

Dedication

This a book about the experiences of just one common citizen soldier, so the Dedication embraces all who have served their country.

However I dedicate this book to one extraordinary officer and a gentleman, **Major Boyd E. Morrow** of Forty Fort, PA. I never met Maj. Morrow's family nor do I know anything about his formative years. My only connection to Maj. Morrow was serving under him. A finer human, a better man, has not crossed my path since. It has always been my hope to someday meet Maj. Morrow's family so that I could tell them what an honor it was to serve with him. Maj. Morrow died doing his job. He took pride in his work and pride in his men.

He will always and forever be missed.

Acknowledgement

This book is a true account to the best of **my** poor old memory of my own experiences. An enlisted man often has no idea of what campaign he is in, what the battle he fights is about or whether it may be some historical event. An enlisted man just knows his job and does it within the context of those around him. He follows orders, not blindly, but within the moral reasoning of his own existence. Thus, it was many years after leaving Vietnam that I finally could put some historical context to my service overseas.

No one did more to record and document the accomplishments of the "Black Widows" than Dick "Cherry Boy" Detra. Dick is a good and close friend. He helped as my assistant in Vietnam without orders and worked with me on his own time when there was no requirement to do so. Maybe he felt sorry for my workload. Maybe he just wanted to be in the "Spider" gun platoon so badly that he would do anything he could. It really does not matter. What matters is what he did. We became good friends for life. 30 some years later I stood in a swimming pool in Florida wearing a formal tie while Dick Detra got married surrounded by his Vietnam buddies.

Dick researched our unit's history. Dick tried to track everyone he could, he tried to listen to every story he could. In the early years he did this via mail. Then later by email. Now the fruits of his labor are posted on several websites including the "Black Widows" website. He never stopped. He followed the unit's activities into the 21st Century as they went to Iraq and Afghanistan. Without his tireless efforts, we may have remained just another footnote in the history of war. Thank you Dick.

Please read this Disclaimer FIRST!

This is not really a book about war. It's a book about living through the consequences of war. It was how a twenty year old coped with the circumstances thrust upon him and his many adventures along the way. Hopefully it will help the reader understand how normal people living everyday lives can be changed into soldiers and how their perceptions of life change along the way.

There may be times you feel like you are reading an harrowing account of a combat soldier.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

The truth is: Every pilot and co-pilot, every crew chief and door gunner, every infantryman and special ops man, had it much tougher than me. I had a cushy job.

Please remember those who really fought our wars, both this one, those before and those that followed. They deserve your thanks and they deserve the credit. They were your next-door neighbors.

Most of all, remember those who never returned. Those who never got a chance to write down their experiences. Those who never saw home again. The Country they died for and the families that lost them deserve your prayers and appreciation.

90mph Door

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Chapter 1

The Building Storm

War sucks! No matter what the reason or justification, war just sucks!

The 1950's was supposed to be the reign of peace and prosperity. In fact, conflicts raged from 1946 to today. Too many to mention. But now the United States was the world kingpin. Renown for our dedication to freedom and strong enough to do something about it.

So that is what we did when North Korea invaded South Korea. But Americans were still war-weary from fighting World War Two. We could no longer call it a "war". We called it a "Police Action" complete with a possible atomic cloud.

* * * *

Then there came the carefree 60's. Wasn't life grand?

We elected a young, Catholic President with a beautiful wife and pretended it was Camelot. The Russian's thought, 'Well here's our chance!', a young President, a close election, an America divided. 1962 saw the Russians putting atomic flavored missiles in Cuba to intimidate our new leader. After all, Kennedy had sponsored an invasion of Cuba in the previous year. It only seemed fair.

* * * *

These were my high school years.

October of 1962 found every American living in fear of total nuclear war. You have to live it to believe it. Imagine living each day under the threat of a mushroom cloud. October was a month of fear, total fear, forever fear.

We lived in beautiful Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Unfortunately beautiful Colonial Williamsburg was planted in the middle of a bunch of really good military targets. We counted ourselves as dead if this war became a fact.

My dad worked at one these bases located in Yorktown, Virginia. At this location, the United States Navy stored it's own nuclear weapons. dad knew that, I did not. It was the most serious and sullen I had ever seen my father.

The whole nation lived in fear. Yet the reality was that the Russians did not desire to be

melted down any more than we did. Our President's resolve saved the day.

The Fall of 1963 started my Senior year at James Blair High School. By now we had heard, as if a distant sound brought to your ear by the wind, of a far away country called Vietnam. There was no threat of war, we were just sending over advisors to help them out. The Seniors at James Blair were more concerned about our coming Senior dance and decorating the gym.

So it was that I found myself on an errand to pick-up some tin milk containers for the dance. It was a wonderful Friday afternoon. I drove to a nearby farm to gather my loot. It was a school day, which made this errand even better. Of course, as any good teenager would, I was listening to the radio. Then, right in the middle of a perfectly good Bobby Vinton song the announcer broke in saying "The President has been shot!"

It was not quite 2PM as I twirled my car around and went racing back to school. I did not bother to park, I pulled up in front and ran into the school office almost yelling, "Turn on the radio, turn on the radio! The President has been shot!" They knew me, there was no need for questions. They simply turned their radio on. The Principal came out of his office amidst the commotion and listened to the broadcast. He then calmly turned to me and asked where I was supposed to be. I answered "The gym sir." He said that is where I needed to be.

I parked the car and ran into the gym yelling out my news but this was quickly drowned out by the school's PA system as the Principal announced the event to all. This was followed by allowing us to listen to radio announcer for awhile. Most were shocked, most were sad, one or two who were unhappy with the election results openly stated that it was about time. After they announced JFK had been pronounced dead, No one said anything else.

1963 was already off to a bad start. Then my home life took a punch to the stomach when my parents decided to split up. Mother's fault. Dad's subsequent anger. I was torn apart on the inside.

My Senior year was not a stellar one. My grades suffered. In those days you did not share your troubles. You kept up appearances, but inside I was a wreck. My Honor Roll days were behind me, my rebellious days were ahead. I played the drums in the marching band and I was the yearbook photographer so I had plenty of distractions. My parents stayed together until I finished high school, after that it was all down hill.

Dad was an engineer. A practical man. He could not understand why my grades were not good at a time in my life when I needed the best grades I could get. I tried harder but my heart wasn't in it. I put up a good front but my insides were churning. My hopes of a top notch engineering school were fading.

I looked at Georgia Tech, Rensselaer Polytechnic and foolishly at MIT, but clearly I would end up at an in-State school. So it was after much effort that the University of

Virginia offered to accept me. A great school, far enough away to be free, close enough to sponge off dad.

The summer of 1964 was my last real quality time at home. I got a job at historic Jamestown which was about 3 miles from my house. I usually walked to work. I paid scant attention to the news, which was voluminous. There was the fight for civil rights in the South, there were riots in some cities, there was a space race and as if a footnote to history, there was a change in policy toward Vietnam.

Our new President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, decided that JFK's decision to start withdrawing advisors was incorrect. He saw the Communist threat in Asia as one which could have a "Domino Effect" throughout the region. So, with good and decent distractions, our country slowly became entangled in Vietnam.

Thus the stage was set for my first year at UVA. My parents, with brave faces, saw me get settled at college in September and then promptly split up.

I ended up in Charlottesville and mother ended up in Richmond. Dad was really alone for the first time in his life and I am sure he was miserable. I was quite happy at UVA. It was a beautiful school, an historic school and a party school! Mom and dad had always been partiers, so I carried our family tradition to Charlottesville where it was received with open arms.

Now UVA is a good academic school. Although I was a good student in high school, I was barely mediocre at UVA. I had no discipline. Dad, wallowing in guilt and loneliness, was not as stingy as he used to be. I always had enough money and eventually I even brought my car to school. Freshmen were not allowed to have a car on campus so I kept it at friend's house in nearby Gordonsville. I loved my 1956 Dodge Royal sedan. It had a V-8! It had been my Grandfather's car which I got after he died.

I had the total freedom that I had so relished. This freedom did nothing for my Grade Point Average, but was most enlightening from the aspect of my developing manhood. I needed roughly a 2.5 GPA to continue to engineering school and I was no where near that. President Johnson was reelected by a landslide in November of 1964. Shortly after that came the Gulf of Tonkin Incident which Johnson used to get new powers from Congress in the form of a resolution to fight Communism in Asia.

Vietnam was slowly inching its way into my life, but I was unaware of it. I never watched the news. I got most of my news from friends and family.

Well I partied through to the Summer of 1965. Then I had to buckle down for Summer school to try to bring my grades up. I had to buckle down because Johnson was again raising the bar in Vietnam. He needed more bodies so the draft requirements kept changing. At first, full-time college students were deferred. Then full-time student was redefined to as one "who was making satisfactory progress toward a degree". Satisfactory was defined as you GPA. Vietnam was now a part of my life.

I only made satisfactory progress at Summer school so UVA would not admit me the following year. There was some sort of regional rule which meant to attend any college I would have to get out of the Commonwealth of Virginia. So I went to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania where I was born and where I had relatives.

Dad's brother Bill lived in Allentown. It was now a race to bring my overall GPA up high enough to avoid the draft. I took classes at both Muhlenberg and Moravian Colleges in order to carry enough credits. I got an apartment in a little section of Allentown called Whitehall where every morning you got up and cleaned the cement dust off your car.

Again I got satisfactory grades, but they were still too low to bring my average GPA up to a level sufficient to avoid the draft. My father and I waited for the hammer to fall.

In January of 1966 the hammer arrived.

Chapter 2

The Letter

Dad sheepishly opened the envelope marked "Selective Service". The first sentence was "You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States . . ." I am sure that he must have started to cry. Although he was an engineer, we was also a sentimental wuss. I was his only child and there was no wife there to console him. It must have hit him like a ton of bricks.

I was still in Pennsylvania and so I had to cancel my new classes and get back home. Generally speaking the government gave you 3 to 4 weeks before you had to report. For my father and for myself, a Plan B needed to be formulated.

Dad was not without influence both locally and within the Defense Department. He would never work outside the system though. His country wanted me and he would not try to stop that even if my life depended on it. That would not be honorable.

So while I resigned myself to military service and headed back to Virginia. Dad worked out the best deal he get for me and for him. He contacted mother about the news. My future military service became the glue to put my parents back together. By the time I got back home, it was almost a home again. Mother was back and everyone pretended that the elephant called Vietnam was not in the room.

Now unlike many draftees, I actually liked and appreciated the military. I grew up on World War Two documentaries and read anything I could on it. I also grew up making plastic models of ships and airplanes. I was a WWII nerd.

I loved to fly. During high school I was a member of the Civil Air Patrol and our meetings were at the old Williamsburg Airport which was a grass field. It had been located NW of town but apparently it no longer exists. The only reminder of its existence is "Airport Road" off of Route 60. In addition to numerous training flights and excursions, I also started taking flying lessons until college and my job at Jamestown interrupted that joy.

Dad's Plan B was simple. He talked to Francis at the local Selective Service Board. She said that if I volunteered for service, that I would not have to report until March. This would give us some time together as a family plus let me choose what I wanted to do in the military. I agreed.

First I went to the Navy. A Navy pilot was my ultimate dream. Aircraft carriers and sharp uniforms. Who could want more? But the Navy required an undergraduate degree as a minimum. So I was summarily dismissed from applying to the Navy. Next I tried the Air Force. The same fate awaited. Finally there was the Army. Bingo!

The Army was rapidly expanding the use of helicopters and would accept me as long as I passed a physical.

The nearest base was Fort Eustis, VA (which we called Fort Useless). Off I went for my flight school physical. I passed this with flying colors and was told by the doctor that I had the best eyesight of anyone he had ever examined. I signed up with Army for a three-year hitch. The Army said that my flight physical would become part of my record and that after Basic Training I would be assigned to Aviation School. This turned out to be one of the first of many lies and/or bureaucratic bungling that I would encounter in my brief military career.

Dad's next big surprise was a trip to Hawaii as a family. We would go first-class. This was a time when jet airlines were just coming into use. It was a thrill to fly so high and so fast after years of noisy travel in propeller driven airliners.

I was excited and for mother this exotic trip would sooth the ruffled feathers of the break-up quite a bit.

Chapter 3 **Hawaii, Part I**

Our first family reunion had been awkward at best.

Mom and dad danced around each other on eggshells. The Vietnam War was on the news every night, so they both danced around me. I was probably the most relaxed of the three of us. I stayed out of the house as much as possible either running errands or visiting old friends. I even took some more flying lessons.

All of my Army exams were completed and my paperwork done. This left only our

‘family’ outing to Hawaii before I was off serve my Country.

We took a propeller plane to Dulles. From there we flew non-stop on a 707 to LA. Then the same from LA to Honolulu. First-class on United Airlines all the way! I loved it! Mom and dad slowly but surely put the past behind them. Dad was determined to make this a happy trip.

Even though we were now officially in the jet era, airports still used roll-up staircases. Coming out of the cabin door I got my first breath of Hawaiian air. It is hard to put into words, but it just seems cleaner, fresher.

At the bottom of the stairs were women in hula skirts putting a real flowered lei on each deplaning passenger. Everything smelled so fresh, the air, the flowers, like the new beginning that dad wished for.

We stayed at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. A hotel that was to become an important part of our life. The Hilton was right on Waikiki Beach. Dad loved the hotel and the airline so much that he bought stock in them.

Besides being a world-class cook, my mother was also a truly world-class singer. Her singing career started early when she was about 6 years old performing on a 15-minute radio show out of Portland, Maine. Given a break or two, she could have been famous. Growing up I remembered her in every local production she could get in. She sang each year in the Williamsburg Lion’s Jamboree. Her proudest moment was being invited to sing at Historic Burton Parish Church. She had the voice of an angel, the voice of a Broadway star and the voice of an opera singer. Dad almost always cried from pure pride every time she sang.

Now at the time, the Hilton Hawaiian Village featured the popular singer Don Ho. Don performed in an almost a piano bar setting at one of their restaurant/bars. So our first night there that was where we went. At some point in the evening Don Ho foolishly asked for a volunteer to sing with him. Well, mother popped out of her seat and was standing next to him before most in the room had time to even contemplate what Don had said. She sang one song with him and he was impressed.

The next night we were there again and this time Don saw her in the audience and asked her to come up. They sang “Tiny Bubbles” and “The Hawaiian Wedding Song” together. Mother was on cloud nine! Dad was crying.

It was a wonderful week. It surpassed dad’s wildest expectations. We were a family again. Leaving Hawaii was very difficult because we all knew where my next overseas jaunt might take me.

Chapter 4

Induction

Throughout life I have discovered that for myself memories of good things are retained far more easily than those of bad. Christmas - good. First trip to dentist - bad. Thus in this spirit I tell you that my memories of induction are fussy at best. According to my form DD-214 my official starting date with US Army was March 4, 1966.

I remember spending one night in a Richmond hotel across the street from Union Station. How I got there I don't know. I remember foolishly answering yes to a question about being in the Boy Scouts. Thereafter it seems I was in charge of a group of inductees until we arrived at Ft. Jackson. My first command!

Luckily for me, my men were calm as sheep to slaughter and I managed to get all of them on board the train the next morning. Ft. Jackson is the Army's basic training center in Columbia, South Carolina. My first command ended at the Columbia train station when my brood was accounted for and shovelled into an Army bus.

Our introduction to Fort Jackson consisted of "hurry-up-and-wait" lines in order to sign papers, get shots, issued clothes and be assigned to temporary barracks. Doubly lucky for me (and my companions) was that Ft. Jackson was too full and we would only be there a short time.

Our temporary barracks were large tents (not so lucky there) which had coal burning stoves in the middle. Now it was still cold at night in early March, so the stoves were used. We slept on Army cots with Army blankets. If you should ever get the chance to sleep in a tent with a coal burning stove, RUN AWAY!!! Coal dust gets in your eyes, ears and worse your nose. I sneezed coal dust for a week after leaving Ft. Jackson!

My entire recollection of Ft. Jackson was needless lines, mindless questions, freezing cold, breathing coal and tall pine trees. At least there were no needles. I hate needles. The Army used the newest thing in injection technology, air-guns. It hurt just as much but at least it was over quickly.

We were told we would be attending basic training at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Sounded good to us, I mean how could it be worse than Jackson? After learning the Army's clever concept of "hurry-up-and-wait", I was introduced to two other new concepts.

These concepts were: 1) Once it is on your record it will probably never disappear, and 2) The concept of an "automatic volunteer". My very short military record showed that I had been in charge of a group of inductees once before. Since the Army needed to move said inductees to Ft. Campbell by train I was "automatically volunteered" to be in charge again.

So it was that I herded my new somewhat larger group onto the last train to Clarksville. Honest. Clarksville, Tennessee was the nearest train station to Ft. Campbell, Ky. Yes, the

same Clarksville as in the Monkees song.

I remember nothing about either the train trip nor much more about Ft. Jackson except I was glad to be gone. I did meet a new friend there whom fate would eventually reunite many months later. His name was Ray Blake of Baltimore, MD.

Arriving at Clarksville, I again lost my command at the door to the Army bus. From this point forward I became just another piece of shit for the Drill Sergeant to yell at.

The good news, they put us in barracks. The bad news, they were World War Two barracks. Stacked steel bunk beds. Beds? A 2 inch thick mattress on a sagging spring frame. The walls were exactly the thickness of one piece of wood plus paint. The bathrooms were designed for cattle, not men. Toilets in a row, no partitions and so close that each leg touched the other guy's leg when you were sitting down. Sinks so close that each arm touched the other guy's arm when you were shaving, washing your hands or brushing your teeth. Good news, no coal stoves!

Chapter 5 **Fort Campbell**

Tennessee or Kentucky? The 101,000 acres of Fort Campbell covers both States. The Headquarters is in Tennessee and the base Post Office is in Kentucky, They tried Tennessee for awhile but kept losing their mail so the official address became Ft. Campbell, KY! Our mess hall had a white stripe painted through the building. One side was Kentucky and one side was Tennessee. You got your plates in Kentucky and you food in Tennessee.

The official record shows that Ft. Campbell began Basic Training classes in July of 1966. Ooops! I was there in March of 1966. Maybe we were top secret basic trainees! A more likely explanation would probably have something to do with budget appropriations.

The Army did admit to us that we were the first class at Campbell and they did admit that they rushed to start this first basic training class. They rushed so much that they did not have time to train our instructors. So the Army being the Army just pulled active duty sergeants out of the 101st Airborne Division and told them they were now basic training instructors! Remember the concept of "automatic volunteer"?

Needless to say these elite paratroopers were less than thrilled with their new assignments. A fact they NEVER ceased to tell us about. I fact that cost us many, many extra pushups.

In addition to what one might expect during basic training, we were subjected to certain “Airborne” rules. No walking was allowed in the company area, only jogging.

Unfortunately this concept was alien to most of these green recruits so half the time we looked more like prancing ponies or worse yet, frightened chickens. This pissed our “instructors” off even more, thus the additional pushups.

Other special “airborne rules” included always jumping down stairs if there were 4 or less steps. Yelling “AIRBORNE!”, every time we exited the door of a building. Singing only airborne songs when marching, particularly “I Want To Be An Airborne Ranger! I Want To Live The Life Of Danger!”. Over and over. I still sing it to this day.

They taught us basic parachute techniques such how to land without breaking your legs. They made us do simulated jumps off the 35’ training tower (my first adventure in zip-lining). They constantly told us how jumping out of a perfectly good airplane was the biggest thrill you could have in your life with your pants on. We also got to witness many actual training drops (from the ground of course).

Whatever the actual basic training manual said we had to do, the instructors usually pushed it up just a notch for us. The marches were a little longer. The marches were a little faster. PE took a little longer. I think I can safely say that the instructors relished finding new things for us to do. At graduation they told us that over half of my fellow participants signed up for airborne training. I was not one of them!

I hated basic training from the start to the finish. I walk like a duck anyway and my feet were always miserable. I spent hours nursing huge blisters. I would have made a horrible paratrooper. This of course just made my instructors even madder at me.

By the end of basic training, Canada was looking like a good option to me. Only the fact that I could finally become a pilot kept me going. Ooops!

I forgot this was the Army.

On our last day we were given “career counseling”. It was another “hurry up and wait day”. I finally got seated across from my “counselor” who proudly stated that since I was “RA” (Regular Army) that I had my choice of advanced training.

What?? I informed him to look at my folder again and he would see that I was pre-qualified for flight school. He looked at my folder again and said, “No you’re not! There is nothing in here about flight school.” He then proceeded to explain that I could certainly go to flight school and all I had to do was sign up for an extra 6-month enlistment and take a flight physical. This was very bad timing on the Army’s part!

After umpteen weeks of basic training I was in no mood to add 6 months to my Army experience, so I said no thank you. He told me that my test scores qualified me for ANY Army enlisted MOS (Military Occupation Specialty) that I wanted. My first question was, “Which one is the longest?”

That one was language specialist, 22 weeks in Monterey, CA. In retrospect that might have been a great choice, but after Latin and Spanish I hated that idea as much as I hated eating liver.

My brilliant young mind then told me to ask, “What is the longest aviation related course?”

Thinking if I can’t be pilot, at least I could be in aviation. Not the best thinking that I have ever done. The clear winner was Aircraft Ordinance Repair by a big margin. 16 weeks (actually it turned to be more) at beautiful Aberdeen Proving Grounds, MD. My counselor beamed! Maybe he got brownie points for that one?

The beaming was yet another red flag that I missed during my life.

Chapter 6

45J20

Advanced training has to be better than basic training. I mean anything had to be better than basic training!. Aberdeen Proving Grounds however, surprised me. I really liked it.

I had every weekend off and I had a car. I think it was a six cylinder Mustang, but I am fussy yet again on that memory. I could go to Baltimore or just go for drives in the country. The rolling hills in this part of Maryland were just beautiful.

I was also only an 1 hour and a half from my parents down Route 301. I even enjoyed the hectic pace of the classes as they constantly pushed us. It was challenging on weekdays and relaxing on weekends. Only drawback to me was there was no flying, no helicopters at Aberdeen.

My new official title would be Aircraft Ordinance Repairman. My official MOS code would be 45J20. This was such a long school because it involved new weapons and new technologies. I would have to learn electronics, hydraulics, airframe and ordinance repair. It also included small arms repair and ordinance disposal. No dummies allowed.

The good news, this was a great job! Intellectual, stimulating and brand new stuff. It was so new that it earns another “Ooops”!

In the Army’s haste to train enlisted men for 45J20 the Army forgot to train officers! This would come in handy throughout my short Army career. Also, because it was so new and complicated, it was an E-5 “slot”. This meant without doing anything else I could be

promoted to E-5 by just doing my job.

The bad news was it guaranteed a ticket to Vietnam. This I ignored or pushed to the back of my head. This concept however, did not slip past my father. Whenever I showed up for a visit it was like Bambi getting a visit from a deer hunter.

Years after I got out of the Army I was at a cocktail party and I struck up a conversation with an Army General who was there in his full dress uniform. The General asked me what my job was in Vietnam. I said, "General, my job was one of the biggest mistakes the Army ever made because they did not train any officers to do it!"

The General smirked, looked me square in the eye and without hesitation said, "45J20".

Chapter 7 Courts Martial One

After I finished my advanced training at Aberdeen I was promoted from E-1 to E-2 (Private First Class). I was then promptly shipped back from whence I came, Ft. Campbell, KY!

I was assigned to a brand new unit. A unit in organization. It was called the 188th Aviation Company (Air Mobile Lt.).

At first there was not much to do. Our barracks was almost empty when I got there. We had no helicopters and I had no armament systems. I was given busy things to do but nothing requiring a brain.

I bought a new car, a six cylinder Plymouth Barracuda fast back. Weekends were still free for the most part and I again spread my "wings" and drove around the country side. Nashville was not far away nor was Western Kentucky University.

Although I went to Nashville several times I preferred the college life and the college coeds at WKU. Thus I spent most of my time going in that direction. I slept in the back of my Cuda' hatchback on more than one occasion. I was really enjoying Army life at this point. If it wasn't for that pesky war, maybe I would have stayed and gone to OCS (Officers Candidate School). The Army was always pushing me to go to OCS.

Then things started happening quickly. Everyday more men showed up, both pilots and enlisted. We were still a tight group that lived outside of the influence of the 101st Airborne Division. The atmosphere between officer and enlisted was relaxed.

Finally our brand new helicopters started arriving and I got a complete shipment of brand

new armament systems still in their boxes. It was like Christmas, everyone finally had something to do. The CO had me quickly unwrap a “mini-gun” system and install it on a Huey so he could see it. This I did, but I put the ammo chutes on wrong. Luckily he did not ask to test fire it!

Oddly one of my best memories were the pizza trucks which would show up outside our barracks. I lived on that pizza! It was so good and fresh. They cooked the pizzas right in the truck!

Unfortunately for me I had failed to grasp the nuances of the concept of an “order”. An order does not mean your interpretation of said order, but rather following it to the letter.

It was coming up on Thanksgiving, 1966. My parents were driving from Virginia to visit me. Suddenly I found myself on the duty list for the Orderly Room on that Saturday. Logical as I am, I traded days with another soldier. Thus the Orderly Room would be manned and I could spend the time with my parents.

My logic is not Army logic. By mid-morning I had been tracked down and found myself reporting to the OD (Officer of the Day). I was dressed down for almost a half hour.

Then the OD asked. “Do you realize this is a Courts Martial offense?”

Of course I didn’t or I wouldn’t have done it! However, I simply answered, “No sir.”

To my amazement the OD was not interested nor moved by my touching story of my parents driving all the way from Williamsburg, VA to see me. The soldier I switched with I got off by saying he thought the OD had approved it. I finished off my shift in the Orderly Room.

After my parents left I got to serve many fruitful nights guarding garbage cans.

Chapter 8

Stockton, CA

We all knew that Vietnam was in our immediate future. The pilots spent time on flying tactics. Another pet flying project was to be the first company to put 1,000 hours on a brand new UH-1H (this was an inspection milestone). So our pilots flew this one poor ship in shifts until we reached that magic number. I got to fly in it occasionally and I really enjoyed flying anywhere.

For my part I had little to do. We left most of my equipment in their shipping boxes to make it easier to ship later. I spent a lot of time at WKU. I think I had become an honorary "Hilltopper"!

Our deployment orders finally came. Most of us were given leave to go home. I drove my Barracuda home but I do not remember a single thing about being home. I was promoted to E-4 (Specialist) in March of 1967. This was just before I had to leave.

I remember the trip to Dulles to fly to California. There I was to report to Sharp Army Depot in Lathrop, CA just outside Stockton. My parents were stoic as they said goodbye but they were clearly perfectly miserable.

In the meantime our gunship helicopters (UH-1C) were flown to Stockton. We left our slicks (troop version, UH-1H) at Ft. Campbell and got brand new ones in California.

Our helicopters were prepared for shipment overseas. They would be loaded on an old World War Two escort aircraft carrier and shipped to Nam. Throughout my Army career my one standing order was where the gunships go, so did I. Thus I found myself with a small group of maintenance guys waiting for our helicopters to be prepared for their sea voyage.

I rented a car and took sightseeing trips.

I dusted off my log book and decided to take some lessons while in Stockton. After a particularly good landing my instructor jumped out of the airplane announcing that I was ready to solo! I was thrilled but my medical certificate had expired. My joy was brief as the instructor jumped back in and taxied to our parking spot.

Yet another aborted attempt to fly by myself!

Chapter 9

Haight-Ashbury

Having a rental car made me semi-popular. My friend and armament assistant Gary Tobey talked me into a trip to San Francisco. He knew me and his bait was simple, girls!

Off we went to San Fran. Gary was a California boy so he knew his way around. He skillfully directed me to the Haight-Ashbury District where we parked and proceeded to his friend's apartment for a party! Party and women, that is what Gary had promised.

Well it was a party and there were women there. Walking in the door I was overwhelmed

by smoke and incense. It seemed to me to be a very quiet party but there was music playing. I was not used to that type of music (sitar). It took my eyes awhile to adjust to the very dark rooms lit only by black lights and fluorescent posters. It took me even longer to find a beer.

Gary immediately deserted me. A woman soon approached me and we made it all the way to bedroom. Lying there with her another man walked in the room. She knew him and told him to join us. I left.

I woke up the next morning sleeping next to a large dog (I think a Saint Bernard) in the hallway of the apartment. I yelled out Gary's name. he emerged and we drove back to Stockton. I wish I could tell you more but that's all I remember.

Back at Stockton, Staff Sergeant Nitchy pulled me aside and asked where I had been last night. I said I went to San Francisco with Gary. He advised me not to do that again and to stay away from "people" like Tobey.

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

Chapter 10 **Indian Spring**

My last night of freedom in California was my best. Just like I often saw in World War Two movies, a soldier about to ship out meets his dream woman. Mine was a drop-dead beautiful woman. She had long, silky black hair that went well past her waist.

This is horrible. I do not remember her name.

It may have been pity sex but when I told her I was shipping out for Vietnam in two days, she just melted. We spent a wonderful day together ending up at her apartment. She was full-blooded Cherokee and she treated me like gold. We never made it off her couch.

There is absolutely no better way to send a soldier off to war than this!

Chapter 11 **Alameda**

Two days later I found myself in an Army bus in a convoy headed for Alameda Naval Air Station. The convoy consisted of buses and eighteen wheelers with flat-bed trailers. On each trailer was one of our Hueys cocooned for their overseas voyage.

At Alameda we reported onboard the Kula Gulf, a transport aircraft carrier of World War Two vintage. This ship would be my home for the next 17 days. We were the last bus to arrive and many of our helicopters had already been loaded aboard. Alameda was packed with aircraft of all sorts and several ships, mostly aircraft carriers or converted carriers.

We were allowed to roam around within earshot of the ship which of course I did. 'Mister' tourist with camera in hand. The loudspeakers on the Kula Gulf announced their intention to depart and that all personnel should be onboard. I reluctantly and sadly walked up the gangway and onto the ship.

Leaning on the railing we all watched a crane lift our gangway off the ship and place it on the dock. This was our last connection to home.

April 22, 1967. Next stop, Vietnam.

Chapter 12 Pacific Cruise

The Kula Gulf was loaded with two companies of helicopters and one of twin-engined Mohawks. That's about 64 helicopters and 15 recon planes. The hanger deck was full of helicopters with their rotors missing and their Plexiglas windows taped over to protect them from the salt air. The rest of the aircraft were completely cocooned against exposure and stored the flight deck along with our trucks and supply containers.

As the tugboats pulled the Kula Gulf away the quay, the aircraft carrier Coral Sea was coming back from deployment on the other side. One ship loses its freedom but another regains it.

It was dusk as we made our way out of San Francisco Bay. Under the Bay Bridge, past Alcatraz, along the city's waterfront to the Golden Gate Bridge. As we passed downtown San Francisco the light was fading and the city lights were coming on, one by one. I was on the flight deck. Below me, huddled together at the ship's bow were the married men, mostly officers.

Between the breeze and the ship's speed, the wind made your eyes water. The men on the bow cried without worry. Maj. Boyd Morrow was there. He would not make it back. CW2 Henry Cauthen was there. He would not make it back. They cried in the wind and thought of their families.

By the time we hit the sea swells of Golden Gate the departing famous bridge faded into darkness, framed by the seagulls still following us. We were all quiet. There was no turning back. We watched our country disappear in the darkness until we saw only black.

It took us 15 days to cross the Pacific. Normally this ship would have a crew of well over a thousand, but as a transport it only had a civilian crew of about 200 plus there were about 200 Army guys. There was plenty of elbow room. Except pulling KP (kitchen police) there was nothing to do. It was like a big grey cruise ship with no amenities except food.

There was plenty of food and very good food to boot. There were big bowls of fresh fruit every night in our bunk areas. The civilian crew had excellent cooks. When they had things like steak, you could choose your steak and tell them how you wanted it cooked. I think Sgt. Lane gained 15 pounds in 15 days.

Most of us read or sunned up on the flight deck. There was always a breeze as the ship was making 15 knots. Occasionally they pulled out a 16mm projector and showed us a movie. The bow was my favorite spot as we were almost always in the company of flying fish or dolphins who preferred to play at the ship's bow wave. Crossing the Pacific was peaceful. We did not see land again until we passed through the Philippine straits.

Maj. Boyd Morrow was in charge of the company's maintenance section and was a pilot. At some point during the voyage Maj. Morrow and two other pilots pulled me aside for a confidential talk. Maj. Morrow explained that every time I installed or changed a gun system it would be necessary for me fly in the copilot's seat for a test flight. He looked at the other pilots and said, "We know that you wanted to be a pilot. Ray Blake said you even took some flight lessons at Stockton."

"Yes sir."

"We are not thrilled with the prospect of having a non-pilot in the left seat in a war zone." Maj. Morrow looked at the other two then back to me and asked, "How would you feel about us teaching you how fly a Huey?"

I beamed, smiled ear-to-ear and said. "Absolutely sir!"

So it was settled. I would have the best of both worlds. Unofficially learning to fly Hueys while remaining but another obscure enlisted man.

As we approached the coast of Vietnam the ship slowed. We pulled into the bay where the Saigon River empties, our ship dropped anchor. The base at Vung Tau was off to the right. They unloaded our aircraft using the ship's crane and placed them on barges pulled up to the side.

At the Vung Tau base we were reunited with our aircraft. That night amidst the new

sounds of war in the distance, I got extremely drunk at the enlisted man's club. That was the last time I did that and I paid for it dearly all the next hot, sunshiny day. I worked very hard mounting our gun systems on all eight UH-1Cs. Between installations, I puked my brains out.

I missed our grey cruise ship. I missed home. It was like when you are a kid and your parents send you off to your first Summer camp. I felt very alone.

Chapter 13

My New Home

Once my job was finished at Vung Tau, we flew to our new home adjacent to a village called Dau Tieng. Dau Tieng's main industry was rubber. In fact our new base was located on a former Michelin rubber plantation.

The flight from the coast to the rubber plantation which was north of Saigon took about a hour. We flew at about 4,000 feet which is above small arms range but was the stratosphere for helicopters. My first impression of Vietnam was its beauty.

It is green everywhere. On the coast there were the beautifully clear water of the lagoons and the South China Sea. There was the eye-catching geometrical patterns of the rice pads. To my left however was the muddy water where the Saigon River emptied into the ocean after passing through Saigon,

As we approached our new base there was a feature which could be seen for miles. It stood like an ancient tree covered pyramid in the middle of a flat plain full of rice pads. Nui Ba Den was known as the Black Virgin Mountain. Named for the woman Ba Den who martyred herself for a soldier she fell in love with. The mountain was considered sacred by the locals.

The top of the mountain held a US communication station. The bottom was held by the Viet Cong (VC). Some said this mountain marked the end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We protected the men on the top but I do not believe we ever assaulted the actual mountain while I was there. They told us that the VC "owned" the mountain and most of the land all around our base. Comforting news!

The 3rd Brigade of
The landing approach gave me a view of my new home. The base at that time was home to a unit of the 4th Infantry Division. If I had to guess I would say the base was about 60-70 acres in size. Most of the base was open land but in the west corner was the rubber plantation with its green rubber trees growing in symmetric rows. Our company area was within these trees.

Dissecting the middle of the base was a dirt runway which stretched from border to border. The airfield was barely big enough to land a C-130. Around the base was one single strand of barbed wire. Off to one side of the runway was an area for our helicopters, also uncomfortably close to the perimeter of the base. Overlooking that area was the old Michelin plantation house.

Under the canopy of the rubber trees were our tents. Since I was one of the last to arrive, much work had already been done. Our tents were still pitched on the ground but they were working on putting in wooden floors. The tents were called medium general purpose tents. They were 16' by 32' and my tent housed 8 people (like you see in "MASH"). That meant each guy had roughly a 6' by 8' space to call home.

Large groups of local workers, mostly women and children, were busy filling sandbags. A stacked sandbag wall was protection against small arms fire and shrapnel. Eventually we constructed sandbag bunkers, L-shaped walls to park our helicopters in and sandbag walls around our tents. Defensive trenches would be dug along our perimeter almost like World War I.

Sanitary facilities consisted of pipes sticking out of the ground with a funnel at the top. *mess tubes* These were placed near the edge of the perimeter along with larger, deeper holes that eventually had a wooden building built over them. The pipes were our open-air urinals and were scattered about. The deeper trenches would be our commodes which in the beginning consisted of two planks of wood to sit on. Each day a detail was assigned to move the wood "bathroom" buildings off the trench and then pour diesel fuel into the trench and set fire to it. These were affectionately known as "shit burning details". The smell was memorable.

We had no mess hall to begin with so we lived off field rations for sometime. A maintenance hanger was a large steel frame affair covered with canvas. It was about 20 feet high with a rounded roof and could hold 1 or 2 helicopters. We had about 3 or 4 of these hangers. I worked in a corner of a hanger or out in the open.

Eventually they built a wood building for me and one for avionics. We also eventually got a wooden mess hall and a "hospital" building. We had diesel generators for power. The shower consisted of two large tanks suspended above your head by a wood frame with canvas wrapped around the frame. We were encouraged to wear our helmets when in the "shower" due its exposed position near the perimeter. In fact we were encouraged to wear our helmets all the time. We did not.

Flying started immediately, mostly tactics and practice. My flight instruction also started immediately. Almost every time I flew on milk-runs or maintenance tests, I got lessons. Pilots would rotate teaching me until I finally got the hang of it. Once you are in air the, flying a Huey is like any other aircraft. That part I learned easily and quickly.

It was hovering, landing and take-off that required more work. Take-off was fairly easy

as long you were not in a crowd. Landings were not too hard if you weren't worried about looking pretty and I eventually got a handle on that too. Those were "biggies" that the pilots wanted me to learn. Hovering was harder and I never had a good grasp of that. I bounced and wobbled at a hover but I could get the job done. After a month the pilots were satisfied I could get them down in one piece. I loved every minute of it!

We did numerous maintenance hops to Saigon for supplies. On one such trip I wrangled some toilet seats. Back at the base these were immediately proclaimed the property of the officers. The pilots who had been with me stood up for me and we ended up splitting the seats between the officers and enlisted. Our "shitters" were now more civilized.

Home Sweet Home.

Chapter 14

Introduction to War

Although we were not operational yet our little base was still in unfriendly territory. There were the occasional snipers and occasional mortar attacks. Our ships flew some combat support missions. We were basically in a place where you could get shot at on your job, in your bed or while flying. Personally I could never figure out the attraction of booze or drugs under these circumstances, yet it was very popular. Not liking the idea of being shot at I stayed sober.

After awhile you could begin to tell the difference in sounds. You could tell what kind of weapon was fired by just hearing the report. You tended to keep one ear peeled for the tinny sound of a mortar leaving the tube. This would give you a couple of seconds to find cover. You soon discovered that noise is good and lack of noise is usually something bad waiting to happen.

You also learned that many deaths in war are accidents. Before we were even settled I was told we lost one guy sleeping under a trailer that collapsed. In our company area we built a couple of large bunkers right on the perimeter with slits toward the enemy and just one entrance in the back. There was artillery on our base and one of our own "short" rounds went through the back door of the bunker. There was not much to recover.

Generally you learned that shit happens.

Work on our sandbagging was proceeding at a leisurely pace. Ooops! Very few L-shaped revetments to protect our helicopters had been built when June 24, 1967 hit us and hit us hard.

Our helicopters were heavily attacked by mortars. When the dust settled 31 of our

helicopters were damaged and deemed unflyable. Our CO got replaced and we got busy repairing!

All of those beautiful, brand new helicopters!. So new that replacement parts were not easy to find. It was decided to temporarily move us north to a larger base until “we got back on our feet”. Perhaps the better reason was to get our company area sandbagged and protected before bringing the helicopters back.

After we got a sufficient number of ships repaired, we packed up and prepared to go to Phu Hiep Army Airfield which was adjacent to Tuy Hoa which was an Air Force base on the coast.

Chapter 15 **I Finally Solo**

My flying experience in Hueys was about to pay off. Many pilots seem to like to take the edge off by drinking ever so often. The pilots of the ship I was assigned to, who shall remain nameless, apparently got very, very plastered that night. I don’t think you could say they were hungover, it was more like they were still drunk and without sleep. I was politely asked if I would like to fly that day?

I said yes but I reminded them that the entire company was flying up and it would be formation flying. The booze however gave them great confidence in their plan and they assured me that I was up for the job. So it was I found myself slipping on the co-pilot’s Warrant Officer jacket and his helmet. I climbed into the left seat and the pilot assured me that he would handle the takeoff. The co-pilot curled up in back and promptly fell asleep.

The pilot did handle the takeoff (sort of for he was wobbly). After we up and in formation he said to me, “See that ship.” He pointed to a helicopter off to the right. “Just keep this position.” whereupon he let go of the stick and slumped his head over, asleep in his seat. I was on my own! I determined that technically this was my first solo.

I flew about two and half hours in formation. When we started to descend my faithful and somewhat recovered pilot woke up and took over. I slipped out of the co-pilot’s seat and switched identities back to enlisted.

We had approached the Tuy Hoa by flying along the coast and at lower altitudes. The coast was beautiful. The South China Sea was clear and the small fishing villages seemed to be living life as usual without war. Their nets were spread out to dry on the beach. Their boats were on the beach also. It seemed so peaceful and serene.

Then into view came watchtowers and barbed wire. Back to our purpose again.

The Air Force base housed mostly old F-100 jet fighter-bombers. The Army airfield adjacent to it had Hueys and the big twin-rotor Chinooks. Both of these bases were more established than what we had left. Real wooden barracks with tin roofs built on concrete floors. The Air Force even had sidewalks, streetlights, an Exchange and best of all, a "MARS" station.

At the exchange you could actually buy things like radios, junk food, toothpaste, etc. If you were lucky and willing to stand in line long enough, you could place a call home at the MARS station. It was still radio, so in my case my mother had say "over" when she finished a thought. Still, a touch of the good life.

Adjacent to our company area was a ROK (Republic of Korea) detachment. These guys had a large log suspended on poles about 7 feet of the ground. Each morning going to chow they had to kick this log before passing under it to go eat. Considering their average height was a little over 5 feet, this was truly a sight to behold. Having some time on our hands, the ROK soldiers gave us classes in hand to hand combat. They were proud and fierce fighters.

This would be my temporary home for awhile.

Chapter 16

The Good, The Bad and the Air Force

The Good

The good of course were all of the amenities at this large base. Also was the fact that we were literally next to the beach. We got to swim in the beautiful South China Sea, albeit fenced in by barbed wire and guard towers on one side. Luckily they were far enough away so as not to be intrusive to our beach experience. This was a far cry from the conditions at Dau Tieng.

We got hot meals cooked in a real mess hall. Most of our flying was to get parts or something equally mundane so we always flew at 5,000 feet, above small arms range. This made for very relaxing flights. At this altitude the scenery was spectacular. Beautiful green hills, large rock outcroppings and clear blue lagoons. Without a war, this would be a great place to vacation.

I received another promotion to E-5 (Specialist). Thanks to my job, I went from E-1 to E-5 in just 16 months. I had it fairly easy because our gunships were not flying missions every day. For Vietnam, being at this base was an excellent experience.

The Bad

The bad was mostly two things. A horrible incident with ROKs and one bad accident.

We supported the ROKs on some of their missions. One such mission turned our stomachs and our general attitude toward them. They sent a team into a small village to scout it out. The VC killed their team and put their heads on stakes in the village. The ROKs went in and wiped out the village, men, women and children. Sometimes you feel that you must treat the enemy the same the way they treat you, but this was a case of emotions that exploded.

War sucks!

Later we lost eight good men, friends. It was a night mission. Two of our gunships each with a pilot, a co-pilot, crew chief and a door gunner, collided in mid-air, crashed and burned. When any helicopter crashes, we always try to recover any equipment that we can, especially weapons. All of the weapons from this crash were brought to me to salvage what I could.

It was one of the worst nights of my life. Almost everybody on those two helicopters were friends. One of them was Warrant Officer Henry Cauthen. Henry came over on the Kula Gulf with me and he was considered to be the officer "weapons expert". I worked closely with him. But everyone in the Gun Platoon was close, very close. It was not unusual to see all the officers and crew chiefs and door gunners working together to help me uncrate ammo and ordinance. If I needed help on anything the entire Gun Platoon was always willing to pitch in.

This night I worked alone, thinking of the friends I had just lost. Seeing a friend's handprint melted into the grip of a machine gun as I took it apart. Cleaning out melted flesh of my friends stuck to parts. I was sick to my stomach literally. I cried and puked and asked why?

This experience changed my attitude for some time. I became more inward. When replacements arrived I did not want to talk to them. I did not want any new friends that might be gone the next day. My outgoing personality turned sour toward new guys and protective towards those I already knew.

Worst then that, I questioned God. How he could he let this happen? Does he really exist? I turned my back on God that night. It took 25 years to recover that lost love. It took a miracle to bring me back.

No more friends for me. War sucks!

The Air Force

The Air Force and I got off to a bad start when I shot down one of their fighters.

I was flying as door gunner on a supply mission and we were flying again in the helicopter stratosphere at 5,000 feet. We were over what is known as a “free-fire” zone. These were areas where the locals were warned to avoid and where the assumption was that only bad guys would be there. Therefore you were allowed to fire into these zones without obtaining prior permission.

Down below I saw a trail. I was bored. I told the pilot I was going to let off a few rounds from my M-60 machine gun. From 5,000 feet, even going downhill I don’t think my bullets would have much impact. I just wanted to see if I could hit that trail. So I started to fire away watching my tracers arc downward. Suddenly I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye.

It was an Air Force F-100 swooping in at ground level apparently intent on the same trail that I was shooting. I immediately took my finger off the trigger. I watched as the last of my tracers drifted down toward the trail. I watched as the F-100 flew right under them.

Our pilot switched to Tuy Hoa air control just in time to hear a F-100 pilot requesting emergency landing instructions having been hit by ground fire. Ooops!

After landing I went over to the Air Force maintenance hanger and said that heard one of their ships was just hit. A sergeant took me over to the aircraft and pointed up at the canopy to a bullet impact almost dead center at the top. The Air Force sergeant told me that the pilot thinks it must have hit the top of the canopy because he was “jinking” back and forth as he went through the valley.

I kept my mouth shut. How could I tell them that a Huey shot them down?

While I was at that hanger I was introduced to an Air Force Captain who was very interested in our armed Hueys. I mentioned that we could have some standoff capability if we could mount those Air Force cannons on a Huey. The Captain looked at our gunships and determined almost immediately that the eight hard points would not be sufficient as these cannon have a tremendous recoil due to their high velocity. I then showed him one of our H models. I pointed out that this model has 16 hard points and a longer fuselage. He said that might work.

So we got busy trying solve the problems. I worked up CG (Center of Gravity) charts for the Captain and he worked on a design for the mount. I never wrote his name down though and I wish I had. Well we finally developed what we thought was a workable solution. We fabricated the mount using angle iron of all things because we needed something that would not compress under the recoil forces. Gary Tobey did a lot of the welding work.

These 20mm cannon were huge, almost 20’ long. The mount looked like a spider web because it connected to all 16 hard points both fore and aft. We designed a torsion bar that went underneath of the helicopter. We bolted the main frame to certain reinforced points in the cabin. I designed a 2-second trigger as the Captain felt that any longer

duration would be unhealthy. We mounted the whole affair one of our helicopters but did not fire it. By the time this was done it was time to return to Dau Tieng. The project was shelved for awhile.

The last thing the Captain said to me was that the system MUST be test fired from a hover because all of his calculations involved the dynamics that part of the recoil would be absorbed by the airframe being pushed back WHILE AIRBORNE. He made me promise not to let them fire it while the helicopter was on the ground. In his opinion he felt that the recoil would rip up the flooring and could cause catastrophic damage. I kept this promise later at a high cost to myself.

I called the system the XM-188 and I still have my original notes and drawings to this day.

Chapter 17

Back to the Rubber Trees

Our time at this Air Force "R&R" (Rest and Relaxation) base had come to an end. This time I flew back with the maintenance crews on a C-123 transport plane. This airplane was originally designed toward the end of World War II as an aluminum skinned glider. Someone got the bright idea to put large piston engines on it, then someone else got the idea of hanging two more jet engines on it. It was one of the only aircraft capable of landing on our short runway at Dau Tieng with a full load.

Due its lineage as described, it was possibly the noisiest aircraft in the Air Force inventory. Inside the cabin you could barely talk to the person next to you even you yelled! My ears were ringing for a week after that trip.

Back at Dau Tieng our base had changed. We had sandbagged revetments for all our helicopters. Separate wooden buildings had been built for armament and avionics maintenance. All of our tents had wooden floors and sides. Our perimeter now had two trenches for defense and more sand bags. Instead of one strand of barbed wire, we were now separated from the village by multiple strands of coiled barbed wire and barbed wire fences. They were still working on sandbagging walls next to our tents but we now had some bunkers to run to which were located between the tents.

The 188th was now operational again and we wasted no time going on missions. My life of leisure was over. I started working sometimes 16 hours a day (well night) keeping the gunships flying.

I represented a tortured dichotomy for my CO and First Sergeant. On one hand I was not to fly combat missions. On the other hand, the more important the mission I again became an "automatic (flying) volunteer".

Most of gun pilots loved it when I flew as door gunner because everything always

worked the way it was supposed to. They would find feeble excuses to take me on missions with them. As for me, I just loved flying so I never turned down a chance to do so.

One time I went on a slick mission to "test the gun system". The gun system was a M-60 machine gun mounted on a metal pedestal. No moving parts other than human fingers. The pilots and I joked about how they pulled off this trick to get me on board, albeit as a passenger. For me, I found out I preferred gunships. The ship I was on got shot up. The co-pilot was hit as well as the crew chief. We headed for the nearest hospital.

I sat in the middle of helicopter with the wounded crewman at my feet. He did look that bad until I put my hand behind his flak vest and found blood. He had been hit from below at an angle that went through his armpit. He was delirious and I kept telling him to hang in there. He later died at the hospital. That was my first and last combat in a slick.

Our company was kept very busy. The base had changed over from the 4th Infantry Division to the 25th (Tropic Lightning). It was a paper change requiring only the uniform insignia to be replaced. The 188th was independent but we obviously flew most of our missions with the Tropic Lightning Division.

Since Dau Tieng was not a large base and we were basically in the middle of Viet Cong territory we received a lot of attention from the enemy. Apparently the frequent mortar attacks and occasional ground attacks were not wearing too well on my friend Ray. Our company got used to flying in the daytime and sleeping in fear at night.

For my good friend, Ray Blake, this was too much. Ray had big plans. He was going to get married and have a career. After he became a civilian he worked for Eastern Airlines before I lost track of him.

Ray had an opportunity to transfer to Tay Ninh and he took it. The soldiers inhabiting Tay Ninh did not have it easy but it was a bigger base and the enemy was not so in your face. I pointed to Ray that he had a new air-conditioned wooden building to work in. He pointed out to me that it stood out in the open within sight of the perimeter. I pointed out the coolness provided by the shade of the rubber trees. He pointed to the barbed wire perimeter just 150 feet way.

I pointed out our friendship. He stared at me like I was nuts! Ray said I should transfer too. He pointed out that I could probably get a posting at Cu Chi easily. He was probably right but I liked the rubber trees and the friends I already had. My best friend told me I was NUTS to stay here and that he had no intention of getting killed. I had really never thought of it that way.

So with heavy hearts we said our goodbyes at the airfield. Ray Blake drug his overstuffed duffle bag to the waiting Huey, got in and flew out of my life. I still miss him even today.

Chapter 18

Courts Martial Offense Two

My work schedule began to take its toll on me. The only chance I had for sleep was in the morning after the ships left on their first mission of the day. Unfortunately for me, this was also the only time that the local workers came in to work on sandbagging our bunkers and “hootches” (a loving term for our tent).

The workforce was usually ladies from the village wearing their straw *cone* shaped hats plus their children! One morning after a particularly hard night of work I laid down on my spacious Army cot, pulled my mosquito netting over and fell fast asleep.

Adjacent to my tent, they were working on sandbagging a bunker and a wall. The women chattered quietly, I could sleep through that. The children on the other hand decided to play wargames on top of the bunker next to my “bed”. They yelled and screamed as children do. Later in my life as a single dad, I could have slept through this too, but not now!

At first I told them to stop. But not speaking any Vietnamese this did little good. Then I yelled at them to stop. This also had little effect.

I had an old World War II hand grenade on a wooden crate which I used as a night stand. You have seen these in novelty shops usually with a sign saying something like “Pull Pin for Complaint Dept.” They were called pineapples because of their serrated appearance which allows them to break into small square pieces of shrapnel. Mine was inert, that is empty of explosives.

Now it came to pass that when the Army designed the new hand grenades they kept the same size opening and screw threads of the old fuse. The fuse is the part that holds the triggering explosive. You pull the pin, the handle flies off, you throw the projectile and it explodes about 3 seconds later. This same fuse was used in grenades and smoke bombs. I did not have any real grenades but I did have smoke bombs.

I was really getting pissed at these kids and I could not get them to play someplace else. I unscrewed a real fuse from one of my smoke grenades and put it into my old WWII grenade. I waived the hand grenade at them and yelled at them to leave, they laughed at me.

I pulled the pin and they stopped laughing. I threw the grenade at them and they scattered like cattle in a thunderstorm. I watched the grenade roll across the top of the bunker and drop out of sight on the other side.

I went to retrieve it by going out the other end of my tent. The sight I beheld told me that I was in trouble again. I saw my “fake” hand grenade, I saw my old First Sergeant on his knees grasping his chest (he was near retirement). I saw two other guys running to help

him up.

It seems my First Sergeant was walking by when suddenly 3 or 4 children came screaming off the top of the bunker and ran past him. This was followed by a hand grenade landing in front of him and at the same time the very real fuse went off in a puff of smoke. Ooops!

In no time I was standing at attention in front of the CO. The Sergeant behind me explaining what he had just gone through. One of the orderlies in the back let out a slight giggle and I swear that the CO might have had a slight smirk on face.

After my explanation of events, which were dismissed as irrelevant, the CO proceeded to ream me a new one, starting with the now famous words, "This is a Courts Martial offense!" Fortunately the CO did not get too far in his chewing out as everyone in the room heard the unmistakable tinny sound of mortars leaving their tubes.

Court or Court?

The Headquarters front office had already bailed, running like hell for the bunkers. The First Sergeant clearly wanted ~~bail~~ but the CO kept me at attention until the first impact (we getting way too used these mortar attacks). Well the first mortar hit sufficiently close to end the proceedings. The CO dismissed us and we all ran like hell for the bunker.

Although I was normally exempt from company duty, I ended up serving Sergeant of the Guard duty for several nights. The CO explained that I was needed too badly to consider a Courts Martial. He got the Sergeant to drop his request.

A few nights later while serving as Sergeant of the Guard I did something even dumber than the grenade. This time however there were no witnesses.

One of the duties of Sergeant of the Guard is to insure that all defensive positions are manned and that our Claymore mines are set out. Claymores are rectangular plastic cases filled with explosives and buckshot. They are designed to explode in one direction and thus are marked with large molded-in letters stating clearly "THIS SIDE TOWARD ENEMY". Wires run out from them to either bunkers or a trench where there is a trigger device to which you can hook these wires up in order to set them off. It takes some time to walk the line and examine that all is set for the night.

I had two enlisted men under me whose job it was to this. One of them had a very bad attitude about checking these. He considered that everybody knew their job so why did he have to double check. He walked back into headquarters after only about ten minutes, ie, enough time to have a smoke. I suspected from the look in his eyes that he had not been smoking a Camel.

I told him to go out and do his job. He copped an attitude with me and said, "What are going to do, shoot me?"

Well I gave it some thought and pulled out my revolver and cocked it. He did not know

that I kept that first chamber empty so he was looking at my revolver and he could see it was loaded. I gave him one more warning about inspecting the perimeter with the gun leveled at him.

He did not move to leave. Instead he said "You wouldn't dare pull that..." he was cut short by me pulling the trigger and the hammer slamming forward. I again saw a person collapse and grab his chest trying to keep his heart inside. Ooops!

I then said, "The next one is for real!" Well there are a lot of crazy people in a war zone and you never know when they might snap. He flew out of the tent and I was sure he would do his job correctly. He never doubted me again and apparently spread the word I might be a little nuts!

Nothing happened to me but that was by far the dumbest, most irresponsible thing I ever did.

It was not however the last time I pointed a loaded pistol at a fellow soldier.

We were under attack on the ground. I was in the defensive trench next to Captain Charbonneau. There was a lull in the fighting and I was doing such clever things as sitting on the edge of the trench to see if they would shoot at me. It was night, they did shoot at me and they missed, though not by much. In fact close enough to blow my hair back a little from the passing bullet. Ha, ha, wasn't this fun?

Capt Charbonneau told me to get back into the trench before they blew my head off. Now we got attacked a lot. And being the company's armorer I always had a few extra goodies for protection. On this night I had hung two hand grenades on each breast pocket. What often happens when the enemy attacks us at our perimeter at night is that they encounter a significant percentage of armed drunk people.

The effect of alcohol varies. The most notable effect was demonstrated by those under the influence who also happened to have M-60 machine guns. It was obvious because their tracer fire would arc way above the tree line going probably a mile or so out into the boonies before killing some rice and hopefully no innocent bystanders.

One such drunk wandered, no stumbled, into my position. He was a Warrant Officer who worked in Quartermaster. He noticed my hand grenades and correctly informed me that they were not issued to me. I acknowledged that and said I would turn them in tomorrow morning. But the booze had a firm grasp with said Warrant Officer who became insistent that I immediately relinquish my contraband to him.

I was not about to hand some hand grenades to anyone who was drunk. He insisted again but this time reached down to grab them. I did not see any future in him yanking my hand grenades and possibly pulling the pin in the process so I swatted his hand away.

He clearly did not see my logic so Capt. Charbonneau reiterated that I would return them

to supply in the morning. The Warrant Officer ignored the Captain's advise and lunged for my grenades grabbing both in his drunk hands. For his efforts he suddenly found my revolver planted on the center of his chest. I had enough.

I had politely but firmly, "SIR, I will return them in morning. Get your hands off me and BACK OFF!"

That apparently and completely blew his buzz. He jumped back (possibly having heard of my nuts reputation by now) and started screaming, "That's a Court Martial mister!"

I mean its not like I haven't heard THAT before! Besides, its Courts Martial not Court Martial. At any rate the best that threat could possibly produce for me was a yawn.

The Warrant Officer turned to the Captain and said, "You saw that! You saw that! He threatened me with a gun!"

Luckily for both of us, by now Capt. Charbonneau had enough also. Beside we were technically still in a firefight. The Captain said, "I didn't see a damn thing except a drunk officer! Now get out of here before I shoot you."

The Warrant Officer left. The next morning I turned in the grenades. The Warrant Officer wasn't there because he was hung over. All was forgotten.

War can be just a little nutty.

Chapter 19

Caught With My Pants Downs

A little time should be spent on what our daily lives were like on the rubber plantation. I had previously mentioned that our base was located in what basically was considered enemy-held territory. The Viet Cong were everywhere (and nowhere) outside of our perimeter.

This meant that we were frequently the recipients of enemy fire, usually at night. The most frequent were mortar attacks by one or two mortars (or tubes as we called them). Occasionally a sniper and occasionally an actual ground attack which would involve a "fire-fight", meaning people shooting back and forth at one another.

The mortars had to be relatively close because of their short range. Someone would usually hear that tinny click sound and scream out "IN-COMING!" This would cause everyone to drop what they were doing and run for cover. For almost a year after I returned to the States, the sound of the word "IN-COMING!" would make me duck

and/or find myself flat on the ground. Now I only wince a little.

In the beginning I would say the frequency of such events was only once or twice a week. After the Tet Offensive was over it was almost everyday. My point is, this was something you lived with and got used to (if that is possible).

“Flight crew” personnel had the choice of an M-16 rifle or a revolver pistol. The early M-16 rifles tended not to go bang every time you pulled the trigger so I chose a revolver. All you had to do was strap it on in the morning and you were set. I certainly never planned on getting close enough to the enemy to ever use it!

Ground attacks however, were a horse of another color. These were people on the other side of the barbed wire shooting at you with rifles, sub-machine guns and sometimes even 50cal (½ inch diameter bullets) machine guns. When such an attack occurred you were required to grab your weapon and run toward the enemy in order to jump into one of the defensive trenches. From a trench you could “pop-up” and fire then duck down safe from bullets.

One thing the enemy never quite got a grasp of was they continued to attack our section of the perimeter. This always proved to be a big mistake for them. The reason was simple. A helicopter company has approximately 32 helicopters. Each helicopter has 2 M-60 machine guns. Thus our perimeter would always return fire with a minimum of 64 machine guns. Simple math.

The enemy either had never taken a math class or simply did not care that much about numbers. The enemy could also choose the most inopportune times to attack on the ground.

Remembering that our “shit-houses” were built on the edge of the perimeter, they often became very holey places. One quiet night (also remember that quiet is not a good thing) was relaxing on one of my newly found toilet seats on the edge of our perimeter minding my own business. I was sitting with my back toward the “enemy” when suddenly I heard the tinny sound of mortars leaving the tube. I immediately stooped over to finish my chores when almost simultaneously the enemy attacked on the ground.

Bullet holes started to appear in my wooden and screened “shit-house”. In fact all Hell was breaking loose as it must have been over hundred men attacking. Bullets were flying everywhere. When this happens adrenalin takes over and you stop thinking entirely, just reacting.

I reached down pulled up my underpants but I did not get my shorts quite all the way up when I decided it was wise to make a run for it. Thus clad in briefs, a t-shirt, with one hand grasping my shorts (near my knees) and a roll of TP in the other hand, I staged my great escape.

To get from the shit-house to the nearest substantial sandbagged bunker required leaping

over a trench and sprinting about 50 yards. In the peace and calm of writing this in my bedroom I now wonder why the hell I didn't just drop into the first trench for cover. Unfortunately, this is now. At that time only my adrenalin spoke and it said run like the wind!

Well running like the wind is not an appropriate description as I still in fact was holding up my shorts just above the knees. Perhaps an extraordinarily fast wobble would be more accurate. Bullets were literally flying everywhere. You could hear them hitting the sandbags, slicing through our tents and of course cutting paths through the rubber tree leaves.

As I approached the sandbagged bunker (which was about 8' high), I heard something else. I heard a little voice say "You're running upright, BEND OVER!". I obeyed. At the exact moment that I bent over in order to run at a crouch, an AK-47 opened up behind me. I saw about ten bullets impact in a line against the sandbagged wall of the bunker. If I had not bent over they would have cut me in half at the chest.

Bullets travel very fast, Duh. So fast that they compress the air in front of them. You can feel them passing you if they are within an inch or so. These bullets were. Being in a crouched position the air from the passing bullets lifted my t-shirt up and over my head. I dove into the bunker now full of my friends almost blindly. My entrance must have been spectacular with a t-shirt over my head, my shorts in one hand and a roll of TP in the other.

After the laughter subsided, some Sergeant barked at me to go back out, grab my weapon and report to the line! I believe my exact words were, "GO FUCK YOURSELF! I'll do it when I'm ready!"

That was probably another Courts Martial offense but at that moment in time I was just happy to be alive.

Chapter 20

The Mini-gun

I wanted avoid technical stuff as much as possible. The Mini-gun however is the source of most of my travails. The birth of the Mini-gun made the helicopter gunship successful. The fact that it was so new when we got there meant that a lot people wanted to see it in action. This explains why I served with Australians, Navy Seals, several Special Forces units, ROKs and last but not least, Marines.

The Mini-gun is six-barreled electrically driven Gatling gun. That is an electric motor spins these six barrels firing one bullet per barrel on each turn. Using this system it fires

4,000 rounds per minute! Much larger, slower firing rotating cannons had been previously built for jet fighters. This was the first one to use the 7.62mm NATO rifle cartridge. Since it was a good deal smaller than the existing rotating barreled guns, it was dubbed the "Mini" gun.

There is really nothing mini about it though. Imagine a high powered hunting rifle. That is the type bullet it fires. To any soldiers of World War Two or Korea, it is the equivalent of a BAR, a M-1 Garand or an M-14. In fact the barrels look like M-60 barrels and the bolt look like an M-14 rifle. The only difference is that there are six bolts and each has a small ball-bearing wheel mounted on top. A Mini-gun can chop down a telephone pole in seconds! I know, I've done it.

The other major point of a Mini-gun is its recoil. Again imagine the recoil of 4,000 high powered rifles. A Huey gunship has a loaded weight of over 9,000 pounds. Yet if you go into a shallow dive at 90mph and fire the Mini-guns for about 5 seconds you will lose 30 or 40mph! It is like putting on the brakes!

Hollywood has hardly ever got it right. Even a beefy Arnold Schwarzenegger would be knocked on his ass trying fire a Mini-gun at full speed. Also Mini-guns DO NOT sound like machine guns! It's 4,000 pounds per minute! They sound like an extraordinarily loud wet fart!

Mini-guns cannot spin without going bang. If you twist the barrels of a loaded Mini-gun it will fire. For each 1/6 of a turn it will fire a bullet. When gunships land the first thing that crew members are supposed to do is stick a safety rod between the barrels which keeps them from being rotated and accidentally killing someone. The second thing they are supposed to do is ground the rocket pods so that they do not accidentally go off. Is that they did in combat? Hell no!

We did not lose anyone from Mini-gun accidents or rockets. We did however have several incidents of people getting hurt as rockets went off and sailed between their legs because someone decided to use a radio before they were grounded.

So that is about it for my Mini-gun primer. Those which were mounted on helicopters were controlled hydraulics to aim them and a 24-volt battery to spin them. The co-pilot had a handheld sight which moved the guns to wherever he pointed. If they were firing straight ahead, each gun would fire at 2,000 rounds per minute. If he tracked a target that went too far to one side then one Mini-gun would cut-off and the other would jump to 4,000 rounds per minute.

In short, Mini-guns were very effective.

Chapter 21

Living with Seals

There were two things that I was genuinely afraid of, getting shot at by 50cal bullets and Navy SEALs.

The United States Navy decided that they wanted to see the Mini-gun in action. We were sent to the SEAL Team One base camp in My Tho, just south of Saigon. To say we were warmly greeted by the SEAL inhabitants would be an overstatement. Generally speaking the SEALs did not wish to have untrained Army pukes living amongst them.

My own personal experience started on the way to breakfast our first morning. I found myself walking beside two SEALs, both were larger and more muscular than my thin 6'1" body. Being an outgoing sort I turned to the one nearest (while we were walking) in order to strike up a conversation. I got as far "Good Mor..." before I found a very large Bowie knife pressing against my throat.

This was followed by said large SEAL asking me, "Did I talk to you?"

With the blade still against my throat I meekly coughed out a "No."

The blade was withdrawn and the two seals continued to the chow hall. I spoke to no other SEALs that morning.

The atmosphere was to change drastically later that day. Our gunships stayed at the base camp on standby. Armed and ready to go. We stayed near our helicopters.

Suddenly one of our officers came running up yelling "Let's go!"

The engines on two Mini-gun equipped gunships started whining while we were putting on our gear. The first thing you put on is your helmet and you plug it into the helicopter so you can hear the pilot. Then you strap on your "chicken plate" (ceramic body armor) then your flak vest and finally your "monkey strap". A monkey strap is webbing which goes around your chest and has one long strap in the rear which you hook into the helicopter wall. This allows you to lean out the door and shoot or more often just keeps you in the helicopter during violent maneuvers.

The one bad thing about the monkey strap was if you got shot down or crashed, the FIRST thing you needed to do was unsnap the monkey strap or you could be connected to a burning ship or a sinking ship!

The last thing I did was grab my machine gun and hang it on the piece of bungee cord dangling in front of me.

While doing all of this the pilot told us that a PBR(Patrol Boat River) had been hit and that another one was pinned down when they went to help. You could hear both sides of

radio conversations as we approached. The Seals were pinned down on the shore from fire above them on a cliff. They wanted us to suppress that fire so they could get the hell out of there.

As we approached we could see the two PBRs. One had its bow blown to bits and the other looked like it might have taken a RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) hit. The "cliff" was only about 15' or 20' high. There was an old building further off, like an old church. The top of the cliff had underbrush and one or two trees. There was no place for the enemy to hide from an air attack.

We could not use rockets as they were not that accurate and we sure did not want to kill any Seals! We went straight in and used our mini-guns to strafe the top of the cliff. This was the first time that the Seals had seen Mini-guns in action and it was the last time that these enemy combatants saw Mini-guns in action. It only took that one pass to silence the enemy fire. We circled while the Seals took the remaining PBR out of there. If there were any enemy left they sure as hell were not going to show themselves after that demonstration.

It is not often that we get such clean shots and the top of that cliff was simply mowed to the ground.

That night at the mess hall the large Seal who had previously threatened my life, came up to me, patted me on the back and said. "Good work today."

Chapter 22

Impersonating An Officer

Back at the rubber plantation life went on.

The officers decided they wanted to enter a band competition. I don't know if was theater wide, but I know it went beyond battalion level. The officers had put their band together but they could not find an officer drummer. Ooops!

I mentioned that I played the drums in high school. I was in. I do not remember how we practiced as I certainly did not bring a drum set with me. I think we went to Chu Chi for the competition. This was a competition open only to officers so....

I became Warrant Officer Miller. I was a nervous wreck! The pilots thought it was pretty funny but they weren't the ones that would get a Courts Martial! Taking chances seemed to become habit-forming with me. I took a couple of drinks to take the edge off and after a couple more drinks I began to see the genius of the plan. I discovered that officers

indeed live a better life than enlisted. Maybe OCS would not be such a bad idea. Naaaa!

We practiced and actually won the first round at battalion. We even got a trophy! No one doubted that I was a Warrant Officer. I didn't even doubt that I was an officer. I began to see the fun involved. My God, I was starting think like a pilot! I was surely doomed!

Since we won the first round we weren't finished. I do not remember where the second round took place but I do remember it was some shindig. Goodies to eat, free drinks and women to talk to. Nurses I think. Wow, this was fun! I left with a buzz and feeling very horny.

We lost the next round but we had a ball! I am not sure to this day what my friendly pilots told the CO about my participation, perhaps someday one of them will let me know. I was grateful for the party and grateful for the short-lived good life.

I was also grateful for avoiding another Courts Martial lecture.

Chapter 23

Singapore

Vietnam was like no other war up to that time. It was covered by television "news". For most troops, it took less than a day to go halfway around the world from peace to war. Because of helicopters troops fought much more often than World War Two, averaging 240 days out of 365. Your tour was one year and you got up to two weeks of paid vacation during your tour!

It was decided that the strenuous schedule for most combat troops required a break from killing and/or being killed. You were given one week of R&R (Rest and Relaxation) at an approved military destination. If you were fortunate, you could also put in for one week of Annual Leave but that needed the CO's approval. You could not take the 2 weeks together.

It was my time for R&R. I forgot the choices but I remembered that I narrowed it down to Singapore or Bangkok. Being a World War Two buff I thought Singapore would be great (and it was).

Donning my Class A uniform I hopped a helicopter ride to Ton Son Nut airport in Saigon. There I played pinball until it was time for my luxurious flight to Singapore. We flew chartered Pan Am straight from Saigon to Singapore. Real stewardesses and everything.

Our modern piston-engined DC-7B taxied out for takeoff behind a F-4 Phantom which

was setting out on a combat mission. Climbing out over Saigon I was impressed by the urban sprawl of this city. It was huge!

Touching down at the Singapore I was greeted by several 1940's era aircraft parked near the hangers. That satisfied me already. Soon the Army would attempt to satisfy me even more.

On R&R you stay in a government approved hotel, actually I think it was a government chartered hotel. After checking in, the new arrivals were cordially invited to a "mixer" in what seemed like a basement conference room. There were lots military guys in their civvies and a podium.

An officer of service and rank I do not remember gave us a quick list of dos and don'ts and off-limits stuff while visiting Singapore. For instance, Singapore law includes a corporal punishment called "caning". That is being struck on the bare butt by a cane of bamboo or something equally hard. This could be administered for such lesser offenses as drug use or overstaying your visa.

Singapore is a very, very clean city (well actually a City-state). Any kind of littering was frowned upon. You could even get arrested for spitting out gum, so we were encouraged not to chew gum! Each city parking lot had an attendant whose sole job was to continually dust the parked vehicles with a big feather duster.

After this mandatory briefing of Singapore minutia and just before we all fell asleep he changed to a more interesting subject. He announced that this meeting was in fact a "mixer". He said shortly we would be joined by a bunch of women. Some yells came out. Then the bomb, "These women have all been inspected and certified clean. What arrangements you make are your own business and we are not interested."

With that women poured into room. I quickly buried my amazement at government inspected whores and enjoyed the moment. I had never paid for a woman in my life but 6-months in the boonies can change your convictions! It was a wonderful first night in Singapore!

I was not your normal unwinding soldier. I loved to sightsee and that is what I did. Our hotel also included other activities such as water-skiing. This was something I loved and I soon found myself on a bus to Kuala Lumpur. There I got to water-ski on a truly pristine river. It was like flying because while you were skiing you could look straight down through the crystal clear at the river bed some 25 feet below. I loved it!

I had my camera and I was everywhere. Downtown, the waterfront, even Tiger Balm Gardens. Somewhere in these travels my magnetism for attracting the unusual must have turned on. I met a local who after an enjoyable half an hour of conversation invited me to a "special" place that night. A private club by invitation only. He gave me directions and a signed card with which to present to the doorman..

I do not remember if it was called Shelford House or if it was just a big house on Shelford House Road. It looked like an old mansion. Once past the door guard I entered another world unknown to me except perhaps in Haight-Ashbury. Lots of people having a very good time, lots of incense, lots of black lights, but this time a live band and plenty of booze. Lots of women asking me weird questions and asking if I had ever tried this or that. I had a lot of fun but afterward I was as perplexed as I had been in San Francisco. I was clueless.

I thoroughly enjoyed that experience as an adventure on its own standing.

The week went by quickly and I soon found myself leaving lushly green Singapore and heading back to lushly green Vietnam, rested and relaxed.

Chapter 24 **Losing Major Morrow**

Major Boyd E. Morrow had been the head of maintenance since Fort Campbell. Although I reported to Sergeant Nitchy, Major Morrow was my immediate commanding officer. He made it clear early on that due to my MOS that I could report directly to him if there was a need.

Thus we always had a close working relationship. Major Morrow was a working officer. He often did the test flights himself, perhaps usually would be more accurate. Anytime there was an airframe repair, an engine repair, any flight controls repair or a change in the armament system, then a test flight was required. Since Major Morrow made many of these, he and I had a lot of flight hours together, with me in the co-pilot's seat.

His style was by the book. He was firm but fair. He was not very good at bending any rule. He wanted his helicopters to be top-of-the-line. He worked me hard, but would not hesitate to shanghai some innocent bystanders if I needed some bodies.

The only place he strayed a little from the book is that he would let me experiment as long as it did not affect any flying characteristics. For instance, every gunship has a depression where a hoist was supposed to be but no hoist. This meant that I had a "spare" electrical circuit with a switch that I could freely use. I used it for different rocket pods and I used it for the XM-188 system.

Major Morrow fully understood the extent of my training and he guarded me like a mother-hen. In return I worked my tail off to make sure he had as many flyable gunships as possible. It was nothing to work straight through the night changing out weapons systems from non-flyable ships to flyable ships. It was not unusual to find Major Morrow up all night either. We had a mutual respect for each other.

On October 13, 1967 that relationship ceased to exist. On a test flight not far from Dau Tieng Major Morrow crashed. We lost two good men that day. But my loss was personal.

The respect that Major Morrow had earned not just from me but everyone in maintenance was dashed in one day. As a Chinook brought in the crumpled remains of Major Morrow's helicopter hung beneath a sling, I took pictures.

Why I did that, I do not know because it hurt. I guess I wanted to make sure I remembered, I don't know. I was crying as I took the pictures.

Tears for a good soldier, a good man, an honorable man, a friend.

Chapter 25

Top Sergeant

First Sergeant Ramon DePalm was big, black and mean. He pushed his men hard. He got in their faces and invaded their spaces. There was no escape if you became a target.

My first encounter with First Sergeant Ramon DePalm ("Top") came after I came back from a mission where I had volunteered to be a door-gunner. Top was waiting for me at the airfield near my armament hootch.

Without any prior warning he lit into me. He would stand nose to nose and yell in your face. I received the following message (somewhat paraphrased), "WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"

Without waiting for an answer Top continued, "DO YOU KNOW HOW IMPORTANT YOUR JOB IS TO THIS COMPANY?"

Again he obviously was not waiting for an answer because he already knew that I was an mindless dumb shit, "DO YOU THINK THE ARMY GAVE YOU ALL THAT TRAINING SO YOU COULD GET YOURSELF SHOT?"

Then a huge poking finger started to prod my chest, "WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"

He went on to explain my MOS and my duties in detail. Top screamed even louder, "LISTEN UP MILLER! I AM GIVING YOU A DIRECT ORDER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? A DIRECT ORDER! YOU ARE NOT TO FLY ON COMBAT MISSIONS PERIOD! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

I shook my head yes and meekly replied, “Yes sir!”

That of course earned me another tirade, “LOOK AT THESE STRIPES! DO I LOOK LIKE AN OFFICER! I WORK FOR A LIVING! DO NOT CALL ME SIR!”

With that he grabbed my arm and drug me across the airfield to Major Morrow, my immediate superior. In front of Major Morrow he repeated his direct order to me. Major Morrow also meekly agreed.

Then Top dragged me across the company area to headquarters. There in front of the CO he again repeated his direct order to me. The CO repeated this direct order to me coming from him personally. It looked like my volunteering days were over.

Years later when Top found out that I earned an Air Medal with two clusters for combat flying he almost had a heart attack. Ooops!

Top pushed us hard. Yet if I was running behind I have seen him roll up his sleeves and help me out.

Top Sergeant Ramon DePalm was a black John Wayne. He was Sergeant Stryker in The Sands of Iwo Jima!

On the other hand there was nothing that he would not do for his men. He would stick his neck out and he could bend rules if it meant that his men would be better off.

No man was more feared. No man was more respected than First Sergeant Ramon DePalm.

Chapter 26

Top Secret Shit

Sergeant DePalm had forgotten the concept of the “automatic volunteer” when he issued me my do not fly combat order.

The CO was always volunteering us, particularly the gunships, for strange and unusual assignments. One day the CO gathered up the gun platoon to address both officers and men.

He cleared his throat and began, “Men I have volunteered us for a dangerous assignment.”

We all looked at each other and collectively held our breath. My own thoughts were simply “Anything but the Seals sir, anything but the Seals!”

Without explaining the mission, the CO said, "Men, I need 25 unmarried men to volunteer for this mission, no questions asked."

The CO paused looked my way and added, "And Spec5 Miller."

Automatic volunteer. Where the gunships go, so do I. The more important the mission, the more important that I be there. I did not mind. It meant I would be away from Top and the CO. Maybe I could get some flying in other than test hops.

My elation was short lived. We were being assigned to support a Special Forces unit out of Tay Ninh East. Upon arrival there we noted a number of what we thought were South Vietnamese soldiers in their "tiger camo" uniforms. It turns out they were "Free Cambodian" fighters. They wore a red, white and blue striped scarf on their neck. Ooops!

Without explanation we were told to remove ALL insignia from our uniforms including our name patch. We removed our dog tags, wallets and anything else identifying. When we walked out of our tents they were spray painting the "U.S.ARMY" off our tail booms. I knew this could not be good.

We were told if we were shot down to deny that we were Americans. Deny? How does a 6'1" soldier who speaks English deny that he is an American in a country full of 5'2" soldiers? I was NOT going to get shot down! We all knew that Cambodia was across the river only a few miles away. Again, this could not be a good thing.

I was assigned to fly on several missions because 'we needed no glitches from the miniguns'. Thus I found myself on the first mission flying just above the jungle canopy. Off to my right was a watchtower which jutted above the trees. It had a Cambodian flag flying from it. It appeared to be shooting at us.

The pilot told me to fire back. I said, "Sir, that's a Cambodian flag!"

He yelled at me, "FIRE!" So I did. This was not a good sign.

Later we circled as slicks dropped off some Special Forces guys and a bunch of "Free Cambodians" in a small clearing amongst the trees. The slicks had barely lifted off when we heard screaming in our radio.

The troops we had just landed were surrounded. They frantically called in the gunships. "We are popping red smoke, make your runs from East to West, East to West!"

The pilot asked where they were in relation to the smoke as we did not want to accidentally hit them.

The radio blared in my ear, "WE ARE AT THE SMOKE. THEY ARE ON OF TOP US FIRE, FIRE! DON'T WORRY ABOUT US! FIRE, FIRE!"

So we swooped in from East to West miniguns blazing and we raked the tree line until they told us to stop. The slicks went back in and plucked them out of there.

Back at Tay Ninh East we found we had become the Special Forces new heroes! They had literally stood behind the west side of any tree they could find. They told us the miniguns mowed down dozens of the enemy at a time. They said that they had never seen such carnage. Apparently neither had the enemy because they quickly withdrew.

Some the Special Forces guys got hit by the miniguns as their trees were not quite wide enough but they did not care, they had survived an impossible ambush! I have never seen such happy men. They were patting us on the back and bringing us beer. They adopted us on the spot! We now all wore the red, white and blue scarf on our neck.

One the SF sergeant said that a bunch of them were going to take a deuce and a half truck over to visit their buddies at the hospital. He invited me to go along. I showed up to find them all gearing up with weapons and hand grenades. They gave me my choice of weapons and they had a big selection. I politely asked why all of this was necessary if we only going to the hospital.

They said, "Well we may have to fight our way if we get ambushed on the road."

Remembering my direct order from Top, I respectfully declined their gracious invitation.

Chapter 27

The First is Worst

One of the reasons we ~~went~~ did not accidentally go into Cambodia in November and December of 1967 was that the enemy not only used it as part of their supply line but had also built base camps just across the border.

One gunship mission I went on was a sweep up the river. Cambodia on the left, Vietnam on the right. Our orders were simple but firm. We were to fly at very low level up the river with two gunships. We were ordered to shoot at ANYTHING that moved including possible food sources. We were given strict orders that no matter what we saw, we were NOT to go back as we would be promptly shot down. We were depending on the element of surprise.

A loaded Huey helicopter is not a quiet thing. You can hear them a mile off. However, if you fly low, very low, you can be on top of them before they know what hit them. Even if you can hear them, the low level muffles the noise and you cannot tell where the noise is coming from. We were counting on that.

Off we went, I went as a door gunner which meant I was on the right side of the helicopter, in this case the Vietnam side. We were so low going up the river that even the pilots could not often acquire a target until we were past it, so the door gunners got a lot of practice.

The pilots would fire a burst or maybe the crew chief would. I would look over to see what they were shooting at. So far I only saw trees on my side. The pilots fired at a bunch of ducks going across the river from Vietnam toward the Cambodian side. They weren't real ducks. They were hollowed out wooden ducks and underneath of them started to pop up dead bodies or frantically swimming bodies as we flew over them.

Another section of the river everyone was firing at the Cambodian side. Just off the river was base camp complete with concrete buildings and what I thought looked like a volleyball net! We did not go back.

Finally on my side coming up was a clearing. The back of a large lean-to was coming up fast. There was smoke rising from under it. I started firing into it. As we raced by I saw there was a very large black kettle (like 8' diameter) over a fire. Draped over the kettle was what I suppose had been the cook. Since I was the only one firing, I knew that I had killed him. That picture burned in my mind as we raced away at low level.

That night and for several nights to follow I was a distraught man. I tried God, I tried my Bible, nothing could explain to me why I had to kill another human being. I can see him even today. I tossed and turned. I worried I was going to Hell. I kept saying over and over. "I killed another human being!"

Up until this time I had only shot at trees. I had been told of the enemy killed but it was not personal until this day, this mission.

I, myself, no one else, killed that man. War sucks!

Chapter 28

Mountain People

There was one other Special Forces assignment which does not seem to be in our company's official history, but I sure as hell was there.

I recall it was in the Central Highlands, west of Pleiku. This was a tree-covered mountainous terrain near the Cambodian border. This was the territory of the Montagnards. Mountain people.

The Montagnards were loyal allies of the Americans. I do not know where their hatred of the Vietcong or the North Vietnamese came from, but they thoroughly hated them. They were a very primitive people living in mud or grass huts. They wore loin clothes and their weapons were clubs and bows. They were fierce and brutal fighters. We were told that the enemy feared them. I believed it.

We were assigned to a small Special Forces detachment, part of B-52 (Delta Force). For the first time I found myself truly living in the field. There were no guard posts, no barbed wire, no boundaries of any kind.

We set up tents in grassy field next to a Montagnard village of small huts. Beside helicopters, the only piece of military equipment I saw was a boxy communications van with a tall antenna jutting out from the top. We had only brought tents and cots.

The grass was about 6-8 inches high in this field. Trying out my cot to see if it was level I heard a rustling sound in the grass. I looked down and saw an extremely large centipede ambling along. It was about foot or so long with a fat bluish body capped by a round red head. I started to reach for it when a Montagnard ran up to me motioning me back saying, "No! No! Bad! Bad!". He did not touch it either but rather just let it amble away. I was later told they were poisonous.

When there were no helicopters practicing repelling troops from a high hover, it was very quiet in this lush mountainous setting. Very beautiful, very peaceful. No sounds of war whatsoever. I cannot remember flying on any missions from here, but I will never forget the experience of quiet mountain living.

The Montagnards confidently kept the area secure. Thus even with the quiet and the lack of defenses, I managed to get the best sleep I had during my entire tour. Sleeping on a cot in the middle of a field!

To wash, we had to go down to a nearby small mountain river which flowed just below the village. Since the river was closer to the enemy, the Montagnards would escort us. It was quite a sight. A bunch of 6 foot tall soldiers totally surrounded by twice as many 5 foot tall Montagnard warriors marching through their village and down a long path to the river.

While we were washing up there was a burst of AK-47 gunfire in the near distance. We instinctively ducked and headed for cover, either behind trees or large rocks. Our Special Forces guy laughed at us and told us to get back up. He said, "That's as close as they will ever get and the man who fired those shots is probably already dead." He went right back to washing his shirt and so did we.

We repeated the march back up the hill to our tents without further incident.

Yes sir, the most peaceful days I spent in Vietnam.

Chapter 29

Hawaii, Part II

First Sergeant DePalm, when he wasn't yelling at people, was a good listener. On nights that I had Sergeant of the Guard duty I would occasionally run into the more relaxed Top Sergeant.

Both DePalm and myself were from Williamsburg, VA. Every once in awhile we would share some stories about home. I told him my story about "volunteering" to go into the Army so that I could get another month before reporting. I told him of the reuniting trip that my parents and I took to Hawaii to be a family again. Now Ray DePalm beside being a top-notch First Sergeant was also a family man. He listened with interest.

By now I had served as door gunner on several hairy missions (much to his displeasure) but this time at least under orders. The Army announced it was opening up Hawaii as a R&R destination. Due to the logistics involved it was only opened to married officers. I am sure that this alone pissed Top off as he had a lot of deserving enlisted men.

This was followed by a letter from my parents saying that they were going back to Hawaii for two weeks and they gave me the dates. This time they were returning on a Hilton Hotels-United Airlines stockholder junket (remember dad bought stock after the first trip). I mentioned to Top wouldn't it be cool to have another family reunion after I've been in Nam for eight months.

I thought nothing more about it. About two weeks later Top called me in to see him. He said, "You know you are eligible to take one week annual leave." It was a statement not a question.

"Yes"

"If I could get you to Hawaii would you be interested?" That was a question!

"Damn straight I would!"

"OK, here's the deal. I cannot get you there straight up because of the married officer thing. But I have a friend at Ton Son Nut who can put you on a flight as a standby passenger. That means no guarantees and you only have a week to pull this off. The CO has signed off."

"So I go to Ton Son Nut and wait for an officer not to show up and get his seat."

"That's it. You may spend your entire annual leave playing pinball machines at Ton Son Nut airport."

“Top I’ll take it.”

“Miller, just one more thing. This isn’t guaranteed so don’t get your parent’s hopes up.”

“I’m not going to say anything. If it works it will be a big surprise.”

“It might be best not to say anything to anybody period.”

“Understood Sarge, will do.”

The weeks went by. Soon I was at the Ton Son Nut airport waiting for an officer to die. My parents were already in Honolulu. With luck I would be on the next flight. Luck? What a God-awful thought. Luck? The only way I could get a seat is if an officer is KIA. Luck? I found myself wishing that I could never get a seat. I found myself thinking this was a dark scheme. For Vietnam however, it was reality.

The loudspeaker blared, “Spec 5 David Miller report to flight desk.”

I reported.

The person behind the counter handed me a ticket and a boarding pass filled out in my name. I was on the next flight. Someone, some family had just lost a loved one. Maybe a father, certainly married. Maybe a wife waiting in Honolulu just got the news. I was happy for me, distraught for them. I took that man’s seat.

The flight was long and boring. 18 hours. A refueling stop in beautiful Guam. I thought I would rather be in Nam than this desolate place.

We landed in Honolulu. Still the same as two years ago. Stairs were rolled up to the cabin door and soldiers deplaned. Many had their wives there to meet them. No one was there for me. No one knew I was coming.

Mom and Dad were staying at the Hilton Village as before. Familiar territory for me. I took a cab there and approached the front desk. I asked the very pretty clerk for my parents room number. She politely turned me down and pointed to the house phone. I tried that, no answer.

It was late morning. I knew Mom all to well. They would be on the beach. I left my pack at the desk and headed for the beach, passing the bar where two years ago we had met Don Ho. The placard proclaimed someone else’s name now.

I trudged across the sand in my Class A Army uniform, scanning the beach for my parents. I saw them. They did not see me. In fact they saw nothing, they saw nobody around them, they were staring blankly toward the sea. Both of them. No doubt wondering if their only son was alright. Thinking they were closer to him now but no

where near close enough. Hawaii was not working its charm this time around. It was just a place full of memories.

I walked up behind them and said, "Aloohaa."

Mother did not even turn around but she quietly and politely mouthed. "aloha"

So I increased my volume and said, "No I mean, ALOOHAA!"

Dad turned his head toward me and turned ashen grey. He looked like a puppy staring at something interesting, sort of cocking his head to one side. Out of his mouth came quiet questions, "Son? Is that you son? Is that you son?" He grabbed his heart.

Mother's head whirled around she yelled out, "DAVID! DAVID!" She jumped up and ran to me and hugged me. She deserted Dad on sand to deal with what looked like seizure on his own. She started screaming to the beach, "THIS IS MY SON! THIS IS MY SON!"

Dad quickly recovered from his disbelief upon seeing that mother in fact was hugging something tangible and not a ghost. Soon he was by my side. He was not screaming. Dad was just hugging me and sobbing. Uncontrollably sobbing.

By now the beach was on alert. Dogs were barking and a crowd was gathering. I was introduced to some of the people that my parents had met on the flight over. Pretty much everyone within earshot was either shouting, pointing or crying. Finally, exhausted by the surprise reunion, I sat down with my parents on their blanket and we slowly came back down to earth.

I explained how I got there and why I could not tell them ahead of time. Dad was still visibly shaken as he had been hiding newspaper articles from my mother for months.

Suddenly Dad gasped when he saw the back of my neck, it was scarred. I explained that when you fire your machine gun in the confines of a helicopter the hot ejected brass sometimes gets caught in the collar of your flak jacket and burns your neck. I don't think he liked the explanation anymore than he liked the scars.

Amidst the still boiling commotion of a crowd still gathered around us, four people with rather official looking name tags approached. Two had United Airlines tags and two had Hilton Hotel tags. They introduced themselves and we stood up to exchange greetings. One woman wearing a Hilton tag was still crying. The man from United Airlines shook my hand and offered to pay for my clothes and any bar bills during my stay. From Hilton came an offer for a free upgrade to a 16th floor suite.

Later, after settling into our suite and purchasing some Hawaiian clothes from the hotel gift shop, we got a call from the front desk. They asked us to come down. By now we were all three like Cheshire cats with permanent wall-to-wall smiles. At the front desk we all got laid leied. Beautiful, big fresh flowered leis. Then a photographer took our picture.

The next day found that picture on the front page of what I think was called the Waikiki Gazette. The paper gave us copies of the picture. We had made Waikiki history. A great human interest story. So much for keeping my mouth shut and a low profile.

That evening we got thoroughly drunk. We had a huge meal and drank some more. As we watched the Hilton Catamaran sail out for their evening cruise mother slurred out, "Look there goes matacaran!" We were three happy people!

At the end of that day I should have been dead tired. I had been up for over 36 hours, endured a day of emotion and drinking. The minute my head that pillow I should have been sound asleep. I mean here I was on the 16th floor an a luxury suite at a luxury hotel over looking Waikiki beach. Peaceful, serene. No war noises, none. I could not go to sleep. I was sure that the Hilton Hawaiian Village would be mortared at any second.

When I saw the first rays of dawn I went out like a light.

Chapter 30 **Don Ho, Part II**

The next night my parents were going to see Don Ho at his new digs at the International Marketplace. I said I would meet them there later. After about an hour I put on one of my new Hawaiian shirts and headed out to meet them. When I got there, I was stopped at the door by the maitre d' who would not let me in because I only had my military ID. I saw my mother at a table near Don's stage. The maitre d' let me go in to tell her my situation.

I whispered in her why I could not come in. Don Ho was not singing right the, he was talking to his band. As I was winding my way back to the maitre d' I suddenly heard Don's voice on his microphone. He called my name and told me to come back. He then, in front of the entire crowd, chewed out the maitre d'. He told him "That he ever refused to admit another serviceman that he could find another place to work!"

After that he invited my mother up on stage with him. Don Ho looked at me and said "This for you!"

They sang "The Hawaiian Wedding" together. They were a great duet. Dad of course was crying again.

What I did not know was that earlier Don had seen my mother in the crowd. He remembered her from two years ago! He called her by name to come sit near the stage and sing with him.

Chapter 31

Political Soldiers

I do not speak for anyone but myself. I would not want to make sweeping generalizations about Vietnam Vets because we are all different.

If such generalities could be made I would bet on these two:

- 1) Vets who served up to and including Tet are more positive about their mission. Vets serving after Tet are less so.
- 2) Vietnam Vets tend to be apolitical. We don't like politics or politicians because they created this mess. Just leave us alone.

The only time I ever saw Vietnam Vets unite as one was the tremendous grass roots effort against John Kerry. Even with 10's upon 10's of thousands of Vets sounding the alarm, no one listened. We were again denigrated and scorned. Later we were called Republican lackeys which was a huge lie. After that, we went back to our solitude with no hope that anyone would ever listen to us again.

The 1960's were not too long after World War II. Most politicians still considered that a military record was needed for a successful run at office. A military record with decorations was even better. Thus there existed some "political" soldiers, that is someone in the service who was only there for one reason, politics.

We had ours.

AJ was a thoroughly likeable guy. Good smile, friendly and a great sense of humor. Everybody liked him, me included. He knew his job and he was smart. But AJ lived a lie (or perhaps we did) and used us to support him. He was a victim of circumstances who simply was stuck in a position he did want to be in. Yet he volunteered.

Please do not misunderstand me. I have no problem with AJ's logic, plenty of people felt that way. I was on Kennedy's side not Johnson's, we should have gotten out. Whether we went to Nam or stayed away was decided when we elected Johnson. It was done. It was over. We were here. Let us get this over with as quickly as possible so we can get home.

AJ could have cared less about how many helicopters were available in the morning. He did not desire to work more than 8 hours per day. This was a stupid war why are you breaking your back? I'm the same rank as you, don't tell me what to do! Screw everybody else they don't know what they are doing! And on, and on. Getting work out of him was like pulling teeth! Trouble is, I really needed his expertise and help.

I just did not understand it. I finally asked him point blank, "AJ, when you transferred

here you KNEW we saw a lot of combat. Why did you volunteer?"

His answer was one I just could not have even imagined. He said, "Some day I plan to run for (political) office. I have to have a service record that will get me votes. As soon as I get a Purple Heart I'll leave your chicken-shit outfit!"

I was speechless.

AJ was also a 45J20. With two of us on hand, one was allowed to fly missions. AJ went on a mission during which some of his own hot brass got caught in his flight glove producing a blister on his wrist. Upon landing he immediately went to sick call to properly record the event. Since it occurred during combat even though he caused it himself, it was technically a combat injury. He wrote himself up for a Purple Heart and submitted it.

By now I was pretty much over having AJ around to "help". I heard the CO signed his transfer with a "...now get the hell out of here..", reminiscent of Kerry's departure from his old outfit. He had his Purple Heart and he was gone. In retrospect I guess I should have about 5 or 6 Purple Hearts but I still possessed a semblance of a conscious.

There is one more political observation I would like to make. You already know that our little village of Dau Tieng was rife with Viet Cong. But here and all over the country, Vietnamese and Americans were interacting. Most soldiers are just the boy next door. Most had good American values of decency and fairness. Thus, to me, an American soldier is one of the best ambassadors of goodwill we have. It was like that in World War II. It was like that in Vietnam and Iraq.

A national election was coming up for Vietnam. For two weeks prior to the actual voting, the Viet Cong had loudspeakers blaring at the villagers of Dau Tieng. I asked an ARVN soldier what the speakers were saying. He said, "They are warning the people not to show up to vote or they mortar Dau Tieng."

The day of the election came. Walking from our tents to the airfield took us past the weakest spot in our perimeter, a barbed wire gate on a road that ran through the village. You could always look down that road like would any main street in a small town. That morning what I saw were people lined up for blocks waiting to vote. That night we heard mortars leaving the tube, someone yelled "IN-COMING!" and we took cover. The mortars however fell on the village. The VC had kept their promise.

I never heard Walter Cronkite reporting on that!

Chapter 32

Planting Rocket Pods

Surely if we had television news in World War II we would all be speaking German or Japanese now. Thank God we didn't!

Unfortunately we had television in Vietnam, plus satellite relay had just been perfected. War was not meant to be televised. It was meant to be fought by those actually engaged in battle. It was not meant to be fought in your living room every night. Actually war should not be fought period!

We can control our own urges but we can not control those who think waging war is a good thing. We can only fight them.

Thus it was that in the living rooms of America the Vietnam War was fought every night. In the officer and enlisted clubs, it was televised every night. So to were demonstrations against the war. The outspoken people against the war. Every night, all the time on TV. It is no wonder that it went on so long. It is no wonder that people grew tired.

Soldiers too got to see the news every night. We too got to see the demonstrations. We too felt the sting.

It would be pure conjecture to try and imagine how short and **the** successful the Vietnam War might have been without television. It would be pure fantasy to imagine a united America supporting the effort. I can however report the facts and the results. They are history now. A totally ignored history, but history none the less.

Reporters barely ever have a grasp on a strategic view or even an ethical view for that matter. Instead they opt for reporting only the facts that they see in front of them, regardless of consequence. Being television it is also necessary to have something interesting to look at.

For instance a reporter from Saigon breathlessly reported that Saigon had been rocketed last night. It turned out to be one rocket propelled grenade. As I have previously noted, Saigon is huge! This was the equivalent of setting off a firecracker blocks away from your house. In the background you see the smoke of the burning fire. To all had been to Saigon it was easy to recognize the trash dump which was always smoking. Creativity in truth.

In Iraq, reporters from every network would rush to every act of terrorism as soon as possible, to report the "facts". Like ambulance chasers they would arrive and film the gory aftermath and the celebrations of those who caused it. They would report on how truthful their efforts were to bring the real war to you. The terrorists knowing the medias' modus operandi were thus encouraged to blow up more things, and more and more

people. This media behavior was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And so it was in Vietnam. The world but especially our enemies, watched the “anti-war” demonstrations. I put anti-war in quotation marks because they were not really anti-war demonstrations, not then, not now. They were anti-American . That is they did not demonstrate against the Vietcong or the invading North Vietnamese, they demonstrated against their own country. They supported the enemy and no one else. Especially not the troops.

When we saw a large demonstration televised from the United States, we knew it was time to clean our weapons with extra care for that next attack. Some of us had a saying, “They demonstrate, we die.” It would still make a great T-shirt slogan even today. We would almost always be the recipient of an attack either the next day or the day after a stateside “anti-war” demonstration.

Were the demonstrators right? Who the fuck cares! We were here and they were there. Give us a break! It is like going to home football game and your own fans boo you while you’re playing the game. Then those same “fans” wonder why you lost the game. War sucks!

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) also knew of this phenomena. After a particularly large “anti-war” demonstration in Washington D.C. I was summoned to the CO’s office. There stood some ARVN officers from their small fort on the other side of Dau Tieng. They said they were expecting an attack that night and wanted to beef up their defenses. The CO called me in to ask if I had anything we could spare or any ideas that might help them out. I said, “Yes sir, I might have something.”

The ARVN were particularly interested in ways to stop the enemy if they got into the barbed wire perimeter. In other words something to help them from being overrun. We had some old 19-shot rocket pods from the Air Force which were down to the point where they could only fire 7 or 8 rockets, so I was no longer using them. I thought that if I mounted them on the ground and pointed them so that they fired parallel to the ARVN fort, that might scare the living shit out of the enemy. The CO told me to do it.

I spent the day at the ARVN fort setting up my surprise. I planted the pods between the rows of barbed wire so that the rockets would shoot across the ground between the strands and hopefully take out some attacking VC in the process. I then sandbagged them and loaded rockets into the few remaining working tubes. I ran wires to the command bunker. When they pushed a button that particular pod would fire its rockets across the ground.

I warned them that there was no way to control these rockets and by bouncing along the ground they might end up anywhere. They did not care. I can attest to the fact when you think you may die any option looks good.

That night we could hear the attack on the ARVN outpost. Mortars, the rifle fire, automatic fire. The we heard the whoosh, whoosh of my rockets being fired. We had no idea what happened.

The next day I was again summoned into the CO's office. Standing there were the same ARVN officers grinning like they just won the lottery. They told me it worked. They said the enemy was about to overrun them when they fired the rockets. The rockets actually killed several but mostly it scared the living shit out of them and they retreated. They told me that unfortunately several of the rockets had bounced into parts of the village. I apparently wiped a small school house, but no civilians were hurt.

To show their appreciation they gave me a battered WWII German Mauser rifle and some WWII ammo. Really, the ammo had 1942 and 1943 stamped on it. I tried to ship it home as a war trophy but some enterprising Lieutenant in Saigon snatched it from the PO for himself.

Because our aircraft rockets were not meant to skittle across the ground, the was a one-time, semi-successful experiment. My planting days were over.

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Chapter 33

Bob Hope

I grew up watching old Bob Hope movies. I loved Bob Hope. I figured even if nothing else came of this war at least I would finally get to see him perform in person.

December approached and Bob Hope announced his schedule. He would be performing at Cu Chi, our battalion headquarters. At last, a life long dream come true. How many times had I watched him entertain the troops over the years. Now I would be one those troops. The anticipation was killing me. They say that expectations will kill you. They were right.

As the day approached, Sergeant Nitchy who knew of my excitement over going to see Bob Hope slowly ambled his way toward my armament hootch. His face was solemn. This could not be good news.

“Dave, I’ve got some bad news for you.”

“Shit!”

“Guess who battalion wants fly counter-mortar during the Bob Hope performance?”

“The 188th.”

“Bingo.”

“Guess who the CO wants to be part of those crews””

“Me.”

“Sorry. I know you were looking forward to it.” Sgt. Nitchy turned and walked away.

Automatic volunteer strikes again! Ooops.

I did get to see the Bob Hope show. I saw it from about a thousand foot altitude doing slow circles in a loaded Huey gunship. We stayed far enough away not to disturb the performance with our rotor noise but close enough to attack. We circled and circled. We circled for the entire show then headed back to Dau Tieng.

At least I help keep Bob Hope safe. That’s something.

Chapter 34

Impersonating a Pilot

The 188th AHC was seeing a whole bunch of combat. In the air and on the ground. In fact many of our pilots were over the limit for flight hours and were technically grounded.

One morning I took off on a test flight with a minigun armed huey. I had just changed out the system so it was just me and the pilot. We were headed to a free-fire zone to try out the system when we got a frantic call from base, “VC in the open!”

It is not often that the enemy shows himself so they wanted to call in artillery right away. We were to return to base ASAP and pick-up an artillery observer. My pilot became equally frantic and informed them that not only did we not have a crew chief and door-gunner but that, “Spec 5 Miller was in the co-pilot’s seat!”

We headed back to the field. Coming in for landing we saw the crew chief, a door-gunner and an artillery waiting for us but no co-pilot! He called in again and repeated, “I ONLY HAVE MILLER WITH ME!”

They answered, “You’ll have to go with Miller. Everybody left here is grounded.”

My pilot said, “OK, Log Miller in.”

He did not care. We had flown a lot together. He knew I could handle the ship if I **has** to. I should also explain that anytime we got **an** “VC in the open” it meant NOW not later. There was no time to “shop” for my replacement. Somewhere on the official flight records of the 188th a Spec 5 is logged in as co-pilot (technically, Assistant Aircraft Commander) for a two hour combat mission!

Our three new passengers climbed on board. The door-gunner relinquished his flight helmet to the artillery Second Lieutenant so that he could talk to the pilot. Before we even took off the 2nd Luey noticed my rank and asked, “Can Spec 5s **could** fly?”

My pilot simply answered, “This one can. Where to?” Our orders were to follow this 2nd Lieutenant’s orders.

As the 2nd Lieutenant was trying to figure out where to point us, two disturbing things came out of his mouth. First he blurted out that he had only **been** Nam for 3 days. Second he asked what altitude was safe from small arms fire, he directed us to that altitude.

Now any idiot knows that no self-respecting gaggle of VC would dare be caught in the open with a gunship overhead in plain view. The pilot attempted to dissuade him but the artillery man held his ground, so off to 5,000 feet we went. Everyone in the helicopter except the 2nd Lieutenant knew that this mission was just blown. The door-gunner, in the dark so to speak was so upset by our climb to altitude that he regained temporary custody of his flight helmet and asked what’s up sir? The pilot laughingly said, “Don’t you know? We’re looking for VC in the open! Now give your helmet back to the nice lieutenant.”

On one hand it was peaceful at that height and we were just following orders. On the other hand the initial report was about 200 VC in the open. We wanted those guys.

The artillery guy was still playing with his map trying to figure out where we were. The crew chief was getting very bored. Down below on the river we saw a big flock of white geese. It was a free fire zone so the crew chief popped off a few rounds at unsuspecting geese, far, far below. Whatever chance we had of catching “VC in the open” was long gone anyway.

The machine gun fire startled the artillery lieutenant so much that he visibly jumped in his seat. He frantically asked, “What was that?”

The crew chief sheepishly replied, “I thought I saw something there at the bend in the river sir.” A true statement. The pilot and myself were visibly laughing.

The 2nd Luey carefully looked at his huge artillery map. These maps show the terrain topographically and have a grid system overlay. You find your target then call back to the artillery firebase, giving them the coordinates. They in turn fire one round of white phosphorus (WP round or ‘willie pete’) to mark their aiming point. Then the artillery observer calls in a correction and asks for another willie pete round. Corrections normally

are something like left 25 up 50. The "50" referring to yards.

The artillery map was obviously not designed for use in Huey helicopters flying with their doors open at 90 mph. The maps were not only unwieldy but they flapped in the breeze like any large piece of paper would. By large I mean about 4' by 4', folded!

When the Second Lieutenant was satisfied with our location and his coordinates, he called them into his Major commanding the artillery battery. Since this was a free-fire zone our pilot was not too concerned about calling in artillery on the unsuspecting VC geese.

Back at the firebase the major informed us that the WP round was on its way. I do not recall the artillery jargon used but the fire base would tell you when the round left their tube and then they would tell you when it was supposed to impact. The artillery Major informed us the WP round should have impacted.

We were all looking out the left side at the bend in the river when the excited door-gunner tapped the pilot on the shoulder and pointed out to the right, about a mile away, the unmistakable white smoke burst of WP round. It was near a village! It was outside the free-fire zone! The Second Lieutenant finally saw it and excitedly recalculated his coordinates.

Calling his Major, the 2nd Lieutenant calmly said, "Up a 1000, left a 1000." Now remember these are yards! A normal correction is about 25 or 50 at the most.

For next 5 minutes those of us with helmets got to listen to a very irate Major chew out a very inexperienced Second Lieutenant over the radio. I was sorry that the door-gunner had to miss it. The Major swore at the Second Lieutenant like a drunken sailor. He called him every name in the book. Every other word was fuck or fucking. Shithead and dumbass were also popular.

Finally, when the Major calmed down a little, he asked the pilot if he was trained to read an artillery map. He was. Standard training at Ft. Rucker.

The Major then ordered his 2nd Lieutenant to give said map to the pilot. He also told his Second Lieutenant that the Warrant Officer was now in charge of this mission, period! The Major told his man that he did not want to hear another word out of him.

Actually the Major said, "I want you to shut the fuck up and give that fucking flight helmet back to someone who can use it!" I don't know that I have ever heard any officer that angry.

This artillery mission was now in the hands of the 188th!

The pilot told me to take over and drop to the deck while he was now busy wrestling with the huge artillery amp. The last thing the Second Lieutenant asked before relinquishing

his helmet was, “What are you doing?”

“We going down on the deck to see we can draw their fire. Now give that helmet to my door-gunner!”

I cannot imagine what was going through the head of that Lieutenant. First he blew his coordinates, then he gets publically chewed out by his Major. Now he found himself diving to treetop level to try and get the enemy to shoot at us. If all that wasn’t bad enough there was a Spec 5 flying the helicopter and the real pilot had a face full of artillery map and could not even see out the cockpit. There are “bad hair” days and there are “wish you had never been born” days.

It is SOP for gunships to “hit the deck” to draw fire. Generally speaking the enemy will not voluntarily step out and wave at a gunship. In the retrospect of 45 additional years of breathing this seems quite insane. At that point in time however it was quite normal.

No one on board really expected the VC to show themselves. It was too unhealthy this close to a US base. All of the helicopter guys were pretty confident no one would shoot at us. But perhaps at treetop level we might actually spot them.

So for an hour I had the best time of my life. Flying at low level with my pilot’s hands fully engaged in playing with that artillery map. I finally felt like a real pilot! It was great! The Second lieutenant in the back was by now ashen white and almost comatose.

The Warrant Officer eventually called it off. I popped back up to 1,000 feet and headed for Dau Tieng.

As we approached for landing there was an MP(Military Police) jeep waiting for us. Well not us, the 2nd Luey. Boy was that Major mad! I’m guessing that ended the lieutenant’s artillery career.

After landing the Warrant Officer gestured an OK to the MP’s. The Second Lieutenant attempted to exit the helicopter but he was a basket case by now. When his feet hit the ground his legs just collapsed. The last we saw of him the MP’s were dragging him to the jeep, one MP under each shoulder, his boots dragging through the dirt like broken landing gear.

This is a true story, I really could not make this kind of stuff up!

Chapter 35

Courts Martial Offense Three

We had been very busy and my XM-188 project had fallen by the wayside. Especially

with the absence of Major Morrow. So it came to pass that a Major Ronald K. Andreson was sent from the 11th Combat Aviation Battalion to evaluate the "...aerodynamic and structural ... feasibility of mounting a duo 20mm cannon system on UH-1H type aircraft."

His report stated, "A visit was made to the 188th Assault Helicopter at Dau Tieng on 21 January 1968 to inspect and analyze their design for this weapons systems." he surmised that, "The system proposal by the 188th Assault Helicopter is an entirely feasible weapons platform from the standpoint of aerodynamic analysis. In fact, it imposes fewer operational restrictions than several armament systems already employed on UH-1 type aircraft."

Now you would think at this point I would be thrilled. But I had three things working against me; my rank, my ego and my word. Major Andreson was actually pretty fair in his evaluation. Unfortunately it was the original document sent to Major Andreson that got my goat!

With Major Morrow gone, a Lieutenant approached me to submit the design for testing to battalion. I said I would be glad to do that. He said no, it would have to come from an officer. I did not like it, it was my idea, but I understood the concept. I submitted my prepared report to him thinking he would add a cover page and certainly give credit where credit was due. After all, it was the work and calculations of the Air Force Captain that made this possible.

After Major Andreson arrived I discovered that my explanation of the chain of events leading to the design had been omitted along with warning of the dire consequences. My name could not be found anywhere and the Air Force Captain's calculations had been plagiarized. Copies of my charts, my trigger design and my CG calculations had also been plagiarized. My name appeared nowhere. The only reference was that this design was created by the 188th.

Major Andreson's report was fair but it was based on the Lieutenant's version. I was not a happy camper. Major Andreson stated he was sure they would be static test-firing the system soon at battalion. He left to submit his report giving me a handwritten draft copy. I could not let this static test occur nor could I make any headway with getting a smidgen of recognition.

The next morning I took a welding torch to the XM-188 mount. I cut it into a hundred pieces. I waited for the fallout.

Two things happened which saved me yet again.

Number one, the officers who had put their name on my system reports could not afford to suddenly say that an E-5 destroyed the mount. At least not without exposing their own deceptions.

Number two was a slightly bigger and more consuming reason. The date of Major Andreson's visit was January 21, 1968. Nine days later the Tet Offensive began. We suddenly had a major fighting breaking out everywhere. Now that is a distraction! He probably never had a chance to submit the report.

I never heard anything else about it. A couple of months after Tet the Army determined that Dau Tieng was no longer a viably safe base for our helicopters. Also, unbeknownst to us the 101st Airborne was about to become Airmobile. The entire company was permanently moved to Landing Zone Sally just north of Hue.

Beside those things already mentioned I should also note that the UH-1G Cobra attack helicopter was now in full production and steadily replacing the old Huey gunships. The capabilities of the new Cobra made the XM-188 redundant at best and obsolete at worse.

Therefore whichever officers had to explain the disappearance of the XM-188 had plenty excuses to save their hide.

What could have been my third Courts Martial Offense never materialized. The XM-188, until now, remained unknown in the aviation annals of Vietnam.

Chapter 36

Tet

The Tet Offensive started late on January 30, 1968 or very early on the 31st, depending on your location. The idea was that the North Vietnamese, combined with the Viet Cong would strike all across the country. The subjected proletariat of Vietnam would rise up and join the struggle. The Americans would give up and go home.

The enemy would strike with an arrogance similar to that of Saddam Hussein. They would die because of that arrogance.

We were told that a two-day cease fire had been called for the Vietnamese celebration of Tet. We felt relaxed. The next morning found us frantically arming our gunships.

As a refresher let me remind you that Dau Tieng was located just north of what was called "The Iron Triangle" in War Zone C. A larger base at Ben Cat was to the east of the triangle and south of the triangle was an even larger base called Cu Chi. "The Iron Triangle" was a haven for the Viet Cong. Any major offensive worried us.

Just prior to Tet I had developed yet another toy. The troops called it "super-gun". I had taken a minigun and mounted it on a M-60 tripod. I meant it to be used for perimeter defense. It required two men to set it up and it required a 24-volt aircraft battery. My

assistant, Danny Wooley and I constructed it.

That night the CO called me in. The weakest point of our perimeter was the gate leading in from the town. We were obviously concerned that we would be attacked. He ordered me to place the “super-gun” near the gate. He asked how much ammo I needed. I said no more than 2,000 rounds (2 ammo boxes). Any more than that and I would need an electric ammo boost.

The CO’s orders were simple but grim. Set up the weapon after dark. Get one volunteer to help (I was “automatic”). Wait until the enemy had breached the perimeter, then fire all 2,000 rounds, place a thermite grenade on the gun, pull the pin and run like hell!

My willing volunteer was Dan Wooley who did not hesitate to do so. We grabbed two M-16s and a thermite grenade from supply. The thermite grenade would melt and fuse the barrels, making its useless if captured. Dan and I both thought this might be “it” for us. I had someone take a Polaroid of us in the darkness. I thought it might be the last picture ever taken of us. Somewhere among my many moves I lost that picture.

Nothing happened that night. Dan and I spent a long and sleepless night in that foxhole. As it turned out, no one was “home”. All the VC were out attacking larger bases or Saigon. In fact for the first weeks of Tet, things were fairly quiet at Dau Tieng. The enemy had left.

During the Tet Offensive most of our missions were around Saigon. Since the brass was not sure of the enemies strength or disposition it was not unusual to drop troops in the morning then pick them up at the end of the day. The next day might find us doing the same thing in the same area. Good for our ground troops, not so good for us. In the past the enemy would avoid shooting at gunships, During Tet they seemed to have different orders.

I flew most missions as door-gunner. Reasons had changed by now though. By now all of the gun crews were very good at maintaining their gun systems. My job was mostly troubleshooting and changing out systems. I was not going because the pilots wanted me but rather it was because all of our gunships were going. Where they go, I go. Additionally we would operating out of bases closer to Saigon and not Dau Tieng.

We would usually take off at dawn’s early light. The crew was briefed over our intercom by the pilot. On this day we were already airborne when the pilot dropped my own personal “phobia” bomb on us. There was quite a lot of WWII equipment still around in Vietnam, used mostly by the ARVN. One of these was a half-track truck which had an anti-craft gun turret that housed four .50 cal machine guns.

Our pilot said that there may be a “quad fifty” at our destination.

When you fly as door gunner you are usually sitting right the edge of the helicopter with your head out in the slipstream. When the pilot said “quad fifty” I got so scared that my

breakfast came up. Since my head was in a 90 mph wind and my visor was down this brew whipped around inside my helmet leaving it and me coated. Thus I would have fly the rest of the day like that. Anyone who tells you that you get used to war and fear goes away is full of shit!

The good news was I did not have to fly in that condition too long. The bad news was we were shot down later in that morning. Now thank God it was not .50 cal! The enemy started using armor piercing bullets (jacketed). If you were low enough these bullets could go clean through an engine.

In this case one severed a hydraulic line and we were forced back to the refueling base. By the time we got there most of the hydraulic fluid was gone. The pilots could not hover so they came in fast and cursing. Cursing because both of them were pulling like hell on the collective (the pitch of the blades) so we could land without crashing. I had already unsnapped my monkey strap expecting the worst!

We landed with a scrape and some bounces but we landed. The ship did not look that bad but we would be down until the hydraulic line was repaired. I gratefully spent the rest of the day with my ripe helmet off my head. I loaded ammo whenever our ships came back to rearm. I even did a little demolition work on some defective rockets. This involved digging a hole, putting C-4 plastic explosive in it, fill the hole the bad rockets or warheads and then blow them up. Its no wonder I can't hear worth a shit today!

There is an interesting dance performed by the gunners of Huey gunships. To perform this dance it is necessary to you to top off the fuel tank. Then you must stuff as much ammunition as you carry into the helicopter. The dance is most frequently seen on hot, humid days.

The dance is a result of trying to takeoff in an overloaded helicopter. First the pilot will test the helicopter to see if in fact it is sufficiently overloaded. This is done by attempting to hover. When the helicopter fails to hover the pilot will politely request the two back seat occupants to deplane. Standing on the ground next to their helicopter but still attached by their helmet cords, those two former passengers prepare for the coming dance.

It takes a very small amount of forward speed to add additional lift to a Huey. The pilot spools up his jet engine and goes into a hover. At the appropriate point he tells the crew chief and door-gunner to go. With that the pilot pushes his stick forward to gain speed usually dragging the front of the skids. The crew members start running along side their helicopter until the pilot yells "Jump in!" into the intercom (which is why they keep their helmets on).

The helicopter, now going at the speed of a running man, bounces 2 or 3 times and finally clears the ground. As the speed picks up so does the lift and eventually it is flying like a normal helicopter again. You would have to see it to believe it!

The enemy wore what we called black pajamas because that is exactly what they looked like. Black pajama bottoms and black pajama tops. Black is easy to spot from the air. On the first two days the one thing you saw from the air were bodies. Bodies everywhere. Thousands of bodies on total.

Around every small triangular shaped ARVN fort, hundreds of bodies. In front of every base perimeter, hundreds of bodies. Bodies scattered all over the sides of roads. There were bodies everywhere. Pajamas do not stop bullets worth a damn.

Most of the attacks against bases were quickly smashed. Things were clearly going very poorly for the enemy. Saigon however was a major objective and they had thousands of troops hidden forests and other such places around Saigon.

Saigon was divided into zones so that we would not run into each other. For instance the Air Force might be given a sector and then one given to the Army. All of the effort was now concentrated on eliminating the enemy around Saigon.

My next mission was one just outside of Saigon. The cloud cover was very low that day, about 3,000 feet. We would fly to our objective as high as we could but just under the cloud cover because there were just too many aircraft doing too many things to risk tooling around inside a cloud.

Off in the distance, I could see Saigon. I saw some large bomb bursts so I figured that must be air strikes. Suddenly from the bottom of a cloud emerged an F-4 Phantom. The Phantom is a very large twin-engined fighter-bomber. Today it was a bomber. It dove straight down on a target releasing it 750 pound bombs. I watched pull up after it dropped the bombs. The trouble was it was headed straight for us! More specifically, straight for me!

It happened in a couple of seconds but it seemed like a lifetime. I watched it come head on at me. I could see the pilots helmet, clearly he saw us. I screamed, "Jet on my side!" but he was coming too fast for us to anything. He was pulling up so it was just a matter of clearances. A miss or total disintegration if he hit. He missed our rotor blades by what looked to me to be about a foot. As his underbelly flashed by I was impressed by the size of this beast and by the number of little stenciled instructions all over the bottom. It was if I took a mental snapshot.

Avoiding that calamity, we proceeded to target. Unfortunately because we had to fly under the cloud cover we were within small arms range. As we flew over a section of forest all hell broke lose. The enemy used green tracers. The entire forest erupted in gunfire that sounded like loud popcorn. There were green tracers everywhere!

I started firing and never took my finger off the trigger until all 2,000 or so rounds in my wooden ammo box were gone. My barrel got hot enough to start turning orangish. My neck was being barbequed by my own spent brass, I could smell it. One enemy bullet went between my leg and hit my wooden ammo box. By the time I stopped firing my

barrel just drooped after the last bullet went through.

We were going down. This time the engine was hit so we would have to auto rotate in order to land. That is, if you are going fast enough you could keep the blades spinning just from your forward speed. If you timed it right, you have just enough energy to pull pitch up on the blades for a “soft” landing! The bad news was without an engine you had to keep going down in order to keep the blades turning. This meant finding a landing spot.

We were in luck, there was a field in range. We had no time to determine if it was our field or their field. It did not matter, we were going down! I unhooked my monkey strap again. My machine gun was useless besides I was out of ammo anyway. The co-pilot was busy with his Mayday on the radio and giving our position, not that mattered as we had other gunships near us.

The pilot made a phenomenal landing, barely a jolt. The next order of business was to remove the minguns. They had not been fired so they were cool. A couple of other helicopters landed, I don’t remember if they were guns or slicks. We threw our gear on board and got the hell out of there. Luckily the field was not inhabited and shortly after we left a Chinook came in and hauled our broken bird back to Dau Tieng. Recovering shot down gunships was always a priority for obvious reasons.

This ended my Tet flying. By the time I got back to Dau Tieng we had so many shot up ships that I would spend the rest of my time working maintenance.

During my brief combat flying career I had bullets go under my arms, between my legs and near my feet, but I never was hit. Not even my chicken plate was ever hit. I managed on several occasions to cook my neck and my wrists with hot brass from my own guns. I lived through being shot down and almost run over by an Air Force fighter (perhaps revenge?).

I was truly a blessed man yet it took almost 25 years before I understood that. Back then I thought I was just lucky.

Chapter 37

Jesus in a Ditch

In the South, the Tet Offensive was pretty much over in a few weeks. A tremendous victory only tainted by the media, the protestors and Walter Cronkite. A thorough military defeat of the enemy with huge enemy losses. A revolutionary defeat with respect that the people did not rise up against their American “aggressors”. The fact was, the vast majority of South Vietnamese liked us. We were not occupiers, we wanted the hell out of

there!

Snatching defeat from victory, the irresponsible press reported only what they wanted to believe. This was capped by Walter Cronkite shaking his head and saying, “I don’t think we can win this war.” Unfortunate timing has we had just won the war.

The North was ready to talk peace. We now know historically that they did not pursue peace because of the “peace” marches. Irony dripping in blood. Then we turned around and repeated our mistake 35 years later. We will just never learn and the military will always pay the price for that learning curve.

The VC eventually came back home to the Iron Triangle. They were none too happy. So as the Tet Offensive fizzled elsewhere, things started to heat up at Dau Tieng. More mortar attacks, more often. At one point, as Americans love to do, the Armed Forces radio would “score” the bases with the most incoming rounds. A list you really did not want to be on. For some time Con Thien at the DMZ was number one on charts, we were number two.

On one such attack I was working on the airfield arming some aircraft. I did not hear the mortars because of jet engines starting up. The mortars announced their presence by exploding on the runway nearby. The explosions started “walking” toward me. I jumped into my jeep intending on racing ahead of the explosions.

As I started to move one hit very close behind me. I floored it! The next hit almost under my jeep, lifting the rear end long enough for the engine to race before the spinning wheels dropped back down to the ground. Wham! I flew down our “runway” at breakneck speeds. When I felt I was far enough in front of the explosions, I slammed on the brakes and dove into the nearest ditch.

Afterwards I went back and picked the tail of the mortar that had lifted the rear end of my jeep up. I figured that would make a good war souvenir. Over the years I lost that artifact too.

Another morning as I was walking out to the airfield I heard the familiar tinny click of mortars leaving their tubes. Boy were there a lot of tubes! As I ran to a large drainage ditch in front of me I could still hear them leaving the tubes, maybe ten or more tubes, I wasn’t keeping score. I dove into the ditch and laid as flat as I could. I buried my head in the sandy bottom of the ditch as the first rounds hit.

My God! They felt like they were right on top of me! I could hear the shrapnel whizzing over my head and the cordite fumes were choking me. The vibrations of the explosions sprayed sand into my ears, my throat and my eyes. I did not think I was going to die, I KNEW I was going to die!

Finally they started to walk the mortars away from my position heading them toward our helicopters. When the explosions started getting a little farther away from me, I shook the

sand from my hair and wiped my eyes.

The good news was I had not been hit. I had spent the entire attack mentally picturing a mortar landing square in the small of my back. Maybe Ray Blake had been right after all. The bad news was not even 6 inches from my nose. There, buried about 2 inches into the sand, complete with Chinese writing, was an unexploded willie pete round. Probably the first round fired. Their marker round. I did not stare at it long!

I was in a long drainage ditch that lead back to a culvert pipe about 100 feet behind me. As mortars were still landing just a little farther away, I chose to crawl backward on my belly to the safety of that culvert pipe. If this were an Olympic event, I surely would have set a new world's record!

By this time in the war we were much better at finding these mortars and soon the anti-mortar patrol had caused them to cease after only about a hundred rounds or so. After the attack was over I crawled out and started to collect sandbags.

Since part of my job was ordinance disposal, I knew I would be the one taking care of that unexploded WP round anyway. I put sandbags around it, stuck in a chunk of C-4, lit the fuse, ran and called "fire in the hole". It blew it in half but I got no phosphorus ignition. Fine by me!

For many, many years I told that story. I told people how lucky I had been. Ooops!

This event came back many years later and changed my life forever.

* * *

19 years later I was in real estate. I had not been to church since losing my eight buddies in 1967. I bent down to make sure my real estate sign was level and as my eyes came level with the top I saw a sign from God. Literally.

The sign said "Spotsylvania Presbyterian Church". My knees went weak and I started to cry like a baby. I leaned on my own sign staring at the sign from God and cried. I wasn't sure why I was crying, but I cried. I made up my mind I would go to church that Sunday with my wife and my two-year old son. I did. I kept going to church. My wife stopped, but my son and I continued until the day I left Fredericksburg, VA.

I moved to Florida after my divorce in order to be near my parents. I had full custody of my 6 year old son. I joined the First Presbyterian Church of Palm Bay and kept going. After just six months the pastor pulled me aside and asked me to be an Elder. I scoffed at the idea since I was so new at this church plus he did not know that I had turned my back on God for almost 20 years! I refused. He said go home and pray about it. Ooops!

That night before going to sleep I did an extremely insincere, half prayer. That was the last night I would ever do something like that.

This next part is very hard to explain. It really happened whether you chose to believe it or not.

Jesus came to me. He made me relive that moment in the ditch. He showed me what really happened. He reminded me of what I really did. Remember I said I KNEW I was dead? That is one key. Remember I said I was lucky? Naaa! In the bottom of that ditch I prayed to God for my life. I prayed harder and more sincerely than I ever had for God to save me just this once. The irony? He already had saved me because that unexploded round was the first round to hit.

I woke up sweating and smelling of cordite smoke. I had actually relived that same moment over again. I had to take a shower to get rid of the cordite smell. My prayer had been answered. Luck had nothing to do with it. To this day I do not use the word lucky, I find blessed to be more accurate under any circumstances.

The next day I went to the church office early and volunteered to be an Elder. I went on to teach Sunday school also. Many times after that when I was cheating on my Christian beliefs, I would receive another dream about one more thing, one more close call I had in Vietnam and the Lord showed me again how he saved me.

The bullets that just missed. The little voice that told me to duck down. Getting shot down and the jet that just missed. The jeep getaway. It took me 23 years to find the Lord again, when in fact I had never lost him.

They say there are no atheists in a foxhole. They are right.

Chapter 38

French Miss

The most unusual request also came around this time. A request for an armament system I had never even unpacked. A French system! My family on my mother's side is from French-speaking Belgium but luckily the instructions were in English.

Huey gunships could also be equipped to fight tanks. The VC had no tanks so we never used the system or even took it out the box. Don't you just know that somewhere up north somebody reported Russian tanks. Actually, there were a few Russian tanks. Quite frankly tanks would be very hard to sneak down the Ho Chi Minh trail to War Zone C!

Nonetheless everybody got excited. I really didn't care if everybody got excited. In order to be prepared the order went out to mount the French (missiles). I questioned the logic but on the other hand I was the only person in the company with a lot time on the French

missile simulator. So perhaps I could get my second combat mission as a co-pilot.

This system was very complex. It consisted of six large stubby wire guided missiles mounted on pylons. To put this system on a helicopter was at least two days work. The CO gave me 12 hours. Everything had to be removed from the subject helicopter. All the French stuff had to be unpacked and tested. Then it all had to be installed.

The sight alone was complicated. It included a little joy stick for you to guide the missile. We used to practice at Aberdeen on the simulator by “blowing up” cars on the passing road. Even though the CO gave me as much help as I could get, it was still hard to meet his deadline.

When I was finished the SS-11 French wire guided missiles looked very sexy on our helicopter. That is the point when we learned that said tanks had already been destroyed the old fashion way by ground troops. Further the brass now saw no further need to be on alert for tanks, sooo. . . I had to take it all apart and put on something more useful. Ooops!

An interesting but tiring exercise that missed the mark.

Chapter 39

Rockets and Tunnels

Things were getting worse and worse at Dau Tieng. More and more attacks.

They also starting throwing the larger 122mm rocket at us. This too could often be heard as it was fired giving you 5 or so seconds to find cover. It looked like a 5 foot drain pipe with fins. If you were curious you could stick your head out and actually see it coming.

It tended to bury itself before exploding thus the shrapnel tended to go up in a steep cone. So if you laid flat, as long as it was not a direct hit the shrapnel would miss you. Still it was bigger and louder and a general pain in the ass. I did not like the rockets.

To fire them however required the VC to set up “aiming stakes”. Two stakes for direction and two crossed stakes to set the rocket on and calculate the range. In Russia these were mounted on a multiple launcher on trucks. That would have been hairy. But the VC only had individual rockets so these stakes were necessary.

They were not small stakes either so they were relatively easy spot since they had to be set up in the open. We simply sent out gunships to hunt for these aiming sites and attack them before they could launch. After a while the frequency died down. Also they could not aim the things worth a damn so where they hit was usually pretty random.

The nearest thing I can think of would be like the old German V-1 bombs hitting London. You just had to listen and be on your toes.

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The other thing we worried about was tunnels. Battalion Headquarters at Cu Chi was discovered to have a significant system of tunnels. We had found some tunnels leading from houses in the village going under our barbed wire. After one particularly rainy night I was walking out to the airfield and near the old plantation house and saw depressions in the ground. Some their tunnels had collapsed. That was a job for the infantry and guys known as “tunnel rats”.

I would much rather be flying.

Our “Home Sweet Home” had matured since we first arrived. Our base now had it’s own version of a Post Exchange. When I say version, think 7-11 compared to a Wal-Mart. But it was ours. They even just completed a snack bar where you could order a “water buffalo” burger. We had a barbershop and civilian laundry. Not that I ever time for them, except of course the barber shop.

Our tents now had all the comforts of home. We had our wood floors plus skeletal 2x4 walls. They brought us steel wall lockers just like I had in high school. Now we could lock up our belongings with a combination lock, again just like high school. Most of us

had electric fans to keep the air moving. We decorated with weaved reed floor mats and ammo cases.

For myself, I had been busy “trading”. Our gun systems were controlled by printed circuit cards. If they went bad, you sent them to battalion and they sent you replacements. I repaired my own thus I had “spares” I took these “spare” circuit boards to Saigon where you could always find a supply sergeant willing to trade with you.

The ground attacks were getting quite old and defending them with my revolver was not giving me any warm fuzzies. I needed a proper machine gun. I traded some circuit boards for a nice M-60 machine gun complete with missing serial number. I kept it locked up in my wall locker, away from prying quartermaster eyes.

On noisy nights it stayed locked up in my wall locker. On quiet nights, I kept it under my bed. This however, was not a foolproof system.

On very nice noisy night, I was suddenly awakened by bullets zipping through my tent, followed by the yelling calls to “Man the line!”. Pissed off, I jumped out of my cot and grabbed my helmet. My machine gun however, was still locked up. So with my adrenalin pumping I stood in front of my wall locker cursing at my combination Master lock. A bullet hit the fan atop the locker next to me and sent it flying. I heard bullets hitting the metal lockers and heard them whizzing clean through the tent. One metal sound seemed very close.

Finally I defeated the lock, grabbed my machine gun and ran out the tent heading toward the defensive trench. By now my adrenalin was really pumping as I heard the distinct sound of a 50cal machine gun rattling at us. Those bullets sounded like cannon balls ripping through our beautiful rubber trees. I turned the corner of the tent and was promptly struck to the ground by a blow to my helmet.

I shook my head and while laying flat on the ground took off my helmet for a look. It was dented on the top! Next to me on the ground was the large enemy tree limb that almost knocked me out. One 50cal bullet was all it took to sever that 3” tree limb. My personal phobia had been reinforced! Not that it needed any help.

This battle was over in less than an hour. It was drowned out by the 64 (plus 1) M-60 machine guns on our line. Dragging myself back to my bed, this time I left the machine gun under my mattress in case of emergency.

The next morning life had to return to normal as we had missions to fly. I rolled out of cot, grabbed my olive drab bath towel I went to my wall locker to get my shaving stuff and soap. My locker had a new feature on it. A dimple on the door about chest high. I opened the door and removed my plastic soap dish and inside was a spent bullet. That loud metallic noise that I heard was that bullet going through the back of my locker,

hitting the inside of the door of my locker while I was fighting with the lock. Thank you Jesus!

Although we had finally gotten our tents and our company area pretty much to where we were happy. No one was thrilled with being attacked one or two times every day. We all wanted out of there. One day we got our wish.

The Army knew our base was not secure and they knew several other things. The battle for the ancient city of Hue was long and hard. They also knew that the 101st Airborne Division was going from airborne to airmobile. That meant they would need helicopters.

One day the CO had a company meeting. "Men, we are leaving Dau Tieng."

Yeah, yeah! The men briefly celebrated.

"Men we are moving to Landing Zone Sally north of Hue."

Another good news, bad news! A landing zone? Hue?

From the frying pan into the fire.

The other thing we worried about was tunnels. Battalion Headquarters at Cu Chi was discovered to have a significant system of tunnels. We had found some tunnels leading from houses in the village going under our barbed wire. After one particularly rainy night I was walking out to the airfield and near the old plantation house and saw depressions in the ground. Some ~~their~~ tunnels had collapsed. That was a job for the infantry and guys known as “tunnel rats”.

I would much rather be flying.

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Chapter 40

The Ancient City

We had to pack up everything and move north. I do not remember how all the stuff was moved. It was a long distance so I assume it was airlifted. I went with the gunships. I went as a passenger as my flying skills were not longer required.

It was another beautiful flight except this time there were more signs of destruction. The Tet Offensive had left its mark. There were more bomb craters. The thrill of the beautiful countryside had vanished for me. Even the flying was old hat now.

We refueled at Monkey Mountain. This was my first contact with Marines. Monkey was their base. They also had a big supply base at Da Nang. A little further north was the province of Quang Tri. This is where the ancient city of Hue is located. Here the Marines

had spilled precious blood.

Those who originally came over with the company were now getting near the end of their tours. A tour was one year and then you were sent home, theoretically for at least a year. When you got near the end of your tour, time seemed more precious. At one month to go, you were known as a “shortimer”.

To show your status shortimers usually purchased a hand-carved cane. I purchased mine before I left Dau Tieng even though I wasn’t quite yet an official shortimer. Now was not the time to get killed! The seriousness that Sergeant DePalm had tried to instill in us now made sense.

From Da Nang we flew north following the main highway. We were at about 1,000 feet, a good viewing altitude. We had all seen the fighting at Hue covered on TV. Seeing it in person brought that sense of reality back. Looking down at the destruction of this ancient city that tinge of fear started creeping up your spine.

The city was an ancient citadel completely surrounded by water. It had a thick fortress wall all the way around it. Inside the wall were signs of destruction everywhere. Outside the wall, the large highway bridges into the city lay in pieces dipping into the water. The fighting was over but the aftermath remained.

Coming into view to the northwest of Hue lay our new home, LZ Sally.

Chapter 41

LZ Sally

LZ Sally was a larger base than Dau Tieng. It lay out in the open with no trees to speak of. All around it in every direction were signs of war, craters and flatten houses. In fact the entire perimeter of LZ Sally was considered a free-fire zone. This was the current home of 101st.

LZ Sally had a well established perimeter but our area was not built up. For us it was back to tents on the ground and trusty cots. I think however we were blessed with warm meals from a field kitchen. One of the first things Danny Wooley and I did was build another super-gun for defense. We put one on top of a bunker in our company area. Since the base was surrounded by a free-fire zone Dan used to take the original super-gun out to the perimeter and shoot it.

One day a large sergeant was at this spot that we basically used for a gun range. He had a big .50 cal machine gun and was plugging away at an old telephone pole about 150 yards

away. He said he was determined to knock that pole down. He watched with curiosity while we set up our minigun.

I took one long burst at the base of the telephone and it fell over. The sergeant was so pissed that he took his machine gun and literally heaved into his truck, pealing sand as he took off. After that we started getting requests to make a super-gun for the infantry guys. I never made another one, but maybe someone else did after I left.

LZ Sally was a dirty, dusty place. Gone was coolness of our rubber trees. The perimeter was still just as close, the major difference was the enemy could not sneak up on us. Here we had occasional mortar attacks. Here we had a much large number of infantry. From that point of view it was a much safer place than Dau Tieng. Still many of us suffered from the “grass is greener on the other side” syndrome.

They had a larger maintenance area here and I was no longer exempt from other duties. My first night as Sergeant of the Guard hit a snag right from the start. In one section of line someone had set up all of the Claymores facing in! How dumb does someone have to be to misunderstand “THIS SIDE TOWARD ENEMY”! The 101st infantrymen did not like a helicopter specialist telling them how to do their job but somebody needed to or they would have killed themselves.

Going through the chow line one night I looked at the new duty roster and noticed it was April 1st. Jeez. The entire day had passed before I realized it was my 22nd birthday! Ooops!

I did not like LZ Sally. I was later told that our base at Dau Tieng had been overrun by the enemy.

Chapter 42

Return of Wings

The last month in Vietnam is possibly the worst month. So close to going home yet the war does stop for just you. You are more careful than before, more alert. Because of these reasons my memories toward the end are my weakest. LZ Sally except for the few standout moments is a blur for me.

I do remember the last mission I went on. It was a resupply mission for Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was the famous Marine base that was under siege for some time and where so many Marines found their own brand of Hell. Khe Sanh was just west of LZ Sally. It was in the mountains.

I found myself on a mission to Khe Sanh when I was shortimer! Why, I don't know.

Perhaps I was ordered, perhaps I was curious. So in April of 1968 I was in a gunship flying with other slicks and guns to Khe Sanh. I do not remember why gunships were going. I guess in case we had to provide cover if someone got shot down. I do remember that we too carried boxes of supplies, probably ammo, in our cabin.

The air is cooler and denser in the mountains and we could lift a lot more than we could at Dau Tieng. To get there we skirted the mountains of the A Shau Valley. It was here that I finally saw something bigger than .50 cal bullets. On one far hill, we were being shot at by a 37mm anti-aircraft cannon. These tracers were HUGE! They looked like basketballs coming at you. Luckily the guy was horrible shot because all tracers fell behind us. But he wasn't that far off because the tracers were moving slowly, that is they were basically coming right at you.

Khe Sanh was not a big base, smaller than Dau Tieng and easy to shoot at from the surrounding hills. We headed for a landing at the south end of the base. Their control tower was interesting. It was a sandbagged platform built on top of three telephone poles. The ships came in together and we were landing fairly close to the "control tower". Our Aircraft Commander was a new Lieutenant and the co-pilot was an experienced Warrant Officer.

Almost the exact moment we touched down, the enemy started lobbing in artillery shells. Being shot at by artillery was a first for me. The Lieutenant started asking for take-off clearance from the "tower". Well one of the first rounds hit one the tower's telephone pole legs and over it went right in front of my eyes. There was no one to give him clearance! The experienced Warrant Officer was trying to pull pitch and takeoff but the Lieutenant was resisting because he didn't have clearance.

The Warrant Officer kept yelling at the Lieutenant to let go of the cyclic stick at the same time yelling to us to throw those supplies out because he wasn't making this trip for nothing! So in the back we were busy tossing boxes out of the helicopter (this also made us lighter) while the Warrant Officer kept calling the Lieutenant names such as "you dumb shit" trying to get him to release his grip.

Suddenly the Warrant Officer won and the cyclic stick came up way too quickly, we popped straight up like pogo stick. Just as we lifted off and about 30 feet directly below us an artillery shell hit right where we had just been. I was still tossing boxes out and I almost got tossed out myself when the shell hit. Luckily it hit directly underneath us and the concussion tossed us straight up another 50 feet. We nosed over and put some distance between us and Khe Sanh.

The other ships fared better and formatted for the trip back to LZ Sally. This time we hugged the opposite side of the mountain from where the 37mm gun had been. He was still there and he still shot at us but we were beyond his range. The tracers still looked ominously large.

After we landed I could only think of one thing, "I'M TOO SHORT FOR THIS SHIT!"

My flight status had always been voluntary. The next day I reported to the CO. I requested to be removed from flight status.

I turned in my wings because of those Marines at Khe Sanh. It wasn't their fault and I always felt guilty about doing it.

Many years later at the big Vietnam reunion in Melbourne, FL I noticed a special tent set up with a banner proclaiming "Khe Sanh Veterans". I decided that confession was good for the soul. I approached their tent and there were big Marines manning their table of Khe Sanh souvenirs.

I told them, "I'm a Khe Sanh coward."

They asked me to explain. I told them my story and how I was so scared that I turned in my wings rather risk flying again. The reaction I got TOTALLY took me by surprise. They yelled to their friends in the back, "Hey guys come on out this guy brought us supplies once!"

I was suddenly surrounded by about eight Marines patting me on the back and thanking me. They only cared that I did it, not how many times. They jokingly said they would not go back either if they had a choice. They made me an honorary Khe Sanh Veteran and gave me all kinds of Khe Sanh stickers and such.

War sucks, but wartime friends are friends forever.

Chapter 43

Going Home

Life at LZ Sally for me just became a matter of marking time. Drudgery. I just wanted to go home. Most of my original friends had already started to rotate home. The company was full of strangers to my eyes. Waiting and hoping that nothing would go wrong now.

But things do happen. It is surviving that is key. To illustrate the axiom "shit happens" is this story about Warrant Officer Bruce Wright. "El Rojo". We had been together for well over a year. He was one of the first pilots at Ft. Campbell and we came over together on the Kula Gulf. He was one of the pilots who taught me to fly.

On one of his last missions, I was approaching his ship just after he landed and had shut down. He waved at me and stepped out of the left seat with his right leg high still on the cockpit deck and his left foot on the top of the left skid. I guess he heard something on the radio and was reaching in to transmit. His rocket pods were full and I noticed the

crew chief had not grounded them.

In Dau Tieng's hot, humid air he might have gotten away with that, but here at LZ Sally that was a no-no. I was about to yell at him to ground those tubes when suddenly, WHOOSH, out flew a rocket from the left pod. I don't know if it was WO Wright transmitting on his radio or the crew chief's boom box, but there was just enough RF set a rocket.

The rocket sailed between El Rojo's legs and embedded itself in the bunker. These rockets have folding stabilizing fins which fan out after they leave the tube. The fins are forced out from the rocket exhaust. Thankfully in the 4 feet between the pod and El Rojo's legs they not fully deployed. Still his legs were cut as it whizzed by. Between the fins and heat from the rocket's exhaust, El Rojo was in a state of shock. He was just too short for this shit!.

Just before I left I was again called into the CO's office. At this point I had just under a year left on my enlistment, The CO congratulated me on my work ethic and then dropped his bomb on me. He wanted me to stay for another six months. He said he would guarantee that I did fly combat and the I could stay off flight status if I wished, He offered me an immediate promotion to E-6. He explained that we were going to be become a part of the 101st and that someone with my experience could help in that transition.

I love the staff sergeant rank. My armament slot was not E-6 so it must have been a maintenance slot, I don't know how he going work that. I loved the idea of be able to sport a Screaming Eagle patch. I loved those ideas but I refused. I wanted to be Stateside. I had just seen "shit happens" with El Rojo and I was in no mood to tempt fate. The CO said he understood, shook my hand and wished me luck.

I was due to rotate home. CW2 Bruce "El Rojo" Wright and I left LZ Sally together. The last of the Kula Gulf crowd. I think they flew us to Camp Evans to process out. Then to Cam Ranh Bay to fly home. We boarded an all white DC-8 which had big black letters that said "Seaboard World". It was a chartered airliner complete with stewardesses.

We stopped for fuel in Osaka, Japan. I was able to deplane there just long enough to say I had set foot in Japan although I only got to see the airport gift shop. From there we flew all night across the North Pole route to Seattle. Lovely, rainy Seattle. We were bused to Fort Lewis outside of Tacoma where we got our new orders and a travel voucher home to Virginia.

After 30 days leave, my next assignment was Savannah, GA.

Stateside - A Changed Man

Back home. How do I act?

The combat stuff, I kept to myself. Only another veteran would understand. Generally speaking I did not bring the subject up. If asked, I would answer their questions. If asked, "Did you see much action?", the answer was "Enough." I wanted the war in my rear-view mirror not the passenger's seat.

The biggest revelation was how incredibly trivial the real world of the United States was. How incredibly trivial television and movies were. They seemed obsessed with trivial problems and ignorant of major problems. After a year of death, everything seemed upside-down back where I called home.

What patience I had was completely lost. No one moved fast enough to suit me. I did not like orders or authority. I became brutally blunt in my honesty. This attitude did nothing for my love life. I found it was easy to get involved and even easier to leave. I left paths of broken hearts in my wake.

Mostly I was not afraid anymore. I was not afraid of someone bigger than me. I was not afraid of threats. If anything, threats would cause a very adverse reaction on my part. I was not afraid of dying, for I had died in that ditch during that mortar attack. Intimidating me was pretty much out of the question.

One of my favorite T-shirts said "What are you going to do? Send me To Vietnam? Been there, done that!"

I had become supremely confident. This trait was certainly more positive than negative. I now really wanted to finish college. I had a much more serious approach to my education than before. While stationed in Savannah I took whatever college courses I could. I went to night school at both Savannah State and Armstrong State.

My education was one of the few things I looked forward into the future to see. Mostly I lived life like there was no tomorrow. I was unafraid of consequences and planning ahead was not a consideration. This one thing bothered my father more than anything else. He was a structured man, a stable man, a planning man. I was a live-by-the-seat-of-your-pants man.

Stationed at Hunter Army Air Field, Savannah, GA this is the way I lived life. Upon arrival I was immediately promoted to "Buck Sergeant". Still an E-5 but now a sergeant not a specialist. I had my own crew, my own truck and I spent each day on the live fire range rearming Huey Cobra attack helicopters. I could not escape the helicopter noise or the minigun. I was however, able to escape having a direct superior looking over my shoulder every day. This was fine by me.

December of 1968 rolled around and I was able to leave the Army 3 months early. The program was called "early out". If you were returning to school and you otherwise

qualified (ie., good service record) you could be granted an early out.

I was home by Christmastime, a free man.

Chapter 45

PTSD

What does fighting a war do to a man?

It sticks with you forever, that's what it does. The older you get the more scared you get of what you did in the past.

Some have what they call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). What the hell this is I still do not know. In World War II it was called shell shock, but it is much more than that. I thought it was only about people who had nightmares every night. That wasn't me. Maybe at first a little. It is reactions and how you live your life.

I went to a re-release of Gone With The Wind at the local theater. The battle for Atlanta scene was a particularly realistic sequence as they used real high explosives instead of the usual gasoline explosions most enough seen in the movies. This is an important sound difference because high explosives have sharp, distinct "crump" sound, whereas gasoline is more of a rumbling sound.

At the end of the scene I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking it. I looked up from the theater floor to see black man looking down at me asking, "Are you alright man? Did you just get back?"

Thankfully the Lord had seated me next to a veteran. He said during the battle scene that I hit the deck, seeking cover behind and under the theater seats. If he had been anyone but a Vet I would have felt foolish. Thank God for that man.

Any loud noises that I can not identify get a reaction from me. The worst is the sound of a load of lumber being dropped. It is very similar to a mortar exploding.

I was and continue to be deathly afraid of being shot in the back. I walk and drive like fighter pilot, trying to look out for anything suspicious. Every time a car pulls up or is passing me I look for a weapon pointed at me. 45 years later! Is this PTSD? Maybe? The Army doesn't care. The VA doesn't care. Older vets have to hire a lawyer and fight for years to prove it. I don't like to beg.

Same goes for my hearing loss. EVERY door-gunner who served in a Huey gunships lost his hearing in his right ear. EVERY crew chief in a Huey gunship lost his hearing in his

left ear. You don't have to be Einstein to figure that out. Yet after a 2 and 1/2 year battle with the VA I was unable to get even a 30% disability for that and the terrible ringing in my head. VA said it wasn't the Army's fault.

Then I see them advertising on TV to give out Food Stamps! A world turned upside-down! Older Vets must beg for help. They must hire attorneys for help. The Vietnam Vet still gets zero respect from his own government. Sound bitter? You bet!

President Johnson decided to fight the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. Then he turns around, robs the Social Security System's savings account to start his own socialist programs. Today, 45 years later, the philosophy we fought and died to defeat now runs our nation, the media and Hollywood. Sound bitter? You bet'cha!

If you see an older Vet and still have a heart for God's sake shake their hand. They fought, they died and they were abandoned. Any act of kindness is appreciated.

My biggest regret is leaving a different America for my son. Different than the one I grew up in. At times it seems there is no more honor, no more honesty, and certainly much less freedom. Sound bitter? No, just scared.

May God bless you and your family. May God not abandon our once great Country.