

Vietnam January 1967 – January 1968
13th Combat Aviation Battalion (Delta Battalion)

In December 1966 I was alerted that I was going back to Vietnam in January 1967 for a second tour. I moved my family to Richfield, MN to a duplex that Norma's sister Janet found for us. We moved in and had Christmas in Minnesota.

On the Sunday of Super Bowl 1967 I left Minnesota and arrived in San Francisco. My cousin Walter Leach met me at the airport and took me to his home in Marin County east of the bay area. I had never met Walter before. He and his wife, Marge, and I watched the first Super Bowl game together. It was good to meet them. The next day Marge drove me to the Oakland Army Terminal. I left Travis Air Force Base and arrived at the 90th Replacement Depot, Ben Hoa airfield on January 18, 1967. I was a Senior Major, unassigned. My branch (Transportation Corps) was not very happy with me. I refused to become an Aviation Maintenance Officer so I went unassigned. After we turned in our records, I saw a Spec. 4th Class looking at the records and making notes. I walked up and addressed him by name (he had a name tag on his uniform) and asked him what he was doing. He said "We're making assignments." I said "Does it do any good to say where you want to go?" He said "It doesn't hurt, sir." I said "That being the case I would like to go to the 13th Combat Aviation Battalion, the Delta Battalion." He said "Thank you, sir." The next day I received orders for the Delta Bn. The moral of the story is that even though there was a big difference in rank he was doing an important job and I treated him with respect and my request was honored.

The Vietnam I returned to in early 1967 was considerably different from the country I left in April 1963. When I left there were 15,000 Americans in the country and less than 200 helicopters. In 1962 and 1963 we were advising and assisting the Vietnamese (Republic) armed forces. When I came back there were over 300,000 Americans in country and several thousand helicopters. The H-21s we used were replaced by UH-1Ds for carrying troops and supplies and armed UH-1B gunships. The Army and the Marine Corps were heavily engaged in ground combat with close air support from the USAF and Navy and Marines. The heat and the smell were the same.

The Delta Battalion (13th Combat Aviation Battalion) was a unique organization, we had two operation bases, Soc Trang and Vinh Long. The 121st Assault Helicopter Co. (AHC) and the 336th were based at Soc Trang. The 114th AHC and the 175th AHC were based at Vinh Long. The Bn Hq. was located at Can Tho. Administratively and tactically the Delta Bn operated more like an Aviation Group than a battalion. The Hq was an administrative not a tactical Hq. We supported three ARVN Infantry Divisions in the Delta (IV ARVN Corps) the 21st located at Bac Lieu, the 7th located at My Tho and the 9th between My Tho and Bac Lieu. The 114th AHC had two lift platoons and two gunship platoons. The other three companies had two lift platoons and one gun platoon. Ordinarily on assault missions each AHC provided 10 UH-1D "slicks" for troop lift and their gun platoons of five gunships. During my tour we did not support US troops. The ARVN Infantry Divisions would request helicopter support from the IV ARVN Corps for operations. The Corp directed the Delta Bn to provide the support if approved. If the operation was for the 21st ARVN Divisions either the CO of the 121st or 336th (Soc Trang) acted as mission commander. If the operation was for either the 9th or 7th Divisions, the CO of the 114th or 175th acted as mission commander. On a big operation all four assault companies would be involved. We would have eight flights of five lift helicopters (two from each AHC), five gun platoons of five gunships, two command and control (C&C) helicopters to control the battle, and two medical evac. helicopters (Dust off) and usually a Chinook (H-47) to evacuate downed helicopters. All of the companies operated tactically in an identical manner and were interchangeable. The lift platoons flew in

two V formations of five lift helicopters. Each would carry ten infantry men. The mission commander in the C&C, would direct the lift platoons and gun platoons from the air in adjunction with the ARVN command regardless of the company they came from. The mission commanders on big operations were de facto battalion commanders. The five gunship platoons provided the bulk of supporting fives unless we had major contact with the Vietnamese Communists (VC) then we would also get USAF close air support. The artillery in the Delta was scattered out all over the Delta. It was rare that artillery provided any significant support. The Delta Bn provided a liaison officer to each ARVN Infantry Division who lived with the advisory team at each division Hq (Delta 21, Delta 9, Delta 7 were their call signs).

On big operations we would operate from a stage air field. My experience was exclusively in support of the 21st ARVN Divisions. The stage fields we usually used in the operations I was involved in were at Vi Thanh south of Can Tho, Ca Mau in the extreme south of the Delta and Soc Trang. Each stage field had at least ten rubberized fuel bladders. When 10 lift helicopters from an AHC needed to refuel the entire flight of 10 landed next to individual fuel bladders and the crew chief of each would refuel a company without having the engine shut down. We could refuel a company of lift helicopters in five minutes. Also we had armament stations for the gunships. A five helicopter gun platoon could rearm with 2.75 inch rockets and machine gun ammunition all at the same time. A typical gunship had rocket pods for 14 rockets, four machine guns in a flexible mount and the crew chief and gunner each had a machine gun one on each side.

During one of these big operations the ARVN Infantry Divisions and their US advisory team would operate a tactical command post at the stage field. The Bn liaison officer ran the stage field and controlled the aviation units on the ground as directed by the Division Hq. The mission commander directed the aviation units once they were in the air.

The VC in the Delta was very well organized and controlled the population in the countryside. They had village militia in each village that ruthlessly controlled the population and prepared defensive position and maintained caches of supplies for the Regional and Main Force VC Battalions. They were very few roads in the Delta but lots of canals. Most travel was by boat. Each canal was a tree line and the villages were strung out along the canals and in the tree lines. Each tree line was fortified with trenches and bunkers. The Regional and Main Force Battalion moved every few days at night throughout their tactical area of operations. At day break they were always in prepared positions. Their intelligence was excellent. They had infiltrated numerous agents throughout the ARVN and at each level of government. Their units were excellent and fought hard. Their cadre were some how always able to slip away when the going got tough. The VC 303 Bn. was decimated in the twin river area south of the Vi Thanh February 15, 1967. In short order they were reconstituted and as tough as ever.

When I reported to the Delta Battalion as a senior major they initially didn't know what to do with me. All operational aviation units had been taken over by the combat arms (Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Engineering, etc.). I was a Transportation Corp Officer and not a maintenance officer. Additionally, until early 1963 most helicopter companies were Transportation Corps units and there was a definite bias against TC Officers. They were not going to give me the command of the AHC. I was assigned as a pilot to the 336 AHC in Soc Trang on January 26th, 1967. Major Lou Jacquay was the CO and was a senior to me. The 336th had some excellent officers. Major Terry Allen the T Bird (gun platoon) leader became a Major General. Capt Roger Greenwood left the active army and joined the Wisconsin Nat'l Guard and became the State Adjutant General (Major General). Capt Jack Bertlelkamp who was in Special Forces on his first tour eventually was promoted to Colonel. The average pilot was 21 years old. The average crew chief was 19. It was quite a contrast in age and experience between the 93rd in 1962 and the 336th (and all of the AHC's). However these young men performed wonderfully. They had the

strength, ability, stamina and bravery to fly 120 combat hours a month (or more). The UH-1D and B models were more reliable than the H-21 and considerably more maintainable. At age 37 I found that it was a young man's game. I didn't have the stamina to keep up with these young men. However it was good to have the experience in an AHC for my later assignment as Delta 21.

The first night I was in Soc Trang, I went to the club wearing a Soc Trang Tiger Shirt. The 121st were the Soc Trang Tigers (the 93rd Trans Co was redesignated the 121st in 1963). The CO of the 121st came roaring up to me and demanded to know what I was doing wearing a Soc Trang Tiger Shirt. I informed him that I was an original Soc Trang Tiger and had been one for five years and that I was going to continue wearing the shirt. The CO in question was junior to me. He didn't push the matter any further. I spent three weeks with the 336th (January 25 to February 14, 1967) and flew 71.8 hours of combat time. It was somewhat discouraging to make an assault into a LZ that I had flown into in 1962 or 63. We weren't trying to seize terrain but to find and fight a very illusive and skilled enemy.

One day we had a two ship mission to pick up a Navy Seal team (Special Ops) and fly them and their gear from Binh Thu airfield on the Bassac Mekong river to Na Bay on the Saigon River. Because of the equipment and number of people it took two rounds trips. After the second trip we went to the mess hall at Na Bay for lunch with the Seals. One of them looked familiar and kept looking at me. Finally he said "Sir you look familiar." I told him the same thing. We talked and discovered he had taken jump training at the Hoa Com Special Forces camp outside Da Nang in 1962 and that I had flown him while he made a parachute jump during his training. He was a Navy Chief Petty Officer. He said that he had been with the SEALS since 1962 but had been detached to the CIA as well.

On February 14, 1967 I was sent to Bac Lieu to become to the Delta Bn Liaison Officer (Delta 21) to the 21st Infantry Division ARVN. It was a great assignment. The 21st Division was one of the best in their Army and was commanded by Brig. General Minh. The senior advisor was a legendary officer Col. Bill Maddox. His call sign was Grey Ghost. He was very distinguished looking and very tough and competent. The 21st Division had seven infantry battalions that were air mobile and suitable for offensive operations. Additionally, they had two ranger battalions (42nd and 44th) and a Calvary Squadron of M113 armored personnel carriers that could travel through the mud and water of the Delta. Each infantry battalion had a rice paddy strength of 400. That allowed the Delta Battalion with 40 lift birds to move an entire infantry battalion in one lift. On a typical operation, a lift was put into the objective area. If there was no contact with the VC the helicopter returned to the stage field and waited any development. Usually there was an ARVN reaction force at the field that could be quickly inserted where ever needed. All 21st Division Operations were entitled Dan Chi – number (Dan Chi 279 as an example).

My second day, February 15, 1967, we started operation Dan Chi 279 using Vi Thanh as a stage field. It was a big battle and a significant victory for the 21st Division. The operation was in the Twin River area south of Vietnam, a very nasty area. The 42nd Rangers were inserted and in moving along the river bank were attacked by a superior VC force. The VC cut the 42nd in two and was pressing them hard. We immediately started lifting in troops to rectify the situation. Capt Robert Stuart, warrior lead (336th AHC) was shot in the head and killed immediately on short final in an assault landing. Also, a sergeant (advisor to the 42nd Rangers) was killed. All day long we shifted ARVN troops to different landing zones. The 21st over ran and decimated the VC 303 Battalion and captured a significant number of crew served weapons, machine guns and mortars. When the VC lost crew served weapons it meant that the unit was badly hurt.

After that operation was over, Colonel Maddox complimented me on the way I ran the air field and quick response to their changing need for aircraft. I established excellent rapport with Col. Maddox, General Minh and the advisory team. Dan Chi 279 was such a big victory that Gen. Westmoreland came down to Bac Lieu for a briefing after it was over.

For a typical operation the Division Operations (G3) advisor would give me the tactics objective, the troops involved, the stage field, and the aviation units assigned. I made up a five paragraph field order and took it to Soc Trang to the Mission Commander. The lead company prepared maps for the operations and conducted the operation. I was always impressed with the competence and professionalism of the 121st. I was able to get around using one of the O-1 Bird Dog observation planes stationed at Bac Lieu.

Bac Lieu was about three feet above sea level during the dry season and right at sea level during the monsoon. The advisory compound consisted of two man huts, complete with refrigerator. The huts were screened in for ventilation, raised up about three feet above the ground and connected with a raised wooden walkway. When we weren't operating, we played volleyball for about two hours each day and immediately after sucked down a couple of beers to replace the lost fluids. We had our own club. The advisory team members were very competent and congenial. I enjoyed the duty and being there. Whenever I wanted to fly the 336th would send down a helicopter for me to fly. Also, I flew as much as I could with the 121st. From February 15th through the end of May I flew 76.1 hours of combat time.

The ARVN had artillery in Bac Lieu quite close to the Advisory compound. At night they would fire H&I concentrations (harassing and interdicting fire) on various VC routes in the countryside. We got used to this and could go right to sleep. One night the sound changed from Boom Siss to Siss Boom. We were being shelled by VC 75mm recoilless rifle firing indirect fire. The range was dead on, I hopped out of bed grabbed my Swedish K sub machine gun and ran to the nearest bunker. The bunker was pretty full so I sat in the doorway. A round landed about 20 yards away on a road. Another round landed right next to a hut 30 yards away detonated in deep mud and blew most of the roof off of the hut. Fortunately the Armored Calvary Squadron was on patrol in the vicinity of the VC firing position. They chased the VC away. At their firing positions they found Chinese range tables for firing the 75 recoilless in indirect fire. There was a tall radio tower right at Division HQ. The VC used that as an aiming point. Given the dispersion pattern for this type of weapon their accuracy was amazing. There were no US casualties. The next day and for several days in a row the 21st went on a rampage after VC village militia in the vicinity of Bac Lieu. General Minh was incensed that the VC would shell his HQ and took it out on the village militia.

In March, we had a multi day operation with the initial lift from Soc Trang and multiple lifts from Vi Thanh where we located the Tactical Division HQ. The objective area was a village tree line between Can Tho and Soc Trang just west of a junction of five canals. The 44th Rangers were on the first lift assault. They ran into an extensive area of manned prepared positions and took heavy casualties. We received reports of their receiving machine gun and mortar fire. It was obvious that this was not village militia and that they had hit something big. We put in multiple lifts all day to stabilize the situation. We had heavy close air support from the USAF. The operation had been done in conjunction with the airborne drop north of Vi Thanh which resulted in no contact. All of a sudden all of the Vietnamese in the command post were clustered around the radio listening intently. I asked what was going on. They said General Minh (in the C&C helicopter) is talking to the VC Commander. It turns out they were class mates at the Vietnamese Military Academy. I asked what they were saying to each other. At first they exchanged pleasantries, and then the VC Commander said "Why don't you get out of your helicopter and fight?" General Minh said "If you stay there we will kill you." The VC Commander answered "Not

today my friend, not today." At which point the conversation ended. We had run into a VC regiment in a very strong position. The battle lasted all day and all night. Early in the morning one of the VC battalions assaulted the ARVN line while the rest slipped away. I don't understand why the Airborne Brigade and/or US Troops from the 9th US Division were not brought in to completely surround the VC positions. At best it was a stale mate and certainly not a victory for the 21st Division. As a aftermath the intelligence experts spent lots of time with General Minh regarding his relationship with the VC Commander. It turns out there was no chance of his coming to the governments side.

In early 1967 the war was still supported generally in the US we saw a number of Hollywood stars who came to visit us in Bac Lieu. Two I remember well, Robert Mitchum and James Garner. I had the good fortune to have lunch with James Garner. He had been an infantry man in Korea. He was very friendly and easy to talk too. I enjoyed meeting him. He is a good guy.

Towards the end of May, Colonel Bill Maddox left the division for an assignment in Germany. He had been in the Delta for a long time. We had a great going away party. The new Senior Advisor's call sign "Paper Tiger", which fit him well. He and General Minh didn't hit it off and in short order he was gone.

On St. Patrick's Day night we had a blast at our club complete with green beer and lots of singing. We were also in the midst of an operation working out of Camau (Dan Chi 281C). The next morning I was pretty rocky but after getting rid of breakfast I felt somewhat better. That afternoon I was told that I had been selected for promotion to Lt. Colonel to be promoted in July. I was hung over but happy.

On Easter Sunday 1967 the Delta Battalion had a real battle while supporting the 9th ARVN Infantry Division. The Delta Battalion Colonel Dempsey was shot down and killed while attempting to rescue a crew that had been shot down. I had flown with him on several occasions. He took a lot of chances. He wanted the Division Liaison officers to fly with him when their divisions where not operating. The Command Sergeant Major also flew as part of the crew on a regular basis. I got along with Colonel Dempsey very well. He was a good man. CWO Jerry Daly, a gunship lead for the Vikings (121st) won a Distinguished Service Cross for laying down a smoke screen that permitted the pick up of the downed crews. I was in Bac Lieu the whole day because the 21st was not involved.

With my pending promotion and the departure of Col. Maddox I received orders to the Delta Battalion HQ to be the S-4 (Staff Officer for logistics). This ended the operational part of my tour. I felt that I was really involved in the war. I reported to Can Tho on June 2 to assume my new duties. It had been an intense period. I really take my hat off to the young men in the helicopter companies and have a great appreciation of the skill, bravery and stamina.

I was the S-4 from June 2 until July 18th. It was a very dull job. Lt. Col. Harper had taken command of the Delta Battalion after Col. Dempsey was killed. He did a good job (and was later promoted to Colonel). He was replaced in June or July by Lt. Col. Robert McDaniel. I had met Col. McDaniel in Europe in 1965 while touring with the Light Observation Helicopter after the Paris Air Show. He assigned me to be the Air Field Commander.

On July 17, 1967, I was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. General Phil Seneff Commanding General of the First Aviation Brigade pinned my silver leaves on me.

On July 18, 1967, I became the CO of the 345th Aviation Operating Detachment and the airfield at Can Tho. I held that job until I rotated back to the US on January 15, 1968. It was a very busy six month. My detachment consisted of three other officers and about 20 non-commissioned officers and soldiers.

The airfield at Can Tho was built by the French. The single runway (north and south) was covered with perforated steel planks. We had a parking ramp and a small terminal building with a control tower. Grass ten to 15 feet high grew right up to the parking ramp. There was NO physical security on the field. The units at the airfield consisted of HDQ Delta Battalion, a Special Forces B Team and Vietnamese Special Forces, support aircraft for the IV Vietnamese Corps and the Delta Battalion, the 3rd Radio Research Unit (Electronic Intelligence) a small USAF Caribou detachment. Next to the perimeter was a large VC POW camp.

A VC officer had been killed that summer. He had a sketch map of the airfield complete with attack arrows. The airfield was defenseless when I took it over. I had my work cut out.

The first thing I did was determine what land constituted the airfield. Because of my good rapport with the Vietnamese 21st Division, I got a platoon of their engineers given to me and over a six week period they put in a double apron, quintuple concertina barbed wire fence around the perimeter. The next thing we did was to defoliate and cut the grass throughout the airfield. I had watch towers built and installed on the perimeter. We built revetments for all the helicopters on the parking ramp. As President of the Base Development Board we planned for an additional compound to house a CH-47 Chinook Company.

While all of this was going on more and more units were assigned to the airfield to include:

244th Mohawk Aviation Company, a
Helicopter Gun Company,
69th Engineer Construction Battalion

The 69th Engineers built a number of barracks for the expansion. The airfield was very crowded. There was no dry land. To create dry land fill had to be hydraulically sucked from the Mekong river bottom. That's how the airfield had been created, and any expansion would require additional filling.

All of this activity was not lost on the VC. The night of December 21, 1967 a VC assault team came through the wire on the Special Forces side of the perimeter. They destroyed two Air America airplanes, one UH-1B gunship and shot up the Corps CG's helicopter and the Delta Battalion CO's helicopter and the control tower. Fortunately I was not relieved. General Desobry, the IV Corps Senior Advisor took me off the hook. I have the remnant of UH horizontal stabilizer painted "ACE Leach" and showing the aircraft that were destroyed and shot up.

All was not work. From October 15th through the 22nd I met my family in Hawaii for Rand R. Bert was 13 and Mark had his 10th birthday there. It was marvelous! It was so good to be with them. Norma and I and the boys had a great time. When I got back my EX O. Harry Hubbard had made major improvements to the terminal including building offices on the balcony.

I rotated home on January 15th, 1968. The story of this tour is not over. I just missed the TET Offensive. During the TET offensive. The VC dusted off their attack plan from the summer before and ran into our wire and the 69th Engineers. They did penetrate into the airfield slightly but left lots of bodies in the wire, and not do any real damage. The wire and defoliating the airfield really paid off.

I received the Bronze Star for my work as airfield commander and received my 6th through 10th oak leaf cluster to the air medal for my flying during the tour.