

Subj: Reflections of one year
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To: RMDavies

Bob,

When I reported as a Captain to A/101 on 1 September 1967, the division was in a normal training rotation. Serving as Post Aviation Safety Officer, I had become very attuned to the activation and closure schedule of the departure airfield control group and their Air Force counterparts. I was also aware that most of the division aircraft were grounded for various problems and there was little emphasis being placed on improving conditions. My assignment officer was curious about my being assigned to Campbell Army Airfield. For that matter so was I; however, when I asked the division AG, LTC Lee, about not being assigned to the division as an aircraft maintenance officer, he just said "you haven't been back from Vietnam yet a year and the policy is to place you in a non-deployable unit for 12-18 months." In later weeks I would learn the subtle difference between a non-rated tour and a rated-tour in Vietnam. Colonel Lee had interpreted the assignment policy correctly; however, he failed to recognize the tour equity policy the Transportation Corps had placed in effect, i.e., most of my fellow aviators were moving to a second tour or had been reassigned already. With that in mind, the AG reassigned me to A/101 as Service Platoon Commander. MAJ Carl G. Midgett was A/101 commander; however, shortly after my arrival he left for parts unknown and I became the acting commander. MAJ Howard L. Stone had been designated as Midgett's replacement and was scheduled to arrive in late November 1967. Little did I know that General Westmoreland had originally asked for the 101st Airborne Division (Airborne) to arrive in 1968, but because of the ominous intelligence on enemy movements he requested that they be in Vietnam by the end of 1967.

We were alerted for Vietnam deployment in early October 1967 and began the ritual of packing and POR qualification. Fortunately for A/101, the Army had mandated installation of KY-28 communication equipment in all division aircraft and a civilian contractor team, along with DAC's from Corpus Christi Army Depot, came to Fort Campbell, Kentucky to give us an aircraft condition profile inspection. We went from very low aircraft availability of less than 30-percent, to the top of the charts. In the middle of all this, we were tasked to provide six UH-1D's and seven air crews, two fuel tankers and up to 60 support personnel in support of flood relief operations in the vicinity of Acapulco, Mexico for an unspecified time.

All of the crews were just out of aviation training-mechanics and pilots alike! They represented a spirit of commitment to mission, a kind of bright-eyed professionalism and dedication that I remember vividly-a quality that I think is unique to Army aviation. Without any real guidance or experience to fall back on, we set up operations exactly like they had been during TAC X at Fort Rucker, Alabama-even the mistakes looked familiar. For the operation in Mexico, I was designated Task Force Commander. I selected 1LT Hendry S. Robinson to be the Operations Officer and 1LT David C. Burch to serve as my Executive Officer. (All three of us were Transportation Corps aviators.) During our time in Mexico, we got to do everything we would finally do during our next year in Vietnam. High altitude operations, forward refueling from tanks dropped along our flight

path by an Air Force C-123 that was part of the operation, sling loads into remote places, radio relay operations, outsized internal load and medical evacuation.

While in Mexico, several nondestructive tests that were performed every five flying hours came due. We didn't have enough dye penetrate to perform the daily tests and I began each day by downgrading the Red X condition to a circle Red X. After getting nowhere with the team STRIKE Command put on the ground, I went over to the commercial aviation side of the airfield and, armed with a SF 441, purchased nondestructive services from Air Mexico. They were certified to perform the test by the Bell Tech Rep who had come along as an observer. Another problem was fuel. The Air Force wanted to fly fuel into Mexico. I decided not to do that and purchased ASTM-1 from the Mexicans. They fueled us day and night and the Mexican Government picked up the tab. Meanwhile, back at Fort Campbell, news of my actions created quite a stir. So much so that when the helicopters returned I was sent to MacDill to brief General Dean, and Lycoming personnel disassembled engines from the six aircraft to inspect for damage. A team from Red River Army Depot was brought in to determine whether or not the nondestructive test had been correctly performed. The verdict was that both the engines and the long control tube were found to have been properly inspected and fueled. With that out of our system we knuckled down to the matter of deployment to Vietnam. A lesson learned at this point was that the Mexican exercise proved to be an excellent rehearsal for our tour in Vietnam.

MAJ Stone had assumed command and CW3 Carl Carrier and CW2 Bert Metcalf ran me through the paces of being a Maintenance Test Pilot. They took the job very seriously and before departing for Vietnam I passed my MTF checkride from a Fort Eustis, Virginia, SIP. Both Carl and Bert retired from the Army before my deployment on the advance party to the 56th Transportation Company (DS) located at Hotel 3 at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

Assembly of our aircraft was done by civilian contractor personnel. I test flew them and accepted them from the contractor. Before getting started though, I got a local area orientation and checkride out of the way. Pilots in the 56th Trans were a great bunch; but, the aircraft were ours and it was my job to keep two or three aircraft moving each day over to Bien Hoa where the division was closing. By the time I rejoined A/101 MAJ Stone was gone and MAJ Benjamin J. Mendez, Jr., had won the command slot. Ben was a real aggressive officer who made no bones about the fact that when he heard that a Captain was about to get command of an aviation company, he had to put in his two cents worth." He was selected instead of me and turned out to be a great commander. After completing Command & General Staff College, he was later killed in an aircraft crash.

The division was working hard relocating and getting the initial orientations out of the way. When the requirements for aircraft were submitted every available aircraft was allocated which meant that we lost our maintenance aircraft. I appealed to MAJ Paul Wise who commanded one of the GS companies and he found an OH-23G that we used until late October 1968 when it was recalled. By that time I had completed an OH-6A transition and was a qualified instructor pilot thanks to the mobile training team at Vung Tau. LTC John E. McGregor was commander, 101st Aviation Battalion. He was replaced by LTC Paul B. Snyder and he was replaced by LTC John D. Kennedy. When I departed, MAJ Murry E. Parker was acting commander. MAJ Alexander Balberdie, Jr., assumed command of A/101 in July. His XO, CPT Bob Mitchell, was the only officer I personally knew who was fragged.

At the six month point half of our crews were rotated to other units in Vietnam. Two officers who left A/101, 1LT David Burch and 1LT Gary Higbee, died as a result of enemy action-they were the only A/101 alumni, to that point, killed.

We left Fort Campbell, Kentucky with 25 UH-1D helicopters. As equipment became available to change the 101st Airborne Division into an airmobile organization we picked-up several OH-23D's, UH-1C/M's and three OH-6As. While there were lots of opportunities for incidents and accidents, we did not have any fatalities, equipment failures, or suffer from in flight screw-up's. I managed to lose the only aircraft to hostile fire in the A Shau valley; however, although the aircraft was beyond repair, I managed to safely fly back to Camp Eagle where it was condemned to the scrap heap. The helicopter was full of holes; gas poured from the many hits on the fuel tanks, and other fluids were everywhere.

We finally turned the corner on the division's propensity to over schedule aircraft missions. Armed with a USARV order not to fly any more than 90 percent of the assigned aircraft on any given day, we convinced the division G4 to let us manage our flying hours and in return we would support division requirements. That was a very lofty effort because at the time we only had 50 Huey's and six OH-6As on the books assigned to HHC, A/101 and B/101. The Maintenance Technician, CW2 Larry E. Willer, our Platoon Sergeant, SSG David A. Hunt, and our two Technical Inspectors, SP5s Winston H. Mackey and Edgar L. Rotenberry, and the crew chiefs who all were assigned to the maintenance platoon, worked 24-hours each day, every day. They epitomized airborne esprit de corps! We were also blessed with an administrative genius in PFC Lee Blumenthal, a draftee, who knew how to operate. A CPA, Lee pulled the operation together and made everything work. Engine availability during the year made our fleet either UH-1D or H without much notice from the supply system-the pilots always noticed! In spite of frequent substitutions our maintenance teams did a superb job keeping all the bits and pieces together for the frequent changes and never got things cross threaded. My recollection of A/101 is that the people were more intelligent and professional than others I met, they thrived on our missions and they trained with a great intensity and sincerity. No job was out of the question; nor was the desire to do it correctly, once.

A/101 did its share of combat assaults and "ash and trash" missions. We used the 1st Aviation Brigade Standing Operating Procedures and found that the lessons learned were very instructing. The powers that be might have wanted us to use some obscure Campbell policy; however, from what we could see operating in Vietnam was very serious business. CPT Ronald F. Kearns, A/101 Operations Officer and I decided that if we could get copies made of their policies we could keep out of immediate danger. When I paid them a visit, MAJ George E. Day said "hell, I'll give you a box of them." And with that he delivered a carton of freshly printed SOPs which we passed out to be memorized and put into immediate use. Following that, everything we did was done following their tried and true procedures-CPT Larry R. Wardle, Ron's replacement, as Operations Officer continued the practice.

The 1968 Tet Offensive, considered by most historians to be the turning point in the Vietnam War involving A/101 began at 2:30 AM 31 January 1968 when Vietcong infiltrators from the C-10 Sapper Battalion forced their way into the American Embassy compound in what would become the most well known assault of the Battle for Saigon or the "Defense of Bunker's Bunker." The

division was alerted to insert elements of the 101st on the roof of the chancery to secure it. We continued throughout the day to fly missions against the enemy who was attacking across Vietnam. More immediately, uniformed forces were marching on Bien Hoa from Zuan Loc and they were repelled by howitzer and aircraft attacks. The only casualty I am aware of at Bien Hoa was the General's enlisted aide who had climbed on top of the water tower for a better look. During the "Battle for Saigon," Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams photographed the execution of a Vietcong lieutenant by Vietnam's National Police Chief, Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The picture appeared on the front page of many American Newspapers and later won the Pulitzer Prize.

We flew everything and at times emptied the door guns before reaching the end of the runway environment. The attackers didn't have a chance with Red Leg support from the battery of 155's on our east flank firing at point blank range into the sea of uniformed Vietcong, and the pounding by Air Force jets and helicopter gunships. Dead bodies began at the perimeter and continued the 25 miles to Zuan Loc mountain.

Reorganization of the 101st Airborne Division (Airborne) in the Spring of 1968 as the second airmobile division and its renaming as the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) was not completed until 29 August 1969. On 1 July 1968, while NEVADA EAGLE was in progress the 101st Airborne Division changed its name to the 101st Air Cavalry Division. Shortly after that, General William C. Westmoreland turned over command of MACV to General Creighton W. Abrams. MG Melvin Zais assumed command and the tactics changed within 15 minutes. Although I knew a three phased plan which involved activation of the 160th Aviation Group (later the 101st Aviation Group) and reorganization of the division included conversion of the Armed Cavalry Squadron to an Air Cavalry Squadron; and, finally, the activation of an Aerial Rocket Artillery Battalion was being considered, the 101st Aviation Battalion was small potatoes.

Following Tet we undertook CARENTAN II, DELEWARE/LAMSON 216 and NEVADA EAGLE which continued beyond my tour.

There was some humor during my "Rendezvous With Destiny" that didn't get much play in the media. Seems as though MG Barsanti decided to make an example of a new lieutenant who kept getting things fouled up. He either threatened to jail the lieutenant in a CONEX at division headquarters or he had placed him under arrest and the lieutenant was in fact being held under arrest in the CONEX. At any rate, we could see the CONEX and the guards. The lieutenant's father was the skipper of the USS Missouri and the battleship was under the operational control of XXIV Corps just off shore. General Barsanti brushed the father off and not long after a CH-46 landed in my maintenance area with a squad of Navy Seals. The officer-in-charge asked for permission to use our pad for a staging operation which we granted. Not long after, the Seals moved out and within an hour the CH-46 was put in action against the CONEX. We got a good look at the VIP departure which went off without a hitch. Apparently the lieutenant was reunited with his father aboard the USS Missouri as a liaison officer.

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