

[REDACTED]

29 November 1986

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FCB Associates

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Dear Clif:

It was good to hear from you, and I apologize for the delay in this response; but we are deeply involved in politics in New Mexico and have been on the road.

The following comments are the short answers to your questions as best I can remember:

1. My only guidance from General Westmoreland was to go out and take command of the 196th. He knew me from my days with the 1st Cavalry and from the time that I had commanded a task force north of Saigon. I did not need any more guidance.

The 196th was attached to the 25th Infantry Division, and the ADC, (General Connor?), acting Commanding General in the absence of General Weyand who was temporarily in the United States, told me to relieve all the commanders. I respectfully declined that guidance on the basis that if I was to command the brigade I had to do it in my own way.

2. No. There was nothing in the mill with regard to any movement of officers except my replacement of the Brigade Commander. I had met and observed some gung-ho officers from the 173d Airborne who were eager for a combat command and who were highly recommended by their commanders. I had numerous requests, but my only commitment was to keep these individuals in mind.

3. I had no preconceived ideas as I proceeded to Tay Ninh to take over the 196th. What I needed were the facts. The 196th was engaged in an operation but nothing red hot. As soon as I arrived I assumed command, was briefed on the situation and went out to visit each major unit starting with an Infantry unit that had had some contact. I asked a lot of questions of the men, the NCO's, platoon leaders and company-commanders. It was my belief that in a situation like that one I had to start at the bottom and work up. The guys who had the most exposure were my prime concern. I found a few, and I stress only a few, weaknesses in the 196th. I shored those up quickly and worked from there. We really had a tremendous array of talent. The unit was well trained and responded instantly to new and innovative ideas. Once the changes were made everything fell into place. I had had the good fortune to have served in combat with several outstanding combat units, and none were finer than the 196th.

4. Clif, you hit the nail on the head. Mobility is, indeed, a "state of mind"; once acquired it becomes contagious. The men get caught up in the spirit of the concept; it becomes exciting; and time goes by very fast, which is so important in combat.

I talked to every new man and officer who reported to the 196th, and my main pitch was to get across to them that I believed my primary mission was to get each and every one of them home safe and sound — in one piece — consistent with our assigned military mission. The soldiers who bore the brunt of the fighting knew that I meant what I said.

Our training program was a key factor in all of this. As you well know, we trained and tested every new man and officer before we threw them into the thick of battle.

5. I talked to General Westmoreland and recommended that he try a different approach in War Zone "C". My main argument was that the usual collection of intelligence, staff estimates, briefings, and meetings — so pertinent to conventional warfare, was just too time consuming. The decision making process and large scale operations were killing us. We needed authority to act at the lowest practical level, and then to reinforce and exploit instantly any activity we could stir up. Almost all of the really good actions that we had started small. They were really meeting engagements, and we reinforced them as fast as we could. They were much like the old "pile on" games we played when we were young. When we thought small, mobile, flexible, and fast — starting at the bottom and working up — things just fell into place in that environment.

I enjoyed the large scale operation only to the extent that they permitted my unit maximum flexibility.

6. General Weyand called me back to the 25th Infantry Division CP. He said General Westmoreland had decided to reinforce the Marines up north with an Infantry brigade. He asked me how fast I could extract the 196th from our activities deep in War Zone "C" and then get them ready to move North — permanently. My response was to ask him how fast he could get the Air Force to bring C130's into the air strip at Tay Ninh. He asked what I meant, and I told him that I would have troops and equipment ready to load on the C130's as fast as they could land them, and I would continue that until we were totally redeployed. And, that was what we did.

7. In both cases — just broad guidance. Both generals were great to work with. They both recognized that the 196th was a superb unit, and they both knew that by this time I had had more experience in the jungles of Vietnam than any other American general officer — at least that was what I was told.

Colonel Berry

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Clif, that completes the answers to your questions. I am willing to answer any more if it would be helpful. Just call - my card is enclosed.

I will also see if I can dig some photos out of my footlockers.

Most sincerely,

Richard T. Knowles

Enc.