DWIGHT F. DAVIS

[redacted]

April 28, 2004

Mr. Jim Anderson
35th Infantry Regiment Historian
[redacted]

Dear Mr. Anderson:

I read about your book project to chronicle the history of the 3rd Brigade Task Force in the 25th and 4th Divisions in the latest issue of the Cacti Times, and want to submit my manuscript for your consideration. I sent you a copy of this manuscript by E-Mail a couple of weeks ago, however, I have revised it by adding many more photographs. I tried to send you the revised manuscript, however, I got an error message back indicating that there are too many bytes in this file for your E-Mail system to accept. Consequently, I am sending you the hard copy.

I do not know if manuscripts like mine can be used in your project, however, I thought it was worth a try. I also recommend you consider the writings of Richard (Dick) Arnold which are posted on the 35th Infantry Regiment (CACTI) Association website because they are unusually good. Dick is a gifted writer and story teller and several of this works are powerful and ring true.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dwight F. Davis
Former Platoon Sergeant
2nd Platoon, C Company, 2/35th Infantry
4th Infantry Division

/dfd

Enclosure

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MY VIETNAM WAR STORY

by

Dwight F. Davis

Staff Sergeant

PROLOGUE

When I began writing this story it was May 20, 1998, 28 years after I left Vietnam. I was playing on the Internet and came on a website with material about the Vietnam War including several other sites with the personal stories of folks who had served in the military in Vietnam. I read one thoroughly which was written by a guy who had served as an infantry officer in the First Division (the Big Red One). Much of this guy's story jived with my own experiences and it got me to reflecting about my experiences and stimulated me to write it up.

In general, there is nothing truly remarkable about my experiences in Vietnam, however, I believe my experience as an infantry platoon sergeant there was a defining moment of my life because it taught me what is important (i.e., God, family, friends, trust, integrity, and perseverance). I have had some success in my life since I left the Army including earning a Ph.D. in Government from Florida State University in 1974. I also served successfully on the faculties of three major state universities (University of Illinois-Chicago Circle, University of Oklahoma, and Texas A&M University), including being tenured and promoted to Associate Professor at Texas A&M University. When I left academics I served as a leader in the largest state legislative program evaluation unit in the United States, and also served as a bureau chief in the Division of Motor Vehicles in the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. All of this pales in significance, however, compared to my service in Vietnam. It was simply the most important thing I ever did. I suppose I reached that conclusion because the stakes were so high there; people got killed, however, I also believe it is because it was real service to my country no matter that it was unpopular. In addition, the fact that I served reasonably well makes me proud of myself.

Like many veterans, I have fantasized about writing a book about my experiences in Vietnam. I doubt, however, that will ever happen although it might when I retire. I suspect a good writer could write a book about my experiences since there are many interesting anecdotes. For right now I will just try to provide the bare bones version.

I will try to tell my story as accurately and as honestly as I can, however, I am afraid my long term memory will fail me on the some of the details and the proper sequence of events. I left Vietnam September 7, 1970 and, as I begin this journal, it is May 20, 1998, so a lot has happened to me in the interim and my memory will be stretched.

TO FORT LEWIS

My story begins with a flight to Seattle, Washington from Pensacola, Florida. I had been given a month's leave before I had to go to Vietnam, however, I spent the last week visiting my girl friend, Jeannie Miller, in Ft. Walton Beach, before I left for Vietnam. She drove me to the airport in Pensacola, I kissed her good-bye, then started on my adventure. At the airport in Seattle, I got on a bus which took me to Ft. Lewis and the reception center for FNGs (F**king New Guys) on their way to Vietnam. I arrived about 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon as I recall. After the inevitable in-processing, we were issued three sets of jungle fatigues and a pair of jungle boots. The instructions I received at Ft. Benning told us to bring our duffle bag complete with khaki uniforms, a couple of pair of regular fatigues, our issue boots and some other nonsense, none of which we needed. Except for a few civilian clothes I brought, this stuff stayed in my bag the entire time I was in Vietnam unused. When I returned home I gave this stuff to my mother who donated it to the Theater Department at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

While we were being in-processed there was an interesting occurrence. An Army nurse, a First Lieutenant, and her husband, an enlisted man, were checking in and were told they would have to stay in separate transit barracks. The nurse went ballistic and gave the poor sergeant in charge maximum grief. He then left to check with higher higher (commanders to whom he reported). It turned out they found some way for this couple to stay together in the same quarters. I was amazed because I did not perceive the Army as having any flexibility. I suspect, however, had the nurse been an enlisted person, she would not have gotten her way.

I killed about two days at Ft. Lewis with nothing much to do except share nervous stories with the other soldiers I met. I went to a movie one night, "Midnight Cowboy" which was a good movie and won an Oscar, however, it was depressing. One of the main characters played by Dustin Hoffman was a scrounge

who lived by his wits on the streets of New York City. The other main character was a hick from out West played by John Voight whose goal was to use his sexual prowess to get things from rich women in New York. These two ultimately get enough money to take a bus to Florida which they envision as the promised land, however, the Dustin Hoffman character dies on the bus trip. Not too uplifting for a guy on his way to serve in the infantry in Vietnam.

The next day we got on bus which took us to the airfield which had large commercial airplanes for the trip to Vietnam. Shortly after I got there my name was called out by some officer in the front. I reported to him and he put me in charge of a loser who had gone AWOL (Absent Without Leave) to avoid going to Vietnam, had been caught, and was being shipped out instead of going to jail where he should have gone. I was actually handcuffed to this guy until the plane took off and was handcuffed to him again when we got to Vietnam until I was able to turn him over to some military police who were waiting for him there. As it turned out, I would relive this experience again when I left Vietnam. I was proud that I had graduated No. 2 in my class at the Noncommissioned Officers Course (NCOC) which gave me the rank of staff sergeant E-6, however, I was to learn that E-6s got picked on for all sorts of sh*tty details.

The guy who graduated number 1 in our NCOC class is Tom Ridge who served successfully in Vietnam and went on to become a congressman from Pennsylvania and then the governor of Pennsylvania. He is now Secretary for Homeland Security in the Bush administration responsible for coordinating the efforts of federal agencies to fight terrorism. I sent him an E-Mail when he was governor and, after seven months, he responded with a very nice letter. I was tickled by his comment about my son who graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy. Tom said that my son appears to be a bright young man who figured out it is much better to be an Air Force officer than a U.S. Army infantry platoon sergeant.

CAM RAHN

The flight to Vietnam took approximately 16 hours with a two hour stopover in Alaska where the plane was refueled. A normal breakfast in the airport in Alaska cost approximately $10.00; not cheap for 1969. We arrived in Vietnam at about 4:00 a.m. Our arrival point was Cam Rahn Bay, a huge military facility with many aircraft and a large transit area. I arrived there on November 1, 1969. Again, the usual in processing, then we were put on a bus which took us to the barracks where we stayed for a little more than a day. The bus had wire mesh over the windows, to prevent grenades from being thrown in, we were told by the bus driver.

By the time we arrived at the barracks it was almost 7:00 a.m. and it was already hot. I was to find out that the normal daytime temperature in Vietnam was over 100 degrees and got up to 115 degrees. In the mountains of the Central Highlands where I was to serve, it might get down to the 80s at night and we would be freezing because of the radical change from the daytime. I decided I needed a shower so I went to the large shower facility behind the barracks. I got undressed in the alcove area then went into the shower area. There I met a Vietnamese woman who was washing clothes in a large metal tub. She waived and said "Hi GI." If it didn't bother her it didn't bother me, so I took my shower without worrying about her.

Basically, we just killed time at Cam Rahn, although we did get to go to the NCO club the first night for several beers and to listen to the Filipino band singing popular rock and roll tunes where the "Ls" sounded like "Rs." The men assigned to Cam Rahn generally ignored us and we were all fairly amazed by the place. It was a huge expanse of sand because the ocean was close and it was easily 500 meters from our barracks to the base camp perimeter with all the concertina wire and machine gun emplacements.

The next day we were all called into a large meeting room, they read off our unit assignments, and told us which bus to take to get transportation to our various divisions. I was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division which, at that time, was headquartered at Camp Enari near Pleiku City which is in the Central Highlands of Vietnam in the military area called II Corps. The far South was IV Corps and was largely a huge mass of rice paddies and swamps. Above that was III Corps which included Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam and the largest city on the Vietnam Peninsula. I believe that area was also largely rice paddies and small villages, not including Saigon. One of my friends from NCO School, John Gilbertson, who also graduated as a Staff Sergeant from NCOC, served there in the 25th Division and he later told me that one of their biggest problems was trench foot because they humped through wet land so long. There were also many more booby traps in the III Corps and IV Corps areas than in the Central Highlands. I Corps, the most Northern part of South Vietnam, was mostly a Marine area of operations (AO), and it has the highest mountains in South Vietnam. The Central Highlands seemed like a good deal. I saw my friend John about a year after I returned from Vietnam. He had just been released from Walter Reed Army Hospital where he spent the better part of a year recovering from wounds he received in Vietnam. He will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. He went on to work as a counselor for juvenile delinquents and I suspect he was good at that.

One of the amazing facts about Vietnam is that it is a wonderfully beautiful country. I discovered that over and over when I flew on helicopters or in C-135s and looked down. The beaches in Vietnam may be the most beautiful beaches in the world and the mountains where I was were truly gorgeous with

many impressive water falls, lush forests, and broad plains with rice paddies and rubber plantations. Everything is green. Of course, when we were there, the land was also pocked marked with the results of bombs and artillery shells. Some areas looked like the skin of someone with really bad acne. I understand that we dropped more ordinance there than in W.W.I and W.W.II combined.

CAMP ENARI

I got a ride on a C-135 from Cam Rahn to Pleiku Air Force Base which was an American Air Force Base located just outside Pleiku City and approximately 10-15 miles from Camp Enari which was my destination. The C-135 trips were often fairly interesting because they normally involved some Vietnamese military types and sometimes some civilians as well. It appeared that many Vietnamese military people traveled with their families and often their pigs and chickens as well. When we got to Pleiku Air Force Base I got on a bus which took us to Camp Enari. Again, the windows of the bus were covered with wire mesh.

Camp Enari was another huge base camp. It was devoid of trees and the land looked much like what you find in South Georgia, lots and lots of red clay and plenty of dust which kicked up every time a helicopter came in. When we got there we had more in-processing and were then assigned to transit barracks. In many ways the base camp looked a lot like a regular Army facility back in the states. Among the lessons I learned my first day there, however, is that the United States of America was not referred to in these terms. Rather, it was referred to as "the World." The psychology of that impressed me immediately. It was clear that soldiers in Vietnam did not think of Vietnam as part of the real world but rather some sort of bad nightmare place which you wanted to leave as soon as you could.

Some guys started their "short timer" calendars shortly after they got to Vietnam. That was a mistake because once you started counting the days you had left on your tour, they started to go by more slowly. I did not start counting until I had a little less than 6 months left and I am sure the days went by quicker before I started counting. For us, the tour was 365 days. My Dad served in Vietnam for 14 months from late 1960 to early 1962 and I believe the Marines typically had a 14 month tour early in the war. By the time I got there, however, everyone was serving 365 days.

The guys stationed at Camp Enari who were short (had little time left to serve) were obnoxious about that. They would ask FNGs how many days they had left which would be about 362-363, and then they would say: "I have less time in hours to spend in the God Damn Army than you have days left to spend in Vietnam." Other comments included: "I am so short I don't have time for a long conversation." "I am so short, I can play handball against the curb." "I am so

short I left yesterday." etc. etc. etc. I told myself that I would never do that to new guys, however, I was just as bad when I got short. War can make one cynical.

We spent about five days in the transit area going to all sorts of classes and orientations to Vietnam. At one point we even got issued M-16s and went on a sweep outside the base camp for a couple of miles. Even guys who were not infantry got to go on this excursion which was interesting because they were not pleased. At the end of our sweep, we went to a shooting range and fired our M-16s for a couple of hours. While we were there we bought pineapple from a Montagnard who used a long machete to carve off the outside for us. The Montagnards charged a dollar for whatever they sold you; one banana one dollar, one pineapple one dollar, etc.

Theoretically, we were not supposed to spend dollars on the local economy. We were supposed to use Vietnamese currency, the piaster, or Military Payment Certificates (MPC). MPC looked like funny money since the bills were in various colors including pink. Periodically, all MPC was collected and replaced with new MPC in the interest of cutting down on black market trading. If a Vietnamese could get hold of dollars or MPC, there is nothing they could not buy. Some guys told me that in Saigon you could buy anything from street vendors, including weapons. Stuff that the Post Exchange (PX) did not have the street vendors had. It turns out that much of what the street vendors had was stolen from the PX resupply points.

The Montagnards were very interesting. They were, historically, a nomadic people, living very much like Native Americans prior to reservations. They are a distinct ethnic group from the Vietnamese and are built a bit stockier. The Vietnamese slang word for Montagnard literally translates as "savages." In general, they were treated like blacks in the South before the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, since Americans wanted to use harassment and interdiction (H&I) fire with bombs and artillery to make the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) nervous, especially at night, they herded up many of the Montagnards and moved them into to artificially established compounds so they would not get hurt. Over time this had the effect of hurting this culture. Despite their bad treatment by the Vietnamese, including South Vietnamese as well as VC and NVA, the Montagnards had a reputation of being good fighters and dependable allies. In addition, they carried as much stuff as a GI which could amount to 60-70 pounds. The South Vietnamese soldiers in contrast whom we often called "Marvin the ARVN", generally appeared to carry little equipment. ARVN stands for Army of the Republic of Vietnam. I know from my reading that the South Vietnamese Army paid heavy dues in the war and many units distinguished themselves with first class efforts, however, the ones I saw were not impressive and most looked liked they were "shamming" (goofing off) most of the time. We respected the Montagnards, however.

As noted earlier, we got classes on all sorts of stuff while we were in the transit area. My personal favorite was a class for noncommissioned officers (NCOs or Noncoms) and officers which was about how to keep your troops from being ripped off in Vietnam. The crusty old E-7 who taught the class was good. He held up a glass jar and said: "I can put Sh*t in here and label it Sh*t, and I can still sell it to a GI." I found out later that he had a point. Of course, alcohol abuse did not help in this regard, however, I have seen stone sober GIs buy crap and pay a premium and I even did it myself on a few occasions.

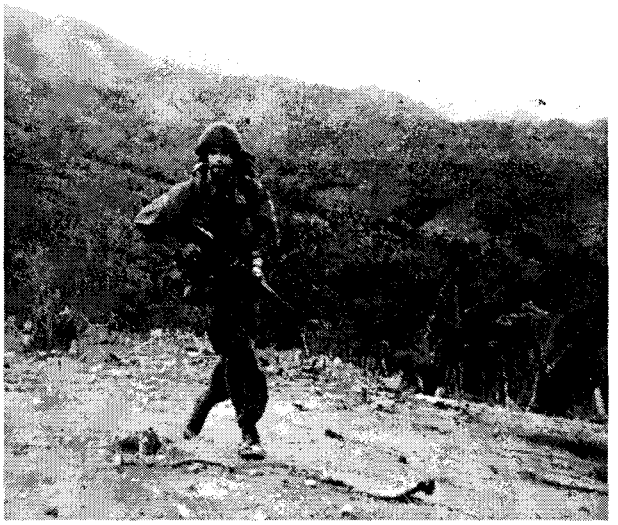
During some downtime, I went to the division's PX which was very large. If you had a ration card you could buy liquor or beer. I had not been issued a ration card yet. Right next to the PX was a large shower and steam room facility in which you could get a rub down from a cute Vietnamese woman wearing shorts and a halter top. I took advantage of that and enjoyed it immensely. I was told later that you could have sex with these women; some guys even alleged that you could get "souvenir" sex which meant free. It was not obvious to me that any of this was possible while I was there.

When I finished my orientation, I was put on a deuce and a half (a very large truck) and taken to my new battalion headquarters which was in the division's base. My battalion was the 2/35th or "Blue Cacti" which was the battalion's symbol. The battalion had a long and distinguished history going back to the Spanish-American War. There I was met by the battalion supply officer who was a captain who had been a first sergeant, then went to OCS (Officers Candidate School). He was a crusty old guy who appeared to be a fine soldier. He issued us gear including an M-16 with ammunition, rucksack, four grenades, two smoke grenades, two hand held flares, a claymore mine, two canteens, a five quart water bag, a gas mask, a poncho liner, a poncho, air mattress, and three days of C-Rations (C-Rats). Then he took us to meet our company clerk. In my case it was "C" Company or "Charlie" Company. The clerk's job was to get us into his paperwork files, then get us out into the field. He told me I was being assigned to the 2nd Platoon.

Speaking of gear, it was amazing what we carried in the boonies. Most guys had an M-16 and two or three bandoleers of M-16 ammo with approximately 8 to 10 magazines in each bandoleer. This ammo weighed approximately 10 pounds. We generally wore the bandoleers strapped across our chests. The machine gunners carried an M-60 machine gun and approximately 200 to 500 rounds of ammo for the machine gun. The M-60 machine gun weighed approximately 25 pounds and the ammo weighed approximately 15 pounds. The guys with the M-40 grenade launchers carried it and a vest full of ammo with extra ammo in their ruck sacks. This ammo weighed at least 15 pounds.

We also all had pistol belts and some guys added the harness that went with the pistol belt. I did not wear a harness because I never figured out how to

make it fit right and it also added to what was on my shoulders with the ruck sack straps. On my pistol belt I carried two pouches with two grenades in each, a canteen of water, and a smoke grenade attached to a strap. When we went to Cambodia some of us also carried incendiary grenades to burn stuff up.



Mark Roe, machine gunner.

In our ruck sacks we carried extra ammo, extra smoke grenades, one or two flares, extra ammo for the machine gunner, and an entrenching tool which is a small fold-up shovel for digging fox holes and fighting positions. We also carried two canteens of water and a five quart water bag tied to the top of our ruck sack which further added to the weight. In our ruck sacks we also carried three days of C-Rats in cans, and some personal stuff. I used an M-16 ammo can which could seal so it was water tight to carry stationary, envelopes and a pen so I could write letters to my folks. I also carried my cigarettes in this can. I also carried a sweatshirt for when it got cold in the mountains and an extra pair of socks. Sometimes we carried socks wrapped around our waist so they could dry out. On the bottom of our ruck sacks we tied our poncho, poncho liner, and air mattress. Some of us carried two ponchos so we had one to keep the rain off and one to use to build a shelter in the boonies when it rained. We also tied a claymore mine to our ruck sack. Some of us occasionally carried a jar of instant coffee. You got some instant coffee with C-Rats, but we generally wanted more. The down side of this is that the jars often broke in your ruck sack. Some guys carried some other personal stuff such as small radios and tape recorders. We prohibited using radios in the boonies because they could give away your position to the enemy, but guys used them in the rear. I appreciated the guys who had tape recorders

because I sent two tapes to my folks back in the World. My Mother kept them and gave them to me about 20 years after I got back from Vietnam.

Generally, when you added up all we carried it amounted to 60 to 70 pounds of stuff. In the 1970s there was an article written by Tim O'Brien whose book about his experiences in Vietnam I also read. The title of the article was "All the things we carried," or something close to that. He describes in great detail what guys carried and used it as a way to tell their stories. It was a powerful piece of writing.

I mentioned that I sent a couple of audio cassettes to my folks while I was in Vietnam. That turned out to be much more difficult that you might assume. You could record up to one hour using both sides of the tape, however, we tended to run out of things to say after a few minutes. You generally did not want to tell your folks the bad stuff so you gave them general information instead. I once spent approximately four hours trying to record one hour on a tape to my folks. I actually recorded less than an hour and that was with the help of several of my buddies who I got to talk into the microphone. We had a really funny experience once when a buddy of mine, Mike Jones, was recording a tape to his wife. He also got others involved including singing badly. We recorded over a tape my folks had sent me and that is the funny part. On my folks tape, my Mother comments on some nice fraternity boys who came to their house for a charity and she says: "They were such nice boys." When we made the tape to my buddy's wife, that line remained on the tape right after several of us in a drunken stupor sang some popular tune. It was a hoot how it came out.

I spoke to the clerk about my "early out" to attend graduate school. While I was home on leave, prior to going to Vietnam, I visited Tallahassee and went to Florida State University (FSU) to see about getting accepted to graduate school. I had been advised that I could get out of Vietnam early if I got unconditionally accepted to school and school started within 90 days of my ETS (Estimated Time of Separation or DEROS, Date Eligible to Return From Overseas; the date when you go home). It turned out that my grades had been so poor in undergraduate school at FSU that the director of graduate studies in the Government Department did not want to accept me. My Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores were acceptable, however, my undergraduate grade point average was only 2.4 which was too low to get accepted. I explained that I could get out of Vietnam early if I was unconditionally accepted and, the professor said: "I don't want anyone to stay there longer than necessary," whereupon he signed my acceptance paper. I brought it with me to Vietnam. The clerk said he would do the necessary paper work for my early out. Interestingly, when I eventually went to graduate school I did quite well, completing my Ph.D. with a 3.8 grade point average. What a difference maturity makes.

During my time at Camp Enari, I had occasion to read a newspaper from the States, I cannot remember from what town. Some guys had newspapers sent to them periodically by their folks from back home. The remarkable thing about this newspaper was that it had a story about the new draft system. Beginning in the Fall of 1969, guys were to be drafted by lottery according to their birthday. College deferments had been eliminated the previous year. I was to learn the significance of the new draft system a couple of years later in Graduate School where we read a book entitled Little Groups of Friends and Neighbors. It was about the old Army draft system. It turned out that the draft system was very corrupt. There were draft boards in every community that decided who got drafted and the result was that draftees were disproportionately the sons of the poor, the working poor, and the nonwhite. I had believed that, if you were 18 and were not in college getting a college deferment or did not have a physical problem that made you 4-F (unable to serve in the military due to physical problems), you got drafted. That was not the way it was. Years later, upon reflection, I concluded that the expansion of the anti-war movement, which began in 1969, and the pressure from the general public, not just college students, to get out of Vietnam, was directly related to the beginning of the draft of the sons of the middle class. I still believe that.

THE FORWARD TRAINS --- BAN ME THUOT

After only a few days in my battalion rear area, I was on a deuce and a half going to Pleiku Air Force Base to catch a ride to the "Forward Transit Area" which we called the "Forward Trains" which was in Ban Me Thuot. It took three days to get this ride because they were overbooked each of the first two days. Consequently, after hanging around in the hot sun all day, we had to get back on the truck and go back to Camp Enari. Finally, I got out and flew to a small base camp just outside Ban Me Thuot and from there caught a resupply helicopter to my company in the "boonies." Ban Me Thuot was a very interesting place I returned to in a couple of weeks and then again a couple of weeks later.

The helicopters we flew in most often were HU-1s which were generally referred to as "Hueys" although we also called them "Slicks" or just "Birds." Each helicopter was staffed with a pilot, co-pilot, and two door gunners who operated M-60 machine guns at the rear of the helicopter. There were no side doors. Typically when you went on a "CA" (Combat Assault), which is how we referred to our missions, one GI sat in the middle and two GIs sat at each side door with their legs hanging out and holding on to the metal support bars on each side. We flew not much above the tree tops most often so the view of the country side was magnificent. I generally liked flying in helicopters, however, as we used to say: "The only bad parts about flying in helicopters are taking off and landing." The reason for this adage was because the helicopter was most vulnerable to sniper fire or attack when it was lifting off or landing. I would have that

experience on several occasions as time went on in Vietnam. I was surprised to learn at the end of my tour that I had earned an Air Medal which is generally given only to pilots and their crews. The reason was because I had been on at least 25 CAs.

Some 2nd Platoon guys being dropped off at a forward firebase.

THE FIRST HUMP

Arriving in the boonies gave me an insight into what was to come. The helicopter landed in a grassy area surrounded by forest and I got out. The troops had surrounded the "Landing Zone" (LZ) for security. I then helped the helicopter crew unload the supplies for my company which included several cases of C-Rats, mail, replacement fatigues, and Supplementary Ration Packs. A Supplementary Ration Pack is a cardboard box about three feet by two feet by eight inches in size in which were 10 cartons of cigarettes, some chewing tobacco, some candy, several tablets of writing paper and ball point pens, and some replacement boot laces. Each platoon got one of these about once a week. Other supplies were delivered by helicopter every three days, weather permitting. Every guy in the platoon got three days of C-Rats (9 meals -- there were only 12 kinds of C-Rats) and a change of fatigues. I was to learn later that the change of fatigues was delivered sporadically. We once went almost a month before we got a change of clothes and we never carried any spare clothes with us except for a jungle sweater or sweatshirt and at least one pair of extra socks.

When a Supplementary Ration Pack was delivered the platoon sergeant doled out the smokes and other contents as equitably as possible. Some guys were picky about what they smoked so they got less than others who were not so picky. I took whatever smokes I could get because I knew that we might miss a Supplementary Ration Pack delivery. The resupply birds also took mail from the troops which got sent to the States upon their return to the division base camp. The good news was that we did not have to pay for postage; one of the few benefits of being in a combat zone.

When we left the LZ, we went into the forest a short way and stopped to divvy up the supplies. There I was introduced to my company commander and platoon leader. The platoon leader's name was Mel Salazar, a Second Lieutenant who was Mexican-American from New Mexico. He was 20 years old but looked about 16. In approximately two months he would be killed, still looking very young and doing something brave and stupid. I also met the other NCOs in the company including one who would become a very good friend, Staff Sergeant George Keener. Keener had a bachelors degree in Forestry and also had the distinction of having been shot in the leg. His Dad and he came on some poachers on their land and the poachers starting shooting. Keener also had the distinction of having volunteered for the Infantry. He had some other staff MOS (Military Occupation Specialty), however, he decided that it was boring so he volunteered for the action. The Infantry MOS was 11-B also known as 11-Bravo or 11-Bush. Our specific MOS was 11-B40 because we were NCOs. The regular grunts were 11-B10.

Dividing up supplies for 2nd Platoon.

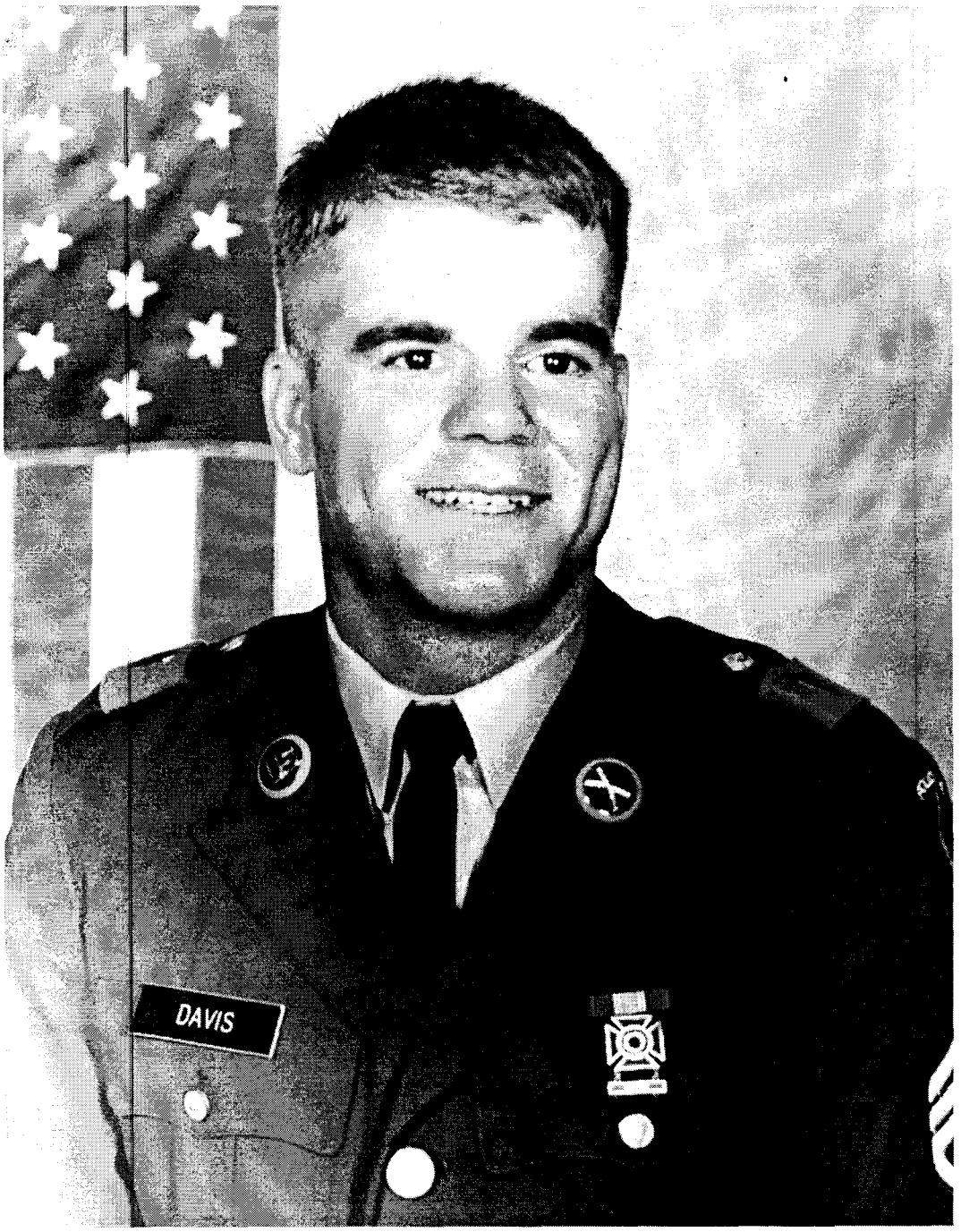
Almost all the NCOs in the field were graduates of the NCOC I had gone to. The regular Army referred to us as "Instant NCOs" or "Shake and Bakes" because we made our stripes in 90 days followed by 90 days of on the job training (OJT), then a ticket straight to Vietnam, do not pass Go, do not collect $200. Almost all Shake and Bake NCOs were draftees. I was to read a few years later that by the close of 1969, 80 percent of all combat troops in Vietnam were draftees. This was truly a citizen soldier war.

Because I was a staff sergeant E-6, I was assigned as the second platoon's platoon sergeant which is an interesting sidelight on the Vietnam War after about 1968. A platoon sergeant should be a Sergeant First Class, an E-7. One did not make this rank until he had been in the Army 8-10 years. In fact, most guys did not make staff sergeant E-6 until they had been in the Army 6-8 years. While I was in Vietnam the largest number of career or "Lifer" NCOs I ever saw in the field were three in my whole battalion which amounted to approximately 500 men. Almost all squad leaders and platoon sergeants were graduates of the Noncommissioned Officer Course (NCOC) and were generally referred to as Shake and Bakes, and almost all of them were draftees. Appointing a Staff Sergeant E-6 as Platoon Sergeant was the result of being grossly undermanned. I also had a first sergeant who was a Sergeant First Class, E-7, rather than an actual First Sergeant, E-8. I also had two different company commanders who were First Lieutenant's even though that is a Captain's job.

The Army began the NCOC program in 1967 to compensate for the lack of junior NCOs, especially Sergeant E-5s, who are the squad leaders. Since you were not in the war for the "duration" like soldiers in W.W.II, but rather served one year tours, in time the Army ran out of junior NCOs. The Lifers had been promoted to ranks too high to serve as squad leaders and everyone else got out of the Army as soon as possible. The NCOC program was the brainchild of a famous soldier, David Hackworth, who was a colonel at the time. He went on to write his memoirs about his experiences in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and then to write books critical of the military establishment. His criticism of the military establishment after his third or fourth tour in Vietnam got him forced into retirement as an embarrassment to the Army. Hackworth was the most decorated soldier in modern times, including five purple hearts which he said were the most important awards because you could not fake them. I believe his observations about the corporate nature of top military leadership, especially in peace time, is right on target.

Several months after I arrived in country, I had occasion to go to the division NCO club with two other platoon sergeants from my company. While we were there getting smashed, we overheard a conversation from the next table from some "Super Lifers;" First Sergeants (E-8s) and Sergeant Majors (E-9s). One of them starting bad mouthing Shake and Bake NCOs as not being real good

NCOs like the career guys supposedly were. After a few minutes of this, one of my buddies, who was a large guy, got up, walked over to their table and said: "You see those stripes on your sleeve. You are a Lifer who volunteered for this Sh*t. You and your Momma should be out humping the boonies rather than relying on us citizen soldiers doing the job for you." Interestingly, the Lifers just stopped talking and turned away. I was afraid we were going to jail, do not pass Go, do not collect $200.



Me when I graduated from NCOC.

I was not in the Army long enough to get a very good understanding of the promotion system. I had the impression, however, that getting promoted was fairly difficult, at least for enlisted guys. I met many guys who had been in the Army 10-12 years who were only Staff Sergeant E-6 and I met some others who had been in the Army longer than that who were only Buck Sergeant E-5. Of course, most of these guys had been busted in grade for some reason. It was amazingly easy for an enlisted guy to receive "non judicial punishment" which resulted in loss of rank and reduction in pay. A non judicial punishment meant that it did not involve a court martial and was, instead, administered by a local commander, generally a company commander. I am unaware of any officer who was reduced in rank or received a loss of pay. It seemed to me that you had to be a fairly tough guy to last in the Army for a long time as an enlisted man. For awhile there was a Sergeant First Class, E-7, in another platoon who illustrated my point. This guy had a Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB) with two stars which meant he fought in three wars; WWII, Korea and Vietnam. He was from the Philippines, however, he was an American citizen and he really knew how to soldier. I watched him field strip an M-60 machine gun in about 30 seconds and then reassemble it in about one minute with a blindfold on. I was amazed that he had been in the Army for almost 30 years and never risen above the rank of Sergeant First Class.

After we had divided up the supplies that came with me to the boonies, I met the members of my platoon. Unfortunately, I cannot remember all of their names. There was a Specialist 4th Class guy named Jerry Kline from Ohio who was called Snake. He was a very good infantry soldier, and often walked point, however, he was always trying to get out of the field. In the World he was a motorcycle gang member. There was another guy, a Private, called Bink who was a Black guy from Delaware whose father was a Highway Patrol trooper. Bink was funny, however, he was low on courage. Another guy was Private Mark Roe. He was from California and had worked for the largest utility company there before he got drafted. For awhile, he kept a detailed journal of his experiences in Vietnam, however, he eventually quit taking notes after the drudgery set in.

There was a Cajun guy, Private Melvin Guidry, from Louisiana. He was the real deal. Later he would meet another Cajun guy back in the rear and they would talk to each other using a variety of basterdized French and expressions unique to the swamps of Louisiana. It turned out Melvin had done something very stupid with regard to his Mom. He had told her he was stationed as a company clerk in Thailand so she would not worry about him. The second platoon leader I had, Lt. Glenn Troester, tried to convince Melvin that he should be honest with his Mom because, if he got hit, it would come as a real shock to her. I don't know if he ever told his mom he was a grunt in Vietnam. I do know that he got some packages from his Mom that he could not hump in the boonies so he had to destroy them including one with a relatively expensive birthday gift.

There was a handsome young Black guy named Private Alvin Thompson who had a sullen personality and generally felt like he had been dealt a bad hand in life. He wanted desperately to get out of the field and eventually did that by purposely wounding himself in the foot with his M-16 in March, 1970. Unfortunately, he had apparently not paid attention in training when they explained the ballistics of the M-16. It is a high velocity weapon which causes the bullet to tumble in flight. The round is 5.56 millimeter, not much bigger than a 22 caliber, however, due to the velocity and tumbling action, when it goes in it makes a very small hole about the size of a dime, however, when it comes out the hole is much bigger, at least the size of a fifty cent piece. I suspect he is crippled for the rest of his life.

Another guy named Specialist 4th Class Robert (Bob) Stevens, was a handsome muscular guy who was one of the few guys in the unit who had actually enlisted in the Army rather than being drafted. He would later assist me in probably my only act of bravery in Vietnam.

One of the radio telephone operators (RTOs) was a Mexican-American guy from Chicago named Private Mario Flores. I really got to like Mario because he was bright, funny and generally worked hard. Mario later earned the distinction of having the best reaction to a "Dear John" letter in the platoon. We used to gather around and have the guy who just got the Dear John letter read it to the platoon. Then we would critique the letter. Mario got one from his girl friend who was a high school student. It basically said that she had met someone else so it was over. At the end she said she hoped Mario would not do anything foolish when he got the letter. His reaction was: "What does the bitch think I'm going to do, jump up and get hit, F**k her!" I commented: "Mario, I believe you are going to do fine." Another funny thing about Mario is that he got mistaken for a Vietnamese a couple of times by some other GIs, probably because he had slightly brown skin and a very youthful face. He was indignant: "I ain't no Dink, I am Mexican man!" Dink is a derogatory term for Vietnamese who were also called Slopes or Gooks. Referring to Vietnamese as Dinks was, of course, dehumanizing, however, it appears that all soldiers dehumanize the enemy, I suppose because it makes it easier to kill them.

There were several other guys, a total of approximately 22, who I remember vaguely. There was a big black guy named Jake from Memphis, Tennessee, who was a machine gunner and a very good man. There was another Mexican guy, Danny Calzada who was an outstanding soldier and mature beyond his years. He came from a very small border town in Texas. I learned several years later that Hispanics had the highest death rate in the Vietnam War. Luckily, both of the Hispanic guys in my platoon went home.

There were also several other Black guys, some of whom were outstanding soldiers. Unfortunately, some of the others would prove to be problems later on.

One of the truly sad parts of the Vietnam War was the extraordinary racism there. It was not very evident in the boonies where everyone depended on each other, however, in the rear, it was omnipresent. Black guys hung out with Black guys and White guys hung out with White guys and both groups bad mouthed each other. The Black guys, who everyone called "Brothers," made bracelets and necklaces out of black boot laces and wore them proudly. They also greeted each other with very elaborate hand shakes called "Daps". And, back in the division rear, there were many racially motivated assaults which I was to experience as well.

2nd Platoon, C (Charlie) Company, 2 /35th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division
at LZ Hard Times approximately July, 1970

A lesson I was to soon learn was that we never had what the military calls "Unit Integrity" in Vietnam. Every month some guys left and others came in their place. As a consequence, we never had a sense of unit that you would get if you had all worked together for awhile. The first Army units sent to Vietnam came as

whole divisions from the States and they had been together for awhile before they went to Vietnam. I am certain that you get better unit performance when you were a team before you go into combat.

My hootch mate (a hootch is any sort of residence or shelter, even temporary) that night and for several other nights was a young guy whose name I cannot remember. He had arrived in country only a couple of weeks before me. We made a hootch using a poncho to keep the rain off and shared the ground and guard duty together. A couple of months later he was shot in the head by a machine gunner from another platoon who was cleaning his 45 Caliber Pistol. The bozo removed the magazine, however, he had pulled back the hammer first and chambered a round. Then he vaguely remembered that he should fire the weapon in the air afterward to ensure there was no round in it, however, he forgot to point it upward. My friend went to Japan a couple of days later and we heard that he was paralyzed.

One of the most interesting characters in my platoon was the medic whose name was Specialist 5th Class Joseph Bugnitz who was known as "Bugnuts" (I am not making this up). He had been the medic in the battalion Recon Platoon and distinguished himself as a soldier there. He turned out to be more of an infantryman than a medic, although he knew his business as a medic. He was, however, more interested in killing VC and NVA than tending to GIs. For reasons I cannot recall he was transferred to my platoon. He taught me a lot about being a "Grunt" (infantryman) and he came the closest to "going native" of anyone I met in Vietnam. He used to carry Vietnamese rations rather than C-Rats and after cooking and eating rice, he would carry rice in a plastic bag for a snack later. He never wore a "steel pot" (helmet) that I can recall. Instead he wore a "boonie cap" or a sweat band tied around his head. He told me that he and a friend of his in Recon Platoon once went into Pleiku and did not get back to base camp by curfew. After a certain time you cannot just walk in or you would get shot. After getting in this predicament, they broke into a Vietnamese peasant's house in the city with their M-16s and all and demanded to stay the night. According to Bugnuts, they got drunk with the man of the house and slept well.

Within a few days I got familiar with the routine of being in the boonies. The gist of it was "humping" several miles a day with side trips looking for "signs," then setting up in a night perimeter complete with claymore mines out and a "listening post (LP)". A listening post was four guys about 100 meters from the perimeter in the area which seemed most likely to be the path of bad guys walking through the boonies. Their job was to provide early warning to the platoon then beat feet back into the perimeter.

For awhile we humped as a company, then we broke up into platoons which operated separately and did not come together until we were pulled out of the boonies. I spent most of my 10 months in Vietnam humping the boonies with

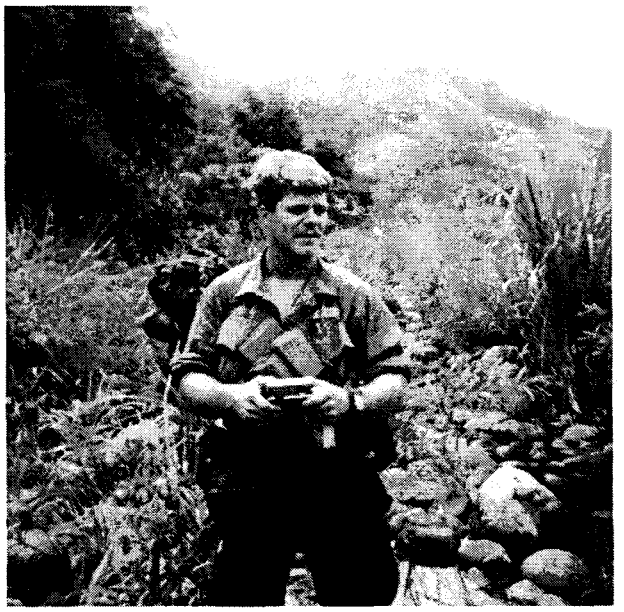
17-25 men several kilometers from the rest of our company. Apparently, this was part of a philosophy of "Higher Higher" (brigade and division commanders). The theory was that the VC operated mostly in small units and that we would have more luck finding them and getting into contact with them if we worked in small units. It was probably a good idea. From a day to day perspective it amounted to long periods of exhausting boredom animated with high anxiety about possible danger from ambushes and snipers. The term "humping" was appropriate because, due to the weight of your rucksack, you felt like a pack mule and it was hot as Hell all the time.

Me at a forward firebase somewhere in the Central Highlands.

The reference to LP reminds me of one of the best stories I heard in Vietnam. It happened to the LP in the Recon Platoon about the same time I arrived in country. About 0200 hrs. (2:00 a.m.) the guys in the perimeter heard screams from their LP so they grabbed their M-16s and rushed out to find out what was happening. It turned out that an Orangutan was loping through the forest and stumbled on the LP. In self defense, the Orangutan kicked butt. One guy got a broken arm and another got broken ribs. If you can imagine an animal that weighs approximately 165 pounds which is much stronger than a man reach out with a long hairy arm and slam you into a tree you get the picture. These guys were legends when they got back to Division base camp.

It was always very hot. Soon after one got to the boonies he stopped wearing underwear and some guys actually wore no socks which was a stupid idea. No underwear was smart, however, because it helped reduce the incidence of rashes which were epidemic. I had occasions where my entire back was

covered with rashes due to the heat and sweat produced by humping a 60 or 70 pound rucksack all day long. We were also subject to frequent "Jungle Rot" which was essentially a staff infection which could be started by very small cuts. Because we were virtually always in a filthy condition and could rarely bathe, Jungle Rot was constant. If it got bad enough you got "Medivaced" (Medical Evacuation) to the rear where they got you clean and tried to keep you dry so it would heal. I bought a wide leather watch band when I was in Camp Enari which eventually caused Jungle Rot on my right wrist. I got another regular width watch band later and starting wearing my watch on my left wrist, even though I am left handed, to solve the Jungle Rot problem. I wear my watch on my left wrist to this day.



A tourist in Vietnam. Me taking some photos in the boonies.

SHAMMING AT BAN ME THUOT

To "sham" is to avoid real work. Shamming was a passion for many soldiers in Vietnam. I had only a couple of opportunities to sham while I was in Vietnam, however, I did get an opportunity shortly after I had arrived in the boonies. For reasons that were a mystery to me, I was selected to attend a seminar at the Trains area in Ban Me Thuot. This involved about three days of attending classes put on by officers and senior NCOs from our brigade. The 2/35th was one of three battalions in the 1st Infantry Brigade along with the 1/35th and 1/8th. The theory was that by providing seminars to company level officers and NCOs, Higher Higher (brigade and division commanders) would get out the word about how to succeed in Vietnam. For the remainder of my time in

Vietnam, I do not recall another seminar being offered so it must not have been a very successful program. This seminar, however, was a golden opportunity for me, an FNG, to sham or what the Brothers called "get over." My company was extracted from the boonies and taken to Fire Base Dean while I flew on to Ban Me Thuot.

I really do not remember what was covered in the seminar, however, as I recall, it was about very practical matters of field operations. In any event, since the seminars did not last all day, I had the opportunity to explore Ban Me Thuot and generally get over in a big way. I caught a bus from our forward Trains area into town where there was a large U.S. military PX. Almost across the street from the PX was an area known affectionately as "Sin City." It was approximately one half of a city block square and surrounded with barbed and concertina wire. To enter you had to pass by an ARVN guard who checked your ID card. Inside were several bars and brothels. I was told that the women who worked in Sin City were periodically checked for venereal disease (VD) by U.S. Army medical personnel. Theoretically, therefore, one had a reasonable guarantee that none of the hookers there had VD. It turned out, as I later learned, the guarantee was not that solid. Because a hooker could make many times what an ARVN private could make in a month, they typically bribed the ARVN guard to get into Sin City and work in the brothels.

The bars were crowded with GIs and smokey. When you sat down in a booth, took up a bar stool, or sat at one of the tables, you were immediately overrun with young Vietnamese women imploring: "You buy me Saigon Tea GI?" It turned out that Saigon Tea was exactly that, however, it costs as much as a mixed drink. In fact, if you were not careful, you could run out of money buying Saigon Teas before you ever got any action and that was actually the womens' plan. If you persisted, however, you could get one to take you around the corner to one of the many small bedrooms for sex. If you were real lucky, the room would have an overhead fan which was definitely Nirvana for a Grunt.

THE FIRST FIREBASE - LZ DEAN

When I finished my seminar at Ban Me Thuot, I caught a flight to the firebase where my company had been taken; LZ Dean. This was the first forward firebase I had seen. A forward firebase is essentially a barren hill in the middle of nowhere on which were located an artillery unit a mortar unit and a company of Grunts for security. The perimeter was composed of bunkers dug into the ground and covered with the heavy metal grates used to make forward runways for planes on top of which were stacked many sandbags. The center of the firebase were two or three very large bunkers which housed the commander who might be the battalion commander, a Lt. Colonel, or a company commander, a captain, and the artillery unit. The bunkers on the perimeter could hold maybe four or five guys,

while the bunkers in the center of the firebase could hold 8-10 people. In addition, because the artillery guys did not move after being placed on a forward firebase, they had extra goodies which might include what amounted to lawn furniture made out of the wood from artillery boxes, books, comic books, extra rations, and often lots of soda and even beer on occasion, although I believe there was not supposed to be beer at a forward firebase. Us Grunts generally envied how the artillery guys lived although we did not think they were as tough as we were. In return the artillery guys appeared to hold us in low esteem which did not make sense since we protected their butts.

A 105 Howitzer on LZ Dean named Scunion.

One day the lack of respect between the artillery guys and us came to a head. Especially at night the artillery guys would shoot off a lot of H&I rounds. When that happened the Grunts tended to flinch. We had spent weeks humping the boonies trying to be quiet as possible so really loud noises made us jumpy. The artillery guys thought that was funny and openly laughed at us when we flinched. When the sun went down, Doc Bugnuts decided to get even. He told me and the other members of the platoon to put on our gas masks and not to ask questions. Knowing him, we did exactly that. In a few minutes we heard screaming from the artillery guys' bunker. Doc had thrown in a CS grenade. CS gas makes your eyes and skin burn and, depending on how much you get exposed to can make you throw up and generally become incapacitated. One of the problems for the artillery guys was that the entrance to their bunker could accommodate only one man and he had to lean over to fit in and out. Well, six guys tried to get through that hole all at once and it didn't work. Shortly thereafter, my company commander came over to my platoon position from the

other side of the firebase and asked what was happening. I told him: "We must have taken an incoming CS mortar." He noticed that we were all equipped with gas masks which might not have happened if we really had taken incoming since GIs hated to hump gas masks and did not keep them close often. He then said: "Good job Sergeant, carry on." A little later Doc Bugnuts returned with a big Sh*t eating grin and we all had a nice laugh. For the rest of our week or so on that firebase, we did not get any more flack from the artillery guys.

A sad thing happened at LZ Dean as well. This firebase had been an ARVN firebase before my battalion took it over. It turns out the ARVNs were not very neat or clean. Consequently, the firebase was overrun with rats, especially at night. The permanent party on the firebase did the best they could to kill the rats but they were never able to eliminate them entirely. The rats were very unpleasant because they were large and scary looking and they crawled over you when you were in the bunkers. I had one crawl over my face. Snakes don't bother me but I hate rats. One of the guys from another platoon got so upset by rats crawling over him in his bunker that he went up on top and rolled up in his poncho liner there. Some time in the wee hours a guy from the next bunker saw movement on top of that bunker which he thought was a sapper. A sapper is a guy trained to crawl through your concertina wire and get into your perimeter to plant explosives. We saw a demonstration of a sapper when we went through orientation at Camp Enari. Typically, the concertina wire had cans on it to make noise if someone jiggled the wire as an early warning to guys in the perimeter bunkers. This guy crawled through approximately 50 meters of wire which had these noise making devices and never made a sound although he was carrying a satchel weighing 10-15 pounds. The guy who thought he saw a sapper opened fire hitting the Grunt sleeping on top of the next bunker and he died from the wounds.

BACK TO BAN ME THUOT

When we were extracted from LZ Dean, we were flown to Ban Me Thuot where we spent about a week pulling perimeter security at a helicopter and refueling base just outside the city. Ban Me Thuot was an interesting place, in part, because there was a statute there commemorating the visit by Teddy Roosevelt when he was President of the U.S., to hunt tigers. I suspect that statute was torn down after the NVA overran South Vietnam in 1975.

A Chinook dropping supplies with a Crane in the background.

While we were at Ban Me Thuot, I was directed to assist our First Sergeant or "Top" in managing the bunker line. His name was Sergeant First Class John Holbrook. The goals were to ensure that guys in each bunker had adequate fields of fire, knew how to react to a sapper attack, and generally kept the bunkers clean. It was easy duty. Our First Sergeant was actually a Sergeant First Class, an E-7 rather than an E-8 First Sergeant, who had been in the Special Forces for a long time. He was kicked out of the Special Forces unit to which he had been assigned on this tour of duty for almost beating a VC prisoner to death. He was a hard drinking crusty guy, however, I liked him very much because he really knew how to soldier and he tried his best to care for his men. While we were at Ban Me Thuot, he visited a "Mike Force", a Special Forces unit, nearby and got us a film projector and the movie "Hawaii." We set it up one night using a generator and several cords we took from claymore mines spliced together. Because of all the splices, we did not get consistently good charge so, periodically, the film would slow down greatly as did the audio. It was actually kind of funny. Top also got us some beer which was greatly appreciated. Theoretically, in a rear area we could each have two beers a day pursuant to division policy. As it turned out, however, you could do much better than that. To my surprise, there were quite a few nice young guys who did not drink. Consequently, those of us that did, traded our sodas to these guys in exchange for beer. It was easy to get a couple of six packs that way.

Probably the highlight of the Ban Me Thuot mission was the night that some guys snuck two or three prostitutes into the perimeter and for several hours shared them bunker by bunker. The drill was that one guy would go into the

bunker with the hooker, lay her out on an air mattress, have sex, then leave for the next lucky guy. The rest of the soldiers assigned to the bunker would wait patiently outside. Before the night was over, I would guess that these young women had sex with approximately 25-30 guys. No one to my knowledge complained about sloppy seconds. In the morning, Top got hip to the circumstance and called the MPs or Military Police who promptly took custody of the women and turned them over to Vietnamese civilian police. Top was concerned that they were VC doing a reconnaissance (recon) of our base. I do not believe that was the case, however, quite a few guys got three penicillin shots a couple of weeks later to get rid of the "clap" (gonorrhea).

BACK TO THE BOONIES FOR CHRISTMAS

About mid December we were flown back to the boonies for the purpose of doing small unit ambushes in a mountainous area not too far from Ban Me Thuot. The theory was that another battalion was going to move through an area not far from us which would force the local VC, or whatever other bad guys were there, to move in our direction where we would catch them in ambushes. It never worked, although we did see some bad guys, NVA regulars.

Every night we would set up small unit ambushes involving a squad, approximately 8 men, along some trail. The claymores were placed next to the trail and camouflaged so you could not see them. We would be approximately 20-30 meters behind the claymores in line with the trail. Generally, everyone in the ambush would be on alert until 10:00 p.m. or so then it would be half and half with half sleeping. You would not think you could sleep in that context, however, after humping all day, it was not hard to fall off into slumber. Some guys would have to be awakened periodically because they snored and noise is a No No in an ambush. We were also very careful to not leave any trash around our area so our position could not be spotted. We heard about a unit that had some guys who took a dump behind their ambush site and left the toilet paper we got in C-rat packs on the ground. Some bad guys tooling through the boonies saw the toilet paper and came up behind the ambush unit and shot them up. We pulled these ambushes for at least a week and never got into any contact.

One day I linked up with my buddy, the platoon sergeant of Third Platoon, Staff Sergeant George Keener. We were essentially taking a break in the shade of some trees when George and I thought we would do a "Leaders Recon." Stupidly, we walked away from our unit with no radio, perhaps a hundred meters or so where we came to a large open field with a steep slope. The day was beautiful and we were admiring the beauty of the surrounding area when we spotted four NVA regular soldiers coming up the slope into the open grass field. In no time we were within 40 meters of them. George and I opened up with our M-16s, then hit the dirt. At that point a B-40 rocket came sailing our way and slammed into a tree

behind us. As I recall, it did not explode. If it did, the shrapnel never touched us. At that point we got up and charged toward the field to shoot at the bad guys again, however, they were gone, di di (di di means to leave -- we often used the term di di mau which means to leave quickly). In their haste to escape the bad guys lost two of their pith helmets which George and I took with us when we went back to our unit. There was Vietnamese writing on the pith helmets. We did not know what it said, however, we guessed that it said "F**k the Army, I am short, etc." like the covers of our steel pots did. A day or two later my First Sergeant said he would put George and me in for a medal, probably an Army Commendation (ARCOM) medal. We did not think we deserved any recognition for this fluke incident and it never happened. This experience did, however, reinforce our affection for each other. George was a somewhat skinny guy, although strong, with a boyish face, but a very tough guy. He had a lot of courage and integrity and I felt it was a privilege to work with him. He is one of only two friends I made in Vietnam with whom I still correspond at Christmas.

Me shaving in the boonies. We did not shave regularly, however, occasionally, higher higher would bitch about our appearance.

At one point during this long mission to the boonies we were asked to track some bad guys who were supposedly carrying resupplies on elephants. That was interesting. We found the elephant tracks fairly easily, but after several days of tracking them which was also easy due to the damage caused by elephants moving through the forest, we never caught up with them. All we got for our efforts was lots of opportunities to step in elephant manure. When we got CA'd out of this area, we took small arms fire. Some rounds hit the helicopters but no one was wounded.

Staff Sergeant George Keener and Me in Base Camp.

After mucking around the boonies for some time, my platoon was operating on its own and came on to a large bunker complex with signs that people had been there shortly before. Such complexes were scattered throughout the Central Highlands and often had supplies for VC Main Force or NVA units which came through. Normally, such units linked up with a local VC who served as their guide through the area since they did not know the area. The guide would show them where the food and weapons caches were and where the bunker complexes were located. This complex was huge, probably regimental size so we figured we were in for something scary.

We set up in one remote corner of the bunker complex then did some searches of the area. About a half kilometer from the bunker complex we came on a tin shack up on stilts. We put out perimeter security then slowly approached the shack. It turned out no one was there, however, there was a small weapons cache, approximately 10-12 rifles and a few thousand rounds of ammunition. Most of the rifles were AK-47s, however, there were a couple of SKS rifles and Chicom 53 rifles. The SKS rifles were really attractive with nice looking wooden stocks and an impressive stainless steel bayonet which folded up under the barrel and stock. They were highly prized as war trophies. I missed getting an SKS, however, I did get one of the Chicom 53s which is a peasant weapon; bolt action and heavy with a very long bayonet which folded up under the barrel and stock. I brought it home with me when I left Vietnam. We hauled all this stuff back to where we had set up and called our company commander to report our find.

Me with my Chicom 53 rifle, a peasant weapon.

The next day the rest of the company came to our location and effectively took over the bunker complex. A resupply bird came in with our company executive officer on it and he promised me he would ensure that my rifle was properly marked and saved for me back in the rear. I hoped that was true because I had heard stories about guys in the rear stealing war trophies picked up by the field Grunts.

We spent the next several days searching the area for more caches and another platoon came on an ammunition cache with approximately 11,000 rounds. This also got taken back and loaded on the next resupply bird for delivery to the rear. Another company of our battalion got into contact not far from us and we heard the shooting. I do not recall the outcome.

Before we knew it, it was Christmas Eve. I spent Christmas Eve on a squad ambush on a trail leading to the bunker complex. Christmas morning when we got up to return to the company area we all said "Merry F**king Christmas." That afternoon, however, we got a treat. A resupply bird came with "Hot A's" \ (hot food) and two Doughnut Dollies (Red Cross workers) dressed up as Santa's helpers with short skirts and good looking legs. What was even more amazing, the helicopter landed and the pilot shut off the engine and joined us for Christmas supper. Helicopters never stayed in the boonies; too valuable and too vulnerable. The Doughnut Dollies came around, said Hi to every guy in the company and also

joined us for Christmas supper. We thought they looked good enough to eat. By this time I had been growing a mustache for a couple of weeks and I thought that might charm them, however, they kept a little distance between themselves and us Grunts. Of course, we looked like we had been living in a pig pen for a month and probably smelled that bad as well. It was a nice time, however, and we felt lucky.

Within an hour of the resupply bird leaving another helicopter came in and out jumped one of the Higher Higher commanders, a one star general. We were again amazed. Behind him came his aide, a 1st Lieutenant, who did not look happy. Both were spit shined to the max and their uniforms were highly starched and crisp. They had to plow through a mud puddle to get to the company's position. The general acted like he did that every day which impressed us. He came around and said Hi to all the troops then spoke briefly with the officers. He told us we were doing a great job and complimented us on the weapons caches we found and secured, then he jumped back into his helicopter and left to visit another field unit. I never saw another general in the boonies while I was in Vietnam.

TO AN KHE

After some more boonie humping we got pulled out and flown back to Camp Enari where we stayed for a few days. On December 28, 1969, I got a Dear John letter from Jeannie Miller. It essentially said that she was pregnant with the baby of a guy she had dated in high school and her freshman year at Florida State University. He had recently returned from Vietnam where he had served as a helicopter pilot. After a couple of hours of remorse, I wrote her a letter saying that I wished her well and appreciated the time we spent together. I then wrote my folks and asked them to not mention this matter again and to not bad mouth Jeannie. As it turned out this was in my best interest. It removed a distraction which was a liability in the boonies where you needed to concentrate. In addition, if this had not happened I would never have met my wonderful Ann and had my great son, Scott. Ann often says that things tend to work out for the best even when they seem bad a first. I believe she is right.

We were at Camp Enari at New Year and we heard there was a party to which some Army nurses and Doughnut Dollies had been invited. This sounded like a good idea so several of us NonComs decided to attend. We were met at the door by an officer of another company who informed us that the party was for officers only. Ah, the privilege of rank. No enlisted grunts were going to be able to meet any round eyed woman and have a few beers. We then retreated to the room of a guy who had been a machine gunner in my platoon until he got a job in the rear at the motor pool. There we drank ourselves into a stupor and lamented the fate of straight leg grunts.

After only a few days at Camp Enari, we then took a convoy to Camp Radcliff near the town of An Khe which was about 60 miles from Pleiku to the East. Our division was moving its headquarters to Camp Radcliff. We had some concerns about that because we thought that our new AO (Area of Operations) would involve some villages which we had not seen in our previous AO and villages generally meant more VC and booby traps. It turned out that we continued to operate in the remote boonies far away from any civilization. Camp Radcliff was sort of an interesting place. It had been the division base camp of the First Cavalry Division. There was a huge hill, almost a mountain, in the middle of the base camp on which was painted a huge First Cavalry Division patch. I was later told that baboons lived on this hill and would come down to the base from time to time and occasionally terrorized the GIs who got too close.

While at Camp Radcliff we generally had it easy although we had to pull security on the perimeter bunkers. That was a very different experience because Camp Radcliff was huge with several miles of perimeter. As an E-6 I did not have to pull duty in a perimeter bunker, however, my Lieutenant and I had to check the bunker line all through the night to ensure that we were covered and that at least one person per bunker was awake and on guard. To check just the sector manned by my platoon involved driving a jeep approximately one mile round trip and that was a bit eerie. We drove without the headlamps on so we would not become a target for a sniper, however, we still felt vulnerable. In addition, it was a bit nerve wracking to walk up on a bunker to check the occupants. The bunkers sat up high on stilts and it was so dark the occupants could not see you until you were right at the foot of the bunker. My Lieutenant and I were a little concerned that we would be shot by our own men out of fear that we were sappers. Consequently, we made friendly noises as we approached each bunker.

It was during this mission that I got an introduction to "Rules of Engagement." Theoretically, a guy in a bunker could not just open up on a sound he thought he heard to his front for a couple of reasons. First, the town of An Khe bordered Camp Radcliff's perimeter. Thus, for guys on that side of the perimeter, blasting with an M-16 or M-60 machine gun could result in innocent civilians being hit or their livestock. It turned out that a lot of livestock got shot to death including big water buffaloes as well as pigs and dogs. If we heard something we were supposed to yell halt and "dung lai" which means stop in Vietnamese and then react to what follows. We thought it made more sense to open up then yell dung lai. As a T-shirt I saw much later said: "Kill em all and sort it out later." The Army paid big money for the livestock killed by perimeter guards. A second rationale for the rules of engagement was the need to conserve ammunition for when it was needed. If a guy blasted up a couple of hundred rounds of ammo only to find out nothing was there, he ran the risk of not having enough ammo when a sapper actually came through the wire and it would not be easy to resupply him quickly. We thought that probably made sense.

One of the nice things about our mission in Camp Radcliff was that we had access to showers every day. They were not fancy, generally involving a large tank on a platform out in the open. You pulled a rope and the water came down on you through the force of gravity. To us, however, this was luxury. To get clean every day was a blessing. It helped to heal the Jungle Rot most of us had and it just made you feel more human. Throughout my tour in Vietnam I was to discover that many things we take for granted are important.

Sgt Deage, Sgt. Jones and I getting ready to take a shower in base camp.

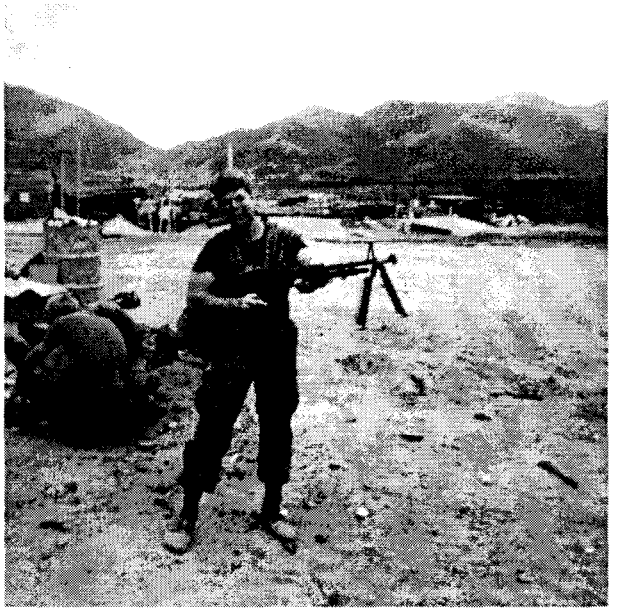
LZ ACTION

We left Camp Radcliff on trucks which took us to LZ Action which was about 20 miles outside Camp Radcliff. It was a forward firebase on Highway 19 which was the East-West highway across the middle of South Vietnam. LZ Action was a tanker firebase and it was named for a goat that had been a pet there for almost a year. As I recall, the mission of the unit assigned there was to ensure that Highway 19 was open for U.S. military traffic. In general, tanks did not make much sense in Vietnam because the terrain usually made it impossible to use tanks. Even tanks can get stuck in the mud and that happened regularly to the tanks in Vietnam. LZ Action was unusual in a couple of respects. First, it was a permanent firebase so it had a messhall and Hot A's every day. The firebases we were used to were used for a few weeks then abandoned out in the boonies. Second, the perimeter at LZ Action was mostly made up of tanks rather than bunkers and, although they had artillery there, they also used the tanks for H&I fire since they had 90 millimeter main guns.

Me making friends with the tank guys on LZ Action

One night they let us Grunts get into the tanks with the tankers and fire the main guns. That was amazing. The shell was large and heavy. You inserted the nose into the breach then pushed it all the way in with the top of your fist. That way you did not lose fingers when the breach automatically slammed shut when the round was completely in. Then when you fired the gun you had to be sure your body was to the side because it would recoil the length of the cabin and crush you if you were immediately behind it. These guns did make impressive booms and we thought they were neat.

I took a bunch of dumb photographs while we were at LZ Action including one with me in a black T-shirt holding a machete in my mouth and an M-60 machine gun pointing toward the camera. By this time I thought my mustache was looking fine. Since it did not make sense to carry film in the boonies nor photographs, it was my practice to send film home to my folks who got it developed on my behalf then mailed it back to me so I could see the photographs. Then I mailed the photographs back to them occasionally writing explanations of the context on the back of the photos. On the back of one picture I wrote: "What do you think of my mustache." My Dad wrote back: "What mustache?" Of course, being essentially a red head, my mustache was red and blonde in color and probably not as cool as I thought it was, except when we got filthy when you could see it real well.



He's Bad! Me fooling around on LZ Action .

Our primary mission at LZ Action was to pull night ambushes along Highway 19. The theory was that we would catch bad guys planting mines in the highway which happened frequently. We did that for a week and, as luck would have it, no ambush involved any contact which was fine with us. One morning, however, when the tanks went out to secure the highway, we found that mines had been planted in the night. It was not near one of our ambush sites so we were not guilty of doing a bad job. The commander of the tank unit, a captain, grabbed hold of me and my lieutenant and led us out to the site where the mines were. He then instructed us in how to disarm them. This was tense. Essentially, we cut wires with finger nail clippers. We knew almost nothing about mines, however, we thought we remembered being taught that some can be set off by trying to disarm them. That was a tense hour. The captain joked: "This is why they pay us the big bucks." Of course, in reality, I was making only about $365 a month and that included the $65 a month combat pay.

After several days of duty at LZ Action, I got to see my one and only "Tac Air" strike. This refers to three jets being guided by a forward air controller (FAC) flying an old small propeller driven plane who acts like a forward observer for the artillery giving guidance where fire should be put. The strike was on some hills about a mile from us and it was impressive. The FAC was up there floating at a fairly low altitude and from out of nowhere come three jets in line which dropped napalm, boom, boom, boom. That made an impressive sight. I was to learn later that napalm was an effective weapon not only because it burned stuff up but also because it burned up oxygen. We found dead bad guys in an area that had been napalmed who were not burned at all. They died of asphyxiation. After

the jets dropped their napalm they soared up above the clouds then, shortly thereafter, came in again from a different angle and shot rockets. Again, they disappeared into the clouds then came in from yet another angle firing their machine guns. Us Grunts thought that was the way to fight a war. To hell with charging the hill with rifles. Several of us thought they should napalm Vietnam from the Chinese border to the Southern tip. Everything would die, we could declare victory and go home.

It turned out the Tac Air strike was based on intelligence that there was a large bad guy unit operating in the area. The next day, January 9, 1970, we teamed up with tankers to attack the hill where they were supposedly holed up. In fact, they were. The object of our assault was a fairly impressive hill about 200 meters from Highway 19. Trucks took us to this point on the highway and we got out and lined up. This turned out to be the closest thing to a John Wayne experience I had in Vietnam. My entire company got on line with tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) after about every 8th man. Then we assaulted the hill.

It did not turn our very well since we saw no more than four or five dead bad guys and we took a couple of KIAs (Killed in Action) and about 4-6 wounded. Up to that point we had generally envied the tank guys because they lived well and could carry extra stuff on their tanks that we could not carry on our backs. After this firefight we changed our minds because the tank guys comprised most of our casualties and both KIAs. It made intuitive sense because the tanks had 90 millimeter main guns and 50 caliber machine guns. As a consequence, the bad guys concentrated their fire on the tanks since the tanks posed the greatest threat to them. The APC (Armored Personnel Carriers) were really bad news because they could be pierced with heavy machine gun fire not to mention B-40 rockets. The B-40s were very deadly since, after they pierced the wall of a tank or APC, they set stuff on fire inside. The second problem we had were bad guys in "Spider Holes". Spider Holes were actually very small holes that a man could barely fit in which were covered over with brush so you could not see them. What happened was that we walked right past a bunch of Spider Holes. When we passed by these positions, bad guys popped out of these holes and shot at us from behind.

One of the guys who got wounded was a squad leader in my platoon whose name I cannot recall. He was an odd duck. He was a Sergeant E-5, however, he was on his third tour in Vietnam. He had somehow concluded that he liked it there better than back in the World. He used to wear a white scarf made out of the small parachute that went with an artillery flare which was very swashbuckling but not too bright because it presented an easy target. I cannot recall what his wound was, however, he never returned to the platoon.

My company commander, who was a 1st Lieutenant from Kansas, did a great job during this fire fight. He ran up and down the line getting guys in line and providing them encouragement. He put himself at risk throughout all this. He was later awarded a decoration for his acts during this firefight and it was justly deserved. He was a great guy and a hard charger. He had his wife disassemble one of his personal shotguns from home and mail it to him which I believe was illegal. Since point men occasionally used shot guns he could get ammo from our supply. Once he got the shotgun that is what he carried in the boonies with a claymore bag full of shotgun shells. We were impressed by that bravado.

BACK TO THE BOONIES AND WORST DAY WE EVER HAD

Shortly after our experiences with the tankers at LZ Action we were flown back out to the boonies; this time about 45 kilometers north of An Khe. Again, the mission was based on intelligence about enemy activity. As it turned out we got more than we bargained for. The night before we left on this mission there was an "Ark Light" in the area to which we were going to be inserted. An Ark Light is a B-52 strike with many 250 and 500 pound bombs which is pretty amazing. You can see the sky light up and the ground will shake from several miles away. When we got the CA into this area we walked through forest where huge trees had been destroyed by the bombs and there were bomb craters large enough to fit 10-15 cars. You would think that such a strike would kill everything within a few miles, however, that is not how it works. Without doubt, Ark Lights did kill many VC and NVA soldiers, however, this experience showed that many also survived by getting into well made bunkers and waiting it out. Their hearing is probably gone and I am sure they got frightened badly, but they still survived. We were to find that out in spades on this mission.

The company was moving together when my company commander, a new guy, Captain Burl Magee, had the First Platoon go out on a sweep where they ran into some bad guys in a bunker complex. We heard the shooting from approximately 3 or 4 kilometers away. The next thing that happened was that my platoon leader got a call from the company commander telling us to pick up the gear of the First Platoon and meet up with them. That turned out to be Hell. Everyone was carrying a rucksack which weighed 60-70 pounds. Now we each had to grab another rucksack of the same weight and walk through a very thick forest and some swamps to link up with the First Platoon. It is bad enough paying attention to what is going on in the boonies when you have to carry only your own rucksack. It was very difficult to feel prepared when we were lugging so much extra weight moving through the boonies.

We finally linked up with the first platoon and the rest of the company at the bunker complex where the contact occurred. The first platoon had killed one

bad guy who appeared to be VC. Some guys cut off his penis and ears and, using a safety pin, pinned an ace of spades to his lip with 2/35th written on it. Everyone in the 2/35th carried aces of spades for this purpose. We actually got whole decks of aces of spades free from a playing card manufacturer. The theory was that the ace of spades was considered bad luck by the Vietnamese and also that it was important to let them know what unit did them in, assuming we won. The mutilation was also tied to Vietnamese superstition. We were told that the Vietnamese believed if any parts of your body are missing when you die, you don't go to life hereafter. Thus, if we cut off an ear or some other body part we were supposedly causing eternal damnation to the victim and, hopefully, frightening his comrades. I did not mind laying an ace of spades on a dead VC body, however, I could take no part in the mutilations. I have read many books about the Vietnam War and quite often they talk about how the war brutalized ordinary men until they lost their humanity. I believe that was exaggerated, however, it had some merit.

That night we set up a company perimeter in the bunker complex which was a large regimental size complex. The next morning, January 19, 1970, we took off with the entire company in line down a well worn trail that went through the bunker complex. My platoon was the lead element. As luck would have it, I was near the end of march of my platoon. I usually walked not far behind the point man and even walked point myself on occasion since I believed it was necessary to set a good example for the men. On this march, however, I was near the back with my RTO, Private John Aquino, immediately in front of me. After humping for no more than five or ten minutes we walked into an ambush with an unknown number of bad guys. My hunch is that there were very few, however, they were in bunkers with supporting firing positions. The Dinks knew how to properly build a bunker complex.

I am not certain who got shot first. I believe it was one of the nice FNGs, Private Dale Forsythe. After that it all went to Hell as guys tried to help guys who got hit. Our medic, Specialist 4th Class Aubrey Wiggins, who was fairly new (Doc Bugnuts had rotated back to a rear job at an aide station) got hit trying to help another guy. Then my lieutenant, Mel Salazar, got hit doing the same thing. Then, for some reason, my RTO, John Aquino, jumped up to run forward to help and he got hit and killed. In total, five guys from my company died in this action, all from my platoon, and another four guys got wounded, some from other platoons. All of them were hit with small arms fire.

I crawled my way forward, slid into a bunker and started firing over the top. I could see two of the bad guys' rifles sticking out of the firing ports in bunkers ahead of me. I tried to aim right into these firing ports, however, I do not believe I was successful. In a short time the rest of the company came up and we opened up with "World Minus," almost 80 M-16s and 6-8 M-60s splattering the bunkers in front of us. After what seemed like an hour of this, but was probably

much less time, a helicopter flew overhead and dumped boxes of ammo. That was followed by some medivac birds who hoisted wounded guys up through the trees on cables. Then one of George Keener's squad leaders, Bill Gano, aimed a Light Anti- Tank Weapon (LAW) at one of the bunkers to our front and the round went in. I saw that as an opportunity and grabbed one of my guys, Specialist 4th Class, Bob Stevens. We then crawled out to retrieve what turned out to be the dead body of one of the FNGs. On our bellies we pulled him back to a relatively safe area. He had taken a round in the head which split his head open from the forehead to the middle. His brains were falling out. I took off my fatigue shirt, wrapped it around his head and tied it so it would not slip off.

I then went to check on the rest of my guys. Another FNG, a really nice slightly overweight baby face kid who looked like he should be in a library somewhere rather than the boonies of Vietnam, had been shot in the hand. I wrapped his hand with one of the field bandages we all carried and gave him a drink from my canteen. He asked me for a smoke. I said: "I thought you didn't smoke." He responded: "I don't; if my Mom caught me she would kill me." That was a poignant moment because it highlighted the madness we were in. Here was a nice kid worrying about what his Mom would think who was badly wounded in a firefight. I then got him hooked up to a cable from a medivac bird and he was gone. He never came back to our unit so I guess his wound was bad.

A little while latter the shooting stopped and the bad guys appeared to be gone. It turned out that two of them were dead in the bunkers to our front. At that point the company moved back to the area we had occupied the night before which was approximately a half mile or so away. We, of course, had to carry the dead and their equipment with us. A dead body even for a small man is amazingly heavy so we had four guys carry each dead body by the feet and hands. When we got it all organized, I realized we did not have enough guys to do all the carrying necessary. Consequently, I picked up my lieutenant's body by myself in a fireman's carry. I remember, like it was yesterday, his body juices running down my back.

When we got to our company's night position, we wrapped all five dead bodies in their ponchos and put tags on their boots with their name, unit, and serial number which we got from their dog tags.

That night I prayed for the first time since I had arrived in Vietnam. In general, I prayed every other night I was in Vietnam. My prayer was always the same: "Please dear Lord, protect the guys in my platoon and company and all the other guys in the boonies and let us go home safely. I will be your main man when I get back to the World if you answer my prayer."

Since I could remember only Lt. Salazar's and John Aquino's names when I was writing this story, I got on the Internet and did a search of names on the

"Wall" at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. trying to get the names of the other guys in my platoon who died this day. I was very pleased to discover that this was easy. I found two websites to help me. The first one is:

http://www.no-quarter.org/html/adv.html

This site lets you search by "casualty date, branch of service, country, and province". I entered the January 19, 1970 date, U.S. Army, South Vietnam, and Binh Dinh Province; then hit the search button and a list of six names came back to me. One of them was a guy in the 101st Airborne who was killed not far from where we were. The second website site lets you search by last name of the person and gives you details about the individual. This site address is:

http://grunt.space.swri.edu/thewall/thewallm.html

The five guys from my platoon who died on January 19, 1970, were as follows: Lt. Mel Salazar, reserve officer from Albuquerque, New Mexico (age 20); Private John Aquino, draftee from Chicago, Illinois (age 21); Private Dale Forsythe, draftee from Nescopeck, Pennsylvania (age 19); Private Juan Fret-Camacho, draftee from Vega Baja, Puerto Rico (age 20); and Specialist 4th Class Aubrey Wiggins, regular enlistee from Orlando, Florida (age 18).

The next morning, we got more slicks in and loaded the dead bodies on to them. Then we humped out into the boonies. That was an object lesson. My hunch had been that they would extract your unit after you had bad contact. That was not the case. We just got resupplied and kept on humping. There was a guy, another Shake and Bake E-6, who was in my platoon for a short while who volunteered to go into the division LRRP (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) unit. The LRRPs had the reputation of being the best unit in the division. They got the most kills and had the lowest casualty rate even though they always operated in 5-7 man units far away from any other units. The LRRPs were distinctive because they wore camouflage fatigues while the rest of us wore only olive drab. Now camouflage fatigues are the standard field uniform, however, in Vietnam, only the elite units wore them. The basic mission of LRRPS was to gather intelligence, however, they also had what they called Hunter-Killer Teams which were 5-7 man units which executed ambushes of the bad guys. The difference was, because they were so isolated, immediately after they made contact they were extracted. No so for the ordinary straight leg Grunt.

About a week after this firefight, my new lieutenant showed up in the boonies. He had bright red hair and a pencil thin mustache and his name was 2nd Lieutenant Glenn Troester (the LT). I thought he looked like a British entomologist rather than an infantry platoon leader, however, he proved to be a fine officer when the sh*t hit the fan. He did have some difficulty, however, living in the boonies. He was from Chicago and he had a bachelors degree in

journalism. I believe he was urban man personified. When I met him he said he was very glad to meet me, had heard good things about me, and expected me to show him the ropes. I told him: " I have about three months on you sir, see if you can catch up." When we set up the first night he was with us, I found his rucksack to be incredibly over packed with stuff you really did not need. I bet his rucksack weighed 90-100 pounds. He had a couple of changes of clothes and a bunch of other stuff I cannot recall. I advised him that he should lighten up a bit because it gets hard to hump a heavy load in the boonies. He eventually did.

Lieutenant Glenn Troester, Platoon Leader, 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 2/35th Infantry

THE BLUR

From the end of January until April, 1970, my recollection is mostly a blur. I can remember some anecdotes, however, I am very unsure of the sequence of events. What is certain is that we humped most of this time.

The first major event during this time period occurred a week to 10 days after the firefight on January 19. It occurred midday after the company had set up a perimeter to have lunch. A trail ran right through the middle of the perimeter. We put out an LP, however, they were apparently asleep on the job, because four Dinks came strolling down the trail right past the LP and got almost to our perimeter when Doc Bugnuts and I saw them. Bugnuts had been reassigned to my platoon again after our other medic was killed on January 19. Doc yelled:

"Dinks" and in a second I shot at them with my M-16 at my hip; very John Wayne. Immediately, Doc went running at them and I followed. Doc shot a couple more times and when I caught up with him there were two dead Dinks and the other two got away. I believe I killed the one closest to our perimeter. We took their weapons and a couple of souvenirs including a lighter, some photographs and a boonie hat then rolled them into the bushes. It was a bit unnerving that four Dinks could walk almost on top of our company perimeter and be seen by no one including the LP. We had a counseling session with the troops about staying alert.

We finally made it back to the division base camp for a much deserved stand down which we really enjoyed. During our stay at the division base camp Captain Magee arranged for some training. We did an exercise about taking a bunker complex. We also got an opportunity to do some rappelling which I really enjoyed. I had loved to do rappelling when I was in NCOC. In addition to rappelling off a wall, we got to free fall from a helicopter which was major fun. I and one of my buddies got to go first and we came down so fast we actually seared the ropes. Of course when you are loaded with your rucksack and weapon the additional weight adds to the speed of decent. This was about the most fun I ever had in base camp, not counting the few occasions where we got drunk.

Me rappelling in Base Camp training.

We got some new FNGs during this time period including two very good men, Sergeant Mike Jones and Sergeant Joe Kellenbach. Mike was from a small town in Kentucky and worked as a lineman for the phone company before he got drafted. Joe was from New York City and had some troubles along the way

including a brother who was a drug addict. Joe also used drugs (marijuana and speed) I was to find out later, although never in the boonies. Both of these guys were Shake and Bake NCOs and became squad leaders in my platoon. Mike was good enough to run the whole platoon and did so when I went on R&R in June. Mike became my best friend in the platoon. He was a great guy who worked hard, was tough and had a good sense of humor. He once showed us a photo of his wife, who was very attractive, in some skimpy negligee. He was proud of her and we were also. I learned from Mike and Joe that our company was considered hot stuff back in the rear because of our firefight on January 19. We were proud of that, I suppose, however, it did not compensate for the guys who died there.

We also got a "Kit Carson Scout" during this period. Eventually, every rifle platoon got a guy who was a Hoi Chan (returnee). These were guys who had fought with the VC then turned themselves into American units which was called Chu Hoi. They received indoctrination and some training, then were assigned to American units. The theory was that they could assist American units because they were familiar with the terrain and the tactics of the bad guys. Many of us Grunts thought that, at least some, were actually still VC. I was never certain how these guys were controlled because they seemed to come and go as they pleased taking trips to visit family and what else we had no notion. During my tour, my platoon had two different scouts. One for only a short time who was pretty lazy. The other, however, was an impressive man. His name was Hua. He had been pressed into service of the VC when he was 14 years old and had fought with them for 6 years. He was handsome and very muscular although still small by American standards. He proved to be a tough guy and fierce fighter. Apparently, one way the VC got people to stay with them was to tell them that their family would suffer if they left. In Hua's case, within two months of his Chu Hoi, his parents were killed. He was a bitter guy, largely because of that. I do not believe we learned much from Hua about the bad guys tactics, etc., however, he was a good comrade, always doing his part and prepared to fight on our behalf.

Hua became a legend one day chewing tobacco. We had taught Hua how to chew tobacco and encouraged him to do so when we were moving through the boonies because the smell of cigarette smoke carried quite a ways and potentially gave away your position. On this occasion we were being airlifted from the rear to the boonies. Hua and I were sitting next to each other on one side of the helicopter. A few minutes after we took off, Hua decided it was time to spit out the tobacco. We had explained that swallowing it was a bad idea. He gave a good spit right out the side of the helicopter and the rest of what happened was like a cartoon. The spit went out a couple of feet then, with the force of the wind came back into the helicopter and hit the door gunner in the face. He was not a happy camper. When we hit the LZ, Hua and I boogied off at an angle so the door gunner could not shoot us with his M-60 machine gun.

Sergeant Joe Kellenbach, Hua and Bob Stevens.

Hua became very good friends with one of my squad leaders, John Stone. A couple of months later Stone lucked out and got a neat job in Vung Tau teaching Vietnamese soldiers English. He had no background in such instruction; he was just selected, apparently at random by someone in Higher Higher. Vung Tau was a resort community and actually considered to be an in-country R&R (Rest and Recreation) center. It had beautiful beaches and lots of restaurants and bars. We heard that the VC vacationed there as well and did not mess with Americans there so they would not screw up their own R&R center. Stone wound up with a live-in girl friend who screwed his brains out and generally lived the good life for approximately six months. He came back to our unit a few days before he left Vietnam and got reacquainted with Hua. He told Hua he wished he could take him back home to Texas with him. Hua, whose knowledge of the U.S. was limited to movies he had seen said: "Ah, Texas Number 1 (very good -- Number 10 is very bad), GI shoot other GI and take money, Number 1!" Apparently, he thought that armed robbery was legitimate in Texas.

Me and Sergeant John Stone.

We did make it back to division base camp at least once. It was a good opportunity to get drunk which most of us did as often as we could get away with. I have a photo in my album from Vietnam that shows one of my buddies, the platoon sergeant of First Platoon, carrying me to bed in a wacked out state. Ah, the memories. We did have an awards ceremony while we were at Camp Radcliff. Several of us were given medals for our performance during the battle of January 19. I received a bronze star. I was proud of that but too tired to really appreciate it at the time and I was wearing boots that hurt my feet. We were told to look as sharp as possible for the awards ceremony and my boots were a wreck from three months in the boonies. I could not figure out how to make them shine, so I borrowed someone else's boots which were a little tight.

One day in March my company was inching its way up a very steep hill, almost a mountain. The temperature was well over 100 degree and the face of this hill was almost devoid of vegetation. As a consequence, we had several heat casualties. Several guys were medivaced because of heat stroke. Among those medivaced for heat problems were some guys from my platoon including a guy named Abrams, Mark Roe, Sgt. John Stone, and Sgt. Joe Kellenbach. I came

Me, George Keener and Bill Gano receive medals for actions at the battle of January 19, 1970.

close myself, eventually crawling under a bush and drinking as much water as I could. We generally carried about seven quarts of water, two canteens and a five quart bag. I got teased about almost becoming a heat casualty. Some guys in my platoon said: "Hey Sarge, you're from Florida. This heat shouldn't bother you." I tried to explain that we lived with air conditioning in Florida; going from air conditioned car to air conditioned mall to air conditioned home. We didn't work out in the heat if we didn't have to. They were not buying that. Most of these men conceived of work as hard physical labor, much of it outdoors.

Eventually, the heat problem passed and my platoon made its way to the top of the ridgeline where we set up for the night. Our company commander and another platoon set up on a small plateau about half-way up the hill. Later that day they took small arms fire and our First Sergeant, John Holbrook, the Special Forces guy, got shot in the leg and medivaced. An amazing thing about this mission was that our battalion commander came out into the field and spent the night with our company. I had never seen a battalion commander in the boonies before except at a forward firebase. I heard that he was scared to the max while he was in the boonies. I never saw a battalion commander in the field after that time either.

Sometime during this time period I was replaced as platoon sergeant by a Lifer E-7. It did not last long; no more than a few weeks. From the moment this guy came to the unit, he told me that I was to continue to run the platoon even

though I was formally a squad leader after he was appointed as platoon sergeant. This guy was on his second tour in Vietnam and it was obvious that his goal was to get a job in the rear which he eventually did. How that worked out is a mystery to me. Every unit that I was aware of was undermanned. For example, the TO&E (Table of Operations and Equipment) said that a rifle platoon should have 44 men. We never had more than 25 in my platoon and got down at one point to 17. That was the norm. How, given this circumstance, they could let a guy rotate to the rear made no sense to me. I surely, however, did not miss this guy after he left. My experience with him increased my cynicism about the military, especially Lifers. I had been brought up in a military family. My Dad spent 23 years in the Air Force. I always admired soldiers and respected the military. My Vietnam experience, however, soured me in this regard. The impression us Grunts had was that the Lifers were primarily dedicated to enhancing their careers, minimizing their risks and to Hell with us. We referred to guys who worked in the rear as REMFs (Rear Echelon Mother F**kers). In my later life I concluded that this term could apply to anyone who avoids personal responsibility and uses others to do the dirty work which is very common in the civilian world.

Another guy who increased my cynicism about Lifers was our battalion executive officer, a major. Other than constantly hassling troops, his claim to fame was that he had flown over more firefights than anyone else. Every time a unit of the battalion got into action, he would hop aboard a Loach (Light Observation Helicopter) which was a very small helicopter which looked like a glass bubble with a propeller. He and the Loach pilot would fly over the contact area and would later be written up for medals. It appeared that the only medal the major earned was an Air Medal.

We made it to a few firebases for short periods of time, during this time period, but we mostly humped the boonies endlessly. The name of one firebase we went to was fun; LZ Racquel, presumably named in honor of the actress Racquel Welsh whose major claim to fame was an outstanding body. It appears that the reason for this firebase name was because it was built on a steep hill close to another steep hill. From the air the two hills together looked like a woman's breasts. It was not, however, a pretty place. My company was the first unit there and we worked with the engineers to build the firebase which was hard back breaking work. Lots of machete work, lots of digging deep holes in hard ground, and lots of filling sandbags. By the time the artillery guys arrived we had it mostly done so the artillery guys avoided the really hard stuff.

There was a guy in my platoon we called French. I do not recall his actual name. He had distinguished himself in the battle of January 19 earning a silver star. I did not see what he did; he was written up by the company commander. French had purchased a monkey from a Montagnard and he kept him as a pet for several months including trips to the boonies. The monkey ate C-Rats like the rest of us. French made a collar for the monkey from a leather watch band. He

tied a long twine to the collar and tied the other end to his rucksack. Usually, the monkey would ride on top of French's rucksack, although he sometimes would lower himself down on the twine and walk along side French.

One day we set up our night perimeter around a large banyon tree. French either let the monkey loose or he got loose and climbed up the banyon tree. After a few minutes he fell out of the tree. I suppose, having not been raised by a Momma monkey, he was not a very skillful climber. He fell splat into the middle of our perimeter and got winded. We thought he was going to die for a few minutes until he came to. The next day, however, it got real interesting. French's monkey loved to ride in helicopters. He would hang on to French's rucksack and put his head outside for the breeze. This day we were getting resupplied and after we had unloaded all the supplies I motioned for the men to clear the LZ. Just as the helicopter was taking off French's monkey came running across the LZ and hopped aboard. The last we saw of him was him looking over the side of the helicopter. When we got back to the division rear we went to the helicopter area and asked whether anyone was aware of where French's monkey was. No one knew anything about him.

We encountered another monkey at a forward firebase we were on for awhile. I believe it was owned by a guy in the artillery unit. We thought the monkey was cute and several of us had our picture taken with monkey perched on our arm. This monkey was, however, mean and nasty. One guy moved too quickly while he was getting his picture taken with the monkey and the monkey bit him on the ear. He heaved the monkey about 10 meters away and it scampered back to the artillery guy.

Me with the artillery guy's monkey.

Vietnam has millions of leeches. We would often be covered with them when we crossed a stream or river. I remember sitting on my rucksack one day and watching hundreds of them inching across the ground. It was eerie. When one of them got on your skin you generally could not just pull it off because it would be sucking your blood and be attached very firmly. While they were sucking your blood, they would increase in size to two or three times their normal size. A lit cigarette could be used to remove a leech, however, that often resulted in getting burned. It turned out that the insect repellant we were issued did the trick. You just sprayed in on an they fell off. Apparently, they breathe through their skin and the insect repellant asphyxiated them. The insect repellant did nothing against the mosquitoes but it worked on the leeches. I remember one day a guy in my platoon got a leech on his penis and was horrified. Another guy offered him a lit cigarette which he declined. Finally, I sprayed insect repellant on the leech and it fell off. Of course, this was comic relief for the rest of us.

At some point the company was inserted to an abandoned firebase. We had been at this firebase before when it was a functioning firebase, however, this time it was just a naked hill in the middle of nowhere, not even a blade of grass on the hill and just large holes around the perimeter where the bunkers had been and a much larger hole in the middle where the command post (CP) had been. A short distance away, perhaps a hundred meters was another smaller naked hill which had also been part of the firebase. Typically, a firebase was a single hill in the middle of nowhere. I suppose that the adjoining hill in this case had been occupied so the bad guys could not use it to attack the main firebase. I believe this firebase was named LZ Challenge. My platoon was directed to occupy the smaller hill. We also got orders to send out an LP which we normally did not do when we were on a firebase. I took three other guys and humped a couple of hundred meters away on to another hill; this one having heavy vegetation. We stayed real quiet and nothing happened so we gladly went back to our unit the next morning.

Me and Lieutenant Glenn Troester on LZ Challenge.

The next morning, just as the sun came up, we took small arms fire with lots of green tracers. Tracers were normally used only in machine guns to assist the machine gunner in aiming his fire. Every fifth round was a tracer. Our tracers were red and VC and NVA had green tracers. You always knew who the source of the fire was. There must have been several bad guys because there were many rounds fired at our position. At this point the LT was overcome with journalistic tendencies. He jumped up and started to take photographs of the light show being put on by the tracers. The rest of us were on our bellies crawling toward the holes where the bunkers had been. I crawled over to the LT and grabbed his pants leg trying to get him to get down. He eventually did, however, he seemed disappointed that he had to stop taking photographs. His tendency to get hot for photos would occur again in Cambodia.

We saw a lot of beautiful country during this time period. Mountains, waterfalls, and lush forests. Of course, in that context, some of the natural beauty was lost on us. We had a special nature experience, however, one day when we saw a tiger. We were on top of a hill looking down on a stream at the base of the hill when the tiger appeared out of nowhere. He was big, maybe six feet in length not counting his tail. He was casually drinking from the stream and appeared not to notice us above him. I knew that Vietnam was a famous tiger hunting place when it was the playground of the French, however, I guessed that all the tigers and most other game had left Vietnam during the war because of all the bombardment. I was wrong. That night the tiger apparently circled our platoon perimeter. We heard low growling and there was a bad smell. I guessed the smell was due to the raw meat the tiger would eat, however, the growl was enough to

make us nervous. We were especially alert on guard that night, however, the tiger never actually got close to the perimeter that we were aware of.

Sometime during this time period, I got my first opportunity to direct artillery fire. I liked doing that in training in the States and I liked doing it in Vietnam where it counted. In the States, however, we did this in an area where we could see the artillery rounds land. Thus, it was fairly easy to adjust. You just pointed your compass toward the impact area to get an azimuth from your position which you reported to the artillery guys then you indicated the directions to which the fire should be adjusted; e.g., right 50 down 100, etc. In Vietnam, however, most direction of artillery was done by sound either because you could not see due to the triple canopy jungle or it was at night. That is a bit hairier. There was a good SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) that the first artillery round was a smoke round. You could hear it thump but there was little chance anyone would get hit if it was too close to your position. When you started calling in the H&E (High Explosive) rounds it got serious. Many a grunt felt the "deadfall" of artillery shrapnel. It would cut you if you were not lucky and it always worried you. Some of the most effective artillery support, however, was very close to your perimeter because contact in Vietnam was typically only 25-50 meters away. Thus, if you wanted to get the bad guys you had to call the rounds in close to your position.

At some point we were in the division rear at Camp Radcliff. One night there, I went to the division NCO club with a squad leader from my platoon. Upon returning to our company area we ran into four Brothers, one of whom asked for a light. I pulled out my lighter and went to light his smoke and the Brother took a swing at me. They then circled the two of us in a menacing manner. My partner and I reached under our fatigue shirts and pulled out our hunting knives. We then got back to back and asked the Brothers if they were ready for this. The Brothers immediately departed and we counted our blessings. I am afraid that, if the Brothers had been armed, we might have gotten shot. During March 1970, more guys in our division were killed in the division rear than were killed in the boonies; in each case by assault by another GI. Typically, these events were racially motivated. It was truly sad that GIs would attack other GIs when we were all in the same Sh*t boat.

One day we had fun with Lieutenant Troester. The platoon was setting up for the night and he broke out a jungle hammock. He had gone to Jungle Warfare School in Panama which is where he acquired the jungle hammock. In some ways, we thought hammock's were pretty neat because they got you off the ground and you were not dependent on an air mattress for comfort. The down side was, if shooting started it was better to be on the ground rather that two to three feet above the ground. What made this incident special was the Lieutenant tying one end of his hammock to a banana tree. I poked Mike Jones and said: "You gotta see this." LT then tied the other end of the hammock to another

banana tree. He then made a poncho cover with sticks on the end so he had a nice awning over his hammock. It looked very neat. When he finished, he backed into the hammock and sat down and that is when the two banana trees collapsed. We roared.

Unfortunately, soon after the jungle hammock incident a sniper opened up on our perimeter and hit Bob Stevens in the leg. We beat feet after him but he was long gone. We found the shells where he did the firing, but he was nowhere to be found. We then called a medivac for Stevens. It arrived about an hour later. Because we were in thick forest with triple canopy with no grassy area nearby, we had to attach Stevens to a cable lowered from the helicopter and the helicopter crew then hoisted him up banging him against the tree branches on the way up. That was the last time we saw Stevens in the field. After his wound healed he got a job in the battalion rear area; good luck to him.

APRIL 1970
THE MEDICAL CACHE, EASTER SUNDAY MORTARS, THE KIA, AND THE LIEUTENANT'S BUTT

One morning during the last week of March or the first week of April, I am not sure, Lieutenant Troester decided that we needed to conduct an ambush so, at first light, he took a squad and went with them to set one up. In less than an hour those of us in the platoon perimeter heard shots being fired from the direction they went so we scampered over to assist. It turned out that two regular NVA soldiers had wandered into the ambush site and the squad opened up on them. Unfortunately, they got away, although there was a blood trail. Somehow Lieutenant Troester got a dog and dog handler delivered to us in a couple of hours. The dog was a Labrador Retriever which I thought was odd. Our past experiences with dogs was with German Shepherds used to walk point. Apparently, Labs have a knack for following blood trails. We never found the guys who got away, however, we did recover some documents that they must have dropped. We were told later by the battalion intelligence officer (the S-2) that the guy who carried the documents was a major in the NVA and was there to link up with a hospital complex hidden somewhere. We would spend several weeks later trying to find the hospital complex without success.

Later that day, however, our point man spotted a grass shack. We went inside and found a large cache of medical supplies. We searched the area around the hootch and found some more medical supplies buried in shallow ground. When it was all over we recovered what we were later told was approximately $100,000 worth of medical supplies including many medicines and surgical implements. It was written up in the division newspaper. If the druggies in our platoon had realized what we had we probably would have lost some of it before

we loaded it on a helicopter occupied by the battalion intelligence officer later that day.

Not too long after the medical cache experience, it was Easter Sunday. Our company set up during the day in the tree line next to a large grassy field close to a river. That morning a Slick came in with two chaplains, a Protestant chaplain and a Roman Catholic chaplain. For security reasons the company was spread out into a large perimeter so the chaplains came to each platoon, conducted a brief church service, and provided counseling to the troops. They were very nice guys. After they had been there about an hour, we took incoming 60 millimeter mortar rounds. Within a few minutes the Slick was back and the Protestant chaplain beat feet to it. When it took off, I asked the Catholic chaplain why he did not get on. His response was: "I believe I am supposed to be here." I am not a Roman Catholic, however, that guy got my vote for being a great chaplain. Before he left he gave many of us Rosaries with a plastic Jesus. Many guys, including many who were not Catholics put them around their necks and wore them for months thereafter.

Later on Easter or the next day, I cannot recall, the company moved down to the river, set up a perimeter and we all took baths in the river. We had not washed for approximately a month so it felt great. One guy became a casualty by floating on his back in the river totally naked. Most of us just took off our shirts and lowered our pants to bathe, but this guy was au natural. We were all fairly tan from so much time in the sun, however, our bodies under our fatigues were never exposed to the sun and for us White guys, were whiter than white. This guy got badly sunburned including a sunburned penis and testicles. He was in pain for several days thereafter. Of course, the rest of us saw this as comic relief.

After the river bathing each platoon pushed out on its own. My platoon went up a fairly steep mountain all the way to the top. On the way, we came across a hootch with a tin roof in very good condition. It was unusual to see hootches of any kind in the boonies let alone one in such good condition. Consequently, we got cautious about this one. Rather than just walk in, one of my squad leaders and I did reconnaissance by fire; that is, we fired off about 40 rounds of M-16 ammo into the hootch before we went in. It turned out the hootch was empty but its presence suggested that bad guys were in the area. That turned out to be a correct conclusion. About an hour after firing up the hootch, I went on a squad sweep. We came upon some deep man made holes. While we were looking around a Dink popped up and was shot dead by a nice FNG, Michael Farley, who was paying attention. He had a nice SKS rifle which we tagged and took with us. We called the company commander to report what had happened and he said we were doing a great job.

The next day we did a search of a small valley not far from where we found the hootch. When we started into the valley we took some sniper fire. One

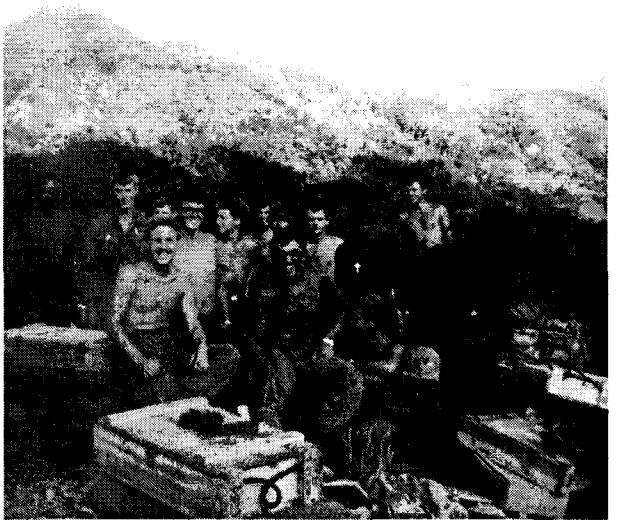
round came a few feet from my head and landed in the rucksack of the guy in front of me. Fortunately, it did not hit the M-60 ammo he was carrying. We lined up to return fire but the sniper was long gone.

The next day, April 10, 1970, we set up the platoon perimeter on the side of the mountain not far from the top. It was a stupid place to setup because it had lots of bushes which partially blocked our view and because there was high ground above it. The LT was reluctant, however, to force the guys all the way to the top of the mountain because we were so fatigued from humping all day in the heat. We would pay a price for that decision. Just as night fell some Dink lobbed a grenade into our perimeter. It landed almost on top of the nice FNG, who had killed the Dink the day before, and killed him; another KIA (Killed in Action). Michael Farley was a draftee from Tipton, Indiana who was 21 when he died. The only good news was that Michael was almost asleep because of humping all day so he never knew what hit him. A few other guys got some shrapnel including Lt. Troester. One guy got shrapnel in his face and eye. The guy who got shrapnel in the eye was a Brother named Poole who was a bad malingerer and racist who would had already been a personnel problem for me. We opened up with World Minus and did not take much return fire. After the brief firefight we medivaced Poole. It was at night so it was a bit hairy.

The LT then called the company commander who was with the mortar platoon on a small hill a couple of kilometers from us. I found out later that Lt. Troester got in trouble with the company commander because of this night medivac from a "hot" zone. Actually, the LT was just following the advice of our medic. The good news was that our mortar platoon had their mortars. Mortar guys typically just humped the boonies with the rest of us, however, in this instance, they were set up with 81 millimeter mortars. They did a great job as did my LT who directed the mortar fire within approximately 25 meters of our position. I believe the bad guys left with that barrage.

As luck would have it, however, our company commander got in touch with either "Spooky" or "Shadow", I am not certain which. Both were old transport planes that had been retrofitted with cannons and machine guns and their mission was ground support. I believe they were C-130s. Apparently, the night medivac justified calling for these guys. In a fairly short while the gun ship guys were talking to my LT. He explained that he had no experience directing fire support from a gun ship and they calmly said they would walk him through it. I believe these were Air Force guys and they were great. They talked so calmly you would have thought they were just having a couple of beers and a B.S. session. The first thing we had to do before they could provide us fire support was mark our position. Because of the foliage, that was not easy, since light from a flashlight would be diffused in the trees. I had a creative idea and suggested that we set off trip flares at the four corners of our perimeter which we did. That worked and the pilots said they could mark our position and were ready to fire up

the area around us. It was impressive. Again, the fire came within 25 meters of our position and they brought tremendous fire power for about a half hour. When



Charlie Company Mortar Platoon..

it was over, my LT said thanks a bunch and the pilots said they were glad to help and to call them up any time we needed them. Then they flew off. The next day a Medivac bird came in an we put Michael Farley's body on it so he went on to his final resting place.

Later I heard that a guy in George Keener's platoon had been shot the day before, apparently by sniper fire. As I recall, he was not killed, however. As I thought about my experiences up to this point it all seemed so pointless. During the 6 or 7 months I spent in Vietnam so far we had very few battles or even skirmishes. Never-the-less, we kept losing guys one or two at a time to snipers. When I later talked to guys who served in other parts of Vietnam, their stories were generally similar. The guys in the South, however, lost guys one by one to booby traps. The result was the same. We never won anything or actually occupied territory toward some tactical objective. You owned the circle you stood on for as long as you were there, then you gave it up when you left. I later read about fierce battles for some hills where the GIs took heavy casualties taking the hill only to give it up the next day. Then, in some cases they were ordered to retake the same hill and pay the same sacrifice again; all for nothing.

AC-130 Gun Ship. These were developed after the Vietnam War. The original gun ships were retrofitted C-130s.

The next day we humped to the top of the mountain and encountered Pungi Stakes just below the trail that ran the ridgeline. Fortunately, no one got stuck. A Pungi Stake was a sharpened bamboo stick about three feet long which was generally placed in grass so you did not see them before they stuck you. The end was very sharp and was generally stuck in human or water buffalo feces to cause infection when they dug into you. A couple of months later I saw a Scout Dog impale himself on a Pungi Stake when he ran forward. They were nasty business.

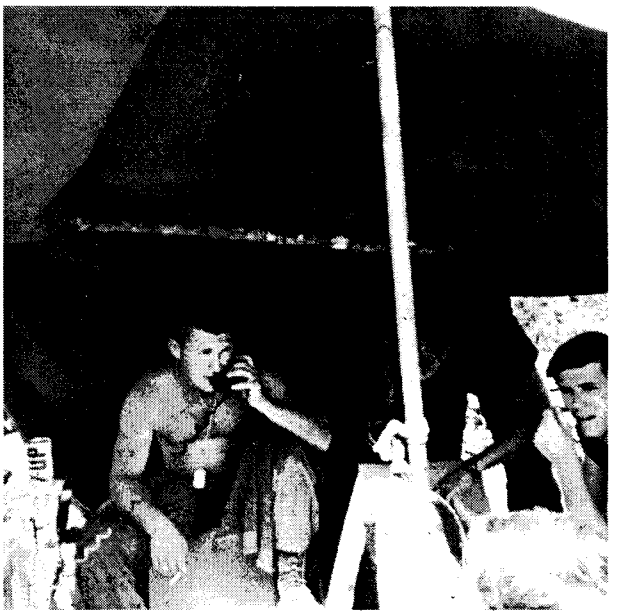
Once we got around the Pungi Stakes and to the top of the mountain, we headed out on the trail that ran the entire length of the ridgeline. Generally, walking on trails is a bad idea because it sets you up for ambush, however, in this case there was really no option because the sides of the ridgeline were so steep. We humped this trail for about a kilometer when the LT caused his own demise. I was walking second man back from the point man. We came to a vine which went across the trail. The point man bent down and scooted under it as did the slack man and me. My LT, however, had a different approach. He pulled out his hunting knife and hacked on the vine. It turned out the vine was part of a pig trap. When the LT yanked on it a spear about four feet long came swooshing out of the bushes and lodged in the cheek of his buttocks at least an inch deep. There he was standing there holding the spear still stuck in his butt and we were on the ground laughing ourselves silly. He pulled the spear out and the medic looked at the

wound. It was fairly substantial, at least an inch deep, about a half inch across and bleeding profusely. The medic wrapped a field bandage around it and we called the company commander to report our circumstance. A short while later a medivac bird came over. This time it was able to almost land on the ridgeline so we just hoisted the LT inside. This was one of three times when I was the acting platoon leader.

Based on guidance from the company commander we humped to the little firebase with him and the mortar guys and took over perimeter security. The setting was picturesque, mountainous and we could see for a couple of miles. We could see the river we had crossed several days before way down in the valley below.

Me taking a break after humping through the boonies to the little firebase with the company commander after Michael Farley was killed.

Some time later our platoon was on an abandoned firebase when a Chinook helicopter dropped a load of ammo and food that was supposed to be delivered to a firebase somewhere. Our platoon was then directed to located the dropped supplies and destroy them so the dinks could not use them. We searched for a couple of days, however, the terrain was so steep and the jungle so thick we never found the stuff. Two guys got into serious trouble on this mission as well. Snake and another guy I do not remember snuck out of the line of march and stayed back at the old abandon firebase while the rest of us were searching for the lost supplies. The LT had them court-martialed and they were busted down in rank from Specialist 4th Class to Private E-1 or E-2. They never came back to the platoon after that.



Captain Burl Magee on the little firebase talking to guys in the boonies.

CAMBODIA AND FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE IN THE REAR

About the second week in May, 1970, our division became part of the great Cambodian invasion of 1970. This was probably the only mission I was ever on that made sense to me. The theory was that American and South Vietnamese forces would hit Cambodia in Force for the purpose of interdicting the bad guys' supply lines. Everyone had known for years that VC and NVA troops used the Ho Chi Minh Trail to bring in supplies to South Vietnam. This was a series of trails running down the border of South Vietnam mostly in Laos and Cambodia. The bad guys actually drove heavy duty trucks down these trails as well as thousands of bicycles loaded down with ammunition and other supplies.

Although there had been the "secret bombing of Cambodia" which the Nixon administration was criticized for, not only by anti-war activists but by the international community, we had never actually attacked the Ho Chi Minh trail with troops. The critique of the Nixon administration was that this action effectively expanded the war into Cambodia which was, theoretically, not a participant. To the typical GI this view was Bull Sh*t. We wanted to bomb the entire Indo China Peninsula into the stone age.

As it turned out the invasion of Cambodia in 1970 was a very successful mission. Thousands of pounds of munitions and other supplies were captured and/or destroyed. According to coverage in the Stars and Stripes this mission put the bad guys in a hurt for no less than six months. Theoretically, that was

supposed to give the South Vietnamese time to regroup and better ensure their control over disputed territory. I do not believe that happened, however, we definitely hurt "Charlie's" ability to fight for awhile.

Our trip to Cambodia was begun with a convoy from Camp Radcliff to a small village on the South Vietnam/Cambodia border a distance of approximately 70-80 miles West of Camp Radcliff. The convoy was long with many deuce and a halfs carrying the troops. I was impressed by the lead vehicle which was a deuce and a half with several modifications including additional armor. Its best asset, however, was a Quad 50 which is a 50 caliber gattling gun; a real pee bringer. Moving by convoy is definitely less tiring than humping, however, there was a downside. In particular, we had to go through the An Khe pass. For several miles the narrow two lane highway cut through a mountain with steep walls on both sides. A couple of kids with 22 rifles could eat you up in that place because there was no way to hide and they would have the high ground. The only time I ever wore a flack jacket in Vietnam was when I went on convoys and I was glad to have it then.

When we got to the border we were supposed to catch Slicks into Cambodia. As it turned out the helicopters involved got shot up badly inserting another unit into Cambodia so our CA was canceled until the next day. A short distance from the small border village, we set up a battalion perimeter which was huge, approximately 500 men. As I was getting my area ready I looked up and saw a couple of puffs of dust in the distance perhaps 200 meters away. As the dust got closer I could see it was three women; two fairly young and one older. The older one was probably no more than 40 years old, however, she looked used up. These were peasant women. As luck would have it the two younger ones were prostitutes. They went into the high elephant grass and set up their business. It was an amazing sight. I recall seeing no less that 40-50 guys in single file waiting their turn with one of the hookers. They were just chatting and smoking like they were waiting to get into a movie or go to chow. In a couple of hours it was over and the three women trudged back to the village. In a couple of weeks a bunch of these guys would line up in single file again at a forward firebase where medics would administer penicillin shots to them, the first of three.

The next day we flew into Cambodia. The terrain was substantially different than what we were used to. It was flat with large areas that had no trees. We found out later that the water there was really bad. We had been quite lucky with regard to water. We were all advised to be careful about drinking water in Vietnam, however, we found the water in the mountain streams we encountered to taste good and be safe. In Cambodia, we had to catch water from rain in our ponchos which we ran into canteens. When we were forced to use water from streams we had to add lots of iodine tablets which eventually makes the water taste awful. Some guys added Kool-Aid to cover up the bad taste, however, that tended to make you more thirsty because of the sugar content.

We experienced no contact when we landed in Cambodia. Shortly after we got there we broke up into platoons and headed off in different directions. The Order of the Day was to find supplies and arrange to have them carried out or destroy them and that included food. Every rifle platoon had been assigned an engineer who carried explosives for the purpose of destroying whatever caches we encountered. The first couple of days we found nothing, then just about every platoon found caches. Our first one was a large grass thatch hootch in which was stored rice. We tried to burn it, however, that did not work very well, so we had as many guys piss on it as possible to destroy its value we thought. The First Platoon's first encounter was a Montagnard woman walking down a trail. They ambushed her and killed her. They felt bad about that, however, movement is movement.

Then my platoon encountered a small village which had been abandoned shortly before we got there. We learned later that there was not much combat during the entire Cambodian invasion. The bad guys knew we were coming and beat feet out of the area as fast as they could. There was nothing remarkable about this village. It had a few grass thatch huts and that was about it. We did, however, encounter an old enfeebled woman who could barely move and was obviously frightened of us. Later that day we called in a helicopter to evacuate her. I am sure she wound up in a refugee camp somewhere among the other hundreds of thousands of homeless people in Southeast Asia.

Sgt Kellenbach, Mark Roe and another guy getting ready
to load the old lady on to a medivac helicopter in Cambodia.

I cannot recall why we did not burn this village since destruction was our goal. I suppose it was because it was so small, in poor condition and apparently

worthless. We found no signs of bad guys in this village and not much of anything really. It appeared the inhabitants took all their worldly possessions with them when they left. The burning was to come later.

In the next day or two we stumbled on another village. This one, however, was fairly large with many grass thatch hootches and a bunch of livestock running around; pigs and chickens. It had been abandoned no more than a few minutes before we arrived since there were some cooking fires still smoldering. We got some good souvenirs from this village including several Montagnard crossbows, some old French paper currency from the Indo China days, and I found a neat knife. The knife had apparently been made out of some part of the undercarriage of a vehicle. It had a good edge, however, and was the size of a small machete. The case was made of some type of soft metal and the knife fit in the case well. I carried this knife for most of the rest of my tour, then I gave it to a guy in my platoon who had given me his sister's address, after I admired a photograph of her, which resulted in very few letters both ways.

This village had definite signs of the bad guys. One corner had apparently been used as a classroom. It had a chalkboard and benches for students to sit. There were also wooden models of U.S. aircraft there including helicopters. We guessed that one subject was how to shoot down American aircraft. I do not recall whether we found any weapons. In any event, after searching the village thoroughly, we decided to burn it down and kill all the livestock. In the vernacular, this was referred to as a "Zippo Party" after the famous cigarette lighter which was the lighter of choice for most GIs. It was amazingly easy to torch the village because the grass thatch hootches went up quickly. In no time we had flames 40-60 feet high. While the hootches were going up in flames we were shooting every animal we saw. It was at this point that my LT let his journalistic instincts take over again and he began to take many photographs. I looked at the flames and decided that we needed to di di out of there ASAP. I said: "Come on Sir. If they didn't know where we were, they do now!" He reluctantly let us exit the village.

My 24th birthday was in Cambodia. It was an unusual birthday.

After a few more days of humping around Cambodia we were pulled out and flown to a staging area just across the border in South Vietnam where we got on deuce and halfs to convoy back to Camp Radcliff. While I was sitting in the back of the truck waiting for the convoy to start I saw a Chinook (a large transport helicopter with two propellers) come in and kick up an amazing amount of dust. Apparently, the dust blinded the pilots because they landed on a deuce and half killing a couple of GIs and wounding others. More evidence of the fruitlessness of our efforts. Guys got killed by accident as well as by small arms fire.

On the convoy an FNG in my truck pulled out a pipe and a "Nickel Bag" ($5.00 worth of marijuana about the size of a man's fist). I watched incredulously while he packed up the pipe with dope and start to light it. At that point, I grabbed his pipe, hit it against the side of the truck so the contents fell out, then grabbed his bag and through it over the side. I said: "Jesus Christ man, I am your F**king platoon sergeant. Don't be smoking that Sh*t in my presence. See if you can get a beer from somebody!"

I cannot remember if it happened right after the Cambodia trip or later, however, while we were at Camp Radcliff our troops got abused by the new battalion executive officer whose name I cannot recall. What happened was that every man in our company was assigned to fill sandbags to reinforce the bunkers around the helicopter pad all day in the 110 degree heat. Then at night we had to pull security around the helicopter pad in very small groups which spread us very thin and resulted in us getting very little sleep. On top of that we got a briefing from our company commander that battalion Higher Higher intended to strongly punish anyone who fell asleep on guard duty during the night. Not surprisingly, falling asleep on guard duty was fairly common since the troops were exhausted from their labors during the day and we could not properly rotate the guards so everyone got short changed on sleep. This went on for several days. Finally, the troops were ready to rebel and tear down the battalion rear area. Cooler heads prevailed.

I got together with George Keener and the other platoon sergeant and said that we should do something about this problem since it appeared to me that this was abuse of the troops which had to be prohibited by some regulation. George and the other platoon sergeant agreed so the three of us marched off to lodge a complaint with the division Inspector General (IG). I was surprised that we were let right in to meet with the IG, a Lt. Colonel, and he was very cordial and understanding. He thanked us for our comments and we left. Immediately upon arriving back in the battalion rear area we were met and told to report to the battalion executive officer which we did. That was interesting because he was almost obsequious. He said he heard we had a concern and was disappointed that we had not come to him in this regard. With some nervousness, we explained our concerns and he said he would solve the problem. Beginning that night the troops got a break. We did not have to pull guard duty and in the days remaining we had no more repeat of the abuse pattern we had experienced before. It still amazes me that we were successful because I thought the Lifers would eat us for lunch. Sometimes the good guys win and you get a cookie.

There was a guy in my platoon who was Italian. Unfortunately, I cannot remember his name. He had immigrated to the United States when he was 16 and lived with his aunt and uncle. He told us he learned to speak English partly on the basis of watching movies. He spoke reasonably good English, however, he had an accent. He was not a typical infantry soldier because he was a bit frail and not

confident. He could get excited and when he did he spoke very rapidly with lots of gestures. The most memorable thing about this guy was when he returned from R&R in Hong Kong. While he was there he purchased land in Arizona. We all got briefed about how to avoid being ripped off on R&R, however, I guess this guy was not paying attention. When he got back to the platoon he had the documents he was given for the land purchase and Sergeant Mike Jones and I read them carefully. It was amazing because they described the land in great detail. It included arroyos and desert and the closest road was several miles away. There was no water anywhere on the land. He thought he had purchased his part of the American dream, however, he had only purchased worthless land in the middle of nowhere and he now faced long term payments for the same. I felt sorry for this guy and for the big picture. Here was a bunch of young guys doing the best they could under very difficult circumstances and people were ripping them off at every opportunity.

PERSONNEL PROBLEMS

I cannot recall exactly when I experienced the four personnel difficulties I had in Vietnam so I am lumping them altogether here. Each one was unpleasant, however, I believe they added to my maturity.

The first incident involved Private Poole. He was a brother who was an awful malingerer. We were on a forward firebase when he failed to show up for perimeter guard duty one night. The next day my buddy Sergeant Mike Jones and I set him up. We called him over and told him exactly when he was supposed to report for perimeter guard duty that night. He said he understood; then, I repeated: "You are telling me, in the presence of Sergeant Jones, that you understand exactly when you are to report for perimeter guard duty?" He responded affirmatively. That night, he again was guilty of "failure to report" which meant that he did not show. The next morning I went to see the company commander to explain what had happened and shortly thereafter Private Poole was on his way back to the rear to face court martial. We never heard of him again. I certainly hope he was court martialed. We had heard stories about criminals going back to the rear to be punished who wound up shamming in the rear for awhile then being sent back to the field without punishment. We hoped that Poole went to Long Binh Jail. That was the baddest jail I ever heard of. For punishment there they put guys in Conex boxes which were large heavy metal containers used for shipping. It would, of course, get very hot inside a Conex box in Vietnam and the guards would add to the prisoners misery by beating on the outside periodically with their batons which would drive the prisoners crazy.

The second incident happened on a mission we had just outside Camp Radcliff. Our company was detailed to execute small unit ambushes only a few kilometers outside the division base camp. We actually walked out the main gate to our destination. The first day, we had stopped in an open field for lunch.

When it got time to go, I got the platoon ready and we headed out. Two Brothers decided that we were moving too fast for them so they lagged behind. When I became aware of this I beat feet to the rear of the column and accosted these guys. I told them that we were leaving now and they did not have to come if they did not want to, however, I also said that I hoped the VC blew them up. They got in gear then. That evening, however, when the platoon was setting up its night position, they came up to the LT and complained that the platoon sergeant was threatening them by saying he hoped the VC blew them up. The LT handled it well and the problem went away. A few weeks later, however, one of these guys re-enlisted in the Army so he could get a rear job. I don't know how that worked, however, he was soon gone and I heard later that he became a truck driver.

The third incident involved a guy who was a "Section 8" (he was crazy). We had been airlifted to the boonies and when we got off the LZ and started to move out, I discovered that this guy had come with no equipment; no M-16 or ammunition, no grenades, and no food. Since it was SOP for our squad leaders to check each guy's equipment before we left on a mission I was incredulous that this could happen. Apparently, just before we got on the Slicks, he just chucked his equipment. When we got resupplied in a couple of days, we sent this guy back to the rear after briefing our company commander who arranged for this guy to be met by MPs and shipped off to wherever they sent crazy GIs.

The last incident occurred while we were in the boonies on the same mission where the crazy guy lost it. We were in a very mountainous area humping like crazy. One day we humped to the top of this mountain and set up briefly on a rock ledge which had a very steep drop off of several hundred feet. When the platoon went to move out, about four guys said they were not moving for awhile because they were exhausted. I was amazed. One of these guys was a guy whom I had liked up to that point; a Native American from Oklahoma named Private Jerome Howlingwater. Jerome had been a scout dog guy who screwed up somehow and got assigned to us. I got so outraged over the behavior of these guys I started swearing at them and actually kicked them. Eventually, they decided to join the rest of the platoon.

R&R IN SYDNEY

In June I went on R&R to Sydney, Australia. Several months before, I had toyed with the idea of not going on R&R in the interest of saving money. I am real glad I changed my mind. The day before I left on this trip, for some irrational reason, I concluded that my mustache would be a deterrent to picking up women in Sydney so I shaved it off. I should have thought this matter through. Even with my fair skin I was pretty tan from living outside in the boonies for so long. When I shaved off my mustache, my upper lip was totally white which was quite a

contrast. It looked dorky. As luck would have it, however, the girls of Sydney did not seem to mind.

To get to Sydney, I took a C-135 from Camp Radcliff to Cam Rahn Bay. I killed a night in Cam Rahn then got on a commercial jet liner for the flight to Sydney. My entire gear consisted of two pairs of slacks, two shirts and four pair of underwear I bought in Cam Rahn. I had approximately $300 in my wallet for six days in a city with a population of two million. It turned out that was enough money. As we boarded the plane a gruff looking E-8 inspected each one of us including our haircuts. Some guys were actually taken to a barber shop a little ways away to get a haircut before they were allowed on the plane. He and an aide also inspected our bags, presumably for drugs.

The flight to Sydney took quite awhile, about eight hours as I recall. When we landed I learned that it was their Winter time because they are in the Southern Hemisphere. It was approximately 40 degrees. It was 115 degrees when we left Cam Rahn Bay. Needless to say, we were freezing. There was an R&R Reception Center commanded by a Navy Lieutenant; truly hard duty. We got a fairly exhaustive briefing about what to do and what not to do. Among the pearls of wisdom provided was the admonition that we should not hitchhike and, if we did, we should not use our thumbs because that meant "Stuff it" to the Australians (presumably up your butt).

After the initial briefing, we had a series of briefings from some really good looking young Australian women about the sites to see and the activities available to us. One option was pretty funny to us Grunts. You could go on a three day camping trip to the Australian "Outback" which is a vast expanse of boonies in Australia. Some of the Air Force guys thought that sounded neat. Us grunts said: "Where are the hotels and bars;" we had had our fill of camping out.

Right next to the Reception Center was a men's clothing store where you could rent clothes. I rented a wool sport coat, a pair of wool slacks, a dress shirt, tie, and a sweater. It was fairly cheap. I then linked up with a Specialist 6th Class who was a cook in my battalion whom I had not met before. He and I took a bus to the Bondi area and checked into a hotel. I learned later that we had been close to a famous beach, however, we never saw it while I was there. From that point on it was **Party Time!** For the next six days our routine was to get up about 7:00 a.m. in the morning, go down to the restaurant in the hotel for breakfast, then go next door to the nice pub and have several beers to start the day. The first time we went into the pub was an education. We both ordered a beer and the bartender asked: "What size?" This was a new question to us, so he pointed to a shelf on the wall behind the bar which had no fewer than 12 different sized glasses and mugs. We ordered a pint because that was all we could think of.

The first night we went into an area of the city called Kings Cross. That was where a bunch of night clubs and bars were located and, apparently, a large percentage of sin in Sidney. We went to a nightclub called the Texas Tavern where we returned at least a couple of times that week. It was a very large and attractive place where you could get a good meal, listen to live music, dance on a dance floor and, most importantly, pick up women. That first night I met a nurse who was pretty good looking and had a nice sense of humor. She thought I was real funny and kept saying: "I'm going right off me bloody face" which apparently meant that she was laughing herself silly. We had a photograph taken by the club photographer and arranged to have the prints mailed to us in a couple of weeks. I got mine when I returned to Vietnam and proudly showed it around my platoon until I mailed it to my folks for safekeeping. In the photo we are both Sh*t Faced.

The next day the nurse gave me a walking tour of Sidney, Australia. Sydney is a very attractive city with a beautiful waterfront. We walked all over and had a grand time. I was overwhelmed by how urban it was since I had been living in the boonies for approximately seven months prior to my trip to Sydney. At one point on our tour I had an embarrassing experience. We were crossing a busy intersection when a motor vehicle backfired. I immediately landed on my belly in the middle of the intersection. I quickly got up and explained that loud noises made us Grunts nervous and that appeared to gloss over my embarrassment, however, her eyes were bugging out.

During the week we took advantage of an invitation to visit some of Sydney's private sporting clubs. There were many of these clubs, all of which sponsored athletic teams, especially soccer and Australian football teams. Each club had slot machines which went to support the club and kept membership prices low. The clubs we went to had large nice restaurants and bars and substantial athletic facilities including a gym and indoor pool. At the reception center we were told that all of these clubs welcomed GIs. They certainly did.

I also went to an Australian football game and that was an education. What a tough sport. The players may wear kneepads, however, they wore no other protective equipment. The only time play stopped was when there was a foul or the period ended. These guys tackled each other like they were in the National Football League (NFL). The woman I went with yelled herself silly asking for her team to "Kill the Buggers" on the other team. The crowd was as much into violence as any football crowd in the States.

One evening I went back to the Texas Tavern with another girl I had picked up the night before. We wound up sitting with a couple celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary and had a ball. I danced with the lady and she danced with the husband and everyone drank heartily. They were delightful people and were very cordial to me. They said they really liked Americans and that

Americans and Australians were a lot alike. I believe they are right. It turned out that the lady owned her own hotel and pub and she invited us to visit her there which we did a couple of days later. The timing was perfect because we were starting to run out of money and the lady bought drinks for us all night. We really felt welcome in this lady's pub so we thanked her profusely.

This second woman I picked up took me to a pub near her apartment. That was a fun place. There were almost no chairs. There was a huge circular bar with a brass rail near the floor where you could rest your leg. Everyone generally stood up to drink and they drank heartily. There was a grand game of darts involving some old guys who had obviously been doing that for many years because they were amazingly accurate with their dart shots. They asked me to play, however, I declined, explaining that I would be embarrassed to play with guys as good as they were. Unfortunately, I left two Australian Bush Hats in this pub. I had bought them for two guys in my platoon who said they would love to have one.

We also went to a movie; "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman. It was a great movie and the Australians howled in the closing scene where Butch and Sundance are in Bolivia fighting about 100 soldiers and are all shot up. Paul Newman turns to Robert Redford and say something like: "I think we should go to Australia." The Aussies loved it.

All in all, my R&R was outstanding. I spent six days living like a civilized person, saw a beautiful city, partied like crazy, and met two attractive young women. I did not look forward to returning to Vietnam.

LZ HARDTIMES, THE NEW LT, AND PUNGI STAKES

When I returned to Vietnam I linked up with my platoon back in the boonies. From there it was lots of more humping. At one point, my company was taken to an ARVN firebase called LZ Hardtimes. It was an unusual firebase because it was built on flat ground not far from a river and was close to a village. Every firebase I had seen before was built on top of a naked hill in the middle of nowhere. This one sat on a broad expanse of sand on flat ground. We did not go into the firebase, but rather, spread around on the ground outside. While we were there women from the village came out and sold us sodas. I suspect some guys linked up for sex as well.

The highlight of this time was the exploding rucksacks. Some guys in another platoon had laid their rucksacks on the ground not knowing that there had been a fire there which was only slightly covered by dirt and still had smoldering coals. In time, one of the rucksacks caught fire and the fireworks began with lots of exploding M-16 and M-60 machine gun ammunition and, as I recall, some

grenades as well. Luckily, no one was injured, however, it took an hour or more before we could extract the rucksacks and stop the explosions.

After more endless humping, we were flown to an area which turned out to have many Pungi Stakes just off the LZ where we landed. Some bright person had an idea how we could avoid getting stuck. We cut mortar shipping tubes and put those over our shins. Unfortunately, many of the Pungi Stakes in this LZ were longer than normal so they hit you in the thigh or higher. Several guys got stuck and a scout dog with us got impaled and medivaced. The guys who got stuck with Pungi Stakes also got medivaced because wounds from Pungi Stakes almost invariably got infected with dire consequences if let untreated. Lt. Troester got stuck with a Pungi Stake and was medivaced to Camh Rahn Bay for a couple of weeks because the wounds were serious. He had taken off the mortar tubes from his shins because it was hard to walk with them. The injury damaged his shin bone and mangled some nerves and muscles in his leg.

While Lt. Troester was in the hospital recovering from his Pungi Stake wounds, he met Melvin Guidry there. Melvin had decided to stop taking the malaria pills we took. We took a big pill on Mondays and a small white one every other day to prevent malaria. As he wanted, Melvin got malaria, however, he lived to regret that because that is an awful illness. He essentially was trying to get out of the boonies which he did, however, he suffered for it. He never came back to the platoon.

Some time during this time period I got a new platoon leader whose name I cannot recall. He turned out to be a real dud. He had graduated from some military school and thought he was hot stuff, however, he turned out to be indecisive and never earned the respect of the platoon as Lt. Troester had. Lt. Troester had rotated back to the division rear where he went to work for the division newspaper which made sense since he had a journalism degree. I was glad for him, however, I disagreed with the Army policy regarding assignment of officers. What the Army did was to assign officers to the field for six months then rotate them to a rear job. I suppose the logic was to give all officers a chance for combat experience in the interest of their career. What it accomplished, however, was to ensure that a large percentage of field commanders were relatively inexperienced and it took very good officers out of the field and often replaced them with guys who were not good field commanders.

Me and Lieutenant Glenn Troester in Base Camp.

We had another experience with Pungi Stakes sometime later where I believe I got stuck, because that is the only explanation for what happened to me a few days later. At the time, I was unaware that I had been stuck. A short time after this Pungi Stake experience my platoon was operating on its own in mountainous terrain. We got to the top of a hill just as a lightning strike occurred. Needless to say, we all hit our bellies immediately because we thought we were taking incoming. It must have struck no more than 50 meters from us because we could feel the concussion and sensed some electrical shock in the air.

That evening, I noticed that my right knee had swollen to at least twice it normal size, had a large pink area in the middle, and began to hurt. It was worse the next morning which happened to be when we were resupplied. My LT put me on the resupply bird and I flew to the battalion forward firebase. At the firebase was a doctor, a Captain, which amazed me. I do not know why he was there. I reported to him, he looked at my knee, then took a scalpel and cut a plug out about the size of a nickel. Then he squeezed an amazing amount of pus out. It was not pleasant. He then dressed it and bandaged it. For the next week or so I became a member of the firebase personnel. I stayed with the mortar guys and pulled guard with them. Every day a medic would redress my wound and it started to heal fairly quickly although it was puffy for several days.

One day, shortly after dawn, we took some small arms fire, apparently from one guy. Fortunately, no one on the firebase was hit. From that point it became an amazing experience. In a very short time, the firebase opened up with World Minus, M-16s, M-60 machine guns, 50 caliber machine guns, 81

millimeter mortars, 4 Deuce mortars (larger than 81 mm.), and 105 howitzers. At one point the artillery guys fired "beehive" rounds aiming straight out rather than arched up as normal. A beehive round has several thousand fleshettes which look like tiny arrows. It is an antipersonnel weapon. I have heard about units which found bad guys pinned to trees by beehive rounds. Later in a conversation with a mortar guy I knew, I was told that we had spent probably $65-100,000 in munitions in response to the sniper fire. The sniper, in contrast, had spent no more than a few cents North Vietnamese currency for the few rounds he fired.

When the smoke cleared the battalion Sergeant Major told me to get the FNGs who had been delivered the previous day and go look for the bad guy. As diplomatically as I could, I tried to explain that I was getting short with only about a month or so to go and did not look forward to doing a sweep with FNGs. Needless to say, the Sergeant Major ruled the day in this matter, so I got approximately eight FNGs and left the firebase in the direction from which we thought the firing had occurred. I grabbed one guy and said that he was walking point. He stammered that he had just gotten in country and was inexperienced. I explained that I was SHORT and was not going to walk point. We went out about 100 meters or so and found the expended brass from the eight or nine rounds the bad guy had fired. We also saw where he had beat feet through the grass and we followed that trail for another 100 meters or so, at which point, I thought we had gone far enough. We went back to the firebase and I reported to the Sergeant Major that we found the place from which the bad guy had fired on us and followed his trail for a bit before it vanished.

We wounded a dog at this firebase. It had become common practice to put out booby traps made of claymore mines. I do not recall exactly how they were made, however, the gist of it was to "daisy chain" several claymores with "det cord" (detonation cord) and then fashion a triggering device connected to a battery which when connected sent the necessary charge to blow the blasting cap which started a series of explosions among the claymores. The triggering device was connected to a wire placed so that someone would trip over the wire to set it off. It was very effective. A claymore has two pounds of C4 which is a neat plastic explosive. We also had sticks of C4 to blow stuff up, however, we used it mostly to cook our C-Rats because it heated better than the heating tablets we were issued. It would not blow up when you set it on fire only when you detonated a military blasting cap in it. In addition, each claymore had something like 700 little ball bearings which went out with great force when the C4 blew. To have several go off in quick succession in the booby trap was a pee bringer. One morning, unfortunately, a mongrel dog, which was the pet of the artillery unit, got outside the firebase perimeter and set off a booby trap. He was lucky, because he was so short most of the blast went over him. He did, however, get one leg blown off. Somehow, miraculously, he survived and hobbled around the firebase only a few days later.

SHAMMING AND GETTING READY TO GO HOME

From the firebase I was sent to our forward trains area to see the medics there so they could look at my knee. I checked in with them and actually stayed with them for several days. This was the life. I had no responsibilities and, because I was with the medics, I was not called on for the various administrative duties which faced guys in the rear. I went to movies, drank beer, read a book or two and generally relaxed. I was a very happy camper. In appreciation I gave one of the young medics my hunting knife that my folks had sent me. A small part of the point had broken off when I used it to pry open a case of C-Rats, however, it was otherwise in good shape and had a good edge. The young medic thought it was really neat.

Sometime during this time period I sent my folks a notice regarding my return home. Somebody duplicated a bunch of these and distributed them to the troops. It is humorous. It said the following:

"ISSUED THIS SOLEMN WARNING, THIS 8TH DAY OF AUGUST, 1970 TO THE FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS AND RELATIVES OF: Dwight F. Davis

1. Very soon the above will once again be in your midst, deamericanized, demoralized and dehydrated; ready once again to take his place as a human being with freedom and justice, engage in life, and somewhat delayed pursuit of happiness.

2. In making your joyous preparations to welcome him back into respectable society, you must make allowances for the crude environment in which he has suffered for the past twelve months. In a small word, he may be somewhat ASIATIC, somewhat suffering from stages of VIETNAMITIS, and of commonly called LACKA-BOOM-BOOM (sex).

3. Therefore, have no alarm if he prefers to squat rather than sit on a chair, pad around in thong sandals and towel, slyly offers to sell cigarettes to the postman, and picks his food suspiciously, as if it were poisoned. Don't be surprised if he answers all questions with such statements as "NUMBER ONE (very good)" (or ten -- very bad), NO CAN DO (I can't do that), SAME-SAME (same as), DIDI-MAU (leave quickly), XIN LOI (sorry about that), DINKY DOW (crazy), or similar expressions, or speaks in abbreviated or incomplete sentences. Be tolerant when he tries to buy everything

at less than half-price, accuses the grocer of being a thief, and refuses to enter an establishment that doesn't have mesh screens over the door and windows. He may also complain of sleeping in a room and refuses to go to bed without a mosquito net.

4. Make no flattering remarks of the exotic South East Asia, avoid mentioning the benefits of overseas duty, seasonal weather, and above all ask before mentioning food delicacies of the East such as FLIED RICE (fried rice). The more references to these particular subjects may trigger an awesome display of temper and violence.

5. Any of the following sights should be avoided since they can produce an advanced stage of shock; people dancing, television, and ROUND EYED WOMEN. In relatively short time his profanity will decrease enough to permit him to associate with mixed company, and soon he will be speaking English as well as he ever was.

6. For the first few months (until he is house-broken) be especially watchful when he is in the presence of women, particularly young women, pretty specimens of femininity. The few American "girls" he may have seen since arriving overseas were either (plain-Jane) Doughnut Dollies (the affectionate name for Red Cross girls) or WACS (who consistently seem to remind you of your old maiden aunt). Therefore, his first reaction upon meeting an attractive ROUND-EYE may be to stare blankly and drool proficiently at the mouth. You are advised to take advantage of his momentary shock and MOVE THE YOUNG LADY OUT OF HIS REACH!!!

7. Keep in mind that beneath this tanned and rugged exterior, there beats the heart of pure gold. Treasure this fact, for it is the only thing of value he has left. Treat him with sympathy, kindness, tolerance and an occasional fifth of good whiskey and you will be able to rehabilitate this hollow shell of the man you used to know.

PLEASE REFRAIN FROM SENDING ANY MORE MAIL OR PACKAGES TO HIS PRESENT ADDRESS AFTER <u>August 24</u>, <u>1970</u> FOR HE IS LEAVING FOR THE WORLD IN <u>29</u> DAYS <u>8</u> HOURS AND <u>10</u> MINUTES.

FUTURE MAILING ADDRESS WILL BE
1955 Woodcrest Drive
Winter Park, Florida 32792
LZ HOME

Suggest that you fill the ice box with beer, stock the bar, fill the car with gas, turn on the radio, T.V. and stereo, take the phone off the hook, roll back the carpet, put out the cat and open the door because:

THE KID IS COMING HOME!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Before I could be called back to duty in the boonies, my company was sent to the forward trains area where I was. From there they were convoyed back to Camp Radcliff and I went with them. I happened to get into a deuce and half with all FNGs. We all had on flack jackets and as an extra precaution, I put a flack jacket over my legs. I sat in the middle of the truck bed. This trip involved going through the An Khe Pass which, as noted earlier, was hairy. As we moved out the FNGs looked at me, I suppose because I looked seasoned and worn while their fatigues were still relatively clean. I informed them that the bad guys would be coming from outside the truck and that is where they should look, not at me.

When we arrived back in division base camp, I had only about a week to go before my ETS (Estimated Time of Separation) or DEROS (Date Estimated for Return From Overseas). In other words, I was SHORT to the max. As a consequence, I was relieved of any duties for the company, although I stayed in the company area. I was expected to outprocess which took at least a couple of days to go through the bureaucratic nonsense involved. During this time, for example, I had to go to some authority to get a paper which allowed me to take my Chicom 53 rifle back to the states as a war souvenir. It was during this week or so that I became obnoxious about being short. I had told myself I would not do that after experiencing this when I first arrived in country, however, there is some compulsion involved which you cannot deny.

I basically spent my last several days in the division rear visiting the various bars in Camp Radcliff and ensuring that I did not get called on to do anything important. I did assist in a class given to our company. I gave a lecture about small unit ambushes and tried to convey everything we had learned in this regard and how to stay out of trouble on ambush. My First Sergeant said I was a natural born teacher.

Sgt. Stone, Sgt. Kellenback, me, and Sgt. Jones have a beer in base camp.

Jerome Howlingwater, Me, George Keener and another guy. We are here for the glory and whatever we can get away with.

I'M LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

Finally, the day came. I loaded on to a deuce and half with several other guys who were going back to the World. It took us to where the C-135s were parked. While we were waiting to get on board, the Sergeant Major from my

battalion came in and asked for me by name. I held up my hand and walked forward to him and he held out my wallet in his hand. I had put it in under my pillow the night before so it would not get stolen and had forgotten it. I thanked him a bunch.

Sgt Stone and I are "short to the max," going home soon.

We took the C-135 to Cam Rahn Bay. When we got onto the C-135 I noticed cables hanging from one wall. I asked the Tech Sergeant Crew Chief what that was about and he casually brushed them away and said it is no big deal. I explained that I was extremely short and thought lots of stuff was a big deal. He said: "Sit down, relax, and leave the driving to us."

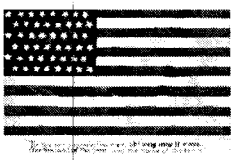
At Cam Rahn, it took a couple of days to get on a plane back to the States so we checked into the transit billets there. I went to the NCO club both nights to watch the Filipino band and drink beer. One afternoon, with nothing much to do, I got on the shuttle bus which you could take for a ride around the base. It was a huge base with a very large Air Force contingent there. While riding on the bus, I was astounded how the Air Force lived. I could see unit air conditioners in the windows of their barracks and I heard that they could wear civilian clothes after 5:00 p.m. A couple of seats in front of me were two young Airmen and one of them was complaining that he had pulled perimeter guard duty **twice** that month. I thought to myself, you have to be kidding; My LT pulls guard duty every night and he is an officer.

Mario Flores and I with plaques given to us by our platoon
shortly before we left Vietnam

At the gift shop in Cam Rahn, I bought three of the lacquer paintings which are unique to Vietnam and mailed them to my folk's house. One was of horses which I gave to my sister and it had a rust colored background. The other two had a black background and were made by sprinkling crushed egg shells onto sticky lacquer. One is a picture of a fisherman on a small boat and the other is of several people harvesting rice in a rice field. I have them on the wall of my office to this day along with the plaque my platoon gave me when I left. A rough approximation of the plaque appears on the next page.

The flag on the right is supposed to be the flag of South Vietnam. Unfortunately, the clip art I have access to does not have that flag so what is shown is actually the flag of Thailand which is as close as I could get. The flag of South Vietnam was yellow with three red stripes running horizontal across the middle. The plaque is also not square. It is made of reddish wood and is in the shape of a badge like a sheriff's badge. The DILLIGAF at the top of the text stands for "Does it Look Like I Give a F**k." They got my middle initial wrong, however, I truly appreciated this gift. I had been through a great deal with these guys and valued their friendship.

VIETNAM



DILLIGAF

TO SSGT DWIGHT D. DAVIS
A SMALL TOKEN OF OUR
APPRECIATION FOR A JOB
WELL DONE FOR 2ND PLATOON
CHARLIE COMPANY 2/35 INF
GOOD LUCK TO A GOOD GUY

THE 2ND PLATOON GUYS

Finally, I boarded the commercial jet liner to return home. Again, I got handcuffed to some lunatic, whose offense I do not remember, until we got airborne. As the plane rumbled down the runway, no one spoke, however, when it became airborne, the entire plane shouted. We had made it. We were alive and Vietnam was behind us; thank God!

We arrived in Seattle at about 2:00 a.m., September 8, 1970. We took a bus to Fort Lewis and got off at the center where out-processing was done. We then spent several hours filling out endless forms, some of which were for the purpose of holding the Army guiltless for any injuries or illnesses we incurred during our military service. There was a funny staff sergeant (E-6) who was in charge of some of this out-processing. We sat down in a large room with large tables in front of us and several forms. The sergeant immediately said:

> "Don't touch any forms until I tell you to. I know some of you think you are smart enough to complete these forms without instructions, however, if you do, you will screw up; and, if you screw up you will be here for some additional time filling out forms. How many of you want to get out of the F**king Army right now. Well, then, follow my instructions."

After this drudgery, we went to be fitted for Class A uniforms which always eluded me since we were all getting out of the Army. The Army's philosophy was that we were going to look like soldiers going home, even though we would never again wear the uniform when we got home. In addition to hemming the pants to the appropriate length, they actually sewed on unit patches on our sleeves. I was amazed.

After about 20 hours of out-processing, we were told we could go to the airport to fly home. It was evening now. I don't remember if they gave us our ticket or not. In any event, a guy I had linked up with from Georgia and I caught a ride with a GI to the airport. When we got there we went to the cocktail lounge and had several since our plane did not leave until about five hours later, about 11:00 p.m. as I recall. While we were there we saw the lunatic I had been handcuffed to when we left Vietnam. He was drunk already and causing a disturbance just outside the cocktail lounge. For some reason, we were overcome with pity and went out to rescue this guy. A military policeman was there who advised us to get this guy out of the airport and he recommended a motel close by where he could stay. We got a cab and took this nut to the motel where we checked him in. We had the hotel manager lock him in the room; then we went back to the airport.

Finally, we were back in the sky flying home. My partner flew to Atlanta with me where he got off. The flight took us from Seattle via St. Louis, then Atlanta, then, in my case to Orlando. We kept drinking all the way. On the flight from St. Louis to Atlanta, I asked for a drink and the flight attendant told me that FAA regulations limited each passenger to two drinks. I explained to her that I had just gotten out of Vietnam and was a little bit paranoid about crashing somewhere in this plane. A few minutes later a free drink was delivered with a sweet note written on a napkin. It said: "We are glad you got back safe. Welcome Home!" That was the nicest thing that had happened to me in a long while.

When I arrived in Orlando, I was half in the bag. This was when the Orlando Airport was a little rinky dink airport and you had to walk from the plane across the tarmac to the airport building. I went in and went to get my duffel bag and souvenir Chinese rifle (Chicom 53). The bolt had been removed from the rifle by order of Army authorities in Vietnam, however, it was still fairly impressive, especially since it had a very long bayonet which folded under the stock. There I was stumbling through the airport and folks were looking at me with either fear or disbelief. I saw my mother and almost ran to her. I gave her a big hug and she said: "Welcome Home." She then drove me home where I immediately crashed for about 12 hours. It was all over, and I still could not believe it.

REFLECTIONS

I left the Army on September 8, 1970 and started graduate school on September 16, 1970; there was no time to decompress. I am a bit surprised that I did as well in graduate school as I did, especially that first quarter, because I was suffering from culture shock for several weeks after returning home from Vietnam. My class in graduate school had about 30 people including only three veterans and only two of us who had been combat veterans. It was clear that most of the people I met at the university held GIs in disdain. We were considered either "baby killers" or stupid for getting drafted. I remember feeling bitter at the time. I was against the war also, however, for different reasons than the college anti-war protesters. I was against getting GIs killed for no apparent reason since it was obvious that the U.S. government was not committed to winning the war. It took me several years to get over this bitterness. I would encounter this bad attitude about GIs again during my eight years as a college professor at three large state universities; the University of Illinois-Chicago Circle, the University of Oklahoma, and Texas A&M University. In each of the three Political Science departments where I served there were about 30 faculty members and I met only four veterans among them.

The only compliment I ever received about my service in Vietnam came from my former platoon leader, Lt. Glenn Troester in an article he wrote for The Ivey Leaf which was the newspaper of the 4th Infantry Division. It was published after I left Vietnam and he sent me a copy with a hand written note above which said: "There it is!" I was very touched because it gave me pride in what I had done, flaws notwithstanding. He wrote the following:

"Academy NCO's Leadership in the Field Earn Them An Image"
(The Ivey Leaf, September 20, 1970, page 6)
by
Glenn R. Troester

"Staff Sergeant Dwight Davis has gone home. Nothing very noteworthy about that. In fact, there is nothing noteworthy about Sergeant Davis either. Except the fact that he kept 25 people alive each day for a year, and earned their respect while doing it. And for the fact he stayed awake all night many times because he knew his men were tired, and someone should make sure they stayed awake on guard; or someone should hear that quiet warning sound a guard might miss. It was always that same someone.

Helping Hand

It was Sergeant Davis who helped his platoon leader during those terrifying First Days, the days when the second lieutenant, his gold bars barely six

months old, wearing his new camouflage cover on his helmet, carrying a new rucksack packed too full with too much unnecessary baggage, and scared to death, must confront his platoon, appear cool, confident, competent and take command. And the platoon always seems to be nothing but old hardened veterans; rugged, tough combat troops sure of themselves and their abilities. But Sergeant Davis stood by the lieutenant and although he actually ran the platoon, he encouraged and directed the platoon leader, and congratulated him on the fine way he was running things.

Eventually, the lieutenant did take over. But Sergeant Davis still worried about his men, still made sure they had enough of the proper supplies and equipment, still checked their condition even though the medic attended them, and still was the one who helped the wounded onto the LZ or into the penetrator, and ensured their equipment was properly tagged and evacuated. And when his men went on a sweep while he stayed behind, he stayed with tense nervousness by the radio, and worried about them until they returned. When one of his platoon was hungry or thirsty, Sergeant Davis was always the first to give the man his own food or water.

None of this is noteworthy about Sergeant Davis.

What is noteworthy is the fact that Sergeant Davis only spent two years in the Army. He is a school-trained NCO. Noteworthy too, he is just one of hundreds like him, a strange and fantastic phenomenon.

Back in the states, the academy NCO went to Basic and Advanced Individual Training, like everyone else. Then, at either the whim of the Army and his leadership test scores, or under his own volition, he finds himself in the NCO Academy. He undergoes weeks of rigorous training and its all geared toward one goal, and he knows it. Someday he will be a squad leader or platoon sergeant in Vietnam.

Distrusted

After he graduates, the new NCO bears the hard looks of some career NCO's with equal rank but many more years service. He endures humorous jokes about himself, and descriptive appellations such as "Instant NCO" or "Shake and Bake." He is initially given a stateside assignment for his on-the-job training to learn in practice what he learned in theory.

Then comes THE DAY; that which was the intended result of all this time, training and preparation. The NCO goes to Vietnam. And here, he justifies every hour and every dollar and everyone used to train him.

In the Army barely a year, and barely older than the men he must lead, he finds himself in the Vietnam jungles suddenly responsible for the lives of men he doesn't even know. His job traditionally belongs to an older man of several years experience, and at least one grade his senior. But there aren't enough such men to go around. So, it falls to the lot of the academy NCO's to take the responsibility, make the most of a bad situation and do the best job possible.

And the best is what he does. Sometimes at the cost of his life, often with valor, but always with the highest professionalism and distinction.

Throughout Vietnam, the academy NCO is a true hero, respected by his men for his sacrifices and unceasing and tireless effort for them; by his platoon leader and higher commanders for his matchless performance and unsurpassed competence, and by everyone else for the contribution he makes for bringing his men home safely at the same time he accomplishes his mission.

Lasting Image

Sergeant Dwight Davis has gone home. But there are many others like him in Vietnam, and still more are coming. I was his platoon leader. But he left me with something I didn't have before I knew him. He left me an image. An image of a citizen soldier, who saw a job to be done and did it flawlessly. An image of a man who will always stand just a little taller in my book than the average run of men. An image I share with countless others throughout Vietnam. An image of the best America has to offer. The image of a leader."

THERE IT IS!

A GRUNT