietnamese being either unable or unwilling to do so.

On this same joint operation, we were snaking along a narrow rice paddy dike with my RFs interspersed with Americans. I began to notice the unmistakable odor of rotting flesh, faint at first, then stronger and stronger to the point that it turned my stomach. The GI behind me explained, "That's a VC we killed a couple of days ago. Guess nobody has claimed the body." Before long, we came across the corpse half submerged beside the paddy dike. The young American rifleman ahead of me – maybe nineteen or twenty at most – turned around and, with typical GI humor, stuck out his tongue and made a face that said "Yecccch!" He chuckled and, still smiling, faced forward and continued trudging along. Such are the experiences to which we condemn young men like him – still boys, really – when we send them off to war.

Even relatively "safe" duties were made dangerous by booby traps. The rainy season flooding washed out a number of bridges, making it difficult for the farmers in the central part of the province to bring their goods into Tam Ky. For a couple of weeks Sergeant Malave I went out daily with a company of RFs that were providing security for a unit of American Combat Engineers who were doing bridge repair. It was cushy duty – we rode out in a jeep equipped with a cooler full of iced soft drinks and pretty much sat around all day. One day the work ran late, it got dark, and Doc Malave and I found ourselves a few miles outside Tam Ky driving slowly along in our jeep with just the tiny "black out" lights for illumination – down the same dirt road that we had taken on the way out in the morning. Suddenly, WHAM! For a moment we didn't know what had happened. Then we realized that we had fallen into and driven up out of a huge hole that had been blown in the road when someone ran over a mine earlier in the day. Our whole column of engineer equipment and RFs had driven over the spot that morning, so a VC had managed to plant the mine during broad daylight

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sometime later. “Jees,” said Doc Malave, “I didn’t know whether we were going up or down. I thought we hit a mine.”

A less humorous occurrence took place some days later when a different MAT and a different RF company went on the same sort of engineer security detail along the same road. The RFs had a habit of getting some sleep during this boring duty, and a couple of them decided to string up their hammocks inside an old abandoned concrete farm house along the side of the road, probably left over from the days of French rule. One of the troopers was killed by a booby trap. The VC had probably watched RFs do this before, and this time they had a surprise waiting.

Major Whitmeyer and another major who served as our S-3 (Operations) Advisor, decided to drive out several miles from Tam Ky to visit a MAT outpost. Standard procedure was to wait until the engineers had swept all the roads for mines, a laborious and time-consuming job which they did every morning. This morning there must have been a communications breakdown, and only after the majors arrived at the outpost did they learn that the engineers had not yet swept the road and weren’t planning to until late that day. The two majors had to drive the several miles back, holding their collective breathe the whole way hoping that they wouldn’t get blown up.

I once saw a U.S. APC hit a mine. The VC had overrun a Vietnamese outpost west of Tam Ky and I was sent out to ride along with an American Armored Cavalry unit that was operating in the area. As I helicoptered onto the outpost’s chopper pad, I saw something vaguely familiar lying on the ground, but I couldn’t quite place it. It took me a few moments to recognize it as a human thigh. It must have belonged to one of the dozen or more VC bodies which were stacked in a pile at the side of the helipad, stiff with rigor mortis. The revolting smell of burned flesh hung over the hilltop.

I joined the American unit, which was waiting at the bottom of the hill, and for the next several days we roamed around the countryside looking for the bad guys. While a dozen or more GIs could ride inside

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an APC's passenger compartment, everyone except the driver soon learned not to sit inside for fear of mines or RPGs. They all either sat on top or stood up in the large open hatch in the roof, so they would be blown off by an explosion rather than bounced around inside. I rode in the company commander's APC, which was bristling with radio antennae (including mine) and would have been very easy to pick out by any VC who was so inclined. The CO was a conscientious captain who was concerned about the welfare of his men. He was very insistent that the drivers follow the standard procedure of "tracking", which meant that every vehicle followed exactly in the tracks of the vehicle ahead, minimizing the chances of setting off mines (the first APC in the column, of course, was still at risk).

For some reason, in this instance tracking didn't work. Perhaps the drivers weren't being careful enough, or the mine wasn't sensitive enough to be set off by the first vehicle, or maybe the VC had used some sort of delayed fuse. At any rate, BOOM – the third APC in line was blown up in the air, scattering the riders in all directions. Whatever sort of mine it was, it was powerful enough to bounce the twelve-ton vehicle off the ground. Luckily, only the driver was wounded, and he "only" suffered a broken leg. (Interestingly, OCS platoon-mate *Rod Seefeld* had a similar experience serving on a MAT near the DMZ, except he was among those tossed through the air when the APC he was riding on hit a mine. Again, the only one injured was the driver. Says Rod, "I was not happy to be on the command track with the American Captain leading the convoy when we hit the mine.") Our driver was medevacked, the APC was deemed unrepairable because of a cracked hull, and it was stripped of equipment and left by the side of the road, another piece of military detritus littering the countryside. We went on with our patrol, but we never did find any VC. Once again, the tremendous firepower that Americans could bring to bear – each of the APCs mounted a .50 caliber machinegun and a couple of M60s – accounted for little against our elusive enemy.

I did, however, gain an understanding of the indiscriminate nature of booby traps on this operation. As usual, the armored cav unit circled

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their APCs every night with the fronts facing out in what the military calls a “laager”, a term borrowed from the South African Boers, to be ready to fend off an attack or move out quickly. The troopers would set out claymore mines in a ring outside the circle of APCs. Claymores are a particularly nasty type of anti-personnel mine, with 700 small steel balls backed by plastic explosive. The mine can be fired by trip wire or a user-controlled firing mechanism. Upon detonation, the steel balls are projected in an arc at almost four thousand feet per second (faster than an M16 bullet). It can be deadly at over fifty yards. The mines would be set out each night and collected in the morning before the unit moved out. Just after dawn one morning there came an explosion from the woods not far outside our laager. Everyone grabbed their weapons, wondering if it might be VC. A couple of troopers were dispatched to check it out, and soon they came back with the answer. No VC – but a young Vietnamese woman and her little daughter from a nearby hamlet, both killed by the explosion. This was not the sort of thing that any of us wanted to dwell on, so we wrote it off to the fortunes of war and went about our business. Unfortunate incidents of this sort did little to contribute to, in a favorite phrase of Lyndon Johnson, “winning the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people.

Although I worried about booby traps wherever we went, one particular instance stands out. We made a helicopter assault on a grassy hilltop, and as soon as we disembarked, the Ruff Puffs started yelling that we had landed in a mine field. We all moved *very* slowly and cautiously, since booby traps can be extremely hard to detect, no matter how hard you try. Apparently, the cries of “mines” were mistaken, since there were no explosions. But we were sweating bullets by the time we got down off that hill.

A sergeant on another MAT had a similar, but infinitely worse, experience. He and his Ruff Puffs actually *did* find themselves in a mine field. The soldier ahead of him tripped a booby trap and, just a few moments later, the one behind him tripped another one. Fortunately, they had been “maintaining their interval” by walking several yards apart

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and the American was unscathed, although badly shaken up.

Two sergeants on an operation with me missed a booby trap by pure luck. For several days we were stuck on a miserable, tiny outpost with a single bunker that was also home to plenty of creepy-crawly things. Big, hairy spiders would scamper across us during the night. One of the sergeants claimed he scored a direct hit on one with a boot heel, but inflicted no damage (probably an exaggeration – he was likely a little off center; but this didn't do anything to assuage our discomfort). The two sergeants had been on that same outpost a few days earlier and had walked down to a village at the base of the hill to get some fresh cabbage. They couldn't stop talking about how wonderful that cabbage had been. After a day or so of this, they decided they just had to go back down and get more. Not being that hungry for cabbage, I told them I would stay on top of the hill with one of our PRC-25 radios while they took the other radio with them. Off they went.

A couple of hours later they arrived back up at the top of the hill with a tale to tell. They had gone to the village, gotten a few of heads of cabbage and come back up the same trail they took down. Part way up the trail the antenna sticking up from their PRC-25 caught a trip wire stretched across the trail above their heads. The trip wire wasn't there when they went down. While they were in the village, a VC had started to set up a booby trap to get them on the way back. It was their good fortune that the bad guy must have heard them coming and took off before he was able to connect a grenade to the trip wire. If they had left the village a few minutes later, the explosion would have gotten at least one of them, and probably both. Needless to say, we did not sleep very well for the rest of our time on that hill knowing that there were VC prowling around. There was no more talk of cabbage.

A harrowing tale of booby traps comes from old friend *Mike Eberhardt*, who led a MAT in the Delta, about seventy-five miles south of Saigon. On October 7, 1970, his MAT was ordered to accompany an RF company into a "heavily VC-controlled area". Accompanying Mike

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was lieutenant Jon Jacobsen, who had joined the team only a few days earlier. Mike had advised him to become acclimated and gain some experience before going on this sort of mission, but the lieutenant insisted on going. Also along was Sergeant James McLauren, whom everyone called "Mac", and Fang, their Vietnamese interpreter. Mac had already extended his time in Vietnam twice and had just 31 days left in his third tour. Mike tried to convince him to stay behind, but Mac said he would go to give another NCO a break, and that it would be his last mission. They rode gunboats to the area of operations, then disembarked and started to move through thick vegetation, as related by Mike:

We had not gone far when one of the RF's stepped off the trail to "relieve" himself. He stepped on a booby trap and injured his foot. At that point I told Fang, Mac and Jacobsen to spread out on the trail since booby traps were everywhere and we were seeing "kill zone" signs on trees used to ward off intruders. This made it difficult to see one another and I questioned my judgment in telling them to do this. After about what I figured was one hundred or so feet, I heard an explosion. When I woke up, I was laying in the brush about twenty feet from the trail with a great deal of pain. After a bit I was able to crawl back to the trail where I heard Mac calling me and telling me his "leg is gone." He also told me Jon was KIA [Killed In Action]. Fang died shortly as I watched him take his last breath. We were eventually able to get medevacked. Mac died in the hospital the next day.

[The major I worked for] visited me in the hospital in Ben Hoa and told me an investigation revealed that the explosion was a command detonated artillery round. From what I could tell laying on the ground, Mac and Jacobsen did not put any distance between themselves and when they passed the spot of the booby trap the VC blew it on them. I always carried the radio following a resolute belief that I may not see anyone to

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shoot but I could sure find someone to talk to if needed. Oddly enough, the radio I was carrying saved my life by catching all the shrapnel that would have hit my back.

Mike also wonders if carrying the radio saved his life in another way. The VC may very well have assumed he was a radio operator rather than an officer or NCO and let Mike pass through, targeting instead the “bigger fish” who were following.

Six weeks after Mike was evacuated, the lieutenant who replaced him, an NCO, an interpreter and the District Advisor were all killed by a claymore mine ambush while they drove on the road to the Province Headquarters, thirteen miles away. Had he not been wounded, Mike would likely have been in the jeep with them.

Drowning

During the rainy season, several civilians drowned in Tam Ky when their motorbikes went off the road and into water that was over their heads. In some places it was almost impossible to tell where the road was, and there could be six or more feet of water just off the side of the raised road bed.

Accidents

With team members regularly working around all sorts of dangerous equipment – from barbed wire to explosives to vehicles – plus hiking slippery trails and muddling about in the dark, there was great potential for accidents. Two members of Team 16 died in strange accidents. One was erecting a tall radio antenna when it fell and hit him on the head, inflicting a fatal injury. Another NCO accidentally shot himself in the heart while handling a captured enemy pistol in his quarters (actually, it was never quite determined whether this was an accident or a suicide).

Regardless of whether or not the sergeant's death was unintentional, there *was* great potential for the accidental discharge of weapons. One

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of the basic gun safety maxims is never to point a gun at something you are not willing to shoot, particularly another person. That's a hard rule to follow when there are large groups of men carrying loaded weapons, especially when jumping off helicopters and tramping through all sorts of nasty undergrowth where you can't even see your comrades. It's rather amazing that people didn't regularly shoot each other by accident. I personally witnessed only one accidental discharge. As a group of us lined up outside the Payne compound mail room window, a jeep pulled up and parked nearby. A few seconds after the driver had walked away, an M16 propped up in the back seat went off, sending a bullet into the air. No one was able to explain why that happened, and we just shrugged it off. I've been around guns since I was a teenager, and that is the only case I know of when a gun "went off by itself".

Snakes

Whenever the subject of the jungle comes up, the subject of snakes cannot be far behind. Even as far back as college I had heard stories about the infamous "two-step" snake of Vietnam – once bitten, that's as far as you got before you dropped dead. In actuality, this is an exaggeration; the two-step is a Malayan pit viper and not nearly as deadly as its nickname would lead one to believe, although anyone bitten would be well-advised to get medical attention. Nevertheless, such tales instilled a worry about coming across one. It may be just luck, but I saw at most a couple of snakes and they were just as interested in getting away from me as I was from them. Whether they were two-steps, I can't say.

However, snakes were not an imaginary danger. One of our MATs had to dispatch a cobra in their bunker with M16 fire. They radioed in an after-action report, "Engaged VC cobra. One enemy KIA."

Diseases and Other Medical Conditions

Just as in most of the tropical world, malaria abounded in Vietnam. Try as we might with insect repellent and mosquito netting, there was

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no way to completely protect ourselves from this insect-borne disease. GIs were required to take two different types of anti-malaria pills, one daily and the other weekly. Some soldiers reacted poorly to these pills, with diarrhea being a common side effect, so they would neglect taking them. There were even GIs who didn't take the pills in the hope that contracting malaria would get out of combat, although once they had developed the symptoms this might not have seemed like such a good idea. One of our MAT lieutenants contracted malaria and his description of being immersed in a bathtub of ice water to bring down his temperature was enough to convince me to take my pills. In some units, malaria became such a problem that NCOs would have to watch each soldier as he swallowed his pills. Fortunately, I didn't have a bad reaction to the pills and took them faithfully.

Vietnam was invested with other conditions unfamiliar to Americans. A former Marine I know was evacuated home after developing intestinal worms from drinking bad water. Small cuts and scratches could rapidly turn into pus-filled sores if not treated. Many men developed strange rashes or other skin conditions. I had one which wouldn't go away until I visited the Payne compound medic for some sort of ointment.

There were also the same sorts of routine situations that crop up even here at home. For instance, I broke a tooth on, of all things, a kernel of popcorn. The closest American base with a dentist was at Chu Lai, which required an hour's drive south on Highway One. So off I went in our trusty jeep. Chu Lai was a huge base but, luckily, I was able to find someone who could direct me to a dentist and, even more luckily, there was no waiting line. In fact, the Army dentist seemed to be sitting around with not much to do. He whisked me into the chair, told me to "open wide", and pronounced, "Yep, you broke a tooth alright." There was a long pause, then I finally asked, "Are you going to fix it?" "Oh," he said. "You want me to fix it." I didn't know whether he thought that all I wanted was a diagnosis or if he was expecting me to make a follow-up appointment, but he seemed surprised. He rather begrudgingly mumbled "OK," and proceeded to patch me up.

Fortunately, that was my only trip to a dentist in Vietnam.

FSB Mary Ann

Mary Ann was mentioned earlier in this narrative, in the account of OCS platoon-mate *Tom Edgren's* untimely death. Mary Ann was the base from which Tom and his men conducted his fatal mission. There is much more to Mary Ann's story, including a meaningful, if remote, connection to me.

A Fire Support Base, or FSB, is typically an American outpost, often on a hilltop, occupied by an artillery battery of four to six cannons and an infantry unit that provided security and conducted operations in the surrounding area. There were FSBs scattered all over South Vietnam; one web site lists over ninety, and it is probably incomplete. Sometimes the firebases were more or less permanent; many bases, on the other hand, came and went when needed, being occupied for specific operations, then abandoned.

FSB Mary Ann was located in the highlands near the very center of Quang Tin Province, close to that "Unnamed District" where Americans seldom trod. It had been built in early 1970 as a temporary base to interdict supplies coming down a branch of the Ho Chi Minh trail, but had then developed into something more permanent. It was named after the sister of the colonel who oversaw the building of the base. During my tour, it was occupied by a battalion of the Americal Division, which was headquartered at Chu Lai. Despite the Americal's earlier label as a "hard luck" division, the battalion occupying Mary Ann in 1970-71 (the 1st Battalion of the 46th Infantry Regiment, or 1/46), had a very good reputation; so did its commander, Lieutenant Colonel William Doyle, who took over the battalion in November of 1970. Several of our MATs had worked with Doyle and found him to be a professional, personable, caring leader, who tried to balance looking out for the welfare of his men with aggressively taking the fight to the enemy.

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Late in 1970 Sergeant Tex and I were sent out with an RF company on an operation near Mary Ann. Rumor had it that the VC had a cache of a million dollars in American greenbacks somewhere in the area, and we were to try to find it. By the way, we never found the money – at least, if anyone found it, they didn't tell me. Maybe today there are a couple of former Ruff Puffs living like kings somewhere.

Since we would be operating in the same area as American units, we went to greater than normal lengths to coordinate with them. The day before the operation, we had a briefing with Colonel Doyle in Tam Ky. After it ended, he took me aside to give me some friendly advice. "Lieutenant," he said, "be careful about pulling out your map. There's a VC sniper out there and he's very good – you don't want to identify yourself as an officer." Good advice, but upon further reflection I realized that if the sniper wanted to shoot an American, he would have no trouble figuring out who we were: both Tex and I were over six feet tall and towered over our Vietnamese comrades. I decided the best approach would be for us to expose ourselves as little as possible. Fortunately, either the sniper had vacated the area or else he had me in his sights and took pity on me; if the latter, I am forever grateful.

Later that day Major Whitmeyer and I flew to Mary Ann to further coordinate with the artillery and infantry units there. It was located on a mountaintop somewhat lower than the surrounding peaks, which were covered by thick jungle and broken up by steep ravines. The base looked like a shantytown, much like other FSBs I had been on: a dreary collection of raggedy bunkers constructed of sandbags and Conex boxes, scattered piss tubes (long, cylindrical steel containers which had been used for shipping artillery rounds, driven into the ground so GIs could urinate into them), barbed wire strung around the perimeter, plenty of dirt and dust, and the stench of burning excrement from the latrines. There were two primary colors: brownish orange for the dirt and dust and OD green for everything else. The only splotch of color came from the Stars and Stripes fluttering overhead. We briefed the Americans about where we would be operating and traded call signs. Then we flew back to Tam Ky to get ready for my helicopter assault the

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next morning.

After a quick breakfast, I arrived at the Tam Ky airstrip, where my RFs were already waiting. The choppers were on time, the sky was clear, and the flight out was as routine as these things can be. As we neared the landing zone, I could hear the prep fires exploding even over the sound of the engines. We swooped in, the birds disgorged their human cargo, and we got off the LZ quickly. For the next several days we crept down jungle trails in a fruitless search for the VC and their stash of American cash. I don't know if we ever got close to the cash, but I think we got close to some VC at least once. I generally positioned myself about one third of the way back in the column with my NCO a little further back. That way I would be close enough to the action if something developed, but I wasn't so close that I would be pinned down. At least that was my thinking; luckily, this theory was never tested.

After we had advanced down the trail for a while, I noticed that the RFs were starting to go past me, heading toward the rear. Hmm. I asked my interpreter what was up, and he said, "*Beaucoup* VC, *beaucoup* VC. We no go there." If my counterpart had decided that there were too many bad guys for our little group to tangle with, I sure wasn't going to argue. So back we went, down the trail in the direction from which we had come.

Now and then a patrol would report suspicious activity and I would call in artillery from Mary Ann. Boom, boom, we could hear the guns go off. Then BANG, BANG, the rounds would land not far away. As usual, the RFs would send a patrol and dutifully report enemy casualties, which I would call in to the TOC.

Mindful of Colonel Doyle's advice about the sniper, I was careful about exposing myself, which wasn't difficult since we were mostly trudging through thick jungle. One day we came across a small clearing that was open enough that I could look up and see one of our Air Force Forward Air Controllers buzzing around in his little prop plane. FACs were able to call in anything from artillery to airstrikes, or, if we were close enough to the coast, naval gunfire from ships out on the South

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China Sea. The VC hated FACs, but were leery of shooting at them since, if they missed, the FAC would “rain shit” upon them. Nevertheless, it was a dangerous job. My brother, Barry, had commanded a FAC unit during the year before I went to Vietnam, and he pointed out that not only did FACs have to watch out for enemy fire, they also needed great situational awareness to keep from colliding with friendly aircraft that might be in the area, avoid flying into friendly artillery barrages, and a dozen other things – all at the same time. I had noticed FACs in the air during quite a few of my operations and, although I never needed to call on their services, it was always comforting to know they were there.

Although my RFs managed to avoid the VC, there were definitely plenty of them in the area. I was monitoring the American unit’s radio frequency and they were reporting quite a bit of contact. This was a clear example of differences in the American and the Vietnamese approaches to the war. The Americans were aggressively seeking enemy contact, while the Vietnamese were finding ways to avoid it. One can easily understand the resentment many GIs felt toward the Vietnamese, for whose country Americans were risking, and sometimes sacrificing, their lives.

This is not to say that the GIs were willing to risk themselves unquestioningly. By this time in the war, Americans were sometimes voicing their reluctance to take risks which seemed foolish. I witnessed an example of this when I overheard a lieutenant calling his superior on Mary Ann for advice when one of his squads refused to go down a trail which they deemed particularly dangerous. Like my RFs, they felt there were *beaucoup* VC. After a heated exchanged which boiled down to “Goddammit, lieutenant, you get those men moving” the situation got resolved. I didn’t hear any calls for a medevac, so maybe there weren’t as many VC as feared. Nevertheless, it demonstrated a new reluctance with which GIs were approaching their job.

Every day, Colonel Doyle was in his helicopter from dawn until dark, guiding his company commanders, flying in supplies, calling artillery, and tending to all kinds of details to give his troops the support they

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needed. He also made it a habit of spending time on the ground with his troops, hiking along with them and often staying overnight. Up until then I had never fully appreciated the difficulty of an Infantry battalion commander's job.

Doyle's saddest duty was flying out the bodies of a couple of his men. After one engagement, I could hear the company commander's radio operator call in the names of the men killed and the manner of their deaths. He tried to sound matter-of-fact, but the agony in his tired voice said it all. Then the colonel's chopper flew in to transport the bodies to Mary Ann. From there they would be sent to Chu Lai to be prepared for transport to the States.

On our last night we camped across the Tranh River from Mary Ann. Towering over us at the top of a steep hill, its big bunkers bristling with machine guns and surrounded by concertina wire, it seemed impregnable. As I lay on the stinking, wet ground, worrying whether the VC would decide to hit us that night, I couldn't help wishing that I was up there, snug in a bunker, sleeping on a real cot, safe, secure and as happy as someone could be in Vietnam.

How wrong I was. Mary Ann was to become famous as what *Sappers in the Wire* called "the U.S. Army's most blatant and humiliating defeat in Vietnam." A few months after I was enviously gazing up at those bunkers, on the night of March 27-28, 1971, a company of VC sappers crept through Mary Ann's defenses and snuck into the firebase undetected. Suddenly, all hell broke loose. Firing rifles and throwing grenades and satchel charges into bunkers, the sappers killed thirty American soldiers and wounded eighty-two others.

The next morning, someone told me the news, "Mary Ann got overrun last night." I was stunned. The "fortress" which had looked to me like such a safe haven taught me another life lesson: Some things that may look very attractive on the surface can turn out to be anything but – a version of "be careful what you wish for".

Another Lesson

On a different operation I learned another important lesson in how the world works. It was the same operation where the “friendly” artillery round hit the side of our hill (which provided its own lesson in the importance of luck in life).

We were on that hill for about a week, sending out little patrols to prevent being surprised by the enemy. The only activity we encountered came at night, when the VC would crawl up close and toss a grenade or two over the wire surrounding our outpost. No one was hurt, but it was enough to cause us to lose sleep and keep everyone on edge and irritable.

The troops not on patrol didn’t have much to do, and, as is their wont, idle soldiers can be a breeding ground for trouble. It came late one afternoon when an RF private got drunk on booze he had smuggled in from a nearby village. Then he did something even stupider: he pulled the pin from a fragmentation grenade and started waving it around, holding down the “spoon” so the fuse wouldn’t ignite. He ranted on and on, shouting a list of complaints about the army and anything else that came to mind. His friends tried to calm him, but to no avail. Pretty soon it started to get dark. The prospect of this going on into the night was not attractive, and it probably crossed several people’s mind that the best solution was to shoot this guy (I know it crossed mine, but only fleetingly, since I wasn’t about to do that). Finally, his buddies were able to get the grenade away from him and put the pin back in, and the situation was – literally – defused.

A little later, my interpreter told me that my counterpart, the RF company commander, had decided on the man’s punishment: he would be sent outside our perimeter wire for the night with only a single grenade for protection. Still a naïve young lieutenant, I was horrified. All kinds of things popped into my head – he would be murdered by the VC, he would go over to the enemy and show them how to sneak through our wire and slit everyone’s throat, and similar frightening prospects. But mostly, I couldn’t help feeling that this just wasn’t the

way it should be done. I told the interpreter, “We should wait until we get back to Tam Ky and hold a court-martial.” This would be the civilized thing to do. My counterpart decided that the offending trooper was not to be sent outside the wire after all.

A couple of days later we all returned to town, and I figured the matter was closed. That is, until Major Whitmeyer pulled me aside and told me that this counterpart no longer wanted to work with me. I had, in effect, countermanded his order in front of his troops, causing him to lose face. Whitmeyer didn’t really think I had done anything wrong and told me to not be concerned, but it was the last time I worked with this captain as my counterpart. That was fine with me, since I was pretty miffed.

Upon reflection, I have decided that my counterpart was right and I was wrong. The Vietnamese probably didn’t even have the sort of military justice system the U.S. Army did, and if they did, they might not have considered this to be a court-martial offense. More importantly, the captain knew his men a hell of a lot better than I did, and the punishment he ordered would have been quick, efficient, fair in its way, and would have sent an appropriate message to the rest of the troops. Just the right solution under the circumstances. Too bad I had intervened.

I had been given a first-hand lesson in the futility of trying to apply the American way of doing things in a country with a vastly different culture.

My Worst Operation

The counterpart for whom I had the most respect was a man named Dieu. He was also the only Vietnamese whose home I visited. When Sergeant Five Tours made one of his trips into Tam Ky from his MAT outpost, he grabbed me and said “Let’s go visit Dieu”, whom he knew from one of his previous tours of duty. We shared some rice wine and a little food with Dieu and his wife in their small apartment, which was

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about the size of a motel room. Limited language skills all around made conversation difficult, but the visit was pleasant, nevertheless.

Dieu commanded a local RF company and he was my counterpart on several operations. I had long thought he was a captain, the normal rank for a company commander. In a conversation with my interpreter, I once referred to Dieu as *Dai Uy*. My interpreter laughed and said that Dieu was a lieutenant, not a captain. The interpreter went on explain that at one time Dieu had been a captain but was demoted. Seems his outpost was taking mortar fire one day and he called back to district headquarters for artillery support. For reasons known only to the men at district, they turned down his request. Dieu decided to teach these REMFs a lesson and ordered his own mortars to fire a couple of rounds near the HQ. Understandably, this resulted in his demotion, apparently all the way down to master sergeant. Eventually he was made company commander again; however, he was promoted only to lieutenant, not captain.

It was Dieu who had given the order to dig in while we were in the sand dunes, so I knew he was a savvy old trooper. He had also shown that he had a gentler side. Usually when his RF company entered a village, there was a friendly greeting. But not always. One village we entered was a suspected VC hideout, and the villagers were upset because soldiers were poking around among their huts. Dieu zeroed in on one middle-aged *mama-san* and proceeded to question her very pointedly, to which she repeatedly shook her head in denial. MATs had a standing order that if the Vietnamese troops started to abuse prisoners or suspects, we should call our TOC and report that the suspect was being “interrogated in the usual fashion”. That was supposed to get us off the hook if things got out of hand. Well, if there had been a TV camera crew with us, Dieu’s “interrogation” might have made the news as an example of abuse by the Vietnamese troops, but they would have had to do some creative editing – in reality it was actually comical. Dieu finally became frustrated with the woman’s lack of cooperation, so he reached down and picked up a broom. Not an American-style broom with short, stiff fibers, but a broom like the Wicked Witch’s in *The*

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Wizard of Oz – a stick with long, floppy grass stalks tied to one end. Dieu reached it up over his head and brought it down on the woman's head, but only hard enough to knock off her conical straw hat. She sobbed but was unhurt. Dieu gave me a look that said I could relax – this was the extent of his interrogation.

My last operation with Dieu was also my worst. At about the half way point in my tour, I took two weeks leave back in the States. As soon as I got back to Tam Ky, Sergeant Pitts, who was now working for the Tam Ky District Advisory Team, pulled me aside and said, "Lieutenant, they're going to send you to a really bad place." Not exactly what I wanted to hear. The next day Dieu's company, accompanied by an NCO and me, rode deuce-and-a-halves out to a spot in the southern part of the province where the flatlands turn into foothills. We dismounted and headed up into the hills. As the dusk settled, the going got rougher, the hills got higher and steeper, and the jungle thicker. At one point we were moving up a steep hillside in complete darkness, so dark I literally couldn't see my hand in front of my face. The RFs picked up little pieces of phosphorescent mold from the jungle floor and tucked them into the straps on their backpacks. But even this did not do much good and the only way to keep up with the man ahead of you was to hold onto his pack. More than once I lost my grip and thrashed about until I made contact with a comrade.

As we neared the crest of the hill, we suddenly stepped into light as bright as a full moon on a cloudless night. It wasn't the moon – the lights from the big American base at Chu Lai were shining over a hill between us and the base. They were a brilliant symbol of one of many stark contrasts between how America and North Vietnam approached the war. Large U.S. rear areas (and even not-so-large ones like our little Payne compound in Tam Ky) were lit with a candlepower equivalent to a small city, almost flaunting their presence. NVA/VC bases in the South – not nearly the size of American bases, but still sometimes covering several acres – were hidden by elaborate camouflage or even buried deep in huge tunnel complexes. The reason for this is simple: Americans had nothing to fear from NVA aircraft, because there were

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none in the skies of South Vietnam. The NVA and VC, on the other hand, were always in danger of being spotted by U.S. helicopters and planes. Americans had no worries about being attacked from the sky, but nights brought the danger of sappers crawling through their barbed wire defenses, and bright lights like those at Chu Lai were an integral element in perimeter defense.

We settled down in a forest of tall trees on the top of the hill and Dieu said to me, "You stay here." Everything was quiet for a while, then far off I heard a single explosion and a couple of gunshots. All was quiet again for a long time. Then one of the RFs came over to me and said very ashamedly, "VC *caca dan* Lieutenant Dieu." *Caca dan* means something like "cut off the head" and was used generically as "kill". I couldn't believe it. In fact, I said something like "You bullshit." Still embarrassed by the message that he had delivered, he said "Yeah, I bullshit," and walked away. Before long I got a call on the radio from an American lieutenant with another MAT that was operating nearby. He had learned from his counterpart that Dieu *had* been killed, and his RF company was on the way to join up with us. His counterpart would take command over both companies, since there was no real second in command under Dieu. Overcome by a feeling of helplessness, we sat and waited for the other RF company to make its way to us.

Then a squad of RFs came trudging into camp with Dieu's body wrapped in a poncho and slung from a pole. When Dieu had told me to "stay here" he had gone off to pay a visit to a girlfriend who lived in a nearby village. Either he walked into an ambush or, by pure coincidence, a couple of VC were also visiting the girlfriend. One of the VC threw a grenade that killed Dieu. The RFs with Dieu fired at them, but they got away. The Vietnamese were downcast because they had lost their commander and embarrassed at letting his killers get away. An ignominious end for a good man.

A helicopter flew in to pick up Dieu's body and we went on with our operation, which never amounted to much. Finally, we dejectedly went back to Tam Ky.

I've always felt that if the officer ranks of South Vietnam had more men like Dieu, the outcome of the war might have been different.

Other Vietnamese

Kit Carson Scouts

Kit Carson Scouts were former VC or North Vietnamese soldiers who defected and served in South Vietnamese units. They were part of a program known as *Chieu Hoi*, which translates roughly as “open hands”. Through a combination of incentives, bribes and propaganda, many thousands were persuaded to join the South (by 1972, over 200,000 had gone over to the South, a measure of the low morale of Northern soldiers as the war ground on). Some of the defectors were selected to be Kit Carson Scouts, in which role they would share their knowledge of how the VC and NVA operated. Kit Carson Scouts accompanied my Ruff Puffs on a couple of operations. My strongest memory of a Scout occurred during a break when we were on patrol. The Scout was chatting with the troops and began talking very animatedly and gesturing like he was firing a rifle. This caused the RFs to break into gales of laughter. I asked my interpreter what was so funny and he explained that the Scout had been telling about a technique he used during one fight when he was a VC. He hid between two advancing columns of South Vietnamese and suddenly popped up and fired toward one column, then turned around and fired at the other column, then hit the dirt. Pretty soon he had both columns firing at each other. One of the RFs blurted “That was us!” Everyone thought this was hilarious.

Kids

We encountered kids almost everywhere we went, sometimes even in the deep jungle where it was surprising to find any sort of civilization.

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In the villages, young children ran around barefoot or in “Ho Chi Minh sandals” made from worn out tire treads. At most, they might be clad in shorts, but often not even that. When my Ruff Puffs entered a village, they usually peeked warily from behind their parents’ legs. They were probably even more wary when a unit of big, strange-looking Americans tramped through.

In villages along the roadsides, the kids were usually bolder, having become more accustomed to troop convoys rolling by or columns on the march. On the engineer security details, kids would swarm around our jeep hoping for handouts, or stand smiling to have their pictures taken with us.

It was different in Tam Ky. The kids here were also friendly but were in school most of the time. They wore uniforms, white tops and blue shorts, pants or skirts. One Vietnam vet recently pointed out to me that he thought the kids were all cute and sometimes the girls grew into attractive women, but all the boys became homely men. I’ll bet a lot of Vietnamese thought most of us GIs were pretty homely, too, with our pink skin and copious body hair.

The kids who worked the rice paddies and fields were very adept at handling water buffalo, riding or walking alongside these huge beasts, rapping them with a stick to give them directions. The buffalo didn’t seem to mind and would do the kids’ bidding without so much as a snort. But they sure didn’t like Americans and would glare menacingly at us. I always took this personally, since they seem to particularly dislike me. I made it a point to not get too close.

One time my RFs heard suspicious noises coming from a thickly overgrown ravine. Thinking there might be some VC in the brush, my counterpart tossed in a fragmentation grenade, then sent a couple of troopers to check it out. Before long they came back with a “prisoner” – an apparently unhurt, but very mad, water buffalo.

Vietnamese Civilians

Aside from giving handouts to kids, my contact with Vietnamese

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civilians was quite limited. In town, even though I was often surrounded by civilians on my way to and from work, I seldom spoke to them. In the Payne compound, we had many civilian workers, including the *mama-sans* who cleaned our rooms and did our laundry. But again, our conversations were typically limited to “good morning” or “how are you today?” The Vietnamese were very polite and respectful toward Americans. This was their culture, plus I think many of them were genuinely grateful for the support we were giving them and their country. They would be mortified if they committed any act of disrespect toward us. As I was entering the latrine in the Payne compound one day, an old Vietnamese worker came hurrying out. He had coughed up a big gob of phlegm and he hadn’t seen me coming. We almost collided head on and just then he let fly, catching me right on the front of my fatigue shirt. I thought he would die. Actually, maybe he thought I would shoot him. He apologized profusely, bowed repeatedly and cleaned me off with a damp cloth. I assured him it was OK, but he couldn’t stop apologizing.

The civilians I encountered while on operations were a mixed bag. While some were friendly enough to my RFs, likely because they were related, others were obviously upset to see soldiers tramping through their fields and poking about their villages. They would stand around giving us surly looks and telling their kids not to talk with us. They might have been actual VC supporters, or maybe they were just tired of the fighting that had gone on around them for years. They might have treated the VC the same way.

It has often been said that the typical Vietnamese civilian did not value human life like we do in western countries. It could be that they were simply more hardened to death than we are, since they saw it so often – from disease, accidents, acts of nature. When you add in the violence of war, which many of them had known virtually their entire lives, it is understandable that their perspective on death could be different than those who live in safer societies.

In my observation, however, the death of a loved one could be just

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as heartbreaking to them as it is to us in the States. As my RFs entered a village in a suspected VC-controlled area, I heard several shots from up ahead. Arriving at the village, I saw the body of a Vietnamese man laid out on a rough table, with a few other villagers awkwardly standing around. My interpreter explained that the man had run when the soldiers approached, a sure sign that he was VC. He had been hit by several bullets from the RF's M16s. One had gone through his left upper arm, breaking the bone and twisting the arm around about ninety degrees. Another had penetrated his abdomen and a bit of intestines protruded through a small hole. His jaw kept working up and down like he was gasping for air and, although there was almost no blood (the Vietnamese seemed to bleed much less than Americans, even from severe wounds), it was evident that he was breathing his last. My counterpart thought about finishing him off, took out his .45 pistol, and walked around the table trying to figure out the best angle to put a bullet in his head. I was on the opposite side and kept trying to get out of the line of fire. Eventually, the man stopped moving altogether and my counterpart holstered his pistol.

The villagers must have sent for the man's wife, and before long she showed up, took one look, and collapsed wailing. No one was able to console her. It was obvious that, regardless of whatever the Vietnamese "attitude toward death" might be, the loss of this one man was devastating to those close to him.

Ohio 1970 and 1971 – The Home Front

In January 1971, I went on R&R, or “Rest and Relaxation”, which was granted to every American serviceman in Vietnam about half way into his one-year tour. Most single guys went to Australia or Thailand and enjoyed a week of debauchery, while many married fellows met their wives in Hawaii. I opted to go back to the States, which, because so much time would be spent travelling, allowed a two-week leave rather just one. The flight laid over in Alaska, and I sat in the airport marveling at my first glimpse of American life since I left home back in July. It was rather amazing to see how life went on as though there were no war. Civilians were bustling here and there, catching planes for business or pleasure, families were greeting new arrivals, people sat in the terminal reading or watching TV to pass the time. Except for a greater presence of men in uniform, it could have been a scene from any time when the country was at peace. Had I not just come from a war zone, this wouldn’t have surprised me. After all, this was the life I had been living before I entered the Army. But I was struck by the incongruousness of it.

Except for those young men who were worried about being drafted and those who had returned from Vietnam, the only people back in the homeland who felt directly impacted by the war were the families of the men actually in the conflict. They were in the unenviable position of being affected by the war but, at the same time, knowing there was almost nothing they could do to contribute to winning the war or even to support those they had overseas. Other than worrying, they could feel little connection to the war. There were no blackouts, no threat of enemy invasion. No troop trains pulled into town where local ladies could greet them with coffee and donuts. There was no rationing of tires or gasoline, no drives for paper or metal. The economy was booming, and America was churning out both “guns and butter”. Much of this was intentional – Washington did not want the populous to feel the pinch of war, lest it increase anti-war sentiment (for instance,

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President Johnson expanded the draft rather than call up the reserves – the Kansas National Guard unit I had served with at Fort Carson was a rare occurrence – for fear of emphasizing the expansion of the war).

Those with relatives in Vietnam – including my parents and Dace and her parents – were in a world by themselves. No one outside the family wanted to hear about what they were going through. There was little they could do to help me except send letters and cookies (which were actually more help than they could have imagined).

On top of all this, by the early 70's the media's reporting about the war was almost universally negative. The press had pretty much all turned against the war after Tet of '68. Until then, CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, "the most trusted man in America", had consistently reported that we were making progress in the war, not questioning the information fed to him by the Johnson Administration. He closed every broadcast with his trademark "that's the way it is", and Americans were led to believe that "the way it is" in Vietnam was that we were winning. After Tet, Cronkite visited Vietnam himself and began to think that the official sources had misled him. During his broadcast on February 27, 1968, he presented what he now claimed was the real picture in Vietnam, and concluded, "it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could." Suddenly, "the way it is" was very much different than it had seemed only a few weeks earlier. There was no outcry from the American people that Cronkite had either been a party to the administration's efforts to mislead them or else he had done a poor job of reporting before Tet. Instead, he continued to be the most trusted man in America.

By the time I enlisted in the Army, virtually no one was under the impression that the war was going well; instead, we were playing for time in order to get the South Vietnamese in shape to carry on the fight by themselves, hopefully, to a successful conclusion. The question now was whether this was a noble enough goal to continue to pour resources and lives into the war. Or maybe it was as simple as whether it was

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worth it to maintain the fight just to keep from losing. At any rate, the mood of America was such that there was not much support for the families whose loved ones were “over there” doing the dirty work. At best, they might get some sympathy, but usually there was little of that.

So, the families hunkered down to wait for their soldiers to return. They did what little they could, but mostly they found ways to keep busy and tried not to think too much about it. Dace went back home to live with her parents. As she described it:

When Brian left for Vietnam, he became a cherished memory. My greatest fear was that he would remain one, or that he would come back as a different person.

I cried for three weeks after he left. And then something changed. Whether it was something particular that happened or just a change in my frame of mind or just acceptance of the situation, I don’t remember. I just stopped crying. Oh, the awful moments would still creep in during his tour of duty, but they were more subdued and didn’t last as long.

While Brian was in Vietnam, I lived with my parents and began my professional career. Even though it wasn’t my chosen field, it occupied my day. The most important part of the day, however, was in the evening when I would write my letter to Brian. My writing desk at home had a large blotter-type monthly calendar. It counted down the number of days until he would return and how many days he was away. His pictures were everywhere in the room.

The few times that a discussion of the war came up at work, she was usually met with a comment from her coworkers along the lines of “Why can’t we all just plant flowers.” (No, I’m not making this up.)

Every day, she worried about that dreaded official telegram, the phone call in the middle of the night, or men in uniform showing up at the door. In a way, I think it was harder on her than it was on me. At least I knew what was happening to me at any given moment. She had

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no idea, and for all she knew I could have been dead or wounded long before she would hear about it.

All of us with family at home shared this experience. *Bill Yacola* notes that while Vietnam was tough for us soldiers, “it was difficult on our families too. In my family, my mother suffered the most. Several years after returning home, my sister shared with me the very, very difficult time Mom had while I was deployed. She would cry numerous times each day worrying about me.”

Only in my later years have I come to at least slightly appreciate what my folks must have gone through when I went to Vietnam. They had not objected to my decision to join the Army, but they must have been conflicted. They certainly had an appreciation of the risks our soldiers faced in Vietnam – after all, they had been through World War II. On the other hand, both were old-fashioned patriots who could understand a young man’s desire to do his duty. Dad, in particular, had great respect for the military, and one of his regrets was being rejected for service in WWII because of poor eyesight. As far as the Vietnam War goes, both were part of the “silent majority” who said little about the war but supported it as all good Americans were expected to. About the only time I saw Mom show any emotion about the war was when she came home fuming at a nurse in her doctor’s office who said if her son was drafted, she would urge him to flee to Canada.

But having a detached support for the war was much different than having two sons go off to serve in it. Barry had left for Vietnam a little over a year before I did, and he came home just as I was leaving. For two years they went through what thousands of parents did – waiting for awful news to come and hoping and praying that it wouldn’t.

Dace’s parents were in much the same position. They knew even more of war, having seen their native Latvia overrun by first the Germans then the Russians during World War II, and finally joining the millions of displaced persons who emigrated to America after the war. Their son Augusts was a Signal Corps lieutenant in Vietnam a couple of years before I was there. Happily, Barry, Augie and I all made it back.

Assistant Operations Advisor

February 5, 1971 found me in a hut in a small village somewhere in the countryside accompanying another Ruff Puff operation. At midnight, the sky was suddenly lit with flares and tracers, and explosions boomed through the darkness. The Vietnamese were celebrating the beginning of Tet, the lunar New Year Festival and the most important holiday in Vietnam. It struck me that they were wasting a lot of valuable munitions. But they must have figured why not – a few crates of flares wouldn't affect the outcome of the war.

The village was in a depression surrounded by high hills, so my radio reception was very poor. The only American I was able to reach was another MAT leader, Jim Sutherland, who's outpost was located on one of those hills. Trying to be funny, I called Jim and said "Happy New Year!" Jim's voice came back very serious, "Can't you hear the radio traffic?" "No," I told him, "I'm not receiving anyone but you." "Well, stay off the radio," replied Jim. "There's something happening west of here. They're reporting some sort of activity, maybe trucks or other vehicles."

Uh oh! Shades of Tet of '68 popped into my head. Could the NVA be mounting a big attack, once again trying to catch the South during their celebration? Here I was, in a village with no real defensive positions, cut off from anyone who might be able to help. Many tense moments passed before Jim came back on the radio. False alarm. The "enemy" activity turned out to be South Vietnamese troops tearing around in trucks and jeeps and firing off weapons in celebration.

My luck held once again, but who knew how long this could last? Fortunately, I would soon receive a change of assignments.

At the end of February, about two thirds of the way through my tour, I was reassigned from being a MAT leader to become the Assistant Province Operations Advisor (Assistant S-3). Although no one ever said so, I suppose this was my reward for having gone on so many operations. As Assistant S-3, I worked in the Tactical Operations Center, a squat, ugly, mottled grey bunker with thick concrete walls and

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scores of tall radio antennae on top. There was only one entrance to the TOC, and there was an RF guard stationed outside to keep out any VC on a suicide mission. One half of the TOC was the American side, the other half was the more-or-less identical Vietnamese side. The two sides were separated by a concrete wall and we seldom ventured into the other's territory. Just as it sounds, the TOC was the center of all of Team 16's military activity. There were large, Plexiglas-covered maps of the province on which we would use grease pencils to track the location of various Ruff Puff operations, plus identify American units throughout the province. Along one wall was a bank of radios that kept us in touch with our district headquarters and MAT outposts, plus with the TOCs of American infantry, artillery and helicopter units.

During the day, the TOC was a busy place, especially if there were operations being conducted, and even more so when enemy contact had been made. At night, it was generally quiet, and time could be devoted to administrative functions. This is when the MAT outposts would call in their list of items to be delivered on the next helicopter supply run – everything from ammunition to frozen food to beer.

My primary duty was to oversee the TOC. Well, “oversee” is an overstatement. While it was required that an officer always be on duty, there were also a couple of sergeants who actually did the work. Initially, I worked nights, which meant I had to try to sleep during the heat of the day. But I did manage to get some sleep at night by stretching out on a desk in the TOC's back room. After a while, I was moved to the day shift and another former MAT lieutenant took over the night shift.

My boss was a major whom I will call “Bluster”, the Team 16 Operations Advisor. There is a saying in the Army that there are only two officer ranks that one has to be concerned about, and they both wear gold – second lieutenants and majors; second lieutenants because they are young and green, and majors because they are lieutenant-colonel-wannabes who typically are stuck in staff jobs with no real command function until they get promoted – so they just make trouble

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for everyone. This may not have been true of all majors, but it seemed true of Major Bluster. He wasn't a bad guy, he just appeared to be trying to be someone he wasn't. He liked to give the impression that he was extremely quick-thinking and decisive. But we all soon learned that, within minutes after snapping off an order in his decisive way, he often changed his mind and reversed what he had told us to do. So rather than immediately carry out his orders, we just waited a while until he told us what he really wanted.

Bluster was close to fifty and had recently been moved from a district assignment to the TOC, likely because of his age. He was close to retirement and it seemed that he wanted to collect a couple more medals before he left Vietnam. Some of his claims could be a little dubious. He once put himself in for a Purple Heart, which is given for being wounded by enemy action. He came bustling into the TOC all excited, claiming that he had been shot at while driving his jeep alone just outside of town. The bullet had supposedly smashed his rearview mirror and he had been cut by the flying glass. He did have a couple of small scratches. There were no witnesses (unless we count the VC who fired the shot, but he wasn't talking), and verification was usually required. As far as I know, his paperwork did not get too far, maybe not even past the Senior Province Advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Wagner.

But on a different occasion, Wagner was very supportive of one of Bluster's claims. The TOC had received a report of some fighting a few miles north of town right along Highway One. The major hopped into his jeep and raced to the scene, for which I suppose he deserved some credit; although, as the Operations Advisor, it may have been more appropriate for him to remain at the TOC. When Major Bluster arrived, there was still fighting going on, but it didn't sound especially serious, at least from the radio reports we were getting. A few days later Wagner put in a recommendation for a Silver Star (one of the highest awards for bravery) for Bluster, claiming that he had personally taken charge of the battle and risked his life calling in air strikes. Just about everyone thought this was at best a bit of an exaggeration. One of our operations sergeants said, in private of course, "Makes you wonder how

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Colonel Wagner got *his* Silver Star.”

When Major Bluster’s tour as S-3 ended he was replaced by Major Sampson, who had a much different approach. He tended to think before rattling off instructions and was generally soft-spoken. I was shocked one day when I overheard a telephone conversation between the major and someone whom I presumed was also a major, since I can’t imagine he would have talked this way to an enlisted man or a higher- or lower-ranking officer. In an ice-cold, steely voice laced with profanity, Sampson was ripping the man apart. The condensed version amounted to this: You God-damn son-of-a-bitch, don’t you ever put one of my men in a position like this again. It was heartening to hear the major supporting his men. I have no idea what the man on the other end of the conversation had done, but I sure didn’t ever want to receive of one the major’s ass-chewings. Luckily, I never did, and we got along just fine.

Although I was now a true REMF, I was not exempt from spending time in the field. I often flew in a command helicopter to coordinate field operations or on other missions (like the time I picked up the wounded Captain Kenny while escorting the Province Chief, or the time I flew around the province with the Air Force FAC as a passenger). In other instances, I was sent to some hilltop outpost or village to spend a few days. But I was no longer tramping around the bush or sleeping on the ground, so my new job was a definite improvement.

As Assistant S-3, I could get a pretty good understanding of what was going on throughout the province, where different units were stationed, and what operations were taking place. Now and then, I was tasked with briefing the senior American staff and visiting officers. All in all, working in the TOC was far closer to a “conventional” job than being a MAT leader. We worked regular shifts and took a break at noon to drive over to the mess hall for lunch; after dinner we played volleyball, watched a movie, or went to the officers’ club for drinks.

The TOC also gave me the opportunity to better understand the “home office” perspective – until then I had known only the priorities

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and viewpoints of those in the field. The concept of REMFs, of course, is not unique to the military. Every organization – business, education, non-profit, what have you – has a hierarchy, and at every level it is difficult to understand the priorities and motivations of those above you in the chain of command, so it is easy to resent them and consider them pretty much idiots. In the TOC I quickly realized the importance and the difficulty of keeping track of what was going on and the necessity of insisting on adherence to rules and procedures which seemed bothersome when I was on my MAT.

For instance, all MATs on operations were required to radio in the map coordinates of their location at least daily or whenever they moved so the TOC would know where they were. This was bothersome since it was necessary to encode the map coordinates before we called them in, using a small plastic device called a KAK (which stands for key-auto-key) wheel along with a code book that would convert the coordinate numbers into letters. This was irritating enough during daylight when it was easy to see the code book and operate the KAK wheel. But it could be exasperating after dark, huddled under a poncho with a flashlight so no escaping light could reveal our position. No matter the conditions, it was one of those administrative procedures that nobody liked doing. One evening after we had been stationed on a hilltop outpost for several days (the same one where the artillery round had landed), the TOC called and asked for our location. Tired and irritated, I answered back smarmily with something like “We’re in the same place we’ve been for the last five days.” The TOC came back with “We still need to know your location.” Now even more irritated, I radioed our coordinates “in the clear”, that is, without encoding them, a blatant violation of security. Immediately, the captain on duty in TOC yelled into the radio “Never, ever, ever send your location in the clear!” He was right of course. When I started working in the TOC I finally understood that they could not be expected to constantly remember the location of every MAT in the province and know whether or not they had moved.

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Sergeant Mallott taught me a neat trick when we were in the field. We made it a practice to sleep at a forty-five-degree angle from each other, with our heads close together and the radio between us. This let us talk with each other in whispers if necessary, plus we had easy access to the radio. Whenever the TOC would call us for a commo check, he would answer “I hear you clear and about half strength.” What “half strength” meant was ambiguous, but he figured that if they ever called when he was asleep or just didn’t feel like responding, he could always claim that the signal had been too weak for him to hear. No one questioned this. Whenever I was on duty in the TOC and someone in the field responded with “I hear you clear and about half strength,” I couldn’t help but smile.

I also saw an amusing example of higher-ups thinking they do not have to follow the same rules as the people below them. Standard procedure was for everyone’s call sign to change periodically for security reasons, so we all had to learn new call signs every few weeks. LTC Wagner, being the highest-ranking officer on the province team, felt this didn’t apply to him, and he always liked to use “Sabre Six”, no matter what his call sign was supposed to be. One day I was in the TOC listening to the radio traffic of an American operation. Colonel Wagner was in a helicopter, also monitoring the operation, and came up on the American unit’s “net” (radio frequency) as Sabre Six asking for information. Immediately, the commander of an American helicopter unit growled, “THIS is Sabre Six. I don’t know who you are claiming to be Sabre Six, but get the hell off my net!” Wagner didn’t have any more to say, and all of us in the TOC had a good laugh, but only among ourselves.

Even as Assistant S-3, my interaction with LTC Wagner was limited, other than the rare briefings I conducted. He spent little time in the TOC, the running of which he left to the Operations Advisor, since he had many other responsibilities to attend to. One of the few times we talked was the day after the helicopter in which I was riding picked up the wounded Captain Kenny and his NCO. I was a little concerned that he might be unhappy that I had diverted Colonel Tho from his planned

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inspection tour, plus pulled out the MAT sergeant. But he actually approved, at least regarding Colonel Tho (I don't think he was happy about the sergeant, but he didn't directly say so). "When something like this happens, that's when we stop playing the game," he told me. I regret now that I responded with a smart-ass answer like, "I never did think of it as a game, sir." Evidently, the colonel didn't realize I was trying to be cute, since he just sort of nodded and walked away. I'm surprised I didn't find myself back on a MAT.

I had another chance to be a wise guy to the colonel, but fortunately thought better off it. The night several 122mm rockets hit at various points around the city I had been sleeping in one of the offices in the TOC. The explosions jerked me awake – fully awake, luckily. Within a couple of minutes, the field phone connected to the colonel's quarters rang and I picked it up. "Damage report," grumbled the colonel, meaning that he wanted me to tell him what damage had been done. I hesitated for a moment and almost said "Roger, send it," joking that I thought *he* would be giving *me* a damage report. But I came to my senses and passed on to him the reports that we had very quickly received after the rockets hit. This satisfied him and we heard no more from him that night.

It wasn't always busy in the TOC, even during the day. Soldiers will fill idle time with activities that seem inane to civilians. One of the fads that developed among the REMFs in Tam Ky was the making of "cannons" powered by cigarette lighter fluid. Using his trusty P-38, a trooper would remove the tops and bottoms of about half a dozen soft drink cans, then tape them together end-to-end, forming the barrel of the cannon. For a firing chamber, he would remove only the top of another can, then use a beer can opener to punch a ring of holes around the bottom end. This "firing chamber" was then taped onto the rear end of the barrel. A cannon ball made out of wadded up masking tape was shoved down the barrel, just like a Civil War muzzle loader. The trooper would then squirt a healthy dose of lighter fluid into the firing chamber for propellant, prop up the barrel on anything handy, and,

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standing far enough away for safety, use a rolled-up piece of paper to ignite the lighter fluid. Then, with a bang, the masking tape cannon ball would fly a couple of dozen yards down range. Sometimes the TOC sergeants would irreverently fire off their contraption during the raising or lowering of the Vietnamese flag. Luckily no one got scorched or lost a finger during this horseplay. But boys will be boys, no matter what their age.

John Paul Vann

It was as Assistant S-3 that I crossed paths with one of the most famous – and controversial – figures of the Vietnam War, John Paul Vann. He was one of the early arrivals in Vietnam, when as an Army Lieutenant Colonel, he was assigned as an advisor to an ARVN Army Corps in 1962. After one especially embarrassing defeat for the South Vietnamese, Vann started to voice his concerns about how the war was being conducted and was vocally critical of both the ARVN officer corps and the U.S. high command. Convinced that his opinions were being ignored by the top brass, he left the Army in 1963.

After working in the private sector for over a year, Vann decided he needed to return to Vietnam. He cared for the people and had a high regard for the Vietnamese soldiers, if not their leadership. In March 1965, he went back to Vietnam, this time as a civilian official with the U.S. Agency for International Development. From there, he worked his way through a series of positions of increasing responsibility and authority. By the time I reached Vietnam, John Vann had risen to become the Senior Advisor in IV Corps, in charge of all American personnel – the first civilian to do so – with a rank equivalent to major general.

Although his record of successes against the communist incursion allowed him to steadily rise to higher positions in the American advisory effort in Vietnam, he continued to rankle many high-ranking officials, both civilian and military. His opinion that the Vietnam War should be viewed as a long-term war fought at a low level of engagement rather

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than a short-term war fought at a high level of engagement did not sit well with many Army generals who believed that a huge military push could end the war quickly. Among these generals was William Westmoreland, the MACV commander from 1964 to 1968 and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1968 to 1970, who regularly spoke of luring the North Vietnamese into a pitched battle where superior American firepower would finally annihilate them.

After I became Assistant S-3 in early 1971, I was given the opportunity to attend a three-day seminar for junior officers in Saigon. The purpose of the seminar was to enable young officers like me to learn more about the progress of the war. It was also, of course, a chance to “get away from the war”, and Saigon was as far from the war as you could get and still be in Vietnam. These seminars were held regularly and officers were sent from all over the country. Major Sampson, as Operations Advisor, was tasked with selecting who would attend, and he chose me. Whether this was a reward for my performance or a matter of my being in a position whose presence would be missed the least, I never knew – once again the basis for decisions that affected me was unclear. Whatever the reason, I drove to Da Nang, then took an Air Vietnam WWII-vintage DC-3 to Saigon. The plane was slow, loud, rickety and crowded, but we made it. Most of the passengers were Vietnamese civilians, some accompanied by chickens and at least one goat.

I don’t remember much about the seminar; lots of presentations, maps, graphs – exactly the sort of things that one finds in today’s corporate seminars and training programs. But I do remember that John Vann was one of the speakers. At the time, I had never heard of him and didn’t realize what a big deal it was to have him there. While I can’t recall anything specific that he said, to this day I remember his enthusiasm and ability to present his views clearly and forcefully. He had me convinced that not only did we need to win this war, by God, we *were* winning it.

The seminar had another similarity to most corporate sessions – within a few days of returning, the realities of work had pushed aside

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most of the enthusiasm that I had felt during the seminar. It was back to business as usual.

Pete Golka, an OCS platoon-mate, also served on a MAT and got a much different impression of Vann. Pete's MAT had seen plenty of action and he quickly became a seasoned veteran. During one nasty operation, Vann, true to his reputation of getting out into the field, helicoptered in to see for himself what was going on and spoke briefly with Pete. Pete's impression was that Vann was like most of those high in the chain of command who, with little understanding of the real situation, drop in, say something like "Lieutenant, you need to do this, that and the other," and take off, satisfied that they have gotten the situation well in hand. But, then, Pete was always an irascible fellow who didn't necessarily demonstrate the proper respect for authority.

Vann may have had a vision for the grand strategy of America's conduct of the Vietnam War, but it was difficult to feel a part of it at the province level. Not that I, as a mere lieutenant, was privy to the overall strategy of the disparate components of Team 16. But I was aware of the military operations in the province, and they seemed to be just a disconnected collection of activities.

A couple of years before this writing I heard from Hal Meinheit, the State Department FSO who served on Team 16. He mentioned that he had read some Vietnam War history at the Army War College, and he found a report written by our Senior Province Advisor stating that "territorial security" was the single most successful program in the province. The primary role of MAT operations was to create a more secure atmosphere in which the province civil affairs programs could be carried out free of interference by the VC/NVA. According to this report, our MATs were doing a pretty darn good job. Unfortunately, I don't recall any real effort to inform the MAT personnel that their efforts were making Vietnam a better place.

The End of My War

Around the second week of May, 1971, I was riding in a helicopter high over Quang Tin Province. What exactly I was doing that day is lost to memory, but I was probably coordinating yet another Ruff Puff operation. The voice of the Province S-1 crackled over my earphones, “Your orders home are in.” My first thought was “Thank God, I’m going home.” My second thought was “What the hell am I doing out here?” I had seen enough movies to appreciate how bad things can happen to people just as they thought they were going to “make it.” The bank robber who is going to do “one more job” before retiring, the hero who perishes after telling everyone “I’ll be right behind you” as he shepherds everyone out of a burning building or off a sinking ship, the soldier killed by a sniper a few days before he was to go home (as *Doug Cannon* almost was in real life). I didn’t want that to be me. Since you are reading this, you’ve already figured out that I landed safely, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t worry for the rest of that flight.

At the time, many of us were getting “early outs”, that is, being sent home before our one-year tours were supposed to end. This was another sign of America’s disengagement from the war. My early out combined with the time I had spent in Panama meant I would be home before the end of May, rather than the first week in July. Once again, I felt lucky.

I’ve always felt that one of the things the Army did most efficiently was getting me home. In the next few days there was our usual small celebration for those of us who were leaving. I still have the items that were presented to each of us: a Certificate of Appreciation from Advisory Team 16 for “meritorious service” and a wooden plaque in the shape of a shield. On it are crossed American and South Vietnamese flags, a map of Vietnam, the MACV patch and small metal plate stating “Presented to LT Brian R. Walarth.” When I pointed out that my name was misspelled, the S-1 offered to have it corrected and sent to me, but I kind of liked it the way it was. Somehow, it seemed to represent what a screwed-up war it was.

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A couple of days later I flew to Saigon, where I was once again processed – this time “out” rather than “in”, which was a good feeling. Then I was standing in line waiting to board the big, beautiful jet liner that would take me to the States. Before we could board, a metal detector was passed over each of us, ensuring that we weren’t carrying any weapons. Then I walked up the ramp and settled in for another long, cramped flight. Not long after we took off, the pilot made an announcement as we crossed the coast of Vietnam. A cheer went up and I snapped a picture out the window. It was the last I would see of that God-forsaken place, and I finally breathed a sigh of relief. We stopped for a couple of hours in Hawaii, and, as I had when I came home on leave, I marveled at how life was going on as though there wasn’t a war on. Pretty soon, my life would be much like theirs.

We landed in Oakland about two o’clock in the morning and, as was standard procedure, the mess hall was open to greet new arrivals no matter when they landed. We all got a nice steak dinner as a welcome home. After a short night’s sleep, I was processed again, this time for the last time. For several more years I would be in the “inactive reserve”, meaning I could be called back to active service in an emergency (but I never was, thank goodness).

A group of us caught a cab to the airport, and we were a happy bunch. We shook hands and wished each other well, strangers who had never met before and wouldn’t meet again, but were now compatriots because of our shared experience. I caught a plane to Cleveland, Dace picked me up at the airport, and soon I was home – and a civilian again. My war was over.

North Vietnam Prevails

President Nixon’s June 1969 announcement of Vietnamization coupled with the first withdrawal of American troops just a month later, in many ways marked the beginning of the end of the Vietnam War, and inevitable victory for the North. Hanoi’s leadership was now confident

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that it was simply a matter of time until the Southern regime collapsed. Almost no one in Washington, especially Nixon and Kissinger, held any false hope that there could be a different outcome. Their goal now became to keep enough pressure on the communists to make them more amenable to granting America a “just and honorable” peace agreement or, at the least, buy enough time between the American exit and the fall of the South that the U.S. would not appear to have abandoned their ally. This meant, of course, that many more American soldiers would have to die, along with even more Vietnamese troops and civilians. While many view this as an example of the cynicism with which America’s leaders approached the war, the alternative of immediately packing up and going home would do great harm to America’s standing in the world. It also meant the U.S. would have little leverage in our attempts to get back the almost six hundred American POWs lingering in North Vietnamese prisons. Nixon knew that there was no way America was going to win this war, and he simply picked one of several distasteful alternatives. History has judge him harshly for this, as he probably would have been judged no matter what he did.

By December of 1971, the number of American servicemen in Vietnam was down to 156,000, from a high of 536,100 in 1968. Noting the low number of Americans and the increased reliance on South Vietnamese troops, Hanoi decided to change its strategy and drop the façade that this was a war of insurgency; instead, they would conduct an all-out conventional attack on the South. Despite the misgivings of some Northern generals, Le Duan, who had replaced Ho Chi Minh after the latter’s death in 1969, insisted that the offensive go ahead regardless of the potential communist casualties, about which, as always, he was unconcerned. In March 1972 the Easter Offensive was launched. Over 200,000 NVA soldiers attacked south across the DMZ and east from Cambodia and Laos, surprising the ARVN and gaining significant territory. Through spirited counterattacks and the judicious application of U.S. air support, the NVA attack was checked and eventually pushed back, leaving about 10% of South Vietnam’s territory,

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mostly along the western border, under communist control. While in many ways the attack was a failure for the North, it succeeded in giving them significant inroads into the South. Over the next two years the NVA gradually expanded the area they controlled and built up forces there, in violation of the Paris peace accords which had been signed in January of 1973.

In early 1975, the North launched their final offensive. Their forces quickly swept aside the South Vietnamese – although some ARVN and Territorial Force units fought bravely, they could not last long without U.S. air support or supplies. Within 55 days of starting their attack, North Vietnam captured Saigon and now controlled all of what had been South Vietnam. Like the Russian soldiers who took Berlin in WWII, the North Vietnamese were astounded by the wealth of Saigon, especially with regard to consumer goods – just as Moscow had lied to the Russian soldiers, Hanoi had misled the NVA about the conditions in their enemy's capital.

Americans were stunned as they watched news reports of the rapid fall of the country that they had fought so long and hard to protect.

Welcome Home, Boys

When the Gulf War ended in 1991, I was working in downtown Cleveland. My office overlooked Burke Lakefront Airport, and one day I looked down to see a crowd gathering beside the terminal to welcome home a local Army unit returning from the war. Finally, a big C-130 came into view, touched down and lumbered to a stop. The men deplaned, fell into formation and waited impatiently while the band played and officials gave speeches thanking them for their service. Then, the ceremony over, the soldiers were dismissed and ran to their families to be greeted with hugs and kisses. It was quite a contrast from the greetings experienced by those returning from Vietnam.

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As *Bill Yacola* put it almost fifty years after we came home, “I am still envious of the troops today who receive the applause and cheers wherever they go. It is super that finally the population appreciates their service. I just wish we could have had the same reception. It was a different time and place.”

It certainly was. A different time. A different place. A different war. Just as when we shipped out, there were no parades to welcome the men when they came back from Vietnam. No marching bands, no speeches, no fanfare. Most of us, our tours over, came home individually and were greeted only by a few friends and family. Some stayed in the service, but most of us returned to civilian life. We tried to get back to our lives as though nothing had happened, like we had awakened from a bad dream. We went to school, got jobs, tried to blend in and be like everyone else. But something *bad* happened and, as a result, we were not like everyone else.

Another generation – my generation – joined our fathers as veterans who “never talk about the war”. We share the same reasons – no one would understand, we had done and seen some things that we didn’t want to talk about, people were too busy to listen – plus, we had some reasons of our own. We had not served in a glorious war, we hadn’t saved the country from the scourge of communism. On top of all this, it was a war that America lost. Granted, the last U.S. combat troops were withdrawn two years before Saigon fell and the North Vietnamese have since admitted that they likely would not have won had America stayed in the war. Nevertheless, Vietnam vets were branded – even by many of those who had supported the war – as the first American soldiers to lose a war. Who wanted to hear war stories from the losers?

For many, worse than losing was the reception we got when we came home. I don’t know any Vietnam vets who expected – or wanted – to be treated as heroes because we didn’t believe we had done anything heroic. Just hard, ugly, often dangerous work in the service of our country. As it turned out, it was also thankless work – in fact, it was beyond thankless. I personally know several vets, including some of my OCS classmates, and have read about many others, who were spat

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upon, pelted with urine or called “baby killers” by anti-war demonstrators.

Granted, there were many in the “silent majority” who showed respect and appreciation for what the vets had done. But the silent majority does not determine images, the media does. And to the everlasting shame of America, for years after the war Vietnam vets were too often portrayed by the media – from the evening news to Hollywood – as maladjusted, anti-social losers who could not fit into a peaceful society. Many, perhaps most, were homeless. A disproportionate percentage of them were incarcerated. All were ready to explode. At best, they might deserve pity, but mostly they deserved scorn. Or so was their public image. Unfortunately, a highly visible minority of Vietnam vets contributed to this image, marching in parades and appearing at patriotic events clad in fatigues and jungle hats festooned with pull rings from smoke grenades, sporting shaggy haircuts, beards and drooping mustaches. The media choose to focus on them rather than on the vast majority of those who had served in Southeast Asia then gone on to quietly build successful lives.

As Max Hastings so eloquently put it in his book *The Korean War*, “Subsequent historical debate about the political merits of a national cause should never be allowed to detract from the honor of those who risked their lives for it on the battlefield.”

So for years, and even today, many Vietnam vets have had good reason to “not talk about the war” except to a trusted few, if at all.

Reflections on Vietnam

There is little that I can add to the history of the Vietnam War. Many books have been written on the subject, ranging from portraying Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese as flawless leaders and benevolent saviors of the oppressed people of the South to casting the American forces as the champions of freedom and the last bulwark against the spread of the horrors of communism. Some claim that Ho

outwitted the Americans at every turn, others say that we actually won the war, but our politicians gave away our victory. I would urge the interested reader to seek out a variety of books if they want to gain even a cursory understanding of this very long and very complicated war. The best single book I've found is, unsurprisingly, Max Hastings' *Vietnam*. About the only new thing I can offer is my experience, described in this book, regarding the operations of Mobile Advisory Teams, a subject which has, unfortunately, been neglected by almost all the histories.

Nevertheless, I will take this opportunity to share a few thoughts. First, I honestly believe that America's attempts to "save" South Vietnam from the communists were well-intended. Granted, there are legitimate views that Washington was more concerned about controlling the influence of Moscow and Beijing in world affairs than the welfare of the Vietnamese people. But one needs only to compare the lives of the citizens of western democracies to those of the subjects of communist regimes to appreciate that communism is worth opposing. If nothing else, as Hastings puts it, "Democracy allows voters to remove governments with which they are dissatisfied. Once Communist rule has been established, however, no further open ballot is indulged, nor has one been under Hanoi's auspices since 1954." Unfortunately, as with so many of America's good intentions, it would seem that the strategy and efforts to implement our good intentions in Vietnam somehow went awry. There were many, many reasons why the U.S. effort failed, and I will focus on just a few: fighting a totalitarian opponent; the North's ruthlessness and determination; lack of popular support for the Saigon regime; the North's intelligence advantage; and the propaganda war.

Fighting a Totalitarian Opponent

As Hastings points out in one of his earlier books about World War II, western democracies like America are always at a disadvantage when facing totalitarian opponents. Because of freedom of the press

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combined with the power of the voters, governments of democracies must wage war within much stricter constraints than dictatorships. This was certainly true in Vietnam, where communist techniques like assassination and torture were a standard way of doing business. I am personally aware of a typical incident in Quang Tin Province when VC assassins entered a village and threw hand grenades into a hut where local officials were meeting, killing a dozen or more. And unlike America, where magazines voiced anti-war messages by running whole pages of pictures of those GIs who had died during the preceding week, Hanoi's government treated their casualties as heroes of the state, not victims of an uncaring policy. Thus, goals like "body count", which America's forces were very adept at inflicting, were more or less irrelevant to North Vietnam. What was relevant, however, was the body count of American soldiers – North Vietnam's leaders knew that sooner or later, Americans would tire of losing young men, while the communist leaders were willing to take as long as necessary, no matter how many of their countrymen's lives it cost.

Totalitarianism accounts, at least in part, for a different sort of motivation on the part of communist soldiers compared to Americans. Certainly, the motivation that comes from knowing that one can be shot out of hand by one's own officers contributes to a level of motivation unknown to the soldiers of democracies. Coupled with this during the Vietnam Era was the absence of the political indoctrination of U.S. GIs that characterized America's earlier wars. If the reason for America's involvement in the war was discussed at all, it was in terms of the necessity of controlling the expansion of communism, which seems a pretty abstract reason for asking men to risk their lives. We were taught, at least to some degree, how to go about doing the job of fighting communists, not why the job was important. Given this, the wonder is not that Americans may have lacked some of the motivation of their opponents, but that they were nevertheless willing to risk their lives and on countless occasions to perform incredible acts of self-sacrifice and heroism. Two hundred and forty-eight Medals of Honor were awarded to American servicemen in Vietnam, one hundred and

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fifty-six of them posthumously.

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, placed as much emphasis on political indoctrination as they did on military training. Each soldier was expected to know as much about why they were fighting as they did about what it took to fight, maybe more. As is standard practice in communist armed forces, each unit had a political commissar, who made sure that every soldier understood the reasons for the conflict and was faithful to the teachings of the politburo and their beloved leader “Uncle” Ho Chi Minh.

American soldiers, being independent cusses, would have laughed at any “commissar” preaching to them about politics or urging them to revere Congress and the president, and to memorize passages from books extolling the wisdom of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon. The Army knew better than to try to impose this on recruits, despite having almost absolute power over them.

FSB Mary Ann provides an interesting contrast in the North Vietnamese and American views of how war should be waged. Fifteen dead VC sappers were found after the attack (the exact number of VC killed is unknown, since the enemy dragged away some dead or wounded comrades, as they almost always did). Most of the dead VC were buried just outside the firebase immediately after the attack so they would not become a health hazard. Somehow, five bodies ended up in the camp’s trash dump instead. Because the bodies were already getting “ripe”, the battalion executive officer ordered a captain to burn them where they lay. The XO and the captain either did not realize, or had forgotten in the heat of the moment, that burning enemy bodies is considered a war crime. An investigation led to the accusation that the brigade commander and the commanding general of the Americal Division had tried to cover up the issue, resulting in the end of their careers.

Here was a classic case of Americans’ endeavoring to conduct a “civilized” war played “by the rules” against an enemy that continuously disregarded almost all rules, except those that would benefit them. The

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North Vietnamese and the VC regularly violated the so-called rules of war by committing such acts as rounding up and murdering local civilian officials, school teachers, doctors and other such important people. The U.S., on the other hand, destroyed the careers of officers who violated lesser rules, like the burning of enemy bodies.

The U.S. was also hamstrung by rules of engagement that increased the difficulty of effectively engaging the enemy. Although the U.S. forces have been cited, often accurately, for the injudicious use of their tremendous firepower, there were many instances where this was forbidden for humanitarian reasons. For instance, during the battle for Hue's Citadel during Tet of '68, the use of U.S. artillery was severely curtailed lest precious historical artifacts be damaged. In Quang Tin, I witnessed calls for artillery being refused by the Vietnamese Tactical Operations Center because civilians were too close. When I travelled with an American Armored Cavalry unit, they were forbidden from firing the 152mm guns on their Sheridan light tanks – they might cause too much damage – thus neutralizing one of their most effective weapons. The VC and NVA, on the other hand, were not nearly so restricted.

The North's Ruthlessness and Determination

Inherent in totalitarianism is a level of ruthlessness on the part of leaders that Americans find difficult to understand. The rulers of North Vietnam unblinkingly demanded sacrifices from their people that no elected official would dare. As Hastings put it, "Beneath a veneer of benignity, [Ho Chi Minh] possessed the quality indispensable to all revolutionaries: absolute ruthlessness about the human cost of the courses he deemed appropriate for his people.... [General Giap, who headed the NVA, summed up the Northern leaders' views on the subject when he stated,] 'Every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die upon this earth. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means

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little.'...Ho Chi Minh's conduct reflected the same conviction, though he was too astute a politician ever to be recorded by Westerners as expressing it." While Ho's replacement, Le Duan, may not have garnered the same virtual reverence by the world press, no one in the media reported that his views, if anything, were even more ruthless than Ho's.

The Northern regime also continually lied to both the people and their own soldiers about how the war was going. American and ARVN casualties were routinely exaggerated, successes were overstated, and the false images of the communist leaders were constantly promoted by the state-controlled media.

Despite such setbacks as the huge military losses in Tet of '68 or the virtual starvation of the civilian population due to failed agricultural and economic policies, the determination of the leaders of North Vietnam did not flag. Throughout the entire length of the war, from the days of fighting the French to the fall of Saigon, the North's leaders never took their eyes off the prize: communist rule over all of Vietnam. Washington and Saigon were focused almost exclusively on military issues, but Hanoi was constantly mindful of integrating both military and political considerations. Whether they were ordering men to almost certain death on the battlefield or agreeing to terms at the negotiating table which they had no intention of keeping, everything was done with the goal of a unified Vietnam in mind, plus, of course, maintaining their own personal power over the people.

Compare this clarity of purpose to that of America's leaders. During the Johnson administration, there was always an overtone of "not losing" more so than winning. LBJ did not want to go down in history as "the president who lost Vietnam". This became more the case under Nixon, who, although claiming to have a "plan to win in Vietnam", strove to get the U.S. out of Vietnam without appearing to lose.

If anything, the goals of the South Vietnamese leadership were even less motivating than Washington's. While there were ARVN and Territorial soldiers who were driven by a desire for a non-communist, independent South Vietnam, the same cannot be said of many, perhaps

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a majority, of their leaders, both military and political. A disappointing number of South Vietnamese politicians and generals were more interested in lining their own pockets and those of family members or consolidating their own personal power than they were in fighting communists, which they viewed as the job of the Americans.

Lack of Popular Support for the Saigon Regime

We may have been trying to help the South Vietnamese *government* fight communism, but it was a different matter when it came to the Vietnamese *people*, as illustrated by a visit that *Mike Eberhardt* paid to a village chief's office. On the wall was a hand-drawn map showing each dwelling with a colored pin stuck in the roof. Mike was somewhat taken aback when he learned that "...one color represented a 'pro-government' supporter. A second color represented those who were supportive of the Viet Cong. The third color designated those who were actually VC." Mike felt that this was an arrangement that begged exploring:

I was a bit surprised at this and through my interpreter the chief explained. All the people in the village were neighbors and many were related who were on opposite sides of the war. They lived together in peace because they were not at war with one another. The rule was that those who were VC could go anywhere else and do what they had to do (mainly kill Americans and civilian leaders who opposed the VC). But when they were in the village they were not allowed to harm anyone. In other words, the "war" was somewhere else but not at home.

I think that is when I realized we would never win this conflict. Our government did not have a clue about what was happening on the level of the people. They were farmers and fishermen. They only wanted to grow their rice, gather their coconuts and fish to sell, and live in peace. I actually do not believe life changed for these Delta people after the government fell other

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than there was not more conflict and life returned to what it had been for generations.

Brian Flora's MAT advised and trained PFs and PSDFs in the Mekong Delta, where his experience was not unlike Mike's. "The home-grown VC and their families and our [PF/PSDF] recruits and their families knew who each other were, but, as they had elsewhere in Vietnam, had learned to live together in relative peace and harmony. ('Search and Avoid' captured the tone and energy of our operations.) The good guys owned the place during the day, the bad guys at night. Families on both sides were vulnerable to retaliation, so an overall accommodation with the village had been reached."

This accommodation didn't always hold, as when a detachment from a VC Main Force Battalion attacked the triangular mud fort in which Brian's MAT bunked with their PF/PSDFs. An alert sentry fired at a noise in the dark and "immediately, a barrage of small arms fire peppered the fort [along with a couple of RPGs, which, Brian learned, could penetrate the fort's mud walls]. Everyone started blasting back, including our one M60 Machine Gun, in the best imitation of a 'mad minute' we could muster. An on-and-off-again firefight ensued; it lasted maybe twenty minutes." The PF/PSDF suffered three killed and seven wounded, and there were many blood trails where the VC had dragged away their casualties. All in all, it was an action that was representative of the short, but bloody, fights between the Territorial Forces and the VC.

George Hatfield's experience as a MAT leader shows another aspect of the difficulty of trying to fight the VC. George's MAT was stationed in the Central Highlands in what George describes as "a very rich area with seven growing seasons and fertile land. The residences had plenty of food and apparently felt it was easier to give the VC the food they wanted rather than to fight them. We spent most of our time helping them develop and build defensive positions around their villages (which they had no intention of using!)." Supporting the VC was a small price to pay so the wealthy plantation owners could go on about their

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business.

My classmates who served in Vietnam, especially those who were advisors, are in virtually universal agreement with Mike, Brian and George – the great majority of South Vietnamese neither supported nor opposed either side in the war. They just wanted it to be over, and in the meantime, they wanted to be inconvenienced as little as possible.

In their lifetimes, the people in the southern half of Vietnam had known rule by the French, the Japanese, again by the French, and finally by an unstable and apparently uncaring government headquartered in Saigon. In all this time, the typical Vietnamese – especially those in the small villages and hamlets – could feel almost no connection with those in power, and had little loyalty to them. Instead, the focus of their lives, and the entities to which they were loyal, were their families and their local community. As long as their lives were not disrupted, they could tolerate the activities of those fighting on both sides of the war. And when the war did disrupt their lives, they tended to blame those doing the disrupting, whether they were VC, South Vietnamese, or Americans. Unfortunately, it was often ARVN and American troops who were doing more disrupting than the VC.

Hastings places much of the reason for America's loss on their inability to find a South Vietnamese leader who could connect with the common people. Nguyen Van Thieu headed the Saigon government during the period of America's greatest involvement, first as Chairman of the National Leadership Committee (1965 to 1967), then President (1967 to 1975). While an apparently honest and sincere man, he was unable to inspire the population to back his regime. He made little effort to include anyone outside the upper class in his government, and his popularity was not enhanced by his favoritism toward fellow Catholics, which represented a minority of the population. The result, as Hastings puts it, was that "Washington policy makers assumed that U.S. technology and firepower could substitute for the acknowledged absence of a viable political and social structure." In contrast, Ho Chi Minh was revered in the North and his spirit lingered with the population long after his death in 1969. Much of his image was

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fabricated by the communist regime, but it was accepted wholeheartedly, at least in public, by his people.

Granted, there were South Vietnamese who were strongly anti-communist, including my counterpart Lieutenant Dieu. Many anti-communists were former Northerners who had gotten a taste of life under Ho Chi Minh before moving south when the country was divided. But these were likely more the exception than the rule, even among the ARVN and the Ruff Puffs. Most of those in uniform were serving because they had little choice, not because of strong political convictions.

As communists have always done, the VC spun tales of how Vietnam would become a workers' paradise after the overthrow of the Southern regime. A strong VC recruiting tool was the idea of eliminating the hated landowners and giving the land to the peasants, an age-old hot button to the poor people both North and South. It wasn't until 1970 that South Vietnam, under pressure from Washington, implemented a competing program called Land to the Tiller – by then it was too late to catch up with the VC. Another concept that made the VC appealing to many was nationalism. The communists could take credit for driving out the detested French and reclaiming at least part of Vietnam for the native people. Many Vietnamese came to view America as simply a substitute for the French, and the South Vietnamese government as American lackies. The Vietnamese are nationalistic by nature, and having an independent Vietnam for the first time in eighty years had great appeal to some.

However, despite the lack of enthusiasm for the Saigon regime, there was never a popular uprising by the South Vietnamese population. During Tet of '68, the North had been counting on the South's peasants to rise up and join the attacks being carried out by the VC and NVA. Although a relative few did assist in providing food and medical aid and some cheered the North's soldiers as they passed by, almost none picked up arms. Evidently, even though many South Vietnamese were disillusioned by their government, there was not enough support for Hanoi to cause most Southerners to risk their lives.

The North's Intelligence Advantage

A fourth advantage possessed by the North Vietnamese was their much more effective intelligence network than that possessed by either Saigon or the Americans. They had infiltrated the South's military and government from the bottom to the top, to the tune of twelve thousand enemy informants, according to a Central Intelligence Agency report. At the lowest levels, my experiences in Quang Tin are likely representative. From the curious Vietnamese barber at the Payne compound who asked a few too many questions as he snipped Americans' hair to the RF company that encountered booby traps wherever they went, it appeared likely that there were VC informants throughout the system – but nobody seemed able to do anything about them.

50th Company classmate *Bob Fullmer's* MAT on the outskirts of Saigon was required to conduct six operations per week, so he personally went on almost seventy ambushes – and they never made contact! Finally, the Vietnamese officer in charge of scheduling the operations was put under investigation because he never plotted ambushes along a path obviously used by the enemy. Whether he was ever punished remains unknown.

Although this sort of VC infiltration down at the tactical level could sometimes be deadly, it was the embedding of members of the communist National Liberation Front in the highest levels of the South Vietnamese government that yielded the greatest results. A few examples from Larry Engelmann's *Tears Before the Rain – An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam* are illustrative. There was the man who was a colonel in both the South and (secretly) North Vietnamese armies working inside the American intelligence system in Saigon. Or the NLF supporter who wrote stories for *Time* magazine. And the special advisor to South Vietnamese President Thieu who met with both Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Nixon, all the while working secretly for the NLF.

Even more incredible is the case of a South Vietnamese congressman named De. When North Vietnam invaded the South in

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1975, De was a member of a delegation sent to Washington asking for \$300 million in military aid. He painted such a dismal picture of the South Vietnamese government and armed forces that the U.S. Congress, already inclined to wash their hands of the war, declined the request. De, yet another secret member of the NLF, sent a report to Hanoi which affirmed North Vietnam's conviction that there would be no more American involvement in Vietnam. The way was open for the final push on Saigon.

America has never been especially adept at spying and deceit in warfare – it evidently is not part of our national culture, where people find it difficult to keep secrets. In this war, deceit was everything, and the enemy was much better at it. The U.S. and our South Vietnamese allies were not successful in penetrating the very closed society of North Vietnam, where government agents watched everything. Additionally, when the country was divided following the French defeat, several million people moved from North to South to escape the communist government, and it seems likely that there were many VC operatives among them; conversely, there was little migration from South to North, leaving numerous communist agents and sympathizers behind to lead the fight.

The South Vietnamese government was hampered not only by infiltrators and VC troublemakers. There were also significant numbers of dissenters among the populace – from Buddhists who felt that they were mistreated by the Catholic-dominated Thieu administration (pictures of self-immolated Buddhist monks were splashed across U.S. newspapers and TV screens), to citizens who strongly opposed the war. While there were anti-war dissenters in North Vietnam, they were quickly silenced and got no media coverage in either their own country or America. While the Hanoi regime may not have had the *support* of the entire population, they did have near-complete *compliance*, which in totalitarian societies is good enough.

The Propaganda War

The Vietnam War was, up to that point, the most freely reported war in history. This, of course, applies only to the American, Western and South Vietnamese media. There was no censorship by MACV, Washington or Saigon.

Unsurprisingly, this gave North Vietnam a huge advantage in the propaganda war, both in the United States and on the world stage. As Max Hastings puts it, "...the world witnessed nightly on prime-time TV the excesses and ugliness perpetrated by US and South Vietnamese forces.... Hanoi released no comparable snapshots of cadres executing indigenous opponents by burying them alive or of Vietcong being mowed down in unsuccessful assaults. It broadcast only heroic narratives, together with heartrending footage of devastation inflicted by capitalist air power. The visual contrast between the war making of a superpower, deploying diabolical technology symbolized by the B-52 bomber, and that of peasants clad in coolie hats or pith helmets, relying for mobility on sandals and bicycles, conferred a towering propaganda advantage on the communists. In the eyes of many young Western people, Ho Chi Minh's 'freedom fighters' became imbued with a romantic glow. It seems quite mistaken to suggest, as did some hawks fifty years ago, that the media lost the war for the United States, but TV and press coverage made it impossible for Westerners to ignore the human cost or to deny the military blunderings."

While I agree with Hastings that the media did not *lose* the war for us, it seems to me equally true that they did almost nothing to *win* the war for us. A *free* press does not necessarily equate to a *fair* or *objective* press. There was little attempt to penetrate, or even report on, the iron hand by which Ho's government and the subsequent leaders of North Vietnam controlled information. As Max Hastings puts it, "Its status as a closed society invited shrugs from most Westerners, who felt this was merely the communist norm." To me, this says much about the Western media's tolerance of the totalitarianism of communism.

A famous example of the control of information was the 1966 visit

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to Hanoi by *New York Times* deputy managing editor Harrison Salisbury, an ardent opponent of U.S. bombing. Salisbury was taken on a closely controlled tour of sites that his Hanoi hosts claimed to be civilian targets of American bombs – homes, schools, a Catholic church. Many of these claims were later discredited. But Salisbury evidently accepted them with much less scrutiny than he would have applied to claims made by the U.S. government, and his dispatches from Hanoi gave the North a major propaganda coup.

While the media in American and other Western countries can be quite industrious in ferreting out lies when they want to, there was little attempt at uncovering the many lies that Hanoi told its own people and soldiers about deaths, battles won, or the state of the economy. Instead, whatever was reported by the government-controlled North Vietnamese media was pretty much accepted without question by the Western media.

On the other hand, while there was no “public opinion” in North Vietnam, Hanoi paid careful attention to American public opinion, at least as it was reported by the American media. They were heartened by reports of anti-war sentiment in the U.S., and knew that if they hung in there long enough, they would achieve victory.

The American media could also have been more careful about using the words “anti-war” or “peacenik” when describing anyone who spoke against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, as though these people were pacifists. The demonstrators waving North Vietnamese flags and the celebrities who posed with communist leaders can hardly be said to have been against war in general or the war in Vietnam in particular. There is little to no record that they did anything to persuade the North to stop their military or terrorist actions in the South, with which they evidently found no fault. Rather than being “anti-war”, they were at best indifferent to anything but America’s involvement, and some were clearly pro-war – they sided with the North. But according to the media, it would seem that they all were worthy of a Nobel Peace Prize.

The American style of war-making provided the North with much

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grist for their propaganda mill. From the start of the 20th century to today, the U.S. military has tried to minimize American casualties by overwhelming their enemies with awesome firepower. In Vietnam, where it was difficult to separate non-combatants from enemy soldiers, this firepower was often applied to South Vietnamese civilians, giving the communists yet another tool to recruit Southerners to their ranks and to gain sympathy for their cause from journalists. But the U.S. Army and Air Force had been designed to fight big battles against hordes of Russians invading western Europe, and it was difficult for commanders at every level not to rely on the firepower at their disposal.

The VC understood this and used it to their advantage by creating conditions which resulted in propaganda favoring them. Hastings quotes an ARVN general saying, "The enemy does not confront you. But he harasses you every night to give the impression that all the people around are hostile. Everyone becomes your enemy. But in reality it is only the same five or six VC who come back every night. And they plant punji pits, booby traps, land mines.... The VC make you nervous to the point that you lose your patience and say, 'I want to be finished with this'. And you have fallen into their trap. You kill the wrong people." Certainly, this inability to identify the VC and separate them from the rest of the population led to many of the well-publicized instances of frustrated GIs setting fire to the hootches of innocent Vietnamese and the killing of others.

Perhaps the single most important propaganda picture of the war was the one in which Saigon's police chief shot a captured VC in the head during Tet of '68. The VC had been accused of cutting the throats of an ARVN lieutenant colonel, his wife, six children and eighty-year-old mother. The photographer won a Pulitzer Prize for the picture, but regretted taking it. He claimed to have thought "absolutely nothing" of the event, and wished he had been there to take pictures when the VC murdered the ARVN officer's family. It is emblematic of the entire war that such photographs of South Vietnamese or American "atrocities" were broadcast world-wide, while those of similar actions by the North's soldiers are virtually non-existent, and those that did exist got

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little publicity in the West.

Such propaganda victories enabled the North – and, to a great extent, the American and other Western media – to, in modern parlance, “spin” Tet of ’68 into a huge psychological victory, rather than the military setback which it was (almost 20,000 NVA and VC had died; casualties were especially high among the VC, with some units being virtually wiped out). The Western world, including the American public, may have fallen for this, but apparently the North’s soldiers did not – morale sank, desertions and self-inflicted wounds mounted, and disciplinary action was taken against a growing number of men who did not display acceptable attitudes.

After Tet of ’68 the Americans and ARVN enjoyed many significant victories and advancements – in the Mekong Delta, VC movement was seriously curtailed by boat patrolling; increased infantry sweeps threatened former sanctuaries in many provinces; many units were forced to withdraw to Cambodia. Even the North Vietnamese, in a rare instance of openness, later acknowledged that 1969 was their worst year, in terms of both losses and morale. My own experiences in Quang Tin Province in 1970 and ’71 verify that there was much less fighting than in 1968-69 and earlier. Unfortunately, the American and other Western media had made up its mind that the North was winning and failed to report virtually anything positive about the American efforts.

Which all brings us to the question: How were we – with all our good intentions, wealth, and sophisticated armed forces – supposed to win this sort of war, a war in which the enemy possessed the advantages outlined above? I don’t know, and apparently no one else knew either. It certainly wasn’t for lack of trying. The American servicemen who fought in Vietnam did their best and paid terrible prices, but to no avail. Close to three million Americans served there. They suffered over 58,000 killed and 153,000 wounded, plus another 150,000 who were wounded, but not seriously enough to require hospitalization. Many have suffered health problems since returning home, and not just as a result of wounds. It is estimated that as many as 15% suffer from Post-

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Traumatic Stress Disorder. Exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides has been linked to a variety of cancers and type 2 diabetes among Vietnam vets (I am among them; although I never handled the stuff, I walked through areas where some sort of defoliant had been used). When America first became involved in what up to that point seemed a very small war, no one in their wildest imagination would have thought it could turn out like it did. Would the outcome have been different had we called on the American servicemen to fight even harder, suffer even more, and make still greater sacrifices? There is no reason to believe so.

In the end, North Vietnam won the war – but they may have lost as much as America did. A “middle” estimate puts North Vietnamese and Viet Cong deaths at around one million, compared to around a quarter-million South Vietnamese military deaths. The “body count” metric didn’t really matter in the long run – even allowing for exaggerations, we *did* kill a lot more of them than they did of us; but our leaders never quite figured out that there was no limit to the number of both military and civilian casualties the North Vietnamese rulers were willing to incur in order to conquer the South.

Much of the country’s infrastructure, North and South, had been destroyed; untold amounts of money had been spent. The North Vietnamese bosses, and today’s historians who defend Ho Chi Minh, insist that Ho was more of a nationalist than a communist, that the war was really about realizing the dream of a united Vietnam. But I can’t overlook the fact that Ho’s dream visualized a united Vietnam with *him* and his cronies as the rulers of a communist regime. If all he really wanted was to make his country “whole” again, he could simply have turned the North over to the South and war would have been avoided. But this evidently was never a consideration. Ho did not live to see his dream realized, but his successors did, and with them in charge. Once they had taken over the South, they continued the same communist, totalitarian rule as before the war. It would appear that Ho and his followers were, *at best*, equal parts nationalists, communists and power-

hungry egoists.

What did this mean for the average (former) South Vietnamese? It depends on who they were. For everyone, the war had ended and life could go on without the constant fear of bombs and bullets. They quickly learned, however, that instead of being liberated from an oppressive regime and united with their brothers in North Vietnam, they were now a conquered people. For those who supported the South Vietnamese government and their American allies, the fighting may have ended, but the violence did not. Over a half million were executed as “enemies of the state”. Hundreds of thousands more were, in the best communist tradition, rounded up and forced into “re-education” camps, where they would be inculcated in the one true way before being allowed to re-enter society. Many would spend years, even decades, in these camps; when they weren’t laboring, they were subjected to endless lectures or spent hours composing “confessions” of their crimes. When finally released from the camps they found themselves “unpersons”; denied work permits, they were reduced to begging or earning paltry wages under the table.

Those Southerners who understood what communism would bring tried to flee – by air or by sea. As the fall of Saigon loomed, many former South Vietnamese Army and Air Force pilots stole helicopters and flew their families to American aircraft carriers waiting off shore. In a symbolic end of America’s noble effort in Vietnam, U.S. sailors pushed the helicopters over the side to make room for more as they streamed in.

For many former Viet Cong, the end of war was accompanied by great disappointment. After years of risking their lives for the cause – and suffering over 20% of the communist fatalities – they found that there was little place for them in this new society, where important positions were held only by Northerners. This clearly was part of Hanoi’s plan all along. Their VC allies had been used and thrown away. A case in point is highlighted in Phillip Keith’s book *Firebase Illingworth*. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Thuon Lai commanded a VC battalion that

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assaulted FSB Illingworth in 1970, and he continued to lead his battalion for the rest of the war. His reward was to be demoted in rank at war's end and to spend the next four years tracking down his new "countrymen", including some of his former VC comrades, and packing them off to the camps. Finally able to stand no more of this disillusionment, he crammed eighteen relatives, including his wife and children, onto a small fishing boat and began a desperate journey toward freedom. They became a tiny portion of the almost two million "boat people" who fled Vietnam between 1975 and 1995. Lai and his family eventually ended up in Switzerland, a world away – both figuratively and literally – from his former homeland, for which he had so faithfully fought.

Mark Bowden makes a supporting observation in *Hue 1968*: "Still, there is no question that the Vietnamese people lost something precious when Hanoi won the war. One young woman from Ho Chi Minh City [the new name of Saigon], born decades after the war ended, told me that her generation looks to Seoul and at Tokyo and asks, 'Is this the way we would have been if we hadn't chased the Americans away?'... Vietnam remains a strictly authoritarian state, where speaking your mind, or even recounting truthful stories from your own experience can get you in trouble."

And for the average American? Vietnam has been characterized as America's most divisive war since our Civil War. Those of us old enough to truly remember the Vietnam Era are fast passing, and with us the hard feelings that still linger. For the most part, younger generations will never understand it, nor do they display much interest in doing so. It was an obscure war fought in an obscure place, for obscure reasons. One day, maybe even the use of "Vietnam" as a representation of a huge mistake (as in "we don't want to get into another Vietnam") will disappear, possibly replaced by some other, later war. The monuments will linger, but their meaning may fade.

As for me, personally, I have to say that serving in Vietnam was a valuable experience. Although I hated just about every moment I was

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there, in retrospect I gained much. Ironically, my initial goal was to stay out of the Infantry, first by attempting to join the Air Force, then hoping that my recruiter's advice would come true and I'd get a transfer to a non-combat branch like the Adjutant General Corps after OCS, and finally shooting for that mythical stateside assignment that was rumored at Fort Carson. Looking back (always easy, of course) I feel fortunate that I did end up in the Infantry, mostly because I can now say that I was in the "purest" form of the Army, the "pointy end of the spear", the Army's *raison d'etre*, the branch which all other branches exist to support (at least, this is what infantrymen like to think).

As I pointed out at the beginning, it must be kept in mind that my "valuable experience" is colored by the fact that I suffered no wounds and came home pretty much intact. Nor did I undergo the horrors of heavy combat, see close friends die, order men to their deaths or face the sort of moral decisions which have haunted many soldiers. I clearly recognize that I had it relatively easy, although not as easy as almost everyone who didn't go to Vietnam or never served at all. I suffered through what I thought was more than enough misery, fear, doubt, and loneliness. As an avid reader of military history, I gained a greater appreciation of what soldiers have gone through, and I realize that this is something that can only be learned first-hand. I stand in awe of those who have suffered through the real horrors of war to serve their country.

All in all, Vietnam added to who I am and helped me grow and better understand how the world works. And, as I have mentioned several times in this narrative, I learned life lessons that have stood me in good stead in the half century since.

Mostly – very importantly – I know that I fulfilled my duty as I saw it in a time when this was not easy.

FORT BENNING, GEORGIA – October 2017 and March 2018

October 2017

Our story ends where it began – at Fort Benning, a place to which I never imagined I would return. But return I did, and more than once. The first 50th Company reunion took place at Benning in October 2017. The genesis for the reunion started in 2015 when former 2nd Platoon members *Mike Thornton*, *Ken Knudsen* and *Paul Kochis*, who had kept in touch all those years, decided that it was time to track down other classmates. They found a few more, and those found more, and it took off from there. I got a call one evening in early 2015 from *Bill Thoroughgood*, who started off saying, “You might not remember me, but...” Not remember him? How could I forget my platoon-mate who had volunteered to be Student Mess Officer?

Soon, there was talk of a reunion. By the time we met in October of 2017, 147 of our 161 classmates had been accounted for. Unfortunately, at least sixteen had passed away in the years following the Vietnam War. While we had lost “only” two in Vietnam, no one can know how service in the war may have shortened the lives of the others. A handful had declined to be involved, apparently out of disinterest or not wanting to dredge up unpleasant memories. Fifty-three attended the reunion, most with wives or other family members.

All in all, we had a grand time. We met current Officer Candidates and were struck by how young they were (or maybe, by how old we had become, as it was brought home how much time had passed since we walked that path ourselves). We learned that Fort Benning now hosts the Army’s only OCS, and it produces just a fraction of the number of

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new lieutenants as it did in the 1960s. It is known as “branch immaterial”, meaning that it graduates officers for all branches of the Army, not just Infantry. The program is only half as long as it was in our day; candidates are commissioned after thirteen weeks, then go off for training in their particular branch. Of course, there are women in the program today. One result of this is a change in the OCS Alma Mater: “Benning’s School for Boys” has been replaced by “Benning’s pride and joy.” There have been many other changes – boots are rough-out leather and no longer need polishing, fatigues aren’t starched, low crawling is not used for punishment – although, we were relieved to learn that there are still plenty of pushups. The attrition rate is only about fifteen percent these days, due almost exclusively to medical reasons. Today the goal is to provide the help each candidate needs to successfully complete the program, not to weed people out (the weeding out is evidently done during the selection process before applicants are accepted). To us, this OCS certainly seems easier than back in our day. But we accept that it is a new Army, an all-volunteer force where trainees cannot be expected to put up with what we had to go through. Does that mean our version of OCS turned out better officers? No one can say, any more than the “ninety-day wonders” of my Uncle Dan’s time were better or worse officers than we were.

At the very impressive National Infantry Museum, our gracious hostess stepped up to each of us, looked us in the eye, personally thanked us for our service, presented us with a Vietnam War Veteran pin inscribed on the back “A Grateful Nation Thanks and Honors You” – then gave us each a hug. Most of these tough old vets struggled to hold back tears. For some, it was the first thanks they had gotten. It was a fitting close for their service begun so many years earlier.

Like the majority of the men who attended OCS during the Vietnam Era, most of us in 50th Company were not soldiers at heart. We were in the Army, reluctantly or not, because there was a war on. A relative few made it a career; some others extended for a hitch or two, then exited. But most, like me, left the Army as soon as our original commitment

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had been met. We were the classic Citizen Soldiers upon which America has relied since the Revolution – men who step out of their civilian roles to serve the country during a time of need, then just as abruptly exit and return to a life out of uniform.

Even though historians have treated the Vietnam War very differently than that “good war” of our parents’ generation, those who served have much in common with their World War II predecessors. In *Armageddon*, his account of the last year of World War II in Europe, author Max Hastings observed, “It should never be forgotten... that few of those wearing uniforms thought of themselves as soldiers. The tide of history had merely swept them into an unwelcome season’s masquerade as warriors.”

As I enter my eighth decade, this “unwelcome season” in uniform, which spanned less than three years, has accounted for just four percent of my life. A masquerade it may have been – and a short one, at that – but for me and a lot of others its importance was far out of proportion to its length. As unwelcome a season as it was, its lasting effect – mostly positive – has been beyond measure.

March 2018

I was fated to return to Fort Benning yet again, when, early 2018, we learned that one of our 50th Company classmates had anonymously donated a memorial to the company to be placed along the OCS Memorial Walk, which resides outside the barracks where OCS is now located. The Memorial Walk is a recent creation which honors various classes and individuals from the past and serves as an inspiration to current and future candidates. Dace and I drove to Fort Benning to join with seven other classmates, plus the sister of Jim DuPont, who had been killed in Vietnam.

The dedication ceremony was much more significant than I had imagined it would be, since it coincided with the annual meeting of the OCS Alumni Association, an organization with membership from all

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past OCS classes, not just Infantry. *Mike Thornton*, who had played a key role in getting 50th back together again and has served as our “chairman” in planning reunions and other activities, described the ceremony in an email to classmates:

When the dedication ceremony began just after 11:00 am, it was cloudy and cool enough to chatter your teeth. Ten OCS classes, all from between 1963 and 1969, had plaques dedicated that day. Our plaque, paid for by an anonymous classmate, is 4 feet by 6 feet and contains all of the names of the graduates and the cadre, as well as a separate section for our Vietnam KIA’s, James DuPont, and Tom Edgren.

After opening remarks by the CO of the OCS battalion and a brief history of the development of the Memorial Walk, each class had three minutes to speak to the small crowd that by my rough count was near 200 people. *Bill Yacola* had agreed to speak for our class and was slotted as the 10th of 10 class speakers. While our brothers-in-arms from other classes did a good job with their remarks, they were inevitably repetitive, and sitting outside was uncomfortable. In an inspired move, Bill had decided to read the poem, “A Company of Men”* by Brian Walrath. It was a triumph. His reading brought tears to the eyes of a number of the grizzled vets in the audience (including me) and was greeted with warm applause. Afterwards Bill was surrounded by people who wanted a copy of the poem and to shake his hand as well as the hand of Brian Walrath, who was in attendance.

It is difficult for me to find the words that adequately describe how honored I was by Bill’s reading of my poem at the ceremony, or how humbled I am by the thought that it may have – in some small way – given these vets something they had been missing all these years.

While visiting a number of Civil War battlefields, I’ve gazed in awe at the soaring monuments erected by the men who fought there. Clearly,

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they wanted the generations who followed to gain some understanding of what they had gone through and what they had accomplished. But it was not until I attended the ceremony at Fort Benning and saw our 50th Company memorial that I appreciated something larger – that these edifices do not simply commemorate what these men *did*, but, more significantly, *who* they did it with.

To the men of 50th Company, I owe a great deal. They helped me make it through OCS by setting the example to follow, offering encouragement when it was needed, finding humor in situations intended to be of the gravest seriousness. Reuniting with them in the last few years has greatly enriched my retirement years and been the impetus to write this book. Bless 'em all.

*See Appendix One

WHAT BECAME OF...

Kent State University

The May 1970 riots and shootings dealt a blow that would take Kent State years to recover from. Enrollment fell so much that some dorms were converted into office space. Kent State has recovered and there are annual ceremonies recalling the shootings, but how much today's students know about those times and the Vietnam War is open to question.

Before May of '70, when I would tell someone not from Ohio where I had gone to school their typical response was "*Kansas State?*" Afterwards, no one questioned me – they were all familiar with Kent State.

I returned to Kent State to receive an MBA in 1975 and also worked there in the 1980s at the Career Planning and Placement Center, where my office was in one of the converted dorms. Today Kent State has grown so much that I hardly recognize parts of the campus.

Infantry Hall and the "Follow Me" Statue

The building where we had attended so many classes is now unrecognizable to those who were in OCS in the '60's. It has been completely remodeled and is now the headquarters of the Maneuver Center for Excellence, which is what Fort Benning now calls itself since the headquarters for the Armor branch moved there from Fort Knox in 2010, combining Infantry and Armor under one umbrella. Soldiers from the 60's would probably find that many things about today's Army are as unrecognizable as Infantry Hall (such as the appellation

“Maneuver Center for Excellence”).

It was popular for newly-commissioned lieutenants to have their picture taken standing by the “Follow Me” statue on graduation day, with Infantry Hall in the background. Over the years weather took its toll on the original resin statue and a replacement was cast in bronze in 2004. The original now stands in a more protected spot at the entrance to the National Infantry Museum, also at Fort Benning. So the original “Follow Me” has much in common with us old soldiers – a little worn, retired, and needing some protection – but still standing, and passing on our work to newer versions of ourselves.

Quang Tin Province and Tam Ky

During the 1972 Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army advanced east across Quang Tin Province from the Laotian border to within fifteen miles of the coast. They were eventually pushed back to near the middle of the province, where they remained until they launched their final offensive in 1975, quickly overrunning all of Quang Tin.

Today, the province where I was stationed has disappeared. Oh, the rice paddies, mountains, jungles and sand dunes over which I tramped are still there, but Quang Tin no longer exists as a political entity. Some time after the fall of the South, it was absorbed back into the province from which it had been created thirteen years earlier. During its brief life, the province went from seeing heavy fighting to a relatively pacified place, but one in which danger still could lurk around every turn in the trail.

Tam Ky, the former capital of Quang Tin Province and the place where I lived in relative luxury when not in the field, is now the capital of Quang Nam Province, which absorbed Quang Tin. From the pictures I’ve seen on the Internet, there is little left that I recognize. According to Wikipedia, “there has been substantial development within the city [and it] is famous for Tam Ky chicken rice, which is

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recognized nationally, and many pristine beaches.” I remember the beaches, although after a couple of GIs were wounded by boobytraps, we were warned not to go there. I never ate the “famous” Tam Ky chicken rice.

Saigon

Not surprisingly, Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City after North Vietnam overwhelmed the South. According to pictures and videos, it is still a bustling city with traffic streaming day and night. Most of the scars of the war have disappeared, along with the hordes of refugees from the fighting.

Chu Lai

The huge American base south of Tam Ky was originally established by the Marines and then taken over by the Army. It was nearly abandoned after the war. Thirty years later, the government of Vietnam decided to develop the old airstrip into a commercial airport and has since invested hundreds of millions of dollars into facilities for passengers, cargo and maintenance.

FSB Mary Ann

The attack on Mary Ann sent shock waves throughout the Americal Division. Colonel Doyle, the commander of the battalion manning Mary Ann, received a formal reprimand for what was determined to be the lax security of the firebase. Once considered one of the finest battalion commanders in Vietnam and a rising star in the U.S. Army, his career was ended. Doyle died of a heart attack in March 1984 at age 52. Also ended were the careers of the brigade commander, to whom Doyle reported, and the commander of the Americal Division, a two-star

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general. In February 1993 this general's son visited the hilltop where Mary Ann had been located. All that remained of one of the greatest American losses of the Vietnam War were a few rusty artillery shell casings and overgrown depressions that had once been those bunkers that I thought seemed impregnable. Everything else had been carried away by the locals.

Case Gresey

The Team 16 S-1 clerk survived his two tours in Vietnam and made it home unscathed. He completed college and worked for the federal government until he retired. We began communicating in 2016 and Case has been extremely helpful in reminding me of events and people that I had forgotten, and adding stories of which I was unaware at the time.

George Ikeda

Our Team 16 S-1 left the Army upon his return from Vietnam in 1971 and developed a career in business. He spent several years in the Cleveland area, although our paths never crossed. In 2015 I decided to try to track him down on WhitePages.com, and found a George Ikeda who was an appropriate age. I gave him a call and it turned out to be the right George Ikeda. We have corresponded since, and in early 2018 we got together when he made a trip to Cleveland for the NCAA wrestling championship. We had a great time reminiscing, and one thing he clearly recalled was playing a lot of poker with Major Whitmeyer in the officer's club.

Hal Meinheit

The State Department Foreign Service Officer who served on Team 16 at the same time I was there, but whom I never met, survived some exciting times in Vietnam, including a spooky, nighttime meeting with the leader of a Vietnamese disabled veterans movement, who placed a Chinese pistol between them on the table at the start of the interview. After leaving Vietnam, Hal remained in the Foreign Service, retiring after thirty years of assignments that took him to Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Canada, and Norway, as well as domestic positions in Honolulu and Washington, DC. He currently researches and writes on the history of cartography. His most recent article is “The Man who Mapped Siam: James McCarthy and the Royal Survey Department” (published in *The Portolan*, Issue 105, Fall 2019).

Like many of us young Americans who served in Vietnam, Hal remains uncertain about what he calls “the hardest question anyone in government service can ask”: Did my work make a difference? While he believes CORDS itself did make a difference (but, like our entire effort in Vietnam, not enough to alter the outcome of war), he modestly says, “In the mere seven months I spent in CORDS, I did not make any lasting contribution.” But, “one small incident continues to make me believe my time there was not wasted.” On a visit to Hau Duc District near the middle of Quang Tin Province, the District Senior Advisor took Hal to a poor Montagnard village. Just as they turned to leave the village, “a villager grabbed my arm and said there were many sick and starving people in the village and nothing was being done to help them. He took me back into a side lane and showed me a house with many emaciated Montagnards lying inside, apparently near death.” The District Advisor looked into it, and “as it turned out, there were people dying in that village and for some reason the [Americans] had not been told, I don’t know why. Nor do I know why someone asked me for help or what I would have done if I hadn’t been able to understand

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Vietnamese.” Hal later learned that food and medical help had been delivered to the Montagnards, who were recovering. Hal should be proud of this “small incident”, which remains emblematic of the good things that America *did* accomplish in Vietnam, and the good intentions which originally took us there.

John Paul Vann

A year after I arrived home from Vietnam, John Vann was killed. In their March 1972 Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese sent the bulk of their entire army to attack the South on three fronts, turning what had been a war of “insurgency” into pure conventional warfare, with infantry and armor supported by artillery. Most U.S. ground troops had been pulled out, leaving only the Vietnamese and their American advisors. But, critically, they still had U.S. air support, including B-52 bombers.

One of the major objectives of the North was to attack from Laos through II Corps all the way to the South China Sea, cutting South Vietnam in half. Standing in their way was the province capital of Kon Tum, a large South Vietnamese force, and John Vann, the Senior Advisor in II Corps. Vann managed to keep the local Vietnamese commander from panicking, then finally assumed *de facto* command of the ARVN forces. At the same time, he was able to coordinate American and South Vietnamese air strikes. He was hailed as one of the heroes who stemmed the communist tide.

Vann was invited to Saigon to brief the top brass on his successful defense of Kon Tum. On the way back from that briefing, on June 9, 1972, his helicopter hit a grove of trees while flying in the dark. Vann, his pilot and an Army officer passenger were killed.

John Paul Vann is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. On the Vietnam Memorial you will find the names of the two men who were in the helicopter with him: the pilot, First Lieutenant Ronald E. Doughtie and the passenger, Captain Robert A. Robertson. However, Vann’s

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name is not with theirs. Since he was a civilian at the time of his death, he does not qualify. Even if his name were on The Wall, today it would probably be recognized only by people who knew him or those with an interest in the Vietnam War. An ignominious legacy for a man who was one of the greatest supporters of the people of South Vietnam and who sacrificed much, including his life, for them.

Mobile Advisory Teams

The last MATs left Vietnam in 1973, as part of the final withdrawal of American troops. The MATs and their Territorial Forces saw plenty of action during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive in 1972.

50TH COMPANY

I have not listed my entire graduating class, but the following does include most of those whose names appear in this book.

Bob Arnold

Soon after Bob left the Army he went to work for the Wall Street Journal. In 1973 he wrote an article titled “An Old Soldier Returns to Fort Benning”, about the changes in OCS that had taken place soon after 50th graduated. Unfortunately, we have been unable to track down 50th’s resident fastest man. There are many Robert Arnolds in the U.S., and all that we have found are not “our” Bob.

Dick Bardsley

Despite Captain Smith’s best efforts, Dick graduated with the rest of 50th. He spent a year in Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division and stayed in Army. One of the few non-college grads in 50th, he eventually completed his degree and retired from the Army in 1983. He had a second career in emergency services, first with the Colorado Emergency Management Board, then with FEMA. He is now retired for good and

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living in Colorado.

Ken Beatty

Ken, who had been advised to leave and enjoy what time he had left before starting OCS, spent time at Fort Riley, Kansas, then served with American units in Vietnam, first with the Ninth Division then with 101st Airborne. He stayed in the Army another year after Vietnam, then served with the Michigan National Guard for three more years. After receiving a Master's degree in English Education and completing all the coursework for a PhD, he taught at a community college on a Navajo Reservation in Arizona, then took a position with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He and his wife Katie both retired in 2006, and in 2015 moved to South Carolina. They have five children and eight grandchildren.

Ken was one of my roommates at Fort Benning, and I remember him as very positive and optimistic, as reflected in his favorite memory from OCS: "...the morning reveille, where units would come together in the shadows of early morning, singing (amazingly) in perfect unison and two-part harmony. It was emotionally and morally energizing." Certainly, Ken was not standing next to me at reveille, with my complete inability to carry a tune.

Craig Biggs

Apparently, Craig suffered no repercussions from failing to order "right shoulder arms" before "Forward March" during the OCS parade, since he became an OCS TAC after graduation. He served as a MAT leader in Vietnam. After leaving the Army in 1971, he developed careers in commercial banking and the electronics industry. In 2007, "the most destructive wildfire in Texas history" swept through their neighborhood east of Austin, and Craig and his wife lost their home and all of their possessions. When they went through the rubble, one of the few things they found was a fused lump of metal, which included his wife's charm bracelet and, says Craig, "intertwined was my son's birth bracelet from...you got it...the hospital at Fort Benning. Sticking out to one side was a blackened rectangle, about one-quarter inch by one inch, inscribed '50th Company.'"

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Herman Bowden

Our classmate who was dropped in the last week of OCS spent his tour in Vietnam with a Signal Battalion near Da Nang. He got an early out in September 1970, came home and started working for a railroad in Georgia. He worked his way up the ladder and spent twenty years as an engineer before retiring. Although he still has a bad taste in his mouth over being dropped, he also remembers “many of the wonderful comrades in the company. The bonds we forged through hardship and common experiences really meant a lot to me.” Herman attended the 2017 50th company reunion where he once again stood – proudly – with his old comrades.

Doug Cannon

As a result of the chest wound inflicted by an NVA sniper, Doug spent time in hospitals in Danang, the Philippines and Denver. Two months after being shot, Doug was declared physically fit for duty, even though he says, “I could hardly climb a flight of stairs.” The Army gave him the option of an early out, and he took it. He earned an advanced degree in English and secondary education, then spent thirty-five years teaching and as a school administrator. He retired in 2006 and is living in Utah and Nevada.

Sandy Carter

After his MAT experience with the Montagnards in Vietnam, Sandy came home in May 1971 and left the Army. He returned to North Carolina and worked in the textile industry and travelled extensively to Europe and the Far East. Upon retiring, he and his wife Barbara moved to a smaller community in North Carolina, where he plays golf, participates in volunteer activities and is active in his church. He remembers watching Neil Armstrong’s historic 1969 Moon walk from his hospital ward at the Fort Benning hospital after injuring his calf on a night exercise.

Scott Davis

On graduation day, Scott was approached by a personnel officer who asked if he wanted to “attend any schools before going to my next duty

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assignment.” All he would have to do is sign up for Voluntary Indefinite Status (“Vol Indef”) and they would send him to school, then to Germany for a year before going to Vietnam. Scott signed up for Psyop (Psychological Operations) school, which meant seven months training at Fort Bragg before he went to Germany. All this sounded good, since he “figured the war had to be over some day” and maybe he would miss it. When he got orders for Berlin, he asked “Where’s Berlin?” Apparently, the beaches of California had been just as isolated as OCS, and Scott had missed hearing about such events as the Berlin Wall going up.

In Germany, he was “assigned as a platoon leader in an infantry battalion where we were defending (tongue in cheek) the Eastern Front against the Red Army. Over time I worked my way up to Brigade HQ as a captain in G3 Training. I saw most of my friends who took the same route go off to Vietnam after a year. I kept waiting for my orders but none came. Finally, after two years, as Vietnam was drawing down they announced a RIF (Reduction in Force) and asked all officers who wanted an early out to submit paperwork. I was back in the US in March 1972.”

Scott returned to California, finished his MBA, received his CPA, and worked for a number of technology companies, ultimately becoming Chief Financial Officer in several private and public companies. He credits his OCS experience with helping him to succeed while working for some very narcissistic, demanding, difficult bosses.

Scott and his wife Liz live at the beach in Laguna in the same neighborhood where he grew up. He remains very active with golf, hiking, skiing, mountain biking and surfing, which he took up at the age of fifty-five. It has grown into a passion and he and two other seventy-year-olds have surfed in exotic places around the world.

When 50th Company started planning our 48th reunion, Scott volunteered to create a slide show of pictures from the old days set to music. It was a great hit, and he continued to be our “audio-video” guy for our Facebook page, our 50th Company website and our 50th year reunion, which was held in Washington, DC.

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Jim DuPont

In 2009, a private organization built the Ohio Veterans Memorial Park in Clinton, Ohio, about an hour from my home. One of the features of the park is the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall, on which are etched the names of the 3,095 Ohioans who died in Vietnam. Jim Dupont was from Canton, and his name appears on this wall. I've visited the memorial a couple of times and paused for a few moments to honor Jim and his service.

Mike Eberhardt

After being medevacked following his wounding by the booby trap, Mike had surgeries on his legs at hospitals in Bien Hoa and Saigon, then was flown home, where he was finally reunited with Robin. After a few more surgeries and a period of recovery, he served as Adjutant of a Headquarters Command to serve out the remainder of his commitment. He modestly says, "Somewhere along the way and for some reason I was awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star with a V device." He got an early out in May 1971, about the same time as many of us from 50th Company did. Mike adds, "I heard from Jon Jacobson's father in 1972 asking about his son's death. He had been able to find out nothing and was able to get my address."

After his discharge, Mike fulfilled his dream of attending seminary and became a Baptist minister. Either he was born with an adventurous streak or the Army gave him one, since he went on to serve as a missionary in Georgia (his home state) and the West Indies island of Grenada, where he witnessed the American invasion in 1983. He also held several ministerial positions around the western U.S. In addition, he has written two western novels and is completing a third.

For years, Mike struggled with undiagnosed PTSD, usually displayed as anger toward those around him, including Robin and his son. One day at a church retreat, the facilitator pulled him aside after a seminar. "Mike," he said, "You are the angriest person I've ever met." Mike was taken aback. He hadn't noticed. They talked long into the night, and the reason for his anger finally emerged – he was angry at himself because he had, in his mind, let his team down in Vietnam. As the team

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leader he was supposed to protect them, and he had allowed three of them die in the explosion. Since then, he became very angry, especially at those closest to him, if they didn't do things exactly as he told them to. How else was he going to protect them? Following this conversation, Mike sought further help to come to grips with his state of mind and his behavior. He apologized to Robin and his son, now grown, and has been able to get on with his life.

For over forty years, Mike thought of his time in the Army as what he describes as a “parentheses”, a blank period in his life that he chose not to recall. When 50th Company started to reunite, there may have been some hesitation to get involved over concern that it might bring back bad memories. But he found that the good memories outweighed the bad, and he became an active participant in the reunification of 50th Company. He attended the 2017 reunion and the dedication of the 50th Company Memorial in 2018. He and I have kept in touch and renewed the friendship that began at Fort Benning way back in 1969. He has mentioned several times that communicating with his Second Platoon mates has helped him tremendously in dealing with what happened in Vietnam – “You guys understand because you were there,” he says.

Mike has become our unofficial chaplain, offering prayers at both of the reunions we've held so far – the 48th at Fort Benning and the 50th in 1969 in Washington, DC. Mike has always been able to strike exactly the right tone with his prayers, and I've included two of them from the 50th reunion in Appendix Three.

Tom Edgren

Tom's name, of course, appears with Jim DuPont's on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Several years ago, I visited Springfield, Illinois to tour the very impressive Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. At Oak Ridge Cemetery, where Lincoln is buried, I discovered the Illinois Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Tom's name is etched into its surface among the almost 3,000 Illinoisans who lost their lives in Vietnam.

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Brian Flora

Brian came home from Vietnam in April 1971 and renewed his goal to become a diplomat. He used the GI Bill to attain a graduate degree in International Relations after which he and his wife Kay (they had met in grad school) served for thirty-five years in the Foreign Service. Says Brian, “Highlights were getting caught up in the Romanian Revolution (a real shooting war in the streets of Bucharest); serving as acting Ambassador to Switzerland for five months; enjoying our private dinner with former President George HW Bush; and hosting a reception for the U.S. and Canadian Supreme Courts at the Ambassador’s residence in Ottawa, Canada when he (the Ambo) was called out of town. We retired to our home state of Illinois in 2009.”

After retiring, Brian has been a full-time volunteer at several non-profits, organized and served as orator at Memorial Day and Veterans Day observances, and been a Civil War re-enactor. For the past couple of years, Brian has been the head of 50th Company’s Stories Team, collecting reminiscences from classmates (no small task, in some cases) to share with each other and, I might add, greatly enriching this book. Thanks, Brian.

John Foote

John, like many 50th company grads, went to law school after returning from Vietnam. He has practiced in the Washington, DC, area, first at the Justice Department, then for a time as the County Attorney for Prince William County, and finally in private practice for over thirty years. Before departing for Vietnam, John attended a special 13-week Vietnamese language course. He admits, “I was never fluent, and have forgotten most (who knew that Arlington County, Virginia, would become more Vietnamese than Saigon — I even ran into General Ky [a former Vice President of South Vietnam] there once).” John has recounted another coincidence that took place in 2016, “Just this week I had a new client come in for a consultation — Lam Nguyen in the Americanized version of what would have been Nguyen Lam in Saigon. Lam told me and my partner that he had been 11 when Vietnam fell,

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and that his father, an enlisted soldier in the motor pool, came rushing home and told the family to go to the docks. Five climbed on the family Vespa, and two sisters rode a bike. When they reached the water, his father found a friend and paid him in his last piasters, and they were permitted to board a barge. Saigon fell the next day. Lam, as good an American as any of us, has spent the last many years as a Fairfax County cop.”

It was John who arranged to have the document about 50th Company placed in the Congressional Record in time for our 2017 reunion.

Bob Fullmer

Bob, who clobbered a TAC with the muzzle of his M14 but made it through OCS anyway, left the Army after his Vietnam service and returned home to New Jersey, where he taught high school for a couple of years. He went back to school for his master's then to law school. Subsequently, he worked for the VA and then for the Army (this time as a civilian) where he was involved in weapons development. After that he was with several large defense contractors which made things like pumps for nuclear subs, GPS systems for satellites and maneuvering gyros for tanks – pretty heady stuff!

Now retired, he and his wife Judy live in a small town west of New York City, where he spends his time managing their rental properties and travelling.

Mike Gilpin

Although Mike recovered enough from his helicopter crash to continue flying and finish his Vietnam tour, he has “lived with back pain ever since and have also suffered seizures since 1981 (controlled by medication) from the closed head wound [resulting from the crash].” He left the Army when he got home from Vietnam, then joined the Mississippi National Guard and continued flying. In 2006, he retired as a colonel.

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Pete Golka

Pete was wounded twice in Vietnam; the second wound was bad enough to send him home. He developed a long-term career in the paints and coatings industry. Pete, a great baseball fan who could rattle off the lineup of each Boston Red Sox's team from the mid-50s on, continues to love the sport in his retirement.

George Hatfield

My platoon-mate who recalls Tom Edgren wondering at our Senior Party whether he would survive Vietnam, was discharged from the Army the day after he arrived back in the States from Vietnam. He then went on to be a teacher and coach, eventually becoming a school superintendent. At the same time, he worked his family farm after his father died, and still does today. George was one of the married candidates at OCS and his wife Beverly had tailored the fatigue pants of several candidates. At the 2017 reunion, I teased her about using defective thread – my fatigues had shrunk within just a few years after I left the Army, especially around the waist!

Bob Hines

Despite his infraction of throwing away the platoon rock in OCS, Bob made it through and received a commission in Armor. He served in Vietnam's Quang Tri Province as a tank platoon leader and battalion operations officer. Like most of us, he got an early out and returned to civilian life, where he was in the landscape business until retiring in 2008. Bob is an avid gardener, and every spring he and his wife plant 400-500 plants they grow over the winter in their greenhouse. He recalls OCS as "a maturation process for me. Viewing it through 70-year-old eyes, I now understand the priceless value of that experience."

Terry Hummel

Terry went to flight school after OCS and I happened to run into him in Tam Ky, when he was flying around some Army brass. He stayed in the Army and served at nine different posts in the U.S. plus Germany and Saudi Arabia (during Operation Desert Storm). He has now retired to the family farm in Iowa, where he also worked as a

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county Emergency Management Coordinator for 15 years. He still laughs about the pogeys runs his wife, Wanda, made for 50th Company.

Don Huskins

50th's resident Captain Smith imitator served as a MAT leader in Vietnam, where he observed that the NCOs' job "was to keep the LTs alive. Damned good men." His post-Army career was as a county attorney in Georgia. Although he suffered from several health problems, some of which were Agent Orange-connected, Don made it to the 48th reunion. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend the 50th reunion, and he passed away shortly after that.

Ken Knudsen

Ken, who served with Jim DuPont in Vietnam, stayed in the Army for five more years then, as he puts it, "climbed the corporate ladder" with companies like Proctor and Gamble and Frito-Lay. Ken was instrumental in getting 50th Company back together.

Paul Kochis

Paul, one of the starving lieutenants fed by Mike Eberhardt and his wife Robin at Fort Carson, served in Korea as a Division Redeye [surface-to-air] Missile Officer. After leaving the Army in May 1971, Paul pursued his J.D., then practiced law before moving over to investment management. In the meantime, he served on 18 non-profit boards. After retiring, he spent almost seven years researching, writing and promoting a two-volume history of the Incas. Paul, along with Ken Knudsen and Mike Thornton, was a key figure in re-uniting 50th Company.

Clarence Kugler

Clarence, the 50th Company "character", managed to survive his antics and graduated with the rest of us. Upon graduation, he signed up for the "Volunteer Indefinite" program, which extended his commitment in exchange for a Signal Corps commission. His first assignment was in New York City as a motion picture producer working on the Army's TV show "The Big Picture". Then it was off to the

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Pentagon where he conducted inspections of Army Research Centers. He was sent to Vietnam in July, 1971, after most of his classmates there had come home, and spent his tour working primarily in supply, but his final assignment was producing a monthly magazine for the Da Nang Support Command.

He came home in 1972 and went to work for OSHA, where he worked for forty years. Meanwhile, he joined the Reserves as a captain, but he failed to complete the required education coursework, so he had to leave the Reserves in 1983. He found he missed the Army, so he joined another Reserve unit in 1989 – this time as an NCO. Says Clarence, “I guess that makes me an Ass-Backward Mustang!” A “mustang” is an officer who began his career as an enlisted man, then was promoted to the officer ranks. His unit was activated twice during the Iraq War and he spent time patrolling the streets of Baghdad, trying to avoid IEDs. At the age of 59, CNN interviewed him and called him “the oldest soldier in Iraq”.

Clarence finally retired from the Reserves in 2005. Those of us who were surprised to learn of his long-term Army service were equally surprised to learn something else: “At OCS,” says Clarence, “I fell in love with running and made it my life-long hobby.” Running? A hobby? Who would have thought?

Joe Marbury

In 2017 I had a phone conversation with my platoon-mate with the soft southern drawl – the first time we had spoken since graduation day 48 years earlier. When I asked about his Army service, Joe told me, “I didn’t do anything different than the rest of you guys.” But I quickly found out that Joe’s story *was* quite a bit different than the rest of us guys. I was aware that Joe had been in the Navy before OCS, but I learned a few things I hadn’t known before. For one thing, Joe was thirty years old when he went through “Benning’s School for Boys”. I knew he was older – and probably wiser – than the rest of us twenty-somethings, but not *that* old, which must have made putting up with the BS aspects of OCS a lot harder. But Joe had a special motivation: He wanted to fly. He had joined the Navy right out of high school and was

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told that if he completed two years of college he could be accepted into Naval flight school. For one reason or another, this didn't happen, and Joe left the Navy.

Before long, he decided to join the Army with the specific goal of becoming an officer so he could go to flight school, which apparently his recruiter had promised him. After graduating from OCS, he reported to flight school with five or six other 50th Company grads – and was promptly told that he was too old! At that point Joe decided he might as well volunteer for Vietnam, since he figured he was bound to go there anyway. He went to Jungle School, where he ran into our old TAC, Lieutenant Dent. The first or second day started with a morning run. After they had gone 100 yards, Dent said to Joe, “This is ridiculous.” They dropped out and didn't go on any more runs. After Jungle School, Joe served as a recon platoon leader in the 9th Infantry Division, seeing plenty of action, including forays into Cambodia, where Americans officially did not go until later in the war. He extended for another year in Vietnam, then left the Army in 1971.

After the Army Joe worked for the Department of Defense until his retirement. He now lives in Sparta, Georgia, where he plays a lot of golf.

Peter Nowlan

My OCS roommate who contracted hepatitis in Vietnam, recovered, left the Army and attended law school. After receiving his JD, he worked as an Assistant Attorney General for Vermont, then opened his own practice. He has been very active in the community, serving on the town council, school board, and as a member and president of the chamber of commerce. He also was a director and vice chair of a local health care organization. A few years ago Peter went to a local Vietnamese restaurant and decided to try out his very rusty language skills. He told the owner that he had served as an advisor in Vietnam, and the entire staff became very excited and began scurrying around waiting on his table hand and foot. He found out later that he had used the wrong inflection when he said “advisor” and the Vietnamese thought he had said “ambassador”.

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John O'Shea

John graduated with another company after being recycled from 50th. He says being recycled was “very hard”, especially since the company he joined was not very receptive to him. I can imagine that trying to break into a unit which already had an established culture would be a challenge. My hat is off to John and any other candidate who had to go through being recycled. Their achievement in sticking it out under those circumstances seems even greater than making it through without this extra burden. John served in Korea then left the Army to attain a Master of Science in Marine Science and worked as a marine biologist in New England. He also joined the Army Reserve and eventually returned to active duty and held a number of Pentagon assignments, including teaching at the Army War College. After retiring in 1999 as a colonel, he held a number of high-level government positions with the Office of Personnel Management and NASA. John is a member of the OCS Hall of Fame – quite an accomplishment for a candidate who had been recycled.

Steve Roeder

After surviving playing a dead cockroach during shock reveille and having a snake draped around his neck on the Ranger Problem, Steve went to Rotary Wing Flight School, and eventually piloted Hueys with the First Air Cav in Vietnam. He left the Army as a captain and worked for IBM for thirty-one years before retiring.

Rod Seefeld

Rod made it through OCS, served at Fort Carson with a number of 50th Company grads, and served on a MAT near the DMZ. Despite being blown off an APC, he says he “was blessed to have a quiet year.” He got an early out, left the Army and came home to get married and graduate from law school. Rod says he is now “substantially retired”, and is active with local civic organizations as well as the Bar Association, plus he plays softball with a number of teams.

Rod adds, “Many times I asked myself whether OCS was worth the effort. Today I can answer YES.”

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Captain Thomas J. Smith

Our OCS Company Commander retired as a Major in 1983. He then began a second career in teaching and coaching. He helped to establish a school for at-risk students and also was an active veterans' advocate. In 2005, he retired from teaching and was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma just three months later. For eleven years he endured numerous chemo and radiation treatments, plus had a stem cell transplant. He died in 2016. Barbara Smith, the Captain's wife of 51 years, attended our 2017 50th Company reunion. Terry Hummel's wife Wanda had known her well at Fort Benning, where she helped the candidates' wives prepare for the life of marriage to an Army officer. Terry and Wanda had managed to track her down and invited her to the reunion. She had served as a nurse assistant at VA hospitals for twenty years. As Wanda wrote to the rest of the class before the reunion, "So there you have it. Two lives lived serving, teaching, coaching and helping or gracing others. Could Terry and I raise a glass in a formal setting, we would sincerely and simply say, 'Bravo! Thank you! Well Done!'"

While attending OCS certainly meant a great deal to me and my classmates, we would be surprised to learn how much commanding 50th Company had meant to Captain Smith. At the 2017 reunion, Mrs. Smith presented to *Ken Sutton* something she had found among her husband's memorabilia. It was the "military letter" that the Captain had ordered Ken to write, carefully preserved all those years – a memento of a period in his life that must have been more significant to him than we would ever have thought at the time. Turned out there was more to our beloved Captain than he let on.

Bill Snodgrass

Our stiff-kneed OCS classmate was transferred to the Quartermaster Corps and eventually got orders for Vietnam. But an opening arose in Thailand; he would have to extend for a year, but he was able to take his family, which was fine with him. After two years, he again got orders for Vietnam, but fate once again intervened when the Army told him they had promoted too many people to captain and offered him an early

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out. Bill returned home and served as an Agricultural Biologist and as Assistant Agricultural Commissioner in California, retiring in 2003. The value of teamwork that he learned in OCS has remained with him all his life.

Ken Sutton

Having survived his 5,000-word “military letter”, Ken graduated and was assigned to Germany. In 1971, he was sent to Vietnam, where he commanded a MACV detachment. He stayed in the Army and retired in 1992. Contrary to those of us who spent two weeks in Jungle School in Panama, Ken was stationed there for 40 months and “loved it” (but it must be remembered that Ken also had a good time in OCS).

Burt and Kief Tackaberry

The Tackaberry twins made the Army their career. Both served in Vietnam, where Kief was wounded. Burt rose to brigadier general, while Kief retired as a colonel. One evening, probably in the early 1980s, I was watching the news when a report came on about helicopter training. Who should appear but LTC Kief Tackaberry! I spoke to him about this at the 2017 reunion, and he told me that at the time he was a battalion commander of a unit that was testing new night flying goggles – “very scary stuff”, he said, with helicopters flying “nap of the earth” in the pitch-black night. He added something that I didn’t recall from the newscast. He had mentioned to the reporter that the goggles had severe limitations and the Blackhawk helicopters had sometimes actually bounced off the ground, but the choppers were so strong that they could take such abuse. Kief hadn’t seen the final report, but after it aired, he got a call from his father, a retired lieutenant general. “Kief,” said his dad, “you should know better than to complain about the equipment.” “Complain?” replied Kief. “I was trying to get across how well-built the Blackhawks are.” But the reporter had twisted this into making it seem like Kief was complaining about the dangerous night vision equipment the Army was issuing. “I never talked to a reporter after that,” says Kief.

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Mike Thornton

Mike has been not only instrumental in getting 50th back together, but has also been the leader who kept us on track as we found others, prepared for our reunion and collected stories from as many classmates as we could. Jim DuPont's family had requested that Mike escort Jim's body home from Vietnam. Mike flew back in his dirty fatigues and jungle boots, having been extracted directly from the field. As he sat alone at a table in the Oakland Army Terminal mess hall, he heard a junior officer at another table tell his mates, "Look at his boots." The dirty boots told them he had been yanked from the field and was headed for a funeral. After being fitted for a new dress uniform, Mike went off to do his somber duty. Mike says, "It was a sad, difficult and emotionally charged week. And even more difficult was going back to Vietnam to my platoon. My nearly-71-year-old self tells me that I should have called the Pentagon and spoken to one of the officers on the Lieutenant's Desk and explained that I was in no emotional shape to return to my previous job. It may not have worked, but my 24-year-old self never even considered this course of action." Mike returned to Vietnam to serve the rest of his tour.

After leaving the Army in 1971, Mike worked for several different large high-tech companies. In 2002, at the age of 55, he suffered the fate of many when he was laid off. He did contract work for several years then joined another company, from which he took early retirement in 2015.

In my introduction to this narrative, I said that when our class started reuniting in 2015 a classmate urged me write down my stories about OCS. Mike was that classmate. Actually, he sort of trapped me into it. I had mentioned to him how important it was that we document our stories for future generations and he replied, "That's a great idea. Why don't you kick it off by writing down *your* stories and sharing them?" Well, he had me there. So I suppose Mike gets a portion of the credit (or blame) for the tome you have before you.

Bill Thoroughgood

50th Company's Student Mess Officer applied for a branch transfer

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and, despite Captain Smith's warning that no one would get such a thing, was commissioned in Armor. He served as a platoon leader with an armored cavalry regiment, first in III Corps outside Saigon, then in I Corps at the old Marine base at Khe Sanh. He got an early out in July 1971, went back to college to get a Master's Degree in Education and taught high school for 33 years.

Lieutenant Anthony J. Travaline

Our popular Second Platoon TAC passed away in June 2017. One thing we didn't know was that his nickname was "Travis", or perhaps this was coined after we served with him. We had always referred to him as "Trav", behind his back, of course. His obituary states "If you heard laughter, Travis was somewhere nearby; if not in the middle of it. He could initiate a conversation with a total stranger then find he made a lifetime friend. A very gentle man of 5'4" with the magnetic personality of someone twice his size. Travis will be remembered as being energetic, high spirited, delightfully cheerful and forever playful." Even when he was trying to act the stern TAC, this couldn't help but show through.

Comments from 50th Company members upon learning of Trav's death included "a good guy, one of our better TACs, and a credit to the Army"; "a good mentor and helpful"; "among all the TACs, I thought he was best"; and "he was a character and not one to be easily forgotten".

Bill Yacola

Bill and I were in the same platoon in both Basic and OCS (and maybe AIT, but neither of us is sure). We also both served at Fort Carson. Bill then went to Vietnam as an advisor. Although Bill says much of his Army service was a "blur", Vietnam "left 3 indelible imprints on my brain that I remember as if they happened yesterday:"

My flight to Vietnam. I don't remember the day or date my flight left from Oakland yet I remember most everything else.

Our first refueling stop was in Alaska – the mountains were so huge and rugged. Our next refueling stop was in Yokohama, Japan. The first time I stepped on foreign soil. Then we left

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for our destination – Vietnam. I vividly remember the pilot announcing "Gentleman we are now over Vietnam." I was sitting by the window and looked out. I saw two flares being deployed lighting up the night sky and then a series of many tracer rounds! Silently I thought – Oh my God! Talk about a reality check. We landed in early morning – it was night and hot! After some preliminary processing in we were sent to a barrack to find a cot to get some sleep. When I woke the next morning the first sight was a Mama-San. A grandmotherly woman sweeping the floor – startled me. My first contact with a Vietnamese citizen.

Poverty – a real 3rd world experience. For the Vietnamese this was their normal. My MACV team probably like others was involved with the area residents. We bought food from the locals & lived among them. Small huts or shacks had multiple families (maybe 200 square feet in size); dirt floors; no indoor plumbing or running water. The outside was their bathroom. To this day I still know how fortunate & blessed I am to be in USA.

The Orphans. Our small compound was near the city of Vung Tau – an in-country R&R area. Stories had it also an in-country R&R center for the VC & Regular Army. Truth or not, there were lots of bars; women and Saigon Tea [a strong, often Kool-Aid flavored beverage served in shot glasses] sold! And lots of babies born! Visiting an Orphanage was tough. There were 2-3-4 toddlers & infants per crib if that is what you would call them. The babies were predominately "round eyes" as they were called. And the locals had a strong dislike for "round eye" babies – they had little chance of being adopted!

Bill came home, left the Army, and spent the next 42 years in sales and territory management with the world's largest supplier of dental products. For many years he felt that, despite his very successful career, his time in the Army gave him a late start in the business world. Only later in life has he come to understand the value of his Army experience.

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Your Humble Narrator and my Wife, Dace

A couple of months after leaving the Army I found a job with The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Akron. Dace transferred with the Ohio State Employment Service, but soon moved on to a career in information technology. We have lived in Northeastern Ohio ever since. Dace worked for several large companies before striking out on her own as a consultant/contractor, from which she recently retired. I worked in human resources for a variety of companies large and small before settling into a twenty-year career in Outplacement, helping displaced employees find new jobs. I've been able to apply several of the lessons I learned in the Army – especially in Vietnam – to my work. I'm now enjoying the good life of retirement.

On display on my wall are the few medals and ribbons which I received (no more than other Infantry officers who served in Vietnam, and none for bravery). My Army greens and dress blue uniform hang in my closet, unworn since I left Fort Carson in 1970. I hesitate to try them on since I'm sure they have “shrunk”, just like the fatigue pants about which I complained to Beverly Hatfield.

Even with life's ups and downs, overall we've lived a happy, comfortable life. Perhaps we've enjoyed it all the more because of the sacrifices we made in the service of our country. Since 1971 we've been trying to “make up” the year we lost in Vietnam.

PICTURES FROM OCS

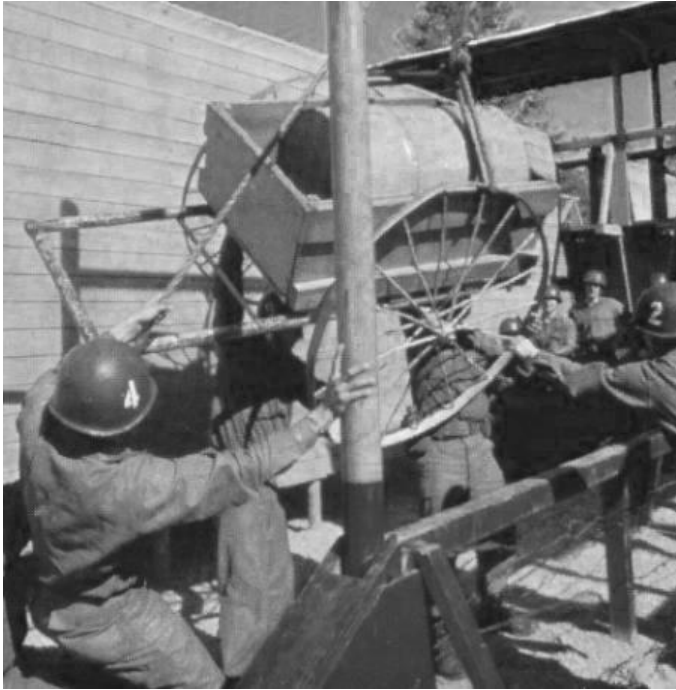


Aerial view of a small portion of Fort Benning in the 1960's. The very large OCS complex was housed in the eight U-shaped barracks on the left, two companies in each building. 50th Company barracks is at the bottom left. The Airborne towers are at the top middle in the huge dirt circles. Infantry Hall is at the bottom right.



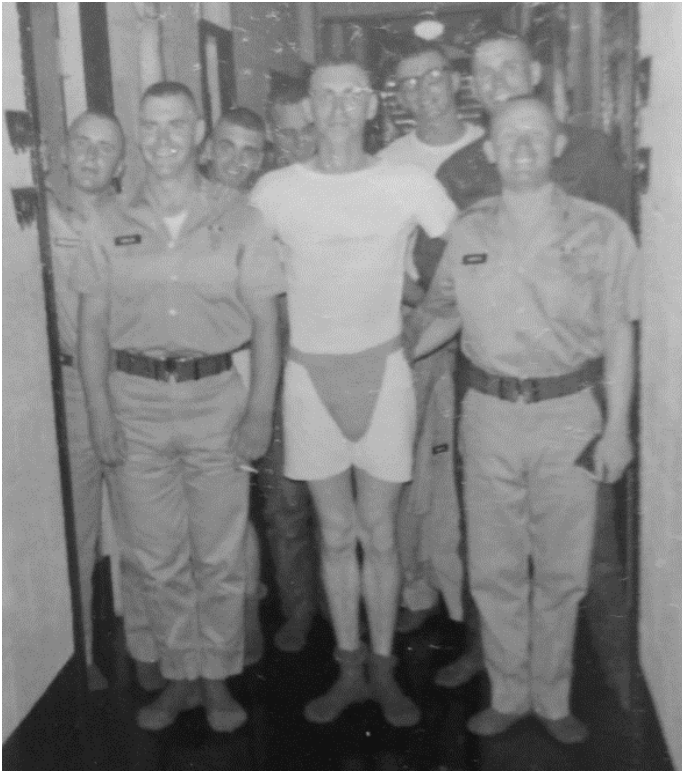
Second Platoon members in front of our barracks. This is likely on the day we “turned blue” (became Senior Candidates). Scarfs with OCS emblem were worn by seniors. The tree was planted by platoon’s area beautification squad, who also built the 50th Company sign at left.

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Typical Leadership Reaction Course exercise.
Photo from the OC 24-69 Class Book.

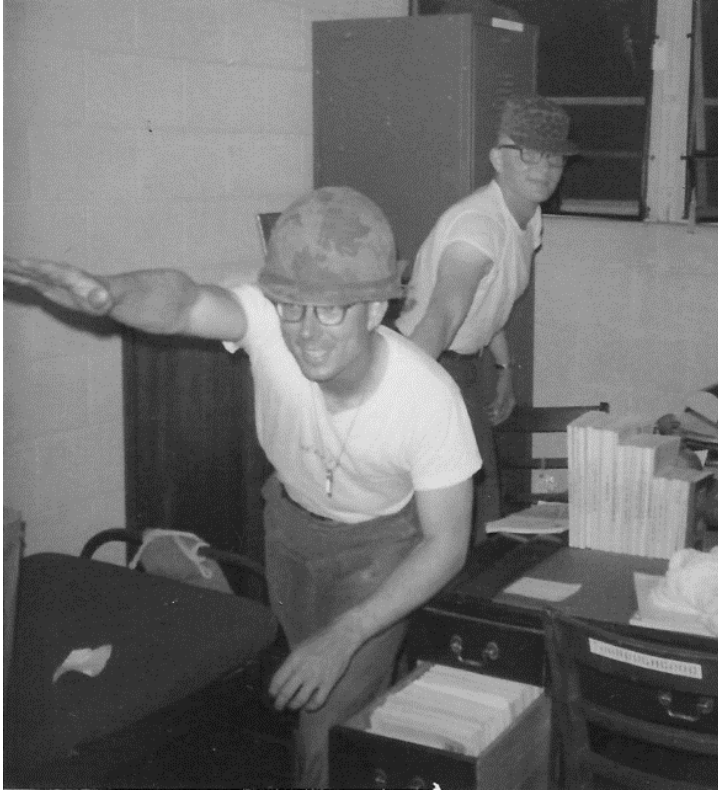
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Hijinks in the barracks. “Infantry blue” scarf, designating underclassmen, is being worn correctly by candidate at right front, while Mike Eberhardt, center, demonstrates an unauthorized alternative. Peter Nowlan, to Mike’s right, enjoys the laugh. At right in back row are me (in glasses) and Tom Edgren. Who could have predicted that among this group there would one day be a doctor, a minister and three lawyers? Wearing socks with no boots protected the polished linoleum floor.

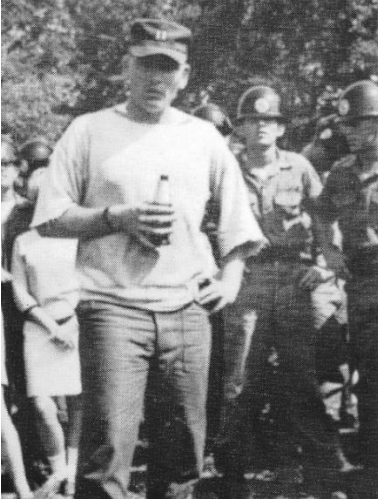
Ken Knudsen photo.

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Roommate Ken Beatty performs a “Follow Me” as I attempt to restrain him. I’m wearing the soft Ranger hat that we wore during the Ranger Problem, our most extensive field exercise. It was a relief compared to the heavy steel pot. We had to learn much of the material contained in the many manuals on the desk and in the drawer. The messy room will need to be “standing tall” by inspection. *Ken Knudsen photo.*

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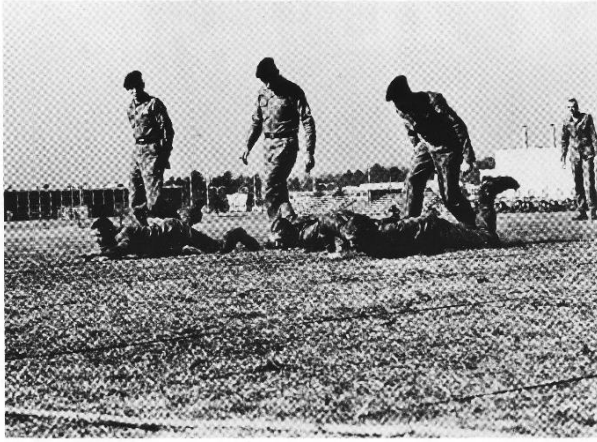


CPT Smith in a more relaxed moment. 2LT Traveline, 2nd Platoon TAC.



Jim Dupont and Tom Edgren, our classmates who died in Vietnam.

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Rangers supervised much of our physical training. Here they put some candidates through low crawling. Personal attention was, shall we say, “helpful”.



Typical work detail to ensure that the company area is neat and orderly – plus a good way to keep idle candidates busy.
Photos on this page from the OC 24-69 Class Book.

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Clarence Kugler slumbers in a sweltering classroom while the surrounding candidates struggle to stay awake.



Kugler wasn't the only one. The Tackaberry twins after a long field exercise.

Photos on this page from the OC 24-69 Class Book.

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On the 106mm recoilless rifle range. Rod Seefeld is driving. I'm at right rear. Joe Marbury standing at right. Starched fatigues, polished belt buckles, straight "gig line", "Follow Me" patch on left shoulder.

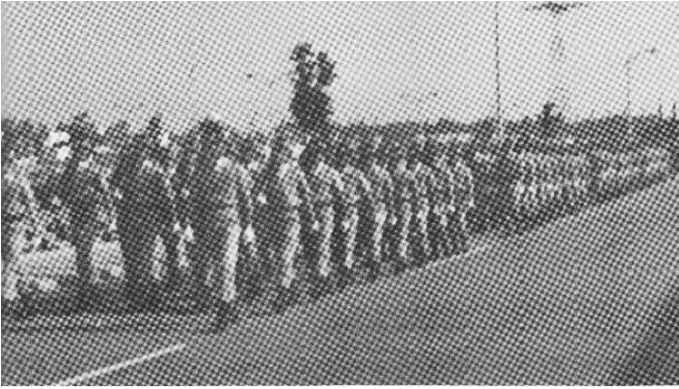
Ken Knudsen photo.



50th Company logo painted on our blacktop area where we formed up every morning. The tiger was added after our company won Tiger Tactics "on the basis of enthusiasm, attitude and performance in classes throughout the cycle". A proud moment.

From the OC 24-69 Class Book

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50th Company marching to the parade ground on the day we “turned blue”. Note the Airborne Tower looming in the background. *From the OC 24-69 Class Book.*



My graduation picture, taken a few weeks before graduation. Most of us are smiling in these pictures since the end was in sight. *From the OC 24-69 Class Book.*

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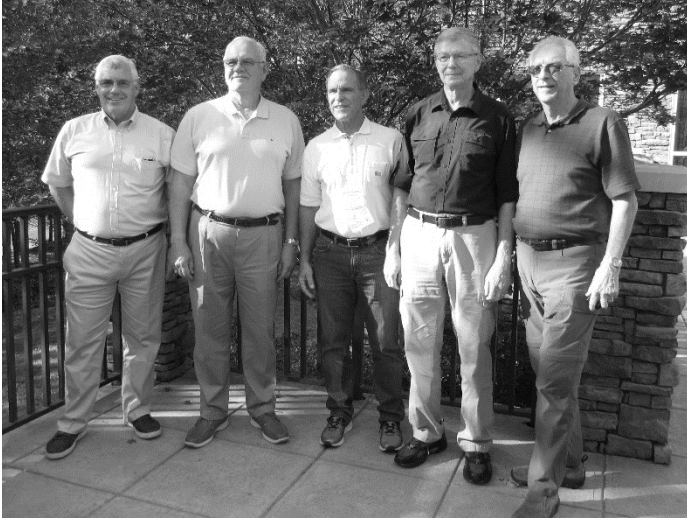


Graduation day – newly commissioned 2LT Brian Walrath in front of Infantry Hall, with the “Follow Me” statue behind.



The same view in 2017, with me, remodeled Infantry Hall and the replaced “Follow Me” statue. I, on the other hand, am neither remodeled nor replaced.

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Peter Nowlan, Steve Roeder, George Hatfield, me and Mike Eberhardt at the 2017 Reunion, Columbus, Georgia.



John O'Shea, me, Mike Eberhardt, Steve Layton, Scott Davis at the 50th Company Memorial Dedication.

PICTURES FROM VIETNAM



Two MAT lieutenants in front of the terminal at “Tam Ky International Airport”, where I was unceremoniously dropped off when I reported to Team 16. It had seen better days.



Nui Loc Son, the hill stretching across the lower center, seen from a helicopter. This is where my MAT was initially located.

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Doc Malave and me with the MAT I-24 jeep in front of the MAT hooch in the Payne compound. The beret was the standard MAT headgear when I arrived.



Advisory Team 16 headquarters and offices in Tam Ky. Located next door to the Province Headquarters.

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Quang Tin Province Headquarters in Tam Ky city. The seat of all Vietnamese civilian and military activities in the province.



COL Tho, the Quang Tin Province Chief. Sort of a governor and military commander rolled into one.
Hal Meinheit photo.

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SGT “Signal” who ran a Signal Station in the Payne Compound. He let me share his quarters when I was denied a room of my own after our bunker on Nui Loc Son burned down. This was his typical hot weather uniform. He was an old soldier who didn’t worry much about the rules.

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When I was finally granted quarters in the Payne compound, my room was in this building, right behind the sheet in the middle of the picture. My roommate was CPT Mann, the team supply officer. The day before I arrived in Tam Ky, a VC mortar round came through the roof and exploded in the room at the far left, wounding a Vietnamese laborer who was taking a nap.



My room in the Payne compound, where I lived when I was not out in the field on an operation. The Christmas tree came with the room and was a more-or-less permanent fixture.

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Resupply Huey on the pad at the Payne compound, loaded with cases of Coke, probably some beer, frozen chicken or hamburger, toiletries and other necessities. Helicopters made regular such runs to MATs or remote District Advisory Teams. A “milk run”, but still dangerous, since the flight was over enemy territory, as indicated by the door gunner and his M60.

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Abandoned ancient pagoda along Highway One north of Tam Ky. White structure at left is a grave.



Shops along Highway One south of Tam Ky. Other than a few short side streets, this was the only paved road in Quang Tin Province.

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Cao Dai temple in Tam Ky. Low building in center right background is housing for wounded Vietnamese veterans.



The Main Market in Tam Ky, with Highway One running across the center. Note the traffic cop and bicycles.

Hal Meinheit photo.

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Closeup of the sort of merchandise available at the market in the picture above. Vegetables, fruit, spices, cigarettes, trinkets, canned goods.



Hueys loading Vietnamese troops for a combat assault. The dust cloud is less than usual, since they are landing in a grassy field. Hueys were the most common way for me to go on an operation.

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Kids swarming our jeep while we were on Engineer security. Usually, the kids in the countryside were friendly, especially when GIs gave them food.



As one travelled west in Quang Tin Province, rice paddies turned to foothills, which, in turn, became mountains.

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One of several abandoned cement/brick houses along a road leading west into the province. Likely from the French colonial era. Two RFs were killed by a booby trap when they slung their hammocks in such a house while on Engineer security.



Typical Vietnam village – grass shacks and dirt roads.

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Water buffalo with calf giving me a typical look. On one operation we landed on the mountain in the background and walked down to this spot.



American Armored Personnel Carrier. I went on a couple of joint operations riding on one of these, and saw one get blown off the ground by a mine. Nobody but the driver rode inside for fear of mines and rocket propelled grenades.

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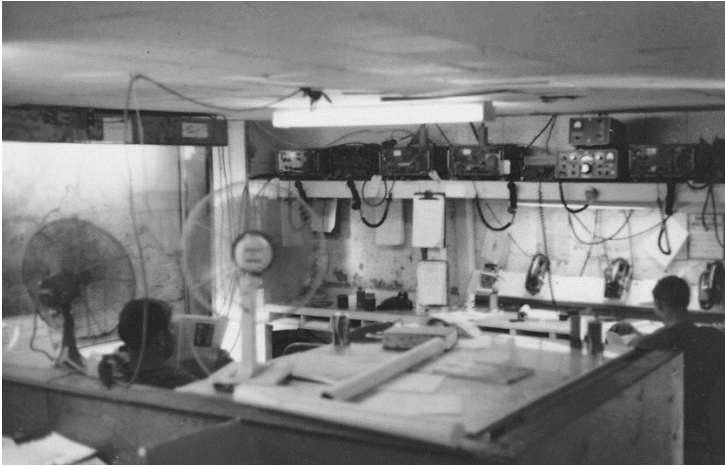
Just in from a MAT operation. I travelled light compared to American infantry units – jungle hat instead of steel pot, bag of C rations slung over my shoulder, M16 and one bandolier of seven magazines, maps, compass, code book and KAK wheel, salt and iodine tablets, a couple of smoke grenades, toothbrush and paste, toilet paper, two canteens, dry socks, extra pair of glasses, flashlight and batteries, strobe light, maybe a paperback book if we planned to stay in one place for very long.

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In February 1971, I became the Assistant Operations Advisor. My primary duty was “supervising” the day shift in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC), the squat cement building with numerous antennae shown here. At left front is Specialist Jerry Moore, one of the TOC radio telephone operators (RTO). Guard tower in background.

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Inside the TOC. With thick cement walls and almost no ventilation, the fans were a necessity. Unit locations were plotted with grease pencil on the plexiglass-covered map at left. The radios kept us in touch with District Advisory Teams, MATs, and American units operating throughout the province, including infantry, artillery, and helicopter units.

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My favorite picture, taken as I headed home. The pilot announced “We are now passing over the coast of Vietnam” and there was a collective sigh of relief followed by an eruption of cheers.

APPENDIX ONE

A COMPANY OF MEN

The youngster sat by the old man's side, for a time not a word was said.
Then he peered up at the weathered face and pondered the graying head.
“When you were in the Army, Gramps, was it during World War Two?”
“I’m not that old,” laughed Grandpa, “Though it might seem so to you.”

The memories came rushing back from some hidden reservoir,
Of a nation torn asunder by a far-off foreign war.
“Still, it seems so very long ago when I wore my suit of green,
And I knew a company of men the likes I’d never seen.

“Duty in the military wasn’t what most fellows chose.
To be numbered in the ranks was rarer than you might suppose.
The ones who served the homeland were looked down upon with scorn.
More respect was shown to Woodstock than to those in uniform.

“No cheering crowds would send them off with waving flags and bands.
The crowds were chanting protests and flags burned across the land.
No long and fervent lines formed up outside recruiting stations.
T’was not the age that pundits dubbed the greatest generation.

“But what to call this Shakespeare’s few, where to search the dictionary?
If asked, they’d blush and grumble ‘we were just ordinary.’
Yet they heard their country beckon while the ordinary shrank.
They’ve an unsung sort of greatness worthy of the country’s thanks.

“I’m honored to be with them, this company of men.
Through nearly half a century I’ve not met their kind again.
The books don’t count them giants but they’re mighty big to me.
And when I stood among them, I was the tallest I’d ever be.”

Brian Walrath

Written in 2015 as a tribute to my 50th Company classmates

APPENDIX TWO



Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 115th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

House of Representatives

CELEBRATING THE REUNION OF THE 50TH COMPANY, INFANTRY OFFICER CANDIDATE SCHOOL CLASS OC 24-69

HON. DONALD S. BEYER JR.
OF VIRGINIA

Thursday, October 12, 2017

Mr. Beyer – Virginia: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor a special group of Americans who are worthy of our recognition for the sacrifices they made for our country.

In October of this year, the surviving members of the 50th Company, Infantry Officer Candidate Schools Class OC 24-69 will have their first reunion at Fort Benning, Georgia, 48 years after pinning on the gold bars of Second Lieutenants. It was a time when the United States was still deeply mired in the Vietnam War.

The young men who made up the 50th Company came from 42 of our 50 states and represented all walk of life and ethnic heritages. Almost all of them had recently graduated from college, and were of an age at which most of their contemporaries were starting their careers, not facing military service and the rigors of war and sacrifice.

They were fully aware that the Vietnam War did not receive the near universal support that the country had offered the servicemen and women of World War II, in whose shadow they had grown up. The feelings of these men toward the war in Southeast Asia were as varied as those of their countrymen.

Nevertheless, they accepted the risks inherent in their decision to become Army officers. Despite their varied backgrounds and their support for, or opposition to, the Vietnam War, they shared more important traits – a love of the United States of America, an abiding belief in democracy, and a devotion to duty no matter the consequences. They had all volunteered for the OCS.

Within a year of graduation, over half would receive orders for Vietnam. Two classmates made the ultimate sacrifice for our country – James DuPont from North Canton, Ohio and Thomas Edgren from Libertyville, Illinois. Many others were awarded the Purple Heart.

They all, no matter where they served, made sacrifices as previous generations who had served in the armed forces had sacrificed – separation from families, missed holidays, arduous and often dangerous work, and sometimes miserable living conditions. And sadly, for these men of the Vietnam Era, their sacrifices were often met upon their return with indifference and even open hostility from a seemingly ungrateful country.

Some of these men made the military a career. But most were classic “citizen soldiers” who returned to civilian life once they had served. They raised families and became successful lawyers, doctors, ministers, teachers, government workers, farmers, and business men.

Over the years, most of the men of the 50th Company put their time in the service behind them. They lost contact with each other as other life issues took precedence. But through the efforts of a few determined classmates, plans were laid for this fall’s reunion. They will gather again at Fort Benning, another generation of Americans who laid down their plowshares to pick up rifles, only to beat them back into plowshares when duty was honorably done.

At the reunion, these old comrades-in-arms will renew the bonds that were forged 48 years ago through the long marches in the brutal Georgia heat, the early morning runs in combat boots and rain, the countless pushups, and the brotherhood of blood and sweat of hard Army training. Now they will share their pride in having served.

I ask my colleagues to join me in pausing to reflect on the sacrifices made by these men and the millions of others they represent, and to extend to them our personal thanks and the thanks of our country.

This document, prepared by John Foote, Brian Walrath and Bill Yacola, was placed in the Congressional Record prior to 50th Company’s 2017 reunion by Congressman Donald S. Beyer, Jr. of Virginia at the request of John Foote.

APPENDIX THREE

Mike Eberhardt's prayer at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial during our 50th reunion

Our God in Heaven, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of mercy, peace and love, we gather on this day in this place to honor our brothers-in-arms whose lives were given in the service of their country. Although most of us did not plan this course for our lives, we followed the path we were called upon as a duty to our country. We found ourselves together as the 50th OCS Company, Ft. Benning, GA and we dedicated ourselves to the task given to us under the commission we earned. During this journey, we became more than comrades in uniform; we became friends, depending upon one another, supporting and encouraging one another.

Our call to duty led many of us into the fields of conflict in Vietnam. We were dedicated to the roles we were given with determination to do our best and with an understanding that the cost could be high. Today, we seek to honor Jim Dupont and Tom Edgren, who paid the highest price that military service can require. We seek to honor their commitment to the service of their country and to the contribution they made to our lives as brothers in uniform. We honor them for their personal loyalty to their fellow candidates during our months together and their service upon being commissioned.

We pray this day for their families who continue to experience the sense of loss of Jim and Tom, whose names are written on this Wall. May they have felt Your presence of compassion through their sorrow over these past years, knowing that these men added to the quality of life and service of those who experienced with them the journey of the 50th Company OC 24-69. We honor these families for the service these men gave to their country and the friendship they gave to those of us

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gathered here this day.

May our hope be grounded in Your eternal love and grace through Your Son, Jesus Christ and in the promise of a glorious life eternal through Him. Amen

Mike Eberhardt's prayer before our formal dinner at our 50th reunion

Our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gather in this place this evening to commemorate the journey we traveled together. We were known as the 50th Company OCS 24-69. The six-month regimen was designed to make us officers. However, the miles we ran, the ranges where we trained, the courses we took did more than develop us as officers; we became friends. Throughout the OCS experience we supported one another, we encouraged one another, we lifted up one another. We became brothers in arms.

As we gather around the tables may the memories we share renew our appreciation for one another. Through both laughter and tears, may we recognize how our lives were changed for the better, not only from the training we received but from the relationships we developed. We ask your blessings upon this evening as we renew the bonds we made five decades ago. We ask Your grace to direct our course as the 50th Company OCS 24-69.

APPENDIX FOUR - GLOSSARY

[NOTE: (VN) applies primarily to the Vietnam War]

Advanced Individual Training or **AIT** – U.S. Army formal training immediately following **Basic Training**, focusing on a soldier's specialty (Infantry, Signal Corps, etc).

Advisor (VN) – An American military officer or civilian who was assigned to advise the South Vietnamese in a variety of areas, including military operations, civil affairs, health and medical, agriculture and a myriad of other subjects.

Agent Orange (VN) – One of a variety of defoliants used to clear vegetation along roadsides, in likely enemy areas, or in other instances where it could interfere with enemy activity. Agent Orange was often sprayed from aircraft and is the most well-known of the defoliants because of its connection with long term health issues among Vietnam Vets.

Airborne – Armed forces that are inserted by air into a battle area, typically by being dropped by parachute. Today, "Airborne" has been generally replaced by the term "Airmobile", since helicopters are increasingly replacing parachute drops.

Airborne Track – An approximately one-mile oval track near the **OCS** barracks at Fort Benning. The track runs around the three 250' tall "drop towers" which are used for **Airborne** training.

Airborne Training or **Jump School** – Training in parachute operations for Airborne troops.

AIT – See **Advanced Individual Training**.

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AK-47 – .30-caliber Russian assault rifle of which approximately one hundred million have been produced, both in Russia and its client states. China manufactured a copy which armed the NVA and many VC.

Army of the Republic of Vietnam, ARVN (VN) – The ground forces of the **Republic of Vietnam** (South Vietnam). Often referred to by Americans as “**Arvin**”.

“Arvin” (VN) – See **Army of the Republic of Vietnam**.

ARVN (VN) – See **Army of the Republic of Vietnam**.

A-Team – The primary fighting force of the **Green Berets**. Typically made up of 12 men, each with a different specialty and cross-trained in other specialties.

Basic – See **Basic Training**.

Basic Training or **Basic** – The initial training that a soldier in the U.S. Army receives upon entering the service.

Battalion – Military unit of 400 to 1000 soldiers. An Infantry battalion is usually made up of four “rifle” **companies** and a headquarters company.

Blue Book – The class book of an **OCS** class, so called because of its “Infantry Blue” cover. Much like a high school yearbook, the Blue Book contained pictures of class members and shots of OCS life.

Brigade – Military unit usually composed of three to six **battalions**.

Bronze Star – Medal awarded to armed forces members for either heroic or meritorious service. If for the former, a “V device” for Valor is attached to the ribbon. To my knowledge, virtually every Army officer who served in Vietnam received a Bronze Star for Meritorious Service.

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***Chu Hoi* (VN)** – Program by which **Viet Cong** and **NVA** soldiers were encouraged to defect to the South Vietnamese government. *Chu Hoi*, which translates roughly to “open hands” also refers to the individual who defects.

CIB – See **Combat Infantryman Badge**.

Claymore – Antipersonnel mine which fires 700 1/8th inch steel balls in an arc. Can be command detonated (remote control) or victim-activated by a tripwire.

Cobra – Attack helicopter armed with rockets, machine guns and other weapons to be used in the support of troops on the ground. Also known as a helicopter gunship.

Combat Infantryman Badge or **CIB** – Decoration which is awarded exclusively to those in the Infantry Branch for “Performing duties while personally present and under fire while serving in an assigned infantry... unit... engaged in active ground combat, to close with and destroy the enemy with direct fires.” There was a long-standing complaint in the Army that those in other branches had no “combat” decoration and were ineligible for the CIB even if they had seen combat while serving in an infantry unit (a friend of mine had served as a lieutenant in an infantry company in Vietnam but did not receive a CIB because his branch was actually Armor – nothing required that the Army assign a soldier to a unit within his/her branch). In 2005 the Army addressed this issue by creating the Combat Action Badge, which may be awarded to soldiers not eligible for the CIB. The badge features both an M9 bayonet and an M67 hand grenade.

Commissioned Officer – See **Officer**.

Company – Basic military unit of about 100 soldiers organized in three to four **platoons**.

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CONEX box – Acronym for Container Express; a large metal container used to store and ship supplies. In Vietnam, CONEX boxes were often used as bunkers on American bases.

CONUS – The Continental United States [sometimes defined as the Contiguous United States, which excludes Alaska and Hawaii]. A soldier returning from an overseas assignment was said to be returning to CONUS.

CORDS (VN) – Civil Operations and Rural Development Support. From History Net (historynet.com): “CORDS was formed to coordinate the U.S. civil and military pacification programs. CORDS pulled together all the various U.S. military and civilian agencies involved in the pacification effort, including the State Department, the AID, the USIA and the CIA. U.S. military or civilian province senior advisers were appointed, and CORDS civilian/military advisory teams were dispatched throughout South Vietnam’s 44 provinces and 250 districts.” MAT teams were part of CORDS. Originally, the R in CORDS stood for Revolutionary, until someone realized that this was a favourite term used by communists; it was then changed to Rural.

Corps Tactical Zones (VN) – Military regions of South Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the country was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones, from north to south: I Corps (from the **DMZ** to the Central Highlands), II Corps (the Central Highlands), III Corps (the Highlands to Saigon), and IV Corps (south of Saigon, including the Mekong **Delta**). All were referred to by their numerical designation, except for I Corps, which was usually called “Eye Corps”.

Counterpart (VN) – The Vietnamese military officer or official whom an American advisor was “advising”. For example, the counterpart of an American Senior Province Advisor was the Vietnamese Province Chief.

Delta, The (VN) – The area in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River empties into the sea.

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Demilitarized Zone or **DMZ** – An area between countries where military installations or activities are prohibited by agreement. A DMZ separated North and South Vietnam during the Vietnam War; another DMZ has separated North and South Korea since the Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953.

***Didi mau* (VN)** – “*Di*” means go; “*didi mau*” means go very fast.

District (VN) – A governmental subdivision of a Vietnamese Province.

District Advisory Team (VN) – Group of American Advisors assigned to advise the leaders of a South Vietnamese District. District Advisory Teams were part of a **Province Advisory Team**.

DMZ – See **Demilitarized Zone**.

Enlisted Man – Any rank below that of **Commissioned Officer** or **Warrant Officer**.

ETS – See **Expiration of Term of Service**.

Executive Officer or **XO** – The second-in-command of a unit (such as an Army company or battalion). The Executive officer usually takes command if the commanding officer is absent or incapacitated. Otherwise, the XO generally performs administrative duties to relieve the commander of such tasks. Often, when the unit is in the field, the XO is back at the company or battalion headquarters, handling such important functions as resupply and providing replacements.

Expiration of Term of Service or **ETS** – End of a service member’s time on active duty.

FAC – See **Forward Air Controller**.

Field Training Exercise or **FTX** – A military training exercise conducted under field conditions rather than in a classroom.

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Fire Support Base or **FSB** – A (usually temporary) base for artillery providing support to infantry units.

Foreign Service Officer (FSO) – State Department position of the type held by Hal Meinheit. There were a significant number of FSOs in Vietnam and they dealt with a wide variety of non-military issues. The State Department website states “Some of these posts are in difficult and even dangerous environments”, more than an understatement when it came to Vietnam.

Forward Air Controller or **FAC** – U.S. Air Force pilot who flies above the battlefield calling in airstrikes, artillery and other activities in support of troops on the ground.

FSB – See **Fire Support Base**.

FSO – see **Foreign Service Officer**

FTX – See **Field Training Exercise**.

Green Beret – See **Special Forces**.

Grunt – Slang for U.S. Infantry soldier.

Ho Chi Minh Trail (VN) – A main infiltration route running through supposedly neutral Cambodia and Laos used by the North Vietnamese to bring men and supplies into South Vietnam. From its 1959 inception as a narrow path through the jungle, by the early 1970s the trail had expanded to accommodate heavy trucks (by 1970, every month five hundred trucks hauled supplies provided by Russia and China to the communist troops in the South) and included fuel dumps and hospitals. The U.S. strove mightily to close down the trail through air strikes and techniques like dropping noise sensors to detect truck movement, but these efforts achieved only moderate success, another example of how American technology could not win the war.

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Huey – UH-1 helicopter, the single-engine, rotary wing “utility” aircraft used to carry troops or supplies. It was the backbone of helicopter operations in Vietnam.

Infantry – As the *goarmy.com* website so nicely puts it: “As an Infantry Soldier, you’ll serve in the field, working to defend our country against any threats on the ground. You’ll capture, destroy, and deter enemy forces, assist in reconnaissance, and help mobilize troops and weaponry to support the mission as the ground combat force.” Although they may be brought to a combat area by helicopter, truck or **APC**, Infantrymen perform their duties on foot, seeking out and engaging in close combat with the enemy.

Landing Zone or **LZ** – Cleared area where helicopters can land.

LZ – See **Landing Zone**.

M14 Rifle – Standard issue U.S. Army rifle from 1959 to mid-1960s. Fires a “full power” 7.62mm (.30 caliber) round. Weight of 9.2 pounds unloaded, length of 44 inches, magazine capacity of 20 rounds.

M16 Rifle – Standard issue U.S. Army rifle since mid-1960s. Fires an “intermediate power” 5.56mm (.223 caliber) round. Weight of 6.4 pounds unloaded, length of 39 inches, magazine capacity of 20 or 30 rounds. Has undergone numerous upgrades and variations since the Vietnam War.

M60 Machine gun – Standard issue U.S. Army machine gun from 1957 to mid-1980s. Fires the same “full power” 7.62mm (.30 caliber) round as the M14 rifle. Weight of 23 pounds unloaded, length of 43 inches, fed by belts holding 200 – 1000 rounds. Used by Infantry and also mounted on vehicles and helicopters.

M79 Grenade Launcher – Standard issue U.S. Army single-shot, break-action, shoulder-fired grenade launcher from 1961 to near the end

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of Vietnam War. Fires a 40mm grenade up to an effective range of 350 meters. Weight 6 pounds.

MACV (VN) – See **Military Assistance Command, Vietnam**.

MAT (VN) – See **Mobile Advisory Team**.

Medevac – Helicopter medical evacuation of wounded personnel.

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam or **MACV (VN)** – The top-level American military command that had authority over all American military operations, including both U.S. units and advisors.

Mobile Advisory Team or **MAT (VN)** – A team of generally five American officers and NCOs who advised the Vietnamese **Territorial Forces**.

National Liberation Front or **NLF (VN)** – The political organization of which the **Viet Cong** was the military branch. Superseded by the **Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)** in June 1969.

NLF (VN)– see **National Liberation Front**.

North Vietnamese Army or **NVA (VN)** – The regular army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; technically, the **People's Army of Vietnam** or **PAVN**.

Noncommissioned Officer – See **Officer**.

Nuoc mam (VN) – A fish sauce which is a staple of Vietnamese cuisine.

NVA (VN) – See **North Vietnamese Army**. NVA can also apply to an individual North Vietnamese soldier.

OCS – See **Officer Candidate School**.

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OFFICER

Commissioned Officer – One in a position of authority in the armed forces and whose authority derives from a commission from the U.S. government. U.S. Army commissioned officer ranks include Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel and various Generals.

Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) – One holding a position of authority lower than a commissioned officer; generally, NCOs achieve their position by being promoted from the lower enlisted ranks. Army NCOs include corporals and sergeants of various ranks.

Warrant Officer – A rank between commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers; they are generally skilled in specialized areas and are not on a career track toward becoming commissioned officers. In Vietnam, for instance, many helicopter pilots were Warrant Officers. [Note: These descriptions apply to the U.S. Army; other services will vary.]

Officer Candidate School or OCS – Military training program to develop current enlisted personnel or new recruits into officers. Graduates of OCS are granted the lowest officer rank of their branch of service; Second Lieutenant, in the case of the U.S. Army.

Pacification (VN) – American strategy to decrease the presence of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops in South Vietnam through a combination of military action and civil government initiatives. Later combined with the strategy of **Vietnamization**, in which the South Vietnamese military would assume increasingly greater responsibility for military operations.

PAVN (VN) – see **People's Army of Vietnam**

People's Army of Vietnam (VN) – The army of North Vietnam, more familiarly referred to as the **NVA**.

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Peoples Self Defense Force or PSDF (VN) – South Vietnamese militia organized for the defense of local communities. Typically made up of men unfit for other military service because of age (too young or too old), infirmities or other reasons. Often armed with obsolete or non-frontline weapons. American advisors were often assigned to work with these units.

PFC – See **Private First Class**.

Phoenix Program (VN) – Highly classified program to identify and eliminate **Viet Cong** infrastructure members through capture or, when necessary, assassination.

Pogey or Pogey Bait – Non-issue or non-authorized food items sent to soldiers through the mail or snuck into military facilities by means of “pogey runs”.

Popular Forces or PF (VN) – See **Territorial Forces**.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – From *mayoclinic.org*: “[A] mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.” While many events can trigger PTSD (including sexual assault, traffic accidents or natural disasters), it has become closely associated with the trauma of combat. Despite the popular misconception, PTSD was not something unique to the Vietnam War. Its existence has been known for centuries, and it has been known by several names, including shell shock and combat fatigue. Of the 800,000 American soldiers who saw combat during WWII, “37.5 percent displayed such severe psychological symptoms that they were permanently discharged” (per www.military1.com). The same source notes that “The oft-cited National Vietnam Veterans’ Readjustment Study concluded that nearly one-third of Vietnam veterans have had PTSD at some point in their lives.”

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PRG (VN) – see **Provisional Revolutionary Government**

Private – The lowest enlisted rank in the U.S. Army.

Private First Class or **PFC** – The rank attained by an enlisted soldier usually within a year of enlistment and after completing **Basic** and **Advanced Individual Training**.

Province (VN) – Governmental subdivision of the Republic of South Vietnam. Headed by a Province Chief, usually a South Vietnamese Army colonel, who was responsible for all military activity and civilian administration in the province.

Province Advisory Team or **Provincial Advisory Team (VN)** – Group of American advisors assigned to advise South Vietnamese military and civilian officials of a province government. These teams plus their support staff often totaled several hundred individuals, both military and civilian. Province Advisory Teams included **District Advisory Teams**.

Province Recon Unit or **PRU (VN)** – South Vietnamese paramilitary unit which was part of the **Phoenix Program** to identify and eliminate Viet Cong infrastructure. Often composed of military veterans and mercenaries.

Provisional Revolutionary Government or **PRG (VN)** – The political organization which superseded the **NLF** in June 1969.

PTSD – See **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**.

Purple Heart – Military award given to soldiers who have been wounded as a result of enemy activity.

R&R – See **Rest and Relaxation**.

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Rear Echelon Mother Fucker or **REMF** – Military slang for anyone with a job not on the “front lines”. REMFs were said to be “in the rear with the gear”.

Redeye – Shoulder fired anti-aircraft missile.

Regiment – Military unit composed of two or more **battalions**.

Regional Forces or **RF (VN)** – See **Territorial Forces**.

REMF – See **Rear Echelon Mother Fucker**.

Republic of Vietnam or **RVN (VN)** – Official name of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1975.

Rest and Relaxation, Rest and Recuperation, Rest and Recreation or **R&R** – Extended time off (usually one or two weeks) for service members serving in a combat zone. During the Vietnam War many soldiers went to Thailand or Australia, or even came back to the U.S.

RF/PF (VN) – See **Territorial Forces**.

ROK – American GI slang for a soldier of the Republic of Korea, which sent military units to serve in Vietnam.

Ruff Puff (VN) – See **Territorial Forces**.

RVN (VN) – See **Republic of Vietnam**.

S-1, S-2, etc. – See **Staff Functions**.

Sapper – Broadly speaking, a military engineer. During the Vietnam War, American GIs used the term “sapper” to refer to **Viet Cong** or **NVA** soldiers who were trained to infiltrate U.S. or South Vietnamese positions.

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Slick – Helicopter used for cargo or troop carrying and armed only with protective weapons, as opposed to a gunship, which carries weapons intended for attacks. Usually applied to a UH-1 **Huey**.

Special Forces or **Green Berets** – Elite U.S. Army unit with specialized training to carry out special operations, often with emphasis on counter insurgency. Often referred to as “Green Berets” because of their distinctive headgear.

Staff Functions, U.S. Army – “S” designation is used at Battalion level; higher level units usually use a “G” designation. The officer heading up the staff function is also referred to by the function’s designation; for example, the officer heading up a battalion’s S-1 section would be called “the S-1.”

S-1 Personnel – Responsible for maintaining individual personnel records and unit assignments, processing orders, transfers, promotions, awards, and all other transactions related to the personnel of a particular unit.

S-2 Intelligence – Responsible for collecting and analyzing intelligence information about the enemy to determine what the enemy is doing or might do.

S-3 Operations – Responsible for plans and training. Plans and coordinates operations including all aspects of sustaining the unit's operations, planning future operations, and additionally planning and executing all unit training.

S-4 Supply – Responsible for managing the wide scope of material, supplies, transportation, facilities, services and medical/health support.

TAC – See **Tactical Officer**.

Tactical Officer or **TAC** – Second lieutenant in charge of one platoon in an **OCS** company.

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Tactical Operations Center or **TOC** – Command center for military operations.

Territorial Forces (VN) – RVN military units similar to National Guard or militias. They were not as well equipped as **ARVN** soldiers and their mission was to engage **Viet Cong** forces rather than **NVA**. Generally, they operated within a specific governmental subdivision, **Province** for **Regional Forces (RF)** and **District** for **Popular Forces (PF)**. RF and PF forces were usually referred to as **RF/PF** or “**Ruff Puffs**”. **PSDF** and **PRU** units can also be considered Territorial Forces. American **Mobile Advisory Teams** were often, but not always, assigned to work with RF/PF units.

Tet (VN) – Vietnamese holiday celebrating the first day of the Lunar New Year. The most important holiday in Vietnamese culture.

Tet of 1968 (VN) – Name given to one of the largest North Vietnamese offensives of the Vietnam War, when Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops launched surprise attacks on most major cities in South Vietnam on the first day Tet.

TOC – See **Tactical Operations Center**.

UH-1 – See **Huey**.

VC (VN) – See **Viet Cong**.

Viet Cong or **VC (VN)** – The communist guerrilla force in South Vietnam that fought the South Vietnamese and U.S. forces.

Vietnamization (VN) – U.S. government policy of giving the South Vietnamese government and armed forces increasingly greater responsibility for carrying on the war, allowing the withdrawal of American forces.

Warrant Officer – See **Officer**.