Third Platoon, B Troop, 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry (Armored)

MY TOUR IN VIETNAM AS AN ARMORED CAVALRY PLATOON LEADER 1969-1970

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INTRODUCTION

This is my story; the story of an armored cavalry platoon leader during the middle stages of the Vietnam War. My story covers the seven months that I held the platoon leader position from July 1969 to March 1970. My unit was the 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, one of the most highly decorated units in US Army history.

This is not a story of a highly decorated officer or a battle-tested, gung-ho war hero. I was just a lower middle-class American with a sense of duty to my country. I had decided my course of action, and it was my duty to make the absolute best of it.

For me, this was a war so long ago in a far away place. For many years, I did not talk much about it or even try to remember it. It was the "lost year" of my life.

There is no doubt that in a combat environment, boys became men, and I was no exception. Many of the lessons we learned about life in Vietnam have helped us often since then.

The price for obtaining this experience was expensive. Our lives were interrupted, and careers and other plans were put on hold. And for some, the ultimate price of death on a battlefield or combat zone was paid.

Looking back, it was an experience that shaped my life. And, I would say, in the main, it was a positive, valuable influence.

Now is the time for me to tell my story. Hopefully, I can now put it in better perspective after 30 years. (The initial drafts of this document began in years 1999-2000. The final draft was completed in 2015.)

By sharing my experiences, it is hoped it will help others understand what the Vietnam War was like, at least from one junior officer's perspective. I suspect many other veterans had a similar experience or can identify with much of this writing.

THE ROAD TO VIETNAM

In June 1964 as I graduated from high school and began college that fall, the war in Vietnam was already in the press. President Johnson was re-elected later in the fall of 1964, my freshman semester, and during the next two years the war quickly escalated. My local draft board was quick to send you a "Greetings from the President" letter if you did not stay in school.

In mid-1965, I realized that the war probably would still be raging when I graduated in 1968. Unless I took some action, I would be drafted as an enlisted man within 30 days of graduation.

I decided that if I must serve in the armed forces I would do it as an officer. The Army had a two-year ROTC program, and I enrolled in that. Two summer camps (one at Ft Knox, KY and one at Indiantowngap, PA) and four ROTC classes later and I was commissioned a 2Lt in the Armor Corps upon graduation from the University of Kentucky in May 1968. Mine was a reserve commission. At least I would be riding when I went to war, so I believed.

I asked to be called to active duty as soon as possible. At that time, many companies did not want to hire and train you if they thought they would lose you to military service within a few months. So to get on with my life, the plan was to get into and out of the Army as soon as possible. I was fortunate to get hired by a defense contractor, North American Aviation (later North American Rockwell) in Columbus, Ohio, and I worked there for approximately three months during the summer 1968 before being called to active duty.

The Army of late 1960's wanted their West Pointers to get the date of rank before all reserve officers. So the West Pointers got to go on active duty first followed by the reservists. My orders finally arrived, and I was called to active duty in late August 1968 to attend the Armor Officer Basic Course, 4-69, at Ft Knox, KY. At the same time, there also was a regular Army class of mostly 2Lt's having their Officer Basic Class. Their class leader was Captain Wesley K Clark, a West Point graduate, and a recent Rhodes scholar.

Our tactical officer in charge of our company of about 120 2Lts used to tell us, "you are already Lts; our job is to make you officers." There is a big difference and the Army planned to do that in about eight weeks.

AOBC was challenging at times but not particularly grueling. We learned most of what we would need to know for our first troop assignment – whether it is at the platoon or staff level. I finished in about the top 20% of that class.

One-third of my AOBC class got orders to go straight to South Korea. These Lts tended to be more serious about their schooling since they realized they would immediately be going to a hostile environment. The remainder of the AOBC class got stateside assignments.

I had asked for a unit assignment in KY; and I was assigned to the 6th Bn, 32nd Armor in the 194th Armored Brigade at Ft Knox. In that unit, I was reassigned to the Headquarters and Headquarters Company as the 4.2" ("four deuce") mortar platoon leader.

The 194th Armored Brigade furnished men and equipment to the Armor School to help train officers, NCOs, and enlisted men. A colonel commanded the armored brigade and the Armor School was headed up by a brigadier general. There was never any question of what to do next. Give the general in the Armor School what he requested.

I had an experienced mortar platoon consisting mainly of Vietnam vets who were serving their last remaining months before being discharged. I tried to learn as much from them as I could. At times, they were frustrated with the "Mickey Mouse" treatment of a training support unit; overall they were good troops.

I learned a great deal during my first six months in the company. Due to additional duty assignments on the post, we were short of junior officers. At one time, I was the mess officer, supply officer, and unit pay officer in addition to my platoon leader assignment.

Later in March 1969, I was in charge of a 15-man funeral detail, which traveled all over KY, WV and OH to bury troopers, most of who were killed

in Vietnam. At another time, I served temporarily as the acting company commander for about a week. A great deal of responsibility for a 2Lt but it was interesting work and challenging.

Life was good in some other respects. My fiancée, Jane Wills, was going to Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY and lived about 100 miles away. On weekends that I did not have Army duty, I was with her. They never said the Army would be this good.

In April 1969, my company commander, Captain Richard Sammons, called me into his office. That is when I got the word – "Sparks you have orders to Vietnam." I would first go to Jungle School in Panama and arrive in Vietnam around mid-July. I was apprehensive about this new assignment but relieved that I finally knew my fate for the next 15 months.

That night I called a couple of my AOBC friends on post and found that they had received the same orders for Vietnam. Lt Dominic Stimola, an AOBC classmate, and I hit the Officers Club that night and about 1 p.m. we closed it. What a hangover the next day after all that drinking! But then again, orders to Vietnam were only going to happen once in this Lt's life.

Within the next week, I broke the news to my fiancée and my parents.

JUNGLE SCHOOL

Before sending you to Vietnam, the Army had decided that many junior officers and mid-level NCOs should attend the Jungle Operations Training Center for a two-week confidence course. This center was located on the north end of the Panama Canal Zone at Fort Sherman. It was just across the harbor from Colon, Panama. In June of 1969, it was a hot and wet place.

The class of about 100 congregated at Charleston Air Force Base, SC and flew down courtesy of a contract carrier for the military. We landed at Hughes Air Force Base and were bused out to the School. We had two-man rooms, and I roomed with 2Lt Dick Specia, whom I had known from the Armor Officer Basic Course.

The first week we had classes in how to survive in the jungle. Soldiers, whose first language was not English, taught many of the classes. This made for some interesting presentations.

We learned how to navigate in the jungle, how to build a raft and swim a river, how to repel off a cliff and many other skills. The first week was individual learning. The second week we were formed into small teams of four people and worked together on several field problems – navigation over longer distances and patrolling.

We were not issued any jungle clothing for this two-week class. We instead wore the cotton fatigues and leathered boots that we had brought from the States. This made for an uncomfortable two weeks. We were wet all the time, and this was unpleasant at night. There was no way to get dry.

The final exercise was a two-day escape and evasion class. Our small group played the game but took a conservative route by following the road.

For some reason or other I did not qualify as a "Jungle Expert." I remember all the guys who did "qualify" were busy buying those lovely blue "Jungle Expert" patches and sewing them on their uniforms before we left Panama. I also remember on the flight to Vietnam that some of them had second thoughts about this and were hastily removing them before we arrived. Sometimes not being the "expert" in the military has its advantages.

THE TRIP OVER AND MY FIRST DAYS IN-COUNTRY

Once Jungle School in Panama was over, I went home to await the flight to Vietnam. I had about two weeks of leave to get my affairs in order. I tried to spend as much time with my fiancée as I could. A year is a long time at age 23 to be separated when you are in love, and your hormones are raging.

One thing I did was to write a holographic will. All I had of value at the time was a $10,000 GI insurance policy. I willed that $2,500 would go to my fiancée to buy a new car and the remaining $7,500 to my parents. That way I thought I had provided something for everyone.

My fiancée took me to the airport in Lexington, KY to depart for the Oakland, CA Air Force Terminal, where many of the flights to RVN originated. As we were saying our final goodbye (hugging and kissing), I spotted a major from the University of KY ROTC Detachment. I broke away for a few moments, approached him and talked briefly to him. He was at the airport to retrieve the body of an RVN KIA. ROTC duty was good but that was one of the downsides.

The flight from Lexington, KY to Oakland, CA was uneventful. I had packed all I was taking to RVN in a small carry-on bag. We had heard plenty of stories from RVN vets about luggage being lost going over and I was determined to get to RVN with the little that I was carrying. I had my Buck knife, a military issue compass, my serviceman's Bible, a few ball-point pens, a set of civilian clothes for R&R, a change of military clothes, some underwear and a shave kit. I knew the Army would issue us all we would need once we arrived in-country.

We arrived in Oakland in the late afternoon and immediately found the O-Club where all the other 2Lts were congregating. After drinking for a few hours, we caught a cab to the billeting office and got a bed for the rest of the night. Next morning about 11 am we boarded the plane for the trip over. We knew we had plenty of time to get rid of that hangover.

On the flight over, I sat next to Lt Dick Specia, who I had known since Armor Officer Basic Course at Ft Knox, KY. It was comforting to be setting next to a friendly face and having someone to talk to who had a similar background. Dick was married to a beautiful young woman (many of us

were envious of him) and he was sorry to be leaving her behind for the upcoming year.

The US government used a number of contract airlines to shuttle troops to and from RVN. Most of the planes were Boeing 707's. On my particular flight, there was nothing but 2Lts and PFCs. This is the lower end of the military food chain. The 2Lts were dressed in their khaki uniforms and the PFCs had been issued jungle fatigues to wear before we left Oakland, creating a sea of khaki and green in the seats of the plane.

The stewardesses had a hard time on these flights to RVN. Imagine over 200 young men in a plane all knowing these are the most beautiful women they will be with in a year. It was all the women could do to keep the men from pawing them to death. I felt sorry for the stewardesses. They were very tactful and understand all things considered. Maybe they enjoyed all this attention, but I doubted it.

It was interesting that we stopped in Hawaii and refueled. We quickly found the bar in the airport in Honolulu and downed a few quick beers. Diamond Head was just a few miles away, and we could easily see it. Here we are setting in a bar with a view of paradise awaiting the continuing trip to hell.

The airline must have been saving pennies on the beverages they offered us to drink. As noted above, there are valid reasons they did not serve alcohol. However, it is beyond me why they did not have carbonated beverages for us. All they served was coffee, tea, milk and water. What some of us would have given for a Coke or Pepsi during the flight?

We had one more refueling stop, Guam, and landed in RVN in the early morning. It was about a 20-hour flight over.

We fully expected to be shot at or mortared as we stepped off the plane. Luckily, we were disappointed. It was just another busy, bustling airport with the highest humidity some of us had ever experienced. It seemed like your uniform quickly absorbed the humidity and it looked horrible. It also probably did not help that we had slept in it on the way over. This did not matter in the grand scheme of things, as we were to find out later.
We were herded onto buses with metal grills over the windows and shuttled off to the personnel replacement depot near Bien Hoa. By the way, the grills were there to keep the VC from lobbing a grenade into the bus.

We spent a couple of days at the replacement depot before getting our assignments. I remembered that I had a sinking feeling when I was told we were flying to Pleiku to join the 4th Infantry Division. Oh no, that probably meant that I would be leading an infantry platoon. That is the last thing an Armor Lt wants to do. Since, the Infantry Branch could not turn out enough Lts fast enough, Armor Lts were frequently assigned to infantry units.

We arrived in Pleiku and went to the 4th Replacement Detachment where I learned that I would be going to the 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry. What a relief to know that I had dodged an infantry assignment! Lt Dick Specia was assigned to the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry and stayed in the Central Highlands.

Although the 2-1 Cavalry had officially moved south and was now part of the 1st Field Force, the 4th Infantry Division continued to provide initial in-country training for the unit. We spent several days getting used to the Central Highlands, which was of no use because we were going to be shipped south where the enemy threat, the weather, and terrain are all different.

We went out on patrols and tried to fire artillery close to our protected position, all outside the wire of the 4th Infantry Division base camp, named Camp Enari. Due to overcast weather and the lack of overhead air cover, we were unable to get this thrilling experience of artillery close support.

An officer from the Dental Corps checked our teeth, and we were given a special tube of fluoride toothpaste and instructed to brush it on for five minutes. The goal was to prevent tooth decay and in my case it seemed to work.

Within a few days, a number of us were flying south to Phan Rang. That area was called "Happy Valley" because the VC and NVA left it alone. It was the site of a major Air Force unit and the runways and facilities there were very modern. The 2-1 Cavalry rear HQ was outside the Air Force base.

We stored our non-combat gear here and were issued our M-16 rifles. Then we were flown by helicopter to Song Mao, the squadron's forward headquarters.

The squadron had taken over a modern, possibly former CIA, base camp in Binh Thuan province. It was very modern for the boondocks of Vietnam; it had air-conditioned offices and sleeping billets for the senior officers, flush toilets and hot showers. Not a bad setup; it sounded too good to be true. A brick wall surrounded the entire base. There was a helicopter landing strip just outside the base camp and a 3,500-foot metal PSP airstrip about a half-mile away.

We met LTC John Fairey, the squadron commanding officer, and he gave us our assignments. It was at that time that we learned that Lt Richard Johnson and I would be going to B Troop. Several of the Captains and Lts were assigned to the Headquarters and Headquarters Troop and the rest of us went to the line troops. Lt Gil Scott, a classmate of mine in AOBC and Jungle School, would be going to C Troop as a platoon leader.

The practice was to rotate the Captains and Lts assignments as much as possible. This meant that if you did a good job in your first assignment, you might get an opportunity in about six months for a different assignment. Some days this hope would be a significant motivation to me.

ARRIVAL AT B TROOP AND TAKING COMMAND OF THE THIRD PLATOON

We (Lt Richard Johnson and I) left squadron headquarters destined to meet up with our new commander, Captain James 'Jim' Barnes, at B Troop. We boarded the Huey resupply chopper and were flown down to Luong Son about 15 miles away.

The firebase was just on the outskirts of Luong Son, a village of probably no more than 500 people. It was just a spot in the road along Highway 1 between Phan Rang and Phan Thiet. It had one small cafe and several small shops.

The B Troop firebase was shared with three other tenants. The ARVNs had the north portion of the perimeter nearest the village, one-half of a 105mm artillery battery (three guns from A Battery, 5th BN, 27th Artillery) had a portion pointed toward the east and B Troop maintained the south and west side of the base. A MACV detachment (MAT 93 with two Lts. and several senior NCOs) also was located inside the firebase, but they had no responsibility for perimeter security. A river was a couple of hundred yards to the west of the firebase. The fields of fire around the firebase were acceptable except for the side near the village.

We landed on the dirt chopper pad outside the firebase. A truck driver met us on the pad and gave us a ride into the firebase.

The firebase still showed signs of the VC / NVA sapper attack on July 6, 1969 on the B Troop, First Platoon. There were several blown-up vehicles that had not yet been carried away still within the firebase. The attack had happened about 10 days ago, and many of the troops were still in shock over what had happened. The VC and NVA had entered the firebase from the village side, which was guarded by the ARVNs. There had been six American KIAs and 19 dusted off. The First Platoon of B Troop was almost decimated that night. There was maybe one or two known enemy KIAs.

Lt Johnson and I met Captain Barnes, who was still recovering from the VC and NVA sapper attack. Captain Barnes assigned Rich to the First Platoon, and he gave me the Third Platoon.

I did not know it at the time, but the Third Platoon, had a distinguished alumnus – John Nelson Abrams. Lt Abrams was the son of General Creighton Abrams, the current commander of MACV and later Army Chief of Staff. Lt Abrams stayed with the 2-1 Cavalry for approximately two years, was promoted to captain and commanded C Troop before he left Vietnam.

The current Third Platoon leader was Lt John Ray. He came down late in the afternoon and picked me up in his M113A1 ACAV. We headed out to the Third Platoon position.

The Third Platoon was fortunate. They had their firebase upon a hill (designated Hill 100 on maps) overlooking the main firebase. It had excellent fields of fire in all directions (unlike the main one) and the vehicles were parked in revetments, which lowered their signature to incoming RPG and small arms fire. Each of the vehicles had built themselves a small-protected bunker for the troopers to sleep in. All the vehicles, except the mortar track, were placed on the perimeter. The mortar track was in the center of the firebase. We had lots of firepower available to protect ourselves from a ground attack.

Lt Ray introduced me to my Platoon Sergeant (E-7), Kermit Preston. I did not realize it but Sgt. Preston was "short' with less than two months remaining in-country. He was a battle tested NCO and liked to run the platoon, especially with a green platoon leader like me around. I was also introduced to the vehicle commanders (mostly E-5s and Sp5s) before dark came. (After PSG Preston had rotated back to the US, PSG Milton Sowell replaced him.)

My first night on the hill was exciting. The sights and sounds of harassment and interdiction fire kept me awake – 50 caliber and M-60 machine gun fire sporadically going off during the night. Also, small hand flares and 81mm-mortar illumination being shot occasionally to light the night. All this was designed to discourage the VC and NVA from trying to sneak upon you during the night. You learned to sleep with one ear open for unusual sounds.

At about midnight, I went to sleep under the stars on my Army issue cot we had received in Song Mao. The night was cool but not cold, so I got some rest.

Next morning, we awoke and called in our ammunition expenditure for the night before. After a C-ration breakfast, Lt Ray boarded the ACAV, and we took him down the hill to the B Troop main firebase. He boarded a chopper bound for Song Mao. I was now officially the platoon leader for the Third Platoon, B Troop, 2-1 Cavalry.

Lt Ray could not teach me or tell me much in our very quick transition period of a few hours. My assuming command was not much different from most junior officers in RVN. I was luckier than some new platoon leaders since at least there was an incumbent platoon leader when I arrived.

You quickly realize there is much you do not know about war and combat despite all your training and preparation. Also, you have an awesome responsibility; 45 troopers depend on your leadership and military skills. I would pray to God that I am up to the challenge ahead and that we all would go home safely. Only time would tell over the next seven months.

THE ARMORED CAVALRY PLATOON

My platoon consisted of one officer, approximately 45 NCO's and enlisted personnel and 10 combat vehicles. The platoon had five sections: platoon HQ (one vehicle and five personnel), scout section (four vehicles and 16 –20 personnel), rifle squad (one vehicle and 5-10 personnel), tank section (three tanks and 16-19 personnel) and a mortar squad (one mortar track and four personnel). The troopers assigned to each section varied depending on the type of mission we were tasked.

My platoon looked like this:

Track 30 – Platoon Leader ACAV
Track 31 – Scout ACAV
Track 32 – Scout ACAV
Track 33 – Scout ACAV
Track 34 – Scout ACAV
Track 35 – Tank
Track 36 – Platoon Sergeant Tank
Track 37 – Tank
Track 38 – Infantry ACAV
Track 39 – Mortar Vehicle

The firepower of the platoon was enormous and could be devastating. Each tank had a 90mm main gun plus one 50-caliber and one 30-caliber machine gun. Each ACAV, except the mortar vehicle, had one 50-caliber machine gun and two M-60 machine guns, and the mortar vehicle had one 81mm mortar and one 50-caliber machine gun. Plus, all troopers had their own personal weapons, usually either an M -16 rifle or a 45-caliber pistol. We also carried hand grenades and a few soldiers carried the M-79 40mm grenade launcher as a personnel weapon.

Because of this tremendous firepower capability, the NVA and VC did not attack us unless they had a well thought-out battle plan. And even when they did have their act together, we could often defeat them with our superior firepower and mobility.

We were very fortunate always to have at least one tank available for road clearing missions. If the road had been mined, the tank would often times

find the mine (run over and detonate it) if our ground clearing crew did not find the mine first. A mine would not usually destroy a tank or hurt the occupants. A mine could totally destroy an ACAV and possibly kill some of the occupants.

With at least one tank along, it truly gave you extra firepower. The 90mm gun had several very powerful anti-personnel rounds. At less than 100 meters, you could kill many enemy troops in the open with a single shot. One tank gave you instant respect with the enemy.

The enemy also respected the mortar vehicle with its 81-mm indirect fire capability. This mortar gave us the ability to hit the enemy when the tanks or ACAVs could not see them. Also, it gave us the ability to quickly light up the night with the illumination rounds.

The enemy's favorite targets were usually the platoon leader's ACAV, the mortar vehicle and tanks in that order. The platoon leader's ACAV and platoon sergeant's tank were easy to recognize because they had two radio antennas. There was usually no doubt who was riding on these vehicles. Some cavalry units installed two antennas on every vehicle to confuse the enemy. Our squadron decided against doing that for some unknown reason.

Because the mortar vehicle did not have the M-60 machine guns, it was an easier target for the enemy. The mortar vehicles were in short supply during the Vietnam War, and we took extra effort to protect and care for ours. By the time I left the platoon in March 1970, this mortar vehicle was one of the few of the original platoon vehicles that had made the trip over from the United States to Vietnam in 1967.

Diesel fuel was the lifeblood of the platoon. The tanks at best got about a mile to the gallon, and we could run three to five days before we needed to be refueled.

An M-48 tank had dual fuel cells that would hold about 350 gallons. Occasionally one of the M-48 tanks would only have one operational fuel cell. That hampered our range when that occurred.

We often had to be refueled miles from nowhere. Chinook helicopters would bring the fuel to us in large 500-gallon rubber fuel bladders. Some ingenuity was often required to get the fuel from the fuel bladders to the

vehicles. Sometimes we had the luxury of having a small gasoline driven motorized pump to help, sometimes only a hand pump, and occasionally we had to devise a gravity flow system of refueling.

Maintenance of the armored vehicles was critical. At every rest stop, the tankers needed to be pulling crew-level maintenance, checking road wheels, tightening the track or cleaning the air filters. The ACAVs required maintenance also but not to the level of the tanks. All vehicle-mounted weapons were cleaned at least once a week. The dust from the roads would often be so severe that we had to clean them more often than that.

We once ran our vehicles for several months on worn-out road track. For some reason or another, tank and ACAV track were difficult to obtain through normal supply channels. Bad road track meant that the tanks were always throwing their tracks in tight turns and for the ACAVs the track was constantly snapping and we had to stop and replace a section. This is not a good situation, especially when you are trying to maneuver against the enemy. When the track comes off, your vehicle becomes an easy, sitting target. I remember what a joyous day it was for the platoon when new tank and ACAV track arrived at B Troop. We immediately took all our vehicles down to the makeshift airstrip outside the front gate of the firebase and installed new track.

FOR THE CAVALRY, A PLATOON WAR

My war was a platoon war. While infantry platoons fought together as companies and battalions, the platoons of 2-1 Cavalry did not. There are perhaps several reasons for this.

One was the nature of a cavalry platoon with its enormous firepower and mobility. The platoon had an automatic safety in numbers factor by definition.

Another contributing factor was the type of missions we were usually given. A cavalry platoon could do many missions, and one platoon was usually enough unless you were engaging the enemy in large numbers.

Our troop headquarters in the squadron were dispersed miles apart. One platoon was usually in the firebase at a time for maintenance and security purposes. That left two line platoons to send out on missions. Because the First Platoon had been decimated in the attack, which put additional pressure for about 90 - 120 days on the Second and Third Platoons to do the missions of the troop.

We worked with an additional cavalry platoon on two separate occasions. On another occasion, we had the luxury of having two platoons of the 1st Battalion, 50th Mechanized Infantry. Usually, our platoon worked independently of other platoons.

Our B Troop commanders were only in the field with us on a couple of occasions. For the most part that did not bother me at all. In fact, I felt more secure outside a firebase without someone of higher rank looking over my shoulder. Every time the troop commander left the firebase we had to conduct a map reading class. They were so unfamiliar with the terrain; they were lost the majority of the time and depended on me getting them where they wanted to go.

By being the only officer on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week with 45 enlisted men, this made an already stressful job even more stressful. You had no one to mentor you or give you any constructive feedback except the platoon sergeant. Many times you had to act and react on instinct and hope that your brief amount of training and background would get you through.

Luckily, I had two good platoon sergeants that I could talk to help plan and execute platoon missions and activities.

One minor incident, when working with another platoon, is interesting. In September 1969, I got a call on the radio from B Troop HQ to go south toward Phan Thiet and meet up with a platoon from C Troop. Supposedly some enemy had been spotted in the area, and the two platoons would conduct a sweep of the area to see what we could stir up.

This was a bad area we were heading toward because the radios did not work there, and we were out of range of the artillery. The enemy knew this, and once before there had been a major attack on C Troop which had been repulsed by Captain Abrams and his platoons.

It probably took us 30 minutes to an hour to reach the other platoon. When we arrived, they were laagered up in the standard defensive position awaiting our arrival.

My platoon assumed a defensive position, and we stopped our vehicle engines so I could dismount and find the other platoon leader. I saw the platoon leader's ACAV with two antennas and headed in that direction.

Soon I saw a dark haired, stubble-faced, dust-covered stressed-out individual with a flak jacket who looked like he might be the platoon leader. He was leaning with his right hand on the side of the ACAV.

As I approached him, there was something usual; he was wearing a class ring. Maybe we got a West Pointer here I thought. We usually did not wear any rings in Vietnam. Jumping off a tank or ACAV with a ring on is an invitation to disaster. If the ring catches on something, good-by finger.

The closer I got the more curious I became about this ring and the Lt, who was wearing it. Finally, I arrived and introduced myself to Lt Warren (Skip) Fee. We then discussed the mission we were about to undertake.

Suddenly Skip moved his hand, and I got a real close look at the ring. By golly, it's just like my ring that had been left at home – a University of Kentucky (UK) class ring.

Curiosity finally got the better of me, and I asked Skip what class he was in at UK. He was the class of 1966 and had gone to grad school before coming on active duty. We had not known each other at UK but had some friends in common. It was unbelievable that two UK grads would meet in this fashion so far from the real world.

We went ahead and conducted the mission without any contact with the enemy.

ROUGH START

As the platoon leader, you are expected to know about many things - military tactics, vehicle maintenance, weapons, communications, leadership etc. The Army tries to get you prepared for all this in the various courses they send you to before you have a platoon assignment. However, no course can ever fully prepare you for the particular environment you will find yourself in. Sometimes mistakes occur no matter how well you have been trained.

During the first month, I tried 110% to ensure that I met the expectations of my troop commander. Given what had happened to B Troop, Captain Barnes was almost to the point of being totally overbearing because he did not want another platoon massacre to happen during the remainder of his command time. Though I had not planned an Army career, I was not going to have the stigma of being relieved as a platoon leader.

All troop commanders have their idiosyncrasies, and Captain Barnes was no exception. One of his was he had to have the last word on any radio transmission. The subordinate could not end the transmission with a "Roger Out" which acknowledged your receipt of the message and that you were about to go on the mission at hand. Captain Barnes always had to end the transmission with the phase of "Six Out."

During one of my early days, he set me straight on this matter of radio protocol. No big deal I thought. If that is the way he wants to work, I can oblige him.

We tried to hide during radio transmissions the superior and subordinate relationship from the enemy. However, I am sure that within a few days of each new month, the enemy had determined our new radio frequencies and call signs. It is hard for a young man from Kentucky to change his accent each month.

I made a breach of radio security one day when I called Captain Barnes, "sir" during a radio transmission. That was an awkward moment for me, since the moment I closed my mouth I knew that I had screwed-up. I do not remember him saying much to me about the incident.

During the first month of my platoon assignment, I had another incident happen that showed a lack of judgment on my part. It involved our medic.

"Doc", our medic, was new in-country like me and just had been assigned to the Third Platoon. The medic rode on the platoon leader's ACAV and assisted in running the platoon headquarters – answering radio calls and pulling security duty at night in addition to his primary first aid medical job.

Our new "Doc' was one of these types who wanted to do everything and be with the troops. So, when we needed to set some trip flares around the platoon perimeter, he came out to help us.

Trip flares, if not handled properly, can be very dangerous. They put off an extreme amount of light and heat when set off. They can burn you very badly.

We had no formal instruction on how to set them and troopers from each vehicle were placing them in front of their positions. The next thing I know, "Doc" is arming one, and it begins burning. He is burned in one eye.

We quickly apply first aid to "Doc's" eye, but he was hurt bad enough to be taken back to the squadron aid station for treatment. I never saw this particular "Doc" again. It would be several weeks before we were assigned another "Doc."

I believe I learned several lessons from this incident with "Doc." If you do not know, ask. Secondly, do not risk a one of a kind resource. From then on, our "Docs" did not get involved in dealing with hazardous materials or assignments.

The crew on the platoon's leader's ACAV is very crucial – they need to be professionals, set the example and be self-starters. The crew had to maintain our ACAV and their crew and individual weapons, monitor the radio when the platoon leader was not on the ACAV, pull guard duty, and keep the ACAV stocked with food, water, fuel and ammo.

The driver is very important since he expected to do first-level maintenance and drive the platoon leader everywhere he needs to go – day or night. I had several drivers very quickly and finally transferred Gary Bailey from ACAV 38 to be my driver. Gary was an excellent driver and only on just a

single occasion did I have to hitch a ride in another platoon ACAV. We also had two side-gunners with mounted M-60's and the platoon medic on my ACAV. Early on my side-gunners were not the best, and I replaced them with Ben Tschetter, Frank Gracie, Bill Ferguson, and Larry Casey, who did an admirable job on the ACAV. Robert Greene was an excellent medic who served with me for several months.

CAVALRY MISSIONS

The cavalry was used for many different missions. In June 1969, the squadron was transferred from the 4th Infantry Division to the 1st Field Force. And with this reassignment, came a change in missions.

Our primary mission was to keep the roads clear and open so that convoys could run Cam Rahn Bay to Saigon. Our portion of the highway ran from Phan Thiet in the south to Phan Rang in the north. Typically, we would open up a stretch of road by searching for mines and booby-traps, then strong point the road to allow the convoys to pass.

The ground team during road clearing had hot, dirty, dangerous work. We usually put our Kit Carson Scout (former VC) in front followed by 6 to 8 troopers, one or more of them using an electronic mine sweeper – metal detector. It usually took us two to four hours to declare the road safe for the convoys. Often there would be a convoy running north and one running south on the same day.

Once done with the clearing, we would strong point the road. This consisted of placing four groups of vehicles consisting of two to three vehicles each up and down the road we just cleared. This way if a convoy was attacked, we would have a few vehicles with troops who could respond quickly.

A couple of times while clearing the road, we missed the mines and our vehicles hit them. A tank was usually the lead vehicle in our column of vehicles going down the road. Both my 35 and 37 tanks hit mines on different occasions. Tank 35 was damaged so badly that we had to turn it in for another. No one was hurt in either of these incidents.

Other missions included:

- Patrols -- looking for enemy – lasting from hours to days
- All night ambushes to kill the enemy
- Guarding support troops to prevent enemy attacks or ambushes
- "Thunder-runs" (firing 50 caliber machine guns and tank main guns) at night to disorient and interdict the enemy
- Search & destroy missions to locate and kill the enemy

Looking back on it, our Area of Operations could be a bad, bad place. The intelligence reports from higher headquarters, we got at the platoon level, were crap. I suppose if we knew the real enemy intelligence situation we would have been scared to death. So, they mainly keep us in the dark and let the platoons be the trip wires for the squadron.

NIGHT DEFENSIVE POSITIONS and ROUTINES

When the night came, we assumed a fighting position, which depended on where we were located. Typically, we would be in the field but on occasion we could be on security duty within a firebase.

When in the field, we would put our vehicles in a circle spreading out over about a 75-yard diameter. All vehicles would be in the circle with the exception of the mortar vehicle and the platoon leader's ACAV, which would be in the center of the circle. The front of the vehicles would be facing outward giving us a field of fire of 360 degrees with our tank main guns and the 50 caliber machine guns on the ACAVs.

To guard against enemy rocket-propelled grenades (RPG's) hitting and destroying our vehicles, we put up a 10-12 foot piece of chain link fence about 10 feet in front of the vehicle. That way if an RPG were fired at the front of the vehicle, it would detonate before hitting the tank or ACAV. We would also set out Claymore anti-personnel mines after getting the chain link set up.

Depending on where we were and whom we had with us, we may put out a listening post team or an ambush team from the platoon. When we had ARVN infantry troops with us, we would try to put them out 100 yards or so in front of us. However, they did not like this because they were afraid of getting caught in 'no man's land' if any fight started between the enemy and us.

When we were on internal firebase security duty, our vehicles would pull into one of the engineered pits where only the very top of the vehicle was exposed. Again, there would be chain link fence in front of the vehicle parking position.

Whether we were in the field or on a base, all vehicles had one person manning the 50-caliber machine gun during the hours of darkness. We regularly took two hours shifts manning the vehicle. The vehicle radios were left on so we could do a platoon radio check every hour or as needed. This necessitated us starting the vehicles every few hours to keep from totally discharging the batteries. No doubt the VC and NVA knew where we

were and avoided us unless they wanted to fight.

We had three types of hand-held flares we used to signal during the night. The white illumination flare would be fired to check noises or just to give us some quick light to survey the area in front of us. If we were under attack, the red flare was to be used, and the all-clear signal was the green flare. Also, our 81 mm mortar had illumination rounds and depending on where we were, we might fire off a few of these during the night. If we were near a base with artillery support, we could call them for illumination rounds too.

Our ambushes used some technology that we could set out to keep the enemy from sneaking up on us. It was a portable electronic system that had three sensors that detected movement. It required someone to wear a set of headphones and listen for sound patterns from the sensors. I am not sure how effective this system was, and it did not seem to help or hurt our ambush teams.

We also had Starlight scopes that we could use at night. They amplify starlight, moonlight filtered by clouds, and the fluorescence of rotting vegetation about 50,000 times to allow a person to see in the night. We had one in the platoon that would fit an M-16 and one that would attach to a 50 caliber machine gun. They were battery powered, and it seems like the batteries (non-standard) were often in very short supply. Consequently, we did not get as much use out of these as we should have.

Occasionally, we would have Air Force "Spooky" aircraft working near us. These were also called "Puff, the Magic Dragon." Typically they were Douglas AC-47's with three 7.62 mm General Electric miniguns to fire through two rear window openings and the side cargo door, all on the left (pilot's) side of the aircraft. Not sure who controlled these aircraft and I was never in radio contact with one.

Our sleeping conditions varied depending on where we were. Sometimes we all slept in the vehicle, which was not recommended. If an enemy RPG or mortar round hit the vehicle, it might kill or injure all troopers on that vehicle. Other times we might put a cot beside the ACAV or tank with a poncho tied to the vehicle for cover from the elements. If we were within a firebase, there were typically permanent bunkers there in which to put our cots and sleep.

THE LE HONG PHONG FOREST

The Le Hong Phong Forest ran near the seacoast from Phan Thiet north to almost Phan Rang. It was a triple canopy jungle that served as VC stronghold and sanctuary. The forest itself covered approximately 400 square miles of dense thorny undergrowth, which provided excellent concealment for the enemy from both aerial and ground observation by friendly forces. The US military had tried to defoliate it with Agent Orange, but it still proved to be a valuable hiding place for the enemy. The forest was difficult to navigate with our vehicles, and the going could be very slow.

Someone high up in the military chain of command came up with an idea – let's build a highway into the forest so we can go chase the enemy. The road would take the shape of a wagon wheel.

This would be no ordinary road. We found ourselves with a company of engineers (687th Land Clearing Company) using giant bulldozers with Rome plows. A Rome plow dozer can knock about anything down. That is what the engineer company proceeded to do – knock down portions of the forest tree-by-tree to cut the highways desired.

We spent about three weeks with the engineers, guarding them while they worked during the day and while they slept at night. Not bad duty since we got one hot meal a day from the engineers. A US infantry company (D Company, 3/506th Bn, 101st Airborne Division) also joined us for security, patrolling and night ambush purposes.

Leading one of the infantry platoons was a Lt that I had met at Jungle School in Panama. He and I attended a field religious service together along with about 15 other troopers during our time in the Le Hong Phong. Later I heard that he was killed in an ambush.

The engineers finished their work in about six to eight weeks and left the forest. We were now about to use this new highway to go chase the enemy.

The enemy also knew how to use this highway. They quickly mined all the existing trails, which made them very hazardous to use.

The Le Hong Phong provided our squadron plenty of excitement. However, we never were able to engage any large-size enemy units there, and the Rome plow cuts were of very limited value because they had been mined. Two other things of note occurred while we were working in the forest. My platoon and the First Platoon of B Troop were working together along with an ARVN company and their MACV advisors.

Our squadron commander, LTC Robert Bond, was in his command and control chopper above us and wanted to use some CS (tear) gas to stir up the enemy for us. So, LTC Bond gave us fair warning, and we scrambled to find and put our gas masks on. Then he dropped the CS gas canisters from his chopper. Nothing happened other than the ARVN troops who didn't have gas masks got a taste of CS gas. This was the only time I used a gas mask in Vietnam.

Later on the same mission we were on the beaches of the Le Hong Phong right before dark and had an Australian Navy destroyer in artillery direct support with their five-inch naval guns. This was a pleasant surprise.

During the night, a Vietnamese fishing boat started to land on the beach right in front of us. One of my tank commanders put his powerful searchlight on the boat, which immediately turned tail. The tank commander wanted to blow the small boat out of the water with the tank main gun. But, I could not see any reason to do this since we were not being threatened at the time. I reported this incident to the Aussie destroyer, which was just on the horizon. Not sure if they did anything.

Finally, another platoon mate of mine from ROTC Summer Camp 1967 and classmate from Jungle School, Lt Rick Cantlin, was assigned to an MACV detachment at Luong Son. He, his ARVN company and my platoon had the opportunity to work together several times in the Le Hong Phong. I have photos of the large python snake the ARVN's killed and ate. I also have a photo of Lt Cantlin holding the head of the snake. As I found out during my entire Army career, you run into people that you met or knew during other times and circumstances.

THE RICE HARVEST 1969

Late October and early November 1969 was rice harvest time in our sector of operations. The VC and NVA would harass the rice farmers and often collect some of the rice as a tax. This was a well-known enemy tactic, and we were stationed out near the rice harvest to slow the VC and NVA down. We would be a reaction force, if needed.

My platoon and three self-propelled 105 mm artillery pieces were sent about 10 miles south of the B Troop firebase to guard the rice harvest. There was a small Chinese village (Song Luy) of a couple hundred people there along the river. There was a small regional forces Vietnamese army unit in the village. As was typical of our mission orders, we had no idea of how long we would be staying in a given area. It could be a day, a week or a month, depending on what other mission opportunities arose.

We set up a three-quarter circle perimeter right outside the village. To our front, at about 200-300 yards was a dirt mound that was approximately three feet tall. To our left were open fields and to our right was the river. Behind us was the Chinese village.

We sent out listening patrols each night on the other side of the mound. This would typically consist of 6-8 men. We had a new electronic sensor monitoring system that helped the patrols avoid someone sneaking up on them. We also planted some different electronic senor devices across the river that the artillery could monitor and fire if there were any activity during the night around these devices.

I don't remember how long we had been there, but one day, a chopper with a colonel from Task Force South arrived. To put it bluntly, he was not happy with our defensive perimeter. So, word came down through channels to quickly improve the defensive perimeter. We worked all night filling sandbags and empty artillery ammo cases with sand and within about 24 hours the perimeter was much improved. The lesson learned was always to be improving your defensive situation.

We probably spent about three weeks guarding the rice harvest and nothing consequential happened. The artillery did fire some missions supporting MACV and the regional forces who were in the rice patties with the farmers.

I don't know if our presence made a difference or not in slowing down the VC and NVA during the rice harvest.

One interesting thing occurred later on at this village. We had only one tank running and it had worn-out track that it was continually throwing. To get into the village, our armored vehicles had to cross the river. Because so many vehicles had gone in and out of the river, the crossing spot in the river had become dug out, slick and difficult to traverse on both riverbanks.

While we were leaving the village, our only tank got stuck in the river. Typically, it takes another tank to pull out a tank that is stuck. When you weigh over 50 tons, it takes another 50 tons to move you. This time we did not have that luxury of another tank. It would take at least a couple of hours to get the VTR (tank retriever) from B Troop to come down to us. Plus it was late in the afternoon, and it would be dark soon.

So, we put three ACAV's together in a chain via tow cables (combined weight of about 45 tons), hooked them to the tank and were able to pull the tank out of the river. It was a tricky and somewhat high-risk tank recovery, but it was our only option, or we would have spent the night there with a tank stuck in the river. This is the first and only time I ever attempted something like this, and luckily it worked.

ON PATROL

As the war began to wind down and American combat forces started to pull out, we found ourselves on more foot patrols. We usually left our vehicles behind and went out on foot looking for the enemy. A real cavalryman never wants to park his armored vehicle and play infantry. His vehicle is the weapon that gives him the edge over the enemy and without it he feels vulnerable.

Nevertheless, in winter 1970, I took my platoon minus the tanks north of Song Mao for a two to three-day patrol. After spending the night, we set off on foot the next morning after a breakfast of C-Rations to investigate the area. We were in an area consisting of several large hills.

I assembled a patrol of 12 men, including Davey, our Vietnamese teenager, and Mao, our Kit Carson Scout (former VC). As luck would have it someone had a camera and took a picture of the 12 of us, which I still possess. We were armed to the teeth with M-16s, M-79s, and hand grenades. We took one portable radio, a PRC-25.

We left the parked ACAVs and started toward one of the hills, which was probably a 30-minute walk away. I picked out the highest hill in the group and decided we should climb it to get a better view of the area. Little did we know that we had just passed by two VC in hiding on an adjoining hill to our right.

The 12 of us started to climb the hill. After a rest break about a quarter of the way up, we pushed on. The hill was very rocky and steep to climb. When we got about one half the way up, I wanted another rest break but I sent the first six men in the column on to the top. I did not want us to be left on the side of the hill in case there was someone at the top.

Six of us stopped on the hillside. One of the troopers had an M-79 with some new CS (tear gas) grenades that we had never used. I asked him to give me the weapon and a couple of CS rounds. I was about to fire them into the hill to our immediate front, the hill to our right as we had walked up.

I fired the two CS rounds, and the smoke started to drift across the hillside. The next thing we knew all hell broke loose on the top of the hill. All six

weapons were blazing and for a few minutes I thought we had got ourselves into a firefight.

The remaining six of us scrambled to the top of the hill to find out what was going on. Unbeknownst to us, the two CS rounds had stirred up two VC on the opposite hill, and they had decided to make a run for it. The VC probably thought the next M-79 rounds in their direction would be high explosive ones.

Given the angle that the troopers were firing at from the top of the hill, the two VC got away in between two other hills and into the woods. They only left behind a straw hat. Since they did not return fire, I am not sure whether or not they were armed.

I immediately called squadron headquarters and reported our brief contact with the enemy. From that call, the artillery peppered the area down with approximately 20-30 rounds of 105mm artillery. This was during the dry season and within a few minutes of firing the artillery, we had a massive forest fire going. Given the fire, we elected not to follow the VC into the woods.

This limited action was typical of the American strategy in the war. We used firepower where we could to save manpower (lives). We probably did not kill either of the VC, but we undoubtedly scared the life out of them, at least for the day. We were very lucky. The VC probably could have killed several of us on the patrol that day given that their positions on the hillside were well concealed.

I was later tasked to lead a combined platoon patrol. The First and Third Platoons were manning the B Troop firebase at the time. So we took 10 troopers from each platoon plus the platoon sergeant from the First Platoon, SSG Augustine Peterman, as the top NCO on the patrol. I was not comfortable with this arrangement since I did not personally know one-half of the patrol.

We practiced as best we could for a few days inside the firebase before being helicoptered out northwest of the firebase for about a 30-minute ride. The helicopters landed, we jumped off and the helicopters quickly departed. We had not been on the ground for five minutes, and we come across a small

fire with a bottle of nuoc mam nearby. That gave me a sinking feeling – somebody had been nearby when we landed.

We patrolled for several hours finally finding an area that gave us good cover and concealment for the night ambush. It turned out we used a dry creek bed that had a very rough rock outcropping on one side, which would make it hard for some to sneak up on us from the backside. There were good fields of fire to our front and shade trees along the creek to keep us cool during the day.

We used this position as our base of operations and the night ambush position for the whole time we were out there. This was not a smart move, but we did not find any better spots during our daily patrols.

The patrol turned out to be uneventful after three days and nights. Right before the helicopters arrived to pick us up, we had a mad-minute where everyone fired their weapons. The helicopters picked us up and took us back to B Troop.

WHISKEY MOUNTAIN

Whiskey Mountain (Nui Ta Dom), north of Phan Thiet, was a much-discussed place in our Area of Operations (AO). First of all, it reminded many of us of a physically well-endowed young woman lying on her back. Secondly, it was the most prominent terrain feature for miles. Finally, the Army had established a radio-relay station and search light on top of the mountain. We used it to relay radio transmissions to our troop HQ when we were out of normal radio range.

In late November 1969, the Third Platoon was sent down to Whiskey Mountain to guard an engineer company (864th Engineer Bn). The engineers were blacktopping the road (QL 1) south toward Phan Thiet.

The engineers had built themselves a base camp on the side of the mountain and it looked fairly secure. However, the VC had attacked them (with sappers), and the engineers needed some additional security and a reaction force in case they were attacked again.

We left Luong Son (B Troop HQ) and traveled to Whiskey Mountain via the Le Hong Phong Forest. The trip was an all day journey because we could not go by the highway. I had requested a light observation plane 0-1 Bird-dog, radio call sign "Seahorse", to fly over us and guide us through the Rome plow cuts in the forest. This also gave us added protection in case we got attacked. "Seahorse" would be able to call in Cobra gunships or Air Force fighter / bomber support, if needed. Luckily we made the trip without incident. We closed on the south side of the mountain late in the afternoon. We had been on the move all day long and were hungry and tired.

Our primary job there was to circle up in our standard defensive position at dusk within a couple of kilometers of the mountain. I would always radio my map coordinates to Landing Zone Sherry in case we would need artillery support during the night. During the day, we rested and pulled maintenance on our vehicles and weapons.

The engineers were so pleased to have a cavalry platoon with our firepower around that they agreed to feed us one hot meal a day, usually the noon meal. They also had showers for us to use, and we could get our clothes washed by the local Vietnamese women. For the cavalry, this was not bad duty at all.

Each night after midnight, we made a "thunder-run." A run consists of three to four ACAVs and one tank. The purpose of the run was to try to keep the enemy off balance. We would drive the vehicles for about a mile along the treeline all the while firing our 50 caliber and M-60 machine guns. Occasionally we would fire the tank 90mm main gun. This is quite a commotion in the night with vehicles starting up and firing their weapons. My guess the bad guys always heard us coming and could take cover long before we started shooting up everything in sight.

Little did I know at the time how dangerous a place -- Whiskey Mountain. It turns out later that our unit discovered that it was a VC and NVA hiding sanctuary. And we attacked it with heavy forces, artillery and B-52s but we never able to drive the enemy out.

We left the engineers about two days before Christmas. We moved down to Phan Thiet to the 1-50th Mechanized Infantry rear HQ at Landing Zone Betty and enjoyed Christmas holidays there.

ACAV 32 TAKES A SWIM

The monsoon season came in October and lasted until January. These continual, heavy rains made our operations more difficult.

The hardest rains, I have ever experienced, occurred during my times in Vietnam. They seemed to last for hours.

I wore glasses and had to take them off during the rains. My eyes never felt such a pounding rain. It was almost impossible to see during these monsoon rains.

The roads in our area of operations were already in bad shape due to the war and lack of maintenance in general. The monsoons made them worse. Creeks would rise out of their banks taking all in sight with them. Culverts would wash away, and side roads would develop, as the civilian traffic would try to drive around the washed out areas. Often we took our vehicle tow cables and helped a stranded truck or bus.

In November 1969, we had been sent to Song Mao to guard the squadron headquarters. Occasionally we were given a road-clearing mission to the north toward Phan Rang.

There were several choke points going north. One was a small bridge that would not support the weight a tank (approximately 50 tons). An ACAV (about 13 tons) could safely cross but a tank could not. In the dry season, there was no problem. The tank would swing down the side of the bridge and ford the small creek and on we would continue the mission.

During the monsoon season, the engineers erected a portable bridge to the side of the permanent bridge. A tank could use this portable bridge to cross the rain-swollen creek.

One day we went out on a road-clearing mission and used the bridge going both directions. We experienced no problems.

On the next day and after heavy rains, we come to the temporary bridge again. This time water from the creek is flowing rapidly over the center of it. The bridge appears to be intact but to be on the cautious side we send one vehicle at a time starting with an ACAV. The platoon sergeant's tank pulls

to the side, and we send ACAV 32 across with only the driver and vehicle commander aboard.

About halfway across the bridge, we get a startling surprise as 32 falls from the center of the bridge into the raging creek. The vehicle completely disappears under the water, and the two crewmembers are scrambling to get off and away from the vehicle. Luckily both troopers could swim and they managed to make it back to shore.

I called squadron HQs and reported what had happened. My road-clearing mission suddenly changed to a vehicle recovery one.

We managed to get the weapons and radio off the vehicle. We did not have with us a cable long enough to recover 32. I wanted to stay the night there, but we were ordered to return to the squadron HQs area.

Next day we obtained a large helicopter sling and went back and recovered 32. One of our tanks was able to pull it out of the creek. The vehicle was a wet, dirty mess, and it was a total loss.

One interesting thing happened from the time we left 32 till the time it was recovered. Someone had swum out and taken all our troopers personal gear – clothing, shaving supplies etc. To this day, we do not know whether this was the enemy or friendly Vietnamese that did this.

CHRISTMAS 1969 and NEW YEAR'S 1970

We had just spent approximately 30 days with the engineers at Whiskey Mountain. About two days before Christmas I received orders to move my platoon down to Phan Thiet for Christmas. We were instructed to spend Christmas in 1-50 Mechanized Infantry firebase at Landing Zone Betty. This was a pleasant surprise.

Phan Thiet was a beautiful city northeast of Saigon along the coast. It is the home of Vietnamese nuoc mam; a concentrated fish oil that is used in cooking. There would be some beautiful beaches there for us to enjoy.

We road marched into Phan Thiet and were met on the outside of town by a ¼ ton jeep with a driver and a sergeant to escort to the 1-50 Mech Infantry firebase. During the road march, there was an incident with one of my ACAV commanders that challenged my leadership of the platoon.

Our radios were crucial to us in the cavalry. It was the best way to communicate from vehicle to vehicle when we were on the move. Also, it gave the platoon leader information that could help him determine the actions of the platoon.

One of my ACAV commanders suddenly decided to monopolize the radio. He was almost acting crazy. I told him several times to get off the radio and leave the frequency clear for official platoon business. He continued his monopolization of the radio despite my several warnings. All the vehicle commanders and their drivers heard this verbal exchange.

He did not stop. As soon as we stopped and parked in the firebase, I told him he was relieved from being the ACAV commander because he had been insubordinate to me. I quickly radioed the troop commander using the radio relay station on top of Whiskey Mountain. This trooper was on a chopper the next day headed for B Troop and subsequently reassigned to A Troop.

The platoon would enjoy not having to pull guard duty for several days. The beautiful beaches were a welcome diversion for us.

As New Year's Day approached, we were ordered back to Whiskey Mountain for a few days. There we spent three days and nights with two platoons from the 1-50 Mechanized Infantry.

On our way out of LZ Betty, Tank 35, commanded by Sergeant Vic Thompson, experienced engine problems and went over to our D Troop (Air) for repair. As it turns out, the crew of this tank seemed very happy down at Phan Thiet and content to spend the rest of their tour in Vietnam there. Only when I flew back to Phan Thiet from Luong Son 45 days later did I get the tank repaired and back on the road to us. I was very disappointed in this crew for their lack of initiative in returning their vehicle to operational status and rejoining the platoon.

There were two events of note while we were with 1-50 Mechanized Infantry. One of the infantry platoons with us was the battalion 4.2 inch mortar platoon. The infantry went out patrolling on foot after we set up our defensive positions. They discovered an enemy bunker complex. About midnight, the 4.2 inch mortars fired a barrage of CS (tear) rounds, waited about 10 to 15 minutes and then fired a barrage of high explosive rounds. The intent was to flush the VC / NVA out of their bunkers with the tear gas and finish them off with the high explosive rounds. Next day the infantry checked the area out and apparently the bunker complex had not occupied.

On one of the days, we decided to get back on the road and patrol up and down the road. No more than we had started moving on the road and Tank 37 hit a mine – there were no injuries to the troopers on the tank. However, there was damage to the tank road track and the suspension system. We believe the mine was very possibly planted right under our noses after we had gotten into our defensive position the previous day. That was how resourceful the enemy could be. We sent Tank 37 on to Luong Son for repair.

Then we were off to Landing Zone Sherry with only one tank in the platoon.

LANDING ZONE SHERRY

We could see LZ Sherry, south of Thien Giao, from Whiskey Mountain. They were our closest artillery support. However, to get there from Whiskey Mountain was another matter.

The LZ was down a road that the VC liked to mine, and it was out in the countryside all by itself. The LZ had a Duster (40mm anti-aircraft) unit plus a 105mm artillery battery and some ARVN troops for perimeter security. Those 40mm Dusters would come in real handy when the North Vietnamese Air Force decided to fly over. They were used in an anti-personnel role much like a machine gun.

The trip there was without incident. However, as we entered the LZ, I noticed something happening near one of the vehicles in front of me.

One of our troopers was standing down on the ground, and an ARVN soldier was pointing an M-16 rifle at him. Seemed at the time like a strange welcoming committee.

I immediately dismounted to find trooper Gary Sanders in trouble. He had made a pass at a Vietnamese woman as we entered the LZ. The woman's husband had not taken kindly to Gary's remarks.

I pulled Gary aside and ordered him to apologize. At first he did not want to, but I told him he had to do it for the platoon. He finally apologized, and we went about parking our vehicles around the perimeter.

We were at LZ Sherry for about three weeks. This was the first time since I arrived in Vietnam that three hot meals a day were available. Plus, we had for the first time all the milk and eggnog you could drink. Oh, the small pleasures of life.

We did one road-clearing mission north of the LZ Sherry toward Thien Giao, but it was an uneventful mission. This was a particularly bad VC infested area where the 1-50 Mech Infantry had come under attack back in December 1969.

One night the VC or NVA mortared us. About a dozen 60mm or 82 mm rounds landed inside the LZ during the middle of the night. Suddenly all

machine guns on our vehicles were firing and the 40 mm Dusters starting firing. This is a precaution against a sapper or human wave attack. Luckily after a few minutes we called a cease-fire, and it was quiet the rest of the night.

On our way out of LZ Sherry in route to our home firebase, we are towing ACAV 38 behind Tank 36. Suddenly 38 had a mine go off underneath it, and its track is blown off on the left side. We abandoned 38 right there and proceeded on.

It was platoon standard operating procedure that you had on a helmet and flak jacket when we were on the move in our vehicles. When Tank 36 detonated the mine, a huge rock came up and hit Charles Goodwin on the head. He was riding outside of Tank 36. If he had not had his helmet on, he might have been seriously injured or killed. Our going to work procedures paid off that day.

We were instructed to return to Luong Son via the Le Hong Phong Forest and stay off the roads since they had not been cleared. This was to lead to an exciting day.

We quickly moved through the Le Hong Phong Forest using the Rome plow cuts and trails. This was expedient but not smart on my part.

We were to hit three more land mines that day. Luckily we rolled over top of all three before they exploded. No one was hurt, and these three mines damaged no vehicles.

Since then my definition of a bad day is anytime I hit more than four mines. Seldom do I have a bad day.

The troop commander personally greeted us upon our return since he had not seen us for almost two months. It was good to see Captain Gonzalo Gonzales again after being gone for two months.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR OUR CAVALRY PLATOON

- Out in the field 80% of the time
- On duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week; no days off
- Must be able to respond/operate under any conditions, any time of day or night, rain or shine
- One hot meal a day, cold C-rations the other two meals
- Dirty and noisy environment – powerful weapons (tank main gun, 50 caliber machine guns) and heavy equipment being operated (tanks and ACAVs).
- Around powerful and noisy artillery weapons when in or near firebases.
- One shower a week; dirty most of the time due to dust from operating on the dirt roads
- Guard duty every night - lasting at least two hours
- Sleeping on the ground, in the back of a vehicle and occasionally on a field cot.
- Frequently working in or near areas (triple canopy forests and jungles) that had been sprayed with Agent Orange defoliant
- Threat of malaria
- Very high-stress environment – attack or ambush could come at any time; very vulnerable to mortars when in base camps; could hit a deadly mine when on the roads or in the jungles. Easy to be injured by vehicles or when using heavy weapons. Weapons were going off at all times of the day and the night. Handling high explosives to blow up enemy mines, tunnels or bunkers.
- We had a few marijuana problems down at the platoon level, but I

don't believe they were serious. I remember we had the alcoholic Sergeant Major at headquarters, and LTC Robert Bond got rid of all the hard liquor in attempt to take the booze away from him. We got so little beer in the field it wasn't much of a problem. Two beers was my limit since you never knew when you might have to be ready for action.

SOME TRAUMATIC AND STRESSFUL EVENTS

- Troop B soldier from another platoon accidentally killed by a sergeant who was cleaning his weapon.

- Troop C First Platoon leader (officer) killed in an ambush in an area that our platoon often patrolled.

- Third Platoon while on foot patrol missed being ambushed by VC and then attacking them when they decided to run.

- On road clearing missions, finding mines in the road and blowing them with high explosives. Tanks 35 and 37 in the Third Platoon hit mines before we could find them, and the vehicles were put out of action.

- Missing mines on road clearing missions and seeing friendly forces injured / killed due to our oversight. This happened to the Third Platoon when we cleared the road for an ARVN convoy and missed a land mine in the turn of a road. We helped medevac the wounded ARVN soldiers.

- During road clearing missions, being assigned to the ground team. This group of 5-7 people was highly exposed to stepping on land mines and enemy attack.

- Tanks and ACAV's hitting large land mines set by enemy. This occurred during road clearing missions and in the jungle. ACAV 33 in the Third Platoon, hit a mine in the Le Hong Phong forest, one crew member was blown off the back of the ACAV onto the ground and the ACAV caught on fire and was completely destroyed.

- Troop B Second Platoon being ambushed in an area where we often patrolled and two troopers KIA with rocket-propelled grenade.

- Losing ACAV 32 in a swollen, raging river. Unbeknown to us, bridge section had washed out. Vehicle driver and ACAV commander safely escaped from the river.

- The VC sapper attack on Troop B, First Platoon that occurred on July 6, 1969. Six friendly KIA's and over 19 friendly WIA's as a result.

- Guarding the engineers at Whiskey Mountain, north of Phan Thiet – this was a dangerous VC / NVA stronghold, and the area was busy with enemy activity.

- Nighttime thunder-runs when guarding the engineers at Whiskey Mountain. Several vehicles are running in a single file firing all their weapons to one side. Very noisy and dangerous operation.

- Periodic patrols and night ambushes

- Being attacked by mortars and sappers when in base camps. The attack on Song Mao of April 1, 1970 was especially stressful and dangerous. Troop C was attacked and successfully repelled the enemy. Troop A was beside the Squadron ammo dump that was destroyed. On the days following the attack, the Squadron's Troops B, and D chased the retreating enemy force killing approximately 150 of them.

MORALE BOOSTERS

It is hard to be young, away from home in a foreign country fighting in an unpopular war. Unfortunately, we of Vietnam service were the first generation of American troops to be involved in such a war. There were things that helped us get through these times.

I owe a lot to my wife (then fiancée) for regularly writing to me and sending me weekly 'care' packages of delicious foodstuffs from home. Without her constant love and support during my time in Vietnam, it would have made my journey there much more difficult if not impossible. My parents also keep in touch and regularly sent me 'care' packages too.

Mail was crucial to the troops, and we tended to get mail every time a hot meal was delivered to us in the field – usually once a day. So, we got mail from home frequently. Along with the mail, we normally got 10-15 copies of the Stars and Stripes daily newspaper; although they might be seven to ten days old by the time we received them.

Every few weeks, the platoons would receive special purpose (SP) packages. These had writing supplies – ballpoint pens, paper and envelopes. They also included shaving supplies, several types of tropical candies and most important – cigarettes, cigars and snuff. When these came in, we would typically have a platoon meeting and divvy the contents up depending on who needed what.

Armed Forces Vietnam Network Radio was broadcast all over the country, and we could pick up their signal on our AM transistor radios. Every vehicle had one or two radios, and we listened to rock and roll music every chance we got. Many of us listened to the radio while on guard duty during the night. It helped pass the time and kept us awake.

Since we were in the field so much, we seldom saw the Red Cross "Donut Dollies" and never saw a USO show. The Third Platoon was visited while on duty at Song Mao by Sheila Ann Kuehl ("Zelda" from the Many Loves of Dobie Gillis TV show) and an unknown airline stewardess.

While some units had memorial services for KIA's, I don't remember participating in one or hearing about one in our squadron while in Vietnam.

ENDINGS

My tour as an armored cavalry platoon leader ended in March 1970 when I was reassigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Troop to be the platoon leader of the Squadron Support Platoon. It was a mixed time for me as we made the last road trip from Luong Son to Song Mao where I turned over the platoon to the platoon sergeant. (Later, I returned to B Troop and was the XO for a very short period during the invasion of Cambodia.)

I was ready for a change in positions. The stress of leading a combat platoon was great, and it had been an around the clock job. I had given it my all for seven months and had only left the platoon for a few hours on a couple of occasions.

In many ways, I had been rewarded. Though we had lost five vehicles (ACAVs 32, 33 and 38 and tanks 35 and 37) to mines and rivers, we had no KIAs and no serious injuries to platoon members. This is something that I am proud of and cherish to this day.

We did not come home from Vietnam to a hero's welcome. In some cases, even our families despised us.

Time has healed this wound for many of us. Especially after the hero's welcome that our brothers from Desert Storm received.

George L. Skypeck, a Vietnam veteran wrote the poem called "Soldier" that says it all for those who served:

**I was that which others did not want to be.
I went where others feared to go and did
what others failed to do.**

**I asked nothing from those who gave
nothing, and reluctantly accepted the
thought of eternal loneliness...
should I fail.**

**I have seen the face of terror; felt the
stinging cold of fear; and enjoyed the
sweet taste of a moment's love.**

**I have cried, pained and hoped...but most
of all, I have lived times other would
say were best forgotten.**

**At least someday I will be able to say that
I was proud of what I was...a soldier.**

END

EPILOGUE

Jane Wills and I were married about two months after I got home from Vietnam and left active service. During our 40+ year marriage we had two sons, who are now both grown and on their own. We have four grandchildren.

In the summer of 1967, at ROTC Summer Camp, I met Mark Weisenbloom who became a very good friend over the 43 years we knew each other. Mark and I were in Vietnam at the same time and landed in the hospital in April/May 1970 in Cam Rahn Bay at the same time. We were to see each other many times over the years. We both developed a love of the hobby fly-fishing and had several good trips over the years until his passing in 2010 from non-Hodgkin lymphoma contracted from Mark's Vietnam service.

As I said at the beginning of these writings, in some ways we can put our Vietnam experience in better perspective after all these years. One perspective is the pain and suffering some troopers incurred. One case in point follows.

Lt James "Jim" Derrill Stevenson, a platoon leader in C Troop, was KIA on October 25, 1969. He was fairly new in-country and had been a platoon leader for less than a month. Lt Stevenson was born on July 24, 1945 and entered the service from Western Springs, IL. Jim's name is on the Vietnam Memorial Wall on Panel 17W, Row 118.

Jim was killed in a VC ambush in the "no man's land" area between B and C Troops. Several VC popped out of a culvert right as his ACAV was passing over it. One of them fired an RPG -7 (rocket propelled grenade), which hit the commander's cupola. Multiple fragment wounds killed him instantly.

I do not recall whether Jim's platoon was able to kill any of the VC. It does not matter at this point.

What I do know it that this incident has bothered his predecessor platoon leader (Warren "Skip" Fee) all these many years. He has carried this burden around that it could have been him that was killed on that day.

As I have pointed out to Skip, it could have been about any one of about six platoon leaders that could have been at the wrong place at the right time. It

could have been me, for that matter. I remember rolling over that culvert several times while clearing the road between B and C Troops.

Skip Fee dedicated his life to helping build facilities for US Army military personnel. He has tried to payback in his way for the life that was taken from us.

The 2-1 Cavalry stood-down from Vietnam service in October 1970 and the squadron colors were returned to the 2nd Armored Division at Ft Hood, TX.

The Jungle Operations Training Center in the Canal Zone of Panama finally closed in June 1999. The Center was the victim of Cold War budget reductions and the US Government turning the Canal Zone over to Panama. In many ways, it was a valuable training ground for junior leaders in small unit tactics. No doubt the school will be missed, and it would not surprise me that a similar school is started again somewhere in the Americas.

Lt Dick Specia and I have seen each other once since we parted company in Vietnam in July 1969. I was on a business trip in 1987 to San Antonio, called him, and arranged to meet him for dinner. Dick arrived in a Porsche 911 automobile with a very attractive woman at his side. As it turns out, it was not his wife but his current significant other. Dick has had a successful career in construction and in approximately 20 years that I had known him three wives. The three of us had a great evening together catching up on old-times.

The ACAV commander who was relieved during Christmas 1969 and I have worked together to build the 2-1 Cavalry Association. We put out past differences behind us in 1996. In fact, we have become good friends and have traveled together.

Lt Richard Johnson struggled as the platoon leader of the First Platoon of B Troop. I do not know whether he inherited an impossible situation (rebuilding a decimated platoon), had a personality clash with the troop commander or whether he was lacking as an officer. It was not long after we arrived that he became the assistant troop executive officer. This was not a good career move for him.

During the year 2000 2-1 Cavalry Association reunion, I met, talked to and had my picture taken with General John N. Abrams, who was the first

platoon leader of the Third Platoon. He was commander of USA TRADOC at that time, and later he retired from the Army in this position.

Wesley K. Clark, after Vietnam service, was assigned to the 6th Bn, 32nd Armor, 194th Brigade at Ft Knox, KY, my first unit. He went on to become a well-known four-star general. He commanded the allied forces in the Kosovo War, then Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO and later a Democratic Party presidential candidate in 2003.

After almost two years of active duty, I stayed in the Army Reserves and National Guard for an additional 19 years. I attended and graduated from Finance Officers Advance Course, Command and General Staff College and the USAF Air War College. I went to graduate school on the GI-Bill and received an MBA from the University of Dayton. This turned out to be a career boost in both my civilian and military life. In 2005, I "officially" retired as a Lt Colonel, AUS.

My entire civilian career was spent working in the finance and accounting function including over 20 years at a senior manager level. I began my career after leaving active military service as a cost accountant in 1970 with a US government contractor in Columbus, OH where we built aircraft and missiles for the US Navy. Moving on in 1977 to a business equipment manufacturer in Dayton, OH, I worked as a financial manager in manufacturing, R&D and finally in the corporate finance group. In 1985, I became the controller for privately held engineering company in Tullahoma, TN where we tested turbine (jet) engines and large strategic missiles for the US Air Force. In 1990, I moved to Detroit, MI area to become the CFO of a manufacturer of vacuum cleaners. In 2002, I became the CFO with an IBM business partner, which specialized in large-scale computer storage and servers of all sizes. In June 2005, I left them and formed my own consulting company, which specializes in the management consulting to small and medium-sized businesses. I have also taught college level management and finance courses with a major online university during my post-IBM era.

Looking for "Davey" – Sung Ba Tran – Warren Roach and Robert Sparks

(Written 2007 and posted 2-1 Cav Association Website Guestbook)

All 2-1 Cavalry platoons probably have a "story" or two that they could share. For this issue of the Blackhawk Bulletin, we would like to focus on a special person who served with the Third Platoon of B Troop. This person was nicknamed "Davey," and we believe his real Vietnamese name was Sung Ba Tran.

Davey was from a small village near the Kontum area and joined up with the platoon when the squadron was attached to the 4th Infantry Division at Pleiku. We are not sure how this came about. In talking with Ken Buschard of the Third Platoon, he remembers our 6 Bravo at the time, PSGT Kermit Preston, adopted Davey and was 6 Bravo's right-hand man.

When we both joined the platoon in 1969, Davey was already there. We are aware that he had been a pimp with a Honda motorcycle before joining us. We are not sure what his motivations were for wanting to be with the US forces except he may have thought that would keep him out the South Vietnamese Army.

Davey had a very good working knowledge of English, often served as a translator and also served as a gunner on one of our ACAVs. In fact, he did most of the tasks of a regular trooper including patrols and night guard duty despite being only 16 to 17 years old at the time. As far as we can recall, he was not on any official rolls, like a Kit Carson scout. We took up a collection each monthly payday, usually collecting about $30 to $50 in MPC to pay him.

Davey was very personable and street-smart, probably because of his former background. We never had anyone in authority at the troop or squadron level question his official presence or status in the platoon. SFC Frank Burkhead, the last platoon leader of the Third Platoon, remembers that Davey remained with him until we stood down in late 1970 and that Davey was drafted into the South Vietnamese Army. As most of us know when you were drafted in Vietnam Army, it was not for two years active duty, but for the duration of the war

Over the years, we have wondered if Davey is still alive, did he get out of Vietnam and what is he doing today? If anyone has found a way to trace Vietnamese nationals that we served with, we would be interested in knowing about it. Finally, if anyone has any more information that may help us locate Davey, this would be most helpful also.

A CHRISTMAS IN ANOTHER TIME AND PLACE

(Note: Originally written back in the late 1980's for our church's Christmas Memories Book)

The time: Christmas 1969; the place: near Phan Thiet, Republic of South Vietnam

My armored cavalry platoon (45 men and 10 combat vehicles) had just spent 5 months in and about the Vietnamese countryside. Sometimes we were hunting the enemy and at other times we knew we were the hunted. The responsibilities of this 23-year-old, Army First Lieutenant were enormous.

We moved into a secure area near Phan Thiet to spend the Christmas holidays. I remember how great it was: to not have to pull guard duty at night and thus have a full continuous night's sleep, to eat three hot meals a day for a change, to have some leisure time to rest and relax on the beautiful beach and enjoy the blue salt water of the Great China Sea. Many of us during this time would openly reflect on our Christmases past and the expectation of Christmases future.

I remember the sharing of "care packages". These were the packages of "goodies" that many families and loved ones sent to their young men. Both Jane, my fiancée, and my parents sent me special packages that Christmas. I still have fond memories of sharing their delicious contents with those in my platoon who were not as fortunate.

My Christmas gift that year to those back in the "real world" was a series of Christmas cards that I had purchased from a roadside merchant while out on a road-clearing mission. I later learned that these cards were cherished by all who received them.

Sometimes we forget that often the simplest of Christmas gifts and acts will be the most treasured in the long run.


NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
QUANG TRI
THUA THIEN
QUANG NAM
I CORPS
QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
THAILAND
KONTUM
BINH DINH
PLEIKU
PHU BON
PHU YEN
CAMBODIA
II CORPS
DARLAC
KHANH HOA
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
NINH THUAN
PHUOC LONG
LAM DONG
TAY NINH
III CORPS
LONG KHANH
BINH TUY
BINH THUAN
KIEN PHONG
CHAU DOC
KIEN GIANG
PHUOC TUY
CAPITAL SPECIAL ZONE
VINH BINH
CHUONG THIEN
BA XUYEN
BAC LIEU
AN XUYEN
IV CORPS
SOUTH VIETNAM
ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS AND MILITARY REGIONS
JUNE 1967
International boundary
Province boundary
Military corps boundary
National capital
Province capital
Autonomous municipality

Binh Thuan Province, South Vietnam

Source: Google Maps

Lt Robert Sparks at Camp Enari, July 1969

Lt Robert Sparks with "Davey" on beaches
outside of Le Hong Phong Forest, Feb 1970

Lt Robert Sparks during road march, Fall 1969

Lt Robert Sparks with MACV team (Lt Hungo and SFC Braxton)
and ARVN officers, Feb 1970

Lt Rick Cantlin (MACV) with python head, Feb 1970

ARVN's holding python, Feb 1970

"Smokey" and Larry Casey, Feb 1970

'Lucky Dozen' – 3rd Platoon Patrol – North of Song Mao – Fall 1969