

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

After I had been out of the army for just a year, the war in Vietnam started to escalate to the point that everyone I had known in the military was starting overseas. I had enjoyed the army and was very disappointed with my civilian job, so I requested re-entry back to active duty. I received my orders to report to Fort Ord, California on July 8, 1966. I was to join the 12th Evacuation Hospital, a unit which had been in training status as a reserve unit on Fort Ord for quite some time.

I left the airport in Colorado Springs by Western Airlines and landed in San Francisco just about the time the city was experiencing one of its worst bus strikes. Trying to find a ride to Fort Ord was next to impossible, so I had to wait in the city for four hours before a local bus lines had a seat going my way.

The trip to Fort Ord was interesting since it had been twenty years since I had been in California and I couldn't believe the change that had taken place in that area. We stopped off for a cup of coffee in Salinas and arrived at Fort Ord about 10 o'clock in the evening. The billeting office assigned me a room on the second floor of an old, yellow barracks which was built before or during the second world war. The building, in spite of its age, was comfortable. I had a living room, a bedroom and shared a bathroom with the officer next door.

I had been assigned to the 12th Evacuation Hospital as the hospital Adjutant, personnel officer and pharmacy officer. Since the unit already had an adjutant/personnel officer (Lt Magno), after my in-processing I spent most of the next eight weeks learning about the people in the unit, where we were going in Viet Nam and getting my field gear issued to me.

Fort Ord is a small post located just south of San Francisco and just north of the Monterey peninsula. The Pacific Ocean was just across a main road and a small beach opposite the main gate of the post. Fort Ord was the only base that seemed to sit in a fog all of the time. Even when the sun would be shining all around, the fog settled in everywhere. You could also tell when you were nearing Fort Ord because of these types of conditions.

Since the unit had already been packing its supplies and equipment into thousands of metal conex containers, we had a lot of free time to travel around the area. Ocean shores was a small community nearby where most of the military lived and through that little city was Carmel and Monterey where all of the rich people played. We spent a lot of time down on the piers watching the fishermen trying to catch something for supper and the boats going out for a leisurely cruise up the coast. That part of California had a lot of vineyards and wineries which we toured to see how wine was made and to taste the various types of wines which were made there.

I did most of my traveling with a Military Police Captain who was about my age, had been a reservist called to active duty and had a small blue MG sports car for transportation. I don't remember his name, but we did share a lot in common and spent many hours at the officer's club, eating, and traveling. He was from San Jose, California and knew how to get about. We left the United States before he did, and I lost track of him from that point on.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

Toward the end of August 1966, the unit spent much of its time inventorying the conex containers and getting them ready to ship. The transportation people came one day and hauled away what seemed like thousands of boxes to place aboard the ship. We would see all of this again in about six weeks.

On August 28, 1966 all of the personnel of the 12th Evac were mustered in full field uniform and were formed into ranks along side chartered Greyhound buses for our movement to the Port of Oakland to sail for the far east. I never could understand why we were all dressed up, I guess it was to give us the feeling of duty, honor and country and a sense that we were part of the war effort. When Major John Lobscher, the Executive Officer counted heads, it seemed that everyone was present except Captain Phil Smith our dental officer. Major Lobscher asked me to call Phil at home and get him moving before the character was courts martialed. When the phone rang, a wonderful female voice answered. Since Phil was single, I supposed that the woman was part of his goodbye party and just stayed the night. Phil finally came on the line and told us that he would meet us in Oakland.

We boarded the busses and trekked to the terminal where we unloaded and formed to march aboard the USN General E.D. Patrick to sail to Vietnam. The Patrick at one time had been a luxury liner converted to a troop carrier after WW II and was again pressed into service at this time. The ship carried approximately 4,000 troops which included our unit plus many other units being rushed to support the swelling numbers already in Vietnam.

The officers were assigned to cabins on the upper deck of the ship while the poor and lowly enlisted men had to sleep and mess down in the bowels of the liner. The cabins were very nice in some ways. Generally, two or three officers were assigned to a cabin which contained sleeping bunks and a shower and toilet area with a sink. My cabin mate was a Dr. Tom Dry, a young family practice type from the midwest, Iowa I think. Tom was a tall lanky farm kid and was sick the whole trip. Countless times, he would get up in the middle of the night to upchuck in the toilet. I'm not sure that I ever got much sleep for the three weeks that I was in that room.

Passage on board the ship to Southeast Asia lasted three weeks which wasn't all bad. From the time we left Oakland, we started receiving separation allowance and hostile fire pay. This was about one hundred extra dollars a month. In August, the Pacific Ocean is very tranquil, so during the day, we would watch the ship break the water and throw up a white foam and at night, we were fascinated with the florescent glow that surrounded us. The leisure time was probably the most boring part of the trip. We had our own library which contained many of the old classics I had never read. I managed to get through 26 of them.

The dining room was very spacious with round tables where four or five people could be seated. The waiters were Filipino and extremely efficient. At every meal we had a choice of two or three entrees, a salad bar and a hug variety of desserts. I was surprised that I didn't gain forty pounds.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

There was also an air conditioned chapel where they would show a different movie every night. Most of the time though, we just sat in deck chairs and sun bathed or played cards to pass the time. Although there was no liquor allowed on board, this didn't stop some of the doctors. They worked out a system of rooms and signals for each evening's cocktail hour which was very hush hush, but went on the whole trip. I still haven't figured out how some of them smuggled so much booze aboard.

After we were about two weeks out, we crossed the International Dateline where we lost exactly twenty four hours. It was strange to go to sleep on the 10th of September and wake up on the 12th of September never to have lived the 11th at all. One of the soldiers on the ship had a birthday on the 11th and can now say that he will never be that old again.

Part of the ritual of the crossing the 180th parallel was to be initiated into King Neptune's Court and the Royal Order of the Golden Dragons. Several of the people on the ship were already members, so they comprised the court and anyone who had not were the novices about to join the royal order. We were required to strip down to our shorts and stand on the fore deck of the ship. They sprayed us with salt water hoses and degraded us with insults. After we were soaking wet, we had to crawl on all fours through these tunnels of rubber tubing which contained coffee grounds, egg shells, smelly cheese, and other items we could not describe.

After we had finished crawling, we spotted King and Queen Neptune at the far end of the deck. They were outfitted in regal wear with three pronged spears and crowns. The King (played by Major Gipson) had covered his stomach with cold cream and we had to kiss it. The queen was our chief nurse who I wouldn't have kissed anywhere on her entire body and thank goodness, I didn't have to. At the end of the ceremony, we were all proclaimed members of the Royal Order of the Golden Dragons and were issued a wallet card to attest to this fact.

We did receive a break in the journey when the ship docked at Subic Bay, Manila in the Philippines. They let us go about three o'clock in the afternoon and we immediately headed for the Naval Officer's Club for a hot shower, a good meal, some gambling on the slot machines and drinking. We had to be back to the ship by midnight, so we crammed way too much into those few short hours. When the bell was about to strike midnight, we suddenly realized that we had missed the last bus back to port and in desperation, we sweet talked a navy man into giving us a ride in his pick-up. Somehow we made it back just in time to set sail.

The rest of the trip was uneventful until we arrived at Vung Tau, a small settlement on the Southeastern tip of Vietnam. We loaded aboard a large landing craft and walked ashore to be welcomed by some of the staff of General Westmoreland's MACV headquarters. We were briefed on the trip to our staging area and then boarded several C-130 aircraft to be airlifted to Ben Hoa air force base where we would load on trucks for the final leg of our days venture.

From Ben Hoa, we were trucked to Long Binh. At Long Binh we were hosted and housed

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

in canvas tents by members of the 24th Evacuation Hospital.

The tents were only temporary billets for the main body of the unit, since the advanced party had been flown from the states to our actual hospital location some 60 miles northeast from where we were now. Our facilities were the standard general purpose (GP) large tents which housed around thirty people. We each had a bunk, a footlocker and a wall locker to store our clothing and personal belongings. We established a social center at the front of the tent where we played cards, listened to music, read, and conversed. This was my first experience with mosquito netting which I found to be a pain especially when you had to get up in the middle of the night and it was dark.

The 24th Evacuation Hospital was about 75% finished and was co-located with the 93rd Evacuation Hospital which had been in country and operating for some time. Both hospitals were located next door to one of the largest logistical centers in that region. In addition to storing a lot of bulk supplies and ammunition, it was also the headquarters for II Field Forces, a major command of USARV (United States Army Vietnam), and was in the vicinity of Ben Hoa Air Force Base, a tactical fighter wing facility.

I was placed in command of the main body who were given the mission of assisting the 24th Evac in setting up their hospital and getting it working. Coming from the relatively mild climate of Fort Ord, the most noticeable difference was the extreme heat and humidity. The average temperature was over 100 degrees with a relative humidity of 60 to 70% during the monsoons and around 40 to 50% generally. Our unit consisted of 99 officers and 250 enlisted personnel, so with the manpower and the three weeks we were there, we were able to get many of the things done for the 24th they needed.

We finally received the word that our hospital site was ready to receive us, so we bid fond farewell to the 24th Evac and were trucked to our new home. As we were leaving LT Coley turned on his radio and the tune by Peter, Paul and Mary, "I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane" was playing. That tune along with the tune "I want to go Home" will always stick in my mind as being associated with Vietnam whenever I hear them.

The official designation for the construction of the 12th Evac was the base camp of the 25th Infantry Division (Tropical Lightning) in the Chu Chi Province. The base camp was located northeast of the Capital City Saigon and just south of Tay Nihn were some of the heaviest fighting of the war was occurring. The province encompassed many rubber plantations, the Ho Bo Woods and made up part of the infamous Iron Triangle. The main highway between Saigon and Cu Chi was highway Q1 which could only be traversed by armed convoy through very hospital country. The trip which would normally take about 45 minutes to drive in peacetime, took four hours to form up and three more hours just to get there.

Plans for the hospital called for 54 buildings in total to include the hospital complex, supply

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

buildings, and living quarters. The space allocated us by the division was a large square piece of ground located on one side by a 175 MM artillery battery, on another side by the petroleum dump, on a third side by division headquarters and on the fourth side by the division communications center. The choice of location never ceased to amaze me since all four sides were highly lucrative targets for enemy rocket fire.

We didn't have to construct all of the buildings since we were replacing the smaller 100 bed mobile army surgical hospital, the 7th MASH. They had built an all brick mess hall, 12 ward buildings and operating rooms and some living quarters. We were supported by the 54th Engineer Brigade which wound up not being much help at all. The scheme was for the engineers to pour concrete slabs with bolts in the cement and we were to construct the buildings. The buildings were World War II quonset huts which came as boxed components ready for assembly.

We formed the enlisted personnel into teams which consisted of one team putting up the ribbed braces, one team bolting the braces in place, one team putting on the outside tin and one team putting on the inside paneling. Once the basic building was in place, the engineers would come in, connect the electrical wiring, frame in the doors, hang the doors, put in the light switches and help us install the more sophisticated equipment. Much of the finish work was left up to us to complete. It was amazing how fast the work progressed under this system with everyone pitching in.

We started in September and were ready to receive our first patients on the 4th of December. We would have become operational, but the lines that connected the four generators to the X-ray equipment were too small and when we tested the X-ray, the power overload was to great and we burned out the lines. When these were replaced, we went to work.

The living quarters were long wooden barracks type buildings for the enlisted personnel and the nurses and smaller hootches for the male officers. The buildings were wood frame with screening and louvered sides to allow the air to circulate. The roofs were tin which really played a concert whenever we had heavy rains. At the end of each hootch, were stands where we kept the water basins, mirrors and shaving supplies. We had a central shower which was constructed with a 500 gallon water tank we somehow acquired from the port of Saigon. The latrines were set out in a field a short distance from the showers and were nothing more than a six hole outhouse. The waste was collected in steel drums which had been cut into halves. When the drums were almost full of waste, they were pulled to the rear of the latrine, covered with diesel fuel and burned to ashes. It was not a very pleasant sight or smell, but was sanitary and efficient.

Each of the male officers tried to individualize their own space. I decorated my area of the hootch by framing in a door and walls with 2 X 4 uprights that I was able to scrounge. I covered my walls with bamboo mat I found in Cu Chi and used strings of beads to act as a door. I built a small table to put my radio and writing materials on and several shelves to store pictures and knick knacks. We each had a metal bunk which we covered with a plastic sheet or poncho to protect the bed and mattress from the dust that blew in during the day or from dust that stirred up whenever a

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

medical evacuation helicopter blew by.

In my hootch were Captain Bob Worrell, our registrar, Captain John Heuman, an orthopedic surgeon, Captain Stuart Poticha a general surgeon, Captain Jim Dynan a general surgeon and Captain Cayano Barrera a general medical officer. The rest of the hootches were pretty much open spaces with card tables in the center and refrigerators on one side. We spent a couple of Sunday afternoons pouring a cement patio on the side of one of the hootches where we would gather to have a bar-b-que or just sit and sunbathe on our time off.

The hospital constructed a special six sided hootch for Major Andy Rasinko, our Chief of Professional Services and Major Charles Anastronski, our Executive Officer. We named the hootch the "Polish Pagoda". We added the national bird of Poland, the fly, over the door. Although Andy never said anything, I don't think he appreciated our humor. Of course, we also built a special one man hootch for our Commander LT. Col. Joe Hannon.

The brick mess hall that the 7th MASH had left behind was very nice, but far too small to accommodate the larger hospital group. We had to feed in shifts which became very inconvenient. We started to build the new larger mess hall, but with poor supervision and a large windstorm, the nearly completed mess hall below down twice before it was finally braced right and completed. I was in Vietnam from September 1966 until July 1967 and never ate a meal in the new mess.

The headquarters building was sectioned off with sheets of stained plywood and was one of the more attractive in the compound. The front part housed myself, the adjutant and the Command Sergeant Major, John Lawson. The middle of the building was office space for the Commander, the Executive Officer, Chief of Professional Services, Chief Nurse and a storage room. In the back of the headquarters building, we housed the reproduction section where we published orders and the unit mail room.

The building just to the west of the headquarters contained the triage area and the officer's club. The club was not built until several months after we arrived, but when it was completed, it became the social center of the unit. We sang, played bridge, drank and told war stories. The funniest stories came from Captain Jim Brashears, a general practitioner from Kentucky who had been drafted out of private practice and was very bitter about it all. We called the "Big Bra" since he was a very obese guy with sandy red hair. He would tell the story of how he hated the Army which we never tired of hearing.

My favorite past time was playing bridge in the club. We played for money, so the stakes got very serious. I usually teamed up with Stu Poticha, the surgeon from Chicago. I was an average player, but with Stu's expertise, we generally cleaned up. I expect that during the time I was in Vietnam, I must have cleared about \$300. I didn't participate much in the social drinking, so when there wasn't a bridge game in progress, I would work at the USAFI (United States Army Field Institute) an education center where the GI's could complete their high school diploma. I taught four

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

nights a week in the subject area of science and earned a little extra money doing it.

The officers club had the bar at the far end of the building. We hired an enlisted person to mix the drinks and paid him a wage. In the center of the room were tables to sit at and to one side were soft couches and a stereo system where they played music, sort of like a juke box. There were unit crests on the walls and pictures and other decorations. The lighting was generally very dim which seemed to add to the atmosphere.

The triage area was the worst part of the war as far as I was concerned. When many casualties would come in, they would off load them from the helipad into the triage area and either a doctor or nurses would examine each patient and decide what to do with them. Some they would send to the emergency room and surgery immediately, some they would treat there and then send to the wards, and some they would just move over to one side to let die. The sight was gruesome and no matter how many times you saw it, you never got used to it.

The building east of the headquarters contained the outpatient clinics where we all got our shots, people went for simple medical problems, and the pharmacy that I was in charge of was located. The pharmacy was as well equipped as any in the states. We had plenty of supplies, a sink, a compounding area and a counter. I had two pharmacy technicians who were school trained and ran the shop in a very professional manner. Somehow, I was able to get almost all of the drugs and supplies the doctors wanted. I was even able to get birth control pills for the females in the unit when they weren't available through the normal supply system.

The other buildings were the emergency room, X-ray, two operating suites, intensive care units, wards and supply. The only buildings that were air conditioned were the ER, X-Ray, operating rooms, ICU's, dental clinic and the Red Cross lounge which also housed the Chaplain's office.

Because the weather was so extremely hot, we generally gravitated toward either the dental clinic where we listened to stereo tapes or the Red Cross lounge where we played pool. Many of the officers were collecting stereo equipment or cameras, so we spent many hours dubbing tapes or looking at slides that we had taken. The opportunity to buy these types of items and the low prices were incredible. Trips to the post exchange or Tokyo, Japan would net you things at 10 or 20 percent of what they would have cost in the states. I left kind of sorry that I didn't have enough money to really invest in some fine materials.

My job in the hospital did have its advantages. As the adjutant, I was responsible for distributing the Rest and Relaxation (R&R) trips out of country and around the world for the unit. After you had been in country for six months, you were eligible for one R&R trip to either Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Hawaii, Kuala Lumpor or Australia. I found early that there was never enough allocations to meet the needs of the hospital personnel, so I searched around and

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

discovered that there were many extras spaces available either at the 25th Division or with the Special Services Office in Saigon. We had a policy in the unit that if the soldier had the time and money, I would get him a flight somewhere. I was able to meet my wife Dianne in Hawaii in March 1967 and I also got away to Tokyo twice, to Hong Kong, to Thailand and to Taiwan.

When the hospital was fully operational, it began to receive patients from all sorts of means. Most of the casualties were flown in by "Dust-Off" medical evacuation helicopters, but we also received people aboard other combat helicopters, by jeep, or by ambulance. Our patient load and work was directly related to the activity of the division. Whenever they would send a unit out on a search and destroy mission, we would suddenly get very busy. I remember one night when the activity started about four o'clock in the afternoon and ran for a solid 14 hours. Everyone in the unit was pressed into some kind of duty. If you weren't hauling litters, you were hauling water, stripping field gear from the bodies in the emergency room or taking supplies to where they were needed.

It was amazing how efficiently the doctors would work when large volumes of casualties would arrive. One of the biggest headaches was keeping track of the equipment taken off the soldiers body. We would remove all of his web gear and weapons and hand grenades and have to store them in a corner of the emergency room for the unit to pick up later. I will never figure out how all of that stuff ever got back to the right place, but it was removed and disappeared.

One night we received two cases that stand out in my mind. One was a black tank driver who had his tank hit by a white phosphorus shell and had received burns over 50% of his body. Phosphorus is a terrible chemical in as much as it continues to burn as long as it is exposed to air. I mixed up a large batch of 5% copper sulfate solution which we applied to the burns. The solution worked, but we did run into a risk of heavy metal poisoning when the copper was absorbed directly through the wounds. I remember seeing the physician peel away large patches of burned skin exposing the tissue underneath. This was not a job for a person with a weak stomach.

The other case was a vietnamese soldier who had an unexploded rocket shell embedded in his chest. We had to sandbag the operating table so that when the surgeon was removing the shell and it might happen to go off, fewer people would have been injured or killed by the blast. Luckily, the shell did not explode and was removed to be disposed of properly.

The survival rate of those injured who arrived at our hospital was unbelievable. If we got them alive, their chances of survival were better than 95%. For those who arrived dead, or we lost, we would place their bodies in a black metal container and call the Graves Registration Unit in the Quartermaster Corps who would come for them in a black ambulance and take the bodies away for preparation to be returned to the U.S. We all hated to see the black ambulance arrive, for we knew what it meant and a small piece of each of us died.

The 12th Evacuation Hospital was a 400 bed facility and was classified as semi-mobile. This meant that we could pick up 50% of the hospital and move it to another location. In Vietnam, by

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

no stretch of the imagination, was this hospital mobile. Our buildings were firmly anchored and we couldn't move even if we wanted to. Our mission was to receive patients either from the 45th MASH just north of us or directly from the field.

Because of our size, we had the capability to perform medical care in a broad range of medical specialties. Once we received the patient, we would do the initial surgery, stabilize the patient and when the patient was able to move, we would ship him to Ton San Hut Airforce Base in Saigon from transport to either Japan, the Philippines, or some large military hospital in the states. At our busy peak, we received or evacuated as many as 75 patients a day. Our 400 bed capacity ran at 380 to 390 beds occupied most of the time. I have never heard of any hospital in Vietnam any busier than we were.

Of course, we also had Vietnamese civilians to contend with. One day, a civilian bus ran into an explosive road mine and the bus was blown up. Thirty four civilians were injured and brought to our hospital since we were the nearest medical facility. We cared for them and established a 30 bed Vietnamese ward which was maintained for the year I was there.

On one occasion, the village that these people were from paid us a visit in mass to present us with flowers, fruit and a large ceramic vase in appreciation for the care we had shown their village members. We had the vase mounted and displayed in the headquarters building.

Our hospital also received many other gifts from civilians and soldiers we had taken care of. One infantry battalion gave us a captured AK-47 rifle which we mounted and another battalion gave each of us a cigarette lighter with their battalion crest on it. One of the most appreciated rewards we received was from the Department of the Army which awarded the unit the Meritorious Unit Citation (First Oak Leaf Cluster) for our operations during that time period. Each unit member could now wear this red badge permanently on their uniform for having served.

Another of my duties was to keep track of and cut the orders for soldiers who were wounded in action and were eligible for the Purple Heart Medal. I also had to keep stock of other medical and decorations which were awarded to our patients for bravery in battle. I would work with the various units we supported, get the names and orders for the soldiers and have the medals ready for presentation when the commanding officers came to the hospital to visit. When the commanding generals or commanding officers would arrive, I would take the medals and the bed locations and escort the visitors to the soldier where the visitor would pin the medal on the individual. There were many times when some of the wounded has not gotten orders to receive a medal, but when the general was there, he would talk to the soldier and give him a medal on the spot. I had to make sure I got all of the details and then would coordinate with the soldier's unit to make sure the proper orders and certificates were firmed up.

This was a pleasant duty for the most part, except in one case when the soldier who had a

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

leg blown off, threw the Purple Heart back at the commander and told him he wanted his leg back and he didn't want any damn medal. Most of the people we treated were too sick to understand what had happened to them, but years later when I was in San Antonio, I saw the results and the long rehabilitation of these people at Brooke Army Medical Center. The bitterness was very apparent then.

Morale was a big problem for most of us in Vietnam. The USO through special services did a bang up job in bringing into country some of the biggest named people in sports and show business. On Christmas Day 1966, 40,000 soldiers met in the "Lightning Bowl" to see the Bob Hope show. Since many of the wounded couldn't stand or sit, they were allowed to be placed on the ground or in wheelchairs in the front of the crowd right in front of the stage. Fortunately, a lot of our medical personnel had to escort them and we never wanted for an excellent seat.

Part of the star's tour of Vietnam also included a tour of the hospitals. We would take them around to visit with and entertain the patients on the wards and talk to the staff. During the time I was there, we saw Phyllis Diller, Vic Damone, Joey Heatherton, Dale Robertson, Don Meredith, Jonathan Winters, baseball players like Warren Spahn, football players like Larry Bass, and many others.

With the exception of a few, like Joey Heatherton who never stopped complaining about something, the rest of the stars were truly dynamic, wonderful people. The show that Jonathan Winters and Phyllis Diller put on in the wards was just great.

We were highly honored when Don Meredith, a quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, had lunch with us. His brother had played football in some semi-pro league with one of our doctors and that was our in. Jim Swink, M.D. had been an all-american halfback from Texas Christian University and was on the team with Don's brother. Meredith was a arrogant cuss, but why shouldn't he be, he was an all-pro quarterback for one of the major football powers, the Dallas Cowboys. It was very interesting to hear him talk. I also remember Joe Torre, Stan Musial, Harmon Killebrew from baseball and Larry Bass from football and others as being great people and very concerned about the welfare of the patients.

I wrote earlier that I had taken several R & R trips. The most enjoyable was my journey to the island of Hong Kong. I flew with Phil Smith, Stu Poticha, and John Heumann from Saigon to the Hong Kong international airport. The runway of the airport was built out into the bay and I wasn't sure but what we were going to land in the water. Somehow we managed to land and were escorted to the reception center where we were briefed on our stay, how to behave ourselves, and assigned hotel rooms for the next five days. The four of us were placed in the Hong Kong Hilton, a luxury hotel just recently constructed. The cost was \$8.00 per night for a room with two beds, stereo music, fresh fruit and pure bottled water.

After we freshened up and changed into civilian clothes, I headed down stairs to the Taj

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

Mahal tailor shop to pick out some materials for suits and sports coats. After I selected the cloth I liked, I ordered two suits, two sports coats, three pair of pants and six shirts. All told, the bill came to \$190. They wanted me to come back in two days for the fitting and the clothes would be ready by the time I left. This was my first experience with tailor made clothing, a luxury that I wished over the years I could afford to continue, but couldn't.

Hong Kong is an island governed by the British and was very modern. It was located in the bay across from the Chinese mainland and the city of Kawloon. Kawloon was accessible only by ferry that ran between the two cities on a regular basis. We made that ferry trip at least six times a day.

Hong Kong is filled with hills and high rise apartment buildings and was one of the cleanest cities I ever visited. On one side of the island was a beach resort area called "Repulse Bay" where the residents and tourists swam in the ocean and bathed in the sun. Hong Kong was very hilly resembling San Francisco with its trolley cars and cable cars traversing the various parts of the city. In one of the residential areas, there was a botanical gardens and park built by a Chinese pharmaceutical magnate which contained thousands of ceramic, lifelike figurines of people, birds, flowers, castles and trees. It was like walking through a countryside filled with marble objects which were almost unreal.

Kawloon, on the other hand, was just the opposite. It was filled with people crowded into too little space, dirty and full of foul odors. Kawloon bustled with life all day and night. I went down many of the alleys of the city and discovered thousands of little hole in the wall shops dealing with goods from all over the world. I purchased a beautiful handcrafted wooden jewel box for my wife for just pennies. I made a trip downtown and visited a jewelry store to look for a blue sapphire the Chief Nurse of the hospital had asked me to get. I sat down and told the clerk I wanted to see what they had in various sapphire stones. He turned on a blue light and handed me a whole tray of sapphires cut in various shapes. I looked at the brilliance of the stones with a pair of tongs while the clerk furnished me with a drink to consume while I looked. I selected one gem cut in a rectangular shape, paid for it and left.

I then went over to the U.S. Navy store which was very much like the PX's of the Army. I bought rings of diamonds and jade and other gifts of silk for the members of my family. One night, after a long day of sightseeing and shopping, our group stopped by the bar in the President Hotel on the top floor and watched the sun sink over the bay which was filled with merchant ships and typical Chinese Junks. I don't think I will ever forget the sight. I vowed after I had picked up my tailored clothes and boarded the plane, to someday return to Hong Kong.

Another of my R & R trips was to Hawaii where I met Dianne in March 1967. Dianne had preceded me by one day from the states and had rented a Volkswagen car for us to use driving around the island. She also rented us a room in the Ilaki Hotel in Honolulu where we stayed. She

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

met me at the airport and we drove the main highway into downtown Honolulu to our hotel. Being separated from your wife for six months always makes any reunion seem strange. We spent most of the day just getting reacquainted and my finding out what was happening at home and stories about the girls.

We spent four nights and five days in Hawaii and the weather was just perfect. It was in the warm 70's with low humidity and lots of sunshine. We visited the Hawaiian Village to see the thatched cottages, the carved statues of the gods and a Hula Dance. We also visited Waikiki beach and the marina. We shopped at the PX at Fort De Russey, an army facility, and ate supper at the officer's club. From the dining room, you could see Diamond Head mountain, the most famous landmark on the island. A visit to Pearl Harbor to see the Arizona Memorial was a must. We never did get a chance to drive all around the island, but what we did see of the pineapple plantations and greenery was enough to last a lifetime.

Also while we were there, we went to the center of the city to a large shopping center which was filled with stores, bars and other tourist traps kinds of places. We shopped for shirts and souvenirs and mingled with the crowds. All of the people were wearing shorts and very colorful shirts of flowers or birds. One night we went to this dinner club to have a nice meal and to listen to a piano player named Joey Bushkin. Joey played a pleasant form of jazz. Although Dianne and I didn't like jazz very much, he was really good and we really enjoyed it.

We never got a chance to see the other islands which everyone said were not quite so crowded. There were lots of people in Honolulu. The streets were full, the highways were full and the hotels were full.

The drinks they served in the bars were also delicious. Many of them were made with fruit juices or coconut milk. They hid the booze very well, so you didn't want to drink too many, or you would really get a buzz on. Many of the drinks were also decorated with different slices of fruit or had little umbrellas stuck in them. The time we spent in Hawaii was far too short, but I felt that seeing Hawaii one time was all I would ever make.

My other trips to Bangkok, Tokyo, and Taiwan were mostly sight seeing in nature and were very short in duration. I remember Tokyo as being too large and too dirty to bring back any fond memories. We would spend most of our time in the hotel room or shopping at the camera or stereo shops. In Bangkok, I loved the floating market where merchants would sell flowers and other wares from their boats. The temples with their gold plated tops were spectacular and reminded me of the old movies I had seen as a child.

Amongst my other duties was to coordinate and sometime go on civil action program visits. These visits were designed to take some of our medical people out into the villages and hamlets to

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

treat the local populace and improve their health and standard of health care. This program was probably one of the more profitable for the Americans in Vietnam. Too many of the civil programs tried to change 4,000 years of an Asian culture and make the people into mirror images of American society. It was impossible to make over people and cost us far more than any benefits the United States derived from it. With health, it was a different story. To relieve the pain from an infected tooth or to clear up a diseased eye on a child or to set a broken leg vibrated a bond of appreciation which could never be measured in dollars or cents.

When we first started the medical program, we would be accompanied into the jungle by a squad of infantry in an armored personnel carrier for protection. It didn't take us long to understand that we didn't need the protection and the presence of the infantry actually brought rifle fire upon us by their being there. Once we got rid of the infantry, the firing stopped. There was no question in our minds that many of the families we treated were members of the Viet Cong, so why would the Viet Cong want to shoot anyone who was taking care of his wife and children.

During these trips, I saw my first leper and a variety of jungle fungus diseases that I had only heard of in college. Of course we had been immunized against most of them, but we still practiced good personal hygiene just to make sure we didn't come down with anything.

Trying to teach the rural Vietnamese people personal hygiene was next to impossible. One day we handed out soap without instructions and they started to eat it. I'm not sure what they thought it was. Many of the Vietnamese were very leery of immunizations until we convinced the local witch doctor of the value and he talked them into it. Much of our success came in working with the spiritual and community leaders. The 12th Evacuation Hospital did receive the Vietnamese Civil Action and Vietnam Presidential Unit Awards as well and the Cross of Gallantry with Palm for the programs we ran during that time.

As life in the jungle was strange, life on the compound was likewise rather bizarre. I don't recall all of the people I associated with or many of the things that happened, but I do recall a few.

I remember I had planted a banana tree just outside my hootch at the corner of the building. I hadn't planned the placement of the tree too carefully, since it was located directly in the path to the latrine from the officer's club. The tree flourished for several weeks and then all of a sudden it died. I discovered later that many of the officers never made it to the latrine, but would stop to water my tree instead. I guess the uric acid was the culprit that finally did the tree in.

One of the problems we were having in the supply operation was a way of disposing waste water that was generated from the laundry plant. We used to run large hoses out into the gullies alongside the main roads, but the water has no where to run and would just sit on top of a bed of clay and would stagnate. This caused a lot of concern by the preventive medicine people since stagnate water is a perfect breeding ground for disease carrying mosquitos. By sheer happenstance, one day we discovered that the 25th Infantry Division base camp had been placed purposely on top of a very

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

elaborate tunnel system the Viet Cong had been building for twenty years. We discovered one of the main entrances to the tunnels and we ran our waste water hoses into this entrance. We must have pumped thousands of gallons of water into the tunnels. We never saw any of that water again.

The base camp on which we were located, was constantly being rocketed or probed by the enemy. One time, a series of rockets rained down, several hitting the hospital area. We were showing an outdoor movie when the attack started and we headed for bunkers. After the raid was over, we found two unexploded rockets in the ground where we had all been sitting. Another time, a rocket was aimed at the building which housed the Red Cross lounge. As the rocket traveled through space, it hit the outside air conditioner, went through the conditioner, skipped on the concrete floor and embedded itself in the far wall. There were several patients shooting pool in the room at the time and could have been killed if the rocket had of exploded. Thank goodness it didn't. These attacks never seemed to bother me, but some people would run for the bunker at the slightest hit of an attack.

In every was I am sure that standard rumors are generated just to keep people stirred up. In Vietnam, it was standard to say that if you are going to get killed, it would be during the first two weeks in country or two weeks just before you left. I don't think many people took much stock in this, but one of our male nurses did actually spend most of his off duty time living in the bunker for the last two weeks of his tour. Also, one of our nurses had met a young Captain and after several months, they had decided that they loved each other and would get married when both of them returned to the states. Just five days before the Captain was to go home, he was killed. It was that sort of thing that keeps a bad story going.

It was standard practice for all units on the base camp to have bunkers located in strategic locations in case of attack. In addition, we built sand bag walls up half way on our buildings for added protection. Several of the bunkers located in the division headquarters area were open on top or just had boards laid on top of the sandbags. One day, during a bombing attack, eight soldiers from the division Adjutant General's office ran into their board covered bunker. One bomb made a direct hit on the bunker and seven of the eight individuals were killed. The eight soldier was left, for some strange reason, totally unmarked. We shipped him out of country to a mental hospital.

We built the bunkers by having the engineers dig a wide hole in the ground which we squared off with shovels. We then built a stairway into the hole. Around the hole, we would stack sandbags two to three wide and about four feet high. On top, we would put piece of steel planking and then would lay another layer of sandbags on top. We felt this gave us good protection. During the day, the bunker was a nice place to visit, because it was cool down in the ground.

One of the favorite booby traps devised by the Viet Cong was to bend a piece of bamboo around a tree and tie the bent bamboo with a string in a flexed position. To the end of the bamboo pole they would place a ten inch long sharpened piece. The trick was for someone moving in the jungle to hit the trip wire which would release the bent pole and the sharpened piece would hit the

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

individual in the body and kill them. I guess the Viet Cong hadn't figured on the height of the Americans, since one day we got in a tall kid who still had this ten inch long stake driven right through the middle of one of his thighs.

Some of the other goodies the Viet Cong thought up were Punji pits, holes in the ground filled with iron stakes and covered with branches, so that if you walked on them, you would fall through and land on the spikes. Or, blocks of concrete with nails in them suspended overhead or hand grenades tied to trees, all with trip wires. No one took a walk in the jungle just for fun.

Unit identity seemed very important to groups in Vietnam. At this point in history, evacuation hospitals were not authorized unit crests to identify their unit, so we decided to create one anyway. We held a contest inviting people to draw a design and posted the entries on a board in the mess hall for everyone to vote on. The unit selected the one I had drawn, which was a shield in the center with a maroon cross, a gold sword crossed by a lightening bolt and the words (12th Evac-SMBL). The top of the shield had the wings and staff of the medical caduceus and the bottom a scroll and olive branches.

We all wore these patches encased in plastic on the right side of our fatigues. We also had the unit crest manufactured in enamel and affixed to cigarette lighters which we purchased out of the unit fund. I understand that now there has been an official crest awarded by the U.S. Army heraldry department for our unit. This must have happened several years after I left Vietnam.

Our official unit patch was not the only patches worn in Vietnam. When you are in a unit, you wore the patch of that unit on your left sleeve until you either left the unit or if you are in a combat unit, you transferred the patch to the right shoulder to denote you served in combat. When we left Vietnam, We were asked which patch we wanted to transfer to our right shoulder. I had a hard time deciding, because our unit had been under the command of four different major headquarters and we were eligible to wear any of the patches from any of these four.

The first major command we were assigned to was Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). This was a red and yellow patch with a sword surrounded by a castle like barrier. This was the headquarters that controlled Vietnam before the big build up. After we arrived in country, we were transferred to United Stated Army Vietnam (USARV) then commanded by General William Westmoreland. That patch was also a sword in the center of blue, red, white, and yellow stripes. That was the patch I chose to wear from Vietnam.

The third major headquarters to which we were assigned was the First Logistical Command which was a blue patch with a red circle around the outside and a white arrow in the center which was pointing at approximately to the hour of 11 o'clock. The patch was pretty, but the way the arrow was pointing, it looked like a leaning outhouse.

The final headquarters was the 44th Medical Brigade which came into the war toward the

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

end of my tour. The patch was maroon and white with a yellow star like figure in the center. I didn't choose that patch, although many other did, because of the lateness of the arrival of the headquarters and the kinds of people who worked there. Whenever the personnel from the 44th Bde would come to visit, it would generally make my life miserable. They really didn't have anything to do, so they would come and inspect the hospital and find fault with every little thing. We tried to tell them that we were a busy hospital and didn't have time for them, but they never listened.

While I was the hospital adjutant, we all decided that we needed a unit newspaper to keep everyone informed of what was going on around the unit in a less than official way. We wanted to include a little humor, an editorial page, news about babies being born to unit members wives, promotions, awards and things like that. We created "the 12th Evacuee". The newspaper was designed in rough layout and then typed onto a blue stencil. After it was finished, the stencil was placed on the unit stencil machine, the same machine used to publish orders and do other kinds of publications. The 12th Evacuee was published weekly and was generally well liked by the unit members. Many of them mailed a copy home to the family and friends. There was some times though that the newspaper was not too popular and it was my fault. I liked to draw a picture of the varies types of specialists we had in the unit as kind of satire. Once a drew a bat symbolic of the pathologist. That didn't get me into too much trouble, but later I drew a picture of a human who as half man and half woman and labeled it "male nurse". Well, we had a male nurse who was covered from head to foot with hair and was a very large individual. He sought me out and told me in no uncertain terms that he didn't like the picture and wanted a retraction. He got his wish and my life was saved. That part of the newspaper was never included again. Unfortunately, I threw away most of the issues and only have one saved which I am including in the history.

I mentioned earlier that the people in the 12th Evac were quite a collection of individuals. I don't recall all of them, but a few things do stick out in my mind.

LTC Joe Hannon was the commander. He was a terrific individual, but had many personal problems which he never spoke to me about. Joe was a short person with a head of grey hair. I do remember that he drank heavily and spent a lot of time in his billets away from the unit. The staff was so protective of him, that we covered whenever we could so that no one would suspect what was happening. Later in my tour, a group of visitors from the 44th Medical Brigade visited and through his actions got a glimpse of his problems. He came to a meeting with the group and had one of the worst hangovers I had ever seen. It was very obvious he was still reeling from his drinking. I ran into Joe in 1968 when he was assigned as an instructor at the Medical Field Service School. He left the Army shortly thereafter for California and that was the last I've heard from him.

Our first Executive Officer in Vietnam was Major Joe Gipson who I had mentioned on the ship coming over. Joe was a jolly, rotund sort, always looking for fun. Joe was a pleasure to work with. We spent many hours just talking. Joe moved on to HQS II Field Force and he was replaced by LTC Charles Anastranski. I think the thing that made him leave was the trouble he got into with the commander over his picture taking.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

Joe had a camera in everyone's face all of the time. He was recording the war in the best of fashion. One day he started to photograph the casualties as they were coming in and he followed them, taking pictures, into the Emergency Room and the operating. He became such a nuisance, he had to be ordered out.

LTC Anastranski was an airborne, ranger type bachelor who was all spit and polish and a real soldier. I never did figure out why he was in a hospital unit. He had always been assigned to field medical units where he could take names and kick ass.

I recall one visit made by the Chief of Staff of the 25th Infantry Division who asked him if he was happy in his job. LTC A replied that he wasn't. When asked why not, he replied that he wanted the Chief of Staff's job or a job commanding a combat unit. That's the way he was. LTC A was very difficult to work with, but once you learned his system, you survived. I received one of the best efficiency reports in my military career from him.

Let me give you an example of just how hard it was to work for him. One day, he came out of his office and told me to get the Commander's jeep into maintenance. To this I turned to the driver and told him take care of it. LTC A stopped and in a very gruff voice said he told me to take care of it. To which I told him that if he wanted me to do things that enlisted should be doing, then he should take the bars off my shoulders and put stripes on my sleeve. He chewed me out royally for being insubordinate and left in a huff. About thirty minutes later, he came by my desk, tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to take a walk around the area with him. On the walk we talked about his past and had a really good time. From that point on, I never had anymore trouble with him.

Others, like nurses weren't that lucky. LTC A always carried an axe handle and would point it at someone to scare them. The new nurses that came into the unit had to report to the headquarters and he would show up with the axe handle and talk rough to them and one day, he made one cry. That sort of stuff didn't seem to bother him, but it did everyone else. I think he must have read military manuals at night just for pleasure and I was even more sure that his blood was colored army olive drab.

LTC A was replaced by LTC Ken Lucas, who I think was a school teacher. Ken was a non descript person, easy to work with and someone I knew for just two months, so I can't comment much on him.

The group that I ran around with was LT Ron Marston, the Detachment Commander, LT Bob Bloom from supply, CPT Bill Hamilton the tallest male nurse I have ever met, LT Norm Cooley and CPT Ron Laluzerne. LT Marston was a short, then, wiry person filled with more energy and personality than anyone in the unit. Ron shaved his head while he was in country and I used to laugh when he would give himself a haircut with a pair of clippers and no mirror. I never did figure out how he did it.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

LT Cooley was one of the smartest people I had ever met, but one of the dumbest when it came to common sense. Norm could play bridge, listen to a stereo while using a headset, and read a novel all at the same time and do it all well. One time when we were back at Fort Ord, he walked into the office with a smoke grenade. I told him not to play with it or something would happen. He didn't listen, but instead pulled the pin. The fuse ignited and the grenade got very hot which he could not handle, so he tossed the grenade away and it landed in a wastepaper basket full of flammable materials which immediately burst into flame. It took several hours for us to clear the building of the smoke.

CPT Laluzerne was our supply officer and the unofficial mentor of LTC Hannon. Ron was a cool, stand offish type who spent most of his time with Joe helping him through some pretty rough times. Some of the worst arguments I ever got into were with Ron, but we never failed to settle our differences. Many of the others were just nice people to have around.

The nurses were a lot of fun, although I never got intimately involved with their activities. The Chief Nurse that shipped with us was Major Ilinda Cicerchia who left when she was involved in an aircraft accident. She was replaced by Major Maxine Douglas who was still there when I left. I do remember one time, I received a call from the Commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division who asked if he could have some nurses join him for supper some evening. We made all of the arrangements and five nurses volunteered to go. The 1st Infantry Division flew in helicopters to pick them up and returned them as scheduled. I remember the helicopters coming in in perfect formation over the POL dump and landing on the heliport to pick the ladies up.

Several weeks later, a cargo helicopter landed and off loaded three refrigerators (which were very desirable and hard to come by). To say the least, the party must have been a great success.

During the early part of my tour in Vietnam, Vietnamese were not allowed on the compound. As the war progressed, the rules were changed to allow some civilian workers to do odd jobs such as cleaning up, working in the messhall and other small jobs. We were able to hire a few civilians to assist on the wards, in the laundry and other places. Part of my responsibilities was to pay the workers once a month. This meant that I would have to go into Saigon to the paymaster's office and collect the payroll and return to take care of the workers.

On my monthly trip, I would take a jeep and driver and go into Saigon for the day. The paymaster's office was located in a section of the city known as Cholon. Usually on the way in, my driver and I would stop by a sauna parlor and take a hot bath and get a massage. It would feel good at the time, but by the time we would arrive back to the base camp, we were just as dirty as we were when we left. Picking up the pay also allowed me a chance to shop in the PX in Cholon to get many of the things for people that weren't available in our little PX in Chu Chi.

One time I made arrangements to meet Tom Sanford (an old college friend) who was with the Military Police unit in Saigon and spend the night. Tom and I spent most of the day touring the

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

city looking at the buildings and the people. We stopped at an intersection near a Buddhist temple when a couple of monks were crossing the road. The monks were dressed in their bright orange robes and were carrying umbrellas. I decided to take a picture of them with my camera. Apparently it is against the Buddhist faith to have your picture taken, since your image would be trapped in the film and would not arrive in heaven. When the monks saw that I was about to take their picture, they charged me with their umbrellas which forced us to leave the intersection and I never did get a picture of them.

During the early days of Vietnam, the only food we ate was that supplied in the mess hall or the kind we were served when we were out in the villages. In the mess hall we could identify it, but in the villages we never asked questions, because when you are hungry, you didn't ask. We ate our meals in shifts because the messhall was so small, but for the most part the food wasn't bad. After awhile, we all started to crave junk food that we had been so used to in the states. As our small PX grew, they stocked some snacks but never enough to satisfy all of the troops. We used to sit around the barracks and talk about food and ways to get some of the things we longed for. Many of the officers wrote home and had their wives or mothers send things. The people back home had to be careful of the distance since the food had to travel and the heat of Vietnam.

I once received a can of fudge from Dianne which by the time it arrived, it had all melted into a large glob at the bottom of the can. Cookies would come reduced to total crumbs. Occasionally, the food would arrive in good shape. One of our doctor's mother sent him a native dish from her homeland, one of the countries in the near east, Lebanon I think. It was a croquet type of cone made with almonds, dates, honey and lamb. Even cold, this dish was truly a gourmets delight. In addition to what was supplied by the families, we started to receive care packages from service clubs and church groups from all over the states. These packages would contain food, tooth brushes, batteries, books, pens, combs, and many other items that those fine folks felt we needed. We would share the goodies with the staff and patients of the hospital and then use some of the excess items as barter material with the combat units.

One time, Phil Smith our dentist and I decided we were still not getting enough good stuff, so we hatched a plan. We obtained an address list of several Jewish organizations and wrote them a letter explaining that we were poor Jewish boys in Vietnam who didn't have Kosher food for the high holy days. We signed the letters Garth Homstein and Phil Silversmith. When the food arrived, we had Kosher pickles, fish, candy, fruits, cookies, cakes and much more. We never did get Kosher hamburgers and french fries, but that would have been greedy. The plot may not have been an absolutely honest one, but we did write and thank the people, did share with our Jewish friends, and did truly enjoy the experience.

We never had much of a sense of the jungle while on the base camp because the division had cleared an area around the camp for several miles so they could see when the enemy was coming. The only time I felt exposed to the jungle was when we went into the villages for civil action.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I was glad I didn't have to roam through the jungle like so many of the infantry. I got scared enough when we arrived in country attending a mandatory training session conducted by the division. What the division had done was to create a simulated dangerous pathway through the jungle in an area nearby. In the jungle training course, we all gathered in a set of bleachers and had a special forces sergeant tell us about the different weapons the Viet Cong had available and how they planned on using them.

After the lecture, we were all escorted to a small path in the jungle and as we walked along the path, the special forces had built displays near the path to demonstrate the punji pits and the other hazards. They even rigged booby traps in the trees with hand grenades and mines. It really gave you a very eerie feeling to walk through the dark green not knowing what was waiting for you just around the corner.

Early on in my tour, I had several occasions to have to go into Saigon to either the supply depot, the 3rd Field Hospital, or the Airforce Base. In the early days, we were not allowed to travel from Chu Chi to Saigon in a vehicle by ourselves because of the possibility of snipers or other enemy actions. The approved procedure was to form up with the other vehicles who were traveling into town along side of the main road. The main road running from Chu Chi to Saigon was known as Vietnam "Q-1". The road started in Saigon and ran northwest toward the Laos-Cambodian border. It was a major highway and always filled with buses, and cars and other forms of transportation.

The column of vehicles that had formed up was led by an armored personnel carrier or a jeep with a 50 caliber machine gun mounted in the back for protection. There were usually other jeeps with mounted guns in the middle or to the rear of the convoy. We all had weapons as well. I always carried a caliber 45 pistol on my waist and my driver had an M-14 rifle between us so he could get to it easily. We also wore a steel helmet and a protective vest. The helmet and the vest got really hot during the trip which was slow and boring. In all of the times I took that trip, I never had anything happen to me. They finally stopped the convoy and we were allowed to travel to and from Saigon if it was during the middle of the day.

Just outside the gate and very close to where the convoy formed, was one of the worst sights I had ever seen. The Vietnamese had captured a Viet Cong and after questioning him, had him executed and then hung him by his feet from the top of a tree. This apparently was to warn the other Viet Cong in the area that if they were to set foot in the 25th Division area controlled by the sister unit the 25th ARVN, this is what would happen to them. Perhaps this is why I never had any problems. The process was very effective, but I never did get used to this way of treating others.

Once the convoy had reached Saigon, we were allowed to split up and to go our merry way to do our business with instructions to return back to a gathering point at a specified time. The gathering point was generally at the terminal end of the run way of the Air Base. As the convoy would collect to return to the division area, we would sit on the hoods of the jeeps, drink a cool soda

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

and watch the giant B-52's as they took off from the field headed toward the north. The B-52 was the largest plane I had ever seen. The wings were so large, they would almost dip to the ground when the plane was standing still. They had four very large jet engines and when they took off, it seemed like they were never going to get airborne. I often wondered why one of them never crashed at the end of the run way and killed us all. The noise they made was deafening and as they left like big birds, they also left a dark trail of smoke which had a horrible diesel smell about it which seemed to linger forever.

As the convoys dropped out, one time my driver and I were going into Saigon in the jeep and had finished our business and were preparing to return. Again, we had to leave by a special time. Whenever we left the compound, the MP's would time us out and record that we had left and then if we had not returned and been logged in, they would start to track us down and to go and look for us.

We left on time as usual. This time however, my driver asked me if it would all right if he took a different route from Ton San Hut Airforce Base back to Q-1 and home. He told me that a buddy of his told him about a different route which would save quite a bit of time and we could get home quicker. I suspect he had something to do and wanted to rush it a bit. I had no objections to his request, so off we went.

We left the Airforce Base and were soon traveling down this small lightly paved country road. As we travelled along, the children would gather along side the road in hopes that we would toss them some candy or gum. This was a usual practice by many of the American Soldiers. After a while, the countryside started to become very unfamiliar and the children no long were present along the side of the road. In fact, most of the village people when they saw us, they would run for their huts and disappear inside.

I got the strangest feeling that we were some place we should not have been. I told the driver to pull over and we would take a look at the map to see where we where. We discovered that we had taken a wrong turn at one of the intersections and were headed in the opposite direction of where we were supposed to be. We arrived back at the base camp just minutes before the deadline to be logged in and when we asked the MP to tell us where we had been, he looked at the location I pointed out on the map and told we were about seven miles inside Viet Cong country and gave us a stiff warning never to go that route again. From that point on, the driver and I took the old route and didn't try anything fancy or speedy.

I have to tell you about this driver. He was a large rusty complexioned type of person with a great sense of humor. He kept the Commander's jeep in tip top shape and was always will to go somewhere and do some thing. One afternoon, he asked me permission to take the Commander's jeep to the jeep wash in Chu Chi to get it cleaned. I told him that was fine and off he went. This same request started to repeat itself quite often, so one afternoon as he was on his way to the village,

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I noticed that he had picked up several of his buddies and they were riding along. After this happened a few times, I became a little suspicious, so I asked him why the jeep had to get washed so often.

Come to find out, there was a jeep washing facility or two in the village for this purpose. Alongside the street would be a slab of concrete with a faucet and a hose connected and you would see a soldier with the jeep on the concrete slab just washing away. What you didn't notice was a small wooden hut off in the distance. Once I saw the soldier washing the jeep and a couple of his buddies going into the hut. I came to find out later that the hut had beer and girls. The guys were going in there to have a drink and have a good time with the prostitutes. I only thought prostitutes hung out in the many bars like the Peppermint Lounge along the main street, but found out there was always a way to disguise that sort of activity.

It was nice to find this out though, because we had an obligation to make sure the girls who were having relations with the soldiers were free of disease, so we used to do VD inspections on the bar girls and certify their health. We had not been doing that with the jeep wash girls. Now we could watch everyone.

It was on April 18, 1967 that I was wounded in Vietnam. The day started late when several of our unit had been out on civil action duties and had stopped by a fire base camp occupied by an artillery battery. We knew many of the members of the battery and they had invited us to stay for a while in the evening and have supper and drinks with them before returning home. We had eaten in their mess hall and were over in one of the tents having a beer when incoming mortar rounds started to fall on their compound.

When the first shell hit, all of the lights in the compound were cut off and one of the officers told us to head for the bunkers. As we exited the tent in the dark, we had to wait a few minutes for our eyes to become adjusted to the dark. When we could see, we spotted the bunker and began running towards it. On the way, a round hit the earth, exploded and sprayed metal shrapnel in our direction. The round had landed behind us and the metal fragments struck some of us in the back and legs.

We made it to the bunker, but as I sat there, I felt this warm soft fluid oozing down my legs and into my boots. I don't remember feeling any pain per se, but as I stood up when the attack was over, I did feel something.

When we arrived home, we went into the emergency room and had the fragments removed under local anesthesia. Luckily the wounds were not damaging to any great extent. We did spend some time in the hospital receiving antibiotics and follow up care. For these wounds received in a combat zone, I was awarded the Purple Heart medal.

Another function I got very involved in was the Enlisted Club. We had to separate the

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

officers drinking and the enlisted drinking although the nurses didn't pay much attention to where they went. The EM club as it was called was located at the opposite end of the hospital area in between some of the living quarters.

I was the club custodian and responsible to see that the operations of the club were on the up and up. We had a sergeant who was in charge of the club and ran things on a daily basis. We didn't charge much for our drinks, but even at the very low prices we charged, the club was so busy, we made money hand over fist.

With the money we bought furniture and stereo equipment for the club, bought extra food for parties, and paid for entertainment to come in. As we were nearing Christmas 1966, the canned beer supply was nearing exhaustion and the troops were beginning to panic. We were told in no uncertain terms that if we ran out of beer, there would be riots in the streets. I took the club NCO and a truck down to the Saigon docks to see if we could find some replacements for our bar. We finally located the warehouse which distributed the beer and came home with enough cases of beer to supply everyone until our regular supplies were again open. I hate to think of what would have happened if we would have run out.

Another task I had to do as the hospital adjutant was to do courier runs from our hospital to the 68th Medical Group headquarters in Long Binh. About twice a week I would gather up all of the requests, reports and other administrative distribution and trudge over to the heliport run by the infantry. There was a small air strip just down the road on the right from the hospital. The control of the air strip was a small open building with a grass thatched roof. Inside the building there were benches where you could sit and wait for an aircraft along side a room where the specialists controlling the aircraft had their radios.

I would schedule a flight and go over to the air strip about 30 minutes before departure. When the helicopter would land, they would give me permission to get on board. We would lift off and fly to the 8th areoport on the side of Ton San Hut airforce base or to an air strip at Long Binh. The 8th areoport was also the place you would gather to take flights out of country. The 8th areoport was a large tin building with a much larger waiting room and facilities.

I would then go over to the group headquarters if I could catch a ride or I would call in advance and have someone from the group come and get me. The group headquarters actually was house in two wooden buildings. The group commander at that time was COL Charles Pixley, Medical Corps who eventually became the Surgeon General of the Army. Dianne also taught his kids in school when we were stationed in San Antonio.

Also in the commander's building was the adjutant, the medical regulating office, the professional services people and the nursing service people. The other building housed the supply type folks. The adjutant at the time was a Major Don Graydon who I could not stand and he knew it. One time I was recommended for the Bronze Star Medal for service and by the time it got to

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

Major Graydon, he had it downgraded to a certificate of achievement. I still have the paperwork and I vowed if I ever saw Don again, I would destroy him.

I didn't enjoy going to the group headquarters very much, so I spent as little an amount of time as possible. There were a lot of wonderful people who worked there, but I can't recall all of their names. I did get the impression that many of them were scared for their jobs and never seemed to be very happy. I did run across a few of them when I went thought the advanced course.

After I left the group and got back on board the helicopter for the return trip, it was always a scary ride. The helicopter would lift off the pad and would leave the safety of the military installation. Just outside the air base, the rice paddies would start and then the jungle. We were always afraid of snipers at the end of the field, so the helicopter would fly as low to the ground as possible and would only rise up to get over the tree lines that ringed the rice fields. The helicopter would bob up and down so fast, you would almost lost your lunch. Once we cleared the rice paddies, the helicopter would take off at a steep climb and get up to the cruising level. At the cruising level you felt like you were riding on a floating carpet and the group moved so slowly underneath you. When you were flying on the deck, the ground rushed by so fast, you couldn't see anything. The normal helicopter ride generally travelled at about 90 knots or 120 miles per hour.

In Vietnam, we really didn't have regular working hours. We worked when the casualties came in and slept when times were lax. We could be working at three in the morning and getting drunk at two in the afternoon. With this type of situation and stress, drinking became almost a past time for many. In one of the doctor's hootches, they did not have any walls, but had a refrigerator in the middle and would drink and play cards at all hours of the day or night. I was never sure how some of them ever got any sleep.

Another problem we often ran into were pets. Some of the troops somehow were able to get their hands on monkeys or dogs from the surrounding area. It was camp policy that no one was to have this type of animal because of the fear of rabies. In spite of the rules, we were constantly gathering up the animals and getting rid of them. I thought we had the problem well under control until one of the young soldiers wrote his mother and told her that the Army would not let him have a pet. Well, she wrote the President of the United States to complain and we had to spent precious time telling the federal government what was going on. I wanted to kill the guy.

I was 31 years old and in Vietnam when I started to smoke. The pressures got so great over there, at times I thought I would lose my mind. The tension and stress kept everyone on edge and there were days when you were on such an adrenalin high, you simply couldn't sleep. The only alternatives to relieving much of this stress seemed to be alcohol and drugs.

I had never been a drug user of any kind in my life and I knew how deadly alcohol could be to a career, so I turned to smoking. Many years later I rued that decision, but here's how it happened.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I was sitting at my desk one day and the Command Sergeant Major came by and said, "Captain Holmes, if you don't relax, you are going to go crazy". To which I said, "I know, what do you suggest"? The Sergeant handed me a cigarette and told me to try it. The brand was Pall Mall long without filters. I lit up and took a big puff, inhaled and got the lightest head I had ever experienced. My throat burned and I wanted to throw up, but I toughed it out so to speak.

I didn't want to go through that burning sensation, so I bought me a package of Parliament filters and much of the side effects disappeared. I eventually tried Viceroy filters which is the brand I smoked for about 18 years. As I began winding down to stopping smoking, I tried Viceroy lights and Kent Lights before quitting "Cold Turkey" after 19 years. When I met Dianne in Hawaii, it really shocked her to see me smoke, but she understood.

One of the more interesting times I had in Vietnam was trying to get anywhere by telephone, which was our major lines of communication. They hadn't furnished the hospital with radios except in the evacuation section run by CPT Worrell. The telephones were just like those in the states, except you could only dial "O" for operator to connect with the switchboard on the Division base camp. If you wanted to talk outside the division area, the division switchboard operator had to connect you with another switch and another until you reached your party.

Each major command switchboard had a particular name, like Danger Switch, or Tiger Switch or something that was tied to the unit. Going through the switches was time consuming, but the further you had to call the fainter the sound became. If you called up into the central highlands, you could hardly hear the person you were talking to. Sometimes, I had to shout so loud on the telephone, I think the person must have heard me without it.

As our tour in Vietnam continued on into the year, it became apparent that we need to transfer some of our folks to other units. The number of people we lost of the original group was small and it didn't make sense for us to all leave country at the same time, since we had come at the same time, and take away all of that experience. We started with volunteers asking them to go to other units and pretty much took care of the problem.

Some of the nurses transferred down to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon and some to the 17th Field in Saigon. The 3rd Field was a really nice four or five story building with tile floors and plaster walls. All of the staff there wore white uniforms or khaki and got to take a clean shower (hot) every day. They used to get all upset if they had to miss their coffee break.

Whenever we visited, of course it was in our filthy dirty fatigues and everywhere we went, people would look at us like we had some disease. A good friend of mine was Frank Smart the patient administration officer who usually ran interference for me. I ran into Frank years later in San Antonio and we used to laugh about those time.

On one occasion, Frank invited me to stay with him in his apartment near the hospital. Most

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

of the hospital staff of the 3rd Field stayed in these high rise apartments which all had balconies. The entrance into the buildings were sandbagged and usually had guards at night. The balconies, however, were not protected and often times, a Vietnamese terrorist would ride by on his motor scooter and toss a hand grenade up on the balcony and it would go off injuring or killing the occupants in the apartment. After I was told the story, I didn't sleep very well, nor did I stay there very often.

It was a lot nicer to visit hospital in other areas which were more like ours, because they understood our situation. One time, I took a trip up to the 62nd Evacuation Hospital located at Da Nang. Da Nang was north of us on the coast and a very nice place. The 62nd was put into a three story concrete building with windows and air conditioning. It was near the local air strip for evacuation and almost on the beach. The people there would party in the surf and really had a good time. I often wished I had transferred up there. I knew many of the people in the 62nd, it was one of the medical units stationed at Fort Carson when I was the Chief of Plans and Operations at the Fort Carson Hospital and had helped prepare them for transfer to Vietnam.

The Army never seemed to amaze me. The personnel officer at the 68th Medical Group was CPT Pat Mumma. I ran into Pat again when he was the personnel officer at Brooke Army Medical Center and was the officer who interviewed me for assignment at the Medical Field Service School. There were also others that I ran into later. One of our supply officers was a registered pharmacist, then CPT Chuck Lassister. Chuck was a tall black officer who did not fare well on active duty. I ran into him later when I was in the 6250th US Army Hospital in Tacoma, a reserve unit. He also worked as a civilian at Madigan Army Medical Center and helped train some of my technicians.

Another was CPT George Bell. George had been with the 45th MUST Hospital at Tay Ninh and had run against the commanders. The two of them hated each others guts and George was asked by the medical group to move down to us to replace CPT Lasssiter. George was a smart officer, but from Chicago, had an abusive way about him. I went to the Officer's Personnel School with George and later worked him as a reservist when I was a mobilization asset. George was the Chief of Military Personnel at William Beaumont Army Medical Center in El Paso, Texas. I did two of my annual training tours working with him.

Another thing to come out of Vietnam was the 12th Evacuation Hospital Association. When the hospital was closed in 1970, the Executive Officer, LTC Dick Harder and the Commander LTC Beal, along with others decided to form an association to help preserve the history of the unit. I didn't know anything about the association until Dianne, my wife came home one day in 1984 and asked me what unit I had been with in Vietnam. When I asked her why, she said that her plastic surgeon, Dr. Wayne Dickison in Olympia was talking about the hospital he was with in Vietnam and it sounded a lot like the one I had been in. I called Wayne and he confirmed that we had both been in the same unit and that there was a newsletter published by the association each year and he would send me a copy. I wrote to the president of the association and got myself on the mailing list. The Association has grown to over 800 members and meets once a year, usually in San Antonio, Texas.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I need to describe our surroundings in a little more detail. As I said before, the 25th Division had cleared away lots of rubber trees and put a large base camp on top of a tunnel system. The base camp was surrounded by several rows of barbed wire, set at various distances from each other. Tied to the wire were alarm systems and guard posts which were manned day and night. In addition, there were armored vehicles stationed at strategic locations to add to the defense. At the west side of the base camp, there was a front gate from which all traffic had to go through. There was a Military Police cabin at the gate who checked everyone in and out. Every one, including the civilians had some form of identification tag which has to be shown.

When you left the base camp, you turned right onto a dirt road which ran for about two miles to the intersection within the village of Chu Chi connecting with Q-1, the major highway leading south to Saigon. About half way to Chu Chi started the businesses that were there because of the troops. Most of the businesses were either bars, fast food places, curio shops, clothing/tailor shops, or jeep washes.

The curio shops were the weirdest. The Vietnamese could turn any discarded materials into something useful. I bought a cigarette lighter which looked just like one manufactured in the states on the outside, but when you took the working parts out and looked inside the case, you could read the words, "COKE". They also made up a footlocker which many of us bought to store things in at the foot of our beds. The footlocker was metal and wood strips on the outside, but when you opened the lid the inside was any number of flavors of beer. They also sold all forms hats, patches, beads, lamps, or anything else they thought the GI's would purchase.

The bars all had hostesses which would sit with the customers. The bar would sell all brands of whiskey and some imported beers. Mostly the beer sold was called "Bom Be Bom" or something to that effect. The brewery was in Saigon and the beer was just a little stronger than American beer. The beer was not pasteurized and was not a highly carbonated as other beers. The jeep washes I have already mentioned. The fast food places sold rice, chicken, ice cones, ice cream and other of this sort of item. You had to be very careful because the water and milk to make many of these products were not treated the way we wanted and you could come down with some strange diseases.

Another problem we were constantly running into were jungle diseases of the skin. The water we showered in was not drinkable, but was alright for showering. I used a detergent soap (Dial or Zest) and one day I noticed a small red rash in my crouch. The rash started to spread and in a couple of days, I was covered from my knee caps to under my arm pits. The rash itched and hurt so bad, I couldn't wear any underwear and I thought I was going to itch myself to death.

I made an appointment with the dermatologist at the 17th Field Hospital in Saigon and went in to see him. Apparently the soap I was using was killing all of the natural bacteria from my skin and the yeast and fungus were taking over. He told me to stop using the detergent soap and switch to something like Dove or Lux. He also started treating me with a 10% resorcin in water solution and a cream called Kenalog which had an anti-inflammatory agent and an anti-fungal combination.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I treated the condition for about two weeks and finally it went away.

Just behind the nurses quarters, there was a grassy field which ran up to the fence enclosing the Division Signal Center. We used to use the field to play intra-mural sports like football and softball. A lot of the units formed up teams and we played mostly tag football. The game got a little rough on some occasions. When the play was put into effect, you were supposed to reach and grab the ribbon suspended from the belt of the player. When the ribbon was pulled, the play was dead. Most of the defensive players would not just grab the ribbon, but would tackle with some force. Of course we were not wearing any pads or other protective equipment and the tackles would really hurt. I was surprised some one was not maimed.

Softball was a lot tamer and saner. As time went on, we got quite a few other units on the base camp to form teams and we started tournaments and awarded trophies. It was a good form of recreation and a neat way for us to pass the time of day. We also got very heavy into volleyball, jungle rules. The jungles rules allowed you to do anything you wanted to get the ball over the net including hanging on the net when you smashed the ball. That game really took its toll in temperatures over 100 degrees.

A lot of strange things happen in a foreign country in war time. In the front of the headquarters building was a water cooler. The cooler was the bottom part and the water was in a large glass bottle which was turned upside down. When you pushed a button on the front of the machine, the water from the bottle would flow through some refrigerated coils and into a spout under which you held a paper cup. This all worked fine until one day, some of the enlisted men decided they wanted Kool Aid to drink, so they took the bottle of water and added several large packages of grade flavored Kool Aid to the bottle. It probably would have worked fine except there was acid in the powder as flavoring. The acid in the powder reacted with the coils in the machine and dissolved particles of tin and other metals were dispensed with the drink. This made several people very ill when they drank it. Usually it was an upset stomach.

The machine was ruined of course, so I had to call in a repair crew to fix it. One afternoon, a Korean civilian showed up with six Vietnamese men to fix the cooler. While he fixed it, the six Vietnamese sat on their heels and watched him. Of course, we had to pay everyone just for watching.

The patients were always doing strange things as well. One of the infantry battalions we had on the compound was the 5th Mechanized Battalion "Wolfhounds". We took care of a lot of Wolfhounds it seemed they were always in the thickest fighting. In fact we took care of so many of them, they gave everyone in the hospital a souvenir cigarette lighter with their unit crest on it.

Well one night, a bunch of the wounded Wolfhounds gathered just outside of one of the wards and decided to howl to the moon in the tradition of their unit. I thought at first when I heard it, the siren had gone off until I found out what was happening. We tried to stop the howling only

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

to find out that their buddies had smuggled in some drinks and the troops were literally howling drunk. We didn't want to be rough with the patients because they were wounded, but we couldn't get them back to bed treating them gently either. We finally called the MP's and hauled them back to the wards.

Some of our nurses became very meshed with the local culture. One of the wards had many Vietnamese from time to time and the nurses who worked on the civilian ward began learning the Vietnamese language. Also from time to time, the nurses would purchase and wear the native dress for females, the Are Die, which was a silk long dress with a slit up the side worn over a pair of silk long legged pants. Usually the Are Die was white and the pants black. Many of the natives also wore black pajamas during the day and a peaked hat made out of reeds. I never saw any of our people wear any of that garb.

We also had the mission to house enemy prisoners of war who had been wounded and could not be returned to their army. These POW's were held on a special ward with police protection. One night, the military police guard was not paying attention when a regular vietnamese soldier decided to leave his bed and go down the ward and kill one of the enemy Viet Cong. He was in the process of doing this when the Viet Cong started some struggling and making loud noises. This alerted the military police and the nurse who had to wrestle the Vietnamese away from the Cong. Thank goodness this didn't happen often, but it did put quite a burden on the staff who had to keep their eye on this sort of thing.

We also had some surgeons who really thought a lot of themselves and not much about the patients. One day, CPT Shannon was going through the surgical ward checking on his patients and he came to one patient who had some belly surgery. CPT Shannon wanted to check the wound, so he grabbed the adhesive tape and ripped it off the soldier's stomach. In those days, we didn't have the nice no grab the skin type of tape. The adhesive tape took all of the hair and most of the skin exposed to the tape.

The patient sat right up in bed when the tape was pulled off and hit CPT Shannon right between the eyes knocking him down to the floor. I think from that day forward, the surgeons took a little more time removing bandages and tape from their customers.

Vietnam was an interesting country. It was actually divided into four major parts. The southern part was hotter and more moist. It was the area where they grew much of the rice and rubber. The coastal plain ran the entire length of the country on the eastern side and was where all of the ports were located. In the middle was the central highlands where there were more mountains and the temperatures were milder. The last section was the industrial north which left off at the central highlands and ran into North Vietnam.

I didn't see much of Vietnam except the southern and coastal regions. When I traveled in the Southern Area, most of it was the same. Rice paddies as far as the eye could see and rows of low

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

growing trees. Most of the more affluent farmers had concert walls around their houses with iron gates, or there would be a concert wall with writing in an arch over the gate telling people who owned the farm. Also along the road were little shrines with religious icons or incense burners depending on the religion. These were put there to bless the fields and make the fields bountiful. In Vietnam there were only two major religions, Buddhists and Catholics. It wasn't hard to tell the difference in the shrine.

Other than going into Saigon to pick up the civilian pay, the only other time I went to town was with a group of guys who wanted to see the city. We all made arrangements to stay in a barracks downtown and off we went. The only night we were there, we wanted to visit the world famous Tu Do Street where all of the shops and bars were located.

The street was very well lighted and gave me a sensation of Reno with an oriental flavor. The shops were of all sorts, jewelry, curios, clothing, ceramics, etc. and seemed to all run by people other than Vietnamese. The shop keepers generally were Chinese or Indian. I thought that was kind of strange, but never did know the reason. I guess they were better businessmen.

The bars were almost all alike. Inside there was a long bar with tables or booths and a band playing in the background. The music was either oriental or a brand of American modern tunes of the times.

When you went into the bar, one of the Vietnamese girls would escort you to a table and want to sit with you. They would ask you to buy them a drink. We were warned to avoid them for obvious reasons. The drinks they would order were generally tea or ginger ale, but the prices you were charged were four to five times the going rate for beer. We were also told that they were generally very young and were involved in prostitution. We told the girls who came over to us to take a hike which they didn't seem to like, but they understood and stayed away from us. I pitied the poor soldiers who didn't have better sense. Many of them we saw in the VD clinics and had to give penicillin shots to. One night on the town was plenty for me and most of the others.

As my tour in Vietnam started to wind down, the war had heated up almost to the highest level it would reach during the U.S. involvement. The enemy began to increase the number of probes on the perimeter of the base camp which forced the division to increase their security and kept everyone very much on edge.

One night an alarm went off that something was trying to penetrate the protective fence and the reactionary forces deployed. A group of us climbed up on the water tower above the shower to watch the show. In no time, several gunship helicopters were airborne and began firing thousands of rounds of machine gun fire laced with tracer bullets. It looked like the 4th of July on a mild summer evening.

The battle lasted for twenty or thirty minutes before the all clear was sounded. We found

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

out the next day that the enemy was the four legged type when the body count revealed a dozen or so head of water buffalo had been killed. Of course, the army didn't know that at the time, it was just another example of the tension everyone had.

I was scheduled to leave Vietnam in July, but by May, I had heard nothing from the Medical Service Corps about my new assignment. I had contacted the personnel people at the Surgeon General's Office several times but had failed to hear from them. I finally wrote to General Hammerick, the Chief of the Corps and asked him about it. He wrote me a nice letter explaining that his staff had failed in their job to keep me informed and that I was scheduled to attend the officer's advance course at the Medical Field Service School in San Antonio, Texas beginning in August 1967. I felt justified in writing the letter, but doing so came back to haunt me which I will explain in later pages when I talk about my tour of duty at the Medical Field Service School.

I received my orders and port call to leave Vietnam from Ton Son Hut airforce base at noon on July 7, 1967. While I was preparing to travel to the airbase, I burned all of my clothing and saved only the uniform I was wearing home and my shaving gear. I had sent a few presents home in advance, so a small handbag met my needs perfectly. My driver took me to the plan where all of the soldiers returning home had gathered to be briefed on the trip home, to exchange the Vietnamese script into dollars we used as money and to get paid.

We were scheduled to leave on a Flying Tiger airplane, a Boeing 707, which had been contracted by the U.S. Government. We were all gathered under this covered building just on the runway. The plane arrived and after taxiing to the terminal, it unloaded a group of new replacements just arriving in country. I really felt sorry for the new guys, but didn't let that damper my feeling of elation to be leaving. I had come to this far off land with a group of my friends and now was leaving alone. Even though there were over 300 people going back to the states with me on the plane, I didn't know any of them and really paid no attention to them for the entire trip.

After the plane had been serviced, we were allowed to board and were on our way. The flight was a regular airline flight with in service movies, stereo sound earphones, and meals. The strange thing was the passing of time zones. It seemed that we were barely in the air and the sun began to set. After a few hours, the sun started to rise. Maybe it was just my imagination. Midway through the flight, the aircraft had to refuel which we did at an Airforce Base in Guam. The Guam facility was a tactical bomber base, so we were taken off the plan and bussed to the base headquarters where we were kept under tight security in the operations building until the plane was ready. It was night time in Guam and raining. The operations building was very empty except for some benches and counters. They had vending machines for coffee, hot chocolate and candy bars. We finally boarded the plan after a couple of hours and flew on to San Francisco International Airport.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I went to a clothing store and bought me a shirt, a pair of pants, and some socks. I then went into the men's bathroom and threw my clothes in the waste can.

VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

I didn't want anyone to know that I was a soldier traveling in the United States. We had heard that American didn't think too much of the soldiers who were stationed in Vietnam and I wanted to avoid any kind of confrontation with any peace demonstrators. It wasn't that I wasn't proud of my involvement in the conflict, it was must that I wanted to get home without any hassle.

I had left Vietnam at noon on July 7, 1967 and arrived at ten minutes after noon on the July 7, 1967. I had gained back the day I had lost in September when we crossed the international dateline.

For all of this year, I had lost 15 pounds, my hair had turned gray, I had aged 10 years, I had received a Vietnamese Campaign Medal, A Vietnamese Service Medal, a Army Commendation Medal, a Purple Heart and four unit citations. It didn't seem like much for a whole year of my life. In a way, it seemed all like a bad dream which really never happened.



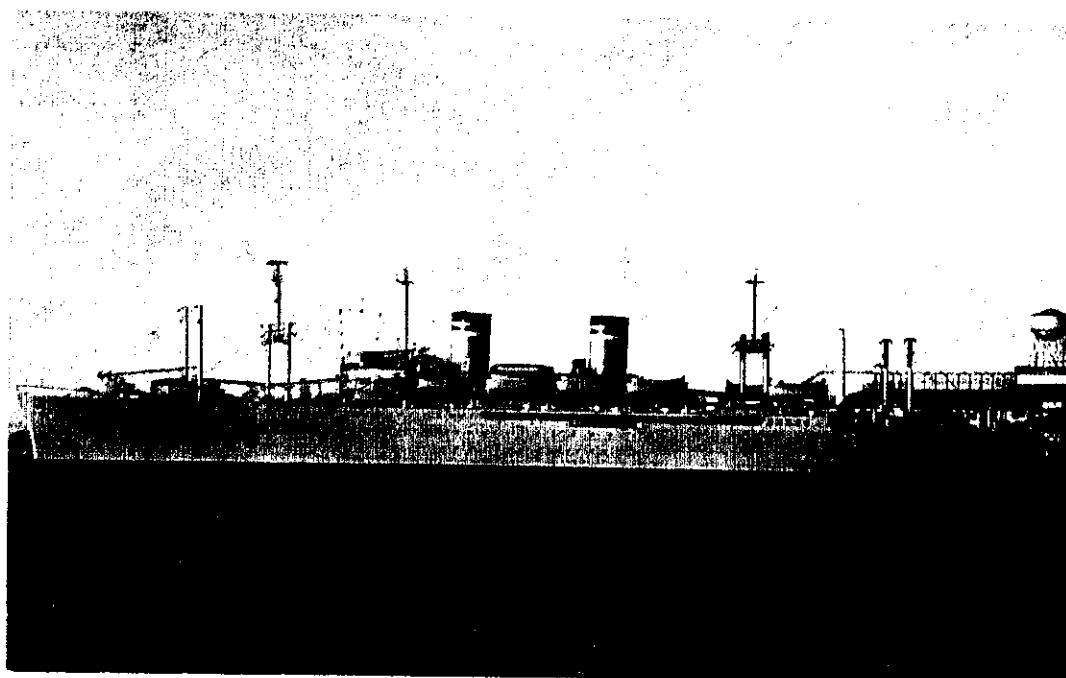
SPECIALIST POINDEXTER RUNNING THE OUTPATIENT PHARMACY



Left to right: MAJ Gipson, CPT Marston, CPT Hamilton, CPT Holmes, CPT James



CSM LAWSON AND CPT HOLMES(Adjutant) at Hqs



The USN ED Patrick, the ship that took the 12th Evac to Vietnam

12th Evacuation Hospital Unofficial Unit Crest

In 1966, field hospital units did not have distinctive unit crests. When we arrived at the base camp of the 25th Infantry Division, we noticed that many units were wearing a embroidered copy of their unit crest (official and unofficial) on the pocket of their fatigue shirts. We decided to do the same. On a Saturday in December 1966, we held a unit crest design contest. Unit members were asked to submit their designs to be selected as the winning design. The designed were numbered and pinned to a bulletin board in the mess hall. A committee was chosed to review the designs and select the one to represent the hospital. This crest won. It was designed by CPT Garth Holmes, Adjutant of the hospital

Cloth replicas were manufactured in the town of Chu Chi, encased in plastic, and distributed to all unit members. The patches were paid for from the unit fund, and profits from the NCO/Enlisted club.

