

# **Recollections of Vietnam**

By Sonny Jones

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Recollections of Vietnam  
First Tour, 1965-1966  
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**Forward**

In 1989, nearly twenty-five years after I went to Vietnam for the first time, my mother, Virginia, reminded me she had kept all, or perhaps nearly all, the letters I had written since I entered the service in November 1963. I was visiting her at Bowling Green, and for whatever reason, she happened to mention it.

I suppose I had known it, but it had escaped my memory. She also had all the awards and certificates I had ever received, framed, and hung on the walls of her little house. It was an "I love me wall," *in extremis*, but it was in her home, not mine. A few officers I knew (and would know in the future) had "I love me walls," but I never developed a taste for them. In Germany, after I was already out of the Army, I had all kinds of stuff hung on the wall behind my desk, but it was souvenirs from trips, photos I'd taken, slogans I liked, and stuff like that. Not an award or certificate among the lot.

Because I had already begun writing these papers, my immediate reaction was of some elation, as I felt they would refresh my memory about things I already remembered, and probably help me recall things I had forgotten. I was anxious to read them, but unfortunately they were in storage, along with the furniture, books, and other things my wife and I were forced to leave behind when we went back to Germany in 1976.

But as I say, the prospect of reading those letters was eagerly awaited. It was not until over a year later, when I returned to Bowling Green to finally arrange shipment of our household goods, from which we had been separated so long, that I was finally able to read them. Before the truck which was to haul the stuff back to Alexandria arrived, I pulled the box in which the letters were packed, and took them back to mom's house, and began reading.

What a disappointment! It seemed nearly every letter contained either a request for a "CARE" package, or I was telling her I had received one and describing the condition in which it had arrived, and finally, thanking whoever was responsible for sending it. There were few references to what I was doing. After I had been in Cam Ranh Bay about six months, I began talking about the MG B GT I planned to order/was ordering/had ordered, and how many days I had until I would be leaving.

It seemed I was obsessed with food. When I wasn't asking for more, or thanking those responsible for sending the last box, I was counting the days until my DEROS (Date Eligible to Return from Overseas), or talking about the arrangements for my wonderful, marvelous new car.

There was mention of the neighboring Quartermaster Company, but even that was woven around the subject of food. There was also mention of my operating a large forklift to help move my Maintenance Platoon to a new location in the Depot. I groused about the unit commander. But all in all, I could find very little to support the memories of which I was already committing to paper. I could scarcely believe it. Looking back, trying to remember those topics about which I

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

wrote then, I *do* recall the obsession with food. It was not that we didn't have any. We were trying, unreasonably perhaps, to add variety to our diet. The 59th QM Company, of which I was a member, enjoyed the services of an excellent mess sergeant, and cooks. SSG Ernest E. Goodno took great pride in outdoing other mess sergeants in feeding "his" company. And as a result, once Ernie got his mess equipment, and built a place from which to operate, he was off and running. His daily fare, just as it had been at Fort Bragg, was head and shoulders above the rest.

So why this obsession with food? I think we were trying to be independent from the unit commander, who early on, had been, at times, difficult. I recall his claim of what must have been a record-setting bout of constipation, which (he claimed) went on uninterrupted for forty-five days, or some such length of time. (I suppose anyone would have been a bit of a pest under those circumstances.) However, in defense of Frank, it must be said that the food at the 524th was pretty Gawd-awful. The 524th served "B" rations, which was worse than eating C-rations, and contributed to constipation. I remember large cans of bacon. The bacon was already cooked or cured, and was packed in a large coil inside the can. Greasy waxed paper was used to keep the bacon separated, and the whole thing was one mass of grease. Yuk! But it occurs to me now, as it surely didn't then, how much a self-centered prig I must have been.

There was some self-serving drivel about a soldier who was brought before me for an Article 15, and the punishment I meted out (I was acting company commander at the time). I wrote something to the effect that he (the soldier) was deserving of punishment, otherwise he wouldn't have been brought before me. What rot! A martinet's words if anyone ever heard the like.

So much for the letters. The following pages are my memories of that first tour in Vietnam. In some respects, the Army has changed much since that time; in other ways, it has changed little. I was first advised by M/Sgt Riley, one of my instructors in ROTC, and a veteran of both WW II and Korea, that one of the U.S. Army's greatest attributes is the ability of its members to improvise and adapt. I believe that is still very true of all our services, not just the Army.

So even if my letters home were of little or no aid in remembering, I discovered that remembering and writing about one incident stimulated thoughts of another, and another. Finally contacting others in the unit enhanced those memories. Small though they may be, these are my recollections of my time in Vietnam.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

### Introduction

I went to Vietnam twice. Once in 1965, and again in 1969. My first tour in Sunny Southeast Asia began after I had been in the Army a little over a year and a half. Before 1965, almost all of the US Army soldiers were sent in the role of advisors or as Special Forces personnel. All Special Forces-qualified soldiers were advisors, but not all advisors were SF. The advisory personnel served a one-year tour; the SF personnel were normally sent TDY for six months - the maximum length of time one could be sent TDY. The Special Forces soldiers, or "Green Beanies" as they were popularly known, were in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, as well as South Vietnam.

Special Forces had been involved in Southeast Asia (SEA), and particularly South Vietnam, since 1957, when elements of the 1st SF Group in Japan began training South Vietnamese at the Nha Trang Commando Center. 1st Group was later moved to Okinawa, and personnel from the 1st, as well as the 5th and 7th Groups, both located at Ft Bragg, were rotated in and out of SEA for years before the whole thing escalated with the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The first Congressional Medal of Honor awarded for action in Vietnam was given to a Special Forces Captain named Roger Donlan, for his actions in trying to prevent the Viet Cong from overrunning a Special Forces camp. By the time I went, a "tour" in Vietnam was twelve months, except for the Marines, who did 13, and remained that length until the US left in 1973.

The year 1965 was an eventful one. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson was inaugurated, Martin Luther King led 4,000 civil rights demonstrators from Selma to Montgomery, it was the 750th anniversary of the Magna Carta, and the 700th anniversary of the British Parliament, in Los Angeles, the Watts riots occurred, and Charles De Gaulle won the election for the French presidency. At the movies, we watched "Dr. Zhivago" and "The Sound of Music," both Soviet and American astronauts did space walks, we listened to "King Of The Road," "It Was A Very Good Year," "Downtown," and "A Hard Day's Night," and we mourned the passing of Winston Churchill, Adlai E. Stevenson, and Edward R. Murrow.

### Leaving Home

My college, Western Kentucky State College (now Western Kentucky University), was in my home town of Bowling Green. I lived at home while I went there, and had been away from Bowling Green on my own only a few times, and then, with the exception of ROTC summer camp, only for a day at a time. So when I left in November 1963, it was my first "Big Adventure." I didn't know what to expect. But the time had come to pay the dues I had incurred from joining ROTC in the first place, and getting that small, monthly stipend they paid in those days - I think it was about thirty dollars a month.

Less than a week before I left, I bought my first new car, a red MG Midget with a black leatherette interior, and real knock off wire wheels. I traded my 1959 VW Beetle, a car a lot of people would kill for these days, for the MG. With it came a monthly payment, and higher insurance. It was only because I was going in the Army, and knew I would be getting a regular paycheck that I thought I could afford it. Boy, were prices (and salaries) cheap in those days. My base pay was \$222.30 a month, with an extra \$47.88 for rations, and - if I lived off-post -

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

\$85.00 for quarters. I was making a lot more than I had been as an architectural draftsman. Wow! New car? Sure, I could afford it. No problem.

As long as I was at Ft Lee, on TDY (temporary duty), drawing per diem, it was no sweat. After I got to Ft Bragg, for the first couple or three months, living in the BOQ, not drawing quarters allowance, things started getting tight. In fact, for three or four months in the middle of 1964, the last week of every month, I was surviving off "C" rations, scrounged from the Special Forces on Smoke Bomb Hill. The Army had not had a pay raise in years; several years, maybe since Eisenhower had been in office. But we got one late in 1964, and things improved a little.

But to get back to leaving home, the morning I left Bowling Green, waiting at the foot of State Street for a red light, to cross the bridge over Barren River, I saw an unusual sight for Bowling Green. It was one which many probably feel, or felt, typical of Kentucky. It was a "tanker," at least that's what it appeared to be. A "tanker" is a car, usually an older one, modified to haul moonshine whiskey. It has a large container - the tank - a souped up motor and heavier suspension to both improve handling, and to support the extra weight of a full tank. When empty of their "merchandise," they are easily recognizable because the rear end is raised high in the air because of the lack of cargo. What was odd about this was that I had never actually seen a "tanker," in BG, or anywhere else for that matter. And so leaving Kentucky early in the morning, embarking on my new life, my new adventure, and seeing that stereotypical piece of "Kentuckiana," I just thought was pretty ironic.

As mentioned, my car was merely days old, it was British, and had not been "run in," as the expression went. In other words, it was not broken in, so I didn't drive very quickly in it. I dawdled. I poked along, varying my speed as I had read one should do in a new British sports car. But I recall marveling at the fact that I could accelerate up hills, as I had never been able to do in a Volkswagen. Instead of rowing up hills with the gearshift lever, I could actually *accelerate* up hills! Incredible!

It was too cold and damp to have the top down, but this little shoebox-size car was *so* cool. I had read voraciously of sports cars since about 1955, and here I was actually driving one, owning one. This was going to be all right. I had allowed most of three days to get from Bowling Green and Ft Lee. (I would later drive it in one.) I spent one night in West Virginia, and another outside Richmond. The first night, I watched Steve McQueen on TV in the motel room in "Soldier In The Rain," wondering if that was what the peacetime Army was really like. It seemed realistic to me. McQueen was a sergeant, I think, and I hoped there weren't any sergeants around like him, because I was pretty ill-equipped to deal with the likes of him, or anyone like him.

On the third day, I reached Ft Lee, drove up to the front gate, and was told by an MP to sign in at the student officer orderly room (wherever that was). Welcome to the Army, Mr. Jones.

### Active Duty

It was November 1963 when I began my active duty, a month and year which most Americans should recognize and remember. I was an "OBV2", or two year obligated volunteer. I incurred this obligation from my ROTC commission from Western Kentucky State College (now Western

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Kentucky University). I reported for active duty two days before President Kennedy was assassinated. Everyone who is old enough to remember, remembers where they were then when they heard about the shooting. I was in the book store of the Quartermaster School, in Mifflin Hall, Fort Lee, Virginia. The store clerk had a radio playing, and we heard it then. Everyone was absolutely stunned. We were in total disbelief the President could have been shot. It was totally alien to anyone's experience. The day after, the television set in the dayroom of the BOQ seemed to have nothing but programs about the assassination. Some watched it all, but I couldn't. I just couldn't absorb it.

### **Officer's Basic**

Quartermaster Officer Basic Course was six weeks long. A break for the Christmas-New Years holiday split it in two, and then there was a period of leave to revisit home. After completion of QMOBC, I was assigned to Company B, 34th Quartermaster Battalion (General Support), or in abbreviated military parlance, Co B, 34th QM Bn (GS), at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It was my first assignment, and probably typical of any major event in one's life, I probably remember more about it than any subsequent assignment during the fifteen-plus years I spent in the Army. During the time I was in Co B, I went through Airborne school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and later, the Parachute Maintenance and Aerial Delivery course at Fort Lee. In fact, it was while I was at the PMAD course, at Fort Lee, that my unit was alerted for overseas movement.

### **An Unrecognized Forecast**

Years before, in 5th or 6th grade summer school, we had a reading exercise booklet. On its cover was a picture of a burned-out tank, sitting on a road, in Indochina. The tank, although it was US-built, it was operated by the French; and symbolic of the way the French were gradually losing the Indochinese war.

### **First Intimations Of The Move**

We were alerted for movement some four month's prior to what would ultimately be our actual movement. I had completed jump school at Fort Benning the previous November, and had immediately applied for Rigger school. Rigger school, at least for many of the officers who applied, was for Quartermaster types who wanted more excitement in their lives than being commissary officers, PX officers, accountable officers or the like. I was scheduled to go to Rigger school in April 1965. A rather significant event occurred almost exactly mid-way through the six-week course. It was '*Dom Rep*' - the Dominican Republic problem or (if you like) invasion.

The 82nd Airborne Division (nicknamed All Americans), had been alerted on Thursday night. Responding to the alert, upon arrival at their units in the division area, everyone was restricted to their respective buildings. No one - NO ONE - heard anything from them for days, or in some cases, weeks. This was definitely not a normal alert. Life as a member of the 82nd Airborne was characterized by two features, if nothing else: physical training, featuring the "airborne shuffle", and alerts.

### **82nd Airborne on Alert**

They drew their equipment, mounted their vehicles, and were dispatched to pre-designated assembly areas at neighboring Pope Air Force Base. As I was told later, they roared across the post at speeds up to 60 MPH, from the Division area to Pope, and according to long-practiced drills, assembled by platoon, then company, then battalion at the loading ramps on Pope. From there, fully prepared for an airborne assault on their objective, they began almost immediately leaving Pope Air Force Base for the Dominican Republic. They flew on C-130s, the standard transport/aerial delivery platform in those days, toward *Dom Rep*. Up until about an hour from their intended drop zone, they fully intended to execute (in approximately brigade-strength), an airborne assault on the island. The Air Force flew in C-130s from all over the country to fly the division to its objective.

### **Proud Surprise**

We, the non-divisional types at Bragg, were surprised, and not a little proud, that they had been alerted, gotten their stuff all in one bag and had, in fact, moved out smartly. It was a standing joke, among those who were not part of the 82nd, that the division couldn't move across the street in a month, let alone, be deployed anywhere. All show and no go. That was the popular opinion. Remember, this was 1965, and the last big "show" the Army had done prior to that was the Berlin Buildup in 1961. In fact, the unit with which I was to deploy to Vietnam had been activated at Fort Lee specifically for deployment to Germany for the Berlin crisis. A friend of mine from QMOBC, Ron Bright, in the neighboring 16th QM Battalion (DS), took somewhat unusual advantage of his deployment to *Dom Rep* by meeting and marrying his wife.

### **Becoming A Red Cap**

I returned to Rigger school and received my red baseball cap, the distinguishing trademark of parachute riggers, in the graduation ceremonies three weeks later. Upon my return to Bragg, our movement was still classified, as it would be for some time, but it had become fairly common knowledge around the company. It was sometime during this period, before our deployment, that Company B, 34th QM Battalion, became the 59th QM Company, and attached to the 34th QM Battalion, not assigned. "A" Company was redesignated the 223rd QM Company. HQ, 34th, which was reorganized with a new MTOE, and now became a separate battalion headquarters, to which various types of support units could be attached.

### **Do I Really Want To Go?**

Early on, I had some reservations because I had just graduated from Rigger school and, for long before I went to Rigger school, I had my sights set on an assignment as a Rigger. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but I had an interview with LTC Richard T. Bull, the battalion commander of the 34th. He was a very well-respected man and I personally had a lot of respect for, and confidence in, him. Colonel Bull knew I had been to Rigger school, and of my desire for a transfer to the 612th QM Company, an aerial delivery company located a few blocks away from our company area. After we discussed career potential of the two courses of action - the merits of going to Vietnam or transferring to the 612th - I chose Vietnam and told him that. Colonel Bull smiled and told me he thought I had made a good decision, but that - in truth - he

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could not have approved a transfer anyway. It was a good laugh on me. After I thought about it, I understood Colonel Bull's position, and admired the way he had handled it. I couldn't help but wonder, though, what he would have said had I asked for a transfer.

### Preparations

So at any rate, here I was, and here we were, with a unit which had been deployed from CONUS just four year's earlier, and was preparing to deploy again. This was what I found out when I drove down to Fort Bragg on the weekend after my third week of training at Fort Lee, to find out what was going on with *Dom Rep*. Instead, I was told - very informally, and very hush-hush - that the 34th QM Battalion had been alerted for deployment to Southeast Asia. At that time, that was the way it stood. We didn't know for sure we were going to Vietnam. In fact, the popular view was that we would go to some place like Thailand, or maybe the Philippines. None of us had a really firm idea exactly where Vietnam was, how big it was, or where we would go, or what we would do if we were sent there. It really was quite a big mystery to all of us, but we were all quite excited about it.

### Coming To Full-Strength

Preparing a unit for overseas movement entails many, many tasks. One of the foremost is to bring the unit up to its full TOE strength. In our case, this was seven officers, one warrant officer and 260 enlisted men. For most of 1964, my first year in the unit, Company B was at around 55% of that authorized strength, and there was one point when the strength sank to less than 50%. The unit had no real mission, there was no situation in the world that potentially required our services, and we were not a part of any rapid deployment force. From that low point, we were gradually built up to approximately 65% of authorized in early 1965. The unit strength stabilized at that level for several months, until we were put on a deployment list somewhere, and then we began receiving filler personnel at a very rapid rate. Suddenly we were at full strength.

### New Personnel

Many of these new soldiers were from Puerto Rico, and because of that, we had some language problems. To our company roster, surnames such as Aparicio-Amengual, Ayala-Caro, Cubero, DeJesus-Rivera, Diaz-Diaz, Figueroa-Gonzales, Martell-Mendez, Martinez-Santiago, and others were added.

There was one youngster, very smart, with a great personality, who acted as our interpreter for those whose English was less than fluent. He was a tremendous help. As with many, many experiences in that company, this influx of a group of people who were other-than-WASPs, also contributed to my education. This young man was well above average in intelligence, but because English was not his native language, and the Army tests of that time definitely favored English-speaking people, this young fellow didn't test well and was given an MOS as a "duty soldier." We began correcting that situation as soon as we could when we realized his capabilities and talents. The company commander, the First Sergeant, his platoon leader and platoon sergeant acted to get him promoted as quickly as possible from E-2 to E-4 before we moved out, and I think after we got to Vietnam, he made E-5. He was a hell of a good kid.

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As with any group of people, most of the soldiers from Puerto Rico were good; and only a few became problems. When our company commander, Frank Connell, looked at their 201 files (personnel records), he saw young men who had been smart enough to graduate high school in their native Puerto Rico. He wisely understood that high school graduates probably weren't all dummies, and that if someone gave them the benefit of the doubt, we might have some pretty good soldiers.

### **Turning "Misfits" Into Reliable Soldiers**

Nearly all of these young Puerto Rican men came to us as "misfits" from other units. It is a sorry indictment on the Army, and American society in general, that the *majority* of these guys were *not* misfits, but had great potential. English was not their native language; I imagine many of them had never received adequate instruction in English. Quite probably, as with kids everywhere, subjects are taught in school for which they see no future use at all. And not until later, when it is too late to study in school, does the real-life value of these subjects manifest itself.

Through the efforts of Capt Connell and SFC Vance, these young soldiers began to be given the opportunity to prove themselves. By this time - perhaps two months before departure - it was reasonably clear we (the company) were going to our destination as an independent company, not as part of the 34th QM Battalion. Accordingly, it gave Connell even more of an impetus to make maximum use of the soldiers assigned, and to hell with what our hide-bound battalion staff said about what we could and could not do regarding assigning soldiers to slots on the MTOE (modified table of organization and equipment), and potential promotions.

The battalion executive officer, Major Tabb, was more a meddler than a helper in this effort. When he got a bee in his bonnet, so to speak, Frank Connell was a hard man to dissuade, and in this matter he knew we and we alone were going to have to live with these Puerto Rican soldiers, not the battalion XO. The more we made of them there at Ft Bragg, the better off the unit would be after it arrived at its destination in Vietnam. When we got our hands on their personnel records, just prior to departure from Ft Bragg, we started to assign some of the most deserving to new MOSs (from their former Duty Soldier MOS), in which there was a potential of promotion to E4, and in a few cases, E5. This was not to say that 100% of the newly assigned soldiers (Puerto Rican as well as others) were salt-of-the-earth, pillars-of-the-community types. We had problems, and had to get rid of a few. But in the main, I think most of our filler personnel may have realized they had been assigned to a unit in which they would be treated fairly and well, and as such were willing to meet the officers and NCOs halfway. The interest, and efforts, of our unit commander and first sergeant in giving these guys an even break certainly paid dividends later.

### **Additional Equipment**

Being brought up to full-strength in personnel was only part of the story. Although before this, our personnel strength had been quite low, the unit had nearly all of its MTOE equipment except for vehicles. As soon as we received the authorization, we submitted requests for all missing equipment, and, in coordination with the post Quartermaster, we soon began receiving these items. Our motor pool, which once housed only a very few vehicles, suddenly was jammed with trucks, trailers and other equipment. Some of these vehicles were in a less-than-perfect

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

condition, most notably the laundry trailers. I don't recall the releasing unit, but they were old and not particularly well maintained. As a result, when we got to Vietnam, and began using them nearly 24-hours a day, there were frequent failures.

When one unit is directed to give up a piece of equipment to another unit, there is the tendency to cut the weakest member of the herd. We drew equipment from a number of units on Bragg which were not (yet) alerted for movement. When you are a Corps-level unit, as many of the units were who were not part of the 82nd Airborne Division, and the recipient of the equipment would be a lowly, non-division, non-corps support unit such as ourselves, there were no qualms whatsoever about offering up the weakest member of their herd. And like personnel assigned to fill up empty positions, we had little grounds for rejecting equipment unless it was clearly damaged and/or so incomplete it could not be restored prior to our departure date. One and only one major piece of equipment came to us new - brand new - and that was an M543A1 wrecker, the latest-model of wrecker. But at any rate, we eventually received every single item of authorized equipment.

### **Movement**

From being fully manned and fully equipped at Fort Bragg, came the task of moving everything and everyone to where ever we were going. A petite, brunette lady who I haven't forgotten so far, and may never forget, was Mrs. Truelove. She worked in the post transportation office and was the teacher who instructed me, along with a number of other people, how to prepare documentation and mark equipment for shipment. I became intimately familiar with the DD Form 1384, Transportation Control and Movement Document, because I typed Lord-knows-how many of them. Five or six were required to list, line after line, each vehicle, trailer and CONEX container. Then one per vehicle, trailer or other piece of equipment, and each CONEX. There were 68 or so wheeled vehicles, and 65 CONEXes. Each of the vehicles and CONEXes had to marked a certain way - correctly - neatly - completely. I cut all the stencils myself. And painted the markings on most of the CONEXes and part of the vehicles. A job for a 1st Lt? Maybe not, but early on, I entrusted part of this to someone else, and they screwed it up. While I was typing the TCMDs, etc, I was also running back and forth to transportation for new instructions, or to get questions answered. As the unit supply officer, I was pretty busy arranging transfers of equipment and ensuring other supply tasks were done.

### **Loading Out**

After the shipping documents were finished, and the equipment was packed and marked, it eventually came time to load everything on rail cars for shipment to the port of embarkation (New Orleans), where it would all be loaded on a ship bound for Vietnam. Because I was the unit transportation officer, I was in charge of the loading. Our turn at the railhead came late one week, Thursday or Friday. Our company was not located very far from the railhead, but with all the CONEXes we had, we had a chore getting them to the loading platforms. We began early, probably around 0630 or so. Vehicles were driven from the company, parked, then driven onto the flat cars, braced, blocked and lashed down with heavy wire. CONEXes were loaded onto

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

flatbed trailers at the unit, driven to the railhead and then loaded into gondola cars, then braced and blocked into position so they wouldn't shift.

We worked all day and into the night, finishing around 0130 the next morning. It took us about twenty hours. No one had been seriously injured. There were scrapes, and some bumps and bruises; some strained muscles. But no one broke anything; no one lost a finger, or mashed a foot or an arm. I recall one young soldier I had to yell at who, at around midnight, after having worked for eighteen hours, was getting a little careless with the CONEXes he was loading with a crane. I was some distance from the gondola being loaded, but I began hearing these thumps and bangs, and walked toward their source. As I got closer to the rail car, I saw another CONEX being swung up off the ground, over the top of the gondola, and down onto the floor of the car. As this was happening, the crane operator nearly flattened another soldier in the car, who was acting as a guide, against the side of the car. It was fatigue, pure and simple. A short, sharp comment cured the problem and everything continued on. The yardmaster told me the next day, when I returned to check out everything in the daylight, that our company had, for its size and number of vehicles, loaded out faster and safer, than any he had yet seen. It was good to hear we did such a good job.

### Departure

A year and nine months after my arrival at Fort Bragg, I, along with the rest of the company, boarded three commercial airliners at Pope Air Force Base; flew three separate routes to the West coast, and boarded our ship at Oakland Army Terminal, for our trip - our free, all-expense paid cruise across the Pacific - to the exotic orient. We were part of a buildup that, I daresay, none of us could have dreamed possible.

### Breakup Of My Old Battalion

The battalion headquarters and its two companies were sent to Vietnam, but at different times, and in separate directions. The HQ, 34th, by itself, was sent to a location between Qui Nhon and An Khe, with some other units attached to it. Its primary business became the movement of petroleum from the coast up to Pleiku, not the general support supply business it was organized to do at Fort Bragg. The 223rd, formerly "A" Company, went to the "Rice Mill" area of Saigon, near the docks. It was to perform, if not its total MTOE-mission of supply support, then something near it, running a warehouse operation there. The 59th, my unit, of course went to Cam Ranh Bay. And our former Group headquarters, the 543rd QM Group, also went to Saigon.

### Pacific Voyage

So there I was, about a dozen years after seeing a burned-out tank on the cover of an elementary-level reading magazine, a 1st Lt, with a few month's date-of-rank, assigned to a 'stateroom' with eight of my peers. A compartment we were to share - closely - for a month. The sea trip was worth a short story, at least. The ship, to be as gracious as I can, was a Liberty Ship, whose keel was laid in 1945, at the end of the war. One of the members of our company, PFC Fenstermacher, had sailed aboard it in the early fifties on his way to another little skirmish in Asia, e.g., Korea. The General Leroy L. Tinge was a single-stack Liberty ship, typical of that design.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

During WW II, America, and its allies, were desperate for ships. Liberty ships were built the cheapest, fastest way, to hold the maximum load. Speed was not a prime consideration.

We were told, or perhaps I read, that the usual capacity of such a ship, as far as human cargo was concerned, was 1,800. As I recall, they managed to jam 3,200 of us on board. If 3,200 ordinary people had been shut up in those confines for a month, at least one murder would have occurred in the first week, if not the first day. But I guess we were extraordinary in some respects, as there were no murders. And, despite a dozen or so Army Nurses on board, no rapes either. At least none I ever heard of.

### **Our Ship, The Lt. Gen. Leroy L. Tinge**

But let me return to my "stateroom." I shared a compartment with eight soon-to-be very good companions, all of whom were 1st Lieutenants. It was about eight feet wide; enough for a triple stack of bunks on either wall, with a narrow space between the bunks for someone, emphasis on ONE, to get out of the sack and move around. The length of the compartment was a bit over thirteen feet and less than nine feet wide. That was enough for two tiers of three bunks on the long wall, and a third tier of three on the other.

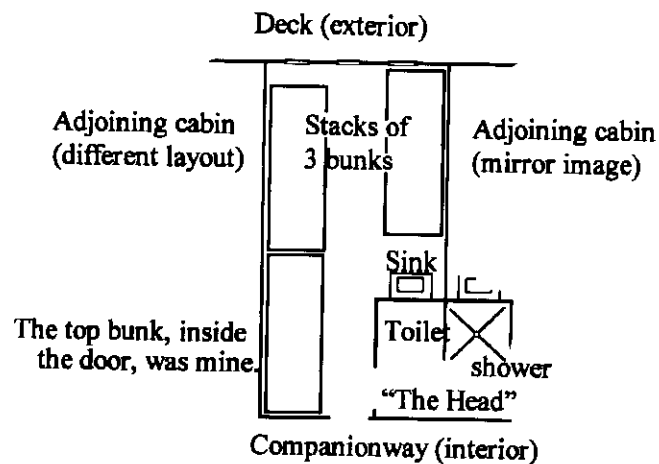
The room was not precisely rectangular, but had a small square cut out of one corner to form half of the shower stall/toilet room. The adjoining compartment was a mirror image of ours, with the same square cut out to form the other half of the shower/toilet room. A basin was fastened to the backside of the wall of the shower/toilet room. Very spacious accommodations - if you like being on the *closest* relations with your fellow man. Actually they were a good bunch. One was a chaplain, who I ran into later in-country; another was a tall, black, Military Intelligence guy named Gilchrist, who I saw two or three years later at Ft Lee, but regrettably never had a chance to talk with. The rest, unfortunately, I've forgotten.

One notable feature of our compartment, and one which evoked much envy from those less fortunate, were the three, yes THREE, portholes. The other lieutenants in my unit, all 2nd Lieutenants, were billeted in a compartment for twelve, which had no portholes at all! Comparisons were often drawn between it and the fabled *Black Hole of Calcutta*.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

### My "Home," From One Home To Another

My bunk was the top one in the first tier, just inside as you entered the door (or whatever they call doors aboard ship). No one could sit straight up on any of the top bunks - unless you were no older than two or three years old. But mine was a little different. About ten inches above my chest, there was a wiring channel, which crossed my bunk at right angles. Parallel to my bunk, about a foot away, and elevated about a foot above it, was a ventilation duct. The wiring channel was of no practical purpose - it was simply a bundle of electrical cables laid in a shallow metal trough - and (for me) having no useful function. The ventilation duct, however, was another matter. Each night, it served as a place to put my boots, and inside my boots, my glasses. Very handy. In cross section, it was about eight inches high and twelve wide. Mine was the only one having extra storage facilities along side.



Each morning we got up one at a time, performing our daily ritual of shaving and minimal wash up. We were allowed a shower every third or fourth day - in cold salt water. Difficult to make a lather with salt water, cold or warm. Each of us had a duffle bag, and a weapon (except the Chaplain). Those of us who had M-14s stacked them in the corners between the head/foot of the bunks and the outside bulkhead. And pretty much forgot about them. Until a couple of weeks into the voyage when I looked for mine and found red rust on the metal parts and green mold on the wooden stock. After that, we saw to our weapons a bit more often. Apart from sleeping, and those times when we were - ahem - feeling a bit under the weather, we spent very little time in the compartment. After getting my "sea legs," I remember a lot of time on deck, talking to first one and then the other, and looking at the ocean. The weather was pretty good, although it became warmer as the trip wore on. Eventually we crossed the International Date Line, but there was no ceremony as there would have been for crossing the Equator. I think we each got a little certificate, but I lost mine some time ago.

In February 1999, I obtained from the Maritime Administration of the Department of Transportation, a copy of the "Vessel Status Card" for the EITinge, and it revealed some interesting facts. The ship was delivered to the Navy (USMC) by the builders (Kaiser Co.) at Richmond, California, on 21 Feb 45. The ship was declared surplus on 29 May 46, but then brought off

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

surplus status with the reserve fleet on 17 Feb 50. On 20 July 50, it was turned over to the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS), then transferred from MSTS custody on 2 July 68 to the Maritime Administration. Title was subsequently transferred to the Waterman Steamship Corporation on 27 Jan 69, and renamed "Robert E. Lee" in September 1969, then renamed a second time on 3 October 1973, as "Robert Toombs." Finally, on 2 May 80, the ship was sold to the Chien Yu Steel Industrial Co., Ltd, to be scrapped in Taiwan.

So thirty-five years after it was delivered, and about fifteen years after our voyage on it, this particular Liberty ship was sold for scrap.

### Activities On Board Ship

It's very easy for me to summarize what we did for four weeks. We read, talked, played cards, ate, and slept - in various mixtures. Duke Soule and Cooper Agent were bridge partners, playing interminable games, day and night. Cooper said if they hadn't had bridge, they might have jumped ship. Many of the games were played sitting on the iron deck of the ship. George Francis taught me to play a simple card game named "Tonk" (if I have the spelling correct). I was not a card player, and its simplicity and speed suited me fine. I also read whatever paperback was available. Two I remember were a book on the underworld mob, and how they took over and ran Las Vegas, and a book titled Black Like Me, written by John Howard Griffin, a white minister who stained his skin to resemble a Negro, and traveled through the South. Instead of a light-skinned black passing for white, this was a white passing for black, and writing of his experiences. I had never read anything like it before, and it had a marked influence on me.

We saw no land until we reached Guam, and that took three weeks. We saw no other ships, no planes, nothing. *Absolutely nothing!* Nothing except sea and sky, and the occasional school of flying fish. That may sound vaguely poetic, but you try it. Admittedly, there are those to whom the ocean has a greater appeal. But I'm not one. I didn't think the ocean could be that empty. Not in the middle '60s. Certainly when Magellan, Drake and all those guys, were doing their thing, but I didn't think it could be that empty in 1965. But it was.

### Another Ship To Vietnam

I learned later that a friend of mine, Don Hargy, also went to Vietnam on a ship, but in two and a half weeks of actual sailing time. Don and I had gone through QMOBC (QM Officer Basic Course) at Fort Lee; in fact he was my roommate in the BOQ. His ship was a standard troop carrier, not a cargo ship fitted with bunks. His odyssey went something like this. His ship left Oakland two days *after* ours, then went (successively) to Hawaii, Japan, and the Philippines, laying over at each stop for *two* days, and arrived in Saigon (I think), two days *before* we arrived at Qui Nhon. Now is that insulting or what? His ship, he told me, had air-conditioning, a swimming pool, and was fit enough for human habitation that it carried mothers with babies. They were disembarking at Hawaii, Japan, and the Philippines.

By contrast, our liberty ship steamed all the way across the Pacific, past Hawaii, to Guam, where we laid over just twenty-four hours, then crawled through the Philippines, finally arriving in Qui Nhon harbor. Then after two days in Qui Nhon, we proceeded southward to Cam Ranh Bay,

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

where we (thankfully) loaded into landing craft, and went ashore at South Beach. The old tub then sailed on to Saigon, releasing the remaining inmates from their misery; sailed north to Korea, where it loaded the South Korean (ROK) Tiger Division on board, and brought them back to Cam Ranh.

### **Layover At Guam**

Our only stop during the "cruise" was at the tiny island of Guam, and for problems with the desalinization unit on board, we might not have made it at all. The layover there was almost exactly twenty-four hours. We docked at about 1600 hours (4:00 PM) one afternoon (I think it was Saturday), and shoved off Sunday afternoon about the same time. After three weeks at sea, for a dyed-in-the-wool landlubber like me, getting onto dry land was welcome in the extreme. The ship's captain, who of course is God on board, wouldn't let everyone off after we tied up. Someone had arranged a beer party for the enlisted troops, but none of the officers were allowed off until sometime after 2000. By that time (I couldn't have been more ready to get off that tub), we were all dressed up in our slightly damp, but still heavily starched khakis (courtesy of Creech Cleaners on Fort Bragg). With a few creases where creases should not have been, we were ready for the Navy Officer's Club. It was dark when we left, and dark when we returned, so no one noticed the ship. We had a subdued good time at the club. I discovered it was possible to call the United States, and so called my mother. Silly thing to do perhaps, but it seemed right at the time. I had no girl friend. My future wife was someone I would meet three years in the future while on leave at home, prior to returning to 'Nam for my second tour.

### **A Missing Ship?**

The next day, in the morning, we were allowed another trip ashore. We went somewhere, I can't remember where; visited what I vaguely recall as a sort of grocery store, and took a taxi ride somewhere. When we returned to the dock area, we set out for the ship. Initially, we thought the damn thing had hoisted anchor, and left without us. We sort of had mixed emotions about that, considering on the one hand, our good fortune not to have to ride the El Tinge again; but on the other, knowing we would be guilty of missing movement, a charge tantamount to desertion. A very serious charge, to be sure. However, as we drew closer to the docks, and began examining an extremely rust-stained old bucket which we absolutely knew was NOT our ship, we saw the name on the stern and sure enough, it was the Lt Gen Leroy L. Tinge. When we boarded her at Oakland, she had been freshly painted, but in the ensuing weeks, her true colors had come through the paint. Astounded was too mild a word to describe our reaction. We had seen signs of rust coming through the paint while on board, but this was ridiculous! It was nothing but rust stains from stem to stern. But we re-boarded her anyway. And were soon to regret it.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

### **Back At Sea**

The first few hours weren't bad. I tried to forestall any re-acquaintance with seasickness by staying on deck while we headed into the weak tail of a dying typhoon. But to no avail. I had to go inside anyway for supper, and by the next day, I was whooping again. Although to my credit, it didn't last as long as the initial bout I suffered for the first few days out of Oakland. Then the engines were throttled back, and we were down to a speed only just sufficient to maintain headway. Something around three or four knots, down from our normal cruising speed of eighteen or so. There was a good reason for this. A typhoon was then stirring up things in the Philippine Straits, and the captain - whether from compassion for his captives, or out of a sense of self-preservation - slowed the ship to avoid the tail of that typhoon.

I wish like anything I'd kept a copy or two of the daily newspaper that was published aboard ship. It gave our distance for the previous twenty-four hours, our average speed, and a few other things of note. By this time we were well down from our normal plodding speed which normally advanced us between 360 to 420 nautical miles daily. Finally, after about 36 hours of this, we regained some momentum and began making about 8 to 10 knots. Thoughts of previous voyages of the El Tinge kept coming back to us.

### **Recent History of The Gen. Leroy L. Tinge**

On her first voyage, after being taken out of mothballs, with the first elements of the 101st Airborne Division - the Screaming Eagles - on board, she sailed as far as Hawaii and no farther. The Leroy L. Tinge was towed back to California, and the 101st had to find other means of getting to the war. On the second attempt, now with part of the 1st Infantry Division - the Big Red One - as her passengers, she sailed as far as the Philippines, but again broke down, leaving the 1st Infantry troops to seek other transportation. Now here we were, approaching the Philippines, slogging along through heavy seas, and having serious doubts. By then the typhoon had moved away to the northwest, far enough to let us through, and past the Philippine Islands, and on to Viet Nam.

### **Arrival At Vietnam**

Our first port of call was Qui Nhon. This was a place I was to see again in about three and a half years, but in late 1965 the harbor had an honest-to-God aircraft carrier parked not far away, and was busily launching jet fighters and prop-driven Douglas Skyraiders on real-live missions. This was hot stuff! Our company commander, Frank Connell, went ashore to visit our former Battalion Commander, LTC Richard T. Bull, whose HQ with the 34th QM Bn was somewhere inland from Qui Nhon. Then, two or three days later, when all who had assignments ashore had gone, we - rather those who were driving the boat - prepared to up anchor and move off to our next stop. There was one problem, however. They couldn't manage to "up" the anchor, and finally had to cut it loose. Then, they had to pry the spare anchor off the deck - it had rusted to the deck - and finally, after the spare had been attached to the anchor chain, we left. Next stop: Cam Ranh Bay, the second-best deep-water harbor in all of the Orient, after Yokohama. Our future home for the next eleven months.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

### **Welcome To Cam Ranh Bay**

Our "advance party" had already been at Cam Ranh for about two weeks. The five of them had been busy since they got there and had succeeded in appropriating a truck for transportation. It was one of the 5-Ton tractors that belonged to the 223rd QM Company, our sister company at Fort Bragg, but which was now in Saigon. Our advance party consisted of Lt Bruce Archinal, CWO John Palmer, a couple of NCOs, and PFC Fenstermacher. They had been assigned a piece of real estate for our billeting area and, if I recall, some, but not all of our eventual operational sites. John had established an operational site at the Army airfield, which was a real postage stamp-size airstrip, and Bruce had been assigned a site for his Maintenance Platoon.

The advance party had made the trip in several stages, spending something like twenty-four hours in the air, flying without pressurization or oxygen at 10 to 12 thousand feet. The Douglas C-124, commonly known as a "Shaky," was a huge, double-decked, piston-engined workhorse from the Fifties. It was made obsolete by Lockheed's very able C-130. Their odyssey was a circuitous route, which had them stopping numerous times for fuel and crew changes, finally depositing them at Tan Son Nhut, near Saigon.

### **Our Surroundings**

As I became acquainted with the area in the next months, I found Cam Ranh peninsular was a generally low piece of land that projected in a generally southerly direction. It seemed about five miles or so long, and maybe a mile and a half wide at its broadest point. The Cam Ranh peninsular was not completely covered with sand, but a large majority of it was. To the East was the South China Sea; to the West, the bay, and beyond that, the mainland of Vietnam; the mouth of the bay was, of course, at the Southern tip. The bay itself was quite large, and very useable for ocean-going ships. Across the bay, was the Special Forces training camp, Dong Ba Thin.

For several months, into early 1966, the way to the mainland was a ferry at My Ca. The ferry was actually a landing craft, an LCM I believe, usually referred to as a "Mike" boat. The distance across was not great, probably less than a half mile, and there were always vehicles on each side waiting to get across. The Mike boat could carry, as a maximum, two 2½-Ton cargo trucks, or some mixture of smaller vehicles and personnel. Sometime in 1966, by at least the Summer, if not earlier, the Mike boat was replaced by a pontoon bridge.

The importance of this crossing was that all of the red laterite dirt used for roads, and the sand required for mixing concrete, had to be transported from the mainland to the peninsular. Apparently it was much too inconvenient, and possibly impractical, for dump trucks and other traffic, to travel the length of the peninsular - north - to go to the source of these materials, and complete the round trip. So once the bridge was in place, the construction of the planned depot complex shifted into high gear, and very large, steel-frame warehouse buildings began to be raised one after another.

The tiny village of Cam Ranh was on the Southwestern tip of the peninsular. This, of course, was an immediate point of interest for every lower-ranking GI around, and the concern for every officer and senior NCO trying to figure out how to keep GIs out of the village. It was a good

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

source of venereal disease and drugs (mostly marijuana at that time), and the scene of too many drunken fights. Curiously, several years after I was stationed at Cam Ranh Bay, I met a Military Police captain who, as a lieutenant, had been involved in trying to break up one of these fights, and had been forced to shoot a soldier who had threatened him with a weapon. That happened a year or two after I had left, and while unfortunate, illustrated - at the extreme - the problems posed by the presence of the village.

Other features of the peninsular were a small rock hill, where a quarry was established; another sand hill, directly at the inner tip of the peninsular, where in WW II, the Japanese army had built a small "fort" to guard the entrance to the bay, and a small group of stuccoed, tiled-roof buildings built by the French during their stay in Indochina. By the time we arrived, a couple of the buildings were used by a part of the headquarters of the 35th Engineer Group, with the rest (about a half-dozen) being a training facility for the Vietnamese Navy.

### **Our New Home**

As we arrived, the thing we had on our mind was a place to sleep. We had not gotten off the ship until after lunch, and so by the time we got everyone off the beach, and up to our part of the cantonment area, it was getting late in the day. Bruce, John and the others had borrowed twenty GP medium tents from the Air Force, and one of them had been set up to serve as their home until we arrived. It stayed where it was, and became the officer's tent. We made improvements in it for the next five or six months, until we moved the entire company to another location in the cantonment area, but it was home.

I remember how very strange it felt, after four weeks of claustrophobic gray-painted steel, to be in the middle of rolling sand dunes, under a broad expanse of sky, sleeping in an open-walled tent. The advance party had scrounged wooden pallets to make a floor and built a "refrigerator" from a discarded oil drum, which they buried in the sand. The "refrigerator" was then filled with some ice blocks, beer, and sodas (more beer than sodas). The ice was covered with rice hulls, and was made from non-potable water. My first beer was probably either a Hamms or a Heineken. I'd never heard of Hamms - I think it came from the Pacific Northwest - but it was cold and wet. John and Bruce had also scrounged some folding cots, and so the first night, wrapped in a blanket, I slept on a wooden and canvas cot, and thought that, for better or worse, this was home for the next eleven months. The troops, in the meanwhile, had paired off with their shelter halves, inflated their air mattresses, and made themselves at home. The next day, we set to work building a company area.

### **Comrades-In-Arms**

We were all together again, a long way from North Carolina. The five who were our advance party, and flown over in a then-old, now-antique, Douglas C-124 Globemaster, and the other 263, who had come by ship.

The officers, my immediate comrades, were Captain Frank M. Connell, our company commander, soon-to-be 1st Lieutenant Bruce Archinal, 2nd Lieutenants Cooper "Coop" Agent, Paul "Duke" Soule, George Francis, and Ed Schlesinger, and Chief Warrant Officer 2 John Palmer.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

Bruce and John were on the advance party, and the rest, with the possible exception of Ed Schlesinger, came over by ship with me. Duke Soule was from Oklahoma; Bruce Archinal from Ohio, "Coop," born in Arkansas, and raised in Oklahoma. Cooper went to school at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where Winston Churchill made his famous "Iron Curtain" speech. Duke was an Oklahoma "Sooner," Bruce went to Ohio State, and took a lot of ribbing from us about the size of OSU's ROTC program. We joked that Ohio State's ROTC program was so big, it was the only one in the United States that had its own cadet Secretary of Defense. George Francis, who was from Texas, I met at Ft Lee, while I was in Rigger school, and he was in QMOBC, before he joined the company at Ft Bragg. George was a graduate of Prairie View A&M.

Cooper Agent was part of an experiment in 1964 where selected ROTC grads were sent directly to their initial assignments without benefit of QMOBC. Coop was not much on peace-time spit 'n polish, as I thought he should have been, and for which I blamed his special program, but when it came to running his platoon in Vietnam, and providing leadership to his troops, he was as good or better than most. He had a lot of initiative, and was an outstanding officer.

Our First Sergeant was a tall, lanky black NCO who was short on conversation, but long on wisdom and influence. SFC Lester Vance - we finally got him promoted to E8 at Cam Ranh - was very dignified, a veteran of the Korean War, and would die of cancer shortly after completing his tour. He was a rock, and I think we would have had a very difficult time running the unit without him. Of course there were others. SSG Ernest Goodno, the mess sergeant. SSG Butler, the supply sergeant, and his able assistant, PFC Norman Fenstermacher. A Caucasian Hawaiian of (apparently rather recent) German descent, SFC Aresta, who while we were at Cam Ranh introduced me to another "Pineapple" who was a Congressional Medal of Honor-winner for action in the Korean War. And there were many others.

PFC Fenstermacher, also one of the advance party, was an interesting man. He was a grey-headed PFC with close to twenty years' service. Fenstermacher had been a first sergeant with an aviation unit, and having become fed up with prima donna airplane drivers, went AWOL. He turned himself in after more than a year, was court-martialed, and spent about a year in Leavenworth, whereupon he was given the opportunity to finish his twenty years. He was assigned to us at Bragg as an E-1, by the time he left Bragg as part of the advance party, he was an E-3, and before he left Vietnam, was back up to Specialist Five. He was very intelligent, and of course with nearly twenty-year's experience, was a very handy guy to have around. On many occasions, while the rest of us were trying to think of the answer to a situation, Fenstermacher already knew the answer, having 'been there, done that.'

### **A Damn Good Unit**

No matter what our experience, I think we all recognized that we were part of a damned good unit. The 59th QM Company had been Company B, 34th Quartermaster Battalion. Before that - while in Germany - was Company B, 56th Quartermaster Battalion. One of our NCOs had been in the unit when it was activated at Ft Lee, and sent to Kaiserslautern, Germany. Three or four were members of the "Big B," as our former commander, Capt Thomas Snyder, had named it,

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

while in Germany as Co B, 56th QM Bn. And another half dozen had been with the unit from its earliest days at Ft Bragg. I joined the unit in February 1964, only about five months after it had arrived at Bragg. We were, in the truest sense of the word, a "unit."

We knew each other. In a combat unit, that is a good and a bad thing; good in that you know who to trust, but bad in that when one of your unit is killed, it's harder to take than if you are all new to one another. But we were a far cry from a combat unit, and the fact that the officers and NCOs knew each other was good for the unit, and good for the new troops assigned to bring us up to strength before deployment.

Our NCOs were experienced in moving a unit, in fact a few were experienced in moving this unit, across an ocean to another continent. As an early-deploying unit, we were allowed to pack our equipment in CONEX containers; large, steel boxes approximately seven feet wide, six feet high, and about ten feet deep. We packed sixty-five of them. Had we been strictly limited to packing only our TO&E equipment, we probably could have gotten by with sixty or fewer. As it was, the extra half dozen or so were loaded with office supplies, blank forms, plywood, lumber, paint, hand tools, repair parts, and a lot of other goodies (including five civilian refrigerators) that experience had taught, or led us to believe, would not be available for several months after our arrival, if then.

### Lucky Us

Arriving on that collection of sand dunes we were to call home for the next four or five months, becoming acquainted with the units around us, and with our next higher HQs, the 504th, it became abundantly clear we had packed wisely. For the first several months, there was little available to any unit, no matter what their need. The only thing we really had to scrounge, i.e., beg, borrow or steal, was tentage. Oh, we did a little trading, a little "midnight requisitioning," just to keep in practice, but when we wanted to build a mess hall for our troops, one that would resist blowing sand, one that would look like something, and make our troops know we cared about them (unlike certain neighbors), one that provided a modicum of comfort, we had the materials. We didn't need to do without. We didn't need to go begging. All Ernie Goodno needed was a little time, and he had a first class, Ft Bragg-style mess hall for his troops.

I realized this even more after returning to the States, and saw units at Ft Lee being activated, organized, equipped, trained and then shipped out in four months. On day one, with these units, there was a small cadre of officers and NCOs; 120 days later, give or take, the "unit" was on its way to Vietnam. No one had known anyone else for longer than four months. With a good bunch of experienced NCOs, this was almost enough time to get the basics, but after a while, when "shake and bake" NCOs were being graduated, it was the blind leading the blind. They were a collection of individuals under one guidon. By 1966 and '67, at Ft Lee, I thought about the 59th, and realized how lucky I had been to go to Vietnam with that unit.

### Settling In

The next few days after arrival, we erected the rest of the twenty GP Mediums, establishing an orderly room, supply room, mess hall, and billets for the troops. Also, even though our equip-

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

ment and vehicles had not yet arrived, we began selecting and setting up our operational sites. As was typical of a lot of support units deployed to Vietnam, that few of them did their assigned TOE missions. The 59th QM Company was organized as a general support unit, with a mission to back up three or four direct support QM units. However, there were no DS units there, so we *became* DS. We located our Supply and Maintenance Platoons, side by side, on one of the main roads. The Rigger Section, as I said, was located at the Army Airfield, and our Laundry Platoon was located just a few meters down the road from them. Initially, there were few units there. In addition to the 59th, there was one other QM company, the 524th, a petroleum unit.

### **Add-Ons**

The organization of the Army, I suppose, is never quite right to deal with new situations (read wars) that arise. With us, this was realized with the addition of several disparate detachments for “rations, quarters, admin and military justice,” as the attachment orders read. We gained two finance detachments, one fairly good size, with two or three officers including a captain, the other only a few soldiers with one lieutenant; three QM detachments, two of them small one- and a two-man MHE repair detachments, and a bakery detachment. This swelled our compliment to something over 400. Our company commander was on his way to becoming a “battalion” commander! The most welcome of these, as far as our mission was concerned, were the three MHE repairmen, who we put to work in our own Maintenance Platoon. The Finance people, of course, went to work augmenting the finance office for Cam Ranh. And the bakery detachment, naturally, went to work baking bread for all Army personnel at Cam Ranh. Some of their output may have even gone, officially or unofficially to the Air Force, up the peninsular.

Fresh-baked bread did wonders for the soldier’s morale. I recall reading a book on WW II in grade school or high school which addressed the subject of Army mobile bakeries and their considerable effect on the morale of the troops in the foxholes. The canned “bread,” if it could be called that, that was included in some of the C-ration meals, was a far cry from what you normally think of bread. Plainly put, it was no kind of substitute for the real thing. An Army mobile bakery, when fully functional, was capable of a prodigious output. Army bakers always seemed to take pride in their work, and the availability of fresh loaves for the unit mess halls was a big plus in the GI’s daily fare.

### **Sister Units**

Some other support units at Cam Ranh in September 1965 were Ordnance companies. There were two ammunition companies, the 606th and 611th, and three automotive (as opposed to tracked vehicle) maintenance companies. There were the previously-mentioned Engineer battalions, the 87th and 864th, and a growing number of Transportation Corps units.

Just over a sand dune from us was the 524th QM Company which had arrived in July from Fort Lee, Virginia. We ate with them for a couple of weeks until we had begged, borrowed, and scrounged enough to put our own mess hall together. Their food was not impressive. I had eaten food like theirs in other mess halls, mess halls run by indifferent mess sergeants, and inept, uncaring cooks; I guess I was just too used to Ernie Goodno and his crew. Once we began operating our own mess hall, things improved considerably.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

In 1965, whole units were moved to Vietnam. Replacements would later fly, but units stayed together on ships. The men went on troop ships, the equipment on cargo ships. *Huge* quantities of unit equipment and expendable supplies were moved from the continental United States (CONUS), to various points along the Vietnamese coast. Therefore, one of the largest logistical considerations initially, if not THE largest, was getting equipment and supplies off the ships, onto the shore, and then to the owning units or to depots for eventual consumption. To that end, many Transportation Corps (TC) units were required. A list of these TC units deployed just to Cam Ranh Bay, began arriving in mid-65, and kept on arriving, as follows:

Designation	Previous Post	Arrival Date
123rd Trans Co (Terminal Service)	Ft Eustis, VA	30 May 65
347th Trans Co (LARC)	Ft Story, VA	30 May 65
97th Trans Co (Heavy Boat)	Ft Eustis	31 May 65
344th Trans Co (LARC)	Ft Story	2 June 65
155th Trans Co (Tml Svc)	Ft Story	4 June 65
670th Trans Co (Medium Truck)	Ft Hood, TX	22 July 65
410th Trans Co (Tml Svc)	Ft Benning, GA	31 Aug 65
82nd Trans Co (Amphibious General Support)	Ft Story	3 Sept 65
10th Trans Bn (Terminal)	Ft Story	19 Sept 65
545th Trans Co (Light Truck)	Ft Campbell, KY	18 Oct 65
116th Trans Co (Tml Svc)	Okinawa	16 Dec 65
870th Trans Co (Tml Svc)	Ft Story	18 Feb 66
24th Trans Bn (Terminal)	Ft Eustis	24 June 65
36th Trans Bn (Motor Transport)	Ft Bragg	31 July 66
124th Trans Command (Terminal)	Ft Eustis	1 Oct 66
57th Trans Bn (Mtr Transp)	Ft Riley, KS	1 Oct 66
500th Trans Gp (Mtr Transp)	Ft Campbell	18 Oct 66

As can be seen from this list, units came from a number of locations, but prominent in the list are those from Ft Story and Ft Eustis, both of which were Transportation Corps installations.

The Quartermaster Corps, along with the Ordnance Corps, were responsible for receipt, storage and issue of supplies and equipment, but if the materiel didn't get off the ships that brought it, all the QM and Ordnance types in the world were useless. At one time, in either December 1965 or January 1966, we counted 36 ships in the harbor waiting to be unloaded. And I'm not talking about "boats" waiting to off loaded, I'm talking about "ships" - *large* ships. There were cargo ships and tankers, and all of them had supplies and equipment on board that was desperately needed on shore.

### A Lack of Piers

The reason so many ships were anchored in Cam Ranh Bay, was because there was a critical lack of piers to which the ships could draw up to for off-loading. When we arrived in late August, there was only one pier, the one the French had built years before. The Army soon began putting down pilings - great steel pipes three or four feet in diameter - assembling what was known as a DeLong pier. It was prefabricated, as opposed to the stone and mortar pier the

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

French had built, and was ready for use in little over a month. The first was built adjacent to the French pier, and was followed closely by a second, then a third around toward South Beach. Meanwhile, work began on a POL jetty some distance up the bay, and farther still, another pier exclusively for unloading ammunition.

But for the moment, until these piers became operational, only two ships could be off-loaded at the French pier at one time. Everything else was "lightered" from ship to shore using amphibious LARC V vehicles. Later, larger and larger versions known as LARC Xs, and LARC XVs came into use. But it was not until the DeLong piers, with their massive cranes, became operational did the process of off-loading ships take on any semblance of efficiency.

### **Too Many Models - Too Few Parts**

Like the Engineers, the Transportation people were under tremendous pressure to get the job done. And like the Engineers, they seemed somewhat ill-prepared, and ill-equipped to do it. That didn't stop them, however. They worked round the clock, and within a few months, were on top of the problem. They drove their forklifts into the ground, running them around the clock. There were far too many makes and models in-country - I think the Army Materiel Command (AMC) found was 165 different makes and models - and so it was impossible to stock repair parts for this many different pieces of MHE. Probably because there were only small amounts of money for procurement of them at any given time, the Army, over a number of years, had built up a fairly large, very mixed, inventory of mechanical handling equipment. A lot of it was "commercial" type lifts, because they were used at CONUS installations, in a very civilized environment. Then the immensity of Vietnam came along, and (I imagine) anything and everything with wheels and a set of hydraulically-operated forks was put on a boat, and sent across the Pacific. This was the mish mash of makes and models the Transportation and ammunition units had to work with, and we - the Quartermaster maintenance units - had to support.

### **A Long Range Solution**

After a fact-finding visit by its four-star commander, AMC responded with a decree that the number of different models of MHE would be reduced to six! As the existing equipment became inoperable, they would be scrapped instead of repaired. For us, that was music to our ears, because we were the ones struggling to obtain the spare parts, or adapt parts from other vehicles to fit. But the fact remained that a huge amount of cargo was waiting to be moved from one place to another, and then moved again, and again, and all we had to do the job was what was there at that time. But after a few months, the new "standard" models began arriving, and put into service. It would take years before all the old MHE was eliminated and replaced by the new standard models. I don't know that it ever did, but those kind of sweeping changes only happen when a major conflict, lasting several years occurs.

### **The 6,000 Pound Lift, By Otis**

A good example of the existing type of forklift, of a type invaluable to our terrain, was the 6,000 pound rough terrain forklift, manufactured by Otis Elevator. In contrast to a commercial forklift, which usually has only one or two hydraulic cylinders to raise and lower the forks, the rough terrain forklift had two cylinders to raise and lower the boom, two more to extend the

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

forks, another to move the forks from side to side, more to cause the entire body of the forklift to tilt to right or left, and they may have been a few more I've forgotten. It was a nightmare of hydraulic complexity, but one which was absolutely essential for working without hardstand. Commercial forklifts could roll around on small tires because they worked on concrete floors or blacktop hardstand. Commercial forklifts only needed to raise and lower the forks because they were always level, and the only hydraulic movement required was up and down. The driver could maneuver the entire lift back and forth to set pallets in position, or pull them off.

The type of terrain with which the Transportation Corps operators had to cope at Cam Ranh was loose sand - requiring large, high-floatation tires - which was anything but level. Pierced steel planking (PSP) was laid down as it was available, but it was always in short supply, and because it was laid directly over the sand, it soon became as undulating as the sand. Rough terrain forklifts were the only answer until large areas of hardstand could be paved, and large warehouse buildings with concrete floors erected. All of which the Engineers were frantically trying to accomplish, but there simply was not enough time, soldiers, equipment, or materiel to do it all immediately.

The Otis Elevator company had, at one time, received a government contract to build 6,000 pound (lifting capacity) rough terrain forklifts. The contract was for a set number of units, with probably a corresponding number of repair parts, and when Otis had produced that many lifts, with that many repair parts, they got out of the forklift business and went back to building elevators. As a result, when Vietnam came along, these forklifts were a number of years old, and perhaps never seen the kind of use to which they were subjected by soldiers doing a real life, round-the-clock job of moving cargo. And so these forklifts did the best they could, and then began breaking down. It was a pretty good piece of equipment. I had seen 6,000 R/Ts in use in Georgia and South Carolina in 1964, during the test of the 11th Air Assault Division, and they performed well. But any piece of mechanical equipment can only be used so long and so hard (without time for proper maintenance) until it breaks down. These lifts had simply been driven into the ground because there was always another pallet of something to be moved, and not enough time for the operators to pull routine maintenance on them.

One particular failure-prone part of the early models was the support bracket attached to the left side of the front axle for the hydraulic cylinder that tilted the lift from right to left and back again. Otis initially had not designed it with enough "meat," and so it bent or broke under heavy usage. They apparently learned this, and later models had a different, reinforced bracket. But many forklifts had never had the old, weak bracket replaced with the newer, stronger one. And so our Maintenance Platoon had several rough terrains in its lot dead lined for that one reason. The stronger bracket was out of production, and the platoon was without the means to fabricate stronger brackets.

### **Yankee Ingenuity**

Two examples of how we fixed MHE with what was at hand included substituting a 5-ton truck engine for the blown up standard engine of a 10,000 pound rough terrain forklift, and substituting a steering tie rod from a ¾ Ton cargo truck for the bent tie rod of a 15,000 pound Hyster

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

commercial forklift. It was controlled cannibalization of hydraulic cylinders from those Otis 6,000 pounders with broken lift brackets, to other 6,000 pounders with good brackets. These were "field fixes;" repairs that GI mechanics, by virtue of their ingenuity and indefatigable attitude, took what was available and made it work. It wasn't "by the book," but it worked, and it returned precious equipment to their operators so they could move more supplies and equipment.

### **Our Leaders (?)**

The 504th Field Depot, which was our initial higher headquarters, and would later become the basis of Cam Ranh Bay Support Command, had come from Fort Lee, Virginia and was commanded by a senile colonel named Morrison. (He was also senior, but mainly he was senile.) He had some really good senior captains, junior majors and lieutenant colonels who did all the work, and saved whatever face the 504th had. (One of the majors, named Davis, I would later work very closely with.) During my time at Cam Ranh, I completed two years' service in November 1965, and was still the "rompin' stompin' airborne troop," or so I thought. I recall one day seeing him (Morrison), outside the 504th HQ building, one of the few wooden structures that had been put up. I was some distance from him, he was hatless, and between his height (he was about 6'4") and his white hair, I had no trouble recognizing him. I whipped off a smart, airborne salute and bellowed out "Morning, Sir," (or "Afternoon, Sir"). In return, I received the greeting "Hi, boy," and a wave of his hand. I was flabbergasted. I couldn't believe a "full bull" would *wave* at another officer and say, "Hi, boy." As I said, I think he was senile. That opinion was shared by my company commander. We were not terribly enamored of our new higher headquarters.

### **Hanging Out Our "Shingle"**

Until our equipment and vehicles arrived, I didn't have a great deal to do. Since I had repainted our company sign at Fort Bragg, and set off a wave of one-upmanship painting/building in the Battalion, I got the idea to construct and paint a company sign there. I found an intact piece of 3/4 inch marine plywood, four feet by eight feet, and decided to use the whole thing. We had brought a lot of paint with us from Bragg, so that was not a problem. I gave it several coats of primer, probably four at least, and the edges got six or eight coats. I knew how plywood could split and peel at the edges, so I wasn't taking chances. The winter monsoon rains had already begun and I wanted this thing to last. My company sign at Bragg had been my pride and joy, and this one was going to be bigger, and a whole lot better.

I mixed what I thought was a proper shade of Quartermaster Buff, and put about three coats of that on. (This sign was NOT going start coming apart in the wet from lack of a protective coating!) At the top, in large letters, I painted **59th QM Co Fld Maint & Svc (GS)**. Under that, in four groupings, I put the previous locations of the company, and the dates, along with a representation of the shoulder patch worn while at each location.

The unit had been activated at Fort Lee sometime in 1959, I think; then moved to Kaiserslautern, Germany, in 1961. From Kaiserslautern, where it was Co B, 56th QM Bn, it returned to CONUS, at Fort Bragg, in late 1963. I joined it in February 1964, of course, so I knew the history intimately from then on. So for each of these periods, I put the geographic location on the first line, and the from-to dates on the second. I alternated the location of the shoulder patch

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

from right to left. I think I may have started the entries with the shoulder patch on the left side, for the Fort Lee entry, then put it on the right side of the Kaiserslautern entry, back to the left for Fort Bragg, and on the right again for Cam Ranh Bay. These four lines were centered between a very large MACV patch on one side and the Quartermaster symbol, the wheel, surmounted by an eagle, with crossed sword and key imposed on the wheel on the opposite side. It was an impressive sign. And because of the many coats of primer and paint, it never showed any signs of water damage, although it did fade from the sun.

But I had to mount it on something. Because we were in the orient, I chose a Japanese-style "gate" with slanted uprights and a cross piece at the top which extended past the uprights. It was crude, and inaccurate, but in spite of that, it looked right. I somehow found a very heavy wooden beam, nicely weathered, and long enough for the cross piece. It was, I recall, a four by eight, about twelve feet long. I then located two four by fours for the uprights. I then made mortises in the bottom of the 4X8, and tenons at the tops of the 4X4s. John Palmer, I believe, contributed some pieces of chain and some shackles to suspend the sign from the cross piece. We erected it some distance from the road, on a little hillock, so it would be visible for a long way off. It was quite a piece of work. I have only one regret - I never took a picture of it. In those days, I was not the camera buff I later became (nor did I have any appreciation of the value of ordinary events that would become part of our history).

### **Capt Frank Connell, Detective**

We had been without our equipment for some weeks, and the powers that be were getting antsy for us to get to work, just as we were. CPT Connell started investigating. With the help of a friend in Saigon, he narrowed the search down to three possible ships our equipment could be on, then eliminated two of the three. The one he believed held our cargo was in Qui Nhon harbor, but was scheduled to off load its cargo, and depart for Da Nang and on to Okinawa. According to transportation sources, its manifest said it contained PX supplies, but Frank, not believing that, flew to Qui Nhon.

In Qui Nhon, he encountered a TC captain who told him he couldn't go out to the ship because it wasn't his cargo. Capt Connell found a LARC driver willing to take him out. After some fast talking and a short argument with one of the crewmen, he went on board, and down into the hold. Sure enough, there were our vehicles and equipment, proved by the markings we had applied at Ft Bragg months before. Our trucks and trailers, our other equipment and our CONEXes - it was all there. And all of it would have been on its way to Okinawa had Frank not been persistent. After finding "the goods" in the hold, he asked to look at the manifest. True to the information given him, it did show PX supplies, but immediately after, it listed all our cargo. He then returned to shore, cornered the TC captain, demanded to see his commander, and when refused again, forced his way past into the battalion commander's office. Once inside the commander's office, Frank laid out the whole nasty tale. The battalion commander applied some reason, and three days later the ship with our stuff arrived at Cam Ranh.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

### Arrival Of Our Equipment

Had our equipment gone to Okinawa, Lord knows what would have happened to it. We probably would have gotten what they didn't want, which would have been equipment for which they saw no use, and maybe some of the CONEXes with repair parts. But our "goodies," so carefully hoarded and packed away, most, if not all, the standard cargo vehicles, the wrecker, and the machine shop van, might never have made their way back to their rightful owners. Except for one CONEX container that went astray (and which we never did locate), everything else arrived. Proving one of the corollaries to Murphy's Law, which might read, "In the shipment and/or handling of any group of items, the item which is the newest and most valuable, or most irreplaceable, will be the one item lost or damaged beyond repair," was the loss of our one and only wrecker: the M543A1.

### Our One Loss - But What A Loss

We were authorized a wrecker because of the mission of our maintenance platoon, which repaired, among many other things, forklifts and other items of materiel handling equipment (MHE). As luck would have it, the wrecker was the only major item we lost. It happened after our equipment arrived offshore in Cam Ranh Bay, and was being pulled up out of the hold to be loaded on one of the landing craft which, together with LARC Vs, were the principle means of getting cargo to the beach. One of the four hooks at the end of the cables attached to the lifting shackles of the vehicle straightened out. That shifted the weight to the remaining three cables and hooks, and it simply wasn't enough to support the weight. The wrecker, which had just cleared the top deck, before it would be swung over the side and lowered to the landing craft, fell back through the cargo hatch, all the way to the bottom of the ship. One of our company, who was there, said the noise was incredible. Why it didn't crash through the bottom of the ship is a small wonder. Our poor wrecker, now in pieces, was retrieved from the hold of the ship and brought ashore.

The wrecker was really pitiful-looking. It sat there sway-backed on the sand because the rivets in the frame had been sheared (the frame was made of two channels per side, overlapped in the middle and riveted). The ring mount, on which the boom rotated, was broken in three places and off the vehicle. The boom itself was lying alongside it. The ring gear was approximately an inch and a half thick, and perhaps two inches wide, not counting the teeth, which were at least a half inch deep, and it had broken *completely apart* in three places. Incredible! We decided the power train, consisting of the engine, transmission, drive shafts and both rear axles, were not salvageable. During the fall, the vehicle had turned to strike the bottom of the ship tail-first, which resulted in placing the power train in a condition of extreme compression.

I don't recall the price of a new M543A1 at that time, but in less than a second, it had been turned into a very heavy, very expensive mass of scrap metal. We were absolutely devastated. It had been the pride of the company and especially the Maintenance Platoon. Virtually everyone in the unit knew of it - almost the only new vehicle we had been issued, the only one of it's kind in the unit, a piece of equipment that was very nearly indispensable to MHE repair, and now it was

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

gone. We, of course, requested another, but it was fully nine months before we received a replacement, and then it was not a new vehicle, in fact it was not an "A1," only an M543.

Because we were a "Field Maintenance and Service" unit, the Supply and Maintenance Platoons were co-located because the Supply Platoon supported the Maintenance Platoon with its parts, and were our main customer. The repair parts warehouse of the Supply Platoon, and the repair shops of the Maintenance Platoon covered about as much real estate as the company billeting and admin area.

Whoever had been in charge of such things at the time (probably someone in the 504th Depot headquarters, although the function of real estate allocation surely passed over to the new provisional Cam Ranh Bay Depot after it became operational), showed our advance party where the maintenance area would be set up. Like nearly all operational sites on Cam Ranh, it was a sand lot. Not the kind kids play baseball on, but a roughly rectangular patch of sand that would have served well as a nice ocean-side beach. Except we were supposed to establish a small repair parts warehouse on this foundation of sand, and repair shops to repair everything from lanterns and typewriters to commercial and rough terrain forklifts.

### **We're Not In Europe, Folks**

According to theory, since most of the theory was focused on a European-style war, our company would be situated well to the rear, and make use of such buildings as were available. Therefore, we had a minimal authorization for tentage, in line with our theoretical deployment (in Europe). But we weren't in Europe, and we were short of tents. So we began scrounging. Long story, short version, we came up with sufficient tents, tarpaulins ("tarps") and lumber to build a makeshift warehouse and office for the Supply Platoon, and enough maintenance tent sections to begin a shelter for the forklift repair shop. A maintenance tent was an aluminum frame, in sections to be assembled, that looked like the skeleton of a WW II Quonset hut. As time passed, we scrounged more and more sections until we had a "maintenance tent" about 50 yards long, or more.

### **Thank God For PSP**

But what, you may ask, about all that sand? The answer was pierced steel planking, or "PSP." Remember your basic WW II documentary of the Pacific island airfields? The ones the SeaBees built? Remember the long funny-looking flat, rectangular pieces with all the holes? That was PSP, and when Vietnam rolled around, the Department of Defense still had tons and tons of it. It was packaged twelve sheets to the bundle; eleven full sheets and two half sheets. One man in reasonably good shape could lift, and carry, a half sheet a few yards. A full sheet took two men. That was what we used to control the sand - to some degree.

### **The Sand**

This is a good place to describe the sand at Cam Ranh. I devote these lines to that purpose because the sand at Cam Ranh had a great deal of nuisance value, but little other value. It was very fine, almost as fine as talc. Well, not quite, but the grains were round, not angular. That meant it was worthless as aggregate for concrete. There we were, sitting on God knew how

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued

many cubic yards, how many tons, of sand, and you couldn't make concrete out of it! But it was fine enough to blow into anything, the slightest crevice, with very little breeze to propel it. Just the thing for a automotive maintenance repair shop to built on, right? Oh yes, with all those sensitive moving parts, engines that had to be torn down and rebuilt, hydraulic cylinders that had to be adjusted, and kept spotlessly clean. Oh yeah, that sand was great.

When walking in it, on the flat, up hills, down hills, one had to develop a whole new style of walking. It was so loose, it was almost literally a case of two steps forward, one step back. The secret, I learned, was to take little short steps. That seemed to work. Long strides were not the answer. Drivers ruined clutches in weeks. Over-enthusiastic drivers would rev up the motor, drop the clutch, and sit there with the driving wheels juddering, doing terrible things to the drive train. The weak link was the clutch, and an insensitive driver could burn one out in a matter of weeks if not days.

When dry, it was very easy to get a vehicle stuck in it. When wet, really wet, it mimicked quicksand. Left parked on it, vehicles, with the help of the wind, sank into it so steadily they had to be moved every three or four days lest they become so mired they had to be dug out by shovel-wielding GIs. Forklift wouldn't run because it needed an engine? Didn't matter, it had to be towed from its parking spot, and repositioned, or it sank. During the monsoon season, it didn't rain all the time, but the wind blew. *All* the time. When the wind found a solitary CONEX container in the open, or even several grouped together, the wind blowing around the CONEX would vacuum the sand away on the lee side, and the CONEX would topple over. No one had to push; the wind and sand took care of that.

### **The Shop Area**

But to get back to the PSP: we laid bundle after bundle. As soon as we could get more, we laid that too. After a while, we had put down close to the equivalent of a football field, and still wanted more. No one had any ideas about the best way, so we just laid it directly on top of the sand. We tried to level the sand the best we could, but lacking graders or dozers, and being pushed for time, we just laid it out, piece by piece, hooking it together as we went along.

We laid most of ours at night. There were two reasons basically. One, it was heavy, back-breaking labor. During most of the time we were putting it on the ground, it was hot. And when it was hot, it was really hot. Everyone already had a job to do, and during the regular duty day, they were doing it. As much under cover as possible. At night, close to midnight and later, it was as cool as it was going to get, and so we waited until then to lay PSP. The second reason was that during the day these big thick sheets of steel were literally too hot to handle. Lying in the sun, the PSP soaked up heat and became too hot to touch even with two or three pairs of leather gloves on. A few hours after the sun went down, it was simply warm, and easy to handle. With some flood lights that were part of the Maintenance Platoon's standard equipment, we could lay PSP for two or three hours, and cover a fair amount of sand. Or said another way, we laid all the PSP that had been issued at one time by a stingy supply system to a unit greedy for the stuff.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

Someone in the Air Force knew a better way. Simple really, when you saw what they'd done. They graded the stuff flat, laid burlap over the sand, then poured "penaprime" (I don't know if that's all one word or two hyphenated) over the burlap. Penaprime was a sort of heavy oil, or thin asphalt. Only then did they lay down the PSP. Between the burlap, the penaprime, and the weight of the PSP, the sand pretty much stayed where it was, not blowing around. Neat method, but we were ignorant of the process when we began laying our first PSP, and didn't have the resources or the time after we had gotten underway.

Concrete, of course, would have made a much better floor under the elongated maintenance tent, but remember our sand wasn't suitable for making concrete. Any and every concrete pad, for anything, was mixed using sand "imported" from the mainland. Yes! Sand worthy of making concrete was trucked in from across the bay, from the mainland! Ludicrous. Perhaps before the US Army arrived, this influenced the Vietnamese to use it only for a penal colony, and a leper colony. And then there were priorities. First priority was the new depot; floors for the huge new metal buildings they were constructing. Second was also floors, floors for the new semi-permanent troop billets, and unit admin buildings in the new containment area. Floors for unit sites, that in the eyes of the hierarchy were completely temporary right from the start, were not in the plan. But we were not privy to the grand plan, and so we groveled around in the sand until they told us to tear it down, and move to the new depot.

### **Barbra**

The first time I heard Barbra Streisand was from a 5" reel-to-reel, portable SONY tape recorder at Cam Ranh Bay. I'd never heard a voice like that before. I'd developed a strong liking for Joan Baez, whose voice was the purest I knew. I'd bought one or two of her records, and played them over and over at Ft. Bragg. She had a voice as pure and cutting as crystal. But here was a girl from *New Yawk*. Except for her picture on the tape box, I didn't know, and wouldn't know what she looked like until I got back to the States months later, finally seeing her on TV, most likely the Ed Sullivan show. Barbra Streisand had a voice that could blow you away. A lot of what she sang was old stuff, songs from the 30s and 40s, but no one ever sang them the way Barbra did. It was amazing that this clunky looking grey box, with the flimsy brown plastic tape could produce such music. But what was even more amazing was the sound of her voice.

A lieutenant that Duke knew had a portable (if you call about 75 pounds portable) SONY tape recorder. Duke soon bought one, and not long after, I bought one. A few months later came tape decks that required an amplifier, and separate speakers, but this was all one unit. I still have it, as a matter of fact. I haven't played it in years; it's probably rusted solid inside. But there in our tents, on those sand dunes, we were introduced to Barbra Streisand, that funny girl from New Yawk. God, could she sing! I think if I could pick one female singer to hear for the rest of my life, to the exclusion of all others, it would be Barbra.

### **A Little Blue Generator Named Onan**

One of the many, many "lessons learned" concerned the great numbers of gasoline- and diesel-powered generators used. We used generators primarily for lights, but also, as far as the 59th QM Company was concerned, to power some of our repair equipment. But as most every-

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

one used them for lights, both in their operational areas and their billets, generators were items of equipment which we depended on like no other army. Being accustomed to (and in some cases, demanding) twenty-four hour electricity, some units destroyed generators like they were going out of style. We had some, but as we were quick to learn, not all generators are created equal(ly). From this distance of years, I recall there seemed to be little relation between power producing capability and longevity, or between the type fuel which powered it and longevity, or any other combination of mechanical or design characteristics and longevity.

We had 1.5, 5, 10 and 15 kw, gas-powered generators; 10, 20 and 30 kw diesel-powered units. Each was a "military standard" generator. The ones which were "skid-mounted" (as opposed to trailer-mounted), were encased in round- or square-tubular frames, and generally beefed-up to a fair-thee-well. They were shrouded and protected from who knows what. And, of course, they were all painted OD (olive drab).

The secret to keeping them in running condition, of course, was tender loving care, and plenty of rest for the things. That effort yielded mixed results. As above, there seemed to be little relationship between any one characteristic, and longevity. Likewise, some generators responded well to TLC, some did not.

After the 59th had been at CRB for about eight months (and the US Army, about a year) a compact little power-producer was introduced. It was painted a sort of robins-egg blue and looked strangely like a generator, but was *much* quieter, and *much* simpler than anything we had seen before. It had, I believe, one instrument - a fuel gauge. And that was in unit with the gas tank cap. A rod (sensor) extended down from the gas cap, and this contraption told you how much fuel was left. It was quiet; it was not adjustable, or tuneable - it just ran. Which rhymes with Onan.

Setting one up was simplicity itself. One person put it in place (light weight, you see), pushed or pounded the ground rod in the ground, attached the ground cable, put gasoline in the tank, connected the power cable to it, pulled the rope and stood back. It would quickly settle into a soft quiet purr, and would run until it ran out of gas, or was shut off. Gosh! Probably designed for the Peace Corps - not the 'War Corps.' But we (all the Army at CRB) only got a few. As soon as industry caught up with producing military standard generators and/or the depots began rebuilding all the ones we burned up, we began seeing more of the old four-man (to carry) OD, Mil Std generators, and we got back to burning them up as before. So much for progress.

### Other Experiments

As I was to learn much later, Vietnam (as I guess any war zone is) was a vast playground and test bed for the researchers, scientists, and other experimenters of the Army. Some of these experiments worked quite well, others more or less well, and as always, some were dismal failures. One that seemed to my untutored eyes to be a fairly solid success were some "trick" tires. One particular 3/4 ton truck - usually driven by an Ordnance major - rode on a set of what appeared to be *airplane* tires. Big, round (in cross section), barely-treaded soft tires that worked beautifully in dry sand. Not sure how they worked in wet sand (which might have been called gritty mud),

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

because I never saw the 3/4 on anything but dry, sunny days. The tires were a much smaller version of what the LARCs wore, and they moved over the sand with amazing agility and speed. But, I suppose the same theory for ordinary land-bound vehicles was just too radical.

### **A Promise of Wings**

In 1965, soldiers on jump status - those assigned to airborne units, in airborne slots - were still required to make the minimum quarterly administrative parachute jump to maintain their jump pay. With the 101st Airborne Division then in country, plus the Special Forces, and all the other odds and sods here and there, that meant tying up aircraft from time to time for missions that had nothing to do with executing the war effort. Both Army and Air Force aircraft were used to provide this quarterly parachute jump simply to ensure these soldiers were paid their \$55 or \$110 (depending on enlisted or officer). Once or twice I saw drops being made up the peninsular, and assumed they were members of the 101st.

Across the bay, a Special Forces Detachment B-51, ran the Vietnamese Special Forces Training Center at Dong Ba Thin. They trained Vietnamese Special Forces (Lac Luong Dac Biet, or LLDB), and CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) personnel. Part of this training was for airborne qualification, as well as other Special Forces techniques. Before the arrival of the main body of the 59th, CWO John Palmer had made contact with them seeking a way to keep himself and his soldiers on jump pay. (John had a small 14-man Rigger section in the company whose normal mission was repair of parachutes and aerial delivery items.) He had come to us at Ft Bragg from the 1st SF Group on Okinawa. I remember when he reported in, still wearing his green beret, with the yellow 1st SF flash. He told me that not only could his people make admin jumps to keep them on jump pay, they would also get their Vietnamese jump wings through the auspices of the SF training center.

Because I'd completed Rigger school a few months before we were deployed, I was hot to keep jumping. John said I could jump too even though I was not in an airborne slot, and not on jump status. I was pretty happy about that. I would have not only my US jump wings from Ft Benning, and my Rigger badge from Ft Lee, I would also have a pair of Vietnamese jump wings. The front of my fatigues were going to be full of patches!

We began going to Dong Ba Thin in October or November. The annual monsoons had already started, so we never knew for sure if we would hit a break in the weather that would allow us to get in a jump. The trip was made by deuce and a half, up the inner coast of Cam Ranh, to the ferry, wait our turn, then across, and on to Dong Ba Thin. I made one or two trips that proved fruitless, it was raining when we left, the weather never broke while we were on the other side, and we rode home in the rain. The first jump I made was sometime in late November.

### **Easy Jump**

That day, as with most days, we were to jump from a UH-1, "Huey" helicopter. Compared to the large, fixed-wing, cargo aircraft of the Air Force, the C-119, the C-130, and long before, the C-124, a Huey was super easy. It was even easier than the DeHavilind Otter from which I had jumped in Rigger school at Ft Lee. With the Huey, like the Otter, there was virtually no wind

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

blast. You sat on the floor, hung your feet over the side, and sort of pushed off in a sort of lurching fall over the side. You had to give it enough effort to miss the landing skids, but that was all it took. You fell almost straight down, and with the T-10 parachute, there was little opening shock. A piece of cake. Drop altitude was 1,500 feet instead of the usual 1,250 which was the standard altitude for administrative jumps from fixed-wing aircraft.

The drop zone (DZ) at the Dong Ba Thin training center was a large piece of ground that at this time of year (the monsoon season) was covered with thick grass, and inhabited by several water buffalo. There were a few bomb craters, which due to the rains were filled with water. It was long and wide, an easy target to hit; an altogether innocuous and harmless DZ, if you didn't come down on a water buffalo. With a break in the weather that promised to last a few hours, we got our parachutes and helmets on, and loaded on the helicopter. With the bulky parachutes on our backs, and the seats removed, there was room for only five of us on each load. Here in Vietnam, with the Army driving the plane, there was none of this minimum flying time crap that the Air Force employed. Time was of the essence.

### **The Routine**

For the pilot, it was take off, climb to altitude, line up with the DZ according to the smoke grenade on the ground, let the idiots-who-jumped-out-of-perfectly-good-airplanes off, then swing around, land, and do it all over again. For the jumpers, it was board the helicopter, make sure everyone was attached to the steel cable rigged on the floor as a static line, ride a few minutes in the air with a little sight-seeing over the green Vietnamese countryside, then scoot over to one or the other of the open doors, swing your legs over the side, and when we got the signal, push up and off. Then you went through the standard stuff of a good body position, hunched over, head down, clutching your reserve. When the slight tug of the "opening shock" occurred, you looked up to check that your canopy had fully deployed, and then around to see where everyone else was. After that it was hang there for a couple of minutes until it was time to assume the landing position, and make contact with Mother Earth. This day, cool with high humidity - there were even a few wisps of low-hanging cloud over the DZ - the drop took longer than if it had been hot and dry. I was always impressed by how quiet it was after you had cleared the aircraft. Apart from the apprehension I always felt (it was *not* a natural, or completely sane act we were doing), but all that went away after I actually jumped.

### **Trying To Make It Look Good**

On my first jump, I was just trying to make it a good one, and look like I knew what I was doing. I knew everyone in John's little detachment had more jumps than I did. SP4 Richard Davis wore senior wings (with a star on top), and John had I don't know how many jumps, and wore "master blaster" wings (with a star and a wreath). Senior wings are awarded after 35 jumps and/or completion of Jumpmaster school; Master wings are awarded after completion of 65 jumps. So I had a long way to go.

John had told me stories about jumping out of "Shakeys," the Douglas C-124 Globemaster in the fifties. He said if you were one of the jumpmasters, you could hear the bangs of jumper's helmets hitting the aft fuselage after they exited the aircraft. The reason was the extreme amount

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

of wind blast encountered on a C-124. The jump doors were high on the fuselage, above wing level, and the propeller wash of the inboard engines blew full-force past the doors. Unless the jumper made an extremely vigorous exit, he was guaranteed of being blown back into the side of the aircraft, thus banging his steel helmet on the aluminum skin of the aircraft. John said they were blown back so hard, some were knocked partially unconscious by the blow.

### **Water Hazard**

But on this jump, the main thing on my mind was to avoid water buffalos, which was pretty easy because there seemed to be only about a half dozen, scattered over the DZ, and avoid the more numerous water-filled craters. That also seemed easy, and with plenty of time and space to take up a slip (accomplished by pulling down the risers on one side so you went a little sideways), I thought I could maneuver around or past any water holes.

That was what I *thought*. In reality, it didn't work that way. When I was fairly close to the ground, I saw my drift was carrying me in the direction of a crater, but with my rate of fall versus my rate of drift, it seemed I would go over it, landing on the far side. In preparation for landing, maybe a hundred feet off the ground, I released my slip – and went straight down into the crater! My collapsing parachute canopy drifted over the crater to land on the dry side. The hole, I found, was less than a yard deep, but completely full of water. I went completely under, and came up sputtering and blowing water. I was soaked! I clambered out, dripping water, and began unfastening my 'chute harness. Some Vietnamese kids came running over, volunteering to carry my parachute back to the truck for the payment of a few cigarettes. Mine, in my shirt pocket, were as soaked as the rest of me, and completely worthless, but they carried my parachute anyway. So much for looking like I knew what I was doing.

### **The Next Time**

In spite of this embarrassing, although admittedly funny end to my first jump in Vietnam, I was ready for the next four jumps that would get me my Vietnamese parachute badge. As it turned out, however, I got my wings and diploma after only one more jump; a jump that could have killed me, or at least crippled me for life, but didn't.

### **Too Cocky**

Christmas day, 1965 was a pretty day in spite of still being in the monsoon season. There had been no breaks in the weather until then, and this was our first opportunity to get another jump in. As before, we took a 2½ Ton truck over to Dong Ba Thin, got our parachutes, and got on the helicopter. The first part of my jump was fine, but I began getting myself in trouble soon after I checked my canopy. As before, we had been dropped toward the end of the DZ, and a long walk back to the truck was not something I wanted. So I pulled down a double-arm slip with one of my back risers, and started making good speed laterally. Like before, it was cool and damp, in spite of the sunshine, so the "hang time" was long. It seemed I had been holding the slip for a good while when I looked back over my shoulder and saw that I was almost on top of John. When you pull a slip, especially as much of one as I had, you descend faster than normal, because you are spilling air out of your canopy. Hang time is traded for lateral distance.

### **Mid-Air Collision!**

I was so startled to see John's parachute, I let go the slip immediately, something they teach you in jump school not to do because you will begin oscillating. But I did do the thing they teach you in jump school if you are about to have a mid-air collision with another jumper, and that was to "spread eagle." To "spread eagle" means to stick your arms out to the side, spread your legs apart, and hold them rigidly in that position. That action prevented me from going through John's shroud lines. I suspect the oscillation caused when I released the slip so suddenly made me bounce off his lines, but in any event, John and people on the ground told me later I bounced off his shroud lines, and swung around to the other side of his 'chute. My body was higher than his, but below the skirt of his canopy. That put my canopy above the level of his, and slightly over it. Being around his canopy for some time caused mine to partially collapse. By this time, we had both dropped to about 100 to 200 feet above the ground. John's parachute, being on the bottom, was unaffected, but as I said, and again from eyewitnesses on the ground, mine partially collapsed, and I went roaring into the ground at a higher-than-optimum speed.

They said I bounced about a foot and a half off the ground when I hit. I came in backwards, which is the most difficult way to do a successful parachute landing fall (PLF), so in quick succession, my heels hit, then my butt, and then my head. I remember hitting, but not clearly. After bouncing off John's shroud lines the second time, and getting clear of him, the rest of it happened so fast, I didn't realize my 'chute had collapsed. I wasn't knocked unconscious when I hit the ground, but it was a few seconds before I was clear-headed enough to start getting up. I knew I hit the ground a lot harder than I should have. And when I tried to move my feet, they didn't move, and I couldn't feel anything. I thought, "Oh shit, what's wrong with my legs?"

I relaxed and very shortly, John, as well as the others who had jumped with me, were bending over me, asking questions. All I knew at that moment was I couldn't get up, and the realization of that was beginning to get through. Shortly, I was loaded on a stretcher, put back on the helicopter from which I had just jumped, and flown to the 8th Field Hospital, about twenty miles up the coast at Nha Trang. John went with me, and got me admitted. On the way from the helicopter to the building, we had hurriedly gotten a story together to explain my injury. We couldn't tell them what really happened because I wasn't supposed to be jumping out of airplanes. What we came up with sounded pretty good at the time, but lame as hell the more I thought about it.

### **Not Much Of A Story**

The story we concocted was that I had jumped off the back of a deuce and a half that was backed up to spot where the ground fell away, and so I had farther to fall than had the truck been on level ground. And, oh yeah, I came down on a big rock I had not seen. You see how that sounds? Lame. But we stuck to it because it was the only story we had, and it was too late for revision. No one ever questioned me about it; accepting it as face value. Only John and I, there at the hospital, and those back at Dong Ba Thin, knew differently. And we weren't telling anybody anything.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

### **My Fault**

This was my fault. I had no one except myself to blame. Because I didn't want to walk a little farther, and hump my thirty or forty pounds of parachute and harness, I had put my life in jeopardy, as well as a very good friend's. And caused no end of trouble to a lot of other people I didn't know, and never would. All because of my selfish act. When I got back to Cam Ranh, John tried to push it off, but I told him it was my fault. He accepted that and we never spoke of it again. It was a dumb shit thing to do.

### **Holidays In The Hospital**

Christmas day in the hospital. Wow. I was there for eleven or twelve days. I was there when Bob Hope came through with Anita Bryant and Carol Baker. Hope seemed detached, not totally interested, and Bryant seemed phony. Carol Baker seemed genuinely concerned about everyone. I was hurting. My back and a lot of other parts of me were hurting. I guess I did hit the ground pretty hard. (Harder than falling off a truck.) I remember the first afternoon being directly across from a Vietnamese soldier, or maybe a VC for all I knew, who had been hit by white phosphorus. God, what a sight that poor guy was. When white phosphorus (WP, or "willie peter") gets on you, it burns through whatever clothing you have on, and just keeps burning into you. There was a blackened hole through one ear where a piece of SP had landed and burned through. He had little black holes all over him where pieces had landed and burned into him. I didn't see him again after that afternoon. Maybe he died. I never knew.

They didn't put me in a cast, or in traction, or anything. The doctor just told me to lie still in bed, and don't move. I didn't feel like moving, so that's what I did. Eventually, I got to the point where I could look around, to notice who else was there. I saw a nurse named Mohammed. Lieutenant Mohammed. God was she beautiful! Shining black hair, olive skin, Arabian features (including a prominent nose - just like Barbra Streisand). She was gorgeous. I only saw her two or three times, but I was in love. She never came close enough to my bed so I could say anything to her. And truth be told, I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea what to say.

### **Good As New - More Or Less**

After a while, the doctors pronounced me healed enough to release me. They told me I had compressed (cracked) a vertebrae, and bruised my tail bone. I don't remember how I got from Nha Trang back to Cam Ranh. I think John arranged a helicopter for me. When I got back to the tent, there was a fine layer of sand over my cot, and everything else. I told someone 'thanks for keeping my stuff clean.' They said they had just brushed everything off that morning. It was my introduction to what happens after the rain stops, but the monsoon winds keep blowing.

Since then, I have had no discernible back problems from my "accident." For years afterward, my tail bone hurt; I couldn't sit upright on a hard or firm chair. I had to sit on one cheek or the other, and people probably thought I was too prone to fidget. I didn't tell a lot of people about the accident, and even when I told them, it was at a distance of some years. The Army frowns on people jumping out of airplanes without good reason, i.e., being authorized to do so by virtue of assignment to an airborne unit.

**Attack? What Attack? Where? I Didn't See Any Attack.**

It is said, and written, that in wartime, strange things occur. I believe that is true. Sometime in late 1965, or early 1966, a few members of the unit read one or two articles in *The Louisville Courier Journal* concerning VC attacks on the 59th QM Company at Cam Ranh Bay. What? What attack? I didn't see or hear any attack. But there it was in the paper. Not some little newspaper in Anywheresville, USA. This was in *The Courier Journal*, a nationally known newspaper! Said so, right there in the article. Had to be true.

It seems we had a young man with a *very vivid* imagination. From late September 1965, when I got there, to early September 1966, when I left, there were no - "no" as in zero - attacks on the 59th QM Company. But this young man had written Mom, in or near Louisville, KY (my home state) about mortar attacks, rocket attacks, flares in the air, tracer bullets, VC attacks, and Lord knows what else. I don't remember if he wrote the paper directly, or if he wrote his mother, and then mom wrote the paper. But it was in print. Newsprint.

Eventually, the newspaper clippings got outside his little circle of friends in his platoon, and were eventually elevated to the company commander by the first sergeant, who in turn showed them to us, his lieutenants. The first sergeant just shook his head. I was especially interested in them because *The Courier Journal* was very familiar to me. My family had subscribed to the Sunday edition of the "Courier" for ever since I could remember. It was a fixture in our home. Our local paper in Bowling Green was *The Park City Daily News*, but our big city newspaper was *The Courier Journal*.

This was amazing. I guess in the mid sixties, when the big US buildup began, a lot of the "news" that was printed in most of the nation's newspapers came from the AP, UPI, and other sources, and basically taken for granted because the papers had no one actually on the ground observing, writing, and sending the stories back. But for stories such as these - total fabrications of this kid's imagination - to appear in a newspaper of national stature was incredible. It was ludicrous. Impossible. But we saw the proof with our very own eyes. We had been attacked!

**Landslide**

It would have been well that the experiment with those fat, balloon tires would have come along earlier, perhaps by the early winter of 1965, because that's about when the monsoons began at Cam Ranh. The monsoon did not conform to my notion of what it was supposed to be (although in other parts of Vietnam, as I was to find out, they were much closer to my conception of them). It didn't rain every day, all the day. At Cam Ranh two days or more might pass without rain. It was cooler, and at night a lot of us slept under blankets. I slept under my newly acquired camouflage poncho liner. Everything was damp and chilly. When it did rain, it did a very credible job of it. The tracks across the sand quickly became impassable, but as it was just sand, as soon as one low part became impassable, Jeeps and trucks simply detoured around that part, and went on. Jeep-drivers who got to the boggy part last, after it had been churned up, and the center ridge was tall enough, would bottom out, and sit there with wheels going round and round, but making no forward progress. Actually, two of the wheels would be going round and round. Assuming its driver had engaged four-wheel drive, one of the front wheels - I can't remember which - and the opposite rear wheel, would turn. The other two would just sit there.

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

The action of the differentials caused this, but it still seemed odd, no matter how many times you saw it.

Sand is easily shifted if there is enough water to move it, and there is a downhill slope. The rock quarry, in which the engineers had busily been making big ones into little ones, had the elevation, and the solidity, to start a downhill runoff. Not far from the quarry, at the bottom of a rather large hill of sand, was a POL package yard. The place where our neighboring QM company, the tanker unit, had been instructed to set up a supply point for drums and cans of fuel and grease. Sometime early in the monsoon, after the rains had begun to fall fairly regularly, there was a period of several days when it rained more often than it didn't. One night the runoff from the quarry was such that enough of it ran toward, and down the hillside above the POL package yard, causing a sand landslide, burying about half of it. Those with any beach experience will appreciate that water-borne sand, while it is still water-borne, is easy to shove about. If some runs over your foot, and up your ankle, you just pull your foot out. But after the water seeps away, the wet, compacted sand is just about the closest approximation you can get to concrete.

It's a matter of conjecture if this fiasco was preventable. From a layman's view, it seems it might have been had the road builders done two things. One, put some drainage ditches along each side of the road, and two, some culverts under the road, both of which would have directed accumulated water in a specified direction, hopefully away from, or around, the package yard. From the road builders point of view, however, they may have discarded either or both these ideas because the road was only temporary. At that point in time, virtually the whole of the lower part of Cam Ranh, i.e., the Army's part, was in a state of flux, looking nothing like it would in a year or two after more permanent facilities had been constructed. I suppose the Engineer's idea was to create some "system" of roads, allowing access around the place, while ensuring that not a great deal of effort would have to be spent on demolition when the time was ripe to put in a more permanent system. And the idea of a flood originating at the rock quarry, inundating the POL package yard below, probably never occurred to anyone. The whole thing would have fallen under the thought a friend of mine expressed some years later, which was, 'you have to expect losses in a big operation.'

### Digging Out

As a more visible result of the "flood," on the road curving round the package yard, going uphill toward the quarry, a bulldozer had been parked by the side of the road. That night, the runoff passed around, under and through the tracks and bogies of that bulldozer. When the water leached out, leaving the sand behind, the 'dozer was half buried. Passing by this poor, stranded machine several times a day, I saw several abortive attempts to free it from its mired condition. First another bulldozer tried to pull it free; then an M88 tank retriever; then two M88s; then a LARC V. Nothing worked. Not until men with shovels, working the better part of three days, dug virtually all the wet, compacted sand away from, and out from between, all the numerous nooks and crannies formed by the bogies and the treads. Then, and only then, was the most powerful vehicle - a LARC - able to pull it free.

The package yard, of course, was not so easy. A half-hearted attempt was begun almost immediately. The futility of it all was finally impressed on even the most stubborn, and the hundreds

## Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

of cans and drums remaining under the sand were left entombed until well after the monsoon passed, some three or four months after it had been buried. Only then, when the sand began to give appearances of drying out, was a serious attempt mounted to recover all the drums of POL there. However, as anyone who has dug a hole at the beach knows, one had only to dig down a foot or so through the sun-dried loose sand, before coming upon - once again - wet, solid sand.

Even in the hottest weather, the heat of the sun only penetrated two feet at best, evaporating the moisture in the sand. Deeper than that, it was still wet. And the depth of the sand that covered the package yard that night was many *yards* deep. Ultimately it was excavated, but only at the cost of many, many man-hours of effort which could probably have been much better spent in other endeavors. How many of those steel containers were still sound, and how many had been penetrated, and contaminated, by the water, I never heard. But the discovery of that had to be pursued as well, adding to the expense of the recovery operation. But in early 1966, such expense was ignored.

### Finding a "Base"

The Army engineers at Cam Ranh labored hard and long on many projects. For months, one of their most frustrating tasks was finding a material that could be laid down as a stable "base" for a road to be built upon it. Many things were tried. As I related previously, the sand which covered the peninsular was worthless for mixing with Portland cement and aggregate to make concrete. Likewise, it was found worthless by itself, or mixed with anything else, to form a base for a road. Yards and yards (cubic yards), by the ton, of red laterite from the mainland were transported across to the peninsular for experimentation. It was spread out, leveled, and packed, but didn't work. It bore a strong resemblance to Georgia clay in color, but its consistency was not sufficient to form a stable base. So the engineers kept up the search, and they experimented, and they searched some more.

Until someone discovered that just off South Beach, the area at the extreme southern end of the peninsular, was an underwater mine of potential base material, namely *coral*. So a floating dredge was brought in, and the dredging began. It was white coral, and after being brought ashore, was crushed (remember the quarry and its rock crushing equipment?) to a powder, which when mixed with water, spread out, and rolled, made an excellent base. Roughly a year after the engineers landed, a material was found to stabilize a road bed. From there, they never looked back. A solution had been found, and they moved on to the next problem.

The two construction battalions at Cam Ranh in 1965 and 66 - the 87th and the 864th - were an indefatigable force. They didn't find immediate solutions for some of the problems they faced, but they did find them, and kept on building. Whatever faults the engineers might have had, shirking from a difficult task wasn't one of them. They were a fantastic bunch, and they worked like Turks.

### The First Officers Clubs

Apart from their tireless efforts to construct a depot complex, we were grateful for their provision of, first, the 87th Engineer Battalion Officers Club on South Beach, and later, the 864th Officers Club on a hill overlooking South Beach.

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The 87th Club was in operation when we arrived. It was literally a little shack on the beach. It consisted of a concrete pad about twelve feet by maybe thirty, with wooden uprights and cross-pieces. The roof and sides, what sides there were, were of some kind of thatch, probably bamboo, purchased in the village. Extremely basic, but it served. Some months later, the 864th club was built on the hill overlooking the beach. It was on a considerably larger concrete pad, and was of post and beam construction, fairly open to the elements. A good bit more care had gone into its design and construction, and it had honest-to-God tables and chairs in contrast to the 87th club, where you either stood, or sat on the sand.

Later still, a group of Ordnance officers from the three automotive maintenance companies, and the two or three ammunition companies, banded together to build the Ordnance Officers Club. It was also situated on South Beach, but a little farther along the beach than the 87th club, which by then had been abandoned in favor of the 864th club. The Ordnance officer's club was larger even than the 864th club, but made of lesser materials, to a more basic design. It was a great wooden platform, which at high tide, was half over the beach, and half over the water. It was roofed over with corrugated metal, and all four sides were screened in. Being right at water's edge, and screened in, it became a very popular place on Sunday afternoons. Even groups of Air Force pilots would make the trip from the air base to visit the club. As our warrant officer, John Palmer, had become acquainted with some of the warrants in the Ordnance units, we felt more or less part of the gang. Our only sure time off was Sunday afternoon, and it was a delight to go there, eat shrimp and get pleasantly drunk watching the bay, cooling off in the breeze that almost always blew in off the bay.

### **The Rise Of The "Official" Officers Club**

It was not to be for long, because the "command" dictated that another club, built well inland, in the middle of the cantonment area, was to become the one and only "true" officers club. It would be known as the "Cam Ranh Bay Officers Open Mess" (CRBOOM). It was the colonels' club, and had a kitchen, a dining room, a ridiculously small bar, and lousy food. And membership was mandatory, except that if you had already been there for several months; had the disdain for the establishment which many of us did, and never bothered to join, then there wasn't a great deal they could do. After all, what *could* they do, send you to Vietnam?

A member of our company, Ed Schlesinger, was detailed to become the club officer. Ed was a very slender second lieutenant, who joined the company not long before we left Fort Bragg. He claimed his parents were German, and lived in the Philippines, and that they were fairly wealthy, among other things. Perhaps his family did live in the Philippines, but the rest of it we weren't so sure of, although we had no way of disproving his claims. Once he was sent to the Philippines, and supposedly arranged for a boatload of San Miguel beer to be delivered to Cam Ranh. Ed talked a lot, and maybe we were just tired of hearing him talk. A boatload of San Miguel did arrive at Cam Ranh. It was unloaded, and pallet after pallet of beer was put in the by-now abandoned rock quarry for storage. Even though it was covered by tarps, sitting in the heat made it lose its potency and flavor after a while. San Miguel wasn't such bad beer, although the quality control seemed to be a little loose on some batches. Some was good, some was a little weak and watery, and other batches had a distinctly odd flavor. All in all, we got tired of San Miguel before the heat started taking its toll. After that, it was a good excuse not to drink the stuff, which the

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“official” officers club insisted on serving, and an excuse to go to the Ordnance club for as long as it stayed in business.

Then, after the “command” forced its closure, we went to the Air Force club occasionally. The CRBOOM, as I remember it, was as unimaginatively designed and constructed as it was operated. Whereas the 864th club had been - to my eye - imaginatively situated, designed, and constructed, as one might expect from the Engineers; the Ordnance club, with its unique “water-front” habitat, contrasted sharply with the CRBOOM, which was poorly-sited and poorly designed. I remember it as being closed in, offering very little ventilation or light inside, and no view to the outside. Of course, there was little one would wish to look at even if one could have looked out. The reason behind its existence, its design, and its operation were all depressing.

### **The Air Force Club**

The officers club at the Air Force base, up the peninsula, was an extreme contrast to any of ours on the lower part of the peninsula. For that matter, the whole base, and the way it was constructed was an extreme contrast, which pointed out the differences between the Army and the Air Force. The Army had scattered troop units here, there and everywhere on the lower part of the Cam Ranh Bay peninsula, almost without regard for when they would be needed. The Infantry came first, secured the area and moved on. They were followed closely by the Engineers to build, or attempt to build, everything for the depot. There was a Group headquarters, situated in some old French buildings from their days of colonization. And the afore-mentioned 87th and 864th battalions, both situated on the southern tip of the peninsula. There were some Transportation units, a mixture of LARC and stevedore units. The LARCs would bring the cargo ashore from the freighters anchored in the harbor (there were insufficient docks to receive them close to shore), and the stevedores would unload it and reload it on trucks for one or another open storage areas.

### **The Air Force Method**

The Air Force really looked like they knew what they were doing. They sent only one group at first, and that was their version of our engineers, the 555th Civil Engineering Squadron, known as Red Horse, or “triple nickel.” The 555th was charged with building the air base. And unlike the Army, they didn’t have anyone else stumbling around, getting in their way. They built aircraft hangers, maintenance shops, administration buildings, barracks, and a runway. (The runway was 10,000 feet long.) After the basic facilities were ready, then and only then did the pilots and the aircraft, the staff and support personnel, and all their equipment arrive. In a very short period of time, F4 Phantoms began flying off the new runway, and made their presence known to the VC and NVA. And while the Red Horse went about their business in a very forthright and efficient manner, we in the Army were floundering around, doing damn little to support the war effort - in the first months, we were doing little but supporting ourselves - but doing much to destroy the prospects of any good relations that might have existed between the local village and the Americans. At least that’s the way I saw it.

After the air base had progressed to a point with a runway, some aircraft parking, hangers, administrative buildings, and other odds and ends, it was time to build the clubs. And although the site location didn’t amount to a lot, the building itself was well conceived, and *LARGE*. I

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recall one nocturnal scrounging mission that took us to the club-under-construction, finding two middle-aged men on their hands and knees, who were busy laying a finishing layer of grout over the concrete floor of the club. I was introduced, and we chatted awhile about the club. Then we left to continue our scrounging. That's when I was told they were both lieutenant colonels. As future users of the club - I have forgotten their official relationship, if any, to the club - they had a vested interest in its completion.

Their method of furnishing the club bears mention. If they lack anything else, the Air Force does not lack for air transport. So those in charge of the Air Force club flew to the Philippines, negotiated a lot of rather nice bamboo and rattan furniture, with delivery now, and payment in the future; loaded it all on C-130s, and flew it back to Cam Ranh. In a short period of time, the club had made enough money, and they paid off their creditors in the Philippines, and the rest, as it may be said, is history.

### Coop's House

At some point in time, perhaps early in 1966, after we had been operational for two or three months, Cooper began building a small house at his Laundry Platoon site, at the airfield. This was to be his living quarters/platoon operations office. At this time, there was scarcely any structure at Cam Ranh, save for the stuccoed masonry, tile-roofed headquarters of the 35th Engineer Group, that looked as though it could sustain a strong wind and/or the natural ravages of only a few months' time. Coop's house was not of that mold. Constructed of the most readily-available materials, i.e., wood and corrugated metal, it used conventional lap siding, and was a small two-room house. Granted, it did not have indoor plumbing, but the appearance of his house was something to marvel at.

It was, as I recall, something for our company commander to worry about for fear that one or more of the headquarters brass would inadvertently wander into the Laundry Platoon operations, and seeing this little building - it *was* pretty small - would begin asking questions. And pretty quickly find out a second lieutenant was living in a *much* nicer structure than most of the field grade officers. It probably would have mattered little that Coop, with his SP4 assistant, had scrounged all the materials, and built it with their own hands. Where on the other hand, I doubt that any Army field grade, especially those in the support staff, had exerted one drop of sweat in building their quarters.

But that never happened. Coop lived in, and worked out of, his little house, and except for the natural weathering of unpainted wood, looked about as good the day he left as it did on its completion some months earlier. It was a sometime-gathering place for the rest of the platoon leaders, where we would prepare the occasional feast on his barbecue grill.

Living and working at the Army airfield, Coop had frequent contact with combat troops from the 1st Cav Division and others, who for one reason or another, flew in and out of the airfield. Being the entrepreneurial sort, Coop did not let these opportunities go untapped. We were living on sort of a barter system anyway, and Coop was quick to trade the services of his laundry operation for foodstuffs and other items from the combat elements. Clean clothes were at a rare premium among the grunts, but apparently they could get their hands on as many steaks as they

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wanted. So many a grunt got the luxury of clean laundry, and Coop ate about as well as the senior field grades on the peninsular.

### **Previous Occupants of the Peninsula**

After I had been at Cam Ranh a few months - probably in the Spring of 1966 - I had the opportunity to visit the long-abandoned tunnels and gun emplacements of some of the former occupants of Cam Ranh peninsula. The Japanese had been there sometime during World War II, and had built at least three gun emplacements on top of the hill overlooking the entrance to the bay. The gun pits were connected by tunnels. I don't recall who went up with me to show me the place. I think it might have been Cooper (known as "Coop") Agent, from our company. We didn't spend long there, but it was strange visiting this place about twenty years after someone else had been there and constructed this small installation.

I have no pictures of the place. I do remember the guns in at least two of the gun pits were still there. Somehow, the restraining mechanisms, which prevented the gun tubes from traveling too far backwards, had been destroyed. Then the guns had been fired, causing them to recoil all the way back off their carriages, thereby denying their use, at least temporarily, to the enemy, whoever that might have been. The Japanese had lined the breeches up with the doorways which led from the pit to the tunnel, and fired the gun. The gun tube had recoiled off the carriage so its breech went through the doorway, into the tunnel. I don't recall how large the guns were, but they appeared to be perhaps 75mm. I have read that some part of the Japanese fleet was anchored, and concealed, in Cam Ranh Bay at some point during the war. These positions would have dated from that time.

### **The Heat**

No mention of Vietnam, or Cam Ranh Bay, would be complete without some mention of the heat. Although we had no thermometers - no signs outside banks displaying the time and temperature, no banks for that matter - we would occasionally hear that at the Air Force base (they had meteorologists, of course), they had recorded such-and-such temperature. We heard of these readings only rarely, and when we did they were always cause for some discussion and wonderment, especially in the Summer. The hottest temperature I ever heard, and this was quite unofficial, was 135°F. Yes, one hundred thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit! That, supposedly, had been the previous day's high. And when we heard about it, and reflected on the previous day, it had a certain credibility. I think it was July or August, smack in the middle of Summer, and we knew, or felt, the days had gradually grown hotter. And hotter. We had no idea how hot, we just knew it was damned hot. At about the same time, before and after, we heard two or three times that the high for a certain day was at, near or exceeding 130. But 135° was the highest I ever heard about.

### **The Cold**

One would not expect to read about, or experience "cold" in Vietnam, and then only in a relative way did we experience it. Since Cam Ranh peninsula was essentially nothing but sand, the ground did not hold the heat the way more solid terrain would. So after a temperature near, or over 100°F during the day, temperature in the low seventies, or even high sixties, would feel chilly. Enough that many would sleep under a blanket at night. During the monsoons, when the

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temperature would achieve only perhaps a high of seventy-five, it would drop to the fifties at night. That, coupled with the constant dampness, made one think of Winter in real terms.

### **A Replacement Proves Himself**

Bruce Archinal had departed in February, and his replacement arrived three or fourth months later. 2nd Lt Vernon D. Lucy was our first officer replacement. I can imagine his unease, as he was being introduced to an "established family," rather like a long-lost, and unknown relative suddenly turning up on the doorstep. He was from Virginia, and had that soft-spoken, Virginia drawl that I was to come to know better in years after, but at the time sounded strange.

Because we had shifted officers around after Bruce's departure, Vernon was assigned as the "Service and Classification Officer" position. This meant he was OIC of the salvage yard. I had held this position for a while, and didn't recognize the potential of the office. Of course that was while we were still at Ft Bragg, without an actual salvage operation to run. But here in Cam Ranh, where units actually had equipment to turn in, some of these things turned out to be diamonds in the rough. One such instance occurred when the Air Force turned in three 50KW diesel generators to the salvage yard. Supposedly they were damaged, and uneconomically repairable.

Our newly assigned Lt Vernon Lucy took a close look and found the Air Force had been a little hasty in their estimation. One was damaged, and without the ability to get parts through the Air Force system, was pretty much a loss. But two of the three were serviceable, and so he "disposed" of them to the 59th. What a find! With knowledgeable mechanics in the Maintenance Platoon, and others in the unit who were practiced in the care and feeding of generators, after a little work, they were as good as new. We used them in the billet area for lights, and they were great! Having two, we were able to run them for only a few hours at night, and alternating them day on-day off gave them plenty of rest. After this service to the "cause," we thought this guy Lucy might be useful after all.

### **Detailed To The 554th**

It was about this time that I was attached to another unit. We had since moved the Supply & Service Platoon, and the Maintenance Platoon to the depot complex, into one of the cavernous metal warehouse buildings. Our new work sites were not all that we had hoped for, particularly as far as space was concerned. The old work sites, in the sand, had been much more spacious. Here, although we were on concrete floors, with a metal roof over our heads, and metal walls around us, we still had the sand to contend with as it kept blowing in the open doors. And in the case of the Maintenance Platoon, operational control had shifted completely away from the 59th, and gone over to the maintenance side of the house in the CRB Support Command, falling under a Maintenance Battalion.

For that reason, I was attached to the 554th Maintenance Company, which meant I physically moved out of the 59th lock, stock and barrel, to the 554th company area. I had the impression the 554th had not been in country as long as we (although Shelby Stanton's Vietnam Order of Battle places it in Cam Ranh in April 65); their company area did not seem as well organized, i.e., comfortable, as ours, nor was their mess hall anything like as good as the 59th. I did not take well to the relocation, and made very little effort to fit in. Instead, I set to work with my company