

Section 3, Stateside Duty: Training; Reserves and National Guard; Random Vignettes

Training Stories

AIRBORNE! Angels' Wings and All That – Ken Knudsen

In March, 1970 I was company commander of a training company at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and having a great time. Off-base, I was rooming with Bill Gist, my OCS classmate. We were expecting orders to Vietnam and we were both looking for ways to slow down the process. In April, I decided to go to Jump School for two reasons. First, two of my young NCO's had Airborne Wings and were giving me a hard time about being a **non**-Airborne Second Looie. Second, I was trying to delay my orders to Vietnam and figured, since the war was winding down, another three or four weeks of training might shorten the time I would have to spend over there. It worked, and I made it home two months early. So it was Jump School in April, 1970. Here are my impressions of the three weeks in the Airborne Course.

GROUND WEEK: The best part is that I was re-united with three of my OCS classmates, Jim Dupont, Mike Thornton and David Doe. We all thought we were in great shape but the morning after the first day we met for breakfast at the BOQ looking creaky like we were 70-year-olds (no offense meant to those of us who have reached this exalted age). Every one of our muscles and bones ached. Ground week meant running, doing PLF's (parachute landing falls), and learning how to jump out of an airplane door by sliding down cables.

TOWER WEEK: We still did PT, but now we jumped from the towers. I remember being pulled up to the top and wondering, "What am I really doing here!?" But I was ready to release and fall/float to the ground, yelling "Airborne, all the way!" The ground was plowed and soft and it was great fun.

JUMP WEEK: Jump week finally came. I was concerned about pushing far enough off the door of a C-130 to keep from hitting the plane, but because of aircraft availability I made all five jumps out of a C-141 jet. All you had to do was stand up, hook up, shuffle to the door and step right out. You didn't have to push yourself off, since you were sucked right out the back of the plane. One memory was walking to the plane for my first jump. I was talking to a classmate who said this was his third attempt at jump week. He had been injured the first two times and had to be recycled for those two weeks. I remember thinking, "This guy is nuts. He has survived two injuries, and I really hope number three doesn't kill him." I never knew if he finally made it through.

Airborne School was a great experience for me and helped get me into shape for Jungle School and Vietnam. Looking back, I'm very proud of earning my wings and for being able to wear my jump boots and Airborne cap as my standard uniform.

Vacationing at Panama's Jungle School Spa – Brian Walrath

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 similar 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 I'm sure many others both preceded and followed me.

Jungle School was supposed to prepare us for conducting operations in Vietnam, so we got training in things like: **River Crossing Techniques**, especially the “slide for life,” sort of an early-day zip line, except that at the end of the run we were jerked to a stop by a huge knot in the rope; I thought I had broken every bone in my body. **Rappelling** – on the final exercise I found myself dangling upside down on a slippery, moss-covered “dry” waterfall; the instructors, believing that experience is the best teacher, let me get myself out of this predicament. **Hitting the Beach** - exiting a landing craft (like it was at D-Day). **Helicopter Assaults** - I almost tipped over the chopper one time. We were hovering a few feet off the ground, and I thought the crew chief signaled us to exit. I poked the man next to me and yelled “let's go!” We did, but everyone else stayed on board, unbalancing the bird and causing it to teeter precariously. The instructors were not amused.

Well, in Vietnam I did make plenty of helicopter assaults, and I managed not to tip one over, so I guess I had learned my lesson. But I never even saw a landing craft, we didn't rappel down anything, and any rivers we came to we just waded across at the shallowest place.

However, 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 molded just hanging in my wall locker. But, on the plus side, I finally learned to enjoy beer in Panama. We also experienced the impenetrable jungle, strange smells, swarms of mosquitoes and other bugs, and rain, rain, rain. Over the years I've met several vets who attended Jungle School, and their universal reaction was: “If they had been shooting at me 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 struggled through a jungle in torrential rain.

One thing 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 “flavor” of life in Panama. I also learned how disorienting it can be at night in the jungle. One of our instructor NCOs was a strange bird. 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 us students. He regularly warned us not to fall asleep when we were conducting patrols, 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 to not 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 gotten turned about ninety degrees and was facing perpendicular to our line, so it was one of my comrades (it may have been Tom Edgren) who I had heard squirming around all night. As far as I know the sergeant never “got” anybody, but he talked a good game.

Another thing I learned was 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 before firing each shot. 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. “Yeah.” He said with a puzzled look on his face. “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. Ah. The fog of war.

Secure Commo: the Key to the Battlefield – Mike Eberhardt

Following OCS, several of us newly-minted Second Looies were assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado. I was assigned to C Company of some battalion whose designation escapes me. It was part of the activated National Guard brigade stationed there. CPT Davidson was our CO, and a great one at that. During one of our field exercises, my mechanized platoon was set up on the rolling plains. NORAD was in sight. My platoon was assigned to cover a specific area, so we dutifully deployed along a dirt road and parked our tracks, ready to take on any on-coming enemy. We were using phones as a means of communication between platoons with hard-wire lines spread out between our positions. As we played out our “war games,” I was sitting on the ground next to my radio operator. We were following our commo SOP, and my radio man was maintaining phone contact with the various squads. Unannounced, a deuce-and-a-half came

barreling down the road. Suddenly, the phone that was between me and my radio man disappeared. The truck wheel somehow kicked up the phone wire which snagged on the truck. It jerked the phone out of my radio man's hand. The last we saw of the AWOL phone, it was trailing behind the vanishing truck.

I had to "report" the incident to the Captain, who never let me forget it. It was a bit embarrassing, to say the least, as I was the Company's Communications Officer. I still laugh, though, when I remember the expression on my radio man's face as we watched the phone bouncing in the dust behind that rogue truck.

National Guard and Army Reserves Stories

I Went Over to the Dark Side – David Hipp

Yes, I did. I went over to the "Dark Side." I joined the Air Force. (GASP)... well, the Air National Guard. After getting out of the Army, I wanted to maintain a link to the military through the National Guard, but the only position open near me at that time was the Arkansas Air National Guard. It turned out well for me, but it wasn't easy!!! There was a whole new mindset that had to happen, and my new boss was on my case. He didn't let me forget that I was trained by the Army and that he would make sure I was converted to the Air Force (and Air National Guard) way of doing things. I was a good student.

He told me to get rid of my Army-colored brown shorts and brown shoes. This was easy, since I didn't have any. [*Editor's Note: the reference to the "brown shoes" went back to time when the Air Force was still the **Army** Air Corps and everyone wore brown shoes. After the creation of the Air Force in '57, the organization immediately switched to black shoes as a sign of its "independence." For years thereafter the Air Force referred to the bad old days as the "brown shoe days." Hence, the "brown shoes are bad" mantra of David Hipp's boss, who must have been an old-timer.*] He kept reminding me for several years that "brown was bad, blue was good," including every time we went to Arkansas Guard Headquarters (Joint Air and Army Guard) at Camp Robinson.

Summer camps (the 15 days of Active Duty Training we received each year) were a little harder getting used to, but a pleasant time. The first year was (for me at least) at home on Little Rock Air Force Base. I asked what I should bring, and the first thing on the list was golf clubs followed by shorts and a couple of clubbing outfits. Oh, and bring a couple of uniforms for work. They said they would have me a room at the VOQ for my stay. Sounded like tough duty, but I decided I would try it! The next year most of the unit went to Gulf Port, Mississippi and stayed at a Guard training site there. A small cadre would stay at home base, but the planes, crews and support personnel would provide support while the planes flew out of Gulf Port. Again, the first thing on the list

was golf clubs, but the second thing was a big ice cooler. The cooler, I found out, was for bringing home shrimp, fresh from the boats, at the end of the training camp.

It was like this every year, it seems. Even if you couldn't go to Gulf Port, all you had to do was send along your ice chest with a buddy, along with some money, and he would fill it up with whatever size shrimp you wanted. Once we changed planes and were flying KC 135's, we got to go to a lot more places and bring home different things. Oh, it was hardly a chore at all, this defecting to the Air Guard. It became easier and easier to be around my Army Guard buddies without getting nostalgic, but my boss still kept reminding me to get rid of the brown shorts and shoes.

I worked my way up from supply officer, to Chief of Supply, to Deputy Commander of Resources, to Support Group Commander and retired as a GS-13 Civilian and militarily as an Air Force Colonel in 2000. I enjoyed a fulfilling and rewarding military career that got off to a great start with 50th Co Infantry OCS.

An Ass-Backward Mustang – Clarence Kugler

While pursuing a Federal career with OSHA (Department of Labor), I stayed in the Army Reserves as a Captain. I never finished the education requirements, so I got out of the Reserves in 1983. I rejoined the Reserves in 1989, but as an NCO, in a Civil Affairs Battalion in Miami. "Mustang" is a slang term referring to a [commissioned officer](#) who began his or her career as [enlisted](#). I went in the other direction, from commissioned officer to enlisted. I guess that makes me an "Ass-Backward Mustang."

In January 2003 I was activated and given secret orders, destination unknown and duration of time unknown, a unique experience for a 58-year old Army Reservist. It turned out that I was sent to an old Russian airbase in Hungary where a group of Iraqi exiles were assembling to be trained in military operations to prepare for their return to Iraq. Our training duties lasted from January to April 2003, just after the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In order to train in Hungary, our training group was designated "non-combatant" and all the trainers were then sent home. I was deactivated.

In December 2003, I was re-activated with the 478th Civil Affairs Battalion from Miami, with orders for Iraq. Upon arrival on Feb. 1, 2004, I was made NCOIC in charge of the Coalition Provisional Authority Office in the Baghdad Convention Center. The office processed complaints by Iraqi citizens against the Coalition. There were many, and if merit was found through our investigations, civilians were awarded cash payments. After six months in this office, I was sent for the remainder of my time on missions with civil affairs units, performing public affairs duties and writing about them for publication. Believe it or not, the Army even paid me to go on a lion hunt. (Well, it was an escaped zoo lion, and we brought her back alive.) I also assisted journalists and film crews who were doing stories on in-country 1st CAV operations, which we joined. For

the record, I was just as scared on combat missions at the age of 59 as I was at 23; however, I became a much better actor with age. And, again for the record, CNN once described me as the oldest soldier in Iraq.

PSYOP Soldiers – a Leadership Challenge – Lou Lallo

When I started pharmacy school in San Francisco after returning from Vietnam, I decided that I missed the Army. So I joined the closest Army Reserve Unit that I could find. I joined the 7th Psychological Operations Group and served in a number of command and staff positions in San Francisco until finishing pharmacy school in 1975. For those of you not familiar with PSYOPS, it is considered a force-multiplier to prepare the battlefield by confusing, deceiving and affecting the enemy's mind through the use of noncombat means. These means could be messages over loudspeakers, leaflets or even direct communication. Many of you are probably familiar with a good example of PSYOP in Vietnam, the "Chieu Hoi Program" that tried to induce desertions from the Vietcong.

Later in my army career, when I was a senior major, I took over a PSYOP Direct Support Company in Sacramento. On paper, the 4th Co. was probably the worse unit in the Army structure. In reality, it had some of the best soldiers that I served with during my 34 years with the military. Ten minutes after I assumed command, I received the worse ass-chewing of my career – all because there was a female major fighting with a female E-7 over the attentions of the "Soldier of the Year" – a young female E-5! I rapidly learned that commanding PSYOP soldiers (mostly officers and senior NCOs) was not the same as commanding a bunch of young, gung-ho grunts. My soldiers were mostly college grads who were doing what they were doing because they really believed in their mission and loved it. Many of them were linguist-trained. They knew their trade and seemed to enjoy the idea of being seen as the Army's "F Troop." I might also add that when it came to basic soldiering skills, they couldn't be equaled. However, you couldn't just tell them to charge up a hill with the infantry. You had to first explain to them WHY it was important. Then get out of their way!

Years later, some of the same "F Troop soldiers" that I commanded distinguished themselves in Operation *Just Cause* in Panama by harassing Noriega to the point of giving up and by doing crowd control for the displaced persons movements. Then came *Desert Storm* where they created leaflets that helped cause tens of thousands of Iraqi troops to surrender. Since then, PSYOP soldiers have made a difference in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Oftentimes, while commanding PSYOP soldiers I thought of all those videos we watched in OCS that always ended with, "What do you do now, Lieutenant?" It always made me appreciate the training that we received at Ft. Benning.

“What the F--- Are We Doing Here?” A Civil Affairs Adventure – Lou Lallo

After about twenty years of various command and staff jobs with an Army Reserve Psychological Operations unit in San Francisco, I transferred to our sister Special Operations Command (SOC), the 351st Civil Affairs Command in Mt. View, California, as a new LTC. Civil Affairs is a part of the SOC that is made up of almost entirely Reserve soldiers, based on their civilian skills. These skills are necessary to do so called “nationbuilding” tasks when these are called for. The 351st had soldiers that in civilian life were judges, police officers, veterinarians, transportation experts, accountants, pharmacists (me) and a host of other professionals that the active duty army did not have in its ranks. I made the transition to Civil Affairs because I thought it was time to stop doing field duty in PSYOPS and become a REMF (Rear Echelon...) in something safe like Civil Affairs. Boy, was I wrong!

At 0700hrs on 26 December, 1989 I got a phone call from my Chief of Staff telling me that a ticket would be waiting for me at the Sacramento airport for a 1900hrs flight to Ft. Bragg, NC. There I would spend 2 days getting vaccinations and drawing field gear and a personal weapon before taking a military plane to Panama to participate in Operation Just Cause (6 days after the shooting started) The night of our departure from Ft. Bragg, we were loaded into the enclosed cattle truck buses that we rode in many times during OCS. In the dark, you could hear a pin drop amongst the 125 old (i.e., in their 40s) soldiers. Everyone, I am sure, was lost in their thoughts about how different this was from going to Vietnam as a young man. Now we had families and careers to live for, and were just getting too old for this stuff. The tension and anxiety were palpable until someone yelled out, “What the f--- are we doing here?” That broke the tension, everyone started laughing, and the gallows humor began. We were back to being professional soldiers!

The 125 members of my deploying unit were selected because of their civilian skills and their army experience in Vietnam. This included lots of ex-MACV guys. My mission was to organize the dispensary at the Displaced Persons camp. Once there, I accomplished this by making a phone call to the local pharmacy school. Two hours later I had a team of pharmacy students (who also called in the nearby nursing school) to run the dispensary as well as the clinic. Mission complete! Time to go home. Wrong! I then became the leader of a team to investigate human rights violations by the Noriega regime, which I did for the following six weeks. In Vietnam I thought I had seen just about all the bad things people could do to other people, but I was wrong.

All-in-all, my tour in Panama was a great adventure. Not only did I accomplish my primary pharmacy mission, but I also had an opportunity, while driving in the boonies with my sergeant, to capture one of Noriega’s men whose picture was on one of the “man wanted” playing cards that were so well publicized. Most of all, I came to realize how lucky most of us were as advisors in Vietnam to have come home in one piece. We

were either brave and stupid or too young to know better, to be running around in enemy territory, often alone, with no 9-1-1 to call for help. For the most part, doing just that is what Civil Affairs soldiers do today.

Random Stories and Thoughts

The STRAC TAC and the National Guard – Craig Biggs

After graduating from Captain Smith's advanced class in PT, precision grass trimming, and basic leadership at the acclaimed Benning School for Boys, I had the opportunity to continue my military career in the traditions of OCS. I was assigned as a TAC officer. The E-8 (who had been in the army longer than I was old) told me it was in recognition of my performance in OCS. I detected a bit of a smirk. Months later when I arrived in Viet Nam another E-8 met me with the same sort of smile. Not really a smirk, not a real smile...you all saw one, right? Right before they reminded you there was nothing more dangerous than a Second Looie with a map, compass, and radio with call signs for artillery fire support.

But I digress. Back to OCS and the brand-new TAC Officer. I was initially assigned to a company (I think it was the 96th) that was in its final weeks, so basically all I did was babysit a bunch of senior candidates who, in my view, paled in comparison to those I graduated with. But that's just my opinion. Their CO was a wimp, too. After getting them through the final weeks, parades, and ceremonies I moved on to my next and most interesting and challenging post: 95th Company -- the National Guard.

The "Guard" arrived in three groups, each of about 40 officer candidates from across the country. And after seeing the variety of uniforms, I thought maybe from around the world. What struck me first were the bloused trousers...khakis and greens both, all nicely tucked in to boots that DID NOT meet the "shine standards" of 50th Company or Lt. Sullivan. I did not see one Airborne patch to go with all those bloused boots. When I asked Candidate Givens (somehow his name sticks when so many other names have not) from Oatmeal (I kid you not), Texas why he had his pants bloused, he shouted (yep, shouted), "SIR, I WAS IN THE COLOR GUARD, SIR." When the last group checked in and I saw a corporal, two stripes and all, sewn on the sleeves of his waist length "Eisenhower" jacket, I knew it was going to be a long three months before I shipped out to Viet Nam. At least no one showed up in a Beret.

Jane Fonda in the Fort Carson Stockade – Brian Walrath

My first assignment after OCS was with an infantry battalion at Fort Carson, Colorado. Because of the civil unrest that was wracking the U.S., my battalion, and other units around the country, were periodically put on stand-by riot duty, ready to move out at a

moment's notice. In the dead of winter, when 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 riot (sort of) at Fort Carson. For some reason, there were troubles in the stockade (the post jail) that had come close to getting out of hand. Actress Jane Fonda decided to drop by for a visit and save the day. It was part of her anti-war (i.e., her anti-U.S. military/pro-North Vietnam) campaign. She was ushered around the fort by the Commanding General, who must have been grinding his teeth the whole time. She even talked with the prisoners in the stockade. Then she flew off on another mission to help save the world, probably thinking that her magic touch had solved everything. And she, of course, knew that she had gotten the sort of publicity that she cherished for her anti-war "crusade." Well, as usual, she hadn't solved anything and the troubles continued in the stockade.

Things got so edgy that every night an infantry platoon would have to patrol outside the stockade in case of a breakout. This was undoubtedly for show, since there were never any real escape attempts. But it hardly put us in a good mood, since those "lucky" enough to pull this duty also had to perform our normal busy routines the next day. It was boring duty that kept us from getting any sleep, but there were occasional incidents that livened it up. For instance, one of the troopers in my platoon managed to lose his bayonet. (He was fooling around with it to pass the time.) Just what we needed, a lost weapon knocking around 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.

1968 – A Frightening, Tumultuous Year – Brian Flora

Most members of 50th Company entered the military toward the end of 1968, the year I (Brian Flora) graduated from college. My memories of that year are vivid, much more so than those of OCS. It was a crazy, frightening, and world-turned-upside-down period of my life. I experienced an America divided by the Vietnam War, then at its peak.

[Editor's note: Much of the following description of the events and atmosphere in 1968 America, and the discussion of the Selective Service System in the following paragraph, come from a Brian Walrath draft.] The war dominated the news, and the news was frightful, bleak, and violent. In February of '68 we were jolted by coverage of the infamous Tet Offensive. Whether or not this meant we were losing the war didn't matter. It was obvious that we weren't winning. This sparked more anti-war protests, including at my own university in New England. ROTC was kicked off the campus. Dow Chemical, known as the manufacturer of napalm, was barred from recruiting. Violent protests erupted in the streets, flags were burned, and simplistic rhetoric flowed from both sides. The country also experienced political upheaval. I remember being teargassed during violent protests at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention while on

assignment with the State Department as an interpreter for a group of French-speaking journalists. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy led to mass protests and race riots in many American cities. To boot, the evolving social and cultural scene was absolutely surreal: Free Love, the Age of Aquarius, Women's Lib, and, of course, the "Flower Children," the anti-establishment drug culture of Haight Asbury. And, for the young men, many of whom did not want to become Vietnam-bound soldiers, there was also *the draft*.

The draft during the 50's and early 60's was pretty much accepted by society as a way to encourage young men to do their "patriotic chore." This all changed as America's involvement in Vietnam grew, and by the mid-to-late 60's most young men, myself included, saw the draft as an almost certain ticket to "the War." Vietnam was not the noble WWII Crusade of our parents' generation; it was a conflict opposed by many of us as immoral and unnecessary. For us, the draft was a threat. Initially, there were various exemptions and deferments, but by 1968 most (apart from the four-year student deferment for undergraduates) had been phased out. There was not even a "draft lottery," which was started the following year. When we, "the Class of '68," graduated from college, we became prime draft targets. We had the option of fleeing to Canada or Sweden as "draft dodgers." (More than just a couple of the males in my graduating class chose this route.) We could try to enlist in the Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard or even the Army and attempt to stay away from the fighting. But this involved a four-year commitment and, in any case, avoiding the war was never a sure bet.

I come from a military family and grew up as an Army brat, but when I graduated from college in May of 1968 I did not want to go into the Army. I wanted to serve my country as a diplomat; my first tour would have been to Vietnam. So I applied for graduate school to train for a career as a U.S. Department of State "Foreign Service Officer." (Believe it or not, this had been my goal ever since my junior high days at the International School of NATO outside of Paris.) Anyway I went off to grad school, hoping that the feared "draft notice" would somehow fly on by. But in 1968, the odds seemed against us. I clearly remember getting my notice to "Report for an Armed Forces Physical Examination" on September 9, 1968 at the Boston Naval Yard. Report time, 07:00 AM. (Ouch! I don't "do" early mornings.) And it was the third day of school and I had just spent over \$200 for books – double Ouch!

I weighed my options and decided to volunteer for OCS, totally unaware of what I was getting into. The reason was that I thought becoming an officer would allow me more of a chance to control my own destiny. Looking back, especially in the context of reconnecting and trading memories with my 50th Company comrades, I realize that this was the right decision. OCS challenged me to the max, made me stronger and more resilient, and taught me leadership skills. As a bonus, it also earned me a very interesting and "exciting" all-expenses-paid trip to an exotic foreign country. When I returned, I wind-sprinted out the Army door, used the GI bill to finish my studies in

International Relations, and spent the next 35 years bouncing around the world serving as a diplomat, as did my wife Kay.

Running a “STRAC” Dining Hall – Mike Eberhardt

Following OCS, like so many from 50th Co, I went to Fort Carson, 5th Division. A number of us were assigned to an activated National Guard brigade. The Brigade Commander, whose name I have fortunately forgotten, had been a restaurant supply salesman in the real world. Although we were supposed to be a “STRAC” unit, ready and able to be heading out to some crisis point within 24 hours (I think), I doubt that we could have made it out of the motor pool in 24 days. But, I will say one thing for the brigade CO, everything in the mess hall was STRAC. [*Editor’s Note: STRAC - A 1970’s era US military acronym, meaning: Strategic, Tough, and Ready Around the Clock. To be labeled “STRAC” was considered high praise.*]

I remember that there could be only so many pancakes in the pan at a given time so they would be hot. After every meal, the salt and pepper shakers were refilled to exactly the same level. The Brigade CO had a habit of slipping in through 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 to report to COL Gibbs, the Battalion CO, presumably for some sort of chewing out or reprimand. After the meal I reported to the Colonel, with whom I happened to have a good relationship. His comment was, “Okay, you’ve reported. Now go about your duty.” Anyway, that was life at the time.

Ping-Ponging My Way into the Quartermaster Corps – Bill Snodgrass

My original post-OCS orders assigned me to a mechanized infantry unit at Fort Carson, Colorado. But just prior to our OCS graduation, there were four of us who had not heard back on our request for a transfer. We kept going over to Personnel to check on the status of our requests. Someone complained to the First Sergeant, who made it known to us that we should quit bugging Personnel. But squeaky wheels tend to get the grease, and we figured the worst thing they could do to us would be to keep us in Infantry, which probably would have also included an eventual ticket to Vietnam. So two days before graduation one other candidate and I went again to Personnel and talked to a Spec. 4 who was sympathetic to our plight. He called Washington, and it turns out that our request was sitting in some Major’s in-basket for approval. If we had waited two more days, we would have been commissioned Infantry and lost our transfer option.

Well, all good things come at a price. On the way back to the OCS barracks, it was raining cats and dogs and we got soaked. Upon arrival, our escapade was discovered by the TACs who had us play a round of ping pong. Sopping wet, we had to bounce/splat between the walls in the hall. Worth every splat. I received a transfer to Quartermaster and orders to Ft. Lee Commissary School for five months. While at Ft. Lee we made beer in one of our classes, and the instructor invited us over to his house to play cards and drink the beer. I was offered a Quartermaster assignment in Bangkok. It required me to extend for a year, but I could take my family. What a great tour! At the end of my two years there, I received orders for War College training in Washington D. C., followed by a tour at Vietnam's Tan Son Nhut Air Base. This was late in 1971 and the war was winding down. I got a letter saying the Army had promoted too many people to Captain. It offered an early out if I didn't plan on making the military my career. So my timing was good, I got my early out, and I missed going out to Vietnam. Ping-ponging into Quartermaster was the right move for me.