

Section 5, Vignettes from Vietnam, a Most Interesting Place

My Most Bizarre Tale of the Missing Body Bag – Bill Thoroughgood

The case of the missing body bag was the most bizarre thing that happened to me during my tour in Vietnam. That is saying a lot because Vietnam was a truly strange experience and every Vietnam vet has a few tales to tell. Let me provide the backdrop to my tale. It was early March 1971 when my unit, the Third Squadron of the Eleventh Armored Cav, stood down and left III Corps for redeployment to the States. I still had enough time left in my tour to be reassigned. I went to the First of the First Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) of the 23rd Infantry (Americal) Division. Our squadron's forward base was at Khe Sanh, the former Marine base in I Corps near the DMZ. I had a memorable deuce-and-a-half ride from the Cav's rear HQ at Chu Lai, up the coast through Hue and then Quang Tri. The terrain became increasingly hilly, then mountainous, and the narrow road cut through sunken ravines as it meandered upward. I worried that our convoy could be easy prey for an ambush. It didn't help that we had to follow a fuel truck for much of the way. Well we made it. We were up on this high plateau surrounded by distant hills. Khe Sanh was a rather eerie place. I was sent several kilometers ("clicks," in Army talk) to an artillery fire base at a place called Lang Vei. Our mission was to keep the road open for the ARVN incursion into Laos known as Operation Lam Son 719. We had a defensive perimeter that offered support for a battery of 155mm self-propelled howitzers firing into Laos.

I reported to the brand new squadron commander, LTC Breeding, in his command post (a command track with a tent set up behind it). The previous commander had been shot down in his helicopter over Laos and was presumed KIA; Breeding was his replacement. I stood in front of him for over a minute saluting while telling him I was LT Thoroughgood, reporting for duty. Strangely the colonel just stared vacantly at me. He neither acknowledged my salute, nor said anything in response. It was rather awkward, to say the least. Thank God the Sergeant Major jumped in and suggested that LT Thoroughgood be given a line platoon. I had been a platoon leader with the 11th Cav and was familiar with the job. However, I was not aware that the road into Laos that the squadron was securing was lined with two regiments of NVA bad guys on both sides of the road. Units of the squadron were getting pretty well clobbered with small arms fire, RPG's and mortars as they tried to keep the road open.

I was blissfully oblivious to the action going on down range and remain thankful to this day that someone from on high had my back. Just as the Sergeant Major made the suggestion for me to serve as a platoon leader of one of those units getting hit on the road, the XO turned to me and asked how much time I had left in-country. I answered him. He turned to the colonel and the ranking NCO and stated that the squadron could not put this officer (me) in a line platoon with such limited time left in-country. (In

Army jargon, I was getting “short.”) While I was unfamiliar with the dangerous circumstances, I was smart enough to realize that I had made it this far without stepping on a mine or attracting a bullet, and agreed that the major had a very good point. The colonel was apparently so green and uneasy with his new assignment that the major was calling the shots. So the major, my new advocate, gave me several less demanding jobs. I was to be the casualty reporting officer and the maintenance reporting officer, to name two. Frankly, I would have been happy to be named the dung-burning reporting officer. I had had enough drama and was anxious to get back to the “real world,” as the troopers would say. I now realize that if God had not put those words in the major’s mouth, my tour of duty at Lang Vei would have become more challenging and hazardous. But enough background. Back to the bizarre incident I mentioned.

One evening it was my turn to be the duty officer in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC), which was the tent at the back of the command track. It had all the radios and communications equipment. Generally there was not much to do at night. An NCO usually monitored the radio, so the duty officer could lie down in a cot and get some rest. At daybreak I was awakened by this horrific noise, a huge explosion. The sun was up, but as I rushed outside I was struck by the heat and bright light of the burning hulk of the 155mm self-propelled howitzer next to us. The 155 was preparing an early morning fire mission when it exploded. There had been some sort of a malfunction. The breech block on the main gun had blown back from a round that had inexplicably ignited. The blow-out of the block severed the leg of the loader, but he was the lucky one and was able to exit the vehicle. The gunner was on the opposite side of the gun and was unable to climb out. Instead he was incinerated when the vehicle blew up and ignited the fuel. We stood by helplessly as howitzer burned. What was left of the poor gunner was scooped up and the ashes and bone fragments placed in a body bag. I was in charge of the Landing Zone and had the responsibility for transporting the bag, weighing perhaps fifteen pounds, to the LZ to await an inbound chopper. I went back to pick up other items that needed to go out and returned to the LZ to await the incoming Huey. To my consternation, the body bag was gone! I had not heard a helicopter, nor had I seen one. Did a slick swoop in to the LZ and the backwash blow the body bag away? Did someone move the bag from the area for whatever reason? I searched the LZ extensively and asked everyone in the squadron if they had moved it, but there were no answers. To me, this was unacceptable. A family back home had lost their son in Vietnam and, at the very least, deserved to have his remains come home. This situation was not a “missing in action and presumed dead.” This was a dead soldier whose body had been recovered, but who had inexplicably gone missing! I was at a loss to explain it. I wrote up a deposition that offered no clues or answers to the missing body. To me it was simply bizarre. From the family’s view, how could the US Army lose their son’s body? How could I have lost their son’s body? My only thought was that a resupply helicopter may have come in without my knowledge and taken off with the bag, but that seemed unlikely. Weeks later, before I was to leave Vietnam, I was in Phu Bai when an

investigating officer found me and posed the same questions about the body bag gone missing. To this day I do not know what happened and am still haunted by the episode. I can only hope that the remains turned up later and made it back to the family, giving them some closure on their loss.

With the Green Berets in Vietnam – Bill Brown

Graduating from OCS at noon, I reported immediately to Ft. Benning's Airborne School. Thanks to Captain Smith's PT regime, I had a "blast." Then it was on to Special Forces training, after which I received orders to an A-Team with the 10th Special Forces Group at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. Covered with snow from skiing and mountain training, the US Army thought I was ready for the Southeast Asian jungles. I didn't. So I wrangled a couple of schools, learning Vietnamese and experiencing the "comforts" of the Jungle Warfare School in Panama. I then deployed to Vietnam for back-to-back tours. I served with the 5th Special Forces Group, first commanding an A-Team in the Delta's Seven Sisters area and then working out of Buon Ma Thuot in the Vietnamese Highlands with MACVSOG (Military Advisory Command Vietnam Studies and Operations Group). *[Editor's Note: this was a highly classified, multi-service special operations unit which conducted covert unconventional operations, including strategic reconnaissance missions in South and North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Other special missions included the capture of enemy prisoners, rescue of downed pilots, and rescue operations to retrieve prisoners of war throughout Southeast Asia. In addition, it conducted clandestine agent team activities and psychological operations.]* I eventually served as the Chief Intelligence Officer for Command and Control South. However, I am now safe to say that we never went to places we weren't supposed to be (sic). It was heady stuff to run with ghosts. That was another planet. After Nam, I served on a general's staff in Europe. I left the Army as a Captain after 5 years and 1 day.

Living among the Montagnards – Wilton (Sandy) Carter

After OCS I was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division at Fort Carson until about February 1970, then went to Ft. Bragg for Vietnamese language school, and then to Vietnam for a tour with MACV. I left for Vietnam in May 1970 about two weeks after the Kent State protests and shootings. The country was protesting the US incursion into Cambodia to destroy the NVA supply depots. (One point, IMHO, about that incursion into Cambodia in May 1970: it worked. There were no major offensives by the NVA for about 22 months, until the Battle of Kontum in March 1972.)

I was assigned to Advisory Team 41 in Kontum which was then commanded by COL Oliver Dillard, who later became the fifth African American to be promoted to flag rank in the US Army. I was assigned to a Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) which consisted of two Lieutenants, two staff sergeants and one Vietnamese interpreter. We were attached to various Montagnard villages in Kontum Province and worked with the local South Vietnamese forces that provided protection for the villages.

The Montagnards (“people of the mountain”) are indigenous people of the Central Highlands; they are also known as the “Degar.” Early on in the Vietnam War, the US Special Forces trained many of them, as they seemed to have some loyalty to the Americans. They picked up a little French during the 1950s; I heard a few of them say after a patrol, “bo-koo VC,” which we understood all too well. They also were keen for Americans to sip their rice wine. They would grab us tightly by the wrists and lead us to the rice wine line-up. After the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, many Montagnards came as refugees to the US, a good number settling in my home state of North Carolina. I admire their work ethic.

I did learn to get by on bamboo shoots, rice, nuoc mam and fish, and rice wine. I spent plenty of time on the Hueys (UH-1s) going from Kontum out to villages like Plei Op. The only tragic event during my tour occurred in March 1971 along HW14 north of Kontum. LT Joe Ryan and his MAT team interpreter were killed by a land mine off the side of the road during a Viet Cong ambush. I felt lucky to get out of Vietnam with only a bad ankle sprain. In May 1971 I returned to CONUS and was discharged at Oakland.

Gourmandizing in a Vietnamese Village – Brian Flora

In the spring of 1970, our Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) was imbedded in a village deep in the Delta. We were provided with standard Army Rations (Meal, Combat, Individual), which we affectionately termed C-Rats. Twelve different menus were included, with varying degrees of palatability. Each contained one canned meat item; one canned fruit, bread or dessert item; an accessory packet containing four cigarettes, matches, chewing gum, toilet paper, instant coffee, plastic cream, sugar, and salt; a plastic spoon; and a trusty P-38 can opener (I still use one while camping). The meat item could be eaten cold, but was better when heated. Needless to say, I quickly tired of my C-Rats.

However, as an “exalted” First Lieutenant (they called me “*Dai Uy*” – Captain), I was a village VIP. As such, I was frequently invited (three to four times a week, on average) into homes for meals. Some of the village elders, including the Village Chief and Security Chief spoke French, so I could engage them in social conversation. Dining out was always an adventure, but my 50th Company training had prepared me to “get with the program.” I actually looked forward to sampling new things with my Vietnamese hosts and am happy to report that I kept a mostly open mind about what I was being served and suffered no lasting damage from the experience. My main memory is of rice, rice, and more rice. It was sticky stuff that even I could eat with chop sticks. I still eat a lot of rice and love fried rice. However, when eating fried rice in the village you had to be on the alert for the presence of tiny, but lethal, red peppers that sometimes found their way into the mix. I enjoyed a variety of tasty soups my hosts concocted. Meat and fish were cut up and served in a stew format. As a condiment, “nuoc mam” (fermented fish sauce) was always available. It’s not bad (actually pretty good) when you get the first couple of pressings. “Numbuh One” (referring to the first pressing) was a word of

praise not only for the fish sauce, but for just about anything. “Numbah Ten” was a term of abject reproach for anyone and everything. Lastly, I 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 bowl, most of it went down pretty well.

For libations, the standard beverage was “Tiger Beer LaRue” AKA, *Ba Muoi Ba* (Beer 33), or “*Bambah*” for short. I liberated many bottles of this fine brew. On occasion, I’d bring a bottle of cheap brandy from Class VI to share with my hosts; it was much appreciated. Sometimes they’d wheel out some rice-distilled fire water called *ba xi de* (*bahk shee day*). Pretty raunchy stuff, not to be recommended. All in all, I enjoyed my various encounters with Vietnamese village cuisine.

First Cavalry Air Assault – Mike Thornton

It was a clear and sunny day with only a few wispy clouds in the sky. Just after lunch, we were supposed to walk off the LZ which served as the Battalion HQ. However, as we were packing up to move out, the Battalion XO came over calling my name. He showed me a drawing, on a napkin, of a suspected enemy siting. The drawing showed a stream along the right side of the napkin. Moving left across the page was a tree line next to the stream, an open area, and then a steep, wooded ridgeline. He explained that a chopper pilot had seen several enemy soldiers moving across the open area toward the ridgeline. The mission, the major explained, was to land, set up a patrol base and move across the open area to locate and engage with the enemy. We were to be inserted by Huey helicopters supported by gunships. It was to be a classic air assault. Like so many things in Vietnam, it did not go as planned. The Hueys arrived and we loaded up. As we took off, I first heard, then saw, the battery of 105 howitzers open fire in support of our air assault. We flew toward the landing zone, and I could see our destination from the air. The small stream, the tree line, the open area, and the ridge line were all in view outside the right side of the chopper. I could see the howitzer shells landing on the open area, now our landing zone. Soon we banked to the right to start our descent I could see a White Phosphorous round land and appear to splash up from ground. The White Phosphorous round was the signal that the artillery would no longer be firing and that it was now safe to fly troop carrying choppers into the LZ.

The Hueys made another right angle turn, and continued to descend toward the landing zone. We were now traveling back toward where we had started, only this time, much lower. I was wondering where the gunships were. The protocol for an air assault was for the gunships to fire their rockets into a landing zone to suppress any enemy before the Hueys landed or hovered near the ground. It was also the most vulnerable time for a chopper. So where were the gunships? They were behind us, I quickly learned, as

rockets from the gunships whooshed by and exploded in the ground ahead of us. One of the jobs of a platoon leader during an air assault was to call in “red” for an LZ with enemy troops or green for an unopposed landing. For this purpose, the platoon RTO traveled with me in the first Huey. The door gunners on the Hueys opened up and began firing, again to protect the choppers, and the troops in them, from enemy forces who might be on the ground. The door gunners had loaded their machine guns with green tracers and I could see them streaking away from the sides of the Huey. American units used red tracers. The NVA, who we were facing, used green tracers. So when I saw the green tracers, my heart leaped to my throat. I thought: “Red LZ!” This thought passed as quickly as it came when I realized that the green tracers were moving out away from us not toward us. (They look remarkably similar; it took several seconds to be certain of the direction.)

Once on the ground, things were not what we had expected. The tree line next to the stream, was sparse – only a few bushes -- and did not offer cover and concealment. A further complication was that the order of the Hueys had changed (I never learned why), and I found that the troops I had loaded into the last chopper were already on the ground. I was particularly worried about a new guy who had just joined our platoon. I had told everyone what the XO had told me, but when that did not match the reality on the ground, the new guy and some others were standing in the open uncertain what to do. Fortunately, my NCOs and more experienced enlisted men also saw that we were in a perilous position -- standing in the open, exposed to a suspected enemy position in a wooded ridgeline 200 yards away. And the topping on the cake was that I could not raise battalion HQ. The radios did not work. I formed the platoon into a defensive line near the stream, and then relayed messages via a passing chopper to battalion HQ. Before long we had both tube artillery and gunships blasting the ridge line. We then made an open area crossing and moved unopposed to the top of the ridge line. Another day another dollar.

“Vietnamizing” the Advisors – Brian Walrath

Upon arrival in Vietnam, after a few days of “in-processing” my next couple of weeks were spent in a school for advisors just outside Saigon. We studied Vietnamese language, customs, food and other helpful information. Several 50th Company classmates were there, along with a mixture of other officers and NCOs, all of whom would then be going to various advisory positions throughout the country. Among us were several Australian soldiers who seemed to be good-natured chaps. They were rather fascinating to us young Americans. One of them pointed out that 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 WWII.

On one of our last nights at the school, about a half dozen of us had supper at the big officer’s club in Saigon. Mike Eberhardt was there, and I believe John Curley was, too.

Since in the next couple of days we would be heading “up country” to our assignments in harm’s way, we decided that a bit of 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. This is probably why we attracted the attention of a U. S. Army captain seated nearby. He came over, introduced himself, and invited us to his office which was nearby. He wanted to tell us a few things about Vietnam. What position he held was never clear, but it must have been one of the legion of rear echelon staff jobs that existed in Saigon. His office walls were covered with maps on which he used a pointer to indicate important things going on in country.

At least they must have been important to him, but none of us were paying much attention. We tried to look attentive, but every time he faced toward the maps and continued to drone on, we rolled our eyes and made faces. Somehow we managed to stifle our giggles, at least enough so that he didn’t catch on. 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 been in a condition to pay attention, but his words of wisdom went right over our heads. Once we got out his door, we all burst into laughter. What made it even funnier is that one of our comrades (I think it was Curley) had “requisitioned” the captain’s pointer. Just like a bunch of frat boys pulling a trick on the prof.

The Brown Stuff Hits the Whirly Thing – VC Night Attack on Our Mud Fort - Brian Flora

The first half of my tour in Vietnam (April to October 1970) was with a Mobile Advisory Team (MAT 72) assigned to the village of Tieu Can in Vinh Binh Province, at the crotch of the Mekong and Bassac Rivers. Tieu Can, as were most of the villages in the province, was located in water-logged rice paddy country on a canal that linked it to the Mekong River. The one dirt road out of the village led to Tra Vinh, seven miles away. Tra Vinh was the “big city;” it was the provincial capital and the location of the provincial MACV compound where I did the second half of my tour. Sampans on the canals were the main means of transportation. We even had our own “sampan,” an aluminum Boston Whaler with a twin-Merc outboard motor. But two months after I got there it went missing one night. We blamed the heist on elite VC frogmen. Since both road and water routes were subject to ambushes, we usually relied on the supply Huey for things we needed.

There were, of course, no U.S. combat units in Vinh Binh Province, nor were there any regular Vietnamese ground forces, just Regional Force units operating out of the provincial capital. Our five-man MAT Team was pretty much on its own, out in the middle of nowhere. The team was composed of a newly-minted Captain, a First Lieutenant (me, also newly minted) and three senior NCO’s, including a personable and

skilled medic, Tom, who we called "Doc." Our mission was to advise and train the local Popular Forces platoon (a village-based part-time militia) and the village PSDF (Peoples Self Defense Force) contingent as they tried to defend their village against marauding Viet Cong units. Altogether, the good guys numbered around 80-90 individuals. The PSDF were youths (12 to 15 as a rule) and older guys (50 and above), armed with obsolescent Army surplus infantry weapons. At night, we sought safety with our PF/PSDF brothers-in-arms and hunkered down in a typical Delta style triangular mud fort. The canal, on one side, and lots of barbed wire on the other two gave some security.

Tieu Can was normally a pretty quiet village. Our work with the PF/PSDF, to be honest, was mostly an attempt to keep the locals out of the VC "draft." The home-grown VC and their families and our 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, bad guys at night. Families on both sides were vulnerable to retaliation, so an overall accommodation within the village had been reached. The one serious attack during my time happened when an out-of-town Main Force VC Battalion came into our AO (Area of Operations) looking for action. The Main Force VC didn't come around often, but when they did, there was trouble in River City.

Back to my story. Around 2 AM (zero-two-hundred hours in Army speak, zero-darkthirty in anybody's parlance), a detachment from the VC Main Force Battalion, maybe the whole damn lot of them, tried to infiltrate through our wire and do us some serious harm. We were bunked down for the night in our mud fort. An alert sentry (Bless his soul!) heard something funny (sloshing in the surrounding rice paddy and a tin can rattle on the barbed wire). He started shooting, which got everyone's attention in a hurry. Immediately, a barrage of small arms fire peppered the fort. Everyone started blasting back, including with our one M60 Machine Gun, in the best imitation of a "mad minute" we could muster. We even managed to launch a couple of illumination flares. An on-and-off again firefight ensued; it lasted maybe twenty minutes. The VC let loose three incoming mortar rounds, all of which missed our fort. We countered by launching grenades with our trusty M79 "Bloop Gun" until we ran out of ammo. The bad guys also shot two RPG rounds at the fort (RPGs do go through mud walls, if you were wondering). This added to the drama and chaos. Shooting waxed and waned. The twenty minutes seemed to last all night, and I will never forget the snap of AK-47 rounds passing overhead or thudding into the mud walls. And then it was over.

Bottom line is that the baddies never got inside the barbed wire perimeter. We lost three KIA (killed) and seven WIA (wounded), but our MAT team was spared. The VC must have also taken a number of hits, based on the many blood trails we found the next morning. They apparently decided that we weren't worth the effort and just faded away with their casualties. And that was it. For the record, we (the MAT and our PF platoon)

also got caught up in a mostly botched ambush on the 4th of July, 1970. It was a memorable way to celebrate Independence Day, and it did get the heart pounding, but it was nothing like the night attack on our mud fort.

Life in Camp Was Pretty Good... When You Weren't Getting Shelled – Mike Eberhardt

MAT 5 was in Ham Luong District, Ben Tre Province, 13 miles from Ben Tre City. We were in the Delta, 85 miles southwest of Saigon. There was a MACV District Team with a major (Cottingham), an Intelligence Officer (CPT Uber), and a NCO Medic. MAT 5 had two officers and three NCOs. Fang was our interpreter. There were four NCOs when I arrived. One was transferred, leaving two infantry NCOs (Mac and Wolf) and one medic (Doc Wenrick). Compared to many others, MAT 5 lived well.

Our "hooch" had apparently been something of a garage for the District Chief (a regular ARVN major). It had been enclosed into one room with walls about three-fourths to the ceiling and screen wire the rest of the way. We had four bunk beds, a table and a few chairs, wall and foot lockers, and a large cooler where we kept ice, when we could get it, and cold drinks. Fortunately, the Major had a house with a nice kitchen area and a large area for relaxing. Its sleeping area had overhead cover, which the team did not have. After a rather harsh rocket attack, our team moved into the Major's sleeping area.

We ate well because the Major had a cook who could actually prepare American food. She had access to the food allotted to two teams so we chowed down when not on a mission. One thing though. She always cooked rice, no matter what else we had. The following morning, she reheated the leftover rice with onions and oil and served that for breakfast, along with whatever else we had. We usually just did our own thing for breakfast. Mac, Wolf, and I most often prepared grits since we were all from the South. I might add that Mac and Wolf were African-Americans, and we got along great.

Our dwelling and the Major's house were located inside a compound that served as the District headquarters for the civilian government. There were a couple of finished-out concrete buildings. Along the perimeter of the compound were galvanized metal buildings used for housing by the Regional Forces (RF) or for storage, etc. Our generator was in one of those.

Having a generator allowed us to watch movies at night, when not on mission. The soldiers would line the windows outside and watch along with us. They especially enjoyed westerns. Those who had a motor scooter often referred to themselves as "Saigon Cowboys." They wore scarfs around their necks and a few actually had 45 calibers slung on a belt like the movies. Life was pretty good when we weren't being shelled.

Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) 28 at Tuy Hoa – Don Driftmier

I arrived in Vietnam in June of 1970. After a week in Saigon, I was assigned as a Team Leader to a new MAT forming up as Team 28 at Tuy Hoa. There was a beach compound with a number of advisors who had various duties. Our two MAT teams were billeted in an ARVN compound outside of town that had once been used by units of the 4th Infantry Division. We had a quick Vietnamese language/culture training week outside of Long Bien. Afterwards, I got rides on various aircraft back to Tuy Hoa. I had been sent down to Cam Ranh Bay to sign for a container full of MAT team supplies. It was waiting for me when I finally got back to Tuy Hoa.

There was another 2LT, Joe Kerns, who also had a new MAT team. We were shortly promoted to 1LT and our boss was a career Infantry/Ranger Major. We were assigned to various Vietnamese local units, including as trainers for what was called PSDF or Peoples Self Defense Force. That was someone's terrible idea of arming men over 50 and boys between 12-15 with a variety of old Army ordinance, such as M-1 carbines, M-1 Garands, Thompson .45 machine guns, BARs and some sort of old radio that would not interface with our PRC 25's. I had two senior NCO's (one was our medic) and an ARVN Sergeant interpreter, Lam Van Que who became my right arm. I had a jeep (made by Ford) and an M-16 (made by the Hydramatic Division of GM).

We spent the majority of our time with a Vietnamese "Regional Forces" rifle company. My counterpart was the Company Commander. We had a Popular Force Platoon assigned to us as well. We did a lot of ambush/interdiction action and engaged usually small units of VC. As I see it, my main function was to be the English-speaking officer on the ground to call in needed air support, Huey and Cobra gunships, and dust-offs. There were no American ground troops around, but we had units of the South Korean White Horse Division in the area. They did not like the Vietnamese. So much for allies! We had a "PSP" [*Editor's Note: Pierced Steel Plank*] airstrip at our compound that could land a Caribou but nothing bigger. Of course a sortie of Hueys could go in and out with ease. Every once in a while we had an Air America "Twin Beech" land with some civilian wanting to know how Nixon's Vietnamization of the war was going. They were not very impressive people.

An Infantry Lawyer in Vietnam – Mickey Metzler

Before I left for Vietnam, Ft. Benning's Center Command commander, a JAG Military Judge who had presided over most of the Court Marshall proceedings where I had represented either the prosecution or the defendant, and the Chief of the Ft. Benning JAG office wrote letters to JAG Viet Nam recommending me for any legal positions that might be available. The Chief Clerk of a Viet Nam JAG office sent me a letter informing me that JAG was aware of my law qualifications, but he quickly reminded me, "you do wear the crossed rifles." Soooooooo, in Viet Nam I served with MACV as Assistant

Logistical Support Coordinator for Civil Operations and Rural Development Support, located at Bien Hoa in III Corps. My responsibilities included coordination of logistical support for eleven provincial advisory teams, one municipality advisory team and CORDS headquarters. As several of you know from personal experience, in 1970 MACV was faced with a myriad of new and complex logistical problems stemming from the accelerated withdrawal of US military units from Viet Nam, coupled with the increased emphasis on the Vietnamization of all aspects of the war effort. The US advisory effort was growing and the sources of essential logistical supplies and support were diminishing. Logistical functions needed to expand and become more sophisticated to assure the continuous supply and support of the 3,700 military and civilian advisors in III Corps. My duties and responsibilities included making numerous liaison trips to outlying province and district teams, advocating for their needs, and making recommendations to avoid complications and expedite support. I also helped educate and assist the advisory teams in the utilization of the new support program, including how to obtain and distribute critical equipment and supplies.

I received a meritorious service Bronze Star Medal for my Viet Nam service, for which I am extremely HONORED and PROUD. I did try to perform my duties and my assignments conscientiously. But I have always believed that my contributions to the team's successes were highly overrated. I knew virtually nothing about military logistical support, *especially in a changing hostile environment*. But my team members, especially SFC Jens Moeller, had a wealth of knowledge and information which they respectfully and selflessly imparted to me. I was merely the contact person and "mouthpiece" for sharing (in the proper *military* manner that *they* suggested) their wisdom, advice, and recommendations.

I lived in Train Compound while in Viet Nam, which had above average recreational facilities. I was able to spend some of my recreational time there with two 50th company comrades, Brooke Pearson and Jeff McCloud. In one of my letters to Ann, "I declared" future fellow lawyer Brooke and me to be the bridge champions of the compound. LOL

I also had a couple of noteworthy "non-military" Viet Nam experiences. Shortly after arriving I made friends with a Bien Hoa civilian worker in the office, Mr. Chung. I agreed to help Mr. Chung with his English (after work) if he would help me with my Vietnamese. We enjoyed each other's company. Mr. Chung gave me an origami bird he had made. (It is still a part of my Viet Nam memorabilia.) In addition, I was flattered when Mr. Chung invited and escorted me to his modest, crowded home in Bien Hoa and introduced me to his family and neighbors. I have often wondered about Mr. Chung's fate after the Americans left Viet Nam. Lastly, toward the end of my Viet Nam tour, I had the opportunity (again, on my own time) to begin transitioning back to civilian life. I taught a business law course at the nearby Bien Hoa Air Force base. Team member SFC Moeller was one of my students.

Lasting Imprints from Vietnam – Bill Yacola

As for Vietnam, it left 3 indelible imprints on my brain that I remember as if they had happened yesterday.

First Imprint: My flight to Vietnam. I don't remember the day or date my flight left from Oakland, yet I remember almost 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 had set on foreign soil. Then we left 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 deployed and lighting up the night sky and then a long series of tracer rounds! Silently I thought, "Oh my God!" Talk about a reality check. We landed in the wee hours; it was night and hot! After some preliminary in-processing we were sent to a barracks to find a cot and get some sleep. When I woke the next morning the first thing I saw was a Mama-San, a grandmotherly woman sweeping the floor. It startled me. My first contact with a Vietnamese citizen.

Second Imprint: Poverty, a real Third World experience. For the Vietnamese this was their normal. My MACV team, like many others, was involved with the area residents. We bought food from the locals and lived among them. Small huts or shacks (maybe 200 square feet in size) had multiple families, dirt floors, and no indoor plumbing or running water. The outside was their bathroom. To this day, I still know how fortunate and blessed I am to be in the USA.

Third Imprint: The orphans. Our small compound was near the city of Vung Tau, an in-country R & R area. Stories were that it was also an in-country R & R center for the VC & Regular Army. Truth or not, there were lots of bars; women and Saigon Tea sold! And lots of babies born! Visiting an orphanage was tough. There were 2-3-4 toddlers and infants per crib, if that is what you would call them. The babies, abandoned by their mothers, were predominately "round eyes," as they were called. The locals had a strong dislike for "round-eyed" babies, so they had little chance of being adopted.

This is my story. As for the rest of my tour, I arrived in-country; made it to my MACV team; did my job to the best of my ability; and arrived home safe and sound! The only thing I remember about the flight home was the cheering as we left the ground! I feel blessed. My tour was better than many (especially compared to our combat troops), but yet somewhat worse than others.

The Phoenix Spook from Tan Binh – Steve Porter

My OCS classmate, Lou Lallo, and I were scheduled to fly to Nam with some of our other 50th Company brethren. But there was some sort of SNAFU in the Ft. Polk personnel

office, and when we got to Travis AFB we were told that we needed to wait for new orders. We were hoping those new orders would send us to guard Disneyland, but no such luck. So we chilled out with the hippies in San Francisco for a few days before taking off. When we arrived in Bien Hoa, the OIC said that all the open slots for 50th Company had been filled. After some milling around, we finally got our assignments to Gia Dinh Province (the province that surrounded Saigon). After a coin flip, Lou went to a team in Nha Be at the mouth of the Saigon River, while I was assigned to a district team in Tan Binh District. Upon arrival, I learned that I would be filling an intelligence slot. All of a sudden, I became a spook. I was part of the Phoenix Program. [*Editor's Note: the Phoenix Program was designed by the CIA to identify and "neutralize" VC infrastructure via infiltration, capture, counter-terrorism, interrogation and – gasp! – assassination.*]

The District Senior Advisor was something of an enigma – a pudgy, disheveled chainsmoker who claimed to work for some civilian agency like USAID or CORDS, but I'm pretty sure he was CIA. My suspicions grew when he took me on a field trip to attend an in-country intelligence school in Vung Tau on the South China Sea – think *China Beach*, only without Dana Delaney. There were about 50 officers and some civilians in attendance. All of the Army officers wore insignia for branches other than MI. I quickly learned that there were levels of specialization and a lot of internal jealousy based on one's classification. The guys looked at my infantry patch and kept asking me what my **real** MOS was, and I kept telling them I was 1542 infantry platoon leader. They didn't buy it and finally decided that my refusal to "fess up" meant that I must be a super spook. Little did they know that I was really just there to catch some beach time. Back in Tan Binh I spent most days driving around the district in my jeep with my faithful interpreter gathering intel reports from the local village and hamlet chiefs and the RF/PFs. I was invited to consume lots of nuoc mam on my food and drink that foul rice whiskey, Ba Xi De, while obtaining very little information regarding VC infiltration. Many nights were spent flying in helicopters looking for bad guys and dodging friendly fire from artillery batteries that lobbed shells out into the district. I didn't see any infiltrators, but the trigger-happy door gunners neutralized some water buffaloes.

I was fortunate to live in a BOQ near MACV HQ and Tan Son Nhut AFB. In other words, near bars, O-Clubs and decent food. Mike Myers occasionally came up from the boonies in the Mekong Delta and considered my modest quarters to be in-country R&R. I returned to the world with a Bronze Star, several air medals and, to quote J.D. Salinger, "most of my faculties intact."

MACV Memories from Vinh Binh – Jim Fields

VC Prison Camp for Boys: In Vietnam, I was assigned to MACV, MAT team 72, Vinh Binh Province, IV Corps. Four of us were with RF-PF Lin Doi 404, a search and

destroy battalion-sized unit, which was regularly dropped into contested country and had consistent contact with the VC. In late 1970, we conducted a two-flight helicopter insert into an area in south-west Vinh Binh Province, where the Lin Doi destroyed a camp holding kidnapped boys, who had been locked in cages. They were held for ransom for food and supplies, etc. from area hamlets. We brought out about a dozen teens and pre-teens. Some were in very bad condition and one had to be carried. On this 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.

Volunteering Saved My Life: After about six months in country, our LTC Provincial Senior Advisor 'volunteered' me to start a night operations advisory team (NOAT) for MAT team 72, for PSDF villagers. Of course, I said yes. That action probably saved my life or at least kept me from serious injury. Within a few weeks after leaving Lin Doi 404 and starting to put together a NOAT team, the Lin Doi's XO, a Vietnamese Captain who I regularly 'humped the patties' with, was injured by a command-detonated mine, while on patrol. When his RTO and others ran up to help him, a second command-detonated mine killed him and his RTO and wounded several others. Usually, when on patrol, immediately following Dai Uy Di would be his RTO, followed by me. We shared the same radio. Had I been on patrol with him, I would have been hit either by the first or second blast. As it happened, the new American Lieutenant was back down the line and was not injured.

Drenched in the Delta - Dealing with Monsoon Season – Mike Gilpin

The "Monsoon Season" in the Vietnamese Delta typically lasted from the end of May to mid-November. The Delta terrain was flat and poorly drained with an intricate network of canals and streams. The average elevation was about 2-3 feet. The monsoon storms were periodic torrential downpours, often with lightning and thunder. They occurred daily, most intensely in the afternoon, but also periodically through the day. Think repeated "bursts of wet!" This subjected the Delta to widespread flooding. It was not uncommon to have 1-3 feet of standing water covering 70 percent of the terrain. Now that is a world class swamp!

At the airfield, despite the mini-concrete wall in the hooch doorway, water would get inside the building. I often found my flip-flops floating in the room. The club was also usually flooded and it was standard practice to wade to the club at night. The off-duty dress of cut-off jeans, T-shirts, and flip-flops worked well. We sat at the tables with our feet in adjacent chairs while eating. The sound of sloshing water with visuals of coke and beer cans bobbing around the room was the norm. The airfield was approximately 10 feet above sea level. In the mornings we would roll the flight suits above our knees

and wade to the airfield. The dry socks and boots hung around our necks with the survival vest. We dressed after completing the pre-flight inspection.

Helicopter pilots in the Vietnamese Delta failed to enjoy the “calm, exotic beauty” (sic) of the monsoon season. Flying was a challenge, and flights were often grounded by weather. The storms, of course, limited visibility and altitude. The downbursts were not constant, but when they hit, it was crazy. We soon became pretty good at “flying blind.” Formation flying and night flying simply increased the risk. The standard procedure was to fly low (tree top) or at 2000 feet above ground level. At 2000 feet we were effectively beyond the range of small arms fire. Low level flight afforded speed before the aircraft was targeted by enemy fire. Canals rather than maps were used for navigation with the rule of “always fly to the right side of the canal.” It was not unusual to “low-level” down a canal, hear the chop-chop of another flight of aircraft, and then see them pass from the left door. It was a way of life.

A Dog Handler Who Never Walked Point – Bill Snodgrass

The Army always lined us up in alphabetical order and so not surprisingly, one of the friends I made during Basic and AIT at Ft. Ord, California, was 50th Company’s Steve Smith. In Basic (or AIT?) we both took the typing test, where we both scored well. This was so we could have it in our personnel records, in case something did not work out in OCS. This proved to be a very fortuitous thing for Steve.

When you dropped out (or were paneled out) of OCS, you became an enlisted man who could expect to wind up in Vietnam, often after 30 days of leave. Several 50th Company members who left the OCS program were sent to the three-month Scout Dog School before heading out “over there.” To say that dog handlers and their dogs had dangerous duty would be an understatement. The scout dog team, (handler and his dog), joined an infantry unit and served as their “eyes and ears” (and nose). On patrols they walked “point,” looking for booby trap trip wires, ambushes, snipers and hidden caches of food or weapons.

Steve decided early on that he did not want to go the officer route and after seven weeks with 50th Company dropped out of OCS. He was then assigned to Scout Dog School at Ft. Benning, and shortly thereafter found himself in Vietnam as a Dog Handler. Upon arrival “In Country” he was sent to a forward base where he was given a rifle, all his equipment and a dog. While Steve was still waiting for his first assignment, the Battalion XO landed by helicopter and asked to speak to him. The XO told him that he had read his personnel file and asked if it was true that he was a college graduate and could type 45 words per minute. Steve replied without hesitation, “Yes sir.” The XO told him to get on the helicopter with him and head back to the rear. Smith was his new clerk. He served his tour without seeing any action except an occasional mortar round aimed at his base camp.