

Recollections of Vietnam, continued.

commander to have the attachment nullified so I could return to where I thought my rightful place was - in the 59th. I especially wanted the attachment ended before 60 days passed by, because after that, my new C.O., Capt Welch, would owe me a rating.

Fortunately for me, my detachment ended just short of 60 days, and I returned to the 59th a month or so before I left for good. It was a short-sighted view I had, but was typical of the inertia which has beset me from time to time. I had been with Company B and the 59th QM for close on to two and a half years, and although I knew that time was coming to an end, I thought I was being thrown to the wolves when they attached me to the 554th. It was immature, and did not "reflect great credit upon me," as a citation might have read.

Smells

There are three very distinct smells which always bring back memories of Vietnam. One is fairly common, even outside Vietnam, but the other two are smelled only rarely; each of them brings back vivid memories. I'll describe the two least common first.

The first is an odor that is probably a mixture of food cooking, grease, steam and garbage, with that key ingredient - sea air - mixed in. I have only smelled it two or three times since 1965, when I smelled it every day for twenty-eight days aboard the Liberty ship we rode to Vietnam. The first few times you smelled it, it was unpleasant, almost nauseating. After a while, like many things, you got used to it. It is difficult, but not impossible, to duplicate on land, and so that's why I seldom experience those memories associated with life aboard the MSTS ship, the USS LTG Leroy L. Ting.

Another rare smell - fortunately - is that associated with crossing, or being near, one of the garbage- and sewage-choked rivers and streams of most any city in Vietnam, but particularly Saigon. Depending on its intensity, because there are degrees, it can range from mildly disagreeable, to extremely nauseous. It seemed that few of the rivers or streams were sufficiently fast-moving to clean themselves of all the God-knows-what that was dumped in them. There was little of the industrial gunk which we pour into our rivers and streams, and the odor was certainly no worse than chemical waste in stagnant water, but it was bad enough that it has been forever impressed on my memory.

The last smell, as I stated, is fairly common, although I doubt if those who were never in Vietnam have the same association as those who were. The smell is burned diesel fuel. Exhaust smoke from busses or trucks. Except that when I smell it, if it's the right kind of fuel (because there are different grades), it immediately reminds me of the burning barrels which were the collectors in the makeshift latrines we built. Every morning, a detail of soldiers would close the latrines for use, remove the barrels (made from 55 gallon fuel drums cut through the middle into two pieces) from the sheds, pour diesel fuel in the half barrels, sometimes with a little gasoline to get them started, and set them on fire. They would burn for a half hour or better, then the remains would be dumped into a hole and covered, and the barrels returned to their positions beneath the wooden seats. The latrines were always closed, of course, for a couple of hours while all this could be accomplished. If you had a case of "the runs," you had a problem. The smell of a particular grade of diesel exhaust will always remind me of 'burning the shit.'

Hidden Treasure - The Lost Is Found

By early summer of 1966, the supply operations at Cam Ranh settled into enough of a routine for attention to be turned to those containers which had been unloaded months before, from the overwhelming number of cargo ships arriving in the Fall and Winter of 1965-66, and which had been placed helter-skelter, wherever room would allow. A treasure trove of equipment was discovered. Nearly all of which was in short supply, and could have been used months before. Typewriters; all kinds of repair parts - some useful, some not so; tents of all sizes (valuable as gold six months before, almost worthless now that semi-permanent buildings were going up), and dozens of other items. Some of it was still worth almost its weight in gold - repair parts were always required - and some things were useful mainly for their curiosity value.

Of this last category were hundreds of pairs of WW II-vintage "Quartermaster" boots. Though originally brown, now dyed black, they were the forerunners of the Cochran "jump" boot. Although now twenty years old, they were in excellent condition, and if not suited to the Southeast Asia climate, a real keepsake for one's return to America. I missed getting a pair by about a half hour. As soon as they were discovered, they disappeared into troop's hands - where they belonged. I was sad I'd missed getting a pair, but glad they had been "distributed" to soldiers, not stuck in a warehouse to be forgotten, or issued only to the high-ranking.

Is It Time Yet?

We, the 268 members of the 59th QM Company, set sail from CONUS (Continental United States) at the end of August, 1965, about the 25th or 26th. So for those of us who had not returned prior to that time a year later, our collective DEROS (Date Eligible to Return from Overseas) date was 365 days after our departure from CONUS, our days on board ship also counting toward the length of the tour. However, whole units had been departing CONUS and arriving in Vietnam all that summer of 1965, and so when it came time to arrange chartered airline 707s and DC-8s for us to leave Vietnam, things got a little out of sync. The remainders of entire units such as ours, even though we were now less than our original 268 assigned strength, could not be moved out, and shoved on to an airplane. There were too many others waiting in line. So our DEROSes were adjusted. But of course the "word" was a little slow in getting out. Understandable, but frustrating nonetheless. Lists of eligibles were published a few days before their departure. First, we all had to get to Tan Son Nhut, near Saigon, because even in late 1966, that was still the only place you could leave from.

My DEROS approached, arrived, and passed, and still I had no idea when I was leaving. I had written my mother about ordering a car, and had invited her to fly to San Francisco to meet me; then we would drive back to Kentucky together. I was down to a day before my DEROS, then my DEROS day. No word, lists with other names were received, but so far none with my name. Then a day past my DEROS, then two. The next day a list came down and I was on it! All right! Finally!

I flew down to Tan Son Nhut, spent two more nights in Camp Alpha - the replacement depot run by the 21st Replacement Battalion - and then on the 707 or DC-8 operated by Continental Airlines, to the United States. The one thing I remember about those two days was going to the VNAAF Officers Club, and getting a salad. A real, green salad. I didn't want a steak; steaks I'd

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eaten on a fairly regular basis, and could get in any club I chose. But a salad was a real treat. I hadn't had a salad for many months. To this day, eight or nine times out of ten, I'll take a good salad over a steak.

I flew out on my Continental Airlines charter on Labor Day, and because of the International Date Line, also arrived in America on Labor day. We stopped once, at Kadena Air Base, on Okinawa, to refuel, and then non-stop to California. Best airplane ride I *ever* took. Those lights of San Francisco on the night of our approach sure looked good. I was through playing on one of the world's largest sand piles. I was going to meet my mother, pick up my new MG, and see some of the great American countryside.

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Between Tours

After I got back from Vietnam in 1966, I had 30 days' leave to use up, and then report to my new duty station, Fort Lee, Virginia. Arriving back in the US, this time by plane rather than ship, I did whatever I had to do at Travis AFB, and then got a taxi to one of the Holiday Inns, where my mother was waiting.

Not being married, and having ordered a car for pickup in San Francisco, I had invited her to drive across the US with me back to Bowling Green, Kentucky. My plane arrived on Labor Day 1966, and the first order of business the next day was to find the foreign car dealership from which I had ordered my car, and take possession of it.

This was long before the war had begun to be unpopular in America, but since I was on leave, I went to the dealership in civilian clothes. My car was waiting, but was not exactly how I had ordered it. I had specified British Racing Green – it was red. I had ordered a Derrington steering wheel – it had some other “off” brand. I had asked for Lucas driving lights, but again, they were a cheaper brand. I didn't make an issue over any of it. I should have, but I guess I was just too happy to be back, and have the car. It did look pretty good in red, and so I forked over a check for the amount due, drove out of the shop, and back to the Holiday Inn.

See . . . The . . . U-S-A

We probably checked out of the hotel the same day – I remember it was foggy – crossed the Golden Gate bridge, and started north on Highway 101. We drove through northern California, into Oregon, turned east, and drove through Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, finally arriving in Kentucky about eleven days after leaving San Francisco. I took it very easy. I wanted to break the car in carefully. And after all, I had 30 days before I had to be a Fort Lee. It was a good trip that my mother and I both enjoyed. Neither of us had ever been farther west than St Louis, and we made frequent stops along the way. We visited the Redwood National Forest, Crater Lake, Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone National Park, and a lot of other places. Did you ever see the movie “North By Northwest,” the Alfred Hitchcock movie with Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint? We stood in the restaurant that was in one scene of the movie! That was so cool! It was exactly the same.

Back To The Garrison Army

On arrival at Ft Lee, I discovered my orders had been changed from the Airborne Department of the Quartermaster School, to post headquarters. I also discovered I had made captain a few days before reporting. As I recall, I got to Lee on a weekend. On the following morning, perhaps a Sunday, I went to the officers club - the FLOOM (Ft Lee Officers Open Mess) - and almost immediately ran into Ron Bright, a friend from the basic course. That's how I found out I'd been promoted, because we both had the same date of rank, 3 OCT 66. On Monday, I found the Assistant Chief of Staff, G3 section of post headquarters, and introduced myself.

New Duty

The post headquarters was divided among several “temporary” World War II-era wood buildings, and G3 had three of them. The G3's office was a small one-story, former company orderly room, which were offices for the G3 himself, his deputy and their secretary. The Plans &

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Operations Division, where I was to spend the next year and a half, was a former barracks, and the third, the offices for the Training Division, was a two-story building of a type I'd not seen before, but assumed it had been an administrative structure for some use, perhaps a regimental personnel and finance office.

A Tie To The Recent Past

My former company commander, from Fort Bragg and Vietnam, Frank Connell, was at the Quartermaster School, in Mifflin Hall. Because he was one of the very few people at Lee that I'd known for more than a day or two, I wasted little time in looking him up. We were now of equal rank, although he had several years time-in-grade on me, which really meant we were not-so-equal in rank. However, we renewed our friendship, and during the next year or so, I went to his house several times for dinner. His wife was German, from Fulda, where he had been the commissary officer. He had completed the career course before going to Vietnam, and I was yet to go. Actually, there were a lot of differences between us, but basically we were two of hundreds of Army Quartermaster captains, and who already had one tour in Vietnam to our credit.

Not long after we had been there, probably Spring of 1967, Frank and I were dissatisfied to the extent we made appointments at QM OPO (Quartermaster Office of Personnel Operations, in Department of Army), and drove up to Fort McNair to ask about returning to Vietnam. A Lieutenant Colonel assignments officer was sympathetic, but told us neither one was going back just yet. I don't recall what he told Frank, but he told me I would have to go through the career course first, before I went back. Since he said I was scheduled to do that in just a few months, I agreed to bide my time. But as it turned out, that "few months" turned into about a year, and I started in April 1968.

Frank, as it turned out, was eventually selected for the Defense language school at the Presidio, in San Francisco, to learn to speak, read and write Thai. He was slated to be an advisor to the Thai Army. I suppose since it was 12 months of nothing but language training, eight hours a day, he and the others were generously allowed leave every month so, so I saw him off and on when he came back to Fort Lee. Frank's wife and kids continued to live in their house off-post. He showed me some of his school work. Thai was a strange language. The letters are much the same as ours, with pronunciation marks similar to Vietnamese, but their sentences are one continuous string, as long as one of our paragraphs. He said it was really difficult to learn, and I believed him.

Becoming A Staff Weenie

My assignment to G3 was an education, and one of great value to a staff officer, which I would be again and again, but it seemed too tame for me at the time. The Plans and Ops Division got a new boss named Floyd Maples. Major Maples was the replacement for the recently-retired chief of P&O, and was promoted to Lt Col shortly after arrival. He and my immediate boss, a senior major named Leroy Brandenburg, taught me a great deal about military writing. MAJ Brandenburg had been enlisted, then gone through OCS, and had been around for a while. He was a black man who sort of mumbled when he spoke, and was not very well-liked by the G3 or some of the other officers. But "Leroy" – which I would never have dreamed of calling him to his face – had a mind that was a sharp as the proverbial tack, and a memory like an elephant. His

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“institutional memory” was phenomenal, and he kept Tony Evans and I hopping, while still producing more than the two of us combined.

Tony was a West Pointer who I had met in Vietnam. He was part of the 504th QM Depot at Cam Ranh, and one of the few to succeed in getting a transfer out of Cam Ranh. He moved all the way to Can Tho, in the Delta. Tony was a frustrated infantryman, who for some reason was QM, and in the Delta, he managed to “qualify” for a Combat Infantryman’s Badge. That was not unusual among non-combat types, who were allowed to tag along on a few operations, do the time, and get awarded the CIB. As one who was already airborne-qualified, a parachute rigger, and wore Vietnamese parachutist wings, a CIB would have looked good on my uniform. But at Cam Ranh I never had the opportunity, and when I was on my second tour, I refused to do it; I thought it was dishonest. It was just like a lot of REMFS who qualified for Air Medals by documenting twenty administrative flights.

Learning The Ropes

My principle duty was post support. I was the broker for detail personnel and equipment for the whole post. Whatever you needed for a short term project, if it was on Ft Lee, it was mine to arrange for that short-term loan. Enlisted students from the QM School for a day’s work detail? I could get ‘em. A forty-foot “float” (flat bed trailer) for the Airborne Department to haul airdrop pallets to the airfield? I arranged it. Whatever, whenever, you got it. One day after a particular involved bit of horse trading, the NCO who worked for me jokingly said, “Cap’n, you’re the biggest thief I’ve ever seen.” I thought that was extremely funny, and took it as a compliment. I laughingly replied, “Why, thank you Sarge. That’s awfully nice of you to say.”

When I took over the job, there was no set procedure, no rules, no method. I fixed that. I wrote the first of my post regulations to cover all the little details, complete with an approved form to request stuff on. This was where LTC Maples and MAJ Brandenburg helped me. I wrote, and revised, and rewrote, and revised again, until each paragraph, each sentence, each word, were just as they wanted them. We discussed, they questioned, I replied; I asked, they answered, but they left me thinking I had done it all. They were *very good* teachers. I was on my way to become a bureaucrat. After six months using the new reg, I fixed what was wrong, plugged the loopholes, and republished it.

Revisions of several post regulations followed in its trail blazing path. A good ally was a junior lieutenant colonel in G4, whom I had known a little from the 504th Depot at Cam Ranh. We shared a slightly off-beat sense of humor, and scratched each others back. Tit for tat. I was becoming a good bureaucrat.

At any rate, duty in G3 was not so bad. It was normally five days a week, eight or so hours a day, usually sitting at a desk writing regulations, op orders, and staff papers. Once in a while, we would get out of the office to plan a parade or ceremony, go to the range for weapons qualification, inspect a unit, or some other such duty. Both MAJ Brandenburg and LTC Maples allowed me, as a junior captain, to make a few mistakes, and then made sure I learned the right lessons from those mistakes. Under their mature guidance, I turned into a pretty good military bureaucrat.

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A Joke On Jim

One morning, very early, we had a post-wide alert scheduled, and as G3, we were to call it, and then inspect how units responded. It gave me the opportunity to play a good joke on my roommate, Jim Ramsey. By rights I should have let Jim in on it, but I didn't. When I left the BOQ with him still asleep, I happened to see a large wooden chock block, such as those used on railway flat cars to chock the wheels of military vehicles to keep them in place. Jim owned a new Camaro, and I wedged the chock behind his right rear wheel. That afternoon, when I saw him again (after he had settled down, and stopped calling me uncomplimentary names), he said he heard the alarm, jumped out of bed, got dressed, wondered how I had gotten out ahead of him, and run downstairs to jump in his car to drive to 4th Log Command where he was assigned. But his car wouldn't back up! He tried several times, but it just wouldn't move. Finally he got out to see why, and discovered the chock at his rear wheel. Then he knew why I wasn't around.

From Brit Wheels To 'Murrican

Less than a year after arrival at Ft Lee, a.k.a. Camp Swampy, I became dissatisfied with my MG. It was the second MG I'd owned, and being a closed car, it was not as "fun" as my little Midget, which I sold before going to Vietnam, but of course it was more practical. It was a great car for trips; immensely comfortable, sufficiently fast, and an excellent handling car.

But things went unexpectedly wrong. Little, niggling things. The paint on the roof seemed to be of a different batch than the rest of the car because it faded and became dull, while the remainder of the car stayed bright and shiny. A second rear wheel bearing went bad - the first had gone bad on the trip across the US, within a few days of setting out from San Francisco. The two six-volt batteries, nestled in twin wells on either side of the prop shaft seemed to be incapable of holding a charge in cold weather. It was fortunate that my BOQ was directly across the street from my office, and I could walk to work when my car would not start. (I should have been walking to work every day, but a constant physical training program was not a part of the Army for staff officers in those days.) The door glass was apparently quite soft (for glass); somehow sand had gotten into the space between the glass and the rubber window seals, so when I raised and lowered the windows, the sand particles scratched the glass.

I became disgruntled with my new car, and within the first year I owned it, I began looking at other cars. One of these was a red XKE Jaguar coupe. It was *sooooo* beautiful. It was same color scheme as my current car - red exterior, black interior - and my MG before that. After talking the seller down to \$3,000 plus my MG, I took a test ride. When I drove this gorgeous thing, it felt like it had been carved out of one gigantic piece of steel. It was so solid. I might have gotten the price down to as little as \$2,500 and my car. The "sticker" price was \$6,000. Had I only known the appreciation that would take place in another twelve or fifteen years about cars. But remembering what an XKE owner had told me a couple of years earlier, about the never-ending maintenance problems, I decided against it.

The New 'Vette

Then the sneak previews of the "new" Corvette began to appear. The Sting Ray was in its last model year (1967), and the predicted 1968 model was radically different in appearance, pattered after

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the Mako Shark. It was mean lookin'. Underneath, it was basically the same as the Sting Ray, but the skin was a lot different. And I fell for it hook, line and sinker.

You have to understand that I had become very dismayed at always having to take my car of the moment to a distant city for maintenance. I believed dealers had the best mechanics and parts supply. I had taken both my Volkswagens, and both my MGs to dealers, and although happy with their service, didn't like having to get a friend to convoy with me to drop it off, and then pick it up. That, as much as anything, influenced me to buy a Corvette. Chevy dealers were everywhere, service was close at hand. Or so I imagined.

Hah! Boy, was I wrong! If the adage had been coined at that time, I was unaware of it, but the phrase, "never be the first on your block to buy the new model" would have certainly applied to the 1968 Corvette. Or maybe all Corvettes, no matter how far along in the model year, were prone to silly evils. The panel fit and finish of my car was very, very good for an American car, not withstanding the fact it was built of fiberglass, not metal. For the first month or two, the only model available was the open car, or as I termed it, the roadster. Along about December, the coupe became available. I saw a silver coupe, the same color as mine, and was quite happy I'd ordered the open car. Didn't matter, I ordered my "roadster" the first Saturday, the third day they were out. That was early October, and I had my car just before Thanksgiving.

'Murrican Cars Have Problems Too

The first malady to manifest itself was the windshield wiper mechanism. On the '68 Vette, and I think on the '69 as well, the windshield wipers, when not in use, were hidden under a cover. There was a moveable panel across the base of the windscreen, which closed over the wiper arms when they parked themselves. But on my car at least, and probably on a lot of others, after the wipers were shut off, and folded themselves in their little shallow well, and the door or flap closed over them, the door would reopen, and the wipers began to make another pass up the windscreen, stop and go back down, with the door again closing. Then the whole process would repeat itself, over, and over, and over again. Door close, reopen. Wipers up, down. Door close, reopen. Wipers up, down. Door close, reopen. Wipers up, down. Door close, reopen, and so on, until you popped the hood, ran around and held the contacts of the solenoid apart. Only then would the process halt. Now if you had turned the wipers off because it had stopped raining, that was one thing. But if you had turned them off because you had arrived at your destination, and were going to dash indoors while it was still raining, but first had to go through the drill of manually halting your funny windshield wipers, that was quite another.

Why Can't They Get This Right?

I took my car back to the dealer from which I bought it four or five times to have it fixed. The dealer was thirty miles away, in Richmond. I think it finally cured itself independently of any efforts by the dealer. Later in its life, I began experiencing a misfire, or actually a late-fire, in the ignition. I also took it back to the dealer from which I bought it - thirty miles away. See the irony of this? Here I was driving an American car - one of the most popular, best-selling makes in the country - and I was still taking it miles away to another city. And to add insult to injury, when I took it to another Chevrolet dealer, also in Richmond, the service manager told me his shop didn't work on "foreign

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cars.” “Foreign?” I said, “But . . .” He looked me dead in the eye, and repeated, “We don’t work on foreign cars.”

I put it in reverse, backed up, and drove off. I finally got the ignition fixed by a guy who owned a tiny private gas station garage in Colonial Heights, drag-raced an Oldsmobile 4-4-2, and had a wall full of Sun test equipment. He diagnosed the problem as an incorrectly machined distributor shaft, replaced it for a very modest charge, and that was that. So much for authorized Chevrolet repair shops.

Those were not the only problems. But in spite of them, all the time I owned that car, I never parked it and walked away without turning to look back, thinking what a great-looking car it was. In spite of my problems with it, even when I went back to Vietnam, I didn’t sell it, but left it for my mother to use. She didn’t drive it immediately, but eventually she did, driving it to and from work now and then, and on an occasional trip. When I returned, knowing I was going to Germany, I finally did sell it. I had heard of the high insurance rates in Germany, and wanted no part of that. After arriving in Germany, and looking at several cars, I bought a four-door Volvo. That Volvo survived three years in Germany, three more in the States, and three more after returning to Germany. Great car! But that’s getting ahead of this story.

Going Regular

While in G3, I decided to “go RA,” that is to apply for a regular army commission. While still at Fort Bragg, before my two-year obligated volunteer period was up, I had gone voluntary indefinite or “vol indef.” I was still a reserve officer, but had no date for separation. In those days, many officers did twenty years as a vol indef, and retired in that status. But I wanted the things an RA commission was supposed to bring, and I applied. After my paperwork crawled through the system - I seem to remember it got lost, and I had to reapply - I went through an interview board, was accepted, and chose the officer to swear me in, my former battalion commander from Ft Bragg, (now) full colonel Richard T. Bull. COL Bull was the commander of the Combat Developments Command office at Ft Lee, and he gladly accepted. It was a proud day for me, and I felt like I really “belonged” to the Army.

Not many months after that, my assignment with G3 Plans & Ops came to a close, and I was awarded the Army Commendation Medal. I was ready for my “advanced education.” I had authored several post regulations, planned a number of ceremonies, and learned an awful lot about staff work from some really good and understanding mentors.

The Career Course

As I said, I began the Quartermaster Officer Advance Course (popularly known as the “career course”) in April 1968. There were some forty US officers, and two Vietnamese lieutenants, one of whom would eventually be one of our classmate’s counterparts after they both returned to Vietnam. Of the forty or so officers in the class, the vast majority were married, and I think for the first time, I began to feel a little odd, left out of the scheme of things. We usually spent about six hours a day in class, although that varied a little. We had some physical training; I was looking for an excuse to stop smoking, but when I found I could outrun most of the class, and still smoke a pack and a half a day, my incentive went out the window.

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Like all advance classes, ours formed a personality of its own, one which was recognized, and respected by the instructor cadre. We weren't as wild as some previous classes, weren't particularly brainy, although we did have some smart people and two or three of them later attained flag rank. We were a solid class that supported each other, and would present a united (stubborn) front to an instructor who we found wanting.

One such instructor was a lieutenant colonel who, late in the course, taught us "Base Development." Base Development is the science of building a support base from scratch, as had to be done all over Vietnam. But it was b-o-r-i-n-g stuff, verrrrry boring. And this instructor confused our class with the one three months ahead, which enjoyed, or labored under, a pretty unfavorable reputation of being a bunch of slackers and wise-asses. That reputation may or may not have been well-earned, but having gained it, some of the class tried to promote it. But the instructors who knew our class, knew us to be attentive until and unless the instructor became condescending or boring.

And that's where this "light" colonel made his mistake. He actually started off his block of instruction, which was scheduled for the better part of a week, by telling us he was well aware of our reputation, and that he would have none of our antics. Eh? "Our reputation?" Shortly thereafter the newspapers came out, the feet went up on the desks, and when called upon, the response, over a partially lowered newspaper, was something to the effect of, "Oh, sorry sir, were you speaking to me?" He got the point. And after rechecking with some of his colleagues, he learned we weren't the class he thought, and gave a grudging apology, but by then it was too late. We were finished with Base Development.

Another instructor, an Ordnance Captain, who was teaching "Storage" I think, began most sentences with, "This is how it's been done in Vietnam, and here's what's wrong with that," ignorant of the fact that many of us had already been to Vietnam, and that he might very well have been showing slides of someone's hard work. Shortly, one of us asked if he had been to Vietnam, to which the answer was "No." Then someone asked where his next assignment was to be, and he replied, "Japan." The newspapers came out again, and since he was a captain and most of us were captains, with a smattering of majors, we didn't even bother replying to his questions. Our class rating of him reflected all this.

Return To Fort Bragg

Eventually, we were done. Thankfully. They were good times, but long, and we were all tired of class and ready to go back to work. But for several going to Vietnam, there would be an intermediate stop at the JFK Special Warfare Center, at Fort Bragg. Four of us, including my new friend Walt Steele and I, were going to the Sector/Unit MATA Course, and four more were signed up for the Province/ Division MATA Course.

Our course was to teach or refresh basic infantry skills such as individual and crew-served weapons of the types we would likely see, e.g., WW II and Korean War-vintage, and our own current weapons, as well as small unit tactics, demolitions, communications, field construction, field medicine and first aid, map reading and land navigation, a little physical training, and four hours of Vietnamese language six days a week. That's all. A busy six weeks.

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Familiarization with all the individual and crew-served weapons - twenty or more - was fun. So was the small amount of demolitions training we had. Commo had never been of particular interest to me, but the field construction part was interesting. During the part of the class on field medicine, one of our guest speakers was a Latino, perhaps Cuban, Lt Col who had been a member of the raid on Son Tay, the US attempt to liberate an NVA camp holding American POWs. He was pretty fascinating, and had no trouble holding our attention. Walt and I did the land navigation course faster than about two-thirds of the class, including most of the infantry, and a couple of the Marines, finishing in daylight. We had waded through a chest-high pond three times in as many directions. For PT, there was a test - a two-mile run - the first week, and those finishing under a certain time were excused. I missed it by about ten seconds (still smoking), and puked my guts out afterwards. Many of those who had to do PT chose the MATA Mile, an up and down, cross-country, through-the-woods course of about 2½ miles. That was a fun way to do PT. All the Marine contingent chose conventional PT, with a run in formation. Figured.

We lived in a high-rise brick BOQ that was newly-built. I left Bragg in August '65; this was a little over three years later, and it had been built in those intervening years. The popular song at the time, played about every third or fourth song in the bar in the BOQ, was "Those Were The Days (My Friend . . . We Thought They'd Never End)." Laaaa Laaaa Laa La La La, La La La Laa La La. La La La La La, La La, or something like that, you remember. Those were good times.

Goodbye USA, Hello Vietnam

But that too came to an end. There was Christmas leave, plane rides to the west coast, and another long, long plane ride. Instead of selling my car as I had done the first time I went to 'Nam, this time I left it - that's right, the Corvette - with my mother. I packed my duffle bags at home, said my good-byes, and flew to St Louis to see my friends Kathy and Jim Ramsey, from Ft Lee days. Then on to LAX (Los Angeles International), then south to San Diego, to meet Walt Steele and his wife in Chula Vista. After a couple of days, Walt and I caught a Navy P3 from one Naval Air Station up the coast, to another Naval Air Station somewhere close to Travis AFB. And from Travis, it was on to 'Nam via Washington state, and Tokyo. From September 1966 to January 1969, it had been a long/ short two years and three months.

Forward

Since writing about my first tour in sunny southeast Asia, I thought I might as well continue with the second tour. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, too many names have been forgotten. For my time at Qui Nhon and Pleiku, I had my friend Charlie Cutshaw on whom I could rely, but for those six months I spent in Phu Bon, I was without a backup. Fortunately, I have a number of slides I took, though many are faded. But they offer graphic, albeit mute, testimony to some of the things I saw and did. In August 2002, I finally paid a visit to the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), in College Park, Maryland. There I was able to refresh my memory - and my spelling - of people and locations I'd known during that last six-month period of my second tour. At NARA I also unintentionally, but fortunately, found evidence of what may have influenced my development of diabetes, the herbicide Agent Orange. More on that later.

By the time I went back, considering the lack of progress in Vietnam, and the war's continuing appetite for virgin and veteran troops, my return was a foregone conclusion. Not that I dreaded it, or tried to make other arrangements - after all, I had applied for and gotten a Regular Army commission while at Ft Lee. It was simply a fact of life that virtually any officer in the Army with at least fifteen months remaining on their commitment would be heading there.

President Nixon took his oath of office only days before I arrived in country (January 1969). In June, Nixon would meet President Nguyen Van Thieu on Midway, advising him the US would begin immediate withdrawal of troops, to begin turning the war over to the South Vietnamese. This was not welcome news for Thieu, but perhaps he accepted it as an eventuality, and the United States began the long process of backing out of the first war it would not win. The first withdrawal of 25,000 troops came in July.

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was history by nearly a year. The Beatles were going strong, and it would be another year and a half before they played their last together. In late November 1968, President Johnson was quoted in the *Pacific Stars & Stripes* as saying "the possibility of peace" had been achieved in Paris - referring to the recently-convened four-party (the US, the governments of South and North Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front, or NLF) talks in Paris - but he continued that, "bitter days and battles lie ahead." Students in the United States were burning draft cards, and saying, "hell no, we won't go." Soldiers returning from Vietnam were branded "baby killers," and spat upon. It was not a good time to be in a US military uniform.

In other parts of the world, Yassar Arafat was elected Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, Golda Mier became Israel's fourth Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou was elected President of France, Ted Kennedy drove himself and his passenger off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island, and Willy Brandt was elected Chancellor of West Germany. We were reading Mario Putzo's *The Godfather*, and *Naked Came The Stranger*, written as a jest by 24 journalists from a Long Island newspaper; it was a bonus year for movies, with "Midnight Cowboy," "Easy Rider," "Bullitt," and "Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid" all released. Deaths of the famous included Judy Garland, Jack Kerouac, John L. Lewis, Ho Chi Minh, Sharon Tate (a victim in the Manson murders), Joseph P. Kennedy (father of Jack, Bobby and Ted), and Westbrook Pegler. SSG David Mitchell and Lt William Calley stood trial for the massacre at My Lai.

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

In 1967, only months after reporting to Fort Lee, Virginia for duty, my former company commander, Frank Connell, and I made an attempt to be sent back - *immediately*. Such was our dissatisfaction with our respective jobs at what we frequently referred to as "Camp Swampy, Home Of The Brave." He was pushing papers in the Quartermaster School, and I was doing the same in post headquarters. As mundane as our duties might have been at Cam Ranh, both of us thought it beat the hell out of being the bureaucrats we were. So about six months after our return, we took a day off, drove to Ft. Leslie J. McNair, Virginia., to see the Army flesh peddlers, and begged to be sent back. We were told we were doing important work, that our times (to return) would come, and sent packing back to Camp Swampy.

For me, a second tour was not to come until January 1969, after I had completed a year and a half in AcofS, G3 Plans & Ops (which I had to admit was a good assignment, and from which I learned much), nearly seven more months in the QM career course, also at Ft. Lee, another six weeks in the MATA (Military Advisory Training Assistance) Course, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and finally, a month of leave at home, where I had the good fortune to meet my future wife.

(I gave a talk on Vietnam one night at my church in Bowling Green, and she was in the audience. An old friend of our family had brought her, and introduced us. We dated once or twice, and corresponded throughout my second Vietnam tour, dated several more times while I was on leave between Vietnam and Germany, and continued to correspond through the first half of my tour in Germany. Then I came back to Bowling Green, we were married at the State Street Methodist Church, and returned to Germany for an eighteen-month "honeymoon.")

Apart from the fact both my tours were in the II Corps area, the second tour was about as different from the first as possible. On my first tour, I had shipped over with an established unit, the 59th QM Company. The 59th was moved *in toto* from Fort Bragg to Cam Ranh Bay. Our unit was an American unit supporting other Americans. For the first few months, I had only occasional contact with, and sight of, the Vietnamese people. When I went back, I went as an individual replacement with a decidedly naive and rose-tinted view of my role as an advisor to the ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

Going, Going, Gone

My going was a prolonged affair. One of my classmates in the career course was Walter W. Steele, a short, extroverted veteran of one tour in Vietnam, and the two of us, as were approximately two-thirds of the class, were destined to be reassigned back to Vietnam on completion of the course. Walt had been with the 1st Cavalry Division, and I with the 1st Logistical Command. Like many going to Vietnam at that time, he would do his second tour as an advisor. Walt had been detailed Infantry the first time, but now of course was Quartermaster, and would go back in that capacity. Walt and I became pretty good buddies during the course, and at the end of my leave in Bowling Green, I flew out to Chula Vista, California to spend a couple of days with him and his wife, Sandi. Walt and I caught a ride on a Navy P3 Orion sub chaser from a Naval Air Station close to San Diego - either North Island or Imperial Beach - to (or near) Travis AFB, from which we were to board our flight to Vietnam.

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

But before Chula Vista, there was a stopover in St. Louis to visit Jim and Kathy Ramsey. Jim and I had been roommates in the BOQ at Ft Lee before he married. Jim and Kathy, and I became neighbors when I moved out of the BOQ, and I took a small apartment adjacent to them in the county south of Ft Lee. I was Jim's best man when he and Kathy married in Shelbyville, Indiana, and a few years later, he was my best man. So I spent one night with them, catching up on what they had been doing since I saw them last, and then I headed for California. It was winter of course, and all I had to wear were my AG44 "Greens." After dinner, I remember going to a bar, and not being able to buy a drink for myself. There were still some people supporting the war. I wondered later had it been a year or more beyond January 1969, would they still have been so supportive.

Ordinary Little Stories

Mine are very ordinary little stories; there is nothing earth-shaking here. These recollections are bits and pieces of my second tour in Vietnam, from January 1969, to April 1970. Since then, I have read the accounts of others who were there in far more dangerous roles than I, and my hat is off to them. I think that, like nearly all history, there are valuable lessons to be learned from our involvement in Vietnam. Often there are misinterpretations, but our involvement in Kuwait and Iraq showed that some lessons were learned well by those who were there, and were in high leadership positions by the time Desert Shield/Desert Storm rolled around.

Better Accounts Than Mine

I own a very small number of the books written about Vietnam. Some I think worth reading are these. For a concise history of the war in one volume, scan through The Ten Thousand Day War Vietnam: 1945-1975, by Michael Maclear. Street Without Joy, by Bernard Fall, and Vietnam Diary, by Richard Tregaskis, provide good background of the early days of the war. Works which are basically collections of participants include Everything We Had and To Bear Any Burden, both by Al Santoli, Strange Ground: An Oral History Of Americans In Vietnam 1945-1975, by Harry Maurer, and A Life In A Year, by James R. Ebert. I think Dispatches, by Michael Herr, is a particularly insightful view of the war. There are many, many others, and I do not wish to slight them. It just so happens these named are on my bookshelves, I have read them, and they seem relevant to me.

My View Of The War

My view of the war is too lengthy to detail here. The war - *our* war as opposed to the French Indo-China war - lasted thirty years, and was an enormously complicated endeavor. Many of my views are probably based on misconceptions, and I am ignorant of too many political and military facets of the war. Therefore I am unqualified to offer any kind of analysis of it. But I firmly believe we should never have been involved in Vietnam. Period. End of text.

Could We Have Won?

Who knows? I now look back at it with knowledge gained from a number of books (above), and dozens of television treatments of it. Those, naturally, have brought me knowledge I certainly didn't have then. Our uncaring ignorance of, and inability to understand the way Vietnamese minds worked prevented us from seeing other than American-style solutions to most situations. That same inability to see the local mind set plagues us still in other countries, par-

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

ticularly the non-European ones. In the military, much is made of the "will to win," as rightly it should be. Simply put, they had it, we didn't. We (the Army and the other branches) proved time and time again, in a straight out fight, that we could win battles. But at echelons above us, the will to win was not there. With the North Vietnamese as dedicated as they were, and we as uncaring as we were, I very much doubt the outcome could have been any different. Far too many things would have had to be different.

Reread my fifth sentence in the paragraph "My View Of The War," above - the one that begins, "But I firmly believe . . ."

Getting There

As I said, the beginning of my second trip was somewhat involved. As it got closer, was I unconsciously trying to put it off? Who knows? I had become acquainted with Walt and Sandi Steele during the career course. Being a bachelor, and Sandi being the sweet person she was, they invited me to dinner at their quarters more than once. When it came time for Walt and I, along with a number of others, to move to Fort Bragg, to complete our training prior to going to Vietnam, Sandi and the kids (two I think) moved to Chula Vista to be close to her parents. So my visit to their house in Chula Vista was sort of a continuation of Fort Lee. It must have been pretty low-key; I don't remember any special sort of going-away party. Certainly Walt was facing far less danger this time than the last. As a rifle platoon leader in the 1st Cav, he had certainly earned the Combat Infantry Badge (CIB) he wore. Incidentally, from a story Walt told, he received his draft notice while on a hill overlooking the Cambodian border. He said he wrote them back, saying in effect, the draft board was a little too late.

After our hop from southern California, Walt and I joined the rest of our flight companions, and learned our plane had just arrived from Washington state. After a delay of an hour or so, we took off for a return trip to Washington. After arriving, we were told some number of us (I think it was about fourteen) would have to get off so they could put enough fuel on board to make it to Japan. Why didn't they think of that when we were still at Travis AFB? Maybe the city fathers of San Francisco didn't want any more stray GIs roaming the streets than was necessary. Considering the year and attitudes of Americans toward Vietnam, perhaps that was just as well.

When we arrived at Tokyo International, we were put in "quarantine," and not allowed anywhere but the dedicated bathrooms, and - where else? - the Duty Free shop. We endured another delay waiting for the plane with those who had volunteered for the second flight, and amazingly enough, it arrived. Our original manifest was together again, and we could do the final leg to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, outside Saigon.

Return To Qui Nhon

I don't recall how long we stayed at Tan Son Nhut; I do recall going through the MACV CIF (Central Issue Facility), where I drew all my field gear, and weapon, an M-16 rifle. I was initially tagged to go to I Corps (referred to as "Eye" Corps, rather than First Corps), and so my field gear was tailored to that cooler area. My "extras" included a field jacket and a wool-knitted sleeping shirt. After a day or so, I flew up to Qui Nhon (my orders had been changed), in northern II Corps. I was assigned to MACV Team 8, the advisory team for the ARVN 5th ALC (Area Logistics Command). The II Corps area covered more territory than the other three, and was

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

divided into two areas of logistical support, thus having 2nd ALC (for the southern half) and 5th ALC for the northern half.

This was a "return" inasmuch as Qui Nhon harbor was the first place my ship anchored when I arrived in Vietnam the first time, in September, 1965. At that time, northern II Corps was one of the hottest areas in Vietnam. An Khe was the base camp for the 1st Cavalry Division, and that area, from An Khe west to Pleiku and beyond was the testing ground for the new airmobile division. But I had never gotten off the ship then, as much as I'd wanted to, so this was the first time I'd actually set foot in Qui Nhon.

A couple of people from the team picked me up in a jeep from the airfield, and drove me to the MACV BOQ, which would be my home for the next twelve months (or so I probably thought at the time). It was immediately apparent that Vietnam, the US presence, and everything else about my second tour, had changed appreciably since I left Cam Ranh in September 1966.

Assignments

My initial assignment, as a Quartermaster Captain on Team 8, was to replace the captain who had been the Commissary Advisor and advisor to a pig farm. Yes, a pig farm. This was *not* what I had come to Vietnam the second time to do. The departing advisor was a nice guy, showed me the newly opened "commissary," and told me of the things he had managed to bring about on his watch, but . . . Fortunately, both the senior man on the Mobile Advisory Logistics Team (MALT), and his "deputy," were moving along as well, and thank God someone deemed the MALT team positions of higher priority than the pig farm. So Major Gene Dimmie, an Ordnance officer, and myself were assigned to the MALT. Team 8 had few enlisted or NCO personnel, and the MALT team was where most of them were. They were specialists in medical, communications, ordnance and the like. Fine by me. We relied heavily on their expertise. In that sense, it made it more like a regular unit.

A Relaxed Atmosphere

I was pretty quickly assimilated into Team 8, at least the part that seemed to spend most of its off-duty time partying. Two names persist in memory: Major Doug Comeaux from Louisiana, and Captain Tom Bradley from Reno, Nevada. The names of the rest, except for my new roomie, who arrived one or two days after I, are forgotten. Charles Q. Cutshaw, Captain, Ordnance Corps, was assigned as my roommate. Our room, soon to be known as "Sonny and Char's Bar and Grill," was to be the site of many drunken parties, or the start, middle, or end of them. Both Doug Comeaux and Tom Bradley played the guitar, and had gotten one from Special Services on sort of an extended loan; "Chuck" Schuder, a pale, skinny, balding guy played Bass, and it seems someone else, maybe Doug, maybe not, played the banjo. Unlike the rest of us, Chuck was assigned to 1st Field Force Vietnam (IFFV). And all of us *thought* we could sing. With such a group, and a work week that was almost nothing but 8-hour days, Monday through Friday, we had a lot of off-duty time. Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill became the center of this social whirl.

On weekends, there was the beach house, a small, crudely constructed hut some way down the street. It was constructed on a concrete slab projecting out over the beach, and as I recall it, although I was only there once or twice, was made from scrounged lumber, woven palm matting,

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and the ubiquitous corrugated metal roof. Although humble in appearance, it was a nice place for a barbecue and a swim. Since I didn't swim, my visits were limited.

This is not to say there weren't some dedicated people on Team 8; I think most were. There was a rather laid-back, business-as-usual attitude which seemed to pervade much of the team, and I think there were two reasons for it. First, the Vietnamese army (ARVN), at least the logistical part of it was, to our dismay, run on an "8 to 5," Monday through Friday basis. There were exceptions, such as the 525th Ordnance Company (Ammo), commanded by an ARVN captain named Thanh, to whom my friend Charlie was the advisor. Ðai-uy' Thanh (later Thieu-ta, or Major, Thanh) ran his company on a combat footing. Our actual duty hours were (I'm guessing here) 0700 to 1800, with a two-hour break at mid-day. During the hot, dry months, that two-hour mid-day break was a good idea, although arguably something that probably should have been dispensed with were one intent on waging (and winning) a war. However, our (US) hours were geared to our Vietnamese counterparts, so that's what we worked.

The second reason for our rather laid-back performance of duty was the leadership of our senior advisor, or "SA." LTC Replinger was a lieutenant colonel in a full colonel's billet, who had reached the end of his career, and was simply not - especially toward the end of his tour - real excited about the advisory business. But to be fair, it was not just his career topping out at Lt Col that was to blame for his attitude. The Vietnamese attitudes were so different from our own, that it took a supremely dedicated person to maintain any kind of fire and zeal in attempting to assist his counterpart in prosecuting his little facet of the war. I expect had he been assigned to a US unit, he would have been as hard-nosed as anyone about getting on with the dance.

He was a personable guy, and when stirred to the occasion, could be as much of a hard ass as anyone. He was Transportation Corps, and like nearly every TC officer or NCO I ever met, was very competent, and committed to his job; I can visualize him yet today. At any rate, the example set by the SA set the tone for most of the officers on the team. I recall one Corps of Engineers Major who insisted on "playing the role" as a serious upright officer, and who gave us (mostly captains) a certain amount of grief when we, in our cups, kept him awake at night with our drunken serenades. We were an inconsiderate lot, and were it not for several other majors being part of this unruly mob, we would have probably been in a lot deeper trouble.

Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill

It may or may not have had anything to do with the fact that Charlie had already spent a tour in Germany, and/or that I had done a previous tour in 'Nam, under fairly spartan circumstances, but we soon agreed that we could cobble some victuals together in a much tastier fashion than our own MACV mess hall. That is when we weren't at the Qui Nhon Support Command Officers Club, which as clubs went, offered some fairly decent chow. So again, with the help of CARE packages from home, and the PX, and from scrounged and donated items, we found ourselves cooking up something two or three nights a week.

The impetus for Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill was manifold. Charlie and I had an attitude of less-than-complete seriousness about some of the "customs of the service." most particularly I guess concerning the sanctity of the mess hall (before they became "dining facilities") and the officers club. Charlie had enjoyed the benefits of an assignment in Europe; I was on my second

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

tour in Vietnam. Those two facts may seem unconnected, but I think they combined, along with some other things influenced our decision to play "host" to a number of our fellow team members. Charlie had the benefit of having eaten well in Germany; I had a background of cooking up scrounged food mixed with the contents of "CARE packages" on my first tour at Cam Ranh Bay.

Charlie's and my room was equipped with a fairly good sized refrigerator, and a two-element hot plate to prepare food. Add to that the fact our room was centrally located, easily accessible to other team members, who could visit in any state of dress or undress that would not be appropriate, or tolerated, by either the mess hall or the club. Operating hours for Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill were rather more flexible than the club, and especially the mess hall.

So with those factors, plus the benign neglect of the senior officers of the team, Charlie's and my room became the gathering place of those bent on letting their hair down, and getting a spot of nourishment in the bargain. Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill became the gathering place for simple fun for the drunks on the team. Too bad there weren't any women around. Or actually, good thing there *weren't* any women around. That element added to the mix would have surely landed us in more trouble than it was worth. Ultimately, Sonny & Char's broke up, partly because I moved to Pleiku, partly because the club on the compound got better, and partly because it simply evolved to other aims.

A Club On The Compound

When we first arrived, there was no functioning "club" in the MACV compound. There was a bar, and some slot machines, but no food. At some point after - I'm a little hazy on the details of this - I think "they" found an NCO to run the place, and with our encouragement, the club began serving meals. One of the most welcome new features was the ability to go down on Sunday morning (after a particularly hard Saturday night), and have steak and eggs, with a Bloody Mary. Talk about "restoratives," that sort of breakfast was exactly what the physician prescribed.

The club improved little by little. The menu was expanded, and the quality of the food improved. We even got the occasional band. In fact, on the evening of my arrival from Pleiku (after I'd been transferred), to leave the next morning on R&R with Charlie, there was a band of some description (probably Filipino or Thai), and, to use our phrase of the time, "it got rather drunk out that night."

Our In-House Neighbors

The MACV BOQ at Qui Nhon housed all of Team 8, but also had a few other tenants, one group of which were some Air Force pilots and crew for the forward air controllers (FACs) at the airfield. Charlie managed to hitch a ride with one of them - Mike Byers, a former B-52 pilot - on one of his FAC flights. Mike flew in support of the Korean "Tiger" Division, and had some tales to tell of how the Koreans preferred to run their segment of the war. There were a few others, some military, some civilian (contractors), but I've forgotten exactly who they were, or what they did. The BOQ was a three-story stucco building, with balconies front and rear, overlooking a street which ran parallel to the beach. A curious feature, typical I guess of tropical construction, was that the hallways outside the rooms, were open to the weather, and ran from balcony to balcony. Pretty palatial. Had the economy been better - and no war - I'm sure the building would have been a hotel (as it might have once been), and charging some pretty good rates for such a

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location. There was a concrete wall all around it, and in the front corner, a thinly grassed, sandy lawn with tables and benches (again concrete) which was part of the club. We were living damned high in comparison to the poor eleven bravos (11B was the MOS for enlisted infantrymen) out in the jungle. Vietnam was indeed a land of contrasts.

Boom!

One vivid memory of this little club-lawn was one night Charlie, a couple of others, and myself, were eating dinner at one of these tables when a jeep blew up a couple of hundred meters down the street. I was the only one who remained seated, saying 'what was that,' as opposed to all the rest jumping up (into possible exposure to flying shrapnel, or bullets) to see what *that* was. I don't know why I had enough sense to stay seated, but I did. Nothing happened to those who did, so I gained nothing from my inadvertent act of caution.

The next day we learned the reason for the explosion. It turned out to be not a Viet Cong satchel charge attack, but a jealous payback of one ARVN against another over some petty difference. One Vietnamese had tossed a grenade into the back of a jeep filled with more Vietnamese. Maybe it was a fight over a girlfriend, maybe something else. And our reaction, when we learned the story behind it, was probably a reinforcement of our already low opinion of our "little brown brothers." Something like, "How are we supposed to be dedicated to helping these little assholes when they pull that kind of shit?"

And Boom Some More

Another memory from the MACV BOQ was being awakened in the middle of the night, out of a drunken stupor, to the fact that either the POL (fuel) or the ammo dump - both ARVN - had been hit by a real-life VC attack. I had been drinking Black Russians the evening before, and was in absolutely no condition to be awakened in the middle of the night. I felt as though I had been split down the middle and glued back together slightly off-center. I was most assuredly not, as Wodehouse would have said, "in mid-season form." But either the POL or the ammo dump was going off at a great rate, providing quite a spectacular show if one were in complete control of his faculties, and rather interesting even when one was not. I watched for a half hour or so, but the desire for bed and sleep overcame my interest, and so I surrendered to my stronger impulse.

Before I left Qui Nhon, there were one or two other attacks on the ARVN POL depot burning and exploding pol and ammo dumps are sort of open-ended affairs because POL has to pretty much burn itself out until all the fuel is consumed, and ammo dumps continue to have explosions from bullets or bombs "cooking off" long after the main explosions have died down.

Charlie was the advisor to the 525th Ordnance Company, the ARVN unit that ran the ammunition depot, and had a very good relationship with its commander, Captain Thanh. Thanh, who was a former grunt, ran patrols outside the perimeter with his own men, and on one of the nights Charlie spent at the place, they killed a VC trying to infiltrate the ammo dump.

Discovering Photography

Not very long after I'd gotten to Qui Nhon, I began to get interested in a camera. Not a little Kodak Instamatic or the like, but a 35mm camera. I guess it was probably due to Charlie, and his Pentax. I began looking in the PACEX (Pacific Exchange) catalog, and eventually settled on a

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

Canon FT QL, with a 55mm f:1.2 lens. I looked at Charlie's Pentax, comparing it to a Canon at the PX, and liked the heft and feel of the Canon. Heavier was better; something with weight, that's what I wanted. Through the catalog, camera body and lens were all of about \$136.00. I ordered it, soon received it, and began taking black & white photos. One of the interpreters for Team 8 got them developed for me downtown. After awhile, I began taking slides, again probably from Charlie's influence.

After I moved to Pleiku (not to get ahead of myself), I ordered a 200mm fixed focal length telephoto, and another FT QL body (so I would have one body for black & white and the other for color film). I was off on a road that continues to this day. While in Vietnam, I took a lot of photos with those cameras, using the telephoto lens to good advantage when I was up in a helicopter. Whereas my first tour in 65-66 was very poorly documented, my second was reasonably well documented, although at this point in time, I would have a hard time putting my fingers on many of the B&W negatives. On my first tour in Germany, I used them at several race tracks, and other trips. The 200mm was such a good lens! I continued to buy lenses, and other accessories for my Canons. Little did I realize what I was getting into in Qui Nhon, when I bought my first 35mm.

Small-World Department

Since Vietnam, I've experienced several instances illustrating that old saying, "it's a small world." One that occurred in 'Nam was Charlie's and my re-acquaintance with a guy named Marvin Sprouse. Charlie had known Marv from IOBC - Infantry Officer Basic Course - at Fort Benning, Georgia. Both had been detailed Infantry at that point in time. I met Marv, a few years after that, at Ft Lee, Virginia, when I was in G3 Ops, and he was in G3 Training. Then we all stumbled into each other there in the MACV BOQ. Marv, at that time, was the Phoenix Advisor on Team 22, the Binh Dinh Province Team.

I don't know what Charlie's experiences with Marvin were while they were in IOBC, but when I knew him at Ft Lee, Marv was the proverbial "loose cannon." He made several video training tapes for the Quartermaster School. In one, he bit the head off a chicken, plucked it, and began eating it raw as a demonstration of what one could do to survive if forced to live off the land. I imagine most of the trainees loved it; I'm not sure about the QMS cadre. Marv once submitted a suggestion through the Suggestion Awards Program that all the men's latrines on Ft Lee have the height of their ceilings reduced to a height of four or five feet, "because all Quartermaster officers squat to pee."

Marvin wanted out of G3 Training, out of the Quartermaster Corps, and away from Ft Lee in the worst way. Having been commissioned QM, detailed Infantry, he succeeded in transferring to Military Intelligence. It was as an MI officer, still a captain, that he got back to Vietnam for the second time.

Marv's tour in Vietnam was with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), as a long range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP) team leader. In 1965, before the print and television media became critical of the war, he and his team were on the cover of Life magazine.

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

As the Phoenix Advisor, with his LRRP experience, Marvin was in his element. The Phoenix Program was described as having various missions, but having known Marv for a while, when he told me his business was long range recon, and assassinations, I believed him. Marv would be around the compound, and then you wouldn't see him for a while. When we did, we would ask, "Where ya been, Marv?", and he would say, "Up north." Once or twice he owned up to a hit, but the rest of the time, he had just been "out," or "away."

The MALT And The "Ruff Puffs"

The mission of the MALT was to "inspect" Regional Force (RF) companies, and Popular Force (PF) platoons. (Although despite their official designations as companies and platoons, they were more often than not under strength and could only muster platoon-plus and squad-plus strengths respectively.) Their nickname among the Americans was "Ruff Puffs," from the initials RF/PF. These units were sort of the equivalent of our Reserve and National Guard on a low, almost non-existent, budget. The PF units were only employed within their District; the RFs only within the Province. After completion of the "inspection," we would return to home base, and write our report. I say "inspection" when we were encouraged not to call it that. I suppose you could have called it a "fact-finding" tour, or perhaps an "audit," although at the time I was unfamiliar with both of those terms. Since 5th ALC covered the northern part of II Corps, the provinces of Binh Dinh, Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Phu Yen were our territory. While with the MALT, I helped conduct the visits to Phu Yen, Pleiku, and Binh Dinh.

Method Of Operations

We dealt with one Province, or Sector, at a time, going to each of the District headquarters, which were also called a Sub-Sector. There they would trot out one or more RF platoons and usually three PF squads. These were usually not all at the same location. It depended on how the Province/ District Chief wished to deploy their troops (meaning how secure or insecure the province chief was feeling at that time). The RF/PF units belonged to the Province Chief, and however he wished to deploy them, that's where they went.

Our method of operation was to drive to the Province headquarters, then accompanied by suitable escorts and guides, and look at the troops they had picked. We had two Jeeps and a ¾ Ton truck; one of the Jeeps was equipped with a pedestal-mounted M-60 machine gun. Shades of "Rat Patrol!" One province, Phu Bon, was too far to drive, so we (actually "they," because I had been reassigned before it was time for the MALT to go to Phu Bon) loaded one Jeep in a C-123 or a Caribou, and flew there, borrowing another vehicle from the advisory team there. Generally, this was OK, because *our advisor*, Captain Mai, was an old, seasoned ARVN officer who seemed to know virtually everyone in northern II Corps, and who found out what the VC situation was where ever we went. If Mai said it was OK to go somewhere, it was OK. If he said it was not, we respected his judgement.

In some cases, it was all we could do to keep from laughing at these poor guys, but you knew the partial uniforms, the mis-matched equipment, the mixture of armament, were all the product of the Vietnamese logistics system, with its rampant corruption and inefficiency. We afforded these kids and old men as much dignity as we could muster, because usually they were proud of themselves, as poorly trained and equipped as they almost always were, and they deserved no less

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from us. Whatever criticisms (about the system) I could slip into the report, which (in our case) went through IFFV headquarters, to MACV headquarters, I would. I became the report writer, taking everyone's input, putting it in a uniform format, and making it as strong as possible without chance of it being rejected. I was using some of the staff-writing lessons learned in G3 Ops at Ft Lee. The report eventually went over to the Vietnamese high command, and then back down the other side for action. I was skeptical of that, but that's what we were told.

Reports

Our report was typed on a mimeograph master - pages and pages - and then reproduced in quantity. I wish I had secreted one away as a souvenir, but didn't. The reports submitted under the previous chief were short and sketchy. I think he wrote them. MAJ Dimmie allowed me nearly free rein. He believed we were doing an important job, and so did I, and both of us wanted to get as much meaningful information in the reports as possible. So they became more uniform, with each specialty treated as thoroughly as the next, and a complete word-picture drawn as to what we had observed. Occasionally he would tone down a word or a phrase, but not often. He and I saw pretty much eye to eye.

But for the record, whatever happened to Major Gene Dimmie after Team 8, he was a good sort. He had learned that valuable lesson that too few grasp, either sooner or later, if at all, and that was to trust his subordinates. I wish I could run into him again.

Dai-uy' Mai

Dai-uy' Mai was an interesting fellow. He served with the Viet Minh, the predecessor of the Viet Cong, when the French were still in Indo China. Then with the departure of the French, Mai crossed over to the other side - the South Vietnamese government *du jour* - and joined their army. He was the first ARVN officer to attend the US Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) school. One eye had been damaged, blinding him, when something he was de-arming blew up. He was a character. He claimed to own two or three brothels in Saigon, a garage and a brothel in Qui Nhon, and some other enterprises. And he may well have done, he was an operator. But he was a valuable asset to the MALT, and I liked him.

Dai-uy' Mai and I became pretty good friends. About as good as an American and an old Thai soldier were going to get. Mai adamantly emphasized that he was Thai, not Vietnamese. I think he felt a degree of kinship with the Montagnards we came in contact with, but he was very firm that he was not Vietnamese. Mai and I shared a cynical sense of humor, often to the dismay and bewilderment of some of the team members. Once, while at Tuy Phuoc District in southern Binh Dinh Province, we were eating lunch with members of the District staff, and the American MAT team who were acting as the district advisors. The second-in-command of the MAT team, incidentally, was Lieutenant Diez, who had been in the same MATA course with me at Bragg. It was to prove one of the best meals I ever had in Vietnam. The district was mostly Montagnard, and the food was more their style than Vietnamese.

Tree Fish

Mai and I were seated next to each other. The meal was simple, consisting of roasted water buffalo, grilled fish, white boiled rice, and a green salad. Nothing fancy, but everything was very good, and easily recognizable. (Some Vietnamese food was not immediately recognizable.) Mai and I set upon the meal with determination. Mai was about as skinny as anyone I'd ever seen; how he stayed that way I do not know. At any rate, Ðai-uy' Mai and I filled our bowls by turns with buffalo, fish, and rice, and then started over again. It was all delicious! And being so un-Vietnamese, I particularly enjoyed it. One of our team asked what kind of fish it was and Mai said "tree fish," because we were in a dry, flat part of Binh Dinh, close to the ocean, but not immediately on it, he conjured up the concept of fish that sometimes lived in trees when there wasn't enough water to support them. I caught on, but no one else seemed to. I began to expand on his explanation, and Mai thought that was great, and added still more outrageous details to the story. Finally they caught it that we were having them on, and said, "yeah, yeah, OK, we get it." But that little interchange I think tied Mai and I together better than anything else I could have done. After that, when he played jokes or pranks on other team members, he always let me in on the gag first.

Not Without Danger

Once, while in Tuy An District, in Phu Yen Province, we were on top of a small plateau overlooking a flat valley. A squad of PFs had been turned out, and while our NCOs were inspecting the troops, MAJ Dimmie and I were on the side of the plateau overlooking the valley. There was an earth berm around the hill on that side, with bushes and grass growing on it. MAJ Dimmie was standing on top of the berm, and I was behind the berm, about 100 meters away from him. I preferred to look through the bushes, rather than over them. I heard a shot fired from some distance away, but didn't think anything of it, I couldn't even place its origin. It was only one shot. At about the same time, I happened to notice MAJ Dimmie jumping down off the berm, although I didn't think much of that either. A short time later, when MAJ Dimmie and I got closer to each other, he asked if I had heard a shot. I told him I had, and he said *he had heard the round as it passed by him*. My staying low, with him standing on the berm, made him a too-tempting target for a sniper across the valley. Good thing the sniper's aim was bad. Maybe his rifle was in no better condition than some we had seen in the hands of the PFs.

We weren't combat types, but the VC didn't know that, so as with anyone else there, we were also a target. This may have been before or after the incident with the blown up Jeep in Qui Nhon, but I was learning to keep my head down.

Sappers

That lesson was also brought home to me another day in Phu Yen Province. North of the province capitol of Tuy Hoa, a few meters off the roadway of the main coastal road, QL I (National Road Nr. 1), there was a monument, an obelisk about eight or ten feet tall. That vicinity was the operating area of a deadly successful VC sapper squad. Numerous mines had been placed and detonated by that sapper squad. Each morning, the highway was cleared by elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first American combat unit to be assigned to Vietnam. Apparently, this daily duty made those who performed the road clearing operation somewhat complacent. They had settled into a routine, and the three armored personnel carriers (APCs) that made up the clearing team drove North on even days, and South on odd days (or the other way round). At any rate, they were

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breaking one of the cardinal rules of engaging (or avoiding) the VC, i.e., never take the same route twice, never do the same thing twice in a row. On the morning that they normally went North, they predictably did so, and suffered the consequences. The sapper squad had planted a command-detonated mine, and set it off just as the middle APC crossed over it. The toll was one dead, three or four wounded, and one destroyed APC. The lesson was pretty clear to anyone paying attention.

Popular Force Weapons

The little "inspections" we did were interesting. I recall one particularly scruffy PF squad somewhere in Binh Dinh province. I think virtually every member of the squad carried a different weapon. One man was carrying a French MAT-49 submachine gun, which had a square-section cooling jacket surrounding the barrel. The MAT-49 was a very peculiar looking weapon, typically French in design. This particular one was the Chinese-modified version, which had a different barrel, about twice as long as the original (I think it was from an AK-47,), and 7.62 mm, instead of the original 9 mm. Another PF soldier had an M1 Garand rifle, possibly of WW II vintage, perhaps given to the French by one of our aid programs, perhaps left behind or captured, eventually coming to rest in this man's hands. It was spotlessly clean, but very time-worn. When I took it from him to examine it, looking down the barrel I discovered it was virtually a smooth bore rifle. It had been fired so many times, nearly all the lands and grooves had been worn away. In its present condition, the round would have begun to tumble as soon as it left the muzzle, and the effective range was probably down to less than fifty meters. One was liable to see almost anything in the hands of the PF platoon members.

We Must Leave - Now!

Another time, we were at a district and I was looking in a "bunker" at their ammunition supply. It was a bunker in name only, as the walls were corrugated metal over a wood frame. There were gaps in the metal siding so that (fortunately) light filtered in so I could see what I was looking at. The bunker was very hot, and crammed with wooden ammo crates of bullets, flares, grenades, and dynamite. Some of the boxes were open, and I reached over my head to see what was in a box. I felt dynamite, but I also felt drops of liquid on the paper wrappers. The dynamite was old, stored in a bunker with too much heat and too little ventilation. It was "sweating" nitroglycerine! 'Oh my God!', I thought. I put the stick of dynamite down very gently, told one of my compatriots I was all done, and that we were going to move off, *very* far away from this bunker. He was initially puzzled, as he knew I had only just begun to look around, but when I told him what I'd found, he wasted no time in following my lead - outta there!

All the aid, financial and materiel, America had given Vietnam did not usually trickle down to the RF/PF units. Once we saw a mechanized RF company which was the Province Chief's guard unit. Their V-100 armored cars were nicely painted in gloss olive drab, and colorful unit markings; the crews were decked out in severely tailored "tiger" fatigues, almost skin-tight, and black berets, but I'm not sure they were as combat ready as they wished their appearance to convey. But they sure looked spiffy - parade ground spiffy.

Dumb Stunts

My sense of immortality occasionally ran to absurd lengths. I was 28 years old during most of this tour, and single, and my sense of 'it can't happen to me' seemed, at times, to overwhelm any common sense I might have possessed. An example of this occurred on the return trip from northern

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Binh Dinh one day. We had been to one of the northern districts, and were running back down QL 1 to Qui Nhon. I was driving the Jeep with the pedestal-mounted M-60. The road was relatively straight and level at the time, and we were approaching one of the many short bridges on QL 1. I was probably doing about 50 or 60 miles per hour, a speed we referred to as "sniper speed," believing that at that speed, a sniper would find it difficult, if not impossible, to hit us. In retrospect, that was probably a naive and erroneous view, but that was another of our rationalizations.

The bridge had only curbs on each edge, but no guard rail, and a 2½ ton truck was approaching from the other side. Rather than slowing down, even to the point of stopping before the bridge began, and waiting for the truck to get across, I continued on to the bridge, by then realizing the bridge was only just barely wide enough for the both of us. And being on the bridge, nearly in the act of passing the truck, I saw that a very long chunk of the curb had broken off, and that there was only a ragged edge to the edge of the bridge on my side. The bridge crossed a nearly dried-out little stream, and was maybe 50 meters long. On both sides, concrete walls formed the bridge abutments; walls that were about ten or twelve feet tall.

Almost Humpty Dumpty

Although I was not to confirm it until we reached the MACV compound in Qui Nhon, our right rear tire had slipped partway off the bridge, and only our momentum had carried us to the other side! Back at the compound, I looked underneath the Jeep at the inside of the right rear tire, and there were white scuff marks (from the concrete) all round the inside sidewall! That could only have happened from the tire being off the edge, and scrabbling along on the rough edge of the bridge. I showed it to the other two team members who had been riding in the Jeep, and they confirmed my theory. Realizing what would have happened should we have slipped off the bridge, I did take a vow to slow down a bit and if at all possible, wait for on-coming 2½ ton trucks in the future. In my imagination, none of the scenarios that came to mind were pretty, and all of them featured visions of broken, bloodied bodies and crumpled metal.

When It's Your Turn

On the MALT's tour of Pleiku Province, something happened that I later recognized changed my outlook on ones inevitable death. At this stage of life's game, I was maybe one-third through it, maybe less. At that stage, few Americans - except those in combat - have the impetus to give much thought on the how or when of their eventual demise.

The incident that made me think of it was the death of a lieutenant on either the II Corps or Province advisory team. I'm not sure which he was assigned to; it doesn't make any difference. I was told he was a quiet reclusive officer who nearly always spent his evenings in his room reading. Occasionally a movie, but usually in his room. But while we were there on the MALT visit, he was on an operation, and got zapped. Died more or less instantly. The same night, the II Corps compound underwent one of its (at that time) rare rocket attacks. One of the rockets, a 122mm, hit dead center in this lieutenant's room. His time, that day, had come. It was sort of like Plan A, and Plan B. If Plan A hadn't got him, there was the backup Plan B. But one way or another, it was his turn.

That may be a callous way of looking at it, but it hit home with me. When it's your turn to go, it's your turn to go. Live life for all it's worth, but when your number is up, that's it.

Pipeline

I'm sure there were American POL (petroleum, oil and lubricant) pipelines at many different locations in South Vietnam. But the only one with which I'm familiar was the one from Qui Nhon to Pleiku. It was about 110 miles long, and went uphill from the coastal lowlands to the central highlands. To keep the "product," as POL people call it, flowing uphill for 110 miles, there were pumping stations along the route. I've forgotten the exact number (I once knew because I'd counted them on the drive between Qui Nhon and Pleiku) . . . I think there were about a dozen.

On one trip between Pleiku and Qui Nhon, when I was not driving myself, I kept busy taking pictures. It may have been when I was going on R&R with Charlie. But as we drove along with the pipeline in sight, I took a picture of one of the pumping stations. Most, if not all of them, were isolated. In addition to the Quartermaster crew which operated and maintained the station, I'm guessing there were probably a squad or two of grunts for protection.

Fuel-Thirsty Customers

The steady flow of POL had to be maintained. We were a vehicle- and air-mobile army, and as such used enormous quantities of MOGAS, DF-1, AVGAS, and JP-4 (standard gasoline, diesel fuel, aviation-grade gasoline, and jet fuel, respectively). Major customers would have included An Khe, halfway between Qui Nhon and Pleiku, Camp Enari, the 4th Division base camp, Camp Holloway, a large airfield of the 1st Aviation Brigade, and the rest of the US units in and around Pleiku.

Although the VC would disrupt the pipeline, and probably attack these pumping stations at regular intervals, the POL and Corps of Engineers soldiers soon put the line back in order, and the product was again flowing. The POL guys were of my branch, and of all the jobs performed by the Quartermaster Corps, I felt the most pride in those guys. Living at those isolated pump stations must have been as bleak as conditions at a firebase, or an LZ, although knowing GIs in Vietnam, I imagine they took care of themselves with stereo equipment and junk food from the PX. Still, theirs had to have been a lonely life, and I felt a healthy respect for them.

Reassigned to Pleiku

Just when I thought I was making a difference on the MALT, the senior QM advisor, a Major named Hale, convinced the SA that I was needed to replace the departing QM captain in Pleiku. Team 8 had a detachment located in Pleiku, about 110 miles away in the Central Highlands. Hale, I think, was jealous of my affinity for the MALT, and resentful of Sonny & Char's Bar & Grill. So he was moving me out. It was disappointing, and ultimately resulted in an OER that was instrumental in me leaving the Army, but all that was in the future. Hale was afraid to travel to Pleiku by road, and so I think I saw him once in the four months I was in Pleiku, because that's how many times he was able to secure a ride on a helicopter to Pleiku. Once was too many times, as it turned out. MAJ Dimmie tried to fight the reassignment, but the SA overruled him.

First Trip To Pleiku

My first trip to Pleiku was by Jeep, up QL 19, through the An Khe Pass, then the city of An Khe, and finally, the Mang Giang Pass. Binh Dinh province was so large that most of the trip, until you get past An Khe, was still in that province. The Mang Giang pass was the site of an ambush of the French by the Viet Minh. Flying over it even then, some fifteen years afterward, you could still see

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a number of burned, rusting hulks of French trucks, halftracks, and tanks resulting from the ambush. It was definitely a sobering sight.

The French Experience

Recalling this, and writing of it, I researched the incident in Bernard Fall's book, Street Without Joy, a well respected book describing the French efforts in Vietnam. He relates that the elements involved were the French *Groupment Mobile* 100, or GM 100, and what was probably the Viet Minh 803rd Regiment. His book describes two separate incidents, on the 1st of April 1954, and again on the 24th of June, 1954. The first ambush, centered around PK (kilometer post) 15, he calls a "dress rehearsal" for the second at PK 22 (relative to An Khe). GM 100 was a composite mechanized group formed to operate in the Central Highlands. These two incidents, the second of which destroyed GM 100, occurred just before and after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, on the 8th of May, 1954.

Ambush Aftermath?

At any rate, my first trip through these passes was in a single Jeep, which conventional wisdom said was of little or no interest to the Viet Cong. At this time, I don't remember which of the passes we were negotiating, although I think it may have been the lower An Khe Pass. We rounded a bend, and stopped in the road ahead was a "deuce and a half" (2½ ton cargo truck), with two GIs hunkered down underneath. One of them had been shot through the hand. Only a few minutes before, not yet in sight of this truck, we had seen a tank off the left side of the road, firing its .50 Cal machine gun into the tree line - and thought absolutely nothing of it! Then when we came upon this truck, with a lightly wounded soldier underneath, it dawned on us we had blundered onto the aftermath of an ambush.

All of us hurriedly "un-assed" (dismounted) the Jeep, and got behind it for cover to see what else was going to happen. This was the first time I had been in anything like a shooting situation, and in retrospect I think the firing was all over. Whoever had shot the GI had long since vacated the premises, but not knowing that at the time, the adrenalin started flowing. My initial reaction was something to the effect, "Oh shit, what do I do now?" Then, realizing I had a loaded M-16, I became angered that someone - some rotten SOB - might actually be trying to shoot me. So I let loose a couple of rounds toward the side of the road at which the tank had been firing, and realizing we were stopped by a rather deep, brush-filled ditch which might be providing cover for Lord-knew who, I let loose a couple of more rounds in that direction. I was sure I'd wounded a few leaves, and felt better for the activity. I didn't know if anyone else in our Jeep had fired, but things got quiet, and by discussion and mutual agreement, we got back in the Jeep and drove off at a pretty good clip, eventually arriving at Pleiku without further incident. I had probably been in no danger whatever, but knowing I had not been reduced to a whimpering mass of jelly, and instead had faced up to whatever was there, I felt pretty good about myself.

Follow The Convoy

Our new Senior Advisor, Colonel Leeper, also Transportation Corps, was of the conservative, political sort. He was a good sort, well-meaning, and all that, but you don't get to be an O6 without some political savvy. One of his decrees, issued in good faith for our well-being, was that if any of us left Qui Nhon for any reason, to drive to some destination, we were always to link up with a

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convoy, and travel with that convoy. No single, unescorted Jeep trips to the hinterlands. Well, of course those of us with more time in country immediately pooh-poohed that idea.

It was actually less macho-oriented, than hedonistically motivated. Convoys were too slow, and with us being at the tail of one, they kicked up too much dust. Added to that was the fact a trailing jeep might be mistaken for the trail element of that convoy, i.e., part of the convoy, and because Jeeps usually carried officers and/or NCOs, might be more of a tempting target. We had convinced ourselves of the apparent wisdom that one lone Jeep would be considered either (a) too insignificant, or (b) too dangerous, for the VC to attack. Our reasoning for (b) was that we might be a decoy that could bring in immediate air support to bring death and destruction on an attacker. This line of reasoning was obviously self-serving, but we had convinced ourselves that traveling by single Jeep was not nearly as dangerous as going with a convoy.

Mines

What bothered me about driving anywhere, particularly outside the city, was the prospect of mines. If I felt ambushes against vehicles were pretty rare, I knew instances of vehicles running over mines, and being blown up were all-too-common. When someone shot at you, there was always the hope that the first shot would miss, and that you could return fire. But with mines, there was no second chance. The damned things simply blew up, and some nasty wounds, if not death, were the usual result. There were many possibilities: having parts of the vehicle, parts of the mine, as well as dirt and rocks blown into the body; having limbs blown off; being blown out of the vehicle, and being run over or forcibly driven into something outside your own vehicle, and so on. The possibilities were many, and none of them were pretty.

Traveling Solo

After I had been in Pleiku for a while, Charlie and I coordinated a mutual R&R to Hong Kong. First, of course, I had to join Charlie in Qui Nhon, so I drove the 110 miles alone from Pleiku to Qui Nhon. Only the week before, an ARVN officer and his family had been blown up by a mine within sight of Fire Base (FB) Blackhawk. Actually, most of the distance from Pleiku to An Khe I had a passenger. I had picked up a GI at Blackhawk, which was a few miles outside Pleiku, and he rode with me to An Khe. He thought I was somewhat deranged when I told him I was headed for Qui Nhon (by myself). That trip also passed without incident, and (in my mind) reinforced our theory.

The Pleiku Team House

The Team 8 detachment at Pleiku lived in a little wooden house built on the compound of an ARVN Ordnance Company. It was large enough to house six or seven people, and had a kitchen, an eating room, a living room, and a large latrine. There were three or four bedrooms. We had a television and could pick up AFRTS Vietnam. We had a Vietnamese cook, who quit almost immediately after the departure of the previous QM captain whom I had replaced. But we hired another, and trained her to cook 'Murrican style. We had a commissary account with the Class I point, which was subject to "first pick" by the unit mess halls when or if there was a shortage of any foodstuffs. Our needs, however, were pretty simple, and since we "planned" our own meals, which tended to be repeated often, we never had a problem with shortages.

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With the assignment of Tom Bradley to the Pleiku detachment, I found we had gained a baker on the team. I could cook fairly well - guy stuff - but didn't have a clue about baking. Tom could bake bread, biscuits, and more. His talents rounded out and improved our meals considerably.

The previous QM captain (whatever his name was), first to be assigned to the Pleiku Detachment, designed and supervised the building of the house, acquired the refrigerator and stove, hired and trained a cook, and did a lot of other things to make the place habitable. For good reason, he was held in high esteem by the senior members of the team in Qui Nhon. I met the guy (I think my first trip to Pleiku was for the purpose of attending his farewell party), but was never around him long enough to really get to know him.

The Lava Grill

We didn't often have time for it, but when we did, and it wasn't raining, we would set up our barbecue grill, and burn some steaks, or whatever we had that was appropriately grilled. Our grillouts usually took place on the weekend, and were often preceded by an hour or so (or more), of drinking. Since we were acquainted with the guys in the EOD team, and also since one of our members was an Engineer master sergeant, we had fairly ready access to C4 explosives, or *plastique*, as the French called it. That's what we used to light the charcoal we bought on the local economy. While C4 is a very powerful explosive, it is not easily, or accidentally detonated. But it does burn rather fiercely, and is easily ignited. If the charcoal was green or damp, as it almost always was, C4 was an excellent way of getting it burning.

One afternoon, someone must have misjudged the amount of C4 to use, as before long, instead of the C4 burning out, and being replaced by the smoke from the charcoal, the C4 kept going, emitting sparks, flames and lots of heat. Eventually, the C4 "boiled over," running over the sides of the grill, and down onto the rubber-tired wheels, setting them alight as well. It resembled a volcanic lava flow. The C4 burned through the bottom of the grill itself, and before long, we had a very smoky conflagration that we were utterly unprepared to extinguish. All we could do was stand back, watch, and run for a camera to take pictures. Eventually, the fire died out, and we were left without a means to grill anything. I don't recall what we did for supper, but we probably sat down to think about it over a fresh beer.

Counterparts

These recollections of a tour spent as an advisor would be incomplete without mention of the reason for our being there, our counterparts. In retrospect, although I certainly would not have admitted it at the time, nor probably for several years after, I didn't try too hard at being a good advisor. Some advisors were fortunate in having a counterpart who had been Americanized to some degree. I was not. By "Americanized," I mean a Vietnamese officer who spoke reasonably good English, and who had been around at least a few American officers before. Charlie was lucky in that his counterpart, Captain Thanh, later Major, was very "American" in the way he ran things, had an excellent command of English, and understood our sense of humor. He and Charlie got along famously, and I must say I was a bit jealous, until I was reassigned to the MALT, and then the problem was solved because I really didn't have a counterpart. This attitude, obviously, was pretty damned petty of me, but that's the way I was. I was not an advisor for my benefit, I was an advisor for theirs. At least that was the theory of the thing.

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Not Doing My Job

After I moved to Pleiku, this got worse, and didn't improve on the subsequent move to Cheo Reo. In Pleiku, I had three or four counterparts. One, a lieutenant in the largest unit, the depot, was a pretty good sort, and I really should have maintained closer contact with him. I had made up my mind, however, that I was going to get that transfer to the 1st Cav Division, and so I neglected him as well. He and I made a trip by Jeep from Pleiku to Khontum that was sort of risky, although nothing happened. We went in his Jeep, and he drove like a bat out of hell. Actually, his driving was no worse than mine, but it was different being in the passenger's seat. I think we might have gotten along pretty well if he had spoken a bit better English. But there I go again, assigning blame where it probably didn't belong. Again, *I* was in Vietnam, trying to advise Vietnamese. *I* should have been the one working on *my* Vietnamese.

This Is The Way They Treat Our Stuff!?!?

One of the smaller units I was supposed to be advising was the one where I got in deep shit with my boss, Major Hale. On the occasion he managed a space on a helicopter, and was able to visit Pleiku (without having to stay overnight), we went to a unit which had a US rough terrain forklift parked in the front yard. You have to remember that during the second half of my first tour to sunny southeast Asia, I was in charge of a Maintenance Platoon that repaired forklifts, among other things. So I had a certain familiarity with rough terrain (R/T) forklifts, and a certain affinity for them. Added to that was the knowledge that by this time, a lot of new equipment was being diverted from American units to Vietnamese ones. This was expensive equipment, and it rankled me it was being so mistreated. I'll take that back; it didn't just "rankle" me, it really pissed me off.

On My Way Out

When I saw the engine cover was off this nearly new forklift - much newer than anything the US units owned - and that the valve cover was off the head, with most of the valve train disassembled and, together with the tools used to take it apart, scattered over the engine and fenders, rusting in pools of water, you may understand my getting a little bent out of shape. This brand new piece of equipment, worth a considerable amount of money, had been shipped from the US directly to the ARVN, *and this is the way they treated it!?!?* I was livid. And my boss, who got along with his counterpart in Qui Nhon by buying cartons of Salem cigarettes and other things for him from the PX, was most distressed at the way I yelled at my counterpart. Without my realizing it, I was on my way out of the Army.

Monsoon

I experienced one monsoon season at Cam Ranh Bay on my first tour, and it was nothing like what I had heard of monsoons. I expected wind, constant rain, and other things; you know, like in the movies. The monsoon on the coast, in 1965-66, was not like that; some days would pass with no rain at all. Then, when I was in Qui Nhon, a little farther up the coast, I saw the tail end of the monsoon at the beginning of 1969, but again, nothing as soggy or persistent as expected. Then I moved to Pleiku. That's where they must have made the movies.

Monsoon rains hit different parts of Vietnam at different times of the year. I guess that's understandable. It was in late June or early July when I moved from Qui Nhon, and about a month or two later, the rains began in the Highlands. It was somewhat tentative at first, but soon hit its stride.

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

And for about a month and a half, it rained every day, for approximately twelve hours a day. It wasn't twelve straight hours of rain, nor did it always start and stop at the same hours. But each day, when you made an estimate of the total number of hours it did rain, versus the total hours it did not, the periods were about equal.

Seldom did it "storm;" rarely did we see lightning or hear thunder. Mostly the rain just came down. In sheets. By the bucketful. Once it got started, you would swear it would never stop. But of course it would. It might rain a half hour, or an hour, or it might rain for four or five hours. The periods when it was not raining might be darkly overcast, with the import of what was to come, or it might clear off, and be perfectly nice, with only the puddles and dripping leaves giving evidence of what had gone before, and what would come again very shortly. Sometimes there was a little wind when it rained, and it would come straight down so hard that visibility would be cut to 100 meters or less. Other times, it would blow with such force you would swear the rain itself would be driven through solid objects. But it consistently averaged about twelve hours a day.

Mold And Pretty Sunsets

Although we had a nice little solid house, the humidity made everything damp. Mold and mildew were everywhere. A light bulb in your wall locker, burning 24 hours a day, could not guarantee that something would not get damp, then turn white, yellow, green, or black. Clothes would be taken off damp and put on damp. It was cold, or relatively so. After becoming used to 95° to 100° temperature, 70-75° during the daytime, and 60-65° at night was *cold*. I couldn't imagine what the poor grunts were doing in those conditions. Well, actually I could pretty well imagine their conditions, and I was very thankful that I didn't have to put up with it myself.

Much of the earth in the highlands is red laterite, a clay that in the dry season can be reduced to fine talcum powder. During the rainy season, when broken down to mud, the rain made it as slick as if someone had poured oil on the ground.

When they coincided with periods of no rain, sunsets and sunrises were spectacular, often with huge, billowing masses of clouds. Once, after a rain, I saw a large spider web, with dozens and dozens of little water droplet jewels on it. It had been spun between the outside mirror frame and the hinge of the door on a truck, and was a true work of art. It was beautiful. But I happened to be out of film.

Gun Trucks

A subject of fascination to both Charlie and I, as well as others, were the "gun trucks" built by GIs in the Transportation battalions which ran convoys up and down the roads of Vietnam. Convoys of trucks were required to resupply base camps, semi-permanent fire support bases (FSB) and landing zones (LZ) from the depots and other supply points scattered throughout the country. These convoys carried "beans, bullets, and black oil," i.e., rations, ammunition, and fuel, and ran virtually every day, on virtually every road in country. In fact, on QL 19, between Qui Nhon Depot and Pleiku, there were a minimum of two convoys, each way, every day, and on many days there were three or four both ways!

These convoys, of course, were favorite targets of VC snipers and sapper squads. They were slow, difficult to defend, too numerous but too low a priority to merit their own air cover, and being

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made up of slow-moving vehicles, could be hit by even the poorest shot or inept sapper. If or when the VC really wanted to make an issue of it, they could stop the lead and trail vehicles, and then shoot or blow them up at their leisure.

To gain some degree of protection from snipers and ambushes, convoy truck drivers armored the cabs of their tractor trucks with heavy steel plate, scavenged from many sources, and put sandbags on the floor to protect against mines. But it was not enough.

Likewise, Military Police, doctrinally responsible for convoy escort and security, armored their Jeeps with armor plate which actually came in kits, and armed them with pedestal-mounted M-60 machine guns. But there were far too few to go around; they were outgunned and with the heavy armor, very much underpowered.

Tanks, of course, were out of the question as escort vehicles for several reasons, but mostly because they were completely unsuited for traveling up and down roads for any distance.

By the time Vietnam rolled around, the Halftrack of WW II was long gone from the Army's inventory, and a substitute was needed. So along came "gun trucks." The amazingly inventive GI built his version of a halftrack. Initially, they were based on the ubiquitous 2½ ton truck. It wasn't long, though, before the more powerful 5 ton truck became the platform of choice. Slabs of armor plate tailored to size were bolted onto the sides, where normally the side racks were positioned. Placed inside this iron corral was some combination of crew-served weapons. As time passed, gun truck drivers tried to outdo one another. First there might have been a .50 Cal heavy machine gun, or two pedestals with an M-60 machine gun on each. Then a crew would up the ante, mounting two or three (or four) M-60s; one at each corner of the bed, or perhaps two .50 Cal. Then someone "obtained" a mini-gun (modern equivalent of a Gatling gun), and mounted that, plus two M-60s. The VC would raise the ante, and the betting would begin again. Nothing was too extreme; after all, they were protecting the convoy – and themselves.

A Precedent

Like many GI "inventions," there was a precedent. In WW II, the 8th Air Force built an aerial gun truck for its B-17 formations. It was a modified B-17, redesignated a B-40. It carried no bombs, but sported about half again the number of machine guns carried by a normal B-17, and was jammed full of ammunition. It was more or less effective on the way to the target, but after the B-17s had dropped their bombs, and consumed half their fuel load, on the way home from the target, they were considerably lighter than the B-40, which still had all its armor and armament. The B-40 could no longer match their higher speed, and since this heavily-armed escort was much slower than the normal bombers, it delayed them, and actually put them in jeopardy. Whether gun trucks slowed the convoys or not, I do not know.

The Iron Butterfly And Others

Because their crews of three or four depended on them - literally - for their lives, when they weren't escorting convoys their waking hours were spent maintaining them and enhancing their appearance. These trucks were often painted to a far greater degree than ordinary cargo trucks, and bore creative names on the sides. Many of the names emblazoned on the sides were in the then-current psychedelic style and color, with such names as "Iron Butterfly," "The Intimidator," "The

Recollections of Vietnam, Second Tour, continued.

Assassin," "Brutus" and many other creative names. They were impressive and effective, but possibly their greatest contribution was to the psychological well-being of those who they were charged with protecting.

More Is Better - Or Is It?

Escalation of designs peaked when the carcasses of armored personnel carriers (APCs) were removed from (I suppose) their own damaged tracked chassis, and mounted atop 5 ton trucks. I only saw two, or perhaps three, of these ungainly monsters, and I thought the design-escalation must surely have gone past the point of diminishing returns. So long as the truck had nothing more than the simple flat armor plate on the sides, sandbags on the cargo bed floor, and an array of machine guns, that was probably the optimum design. The 5 ton was better than the 2½ ton, as it was more powerful, and could carry the extra weight better. But some were never satisfied with "enough," and so from time to time, I would see a truck which was truly awesome in appearance, but it must have been so overweight, its usefulness was probably questionable.

July 20th, 1969

Recognize the date? That was the day two astronauts first set foot on the moon. "One small step for man, one giant step for mankind." America was watching, and we were too, in Pleiku, on AFN Vietnam.

Whut Wuz Thet?!?!?

One night we were sitting in the team house, most of us watching AFN, when we heard several shots go off. Whoa, wait a minute! "Whut wuz thet," someone said. And then there was a general commotion and scramble to grab helmets, flak vests and weapons; turn out the lights, and get outside. We got outside, not exactly low-crawling around, but not standing up straight either. No more shots. Everything was quiet. Then some more shooting. Damn, where was it coming from? From our viewpoint then, being outside and being able to judge directions and distances better than from inside the team house, it was coming from - generally - one corner of the compound, but still didn't seem to be real close to it. And all the lights in the city were still burning. And there was no shooting to be heard from any other direction. Weird!

Our ARVN Ordnance Company compound was in the middle of Pleiku, surrounded by the city. All the US compounds - Camp Holloway, Camp Enari, Pleiku Air Base - were miles away. We walked around the compound a little bit, and still couldn't figure out what was going on. A few of the Vietnamese that lived on the compound seemed to be moving around a little, but no one seemed excited. After fifteen minutes or so (I really have no idea exactly how long it was), with no more firing, we went back inside, turned on the lights, took off our gear (but kept it handy in the living room), turned on the TV, and settled down again. Eventually, we all went to bed, again making sure our gear was handy.

The next day we found out what all the excitement had been. It seemed some ARVN Rangers, from a compound outside Pleiku, were visiting a local bar, got a little drunk, and started raising hell. They got into an argument over some bar girls with some of the local ARVNs, and the two bunches decided to shoot it out. Jesus!

Funny Money

Not long after I arrived in Vietnam in 1965, all the regular "greenback" currency was collected from the troops, and Military Payment Certificates (MPC) issued in its place. MPC was also called "script." This was to prevent hard American currency from falling into the hands of both North and South Vietnamese. At intervals of about every two years, the MPC currently in circulation was exchanged for that of a newer, different design, to prevent the accumulation of MPC in the hands of the Vietnamese.

To effect the exchange, each unit appointed a Class "B" financial agent, and when the time came, official announcements went out to all units. All personnel present for duty at the unit compound were confined to those compounds, while the Class B agent collected, and accounted for all MPC from all present-for-duty personnel, and then went to their supporting finance unit to turn in the old MPC, and draw a like quantity of the new issue. Once back at the compound, all personnel were issued their new MPC, and personnel were released to perform their normal duties.

As you would think, small units, such as our detachment, took much less time to accomplish this exchange than large units. Another small unit with which we were familiar was the Army Explosive Ordnance Detachment (EOD). Every once in a while, some of us would visit them, or vice versa. They were some distance away from us, but not all that far from the Army finance unit, which would be effecting the exchange.

Now as it happened, within the past week or so, the EOD detachment had received two or three "recreation packs." These were large, heavy, cardboard boxes, issued by Special Services, for the amusement of the troops. They contained decks of cards, board games, and other such items. One of the board games which was included was Monopoly. (Are you ahead of me already?) Having found out about the exchange perhaps sooner than some, the Class B agent of the detachment collected all the old script from the detachment's dozen or so members, went to the finance office, turned in the old, picked up the new, sped back to the EOD compound - due to the nature of their work, they had their own, separate compound - hurriedly issued the new MPC to its rightful owners, and then . . .

A Golden Opportunity

Recognizing a golden opportunity, some of the EOD guys gathered up all the new Monopoly money, jumped in a Jeep or two, drove hastily downtown to a bar and brothel (not their regular favorite brothel), and began spending the new money like it was going out of style - before the madame and her girls knew what the new script looked like! A day later, when other GIs visited with their new MPC, they realized they had been taken, but by then it was too late.

Although prohibited from doing so, GIs passed MPC for payment to the Vietnamese for most of their purchases. Vietnamese currency could be had from any finance office, or officer/NCO/ enlisted clubs, for the official rate, but few bothered. Thus during the period between MPC exchanges, an awful lot of it got into local hands. Money lenders traded it, made deals with it, and built up large amounts of script. At every exchange there were numerous Vietnamese desperate to find a soldier who could take their old, now worthless, money and exchange it for the new. Every time there were reports of one or more Vietnamese who committed suicide because of their (often huge) losses.

“I Got To Get Outta This Place!”

As time passed in Pleiku, and my dissatisfaction with my lot in life grew, I began looking for a way out. Somehow, I got the news a friend of mine from my first tour, CW3 John Palmer, was in the Rigger company of the 1st Cav DISCOM (division support command), and told me they needed a replacement company commander. A friend of a friend was an aviator, and the commander of an Army Air Traffic Controller platoon, and who instead of a Jeep, had a de Haviland Beaver as his personal transportation. With his assistance, I got a ride to Bien Hoa Air Base, which was near the base camp of the 1st Cavalry Division. As we neared Bien Hoa, my aviator friend pointed out all the shell and bomb craters on the ground. The rainy season had already begun there, and most of them were full of water, so it was easy to pick them out. There were so many, it looked like the surface of the moon, or would have if there was water on the moon. Seeing John again was great, and he took me to see one of the personnel types in division headquarters, who said they would be happy to assign me to the rigger company when and if they received my request for reassignment.

Well, that was great. Returning to Pleiku, I quickly typed up a request, processed it through Team 8, and sent it on its way. Unfortunately, I learned the only way MACV would let me go to the Cav was if someone from the Cav wanted to come to MACV. (This was in the beginning of “Vietnamization,” and MACV had priority for personnel assignments.) MACV said they would, however, reassign me within MACV, and offered to send me to a Province team. The one they picked for me was Team 31, in Phu Bon Province. So if I couldn’t get to the Cav, at least I could get out of Pleiku, and away from Hale. In a very short period of time, my orders came through, and I was on my way southeast to Phu Bon, and Team 31. I think I made one last visit to Qui Nhon to clear the Team, and then back to Pleiku to get my gear, and hop a ride to Cheo Reo. I was not sorry to leave Pleiku and Team 8 - especially Team 8 - although I was sorry to say goodbye to Tom Bradley, SFC Welch (the Engineer unit advisor), and the rest of the detachment.

Welcome To Cheo Reo

Phu Bon Province was definitely one of the backwater areas of Vietnam. It was province-locked, being one of the few provinces which did not border either the ocean to the east, or either Laos or Cambodia to the west. The Province capitol of Phu Bon was Hau Bon, better known by its Montagnard name of Cheo Reo. The province population was about 95% Montagnard, and one of the influential people in the Province had once been the leading candidate for president of a breakaway nation of Montagnards which was to have been carved out of the highlands of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Unfortunately for the Montagnard tribes, this never occurred, and they continued to be exploited by the Vietnamese.

Phu Bon Province

Phu Bon had three districts: Phu Thien, in which Cheo Reo, the province capitol was located, Phu Tuc and Thuan Man. Phu Bon was sparsely populated by three Montagnard tribes: the Jarai, the Rhadé, and the Bahnar. Although neither the Viet Cong nor the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) considered Phu Bon worthy of its occupation, there were two main infiltration routes from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, through neighboring Pleiku Province, through Phu Bon, to neighboring Phu Yen Province. Phu Yen was one supposedly of the most heavily VC-infested provinces in South Vietnam.

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Similar, I suppose, to the VC and NVA, MACV (and USARV, the American-unit side of the house) did not consider Phu Bon worthy of placing any combat units there. The division base camp of the 4th Infantry Division was north of us at Pleiku, at Camp Enari, with elements in Binh Dinh, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade was in Phu Yen. The only Americans permanently stationed in Phu Bon were the province team (Team 31), which consisted of both military (Army) personnel, and State Department civilians, an Army Forward Air Control (FAC) element of two aircraft, an Air Force FAC element, also of two aircraft, and a detachment of 1st Logistical Command support personnel. All the others (Americans) who might operate in the province did so from bases outside the province. Occasionally, the 4th Division would ask for, and receive, permission to run an operation into the northern part of the province, and once we had an Army Engineer Rome Plow company do a road-clearing operation for us between Cheo Reo and Phu Thien. Pleiku was about sixty dusty miles away to the north by road.

Phu Bon had once been the province of US Special Forces units, there being at least four major camps there, including the district headquarters of Tuan Man, Phu Tuc (Det A-224, formerly A-432), and Mai Linh (A-112), near Phu Thien. The most recent to be turned over to MACV, Buon Blech (A-238), overlooked the border of Pleiku Province. The conversion to RF/PF was completed in June 1969, before I was assigned to Team 31. Before the introduction of full-fledged US combat elements into South Vietnam, many Special Forces camps were established in Montagnard territory. The positioning of these SF camps often ignored political borders, and they were scattered throughout the highland areas of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, as well as South Vietnam.

The Montagnards were usually, but not always, receptive to Americans, and their instructions on how to wage guerrilla warfare against the other guerrillas, the Viet Cong. Some of the Montagnard tribes were semi-nomadic, and were generally much less sophisticated than the Vietnamese. They were looked down upon by most of the Vietnamese, and often cheated. Although those Vietnamese who knew them, and worked with them found them, like we did, extremely trustworthy. Captain Mai told me of one ARVN finance officer who would never adjust the pay of a Vietnamese soldier who came back to the pay window claiming underpayment, but he would for a Montagnard.

MACV Team 31

In spite of their location, MACV Team 31 was a dedicated group. Half the Province teams in South Vietnam had a military senior advisor and a State Department civilian deputy. In the other half, the Senior Advisor was State Department, and the deputy was military. Team 31 had the second combination. LTC Robert R. Hicks, an Air Defense Artillery officer, was our deputy, and our Senior Advisor (SA) was a young (30-ish) State Department officer, Russell L. Meerdink; a very intelligent man. Stories were heard about friction between SAs and deputies: arguments, lack of communication, other problems. Not so with Team 31. The SA took care of the civilian stuff, meaning relations with the province chief, and all the civilian provincial staff, i.e., all the specialties represented by the lower-ranked State Department civilians on the team, and LTC Hicks took care of military operations, with his staff of military advisors. If - *if* - there was any friction between them, they settled it invisibly. We had a good team.

Military members liked it so well, in fact, that Team 31 had the highest rate of in-country extensions of any MACV team. And had more team members serving beyond their normal twelve

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month tours than any other. The team's chief medic, SFC Larry ("Doc") White, was in his fourth year in Cheo Reo. SFC Stephens, whose most visible duty was the PX manager, was on his second or third year as well. Others were also in their second and third years. One who did his year with the team and no more was our mess sergeant. We thought he was great, and was doing a terrific job, but he missed being with a regular army unit, and couldn't wait to get out of MACV. Well, I understood the last part. But this guy tried very hard to provide us with above-average chow, and succeeded at it day after day. Considering our isolation, that was no mean feat.

Extensions could be made for any length of time, but the most common was for six months, because with that came a free 30-day leave, and another R & R. I extended for three months to avoid rotating in January, which would have meant my arriving in Germany in February. Leaving three months later, in late April, with a 45-day leave, put me in Germany in early June.

Branch Transfer Courtesy Of AAFES

The senior advisor for Thun Man district was a Quartermaster major who had managed to occupy what was normally a combat arms position. He had met, and convinced the deputy SA for the province that he was capable of handling the job. After being sold on the idea, the deputy told him he would have a difficult time with both his small staff, and his counterparts if he continued to wear his Quartermaster collar insignia, and advised him to pick up some Air Defense Artillery insignia at the PX. His rationale for this was that while ADA was combat arms, if he didn't know some of the finer points of infantry tactics or close artillery support, it would be understood of an ADA officer, but if he masqueraded as an Infantry officer (who would normally be assigned to the position), he would likely be found out. Our deputy was a pretty cagey guy.

The Cheo Reo Air Field

Cheo Reo, and Phu Bon Province, was too far along the logistical chain to be regularly supplied by road. Every so often, a 1st Log POL convoy would arrive, but most of the other necessities, including aviation fuel for the FAC aircraft, and JP4 for the helicopters, and incidentals came by air. Generally, the road wasn't that unsecured, although at times it would be, but I suspect the quantity of ammunition, food, repair parts, and general supplies was too great for constant road resupply. So periodically, an Air Force C-123 or Caribou would land with fresh supplies.

A Mix Of Aircraft

For administrative movement, we were allotted one Huey helicopter six days a week, to ferry personnel between the three districts and Cheo Reo, and to make a mail run to Pleiku. Those who had to go out of the province could get a seat in the Air America flight that flew a circuit six days per week, which included Cheo Reo, Pleiku, Kontum, An Khe, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang. Every other day the circuit was flown clockwise, and on the other three days anti-clockwise. Prior planning helped if you didn't want to spend all day on a C-46 or C-47. Most of the passengers were Vietnamese, who had a disgusting tendency to barf *Nuoc Mam* (a pungent fish sauce) all over the place at the slightest hint of turbulence (such as when the engines revved up to begin the takeoff roll). Those old tail-draggers were still doing yeoman service nearly forty years after the first designs had taken to the air.

The air field at Cheo Reo was not one of the busiest in Vietnam, but between the province chopper coming and going three or four times a day, two Army FAC O-1s, and two Air Force FAC

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O-2s, plus an arrival and takeoff by Air America, plus an occasional Caribou or C-123 resupply ship, it was fairly active. I don't know how long the single runway was - I imagine a sharp C-130 pilot could have gotten in and out - but it served our purposes.

Chico

One of the features of the airfield, and of the team compound, was a white dog named Chico. Chico was that breed of dog which evolves after generations of living on the street by your wits and speed. Chico was not a "wild" dog; he "allowed" himself to be kept by the team, but on his terms. He seemed very intelligent, as evidenced by his ability to catch rides to and from the airfield. He had the uncanny ability to recognize Jeeps driven by team members, and would half way run out in front of us when headed to or from the airfield. One of us would slow almost to a stop, Chico would hop in the vehicle, and either ride to the airfield, or back to the compound. Smart dog. And rather handsome too.

Camp Waite-Davis

Roughly mid-way between Cheo Reo and Pleiku, near the junction of QL 14 and QL 7B, there was an Engineer camp named Waite Davis, or perhaps it was hyphenated Waite-Davis. Evidently named for someone or two someones, I don't believe I ever knew the significance of its name. I did know a lieutenant from there who was detached to our team for a while, by the name of Witte. He was a short, chunky, good-natured fellow, pleasant to be around.

The Waterfall

But the significance of Waite Davis - to me at least, and perhaps to those who flew over it - was the magnificent waterfall behind it. Along the route of a small river which snaked its way along the central highlands, there was a shelf of red rock, with a cave underneath, and a drop, or fall, of a good many feet. Having never seen it from anywhere but from a helicopter, I don't know how high that falls was, but it seemed pretty high, and was pretty spectacular as far as I was concerned. It was definitely the high point for scenery between Pleiku and Cheo Reo.

Especially in the wet season, when the vegetation was green, and the river full of water, it was a spectacular sight. The province chopper always flew with its doors open, and looking out and down at the countryside, one had an uninterrupted view. The river above the falls was churned white passing over a rough bottom, and it roiled and twisted through the single-canopy jungle, suddenly cascading over the lip of the red rock shelf to fall maybe a hundred feet, maybe more, to the foot of the falls. When you caught it at the right angle to the sun, there was a rainbow in the mist. It was an awesomely beautiful sight, and made me realize that, in spite of the war going on throughout the country, here was a gift of nature for those lucky enough to see it.

No Drills, Just Do Your Job

Unlike many other US camps and compounds, we never had a practice alert. If the siren went off, there was incoming. Soldiers not only took care of their own personal weapons, they took care of the crew-served weapons on the perimeter. We looked like soldiers, but there was no spit and polish. Sometimes we looked a little scruffy, but that was because we didn't often get replacement fatigues or boots. The bunker to which I was assigned had a 60mm mortar on top, mainly for firing illumination rounds.

Our Compound

The military compound at Cheo Reo was a curious blend (at least to me) of what appeared to be an amalgam of French-Vietnamese style, and US military construction. Most of the living quarters and offices were stucco over masonry, with wood door and window frames, and corrugated metal roofs. Obviously they had been there for a while. My room was typical, at approximately three meters wide by about four meters long. Rooms such as these were side by side in a long line. It almost looked like a row of ritzy horse stalls. The door was centered on one of the two short walls, flanked by windows; on the opposite (back) wall were three windows, wall to wall. The five windows were all screened, with drop-down panels, hinged at the top, to keep blowing rain out during the monsoon season. I had a bed, an Army field table with a chair, a chest of drawers, and a wooden wardrobe.

Dust

One of the things we had to contend with in the dry season, which in the Highlands was most of the year, was dust. The red laterite dust that formed on a well-traveled road could become almost overwhelming. If enough vehicles traveled a road, they churned it into inches, sometimes a foot, of the finest, powdery dust imaginable. I remember returning from Pleiku one day, running along QL 14 where the Engineers were rebuilding and widening the road, and I hit an unseen dip in the road filled with dust. The dust acted just like water. As the front of my Jeep went down into the dip, a wave of dust rose over the front of the hood, rolled over it, hit the windshield, rolled over the top and sides, and completely enveloped me and the Jeep. It took only seconds to happen, but was rather fascinating to watch. My momentum carried me through and out of it, but for a few moments, the world as I saw it was rusty red. Incredible! And of course when I emerged from this immersion in dust, the Jeep and I were also rusty red.

Whenever I returned to the compound from traveling the roads, it was always a three-shower job to get the dust off. Once I saw what I looked like from these excursions when Bill Schmeltz, Pete Peterson's replacement, came back from a road trip. He looked like a character from a sci-fi movie, "Mr. Rust Man!" There was no part of him that wasn't rusty red. His floppy hat, his head and face, his fatigues, his web gear, his rifle, his boots, every part and everything about him was rusty red.

Our Ugly Jeep

The advisors to the A&DSL Company shared a jeep. Except for getting back and forth to the airfield (which was really close enough to walk), or going to Phu Thien, or Pleiku, there wasn't much need for a vehicle. The A&DSL Company was within easy walking distance. There were five of us, and seldom did all five go to and from a common destination. But we took as good a care of that Jeep as if it were a Ferrari or Rolls Royce. Once a month, without fail, the suspension was lubed, and the engine oil and oil filter were changed. Except for a brief monsoon season, Phu Bon was a pretty dusty environment, and no one wanted to be stranded on the road because of a locked up engine or failed suspension. Because of all the dust, which was mildly abrasive, and people clambering in and out of it, the paint wore thin, and so every edge and many of the flat surfaces of the bodywork were shiny from the paint being rubbed off.

It was very common for someone to borrow someone else's Jeep, but unheard of for them to devote any time to helping maintain it. Someone, I think the Ordnance advisor, scrounged two or

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three gallons of primer. Ordinarily, the Jeep would have been painted olive drab (OD), but this primer was a particularly offensive shade of yellowish-brown, "baby-shit" brown, if you will. We painted the entire Jeep with it. Inside, outside, all over, baby-shit brown. It was a flat, camouflage-like shade, and we thought it looked good. And the big advantage was that hardly anyone else wanted to be seen driving it. But it was all ours, tenderly cared for, and (objectively-speaking) rather ugly.

Weird Harold

More or less in the center of the Team 21 compound was a concrete bunker. It seemed relatively new, that is the concrete had the appearance of being fairly new, and its sole human, full-time occupant was Doc White. It was about three fourths below ground, and a quarter above. Inside and out, it was just rough-coat concrete.

Besides Doc, the only other full-time resident was Doc's civet, Weird Harold. His name came from Bill Cosby's stories. I did not recall ever having seen a civet before, although I may have done in a zoo. Harold bore strong resemblance to a weasel, but was smaller. He was long of body, longer of tail, with little short legs, and had a mouthful of very sharp teeth.

Civets are nocturnal animals, and at night, when Doc was attempting to get some sleep, Harold was just as happy to explore the bunker, and all that was in it. One of his many tricks was to balance on the scales Doc kept for weighing his patients. The top of the scale, of course, was a balance beam, and Harold would climb up the scale, and cling to the beam, rocking back and forth. All that was not without some noise, of course, and kept Doc awake, or woke him, depending on the time of night Harold decided to play on it.

One night Doc went from the club to his bunker rather the worse for wear. Harold of course, began playing, and was thrown across the room for his pains, breaking a front leg in the process. Naturally Doc felt pretty bad about this as soon as he had seen what he had done, especially since it was only Harold's nature to play with anyone and anything in the bunker. So Doc tried to bandage his leg, but Harold, by that time, was having none of it, and Doc had to abandon the process. A night or two later, when Doc and I were once again in the bar, he asked if I would help splint Harold's leg, as Doc need someone to hold him while he did the splint work. I agreed, and with both of us more than slightly inebriated, went to the bunker, found Harold, and proceeded with the job.

In spite of much wriggling, together with gnawing on my thumb to relieve his tension, we succeeded in giving Harold a very tidily bandaged front leg, complete with popsicle splints. Then Doc proceeded to clean my thumb wounds, and bind it up. Fortunately, I was rather well anesthetized during both the wounding, and medical treatment. I think Harold and I got our bandages off for the last time, about the same time. Harold was back to his old self, thanks to Doc's skills, and so was my thumb. But his nocturnal play was somewhat subdued, especially when Doc came back from the club at night, and Doc was much more mindful of the playful habits of civets.

One rare day Doc had Harold outside, on top of the bunker, and I took some slides of him. He was mostly black, with a white belly, but had stiff, whitish colored hairs mixed through his coat. His face was small, like an otter or a weasel, and of course his eyes looked like little black buttons. His

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nose that was constantly wiggling and sniffing, and long whiskers completed the picture. Harold was a smart little rascal, but not one you wanted to deal with if cornered or threatened.

The Nameless Pig

In addition to Weird Harold, and Chico the airfield dog, Doc White told me of a pig which once lived on the compound. I don't recall whether it was a low slung, belly dragging, shaggy black haired, Vietnamese pig, or one of the more standard pink varieties, but in any event a small pig once inhabited the Team 31 compound. One of its favorite pastimes was tormenting a dog (not Chico) which also made the compound his home.

It seems the dog liked to nap out in one of the many open areas of the compound. And once asleep, was apparently oblivious to all that transpired around him. The pig, possessing the sense of humor common to pigs, would discover the sleeping canine, and run at him full tilt, snout down, and spear the hapless dog right in the stomach. The dog, of course, rudely wakened from a sound sleep, was totally disoriented, and by the time he regained his senses, the pig was long out of sight. As often as this scenario was repeated, the pig never tired of it, and the dog never caught on to the identity of his tormentor.

All this occurred before the Special Forces camp at Mai Linh, near Phu Thien, was closed. The story has a rather unhappy end, because the pig disappeared one day, and Doc believed the blame for the pig's disappearance was properly laid at the doorstep of the SF camp. As some of the SF team visited the compound now and again, he speculated they supplemented their regular rations with some pork, although nothing was ever proven.

The Boys From The Boonies

The RF/PF advisor was CPT Rene ("Pete") Petersen, from Baton Rouge. Once there was a conference for RF/PF and A&DSL (Admin & Direct Support Logistics) advisors at Nha Trang, hosted by IFFV (1st Field Force Vietnam). IFFV was the equivalent of a US Corps headquarters, and was the headquarters for all US combat elements in II Corps, and also had an advisory element as well, and passed information and directives to and from MACV in Saigon. Pete and I caught the Air America flight - on the right day to get the short leg to Nha Trang - and found a hotel I'd stayed at once on my first tour. On the evening of the first day of the conference, the CG, IFFV, together with the senior CORDS man (whose wife was with him!) hosted a cocktail party for us. The Commanding General wore his white dress uniform, and the CORDS guy was in a suit and tie. The rest of us, from all over II Corps, were in jungle fatigues and jungle boots.

We were rather a contrast. While the dignitaries sipped their drinks and nibbled their *hors d'oeuvres*, we were knocking them back and shoving it in. Jeez, this was probably supper for us. It was a sure thing the mess hall would be closed by the time this thing was over, and since we weren't allowed to carry weapons in Nha Trang, we damn sure weren't going downtown unarmed. And all that left was a military club of some description that might or might not serve any food. So we would make a low pass on the food at hand, scooping up as much as we could carry, get two or three drinks from the free bar, and go prop up a wall to talk to our fellow advisors from the boonies.

After it was over, Pete and I went somewhere - I do not remember where - got drunker than we had been when we left the cocktail party, and wound up several hours later climbing the front gate

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of the hotel compound. *That* I remember. As I had reached the top of the gate, I looked down. It was a long, long way down. Fortunately, neither of us fell off the gate. We went inside to the hotel bar, where the female bartender, after a couple more drinks, gave us a cube of ham wrapped in a banana leaf, with a clove of garlic inside the ham. This kindly act was to prove my undoing. At least I think that was the source of my undoing.

The conference (of which I remember absolutely nothing) wrapped up the next day, and Pete and I caught another Air America flight back to Cheo Reo. The following day, something came up that required my presence in Qui Nhon; some bit of Team 31 business. So two days after returning from Nha Trang, I was on my way to Qui Nhon. That's when it hit me. I think there must have been something about that ham in Nha Trang that my Caucasian constitution wasn't ready for.

Dengue Fever, Or Something

That night I started throwing up. And the diarrhea started. Eventually I was vomiting green liquid. And I was hallucinating. I was so weak I couldn't stand. All I could do was lay on the bed, drifting in and out of sleep. Being in Qui Nhon on short notice, I had asked my old roomie, Charlie, if I could stay with him. There was an empty bed because someone was out of town at the time. But Charlie was at work, and I couldn't do anything but lay there. There was nothing more in my stomach to come up or go down. I was cold, and then I was sweating. I lapsed into sleep, but that was accompanied by some strange dreams. Maybe I wasn't asleep, but hallucinating. I didn't know what I had, but I was more than ready for it to end.

Finally, I think on the third day, I was barely able to walk, and part way through the morning, I started for the American hospital I knew was around on the far side of the airfield. I don't know how long it took me, but I finally made it. I was hoping to thumb a ride with a passing GI, but no one stopped. After examination by a doctor, he tentatively diagnosed a mild case of Dengue fever, with possibly something else, he didn't know what. Or maybe it wasn't Dengue fever at all, but whatever I had suffered, he wasn't exactly sure what it had been. Well, I didn't know what I had either, but I sure as hell knew I didn't want it again.

I had seen Dengue fever on my first tour. One of our NCOs, a staff sergeant, a nice guy, was stricken with it. One day he was fine, the next day he was in the Air Force hospital pretty close to the point of death. He was laid out. Then after two or three days he started to come out of it. I went to see him the day before he was released, and by that time he was definitely coming around, but he was not as he had been a few days before. His symptoms had been much the same as mine: vomiting, diarrhea, fever, sweats, chills, extreme weakness. Whether I had a mild case of Dengue fever, I don't know. Never will know. But it brought home to me the fact there were strange bugs in the Orient that Western man just wasn't prepared for.

I don't know if I accomplished what I was supposed to have accomplished in Qui Nhon or not. I flew back to Cheo Reo, and was very glad to be "home."

Learning About Prejudice

I was a white boy with absolutely no experience in what would later be called "race relations" until I entered the Army, and even then it took a while. My high school graduation was in 1958, before any civil rights legislation was enacted, or maybe even thought about very seriously by blacks

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or whites. My high school was segregated, movie theaters were segregated, and I took it all for granted. My home town had a population of about 35,000, and its economy was linked strongly to the farms around it, many of which grew large crops of tobacco. Industry was virtually nil. I recall a period when the churches and "Christians" rallied round to vote the county dry. Kentucky handled liquor on a county-by-county basis, as I suppose many states did. Bowling Green dried up in more ways than one, and as soon as another election could be held, it went solidly "wet" again and stayed that way. The businessmen were in an uproar six months after prohibition became law, with their business flowing away to the surrounding counties.

At QMOBC at Ft Lee, Virginia, I was introduced to a desegregated Army, and when I reported to my first unit at Ft Bragg, there were numerous black soldiers and NCOs in the unit. When I went to Rigger school, to learn how to pack parachutes and rig platforms for aerial delivery, my roommate was a black second lieutenant. I was becoming accustomed to other than white faces. On the ship over to 'Nam for my first tour, I read a fascinating book titled Black Like Me. It lifted the veil on what it was like to be a Black man in America. Terrific book.

But it wasn't until my second tour that I began to feel I was seeing, and understanding, prejudice firsthand.

We Were Different - They Were Different

There was such a difference between Americans and Vietnamese. The greatest difference was between *white* Americans and Vietnamese. I had been a rabid Anglophile in high school, and it was not until I got to Germany, after I made a trip or two to England, and read a few books, that my devotion to, and admiration for the English began to fade. But in 1969-1970, that hadn't happened yet. But one thing was certain, I could see right before me a prejudice, a bigotry, formed between white Americans and the Vietnamese. There was a difference between Black Americans and the Vietnamese. They understood people of color, and could identify with them. White Americans, on the other hand, saw only differences.

They were short, we were tall; they were small and slight, we were solid (and often fat); they smiled at the wrong things and at the wrong times; men walked hand in hand - and as advisors, we were told to do the same if our counterpart initiated it. Yecchh! Bunch of fairies. And the old mama sans and papa sans who chewed beetlenut until their teeth turned dark brown. But I saw a tall, light-skinned Eurasian woman in Saigon who was one of the most gorgeous creatures I'd ever laid eyes on. But most were not. Broad, flat noses; yellowish skin. Not, I thought, some of God's best work.

Dinks, Slopes, VC, etc.

We had all kinds of nicknames for them. "Dinks," "slopeheads," "slopes," "our little brown brothers," "VC" (not just the Viet Cong per se, but all Vietnamese), and probably a dozen more I've forgotten. All the names were degrading. Why? Possibly out of resentment at having to be in Vietnam. Because they were different. I think America is ironically one of the most xenophobic of the supposedly 'civilized' countries of the world. And what I find so ironic is that most of us descended from people who came from somewhere else. Yet we are an 'island nation' as sure as Great Britain is an island nation, or Australia.

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The ARVNs looked goofy in our oversized steel helmets that were twice as big on them as they should have been. Tailored fatigues with too-short trousers that were seldom tucked inside their boots like *proper* soldiers wore them. It looked as though they were wearing olive drab pajamas. And all the time that ingratiating grin that was almost a grimace. Prejudice. They were inferior, we were superior. They were crooked, and we were honest, well some of us were, most of the time anyway. Except you did it to them before they could do it to you. Nothing wrong with that. Unless you thought about it. And those damned Honda 125cc motorcycles the "cowboys" rode around on. They were all over. Couldn't drive for 'em. Some GIs would kick them over when they passed them in their quarter tons (a "Jeep" is a Truck, Utility, ¼ Ton).

My six weeks at Ft Bragg, going through the MATA course (a "prep" school for advisors) didn't prepare for this. For 5½ days a week, they taught us how to fire a couple of dozen weapons, old and new, US and foreign, and how to blow up things with dynamite, TNT and C4 (plastic explosives). Rather attractive young Vietnamese women tutored us in the rudiments of the Vietnamese language. They kept us in some semblance of physical fitness by having us run the "MATA Mile," a 2½ mile cross-country trail up and down hills through the North Carolina woods. Walt Steele and I partnered the compass orienteering course, criss-crossing the same four-foot deep pond three times, and finished ahead of many in the course (while it was still light). Specialists showed us how to jury rig communications, effect field medical treatments, build shelters using basic construction techniques, and employing materials at hand, and a lot of other things, but they only touched on prejudice. Or maybe we just didn't grasp what they were dealing out on that subject.

I could only see the differences, not the similarities. Couldn't see that what the Vietnamese wanted most was for us to go away. For the VC to go away. For everyone to leave them alone. The Vietnamese had been a recognized people a lot longer than we had been a country. "Uncle Ho" wanted all the foreigners to go away. And that included other Asians.

The French were colonials, and we were "protectors." At least I think the French had a better idea what they wanted out of Vietnam, or Indochina. We didn't seem to know. We hired Vietnamese as servants, for all the shitty jobs we didn't want any part of. Trash haulers, kitchen police, waiters, maids. Damn, that's what the white man in America did to the Black man in America. No wonder the Detroit and Watts riots came about.

A Few Understood

There were few of us who liked the Vietnamese. Charlie's NCO EOD advisor, MSG Tom Doritza, was married to a Vietnamese. He had been in Vietnam several years, and he and his wife lived in downtown Qui Nhon. Doc White, I think liked them. He had done a lot of MEDCAP missions (small operations designed to help treat medical problems of the local populace), which were about the only things the Army ever did to actually improve the living conditions of the Vietnamese and the Montagnards. Special Forces did this, in fact they may have originated it, but US units (division and brigade) did it as well. It was the sort of thing Americans did well, and there was the side effect of improving our intelligence capability to find out who the bad guys were in a particular location. If that sounds cynical, perhaps so, but after some of the people had been helped, those who were not hard-core believers sometimes would "fess up" about who were the VC in the AO (area of operations), and would warn GIs about mines and booby traps.

The Montagnards Were Different

The Montagnards were different from the Vietnamese. Everything I knew about them was second hand from people who professed to know them, and from my own visual observation. Physically, the Montagnards bore little resemblance to Vietnamese; they were very obviously not descended from the same people. Many of them resembled American Indians. Their skin was a reddish brown, some had hooked noses, and their overall appearance was "Indian," rather than Oriental. Made one wonder about early exploration - before the Europeans took a hand at it.

Invariably, I found those who had contact with Montagnards reported them being more honest than Vietnamese. "Honesty" has more than one face, and we were taught at the MATA course that Vietnamese do not, as a rule, say exactly what they mean. That might be evaluated as being dishonest, but if that's been your way of life for generations, I doubt you'd categorize it as "dishonesty." But it was yet another way the Vietnamese were different from us.

Cause And Effect - Personal Opinion

So what's my point? I think this: The US Army, as it went to Vietnam in force in 1964 and 65, was really unprepared for the job. We had pretty good equipment, which got better and better as time went on. Our tactics improved as we gained experience, even if our strategy didn't. As a fighting machine, with the support required, we improved. We could blow the hell out of anything and anybody we so chose. The medics and doctors saved soldiers who would have been lost in previous wars. But relations with our "allies," the Vietnamese, deteriorated rather than improved. At the level where it had to function, it often didn't. Oh, I'm sure there were niceties exchanged, and platitudes agreed to, at the flag-rank level, but the rank and file ultimately resented the hell out of being there, doing stupid things, putting up with stupid commands, faking high body counts, and seeing the Vietnamese fight one kind of war, while we fought another.

This was the first large-scale war in which we pitted our regular forces against an irregular force (initially) we had fought. And we weren't ready. It was the first we had fought where we were supposed to stay in the passenger seat, and let the other guy drive. And when the driver was a product of a country which, in many regards, was barely into the 20th century, that didn't work well.

McNamara's 100,000 And Other Bad Ideas

I harbor a personal animosity toward Robert McNamara, and to a lesser extent, Lyndon Johnson. McNamara and his "whiz kids," as I understood it, were the ones who cooked up such ideas as McNamara's 100,000, and other ideas which had very negative effects on the Army. That particular idea - the 100,000 - involved reducing the mental standards for draftees to make them eligible for service. These soldiers consumed a disproportionate amount of time and effort on the part of the rest of the Army to educate, train and discipline them in an effort to make them functional soldiers, or to punish and separate from the service those who would never adapt to military life. It was a bad idea, and it did severe damage to the morale of the rest of the Army.

More Washington Meddling

Other meddling included concocting "rules of engagement" that were so unrealistic, and counter to what was best for the Army and the Air Force, that soldiers and pilots were often put a grave risk, and killed before the requisite criteria were met which allowed them to take either offensive or defensive action. I've heard there were more targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area *forbidden* to our pilots, than there were legitimate ones. There was no question that ships in Haiphong harbor, or trucks on Hanoi streets and roads were there to supply the North Vietnamese war effort, yet for much of the time, Air Force pilots could not bomb or strafe them. Another was "don't fire unless fired upon." Designed to prevent loss of innocent civilian life, a laudable aim, it resulted in infantrymen getting killed and wounded in situations where the people on the ground were denied the use of their own judgement and common sense to the point of ambushes set, and snipers picking off GIs with initial impunity.

When the rules of engagement defined by people in Washington, who had never gotten their hands dirty in any war, were working against the men in the field, that didn't go down well. Frustration was piled onto frustration. As a result, the Vietnamese were the ones many of us took our frustrations out on. They were there, they were handy. And so prejudices were formed, and both sides suffered from it.

The AWOL Captain

In November or December 1969, a new captain was assigned as the S3 Advisor. The former one rotated, and a new one was assigned. The new officer was a veteran; he had served a previous tour in 'Nam as an enlisted man in the 1st Cav. When he rotated, he returned to the States, attended OCS, and because of the accelerated promotions of company grade officers, he was back two years later as a junior captain. It was at this stage of the war that it became very apparent that black soldiers were fighting and dying in higher percentages - *much higher* percentages - than an equivalent percentage of the US black male civilian population. And it should come as no surprise to anyone that they were less than enthusiastic about it. It was also at this time, in the States, that Black Power became popular, and of course was soon very evident in Vietnam.

Ready To Fight, But Ill-Prepared To Advise

This captain, Al _____, was both a product and a victim of those times, and a victim of the CORDS advisory system. I give his name here as CPT Al _____, because quite frankly, I don't remember it. Actually, if I did remember it, I wouldn't put it in print anyway, so it's just as well I don't remember. Al, to give him his due, wanted to get on with the dance. Had he been sent back to Vietnam to become a company commander, or a battalion-level staff officer, in a US combat division, he would have put his previous tour's experience to very good use, and been quite successful. But like so many young US officers in MACV, he was ill-trained, and ill-prepared to advise foreign officers of a totally different culture. Al's predecessor had a totally different, low-key temperament. Al's counterpart was typical Vietnamese, and his oriental method was completely opposed to doing things the way an American would do them.

When his counterpart told Al they were planning an operation, Al was ready to go - but that was not the Vietnamese way. First the operation had to be discussed with several in the Vietnamese chain of command, any one of whom could have been a security leak. Then Al's counterpart delayed for

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several reasons, all of which made perfect sense to him, but which made little sense to Al. Al wanted to "close with the enemy, and destroy him," just as they teach at the Fort Benning School For Boys. And Al, not being the most tactful or diplomatic of souls, probably offended his counterpart on several counts.

There was an RF company commander in the province, a Montagnard, with whom Al would have worked very well. The Montagnard commander's philosophy of making contact with the VC or NVA was to: (1) find a fresh trail (of the enemy), (2) travel down that trail so fast he overran the enemy from behind, and (3) destroy him. The Montagnard commander and his company were in such incredible physical condition there was only one American on our team that could keep up, and even then he would have occasional difficulty. Al was a stocky guy, and might not have been able to hold his own, but that is the type counterpart Al needed. The problem was, Al was a captain, and was prevented from going on such small, company-sized operations.

Gone

Al could not get his counterpart off dead center, and became very frustrated. It didn't help matters that his boss, the deputy SA, had been in MACV, and Phu Bon Province, for much longer than Al, and did not have a sympathetic ear for Al's plight. So Al fussed and fumed around the compound, got drunk on several nights, tried bending the ear of anyone who would listen, and finally, in a fit of pique or something, went Absent Without Leave - A-W-O-Loose.

As we were to learn later, he hopped the province chopper to Pleiku - certainly not difficult to pull off - then somehow got on a Saigon-bound C-130 from Pleiku Airbase, which would have required some degree of subterfuge and collusion. When he hit Tan Son Nhut, outside Saigon, he then disappeared into the bars and whore houses of Saigon, where he was unquestionably not alone as a black GI, enjoyed that life for a while, and then - and this part would definitely be more difficult, but obviously not impossible - somehow talked his way onto a commercial flight back to CONUS.

I will say this for Al, he had a gift of gab that was above average, and so it was no big surprise to me, that having been a former enlisted man - knowing how the Army really worked, and who to see to get things done - he was able to secure boarding passes for successively difficult-to-obtain plane rides.

And Gone Again!

The story continues with Al (allegedly) hopping around the United States on military flights, but eventually being found out, and returned to Vietnam to face the music. While waiting for an Article 15 from the IFFV commander, *Al went AWOL again!* We couldn't believe it. This information filtered down from the deputy, because after Captain Al was returned to Vietnam, he was held somewhere else, either Nha Trang, where IFFV headquarters was located, or maybe in LBJ - Long Binh Jail. Once again, he made his way to Saigon/Tan Son Nhut, boarded a plane for the States, but was eventually caught and returned to Vietnam. And that's about the time I lost track of Al because by this time, it was getting to be mid-April, and I was getting very short. My DEROS (Date Eligible to Return from Overseas) was the 20th of April 1970, and I was going to be ready.

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I never heard the end of Captain Al's saga. I'm sure that after the second AWOL, a court martial was in the works, but by the time it was convened, I was "from" Vietnam - *far from* Vietnam. As they used to say, I left there with mixed emotions: joy and happiness.

Buon Blech - The Hilltop Camp

Buon Blech was a recently-acquired MACV asset which was a former Special Forces camp. Like dozens of other SF camps, it was isolated and strategically placed along a VC route or area, built on a hill, had an air strip, was manned by Montagnards, heavily armed, and offered no more than the very basic living conditions. From Cheo Reo, it was about a twenty minute helicopter ride. A helicopter could land on the hill, but there was also a landing strip, covered with pierced steel planking (PSP), for fixed wing aircraft. The "commander" was a very young Infantry captain, CPT Hill. He and I hit it off well during an early visit he had made to Cheo Reo, and for the next time or two he saw me, he kept insisting that I come for a visit. So I did.

One day when things were quiet, I got my sleeping bag - I don't think I'd slept in it since it had been issued at Tan Son Nhut - my camera with a 200mm lens, a paperback, and my M-16, jumped on the province chopper, and flew out for an overnight visit. There were almost no above-ground structures on the hill as I recall. Everyone slept in underground bunkers.

I don't recall much about my visit except that late in the day, before dusk, the senior advisor of the MAT team invited me out for their daily "happy hour." This consisted not of going to a club for drinks, but test firing all their weapons. I took a few photos, of course, and fired my own M-16, as well as the captain's .45 (learning how to place rounds into a 55-gallon drum that was a hundred or more meters away from and well below the part of the hill on which we were sitting), and the camp's 57mm recoilless rifle. It was amusing, but soon it was dark, we ate, and I turned in and slept in a place out of the way of any potential pathway should the hill be hit that night. The night was uneventful, and the next day I flew back to Cheo Reo on the province helicopter.

Mad Minute

Each evening, around sundown, and continuing until it was too dark to see anything, they held their version of a "mad minute" where everyone fires everything. This was a little different in that they only loosed a few rounds from all their different weapons over a thirty or forty-five minute period, a few rounds at a time. Not a true "mad minute," but enough to wake up the neighborhood. Their weaponry covered the gamut from .45 Cal pistols, M1A1 Carbines, M-16s, and M-79 grenade launchers, through M-60 and .50 Cal machine guns, to their one 57mm recoilless rifle, several 60 and 81mm mortars, and one 4.2 inch mortar. Quite an array of firepower. Hill and I fired the recoilless rifle. It went off with a terrific whang, a combination of a loud crack and what sounded like a ricochet. Peculiar noise. Those things sure are loud.

The practical side of the mad minute was to establish new pre-planned fires, and to verify existing ones for the crew-served weapons such as the machine guns and mortars. The "four deuce" was used almost exclusively for illumination rounds, as its range for ordinary HE (high explosive) was considerably more than would be useful under a close attack.

The hill itself was about fifty or more feet high, and except for one "ramp" for vehicles to go to and from the nearby stream for water, was pretty steep all around. And totally devoid of any

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vegetation. It was just this big ugly hill of red laterite, surrounded by fields of more red laterite, with very little grass and only small saplings. It was not likely to become a spot in a Michelin green book, even with one star. Although for an American, it was better to be *on* the hill, than *off* it. It did have its charms, but life was very simple there.

I remember the mad minute. One of my Infantry-captain friend's amusements was shooting at a 55-gallon drum with a .45 Cal pistol. The drum was quite some distance away, at the bottom of the hill, and the technique, since the .45 was definitely a short-range weapon, was to aim up in the air, roughly at the horizon, and "drop" the round on the barrel, e.g., indirect fire, as with a mortar. One could watch for dust eruptions around the barrel for misses, or hear a barely audible plunk if you hit it. I think I might have gotten one "plunk," but I was almost as good as Hill, who had a lot more practice than I. The practicality of this of course, was completely nil; it was solely for our amusement.

Night Watch

When it got dark, or nearly so, it was time to go underground, eat some "Cs", talk, read, and hit the sack. At least that's what I did. Nearly everyone else was up and around at some point during the night, changing shifts on the radio or on lookout, moving around the compound checking on this or that. Due to my unfamiliarity of both the hill, and its surroundings, it was better that I stay in one known place, e.g., out of the way. If they needed the awesome firepower of my single M-16, they knew where to find me. A few lights stayed on all night, as a generator had to be run to keep the radio operational. Because of the noise, lights, and my own pure unadulterated fear of being attacked, I slept fitfully, as the expression goes. Actually, I think I was more afraid something would crawl into my sleeping bag with me.

It was indeed an experience for a REMF like me, but later when someone bent the standard (the adjustable column for controlling elevation of the mortar tube) for the four-deuce, and I was charged with finding a replacement, I knew exactly who was depending on the operability of that mortar, and why. It was more than adequate incentive.

Finding A "Four-Deuce" Standard

Finding a replacement standard for the mortar at Buon Blech was not an easy chore. I sent messages to Nha Trang. I asked around at Camp Enari, outside Pleiku, the 4th Infantry Division base camp. I checked at the advisory team at II Corps headquarters. Couldn't locate one anywhere. Finally, the deputy told me he had located one in Pleiku, so I flew up on the province chopper, to the II Corps helipad. Someone had delivered it to the helipad, and it was up to me to get it back to Cheo Reo. Let me tell you, a standard for a 4.2 inch mortar, in the wooden crate in which it is packed, is one heavy mother. But I managed to get it on the Huey, and away we flew, back to Phu Bon. From there, it was flown out to Buon Blech, and once again, the compound had a way to kick those big illumination rounds up into the air. They were most appreciative. I guess so, it was their prime means of lighting up any attack that might happen, and probing attacks at Buon Blech were not that rare. If the VC or NVA had suspected they were without that mortar, they might have taken advantage of the situation and launched a large attack against them.

Attack On Phu Thien

One night the VC did attack the compound at Phu Thien. Like nearly all VC attacks, it was well-planned, and well-rehearsed. And this one lasted longer than most of them. Conventional wisdom held that a VC attack, if unsuccessful in overrunning a compound, would be broken off after about forty-five minutes. This one was not successful within that time, but they persisted. It erupted sometime after midnight, and lasted for several hours. One corner bunker, and part of one wall was taken before the occupants, Montagnard, Vietnamese, and US advisors were able to beat them off. One US lieutenant was killed and an NCO wounded, along with several native soldiers and civilians killed and wounded.

The next morning, Doc White and I drove up in a jeep with a trailer loaded with ammunition in case there was another attempt that night. The advisors said they had found blood trails, and places beaten down in the grass where assembly areas had been. It was a typical VC attack from more than one direction, with a diversion to take attention away from the main thrust, and fire support for the attack with mortars. They were good, they were damned good, and they were determined. That attack almost succeeded in overrunning the whole compound.

There was no second attack. The senior advisor admitted they had become a little complacent. There had been talk of cleaning up the perimeter, cutting the tall grass, putting in more barbed wire and trip wires, etc. But the VC superceded those plans. The overdue cleanup began that day.

Would the attack have been made had the clean-up, fix-up been done before? It's hard to tell, perhaps not, but that sort of complacency was what the VC and NVA thrived upon. It was always a good bet that when you let your guard down, either by falling into a routine of movement, by failing to keep your defenses sharp, or adopting any of a dozen other lazy habits, "Charlie" was going to exploit that complacency with painful, often deadly, results.

Our Little Club

Team 21 was so small, and the compound so small, that we had one combined officer/NCO/enlisted club. The State Department people lived in their own compound down the road, and had what passed for a club of their own. Our club was a small building, built by Americans, after the main quarters and admin space described previously. It was a regular, enclosed wooden building, board and batten exterior, with a gable roof. While I was there, we doubled its space by adding a concrete floored, screened-in portion for showing movies. Movies had been shown in an open area in front of the club, but because of the rainy season, and because it wasn't the best of ideas to have twenty or thirty guys clustered out in the open in front of an illuminated movie screen, it was decided to put this show under roof, and more out of sight. Its one side abutted the original club building, and was solid of course, but the remaining three sides had a yard-high wainscot of wood, and from there up was screened in.

Since the A&DSL advisor - that was me - always inherited the club as an extra duty, I was the "club officer." I was fortunate to have a Spec Four who was an RTO (radio-telegraph operator), but who by his civilian training, was an accountant. See how the Army fits people to their jobs? Again, I can picture this guy perfectly - a little shorter than me, very thin, olive-complexion, dark hair, bushy eyebrows - but I can't remember his name. I remember that he was very conscientious about his