Half Way Down The Trail To Hell

A Wartime Remembrance in Three Parts

By

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Prologue

"The danger, being around veterans, the memories are so selective and so heroic that you've got to be careful talking to a guy like me."

George Herbert Walker Bush

A while back I discovered the Library of Congress is conducting a program called The Veterans History Project. The mission of the project is the collection and preservation of veteran's wartime recollections and documents before they are lost forever.

Like many wartime veterans, I concentrated on getting on with my life. I needed a job that would allow me to marry, buy a house and raise a family. I didn't feel anything I had experienced in Vietnam would contribute to these goals, and I felt that, for the most part, people who hadn't served didn't know or even care what I had seen or done. The country's attitude was different than with the Gulf War veterans and I deflected the few inquires that were made, especially the ones that contained the words "Did ya' kill anybody?" I was too busy dealing with the present to spend a lot of time staring into the past.

Now, almost four decades after returning home, the time has come to look back and try to recreate a piece of personal history, albeit history filtered though my water colored memories. I've relied on a number of sources for this remembrance, not the least of which were letters that I wrote home. Although they were by necessity self censored, I was able to retrieve dates, names and places that would otherwise be lost. Although I've attempted to be as complete and accurate as possible in telling a story that occurred

several decades past, there are some memories as clear as a picture while others are murky. I've written about several individuals whom I felt influenced the experience. Some of these people were highly regarded, while others were not, and I've portrayed them in the roles they cast for themselves. There are, of course, many people and events I've left out of this remembrance, mostly because I can't recall enough about them to recreate our interactions.

Upon occasion this remembrance contains the verbatim interchanges I was able to retrieve from letters, although most of the time I've merely narrated events. In either case, I've attempted to capture the spirit of what was said or done, be it mundane, exciting, tragic or comedic. Ultimately this is a story of everyday people caught up in war unlike any other. This remembrance is dedicated to my brother and sister, Jim and Glenda, my wife Ann, my daughters Heather and Teresa and all of the troopers camped at Fiddler's Green.

Part One Basic Combat Training

Background

I was born at home on April 8, 1948 in a little place located in McMinn County Tennessee called The Rocky Mount Community. Situated about seventy miles south east of Knoxville, the community had no post office, so my birth certificate states that I was born in Athens, Tennessee, the County Seat and the largest city near my birthplace. I am the youngest of three children born to Buster Madison and Joy Chloey (nee Moss) Kirkland; my brother James Madison was twelve years of age when I was born while my sister Glenda Mardell was not quite two years old. My father worked in the airplane tire division of one of the major rubber companies in Akron, Ohio during WWII. Mom worked as a maid and took care of my brother, Jim. Following the war, dad was unable to get meaningful employment in Tennessee, and was unwilling to scratch out a living on a dirt poor farm so he traveled to Michigan to seek his fortune, leaving Mom and Jim behind until he could get established and buy a home. Dad moved the family to Detroit, Michigan in 1953, where I attended school from kindergarten through seventh grade at Nichols Elementary in Indian Village. The family moved farther to Detroit's East side in 1961 and settled on Guilford Street, off of Chandler Park Drive. While living there I finished elementary school at Marquette Elementary then Junior High and High School at Finney Junior/Senior High, located at the end of the street where I lived, graduating in 1966. I was an average student and didn't have much hope of getting accepted into college, nor did I have any real desire. I was eighteen in April of that year and registered

for the draft. Following high school I attended Macomb Community College part time and worked for the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Corporation in downtown Detroit. In those days computers were huge machines, too expensive for most businesses, and much of the record keeping was done by hand or on punch cards. This labor intensive work was largely done by women; thus Blue Cross/ Blue Shield was a bachelor's paradise, with seven floors chock full of women of all ages, shapes, sizes, creeds and colors. My job as a stock boy included making deliveries, and soon I met Ann Teresa Williams, who, as fate would have it, lived not far from my parent's home. We began to date and soon fell in love. Ann would write to me faithfully all during my active service, something that's very important to lonely young soldiers, and we would marry a year after I was discharged from active duty.

In 1967 I took the standard military physical and aptitude testing at Fort Wayne on Detroit's West side. I went early, since I didn't know the area around that part of town and didn't want to be late. I found a spot to park on a nearby street, but when I came out several hours later there was a parking ticket on my car's windshield. I had unwittingly found a parking spot reserved for the buses used to haul recruits to basic training. Talk about adding insult to injury. I wasn't attending school full time, and The United States was sending troops overseas in large numbers; I knew it would be only a matter of time until I was inducted. I checked into joining an Enlisted Reserve or National Guard unit, but they were at capacity since in those days they were not deployed outside of the United States. In the fall of 1967 I received "Greetings from the President" with instructions to report to Fort Wayne for induction into the U.S. Army on February 2,

1968. I was two months short of my twentieth birthday, stood six feet tall and weighed one hundred and forty pounds.

Draft Day

On the morning of February 2, 1968 I went in to my father's bedroom to tell him I was leaving. Dad worked the afternoon shift as a diemaker at GM and he was lying on his side facing away from me when I sat down on the bed. Without turning around he told me to "Keep a stiff upper lip." In quiet moments over the next couple of years I would think back on that piece of advice and wonder just what he meant. When I returned home from Vietnam I had occasion to ask him. He looked at the floor a long time as if he thought the answer might be written there. He finally looked at me and said, "Well son I couldn't think of any thing else to say." Many years later dad's younger brother, Bob, told me that dad has used the first half of a saying meaning stay strong under stress. Where dad was raised children's parents would tell them stories to keep them from wandering too far from home while at play. One of the tales involved a snake indigenous to the region called a Blue Racer. If an unfortunate child encountered a Blue Racer they were to stand motionless, "With a stiff upper lip and a tight asshole", to prevent the snake from chasing them down and running up their rear end. Bob said he didn't know the correlation between the two, but dad had only given me one half of this sage advice.

It was a cold, clear day when my sister, Glenda and my future spouse, Ann, dropped me off at Fort Wayne. I entered the gate and made the long walk to the main building entrance without looking back, lest I change my mind and retreat. I had several

conflicting emotions churning through my mind at that moment. I knew my parents were heartsick at my being inducted during time of war, I didn't want to leave Ann behind, and I was terribly afraid of the vast unknown lying in front of me. I think turning my back on my only sister and my best female friend symbolically separated the painful present from the past, offering the only defense I had. Some years later Ann told me she got to work and was crying, so she went into the women's room and bawled her eyes out. Her boss came in to see what was the matter. Of course Ann told the boss that I had walked away and never looked back. I've long regretted having done it, but once done some things can't be undone.

There was a lot of standing in lines and paperwork involved in the induction process, so there was time to talk with the men on either side of me. I got to know one of the guys, Mike Van Leer, who was in line to my right, well enough that we hung out together as much as we were allowed. As a result of our proximity our serial numbers are only one digit apart, an anomaly that would cause consternation whenever we were together and needed to produce our ID cards. The staff started us off with physicals. I was among hundreds of young men parading around in our drawers most of the day in a drafty old building that looked like it had been around since the Revolutionary war. The majority of the guys wore boxer or jockey shorts, but I remember one of the guys had on a pair of what I guess you would call Speedos, and a sergeant made him change into Army issue boxers. We all had to stand at attention while he changed in front of us and the sergeant hollered out to one of the watchers: "Is that a hard on I see?" Several heads turned to look, but another sergeant reminded us that we were at the position of attention. I cut my eyes as hard as I could in that direction anyway, but I could only see the guy next to me.

We discussed this later and the consensus was they were just messing around since no one was removed from the line. Most of the physical exam was invasive; we were checked for hernias, hemorrhoids, venereal disease and bad teeth. Of course I had an eye exam where they checked my prescription so I could have glasses made. I was hoping my poor eyesight would merit a deferment, but no such luck. One had to be legally blind for eyesight to make a difference. I did have another physical anomaly that I thought might turn out be an ace in the hole. While I was waiting for my draft notice, I observed two little mole like appendages, one growing from my right hip and the other from the inside of my left leg. I didn't have medical insurance in those days, and thinking they might somehow preclude me from being drafted I didn't seek civilian medical help to find out what they were. The Army doctor that looked at them told me they were "skin tags" that could be surgically excised without my being hospitalized. He told me to report for sick call when I got to Basic Combat Training (BCT).

There were recruiting officers for all of the other branches of the military present, each offering a reprieve from the Army experience, but with a price; you had to commit to three years of active service. I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to do more than two years of active service, so I ignored the Siren songs and stoically plodded through the induction process. The method of turning us into soldiers began during this process, in more ways than one. In addition to the physical treatments, there was a mental process of changing the inductees from independent thinking civilians into team-orientated soldiers. We learned that the twenty four hour clock was used in the military, thus noon became twelve hundred hours, and midnight became twenty-four hundred hours. The method of referring to calendar dates also changed. We would now refer to

the date by the day followed by the month then the year. Therefore February 2, 1968 was written 2 February 1968. We did a swearing in ceremony where we took an oath of allegiance, and when told, took one step forward to affirm our commitment. The Specialist 4 (Sp4) who conducted the ceremony stood at the end of each row as we were called up to make sure we all complied.

The specialist on duty then pointed out a thirty gallon garbage can at the rear of the room. He told us that we were not allowed to have any type of erotic material, including nude pictures of our wives or girlfriends with us at Basic Training, so if we had anything we should put it in the can. He was going to leave the room and give us a few minutes to get rid of any contraband. After that we were on our own. I remember one guy had some skin magazines with naked men. I didn't have anything to put into the barrel, but a lot of stuff went in. I suppose the soldiers stationed at Fort Wayne got all of the erotic material they wanted from this one source. We were still civilians at heart at this point, so when the specialist told us that it was unlikely that we would get any leave between Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training there was a Black dude who stood up and said "Well I'll be damned!" I remember thinking that he was going to be a trouble maker and resolved to stay away from him if at all possible, but after a couple of weeks in BCT he was as meek as a lamb. After what seemed like days we were herded onto buses for the trip to Fort Knox, Kentucky to begin In Processing and Basic Combat Training. The word "Combat" was inserted into the basic training designation in recognition of the fact that while some of the new soldiers would remain stateside or serve in Europe or Korea most were destined to take a trip to Vietnam. I was now Private E-1 S.E. Kirkland, US 54977426.

Reception Station

In those days it was about an eighteen hour trip to Fort Knox, Kentucky which is situated about thirty miles southwest of Louisville. The bus swayed through southern Michigan, then northern Ohio until we began getting into hills around Cincinnati, then mountains after that. We ate and got bathroom breaks along the way at predetermined stops. If it was an emergency you could go on the bus, number one was an adventure and I wouldn't care to contemplate a number two with the bus flying up and down a mountainside. We could smoke on the bus, so we were fairly relaxed, Mike Van Leer sat on the seat next to mine and we talked, read and looked out the window. Sleep was out of the question as we were too wound up for that to happen.

We arrived in the early morning of 3 February, tired, cold, disoriented and nervous. It didn't take long to find out this is where we would get our first taste of what was to come. After disembarking from the buses we were formed into loose columns of two and marched into a barn-like building where we were seated on benches while a staff sergeant harangued us at length on topics dear to his heart. The most popular theme seemed to be his studied opinion that we were unlikely to ever make decent soldiers, that we were just pussies who shouldn't have ever been allowed to make it this far, and that if he had his way we would all be sent back to our mommies. About this time I felt like I was pretty much alone even though I was surrounded by hundreds of other young guys, all of us in the same boat. Other points were related to the language associated with the military. We did not run, we double timed, we did not eat a meal we went to the mess hall for chow,

and we did not wear shoes, our footgear was either boots or low quarters. Perhaps the most important topic was that the Army does not have any guns; there are pistols, knives, bayonets, clubs, rifles, automatic weapons and dozens of other lethal items but no guns! This admonition would become clearly important during Basic Combat Training when one of my fellow trainees lost his presence of mind.

In-Processing

The period that followed is informally called Zero Week, since it doesn't count against the BCT time. During In-Processing we got haircuts; it was winter so they left us about an eighth inch of hair, then we were issued fatigue uniforms, dress uniforms, underwear, winter field jackets, gloves, caps with ear flaps, all the stuff we would need for a few weeks of Kentucky Winter, along with basic toilet items; towels, wash cloths and so forth. We were issued a duffle bag to stuff all of this into, so when we pulled out a set of fatigues they were wrinkled as Hell, and our dress uniforms were a disaster. My eye exam at Fort Wayne resulted in my being issued two pairs of prescription glasses and one pair of prescription sunglasses. We received immunizations against all of the common diseases of the day, got pictures taken for our ID cards, were fingerprinted, and had blood drawn so our blood type could be accurately identified on our ID tags. These tags are commonly known as dog tags because of the metal chain used to attach them. The dog tags are made of stainless steel, and stamped into the metal are the individual's last name, first name and middle initial, serial #, blood type and religious affiliation. We were warned not to put down agnostic or atheist because we were going to wind up in a

foxhole, and there were no atheists in foxholes. In addition, we were told not to put both dog tags around our neck when we were in combat situations since they could be shot off. One tag around the neck and the other in a boot was the best configuration. We filled out reams of paperwork, and took aptitude tests. Some of the tests were pretty clear-cut, such as Morse code or touch typing to see if we had innate skills that the Army could use, while other tests were psychological, with questions such as, do you prefer girls or boys? This was before the days of "don't ask don't tell" and they were pretty open about trying to weed out anyone who was gay.

The In Processing sergeant (I don't recall his name) was a good guy who went out of his way to help us. He had a southern accent that was a little hard to understand at first. When he marched us from one place to another he would call out cadence that sounded something like "To the leff, rite, leff, rite, and we couldn't keep in step worth a damn since none of us was used to marching. While telling us what to expect at the Chaplain's Orientation, he said that when the Chaplain asked us if there were any questions there wouldn't be any. I guess there had been some pretty silly questions, such as: "Do you suppose my girl will have her drawers dropped when I get home?" so he told us to save the dumb questions for him to answer.

We were all pretty disoriented most of the time during this period, and one of the ways we would combat our bewilderment was to talk about the one thing everyone knew something about; what it was like back home. Most of the guys were from Michigan, either drafted or enlisted, with a fair sized group of National Guard troops from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Someone referred to this group as the potato farmers, a nickname that stuck. One of the favored activities was sharing pictures of our wives or girlfriends and

one day the sergeant came around while this was going on and asked to see the photos. He murmured polite little comments about them until he got the picture of Ann. His jaw sagged a little and said “Well she’s a cute little heifer isn’t she?” Given the sergeant’s Southern heritage that was meant as high praise, but when I wrote home about it I told her to never mind what he said. Of course she wrote back insisting that I tell her and when I did I tried to emphasize that he did not call her a cow!

There were long pauses between one activity and another, so we hung around the barracks until we were called out for whatever process was coming up next. Most of the time was filled with worrying about our ultimate fates As someone put it, we were lower than whale shit with no prospects of getting much higher anytime soon. Nevertheless, I knew a lot of jokes and the guys got a kick out of laughing at them, so it wasn’t all doom and gloom. We were killing time one morning when I got a call to report to the orderly room, it seems I had a visitor. I couldn’t imagine who would visit me at this place, but I was excited to find out. When I reported in a Private First Class cried out “Howdy cousin, you get to hang out with me the rest of the day!” It was Ron Hirth, an old classmate from Finney High. Ron was never a good or even a willing student in school. But he realized the mistake he’d made when he found a high school diploma was a minimum requirement for decent employment. With no job and the draft inevitably looming, he joined the Army, earned a GED and became a tank driver. He said he had been checking the rosters for the names of anyone he knew in school and decided to give me a break from the routine. It was a good day; Ron had matured a lot since I last knew him, and we got along famously. He was expecting a promotion to Specialist 4 and orders to Germany to come through any time. We hung out at the Enlisted Men’s club, played cards and

drank sodas, visited the Post Exchange and just walked around the area talking about things that happened during high school. I never saw or heard from Ron again, but I'll always remember his kindness in rescuing me for a day away from the boredom and dread of the unknown that was integral to In-Processing.

On the last full day we received our dog tags and all of the guys with a high school diploma got a reenlistment pitch. The recruiting sergeant (name unknown) was good at his job; he got us relaxed, had us light up a smoke then talked to us about life in the US Army. He admitted that Army life was not perfect, but what was after all? I recall he told a humorous personal anecdote involving his training days. It seems that during his Advanced Individual Training he learned that his kitchen police detail would be cancelled if he elected to help serve at an Offices' Club social function involving VIP officers, members of Congress and their wives. The days had been long and the nights short during his training and it wasn't long before he drifted off to sleep while a sergeant was droning on about do's and don'ts for servers at this highly important function. He awoke with a start when the soldier by his side poked him hard in the ribs. The sergeant was standing in front of him glaring intently. Bent over from the waist he bellowed: "Let me ask you again Private! What is the proper procedure for entering a room?" The story teller had no clue as to the answer, so he shouted out: "Toss in a grenade and go in firing!"

The recruiter's main pitch was a story that had two morals. One, we could reenlist and get a safe job for the duration, or two, we could not reenlist and die in Vietnam. Several of the men present decided to go for the bait. There were clerks on hand to facilitate, so enlistment papers were torn up and new ones typed out on the spot. Along with not dying

in Vietnam they were “guaranteed” training in a field of their choice. All they had to do was turn in their two year commitment orders and add another year of active duty. I opted to take a chance on dying in Vietnam since I wasn’t about to add another year of active service. The next day, 7 February, we began our eight weeks of Basic Combat Training (BCT).

BCT Begins

Things had been pretty relaxed up until this point, but that all changed when we were loaded into what were called “cattle cars” for the trip from the orientation area to the BCT area. “Make your buddy smile” the sergeants crooned as we loaded into these trucks. We were packed like sardines in a standing position so tight that when we exited the vehicle via a ramp my legs were nearly asleep from my thigh down to my ankle. There were drill Instructors (DI) standing at measured distances, and as we left the vehicle we were counted off into platoon-sized groups of forty men. I wound up in 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, 19th Battalion, 5th Brigade, United States Army Training Center, and (USATC) Armor. My drill sergeant’s name was Ronald Scott; the assistant platoon sergeant’s name was William Lyons. Along with the other platoon sergeants and their assistants, Scott and Lyons constituted what is called a Cadre. Derived from the old French word quadrum, meaning square; the Cadre formed a nucleus of USATC trainers around whom the BCT units revolved. After forming us into four squads of ten we were told to double time across an open field to the barracks. There was an old horse shoe pit near the far edge of the field, the pipe was cut off near the ground and the boards were just sticking up maybe a half inch, but I stubbed my toe on one of them and went

sprawling. In civilian life someone would have stopped to see about me, but of course all of the other trainees left me in the dust. Sgt. Scott came over to where I was scrambling to my feet and collecting my duffle bag. He didn't say anything, but I could sense that he was marking me down as a clumsy jerk that would need to be watched closely. Sgt. Scott had cultivated a mustache that curled down on the sides of his mouth giving the impression of an evil frown. His skin was the color of coffee with a little milk and his eyes were dark and piercing. His DI's hat was cocked down over his face, giving him a menacing appearance. I was not afraid exactly, but it was not one of the high points of my life either.

One of the first pieces of business was paperwork, life insurance policies, records pertaining to next of kin, home addresses and so forth. I guess it must have been normal for guys to mess this part up in some way or other causing unnecessary delays, because Sergeant Scott walked between the rows, saying loudly and distinctly just what was required on each line. For example, he said "On the first line you will write your full name, beginning with your last name. So, if your name is Stanley F. Puddthumper, you would write, Puddthumper, Stanley, F." He looked us over with his baleful stare, waiting as we printed our names. "Next you will print your home address; this will be the address where you receive your mail. If you receive your mail at 1234 Big Titty Lane in Good Pussy, Mississippi, then you will print 1234 Big Titty Lane Good Pussy, Mississippi," and so forth for the entire set of forms.

After we had filled out the forms (some guys had messed them up, so it took awhile), titular leaders were assigned. The Field Training Non Commissioned Officer (FTNCO), Sergeant First Class (SFC) Raymond Temple asked if anyone had participated in military

training, such as ROTC, selecting anyone who said they had such training for what was called Platoon Guide (PG) who would serve as acting platoon sergeant, and four Squad Leaders (SL) who were selected on the basis of being the most physically imposing.

That afternoon the Cadre issued a list of contraband and left us alone with a thirty gallon trash barrel. On the list there appeared a lot of the same things that we had been warned about when we were still at Fort Wayne: erotic materials topped the list, but there were new items such as straight razors, switchblades, fireworks and blousing rubbers. When a soldier wears boots he is supposed to puff his or her pant legs out around the top of the boot. This is called blousing. When the pant leg is tucked in it is difficult to get the pant leg to puff uniformly, so somewhere along the line some enterprising soldier used a rubber band to get the desired effect. This led to more experimentation until a specially made elastic device, called a blousing rubber, was invented. Anyone can purchase blousing rubbers at the Post Exchange (PX) or in stores in the local towns. Of course we all bought them when we were still In-Processing since they are very easy to use and up to that point no one told us we couldn't wear them. The supposed reason they were prohibited in BCT was that they were not Army issue and therefore we would be out of uniform. Of course the entire Cadre used them, and I think the real reason they were not allowed was so they would have an easy free supply for themselves. The prohibition on knives and other weapons was understandable, but as with the blousing rubbers, I believe the Cadre just wanted to get a fresh supply of dirty books and pictures for their own enjoyment.

After the contraband had been collected two Sp4s came in and pulled a kind of sneak attack. They asked if anyone was interested in driving an ambulance. It seems that there

would be a driver and assistant needed for the ambulance that would accompany us on forced marches. I had been warned numerous times to not volunteer for anything in the Army so I remained mute. Of course there were several takers, one of whom was a fellow who had reenlisted while we were still In-Processing. His serial number change hadn't caught up with him yet and the team of tricksters had an older document listing his US serial number. When he told them he was now an RA, they both groaned and told him he would be sorry he had ever done that so soon. As I said, there were several volunteers who wanted to earn an Army drivers license, but only two were selected. The rest were told they were going to be licensed to drive wheel barrows; wheel barrows filled with coal. The buildings were all coal fired and needed to be tended twenty-four hours. Of course the newly volunteered Firemen all tried to back out, but they were stuck for the duration of BCT.

We had already self assigned bunks the first time we entered the barracks, the first empty bunk you came upon was yours, although there was some horse trading for top or bottom bunks or to be nearer someone we knew. We all stayed up pretty late the first night, putting away our uniforms, toiletry items and other gear. There were photographs inside the wall lockers and foot lockers detailing the proper way to arrange everything. The problem was we had more gear than would fit into the lockers and I really couldn't make it look exactly like the picture. It was explained that there would be a bugle call played over the loud speaker system first thing in the morning and just before bed at night. The morning bugle call is known as Reveille, and the evening bugle call is known as Taps. We found out the first morning that reveille, or wake up, was before daylight when as the last note faded a disgustingly fresh looking Sgt. Lyons turned on the

overhead lights and shouted “All right, drop your cocks and grab your socks people, get this barracks squared away and ready for an inspection!” Periodic inspections were conducted, ranging from having Sgt. Scott look over our lockers and bunks and tell us where we needed improvement, to having a full scale Inspector General (IG) inspection. For IG inspections feverish preparation was the rule, since these inspections could lead to drastic measures for the leaders, up to and including demotions and the company commander being relieved. Every detail had to be accounted for. One major problem we all had was that explicably we had been issued more equipment than we could store away and still have our lockers look textbook. We were warned against trying to hide stuff in our laundry bags since the inspectors were wise to that old trick. We put our heads together and decided to hide all of the excess gear in the attic of the barracks. One of the bigger guys stood underneath the trap door leading to the attic while another cupped his hands and boosted a diminutive but wiry solider onto the first trainee’s shoulders. Once he was balanced the small soldier pushed the trap door open and then climbed onto the rafters. We took turns handing gear up until we had it all stashed. When Sgt. Scott made his last walk through he asked where all the “Excess gear” was hidden. We admitted what we had done and he rolled his eyes up and said “Let’s hope the ceiling doesn’t cave in on the IG’s ass!”

First thing in the morning we were given some time to wash and shave, then we spent time getting into our fatigues and boots and “squaring away” the barracks, a process that included making our bunks, putting any dirty clothes into our laundry bags and arranging our wall and foot lockers. We took turns cleaning the latrine after the brief allotted time for personal clean up. I recall one occasion when I was on the toilet, (there were walls,

but no doors), when Sgt. Scott came in and told me to “Get off that shit stool and clean up this latrine!” We were not civilians anymore; that was certain. After a couple of days we would get up well before the wake up call to shit, shower and shave, the trick to this was we had to do so in the light shining through the latrine windows since no lights were allowed on before reveille.

Learning The Ropes

The M-14 rifle, the standard infantry firearm in those days, was issued to each individual and then we were drilled on the serial numbers until we knew them. The M-14 is a gas operated weapon that fires 7.62 x 51 Millimeter (MM), North American Treaty Organization (NATO) Full Metal Jacket (FMJ) ammunition. All ammunition used by the US Military is FMJ meaning the bullet is covered by a metal alloy. These bullets offer a couple of advantages, one they leave less residue in the rifle barrel and two they tend to hold together on impact making a cleaner wound channel. The M-14 could be fitted with a selector switch allowing it to be fired in fully automatic mode, where the rifle continues to shoot as long as the trigger is held back. Since I only fired the M-14 in semi automatic, (one shot per trigger pull), it’s probable that the selector switch on these training models was not an option. We were only allowed to have the rifles in our possession when we were actually going someplace with them, the rest of the time they stayed locked in a storage rack. Once we had the rifles it was time for instruction in what was called The Manual of Arms (MOA). This consisted of learning to maneuver the rifle in a precision fashion so that on a certain command the entire platoon could move the

rifle from one position to another all at the same time, and in the exact same prescribed way. One of the drills was field stacking the rifles. This is a rather delicate maneuver that requires precise handling. The rifles are placed in a circular fashion around a stake, with the butt on the ground and rifle leaning on a forty five degree angle with the barrels lightly touching. Done right this is an effective way to store rifles when in the field; it keeps them off the ground and they are easily accessible on short notice since they are in one location. The first time we practiced this drill the DI's stood over us like mother hens, making sure we stacked and un-stacked the pieces correctly. After a couple of sessions they relaxed slightly and called a smoke break. On the first attempt at stacking a couple of trainees had nearly knocked the stack over. Their clumsiness resulted in them being cussed out and set to checking the area for cigarette butts. This would have been the end of their immediate concerns if the one of the two transgressors had not been the last to pick up his rifle. He immediately told the DI he had a concern. "What the hell is your problem?" he was asked harshly. The trainee reported that there was only one rifle left on the stake, but it wasn't his piece. The DI's lined us all up and had us examine our serial numbers, then again and again and again. I checked my serial number each time, even though after the first glance I knew there was no mistake. Time after time no one admitted they had the wrong rifle. Finally, the guilty party saw there was no way out and turned himself in, haltingly explaining that he had gotten away with not knowing his serial number by always waiting until there was only one rifle left on the rack. This time there were two and he guessed wrong. I think the sergeants were really kind of sorry for him. The serial numbers were probably about eleven or twelve digits and anyone who couldn't memorize them had a real problem. Nevertheless, he spent the rest of the day

double timing back and forth between formations, with each of the sergeants having him report to another, reciting his serial number to them again and again. We didn't have any more instances of this error. Manual of Arms training was often combined with Dismounted Drill (DD) which I will talk more about later.

Physical Training (PT) was another heavily emphasized activity. This phase of the PT training included pushups, jumping jacks, running around the training field and squat thrusts, along with exercises such as duck walking. In later years duck walking was banned because the extreme nature of the movements required could cause serious physical damage. We usually exercised twice a day, and ran around the company area before first chow and before we were released for the evening. Interspersed with the physical activities there were classroom sessions on first aid, map and compass reading, and general military knowledge such as the chain of command, which began with President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Commander in Chief, and ended with our Company Commander 1Lt Harold Stone.

The weather for the most part was cold but clear, and time passed fairly quickly during the first few days. In addition to training we learned to make up our bunks in a manner that would allow a quarter to be bounced off the top blanket, to set up our wall and foot lockers in a prescribed manner, and what was expected of us as far as keeping the barracks and surrounding areas in top condition, called "policing the area." We were sometimes assigned extra duty, such as Kitchen Police (KP), Fire Watch (FW), Guard Duty (GD) or Charge of Quarters (CQ). KP was the most dreaded duty, because of the brutally long days, sometimes sixteen hours, combined with crude labor performed under the worst of conditions. FW was a duty dictated by the coal furnaces that heated the

buildings. This was done in four hour shifts where one person from each floor would stay awake so they could warn everyone else should a fire break out. GD was performed only once as I recall, it was an all night ordeal where we were dressed up all spit and polish and left to “guard” various places around the base under the watchful eye of our DI’s and an officer who was in overall charge. CQ was good duty, mostly consisting of sitting around the headquarters orderly room drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. We spent our “free time” (FT) polishing our boots, and generally taking care of the increasing amount of gear we were issued. I always tried to take a few minutes to write letters to my friend Ann and my folks back home. One night I had showered and was sitting on my footlocker writing a letter when one of the other squad leaders, Robert Parks, decided that someone needed to empty the trash can into the dumpster located between our barracks and second platoon barracks. Sadistically, he marched past his squad, most of whom were still dressed and wearing boots, to where I sat. He ordered me to take out the trash. Since I hadn’t been in the Army very long I told him to “Kiss my ass, you’re not my squad leader.” He went over to my squad leader, William Nemeth, who was distracted by some activity or other and got his permission to give the order. I was unhappy, but got dressed and emptied the trash. This incident would come back to haunt me later.

Basic Marksmanship

One of the few somewhat enjoyable parts of BCT was what was called Basic Marksmanship which included firing the rifles. We began with sighting in the M-14’s to our individual zero. A common misconception is that one trains a rifle to fire to where the

shooter is looking. In fact, due to variations in construction each rifle fires to its own point of impact every time. The trick is to adjust the sighting devices so that the shooter is looking at the rifle's point of impact, or rather where the bullet will impact the target. This technique is called "zeroing in." This was accomplished on the M-14 by first setting the up and down portion of the rear sight, known as elevation, and the side to side portion of the sight, known as windage, to the zero or neutral position. Then, while lying in the prone position and resting the rifle on sandbags to reduce variation caused by movement, the rifle is fired three times at a twenty-four by twenty-four inch target set at twenty-five meters distance from the shooter. The idea is to have a group of three shots spaced in such a way that a silver dollar could be placed over them. This technique showed the instructor that the same sight picture was used each time. It didn't matter where the group was on the paper target, as long as the group was tight. If the shots were widely spaced that meant the shooter wasn't looking at the same spot each time or was jerking the trigger causing the rifle to jump. The instructors would demonstrate that the rifle's recoil would not hurt if held correctly, that is to say tight into the shoulder socket. One of the DI's would fire a rifle off of his shoulder, his chin and even his crotch to prove that as long as the rifle was held tight to the body the gas operation of the bolt would take up the recoil. A rifle trigger is supposed to be pulled back slowly in a smooth action so that the shooter is actually surprised when the weapon fires. If the shooter anticipates the recoil the result is often a flinch, and a sure miss. I remember the range NCO for our platoon, a full blooded American Indian whose dark eyes would smile as he crooned "Squeeze your trigger boys, you jerk your dick, but you squeeze your trigger!"

Once we had achieved a satisfactory shot group, we were ready to adjust the sights so we could fire accurately. The rear sights have little rollers on each side and when they are turned they make a faint clicking sound as they fall into place. Each of the targets was divided into squares of about one inch, so if the group was say three squares up and two squares to the left of the bulls eye, the rifle sights, which had been set to the center or neutral position, would be adjusted three clicks down on the elevation dial and two clicks to the right on the windage dial. This would change where the shooter is looking to match where the rifle is firing. It was important to remember one's zero. If the rifle sights were somehow set to a different position one just had to return to the center position, then make the proper clicks.

Safety was of paramount importance during these sighting in sessions. We fired from a prone position with the rifle always pointing down range. Another trainee would kneel next to the shooter and on command from the range officer, load a single round into the open chamber of the rifle. Once all three rounds had been fired the shooter would lay the rifle on its side and stand up behind it. Only when everyone was standing up behind the rifles would the range officer give the command for the rifles to be lifted from the ground, while still pointing them down range until a member of the Cadre could look into the chamber and take the rifle to a rack. At that point we would all go downrange to inspect our targets. This process took quite awhile, since there were variances in how well individuals grouped the shots and sometimes it took a couple of tries to get it right. In order to make sure no one was ever in front of anyone else with a rifle, there were three positions, or firing stakes, positioned in such a way that everyone was in a perfectly straight line. After we had retrieved our weapons from the rack, the range officer, who

was in a tower, would call out, “Ready on the left, ready on the right,” meaning everyone was standing at a stake, “Move to the next stake!” This would be repeated once more to get everyone advanced to the firing line, all walking side by side. On one occasion the range officer said “Now, this next command will be to NOT move to the next stake. I know someone will still move up, someone always does because he is not listening.” I thought to myself there is no way in Hell anyone is going to move up after what was just said. Then “Ready on the left, ready on the right, do NOT move up to the next stake!” My jaw must have sagged when Mike Van Leer, who was to my right, began to stroll up to the next stake while everyone else stood stock still in shocked disbelief. Quickly Mike was surrounded by the Cadre, each one yelling disparaging remarks about Mike’s heritage, all while telling him what an idiot he was. Mike was not allowed back on the firing range the rest of the day. Instead he was detailed to deep clean the latrine, a process known as Gee Eyeing (GI). When we got back to the barracks that night I asked him what he had been thinking about. Mike said he had not received a letter from his girlfriend in some time, and was thinking of that while the range officer’s voice droned on in that bored monotone. He had just reacted to the familiar cadence rather than the actual command. Right about this same time one of the trainees from another platoon made the Cardinal Sin of referring to his M-14 as his “gun.” As we went to the noon meal he was standing by the latrine with his rifle on his shoulder, alternately pointing at it and then his groin area, all the while chanting “This is my rifle, this is my gun, this one’s for shooting, this one’s for fun!”

The next step in the rifle training was called field firing. Up to this point we had been only firing our pieces from a prone position. Now we learned to fire while standing,

sitting, kneeling, squatting, and from a foxhole-like position off sandbags. The same process for loading was used, another trainee would load one round at a time into the open breech, and we would then load and fire. This time we used one of the firing stakes as a position unless we were in the foxhole position. Once we were proficient at firing from different positions the rifles were replaced with BB guns and we practiced shooting at little silhouettes by throwing the BB gun from a lowered position up to the shoulder and firing rapidly with both eyes open. Then the DI's would toss metal disks into the air and we had to snap-shoot at the disks. Finally, they set up some man sized silhouettes at about ten meters distance and had us empty our weapons as fast as we could raise them, fire, drop them to waist level and repeat until the magazine was emptied. I remember I shot the stake holding the target in half. In this instance the idea was that in Vietnam the enemy probably would not be nice and stand 75 to 300 meters distant while we drew a bead; instead they were more likely to pop up a few feet away. Somewhere along the way we were assembled into the bleachers behind the firing range. One of the Cadre explained that we would not be using the same weapons we were training with. It seems that the Army had decided that the M-14, modeled on the old WWII standby the M-1 Garand, was not the most suitable weapon for the type of combat that we would see in an environment such as Vietnam. In addition to firing the 7.62x 51 MM NATO, the M-14 weighed a little over nine pounds unloaded; it was long and had a wooden stock. These would prove to have decided disadvantages in a jungle environment, so another rifle had been designed that would more closely meet the need. This rifle was called the M-16. It featured a lightweight composite stock that would reduce the weight by about four pounds and eliminate the problems that would be caused by a wooden stock in a tropical

setting. It also fired a smaller bullet, 5.56 x 45 MM NATO. The reason I mention this at this point is that we were told that the 5.56 MM would "tumble" or flip end over end as it approached the target. This tumbling, it was said, would produce the devastating effect of entering the enemy's body at, say, the neck area, then exiting at the groin, wreaking havoc all the while. I was very impressed with this information, but I later learned that a bullet that flipped end over end would result in extreme inaccuracy and would most likely result in a complete miss of any target. In other words this "information" was incorrect. There is some truth to the tumbling of the 5.56 bullet, but if it occurs at all it does it after it impacts the human body. I don't know if the Cadre didn't know any better, or it just made a good story to tell green troops.

As we sat quietly awaiting the next exercise, a figure in black pajamas jumped up from behind a stack of hay bales with a Russian AK-47 assault rifle and fired off a full magazine of blanks into the air. Needless to say we all just about crapped in our pants. The Cadre got a big kick out of the whole thing, but the point was this was the kind of war we could expect, sneaky enemy soldiers who would strike at any time, usually when we least expected it.

The weeks passed, we marched up and down hills nicknamed Misery and Agony while wearing packs and toting rifles. The sergeants would call out a cadence to help us stay in step and lead us in singing songs that were designed to break the boredom of just marching. Most songs centered on a topic that concerned all soldiers stationed far from home; what was the wife or girl doing with her free time? These lyrics involved the antics of a Four F philanderer universally called Jodie. A typical lyric would sound like this: "*Ain't no sense in going home, Jodie got your girl and gone!" "Sound off,- one-Two!*

Sound off,---one-two---three-four!" This would be sung in a call and response fashion, the DI calling out the lyric, with the marchers calling out the cadence while making sure to keep in step with the soldier marching just ahead.

On one occasion we were marching to the rifle range and we crossed a main highway. That day I was second in line, so it was my task to double time out onto the flank to hold up traffic until the platoon had passed through, then I fell back into the last position. Sgt. Scott came up to me carrying my overshoes. Apparently I had not secured them well enough to withstand double timing and they had fallen off my backpack. I had my rifle over my right shoulder so he laid them in the crotch of my left arm and folded my arm up in a raised position. When we finally arrived at the range one of the other guys had to pry my arm down since I was unable to move it on my own and couldn't set my rifle down with one arm.

The rifle range was about six miles one-way, so it served two functions in one; a relatively long march and a place to practice marksmanship. About the end of February we marched to a range with pop up targets where I fired forty-eight rounds at targets spaced at 75, 150 and 300 meters and hit twenty-two. Not all bad really, since the top score was twenty-seven. The 300-meter targets looked to be about an inch tall, but in some ways they were easier than the 75-meter targets since I tended to shoot over the closer targets. I thought we had marched a long way to the first rifle range until we went ten miles further to the second one. As bad as I hated that old barracks it looked so good when I'd see it come into view on the way back from such a long march.

When the Cadre thought we were as ready as we were going to get we marched out to the pop up target range for what was called Record Firing. This was the same type of

firing we had been doing, except now once we were in the foxhole position we had full magazines handed to us by a soldier who was going to score the number of hits we recorded. There was no time limit, but we had a limited amount of ammunition and once we ran out the trial ended. The record keepers in this case were troops from another company who were a few weeks ahead of our group. The targets popped up randomly at 50, 100, 150, 200 and 300 meter distances and I fired on them until they went down. The scorer coached me on where to look, calling out the yardage, and if I hit a target but it didn't fall right away he would say, "That's good, or dead target" so I didn't waste shots. I fired a score high enough above the minimum score to qualify that first day. The three levels of competency with a firearm are Marksman, Sharpshooter and Expert. The next day we marched to another range where the targets would pop up in a concealed environment with bushes, rocks, and even small trees camouflaging them. In the morning we practiced a technique called Target Detection where we stood at a fence facing a wooded area. There were telescope type affairs located every so often along the fence and our assignment was to try and detect Cadre who were camouflaged to look like the trees, bushes and such. We took turns looking either with our naked eye or through the scope, and some of the guys could pick out what they thought was a target. After we all had a chance the Cadre stood up. One of them was almost under our feet and the others were still hard to see even though we now knew what direction to look.

We fired for record on this range with the targets popping up among the flora. Although I didn't fare as well on this range as I did on the open one, my combined efforts resulted in a Sharpshooter Badge with rifle bar. One phase of training was finally completed.

Dismounted Drill/Manual of Arms and Spirit Of The Bayonet

When we didn't march into the field we would perform what was called Dismounted Drill (DD), which consisted of learning to march as a unit, changing direction on command while keeping the proper spacing. If we carried our rifles we would also do Manual of Arms maneuvers involving such things as changing the rifle from one shoulder to the other, the proper way to stand at parade rest, and saluting when standing or marching with a rifle, all done in unison. These maneuvers date back to the Revolutionary War, when the use of flintlock muzzle loading rifles required a uniform method of maneuver wherein one group of soldiers could fire while the rest reloaded. It was important for everyone to be working as a unit otherwise it was quite likely that casualties from so called "friendly fire" would occur.

Saluting in the military dates back through the centuries and was originally intended to show that one was not carrying a weapon. The right hand being dominant in the majority of warriors, it was used as the signal hand, with both hands being raised as a sign of surrender. In Medieval times chain mail shirts had fasteners that allowed the right hand to remain free to grasp a sword while being buttoned with the left. Women were generally considered non-combatants, thus they could button from the right.

Although Manual of Arms maneuvers are now used largely for ceremonial purposes, they help instill discipline and a sense of order to trainees. Two of the less useful maneuvers involved saluting while the rifle was held in both hands, or with the butt on the ground, but these Manual of Arms exercises seemed extremely important to the DI's. Both maneuvers consisted of starting with the rifle mounted on the left shoulder. First, beginning with the rifle on the left shoulder, and on the command of *Present Arms* the right hand would cross over to slap smartly against the forearm of the rifle, the piece was then lifted away from the body. Next, the left hand slapped underneath the forearm and the right hand slapped down onto the stock just below the pistol grip. At this point the rifle was held vertically in front of the body with the top of the barrel about three inches above the trainee's eyes. The second command is *Order Arms* which starts the same way as *Present Arms*, except that instead of holding the rifle vertically away from the body additional moves are required to lower the rifle so it was held vertically next to the right leg with its butt resting on the ground. All of these maneuvers were done to the count of "One-Two." Salutes are normally executed with the right hand, but in this case the right hand is employed holding the rifle, so a salute would be issued by swinging the left arm across the body, holding the hand palm downward with the blade of the forefinger touching the rifle just below the end of the barrel. The reason these maneuvers were so vital was that our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Stone, had a penchant for inspecting us while we were carrying our rifles and had each group of trainees report for pay while carrying rifles. Having the rifle butt resting on the ground allowed for saluting and freed up the left hand to take the cash he counted out to us. I guess he felt observing these activities afforded him a chance to see how well we were learning.

Another, perhaps more practical way to use the rifle, was with a bayonet mounted on the business end. We were told that the spirit of the bayonet is to *KILL*! So, each time we thrust the bayonet forward we shouted out "*KILL*!" at the top of our lungs. One of the DI's demonstrated the proper technique for using the bayonet, starting from a more or less flat footed stance and ending in a long stride with the bayonet hopefully thrust into the belly of the enemy soldier. This sounds pretty brutal, but bear in mind that if a rifle has to be used as a spear things are in desperate shape at that juncture and one does whatever it takes. After some practice with our foot work, we moved to a sand filled area where we would practice our technique on "opponents." These adversaries consisted of poles that stood about six feet tall. They had a truck tire mounted on them with a sandbag hanging from the center of the tire to simulate a human torso. In addition to the tire and sandbag, the pole had a second sandbag on top that was supposed to represent a head, and a stationary length of wood represented the enemy's left arm. There was a longer, spring loaded, protuberance representing the enemy's bayonet equipped rifle. The idea was to use footwork to get inside the enemy's defense, knock his "rifle" out of the way and then stride forward sticking ones' bayonet into his defenseless middle. All went well until I lost my footing slightly on the loose dirt. After batting the enemy dummy's pseudo firearm aside, I didn't get close enough to block the stick when it sprang back, resulting in my M-14 being knocked out of my hands and into the sand. Almost everyone was too busy to see what had happened, except the ubiquitous Sergeant Scott, who had me cradle the piece in my arms while doing pushups with my elbows and chanting, "I love my rifle!" "I love my rifle!" Of course he had to let everyone else know that I had been

defeated by a bayonet dummy, looking at me with his big, sad brown eyes, evidently wondering how he could live with himself after he sent this sad sack to die in Vietnam.

Pugil Stick Training

In order to get a more realistic feel for using not only the bayonet, but the entire rifle for close quarters fighting, we trained with something called the Pugil Stick. Imagine a giant Q-Tip and you pretty much have the make up of a Pugil Stick. We assembled on the same dirt field used for PT and watched as two DI's demonstrated the tactics we would be using against one another. In addition to pretending the stick was a rifle with a bayonet mounted on the barrel, we were to use the butt end and even the stick itself to gain advantage over our opponent. If a combatant was disarmed, or knocked to the ground, the DI would step in and declare a victor, otherwise they would allow the contest to continue for an unspecified period before declaring a draw. We were each issued a helmet with a bird cage mask, similar to a football helmet, gauntlets that resembled hockey gloves, and a sort of protective cup worn in a diaper shaped loin cloth to protect the groin area. Then the DI picked out two individuals of about the same size, and, with the rest of the platoon gathered around like a crowd at The Coliseum, the gladiators would practice thrusting and parrying as if they were holding rifles and locked in a life or death struggle. The DI's would shout out encouragement or advice and the rest would shout excitedly as advantage was gained or lost by individual favorites. My platoon guide was now Robert Parks, elevated when Lester Newsome fell from grace when it became clear he had not

even been in the ROTC, much less a lieutenant. When my turn came to battle with the sticks Sergeant Scott was prepared to pick out a soldier similar to my slight stature, when Parks stepped out and said he "Would like to take this one." Scott narrowed his eyes at this, hesitated slightly, and then waved us on. Parks was over six feet and weighed about two fifty to my six feet one forty. I began to try to work the tactics we had been taught, but Parks whispered "Kiss my ass" and began to swing the stick like a baseball bat, striking my helmet so hard that the fabric of the padded end of the stick wrapped around the face guard and stung my face. I kept taking his sledge hammer blows as best I could and continued to give back as much as I was able, drawing a satisfying "*OOOFF*" out of him at one point. I don't know how long this was allowed to continue, but eventually the DI's called a halt and I got an "Atta-boy" look from the DI when I walked exhaustedly back to the ranks. Several of the other troops nodded slightly to me as well, and Mike Van Leer said, "You stood right in there." I must have impressed Parks as well, and since his ego was satisfied we got along just fine for the rest of BCT.

Cold Weather Training

It was wintertime in Kentucky, which meant little snow, but the sidewalks and roads would often be slippery with ice. There was about a half inch of snow on the ground when we awoke one morning. An enlisted reservist, Glen Ono, who was born and raised in Hawaii, was ecstatic, he had never seen snow before and was like a kid at Christmas. On days when it was really cold or icy we would sometimes go indoors to be lectured on Army protocol. These old buildings were designed to house troops in WWII so they had

coal fired furnaces. I don't think they were insulated in any way, just wooden planks nailed together. The firemen stoked the furnaces and it would get really hot after awhile. We were sitting in tight rows and it was everyone's job to poke the guy sitting next to you if he dozed off. Anyone caught dozing got extra duty along with the guys on either side of him. I think the Cadre was as bored by this as we were. On one occasion Sgt. Scott told us "He had not sweated like this since the last time he was in Georgia and went to an election!" That got a laugh from some of the guys, but I didn't know what he was talking about. Lester Newsome, my Platoon Guide at the time, later told me it was an old Jim Crow joke from the early emancipation days. One day it was so cold and snowy we stayed in the barracks and practiced taking our M-14's apart and putting them back together. At first we had a silhouette sheet to lay the parts on, then that was taken away and we laid them on a blanket. Sometimes Sgt. Scott or Sgt. Lyons would take the blanket, fold it over and shake the parts up. They then would lay the blanket down with the parts all mixed up to see what we would do. The bigger parts were no real problem of course, but we had taken the rifles apart right down to the small springs in the trigger assembly, so it was nerve racking to say the least. I did pretty well at it since I have a good memory for detail, but then it got to be a speed contest. We had to race to see which one of us could put the weapon back together the fastest, with extra duty for the one who came in last. One attempt found me with the rifle assembled part way when I discovered to my horror that I had missed a step. I knew backing up would cost me, so I just held the part in place with my hand. I almost got away with it since Sgt. Scott had already walked past me when I had a spasm and rattled the part against the barrel. He spun around and said "Who's fucking with that weapon?!" I had to own up that it was me and explain

what had happened. I think he sort of liked the fact that I had been almost clever enough to cover up my mistake, but he couldn't let me off that easy so he said "You will be the first one finished next time won't you?" I affirmed that would be the case. We both knew that with the way I was shaking I couldn't have finished first if I was the only one there. Then he said, "You wouldn't lie to me would you?" I said I would not. "But you will finish first won't you" I affirmed that would be the case. He looked at Sgt. Lyons who was making a point of not looking at me. "What should we do now Lyons?" Scott asked. "I think it would be a good time to move on to some light PT", Lyons replied, getting both Sgt. Scott and me off the hook. Sgt. Scott really didn't want to punish me and I felt relief flood into me like water into a jug.

This brings up a point that what should be easy, somehow usually is not. For instance there are several kinds of language, including codes, used in the military that are foreign to most civilians. Terms such as "In cadence" means doing exercise, such as jumping jacks, while verbally calling out the cadence, such as "One-two-three-four" in time with the various movements. This serves the purpose of keeping everyone in perfect step with one another. "By the numbers," on the other hand, is doing the same exercise while silently counting off in one's head except for the total count. So, a set of squat thrusts "By the numbers" would include dropping into a crouch, kicking out one's legs, performing one push up, drawing back into a crouch, returning to one's feet, and then shouting "One!" In theory this accomplished the same choreography as "In cadence" without all of the noise. The problem usually comes in when people become brain dead and shout a number other than the total count when they are doing, "By the numbers." So, when Sgt. Scott shouts out "In cadence!" he's watching us to see if our mouths are

moving and of course listening for us to mess up when he calls “By the numbers!” It’s difficult to believe, but someone would mess this up almost every time, leading a frustrated Sgt. Scott to assign extra duty to the entire platoon.

Hand to Hand Combat

Given the fact that in combat it was always possible that a soldier could become disarmed, or that stealth might be required, we were drilled on what was called Hand To Hand Combat. This consisted of learning various take down moves and ways of disabling the enemy using only one’s hands and body as weapons. We used Jujitsu on dummies suspended from beams, using the sides of our hands to hit them just below the ear, the tips of our fingers to poke them in the eye and the heel of our hand to smash into the point of the dummy’s nose. The ideal results of the first activity was to merely disable our foe, while the second and third were definitely intended to be lethal since they involved permanently blinding or jamming the nose cartilage into the enemy’s brain.

In addition to using our hands we would use a sheathed bayonet to administer the Coup De Grace to our vanquished foe. There was an area with pits of loose sand where we were taught a dozen or so take down moves, and then worked against one another alternating the attacker and prey role. The Cadre observed closely and offered encouragement or constructive criticism as needed. I enjoyed this training; it gave me a chance to see that my opponent’s size could be used against him, unlike a straight up fist fighting match. Although we spent hours practicing, I don’t think any of us became really

competent because this kind of specialized training takes months or even years to master, and we didn't have that kind of time to devote.

Hand Grenade Training

One morning we marched out to an area that contained the hand grenade range. It was important that we didn't kill ourselves, or anyone else for that matter, so meticulous attention was paid to preparing us to actually toss a live grenade. First, a training NCO described the proper technique, while another training NCO demonstrated with a practice grenade. These grenades were of a different construction than the pineapple shaped grenades that I recalled seeing in the movies. Instead, these were more of a baseball shape. One of the trainers explained that over time it was decided that the football shape of the older grenades was not the shape that American boys most often grew up tossing around. Percentage wise it was much more likely that the average American boy had spent a lot of summer days tossing a baseball. Another important feature of the grenades was the lethal nature of the weapon. The old pineapple shape depended on a charge detonating inside the device with the pineapple like outside breaking into pieces and creating deadly shrapnel. The newer type did not depend on the outer casing alone for its shrapnel, instead its diabolical design incorporated a serrated internal spring that would separate on exploding, making it a more effective anti- personnel weapon. The NCO's demonstrated tossing a grenade while we watched. This was done with the assistance of a loudspeaker while a group of us peered through periscopes while standing behind a

concrete wall facing the grenade toss area. Anyone not actually standing behind the wall was located under a steel roof some distance away. The grenade toss area consisted of six concrete cubicles enclosed on three sides with the opening on the side facing away from the impact area, with a sidewalk running parallel with the cubicles, and a sandy pit located just on the other side of the walkway. The sandy pit was the last line of defense against a dropped armed grenade. If one were dropped the offender was supposed to yell "Grenade!" and then jump into the pit. Of course everyone else in the vicinity was supposed to jump into the hole as well. After the demonstrations we spent time with practice dummy grenades going through the prescribed methods of tossing a grenade, first gripping the grenade firmly in our dominant hand, fingers wrapped around the arming handle, pulling the safely pin, then extending our free arm on a line with the intended direction of the toss. We practiced tossing grenades into tires that were located a few yards away while standing, from our knees and while in the prone position. We were simulating pulling the pin and releasing the arming handle; then hurling the grenade, always hitting the ground flat on our faces after each toss. The area we used for this exercise was covered with a kitty litter like substance, I guess so we wouldn't be as muddy as hogs all day.

Next we were grouped into sixes and each of us was accompanied by a trainer as we marched down to the walkway in front of the cubicles. As each group was assembling, the next group would watch through the periscope. First the trainees were handed practice grenades and the NCO's watched as they tossed the grenades and then dived into the cubicle so as to be below the concrete barrier. In the group ahead of mine one of the trainees dropped his practice grenade, yelled "Grenade!" and dived into the pit. The

NCOs impeded anyone else from doing so, instead forcing them down inside the cubicle. The offender was removed from the group and only five tossed live grenades. When my turn came I carefully followed the instructions of my trainer and successfully tossed both the dummy and live grenade. I remember the trainers were very kind to us. They were not our DI's and therefore didn't feel a need to treat us like scum. Of course the fact that we were holding live grenades might have made them not want to cause us any more angst than we already felt.

Chemical, Biological, Radiological Training

Another unpleasant exercise was gas mask training, also known as Chemical, Biological Radiological (CBR). In addition to extensive classroom training on the various types of CBR currently in use we were all fitted with M-17 gas masks. These masks were designed to allow us to withstand the effects of the gases that might be encountered on the battlefield, one of which is 2-chlorobenzylidene malononitrile (CS), more commonly know as tear gas. This type of gas works on the mucus membranes, causing the victim to have uncontrolled mucus from his nose, and tears from the eyes, thus the term tear gas. The masks were made of rubber and incorporated straps that would allow them to be fastened over the head area while allowing a helmet to still be worn. Goggles were built in to facilitate vision while cartridges were used to filter out contaminants and allow the wearer to breathe clean air. If the mask did not fit perfectly gas would seep in, rendering them useless. The basic test of a good fit was to place both hands over the filters and then breath in hard. If the mask collapsed against the face a fit was considered adequate. If any

air was pulled in from around the mask the straps were readjusted. This process was repeated until a proper fit was attained.

The standard practice was for a platoon size group to don their masks, then march into a Quonset hut and stand at attention in squad formation. A tag with name, rank and serial number was attached to the pocket of the fatigue shirt. Once everyone was inside the door was closed and sealed and on some unseen signal CS gas was released into the hut. Since we were wearing gas masks the only indication that anything had changed was that the room seemed to be filling with fog. One by one, beginning with the soldier in the first rank, we were called to step forward and face a mask equipped instructor who would pick up the tag, have us remove our mask and recite our name, rank and serial number. No one made it much past their name before being overcome. When this happened we were led to a door that contained a breezeway and then released out into the open. We were admonished to not touch our faces as this would only spread the awful stuff around and make it last longer. We were told to stand with the wind blowing on our faces and let time do its work. There were chain link fences surrounding the CBR training facility and we all leaned against the wire, crying and sniveling, until we could again function. This was a terrible experience, but one I would suffer several more times during my stint in the Army.

Bivouac

Two whole weeks of our training were devoted to Bivouac. Early on the first day we marched for hours until we reached a wooded area deep in the bowels of the Fort Knox

training center. Near noon on the first day we set up tents by using shelter halves. Each of us carried in addition to our normal pack, a piece of canvas, a pole, some stakes and rope. I was paired off with another trainee who would contribute his shelter half, pole and stakes to my half so we could assemble a two man tent. Two of the DI's demonstrated how to assemble the two halves to make up the tent, and then supervised the erection of a tent city by the trainees. We put the tents up on the side of a slight rise, so that if it rained the water would tend to run away from the tent instead of flooding the inside. As a further precaution we dug a trench around the tent area to provide a low place for the water to flow into. We blew up air mattresses to sleep on and made up a cot of sorts with a sheet, pillow and blanket supplied from a two and one-half ton truck (commonly called a deuce and a-half) that had been driven to the area sometime before our arrival. We laid out mess kits, toilet kits, our rifles and other gear, and once our squad leaders felt we had everything in top shape the DI's inspected the layout. I remember they shook their heads in wonder how we would ever survive with our sway-backed tents and dust covered equipment. We all had to retighten tent stakes, re-inflate air mattresses, wipe down mess kits and go through the whole exercise until we either got it right, or the DI's got tired of messing with us; I'm not sure which came first.

Chow in the field was served hot, the kitchens set up tents for cooking and clean up, and everyone took turns serving food or pulling KP, so that everything went smoothly. We ate standing up, off of pierced steel plate (PSP) tables welded to pipes that had been driven into the ground. The food was good, usually a stew or casserole of some kind, with bread and butter, juice or milk to drink and fruit or pie for desert. We ate using our

mess kits, and then dipped them in a garbage can that had a heater in it to sterilize the tin ware so we didn't come down with dysentery.

The Obstacle Course/Individual Tactical Training

There were areas laid out a short march from the bivouac area used for field training. Each exercise was a build up for the next, more difficult training exercise. The second day of bivouac saw us on the Obstacle Course. This layout included drainage pipes to be duck walked through; wooden enclosures made of two-by-fours to be low crawled through, rows of sandbags laid out to resemble rice paddy dikes to be balanced on, and towers covered with rope-like nets that had to be scaled as if we were on a amphibious landing. These seemed like some pretty hard exercises until after noon chow when we marched over to the Individual Tactical Training – Day area. This area included wooden pole fences that had to be scaled, barbed wire that had to be low crawled under, or sometimes crawled through, logs that had to be crawled over, and finally an open area where we practiced advance and cover tactics. This consists of one trainee advancing at double time while the other provides covering fire. Then, in leap frog patterns, the roles were reversed until an objective was reached. All of this running, crouching, and crawling made me glad the DI's had pushed us so hard on the PT field two or three times a day. I was as hard as a rock without an ounce of fat on my lean frame. We went back to the bivouac area that night and slept the sleep of the exhausted trainee. The next day we had lecture from the trainers on the finer points of Individual Tactical Training, and cleaned and laid out all of our gear for a field inspection by the assistant commanding

officer, 2nd Lieutenant William Guerrant. At dusk we marched back to the area for Individual Tactical Training-Night. It was pretty much the same stuff, advance and cover, crawling under barbed wire, and over fences and logs, except this time we only had starlight to go by. Occasionally one of the DI's would fire a flare into the air and we would have to freeze in place until the light faded. I recall this was especially back breaking if I was halfway over a log or crouching behind an obstacle.

The next day we were again allowed to sleep in the morning, then had lectures on field activities and a field inspection. In the evening we marched to a firing range where we stood toeing a stake while firing off hand at man sized targets set up about twenty five meters to our front. After full dark we laid down at the stakes and by the light of a flare, fired at the same type of target. After we had fired a full magazine, flood lights would come on and we would advance down range to look at our handiwork. Each hit was marked with a piece of chalk. I think a seventy five percent hit rate was considered satisfactory. I was pretty good with the M-14 and made the grade the first time. Typically, the DI's rewarded my performance by having me police-up brass, meaning retrieving the spent cartridges, while the guys who had fired less than the benchmark continued to bang away in the flare light. I was getting smarter by this time and spent the time between flares sneaking a smoke behind the lecture podium.

The Close Combat Course

The next activity was an upgrade from the advance and cover routine called The Close Combat Course. This exercise was carried out on a field with a road running down the

center so the ambulance could get easy access to anyone who was hurt. This would prove to be the roughest training we had yet experienced. With our M-14s loaded with blank ammunition, and with dummy grenades hanging from our pistol belts, we began from a sandbagged position where we fired from the prone position. On the command “Column advance” we jumped up and rushed forward until we could take cover behind a pole fence that ran though the field. More firing, then we crawled though the fence and advanced once more to some mounds of dirt where there were man sized targets set up about ten meters to our front. Again on command, we practiced grenade tossing and firing our rifles at the targets. During the advance we were screaming like banshees; this was supposed to instill fear in the enemy, but mostly it just made our throats raw and scratchy. I resolved that if I ever had to do this for real I would reserve the shouting for being wounded and hollering for a medic. Once this exercise was complete we were allowed to take a drink from our canteens and smoke a cigarette before marching back up the road while another squad attacked the distant targets on the field beside us. This was such an exhausting event I could only wonder what it was going to be like in actual combat when the targets returned fire and we couldn’t just quit and march back up a convenient road to the bivouac area.

Commanding Officer’s Review

After noon chow Sergeant Scott picked out a squad sized group to represent the platoon for a Commanding Officer’s Review. I couldn’t believe it when he selected me, but Bob Parks’ eyes were gleaming when he was also selected and he gave me a wink

when we lined up for inspection. A squad from each platoon stood at attention with our rifles shouldered while Sgt. Scott rehearsed us on what to expect and told us, not requested, told us, that we would not embarrass him. We assured him we would not, but I noticed that our voices sounded as if a squad of mice were answering his admonition. I think we all had our scrotums pulled so tight against our stomachs they wouldn't succumb to gravity for days. We stood like that a short while, then a Jeep pulled up and 2nd Lieutenant Guerrant stepped out. He nodded to Sgt. Scott who raked us one last time with his eyes while smiling broadly from under his Smoky the Bear hat. "All present or accounted for Sir!" he barked out while snapping off a smart salute, then turned to us and shouted out a command. We slapped out right hands onto our shouldered rifles and in unison moved through the manual of arms drill until the butt of our rifles were on the ground and our left hand was across the barrel in a rifle salute. This salute was returned in the conventional manner by the lieutenant. Then Sergeant Scott had us re-shoulder our rifles, left face and forward march to an area where we crawled on our backs under barbed wire while holding our M-14s between our legs with the barrel resting on our chests. Next, we scaled a wall made of logs, fixed bayonets and attacked some bayonet dummies. I could feel Sgt. Scott's eyes burning into my back and actually produced a classic move, being careful to get close inside the dummy's outstretched weapon, then with knees bent and the rifle on a 45 degree angle, planted the bayonet into his tire treaded chest. Finally, we stood in the parade rest position while one of the squad leaders demonstrated hand to hand combat on one of the Cadre, who passively allowed himself to be overcome. All of this was tentatively observed by Lt. Guerrant, who actually looked as if he were interested. I was so relieved to not have made some huge mistake my knees

were weak. SFC Temple told us to not get to feeling we were anything special, in fact we had been selected for "This dog and pony show because we were some of the biggest fuck ups and they were hoping we would fail because they wanted to hear Lt. Guerrant cuss us out!" That said, the sergeants double timed us all the way back to the bivouac area.

The Infiltration Course

The last portion of the bivouac was dedicated to an exercise that combined all of the elements we had practiced up to this point. The Infiltration Course was done in two parts. In the morning we assembled in a bleacher area where the trainers explained what was ahead and took any questions. We started the exercise by crouching behind a concrete berm while a trainer walked above us and told us that when we repeated this exercise that night that a live machine gun would be firing at a fixed height above our positions and that standing up would get us killed. The course was about two hundred meters and had fences separating the field into separate areas. This was so we didn't all begin to crawl on an angle increasing the overall distance, and increasing the chance we would bunch up and someone would get his body too high into the air. There was barbed wire that had to be crawled under and there were berms that had to be negotiated by crabbing sideways. These berms were stepped slightly down and gradually took us lower, so that when we reached the end we were far enough below the level of the machine gun fire there was less likelihood of someone standing up and getting his head shot off. Lastly, there were sand bagged areas that contained explosives designed to randomly detonate, simulating

incoming artillery or mortars. The ground was very soft and we were to make sure that our rifles didn't pick up too much dirt when we were low crawling because we would be issued blanks and told to fire our weapons at the other side of the course. Anyone whose rifle malfunctioned would be required to clear the jam, clean the piece and re-infiltrate. We crawled over the first berm, keeping close to the ground, cradling our rifles in our arms while using our elbows and knees to move through the soft soil. It was tough going and again I was grateful for the PT we had been tortured with since the first day in BCT. After what seemed like days I got to the other side, where a sergeant chewed me out, telling me that my skinny ass had been too high in the air towards the end of the crawl and if I did that again that night it would get shot off. I gasped an acknowledgement which he disdained to answer. Instead he took my M-14, opened the action and peered inside. Then he turned the rifle up into the air and looked into the barrel. Gruffly, he said OK and handed it back. I stood there mute, and he asked what the Hell I was waiting for, was I a queer who wanted him? I stammered that we were told that we would have to fire a blank and he told me to get out of his sight before he fired a blank up my rear end.

Following the day exercise we ate chow, cleaned our rifles and just kind of lay around until dusk when we once again crouched beneath the berm. As soon as it was full dark, the machine guns began to bark, sending red tracers cracking over our heads. I crawled out of the trench, and began working my way through the dirt, trying to remember how far it was to the first drop off. As it turned out this was not as big a problem as I had anticipated since flares were fired off every so often allowing us to peer into the semi darkness and get a bearing. The dynamite, or whatever they were using, would detonate periodically deafening me, but with the benefit of making the snapping sound the

machine gun bullets made seem muted and more distant. Again I negotiated the course without any real mishaps, and was met at the end by a Cadre who checked my rifle. This one was kind about it, actually offering a small smile and a slap on the shoulder as I left to return to the bleacher area.

The Confidence Course

The last morning of Bivouac we went over to The Confidence Course. This was set up as a series of obstacles built mostly out of logs, and entailed various ways of climbing and balancing. Team efforts and helping one another to the next level was encouraged. All of the obstacles had names such as The Tarzan which entailed swinging on a rope, The Skyscraper which was several floors high or The Weaver which required climbing a sort of "A" ladder made of logs. The DI's did not insist that we do anything in particular and if we didn't want to try something it was okay. I did enough that I didn't look like a chicken, mostly the ones that entailed balancing since that was my strong suit, after all it was a confidence course, so why do anything I didn't feel confident with.
That afternoon we marched back to the Company area, with that old barracks looking better than ever.

Physical Combat Proficiency Test

The most difficult phase of BCT for me was the physical training exercises. Sgt. Scott tried to help me put on weight by telling the cooks to put extra desserts and pasta on my

tray at meal times but my metabolism in those days kept me burning calories at a tremendous rate and I hovered around one hundred and forty to one hundred forty five pounds. At six feet I was as thin as a rail and without some bulk my bones and tendons took a beating on some of the exercise drills. The PT Combat Proficiency Test consisted of running a mile in under eight minutes while wearing fatigues and combat boots, low crawling forty meters through sand, carrying another trainee on our backs for 40 meters while running around obstacles, long tossing a hand grenade, and going hand over hand through a series of overhead pipes while suspending ourselves with just our arms. The mile run was first and I did well at that portion, I was lightweight and could run more quickly than some of the others who were bulkier. The low crawl was not too much trouble either, again being lighter helped in pulling my body thorough the soft sand, although the tendency was to get going too fast and stick my ass up. When this happened a member of the training Cadre would come over and put his foot on my butt, yelling that I was going to get it shot off if I didn't learn to keep it down.

Where the trouble began was on the long grenade toss. I don't have a strong throwing arm and all of my attempts came up woefully short of the required distance. One of the DI's said if I ever need to toss a grenade I had better get up close, since these tosses were more likely to kill me than the distant enemy. Failing that segment was bad news, because I now needed to really excel in the other events. I felt terrible about my lack of proficiency, yet in reality this was an area that we never trained for. At no time was there an exercise designed to strengthen our ability to throw a baseball sized object the equivalent distance of a third baseman throwing to first base; you either had a good throwing arm or you didn't.

Another near disaster occurred when I fell while carrying my partner in the fireman's carry. The poor sucker had carried me across the gravel lot, winding his way around obstacles made of logs, with me giddily shouting encouragement. When he reached the far side he set me down, then I bent at the waist while he stood close behind me. With his arm around my neck I reached back, picked him up by the thighs and began trundling across the field. We were doing well through the first set of obstacles, but somewhere between there and the next set, my legs began to feel like rubber bands and I was wobbling when we went into the next hurdle. I remember his cry of "Oh No!" when it became clear that I was going down and I had to drop him so he wouldn't fall on top of me. I staggered back to my feet, got him back in position and used the obstacles to support myself until I was in the clear, then staggered to the finish line with him pleading with me to make it. He didn't hold it against me, and we parted with him in good spirits, but it I figured it would really cost me points on time when I had to get up and get him remounted. As it turns out, the Cadre didn't even look at me, just took my white board and marked a near perfect score on it. I don't know if he didn't notice my screw up, or got me confused with someone else. Either way, I wasn't going to argue.

The final test, the overhead bars, was a terrible problem. We had a set of these between the barracks and I had practiced on them whenever I had some free time. The bars were loose and would turn as I swung from one to another causing me to hang on with just my fingers.. Without gloves my hands would be so cold after a few repetitions that I couldn't close them for several minutes after I returned to the barracks, but with gloves I would often lose my grip and slip to the ground before I could swing to the next bar. Once again, my inability to gain weight and bulk left me without great arm strength,

so all of my weight was supported by my shoulder, wrist and finger muscles and I didn't do as many repetitions as I needed to get a top score. I waited with my heart in my mouth for my score to be tallied, three hundred points was the minimum. My final score: three hundred eight. A second hurdle had been jumped. I felt like it was a miracle. There was only one more to go.

A Three Day Pass/ Glenda Visits

Two unexpected occurrences emerged not long after the PT test. The first was when I was summoned to the Orderly Room one evening and told I had a visitor. This was most unusual because the Army wanted us immersed in the BCT experience and discouraged contact with the outside world. However, due to the circumstances, the duty sergeant decided to allow it. As I remember, my sister, Glenda, had secured the services of a Justice of the Peace and gotten married to Frank Pavia, to whom she had been engaged for some time. Frank asked what she wanted to do next and she told him she wanted to see her little brother. As any dutiful husband would, he drove with her down to Fort Knox and upon arrival checked in at the military police station. The MP's contacted my unit and secured permission for Frank and Glenda's visit. The Duty NCO explained to me that I could only go so far away from the unit, because I was in fatigues and the MP's would issue a delinquency report if I was observed. I remember telling them that I could really use a hamburger so Frank went somewhere and came back with a couple of juicy burgers, an act for which I am still grateful. Glenda cried because they were being mean to her brother, but Frank, who had served a few years prior, assured her this was only

temporary and that I would soon be a full fledged soldier with all of the privileges that entailed. Of course that meant damned little, but she didn't know that and was mollified. This is still to this day a good memory.

The second unexpected event occurred when some of us were again summoned to the Orderly Room. Sergeant Scott personally escorted us there and had us stand outside while he coached us on what to do. We were to enter and take three steps up to the First Sergeant's desk, snap our heels together and stand rigidly at attention with our eyes locked on the back wall. We were not to salute, or call the First Sergeant Sir, for as Sergeant Scott admonished "He works for a living." We were however, required to shout out our names, including the rank of private, "Private Kirkland reporting as ordered!" Then say "Yes, First Sergeant!" to his question, and nothing else. Of course, when Sgt. Scott asked if there were any questions we answered "No Sir" causing him to scowl at us and remind us that he too worked for a living. When my turn came up I marched into the room, stopped in front of FSgt Stephen's desk, snapped my heels together and shouted out the required statement. FSgt Stephens asked if I would be a good boy and not disgrace the outfit if he let me go into Louisville for a couple of days and I answered in the prescribed manner. I would like to tell you that this was a reward for doing a good job on the Commanding Officers Review, but in truth I think they were required to give out so many passes and they picked out the guys they figured were least likely to "embarrass the outfit" as the First Sergeant intimated. I was partnered up with Richard Lamerts, whom Sgt. Scott called Lambert. We polished up our dress shoes (called low quarters) and brass belt buckles that evening and lined up for an inspection the next morning, dressed in khaki uniforms and garrison caps. A bus picked us up in front of the orderly

room and the bored civilian driver took time to tell us how long it would take to make the trip into town, recommended a place to stay and told us where and when he would pick us up to come back. He said he knew none of us was old enough to drink, so we were to watch out for the Military Police if we decided to drink and walk the streets. He also told us to forget about any action with the local girls; we were in uniform, and our haircuts would give us away even if we weren't. Lamerts had a steady girl that wrote to him on a regular basis and of course I did too, so we weren't surprised or disappointed by this revelation. That didn't mean we weren't interested in the female form however, and after securing a room in the suggested hotel, we walked down the main street in search of adventure. We couldn't believe we were away from the base and all of the crap that went with it, so just being free to walk around without harassment seemed heavenly. Before long we came adjacent to a theater type of structure, where a Carnival Barker loudly proclaimed that we would be amazed by the beauty of the girls that were about to perform on the stage. I don't recall what the entrance fee was, but the prospect of seeing real live girls performing on a stage was all we needed to know. We paid our fee, received our tickets and entered the dark building that contained a low stage with heavy curtains backing it and rows of bleacher type seating starting about four feet from the stage and rising all the way to the rear wall. The place was nearly empty when we went in, so we found seats in the center about half way up. Men slowly filed in and the seats were perhaps half full when the curtains opened revealing a movie screen. A few seconds later a projector started up and a black and white Laurel and Hardy movie came on. Lamerts looked over at me and shrugged as if to say "Well we got suckered on this one," but we had paid to get in and the place was filling up so we decided to just sit it out. In a

short while the lights came up, the projector shut off and an emcee took center stage to introduce the first act. It turned out the performers were strippers who took off their clothes down to the birthday suit! We hooted and hollered until we were hoarse as the emcee encouraged more noise to egg the performers on to greater splendor. I don't recall how many performers there were, but we left hoarse and happy when the final curtain fell. There wasn't anything else even approaching that thrilling afternoon. We mostly just hung out, went to a movie or lay on the bed in the hotel, making sure we didn't embarrass the outfit. The bus picked us up on the evening of the third day and returned us to the reality of BCT. The rest of the guys wanted to hear a lurid story of debauchery, but outside of the strip show we didn't have one to tell. Nevertheless we were the envy of the entire platoon.

The Proficiency Test

The Proficiency Test is the last hurdle of the BCT process. Just as the name implies it tests the trainees' proficiency in everything we were supposed to have learned in the preceding eight weeks. Just before we went into the training area Sgt. Scott drilled us repeatedly on the finer points of areas he knew were common tripping points. Unfortunately, there was too much to remember and sometimes what we were taught was not what the testing Cadre wanted, so I got marked down anyway. We were dressed in fatigues and carried our M-14's wherever we went, stacking them when they weren't needed. An erasable board with an identification number and a square representing each of the tests was hung around our necks from a cord. Each square had a number assigned

to the corresponding test. If we passed the test the examiner would mark a diagonal slash through the number, if not, the training Cadre would wipe the number out. I don't recall the order of events, but it covered guard duty, reporting for pay while carrying a rifle, (basically executing a rifle salute), first aid, hand to hand combat, bayonet, (there are pictures in our class book of me slaughtering a bayonet dummy during this test), field stripping weapons, applying camouflage paint, and what felt like a hundred other proficiencies.

During the proficiency exam I received a couple of lessons in how the Army works. The first came when I was simulating guard duty, marching back and forth with my rifle on my shoulder. I had been taught that if I was approached by anyone other than the sergeant of the guard that I was to ignore them and continue on my path. During the test, a sergeant dressed in rags like a bum approached asking for a smoke. I refused eye contact and continued on my path, at which point the "bum" grabbed me and failed me on this test by wiping off the number because I was supposed to stop, and yell "Sergeant of the guard!" When I told the sergeant that we had not been told to do this, he chewed me out for being a "Lying, smart assed punk trainee, who had better learn his place in this man's Army or his ass would be had." The lesson I learned is to keep my mouth shut when a sergeant makes a statement I didn't agree with. The second experience was strangely pleasant, given that long tossing grenades was not my strongest area. We approached the Grenade Toss area and the sergeant in charge asked us if we could toss grenades, of course we said we could, so he said he believed us, marked passed on our pads and told us to move out to the next station. I was euphoric at not being humiliated once again. This lesson was to go along with what ever the sergeant says; you might be

surprised with the outcome. We went through physically demanding tests all morning, ate chow at noon and then finished with tests on such areas as compass reading, Chain of Command, rifle inspection, first aid and so forth.

After evening chow we just sort of sat around waiting for results, although we all knew pretty much how we had done based on how many numbers had been rubbed off our boards. Another clue was how relaxed the Cadre was around us, no harassment or yelling of any sort, even from SFC Temple, which was most unusual. Just before dark we were told that everyone had passed, news greeted by great cheering from the ranks. I don't know if I was cheering because I was pleased with myself, or if I was just glad this phase of my Army experience was almost completed; probably both. We all dreaded the thought of being recycled back to another BCT unit and leaving the comrades we had been through so much with. The Army was weaving its magic. Already we thought of ourselves as a cog in the gear and civilian life seemed more distant than ever. Our time wasn't up just yet though. We had a few more days and nights before we would ship out to our next training stations, and there were more strange events yet to occur.

We were done with BCT, but it wasn't done with us. For one thing we had to leave our rifles as clean as the day they were issued to us. This entailed taking them outside the barracks where the DI's had set up buckets of kerosene. We took the M-14's apart down to the last spring, soaked them in the kerosene and then scrubbed the parts with toothbrushes, pipe cleaners and rags, until the DI's agreed that they were in perfect condition. This served the added purpose of keeping us busy, since the Army considers idle hands to be the tools of the Devil. Otherwise things were pretty relaxed; we just kind of hung around smoking and joking, with even the Cadre talking to us as if we were

human beings. Sgt. Scott told us we were like sons to him and that he had only been hard on us because we were going to see worse and he wanted us to be prepared. Finally, the last night of BCT came to pass. The next day was graduation day; families would be allowed to visit and the DI's would pretend to be nice, all would be well; unless someone pulled a stunt, such as going AWOL, or some other embarrassing trick. If that happened our relatives would be told that we had an emergency training session and no one would see good old mom or dad before we were shipped out to our new duty stations.

Over the course of the eight weeks there were events that I believe are important to this memoir, but they didn't seem to fit the narrative. Accordingly, I've grouped them into a section of their own. Since each incident involves unique individuals I've called that section Characters.

Characters

The first character is actually the last one, but most certainly not the least. I don't recall his real name, only his nickname, Hollywood. He earned this name one morning when we fell out for formation in front of our barracks and he was wearing his sunglasses. Sgt. Scott declared that everyone was out of uniform except "Hollywood," so we all had to return to the barracks and come out wearing our sunglasses. Mind you this is a March day in Kentucky, so overcast not sunshine was the rule. When we returned to the formation, Hollywood was not wearing his gloves. Again, we were all out of uniform except Hollywood, so we all removed our gloves. A few hours later our hands were frozen, and Sgt. Scott allowed us all to put our gloves back on, but admonished us to

remember who it was that caused all the trouble. It turned out that Hollywood was attempting to get out of the Army by failing BCT. He tried to fail the marksmanship test, but the Cadre had him re-fire for record with shooters who had qualified as Expert firing at the same targets from either side of him. Same with the PT Test, they just had another soldier run ahead of him, then "mistook" the ringer for him when scoring. I suppose he did eventually get out of the Army, but the DI's were determined that he wasn't going to do it at their expense. These were mostly career soldiers and something like that would reverberate all the way to headquarters. Cover your ass is the motto in the military, always make sure you have someone to blame when things go wrong, or, as in this case, don't let the tail wag the dog. Most of us didn't care what happened to Hollywood, other than the sunglasses/glove incident I don't think he caused me any real grief. That is until the last night before graduation. It was after lights out and he was outside the barracks somewhere. If he got caught, or worse yet one of the sergeants decided to do a head count, we were all going to be grounded for graduation day. After much discussion we reached a consensus that when the CQ runner came by to check on the fire watch, we would send word that we had an AWOL. This resulted in a visit from the duty NCO who contacted Sgt. Scott at home. Word came back that we were to see to it that Hollywood "Fell over a footlocker," a euphuism for having an unfortunate accident. We seized on this as a solution to our dilemma. If he returned we would have to be ready.

The sky was clear and the moon was shining in through the windows, providing enough light for some covert activity we had planned for his eventual return. First, sheets were tied together and laid out on the floor between two pillars half way through the barracks. Realizing the moon would reflect off the sheets, blankets were laid over the

sheets to darken them. Waiting crouched on either of the end of the sheets was a burly member of the platoon. Another trainee was stationed at the top of the stairs so we could have early warning of Hollywood's arrival. The cooks who bunked in Cadre rooms on the first floor worked nights so they couldn't interfere. Sometime in the wee hours Hollywood crept into the barracks, slipping quietly around the corner and towards his bunk. When he reached the sheets, they were pulled taut dumping him unceremoniously to the floor. He cried out in pain and surprise, and then the entire platoon leapt out of our bunks and proceeded to kick and hit him as he rolled around on the floor, trying to escape his attackers. I got a couple of kicks in, but I wasn't real keen on the gang attack, I was as likely to get hit as he was in the wild melee, so I retreated to my bunk and listened to the rest of the carnage. After the majority of the second floor troops exhausted themselves some of the guys from the first floor came up and carried him into the latrine where they dunked his head in a toilet, and who knows what else. He was crying out for mercy, saying his arm was broken, but no one listened. Finally, he was carried over to his bunk, where he wept, being cursed and told to quiet down. Finally, one of the guys got the flashlight from the Firewatcher and proceeded to clobber Hollywood with the flashlight until he hit his knuckles on the top bunk and then really went nuts. Someone pulled him away and it was still the rest of the night, even the quiet weeping stopped after awhile.

I must have slept, because the next thing I became aware of was that well before reveille Sgt. Scott appeared on the second floor and switched on the overhead light. The platoon guide immediately jumped up and reported that it seemed one of the platoon members had an accident during the night. Sgt. Scott feigned shocked disbelief, but it was easy to tell he was pleased. When he saw the shape Hollywood was in his brow

furrowed and asked “Where was this footlocker, at the top of the stairs?” I never officially heard what happened after that morning, just that Hollywood left the area for a trip to the infirmary. Another hard lesson was learned, there were no individuals in this man’s Army: we all pulled together or someone, often everyone, paid a price.

A second poor soul whose name I remember but who will remain un-named had what was probably a nervous breakdown about half way through BCT. I’m not a doctor, and couldn’t give a clinical diagnosis, but he bunked right across from me and it became more and more evident to me that something was going wrong with him. For one thing, he hardly slept at night. I remember waking up in the morning and seeing him sitting on the side of his bunk, staring blankly off into space. For someone to stay awake when it wasn’t required was really unusual, because the pace was exhausting and the nights were often very short, making sleep a precious commodity.

One of the unpardonable sins this individual committed was causing the barracks to fail an inspection by the CO because he did not prepare for it. His squad leader was demoted back to the ranks, and Sgt. Scott was in a rage, telling the platoon guide “That S.O.B had better have an accident if you know what’s good for you.” By extension it was what was good for the entire platoon. It took a couple of nights for him to relax. It wasn’t unusual for him to stay awake nearly all night, but the rigorous training schedule finally caused him to drop off to an exhausted sleep. The fire watchman wasted no time in letting key people know the score. After a stealthy approach a blanket was thrown over him and he was beaten with fists until his struggles caused him to fall from the top bunk to the floor where he was kicked and beaten further. I didn’t participate in the blanket

party, or at least I don't think I did. I might have been required to throw a punch or kick in order to assume a portion of the guilt, but I don't think so.

Sgt. Scott flipped on the light first thing in the morning and smiled when he saw the figure huddled under his bunk, where he had crawled while seeking refuge from his attackers. We fell out for morning formation that day, and everything was routine, until we were marching someplace with our weapons mounted on our shoulders. He wasn't in my squad so I didn't see this, but I was told he waited until an officer was right alongside him in the formation and then slammed his rifle butt into the back of the man in front of him. The officer immediately went ballistic, roaring in outrage, while the rest of the platoon was called to halt. The Cadre surrounded him, disarming him without protest and hustling him over to the ambulance that always accompanied us on forced marches. I don't think the guy who was struck with the rifle butt was seriously injured. Needless to say we didn't see this crazed individual again. I did hear a report from one of my squad members who was on CQ duty that the patient was strapped to a gurney in the orderly room hallway that night. We were later told that he was given what is known as a Section Eight, a mentally unfit discharge from the military. His bunk was stripped of sheets and blankets and the mattress was rolled up onto one end. This was just one of several empty bunks whose owners had succumbed to one malady or another and was no longer with the platoon. As badly as we hated the environment we were in none of us wanted to find ourselves thrown out of the platoon. We didn't know it, but the idea of comradeship and team work so important to successful armies was already wheedling itself into our psyche.

I talked about the fire watch and how important it was that the people assigned to the duty actually stay awake. As a sort of check and balance, one of the jobs of the CQ was to have a runner periodically go around to each barracks and check on the fire watch. Most of the time they were alert, but on one occasion when I was the FW I was awakened by someone slapping my face and whispering for me to wake up. It was Stuart Neufeld, a member of my squad, who had gotten up to go to the latrine and found me perched on the edge of a sink, sound asleep. I thanked him and told him I owed him a big favor. Sometime later, we were marching around the training field doing dismounted drill when Neufeld got tangled up in his own feet and stumbled into me knocking me out of formation. Before I could recover Sgt. Scott noticed me out of position and asked how it had happened. I'm pretty certain he knew but he just wanted me to tell him. I told him it was caused by my own clumsiness, causing Sgt. Scott to give me a long stare, and then tell me to "Put my left hand on my left ear, and my right hand on my right ear and pull." "You will hear a loud popping sound, which will be your head clearing your ass!" When I got back into formation, I exchanged a glance with Neufeld. The favor had been repaid in full.

I mentioned in the section involving the induction physical that one of the doctors advised me to report the "skin tags" when I got to BCT. On a night when Sgt. Scott was fairly calm, I talked to him about them, telling him that they itched and looked like "Little peters." I showed him the one near my hip, at which time he told me to report for sick call in the morning. Reporting for sick call in BCT was discouraged to the maximum. During the morning formation SFC Temple would ask if there were any "Sick, lame or lazy" that needed to see a doctor. Anyone who answered in the affirmative was subjected

to vilification and ridicule. This treatment goes back centuries and is commonly used to discourage soldiers from trying to get out of combat, or more often, just having to do ordinary duties. I recall being told that the term used to describe a solider who malingered was “Gold bricking” because they laid around like the bricks at Fort Knox, although I don’t know for certain that’s the real meaning of the term. When my turn came to be asked “And just what’s wrong with you?” Sgt. Scott quietly told SFC Temple that I was the man he had told him about at breakfast, saving me from trying to explain my unusual problem..

After formation everyone moved back to the barracks except for those of us who had reported for sick call. We were marched over to the orderly room, where we stood at attention outside a window where we could see a pot bellied stove merrily burning coal and exuding warmth. The drill sergeants all took turns warming their hands by the stove while smiling wolfishly out the window. I think the theatrics were intended to discourage future trips to the infirmary. We were almost frozen when we were finally loaded into a three-quarter ton truck and hauled to the clinic. Once there we off loaded from the truck, and again stood at attention outside the front door of the lobby. There was at least one man from my platoon, Robert Tucker, who had horrible blisters on the bottom of his feet and he would have collapsed if the men on either side of him hadn’t figured out a way to get him braced between them. After a short wait, we were ushered in to the lobby where a bored male Navy nurse sorted us out by illness symptoms. The majority of the complaints involved severe coughing and respiratory distress. These individuals were given “cold packs” and sent back to the truck. They had Tucker remove his boots and socks revealing his goose egg sized blisters and after I showed the nurse my “skin tag,” we were referred

to the infirmary where we would see a physician. A wheelchair was produced, we got Tucker seated, and then I followed the nurse as he wheeled Tucker through the corridors until we came to an area that reminded me of an emergency room. There were gurneys in booths along one wall, each with curtains that could be pulled around for privacy. I was issued a hospital gown and paper footies and told to wait on one of the gurneys. A youthful appearing doctor came in, looked at my chart, asked a couple of questions, and then examined the "skin tags" with great interest. He asked if I had spent anytime overseas or in the tropics. I told him I was from Michigan and had not traveled outside of the US or Canada. He hollered for the orderly, issued some instructions, and when out of the booth toward a sink. The orderly was not pleased; he whispered to me that "This sum-bitch loves to cut," and that if I didn't want it done to say so, he would witness it for me. I was confused and not a little frightened by this turn of events. It was obvious that the doctor intended to excise the skin tags right away, and that the orderly knew something I didn't. On the other hand, the doctor was also an officer, and I didn't know what Sgt. Scott would say if I came back untreated. In the end I allowed the doctor to administer a local antiseptic solution and pain killer, then he had me lie on my stomach while he sawed happily away; making deep cuts to make sure he got to the root of the skin tag. After he finished with the second one, he said I could sit up, at which point I realized I was laying in a pool of blood. He pointed to a stack of towels and told me to clean myself up, and come back in a two weeks for the results of the biopsy and to get the stitches removed. I stood up with blood running down my leg, and when I picked up a towel and began to wipe, I realized the doctor had not closed the curtain and several patients were staring at me with horrified looks on their faces.

Two weeks later I again reported for sick call. I was subjected to the same humiliating routine in front of the orderly room, except this time a deuce and a-half was needed due to the number of upper respiratory infection cases. Again I was sorted out of the group and sent to the infirmary where the doctor told me the results of the biopsy were negative. He opined that the skin tags were some type of microorganism I had picked up from swimming in the Great Lakes, but I've never known for sure. As for Tucker, his blisters responded to treatment, and his foot size was reevaluated. It seems that he had unusually small feet, and oversized boots were issued to him during In-Processing, causing his feet to shift around in his boots. He was issued the correct size and returned to the platoon.

There were some other interesting characters in Charlie Company, a few of which were players in a story involving KP. There were two guys I graduated from high school with in my platoon, Frank Maxa and Walter Noechel. We stuck together as much as we could, and one day we were talking during a break from classroom instruction when we were approached by the fourth platoon assistant DI, Sergeant James Watts. He looked us over carefully, asked us our names and if we had gone to Finney High. We told him we had, and then he told us to "Get the hell away from him." That evening, when we had returned to our barracks, Watts came in wearing civilian clothes and talked to the three of us. He was a year older and had joined the Army while still in his senior year at Finney High, as a hedge against going into the draft and the seemingly inevitable trip to Vietnam. It wasn't that he was a coward; in fact he was anything but. I recall one occasion when still in high school where a bully was picking on a nerd. Watts accosted the bully on the staircase and told him further such nonsense would result in Watts tearing off the bully's arm and beating him to death with it. He told us it was a good

thing we were not in his platoon, as he would be harder on us than anyone else, because he wanted us to be prepared for the hardships that were to come. As he left us he told us he couldn't contact us again, but that if he could ever pull us out of a jam he would.

My first KP assignment showed how little I understood about the difference between civilian and Army life. I don't remember why I was late getting over to the mess hall the night before. I suppose whoever was responsible for telling me to report dropped the ball, but since I was the last to report I got the worst job. The next morning I thought I would be first to get to the mess hall so I decided to skip shaving, something a civilian could get away with. Despite my ploy, based on the fact that I was the last one to report to the kitchen the night before I still wound up on the worst job, scrubbing pots and pans that had food burned onto them. The requirement for the water temperature was so hot that it was nearly unbearable and the amount of tin ware that came through was overwhelming to someone like me who had never done such a task, and was not used to the oppressive heat in the kitchen area. As the day passed one of the assistant cooks began to look at me in a strange fashion. Finally, he called over a head cook, PFC Thompson, and pointed out that I needed a shave. Thompson sadistically ordered me to go over to the barracks and retrieve a razor, then come back and shave without the benefit of shaving soap. I did so but when they weren't looking I splashed hot water on my face from the rinse water. The super hot water made my face red but they took it to be a razor rash and were satisfied. I might not even remember this incident if it wasn't for what happened afterwards. Not satisfied with his initial action and drunk with power over outranking a trainee, Thompson told me to put the razor in my pocket and at every meal I was to pull it out and announce: "PFC Thompson, I have my razor!" In order to keep

track of us we were counted three times a day, at meal times. This entailed having a sergeant sit near the chow line entrance to the mess hall while we entered in groups of five yelling out our designation and a number from one to five. By designation I mean the first two letters preceding our serial number; either Regular Army (RA), National Guard (NG), Army Reserve (AR) or Unwilling Soldier (US); (I don't remember what the US really stood for.) At any rate I came in yelling my number, then seeing PFC Thompson eying me wolfishly went through the ordered routine. Sergeant Watts sat upright in his chair and asked what this was about. Before I could answer PFC Thompson told him that it was on his orders. "Fuck you Thompson!" Watts roared, then turned to me and told me the next time he saw that razor I had better be shaving with it in the latrine. Thus Watts followed up on his promise. Apparently Sgt. Watts decided to show he wasn't playing favorites because that afternoon he was leading the Physical Training (PT) portion of the day. Sgt. Watts singled Maxa, Noechel and me out for special attention and made us do so many extra pushups that we couldn't lift a fork at dinnertime. He said to his platoon members who were watching "And they're my brothers." I'll say a last thing regarding Watts, Maxa and Noechel. Jim Watts survived his stint in the Army, and then was killed while leading a drug raid with the Detroit Police Department. As for Maxa there was a terrible outbreak of upper respiratory infection (URI) that swept through the company and Maxa came down with pneumonia. He was treated very poorly by the company headquarters people, who considered even serious illness to be malingering. Frank was eventually hospitalized and missed too much time to graduate with his class. He was sent back to another incoming group and finished BCT. He came by one evening and told me that the platoon sergeant in his new BCT unit was concerned since he was being recycled.

But Frank was a good man and I'm certain he had no more problems. As with most everyone I came into contact with we promised to see one another when we were discharged, but we never followed up on our pact.

Sgt. Scott had a favorite phrase he used when we pulled a dumb stunt: he would call out the offenders name, then "Your ass is in the Mess Hall, all weekend!" Walter Noechel (pronounced No-Show) started imitating Sgt. Scott (who called him No-Shell,) by going around hollering out the phrase in a pretty good likeness. One day he was in fine form when Sgt. Scott walked up the stairs, listened for thirty seconds and then shouted, "Wrong, No-Shell, it's your ass that's in the Mess Hall all weekend!"

Another character was Specialist 4 George Chereghino, a training NCO. Word had it that Sp4 Chereghino had been busted down from Sergeant for striking a trainee. Whether this was true or not, one thing was clear: he was filled with anger and took it out on anyone and everyone who crossed him. Since he didn't have a specific platoon and lived on the post he was liable to show up at any time, any place. We were restricted to the company area for the first few weeks of BCT, mostly I guess to keep us from going AWOL. Of course we were sick of the bland Army food within a short period and a few adventuresome souls snuck out to a snack truck and got some hamburgers. It probably would not have amounted to anything except they got onions on them and Sp4 Chereghino decided to pay an unannounced visit. I don't know if he had gotten wind of the unauthorized expedition or just popped in, but the smell of onions was a dead giveaway. Of course we had the code of Omerta and would not rat anyone out, so we all had to carry everything; bunks, footlockers, wall lockers, you name it, out into the yard and set up for inspection. This is from the second floor of the barracks, which screwed up

the guys on the first floor, as they were gawking and thus ordered to join the party. Needless to say we all failed the “inspection” leading to our bunks being overturned and the contents of our lockers being strewn all over the place. This was accomplished with a great deal of yelling and commotion, which attracted the attention of someone with a cooler head, who calmed Sp4 Chereghino down. Then we carried our bedding and equipment back inside and spent the rest of the night setting it back up.

The last person I recall as making a lasting impression was the Field First Sergeant Raymond Temple, whom, as the title implies, was in overall charge of field training. Each morning we would have assembly formation on a square of asphalt in front of a raised podium. General business, consisting of reports of AWOL soldiers (rare), anyone reporting for sick call and so forth would be conducted from this platform in a comically loud voice by SFC Temple. Temple was a career soldier with a Combat Infantry Badge (CIB) and didn’t take this assignment any more seriously than he needed to. I’ll never forget the smell of coal smoke in the air and standing at attention on cold February mornings listening to him shout; “The uniform for today will be: *Fatigues, Helmet Liners, Pistol Belts----Your Fucking Weapons!----You Ought To Know This Shit by now God Damn it!”* One of the guys got to where he could sound just like SFC Temple with about the same result as when Sgt Scott heard Walt Noechel. The next evening the imitator found himself the personal busboy for SFC Temple, who would send him to fetch something from the kitchen, then loudly tell him that he was an asshole for bringing whatever it was, that he wanted something different. This went on throughout the mess, until SFC Temple tired of his cat and mouse game and released the hapless mimic back to his DI for Lord only knows what other extra duty.

Graduation Day

Gradation day couldn't have come soon enough. I was tired of being harassed and wanted to get free of BCT so I could get on with my hitch and get back home. At the same time I was proud of myself for accomplishing a feat. Although Ann and my parents were not able to attend, most of the guys had family and or friends attend the ceremony. The Cadre all put on their best faces, spit shined boots and dress green uniforms complete with medals and awards.. I think an aside is important here. The term "spit shined" is really a misnomer, since saliva is not involved. The actual process is accomplished using boot polish, a match, and cotton balls soaked in tap water (the lid of the boot polish tin comes in handy here as a temporary water container). After applying polish and brushing the entire boot, a heavy layer of polish is reapplied to the toe and allowed to dry. In the next step the polish is scorched with a cigarette lighter or match until it is melted. At that point the cotton ball is vigorously rubbed on the melted polish, giving the boot's toe a shine that appears bright next to the rest of the comparatively dull brush shined boot. Sometimes the heel portion of the boot was also given this treatment.

The sergeants were really nice to the mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters of the new soldiers, checking out the better looking ones from under their Smoky the Bear hats, while acting like butter wouldn't melt on their tongues. SFC Temple called out the uniform for the day, but because the ladies were within ear shot he had to keep it tame.

There are two types of headgear issued for the dress uniforms, one is a sort of canoe shaped cap called a Garrison cap and the other is a cap similar to what a policeman would wear. SFC Temple bawled "The uniform for today will be, not what it always has been, and you ought know that part by now! Today the uniform will be your dress greens, poplin shirts, ties, and low quarters . . . your belts, with shiny buckles!" The funny part came when he wanted to tell us to wear our garrison caps, but couldn't think of the name, so he said "Oh, just wear the flat sons-of-bitches!" It was the only time we laughed in formation without being punished. I'll say this: although I wasn't happy with Army life, the Cadre in BCT tried their level best to make a soldier out of me.

Out Processing

This is just what it sounds like. We had all graduated and those with friends or relatives who came down had some time with them, but then it was back to the serious process of sorting us out so we could travel on to our various Advance Individual Training units. We had been counseled when we were first inducted that there was a good chance that we would not see home for sixteen or seventeen weeks, and this was the case for about two thirds of the company. We were not shaken out of our bunks that last morning, instead we all pretty much rose on our own, too excited to sleep. After morning chow, we donned our dress greens, low quarters and garrison caps, packed our duffle bags with all of the gear we were to take with us, and then we "fell out" for the morning formation. The Cadre called out our names in alphabetical order pulling men out of the ranks to stand in a separate formation and it didn't take long to notice they were skipping

some names. After we were separated into two groups, it was announced that there were busses waiting to take the larger group on to places such as Fort Polk, Louisiana for training. I was in the smaller group and the sergeant told us that we would be going home to see mama. This was met with bitter cursing from the other group, but I was elated to get a chance to go home and see Ann and my family. Sgt. Scott talked to us and again told us he felt like we were all his sons, and that he wished us all the best. A bus dropped us off in Louisville. Some of the guys who lived in Kentucky caught a bus, but Bob Parks suggested that he, Lester Newsome and I catch a plane ride home together since we all lived in Detroit. When we arrived at Detroit Metro, Lester's brother was there to pick him up and offered to give me a ride. I asked if he could drop me off at my brother's house since Lester lived on the West Side of Detroit and it wouldn't be so far out of his way. They dropped me off at the curb. I wasn't sure if anyone was home so I checked the garage by looking through the window to see if Jim's car was there. It wasn't so I took a chance and knocked at the door. My sister in law, Cecelia answered and her eyes went wide when she realized who it was. She said she nearly didn't open the door since she had seen me looking through the garage window, and mistook me for a Salvation Army guy looking for newspapers. After awhile Jim came home and called my parents telling them to come over, that he had something they would want to see. Of course he was right, the prodigal son had returned; at least for the next thirty days. I graduated from BCT on 5 April 1968, three days short of my twentieth birthday. I was six feet tall and weighed one hundred forty five pounds.

Part Two Advanced Individual Training

The MOS

Most people don't think of it this way, but the Armed Forces are employers, and the members constitute the workforce; they hold a job, draw a paycheck, and pay income and social security taxes. The largest unit of the Armed Forces is an entity called the U. S. Army which is divided into ever smaller segments. Although the numbers within the category can vary, these are accurate as of the Vietnam era. There are nine major segments. First there are Armies, consisting of 50,000 + soldiers, and two or more Corps. Second are Corps consisting of 30,000 to 45,000 + soldiers, and two to three Divisions. Third are Divisions, 15,000 to 20,000 + soldiers, and two to three Brigades. Fourth are Brigades 8000 to 10,000 + soldiers and two to five Battalions. Fifth are Battalions, 4000 to 5,000+ soldiers and four to six Companies. Sixth are Companies, 50 to 200 + soldiers, and three to five Platoons. Seventh are Platoons, 10 to 40 soldiers and two to four Squads. Eighth is Squads, 5 to 10 soldiers. Ninth is the most basic Army unit, the Individual Soldier.

A soldier's job in the Army is based on a number of factors. The initial determination is heavily weighted by the Army Battery of Aptitude tests administered at the reception station; although civilian education and occupation, the individuals' personal preference, and the recommendations of the US Army Training Center (Armor) (USATCA) all go into determining what kind of Advanced Individual Training (AIT) they will undergo. The resulting decision is the assignment of a job title known as the Military Occupational

Specialty (MOS). I had no intention of making a career of the Army, but since I had to invest two years of my life I wanted to at least do something interesting. Accordingly, I asked to stay at Fort Knox to train as a Reconnaissance Specialist, MOS 11D10, because they were considered troopers, and I guess I liked idea of doing something out of the ordinary. In addition to training in scouting techniques, the reconnaissance specialists got to fire the M60 machine gun, the M14 Rifle, the M79 Grenade launcher and the .45 Caliber Colt ACP pistol. Upon graduation I would be assigned to an elite Cavalry unit where I could be proud to bear the title of *trooper*. Instead, mostly because I could type slowly but accurately on a manual typewriter, I was assigned to Fort Bragg to be trained as a General Supply Clerk, MOS 76A10, where, in addition to learning the all important records keeping procedures, I would be trained to fire the Royal typewriter, the NCR adding machine, and the Xerox copier. After graduation I would be assigned to some obscure office where I could not so proudly bear the title of company supply clerk. When I wrote home to tell my girl and my folks they were delighted. I wasn't so thrilled myself but I couldn't let on, so I kept a stiff upper lip and continued to march. One thing I was about to learn about the Army: the only thing that was certain was uncertainty.

Thirty Day Leave/Travel to Duty Station for Training

After completing Basic Combat Training I was granted thirty days leave, (with fifteen additional days allotted for travel, for a total of forty five) that was to be spent within the Continental United States (CONUS), I was precious US Government property and they

couldn't risk my pulling some dumb stunt in a foreign country while I was out of their sight. I spent my leave in and around Detroit, getting reacquainted with my girl and just generally bumming around. Knowing I would need a place to deposit my pay while I was in the military I opened a joint checking account with my mother prior to being inducted. As a Private E-1 my net monthly pay was eighty six dollars. Since I had no need for a lot of money in BCT I had mailed home most of my pay, and my dad had sold the old car I drove before being drafted, so I had enough cash to not be dependent on my parents or buddies for entertainment money.

My mother told me an interesting story about the sale of my car. Dad never mentioned this, but it caused me to look at him in a whole different light. As the tale was related to me, dad sold the old car, a 1960 Ford Galaxy two door sedan, to the son of a friend and coworker. The price was one hundred dollars, and since the buyer had only begun working at the shop with my dad, the money would be paid when the buyer got his first full paycheck. After a couple of weeks the friend/coworker shamefacedly told dad that the man's good for nothing son had loaded up the furniture from the flat the father had rented for him into a trailer and took his wife and kids to Tennessee. Dad deposited one hundred dollars into my bank account and resolved not to tell me he had been conned. As fate would have it the engine on that old car blew up somewhere along Interstate 75, and was abandoned along with the trailer. The wayward son returned to Detroit and regained his job at the shop where dad worked. No more was said until two weeks had again passed. On payday dad met the deadbeat in the plant parking lot and told him he could either produce a hundred dollars or "Take an ass whipping." The scoundrel's dad was a witness to this conversation (he's the one who told mom about it)

and when the son looked to him for support said “I’d pay the man.” After a little whining about his wife and kids being hungry, the debt was paid in cash.

In addition to the incongruous golden sun tan on my face, neck and the backs of my hands picked up in the winter sun of Kentucky, I put on a little weight while I was home due to my mother being horrified by my emaciated condition and feeding me fried chicken, dumplings and other fat-laden Southern dishes. Although I hadn’t been much of a drinker up to than point, I drank a prodigious amount of beer with my buddies; a couple of them were draft-dodging National Guardsmen old enough to legally buy alcohol. Most of the other guys who were still home were a little younger than I was and had yet to be drafted. That’s one of the ironies of military service; a soldier is old enough to legally kill someone, but not old enough to be legally drunk while he’s doing it. Of course all of my single male friends knew my girl and were all hoping to offer solace to the poor, distraught soul. She wasn’t interested, so this became a sore point since Ann’s parents were less than thrilled with the fact that we were still an item. They had thought that once I departed from the scene she would come to her senses and date nice Irish Catholic guys who worked in offices. Southern, Baptist guys, who were serving in the military during war time and were likely to get their tail shot off need not apply.

The forty five days ended all too soon and I contacted Mike Van Leer, who was also assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for AIT. We coordinated our travel plans so we could arrive together. Soldiers can fly more cheaply if they fly in uniform, plus they are given priority on overbooked flights through a process called flying Military Standby. Technically if the flight was filled with passengers paying a full priced ticket the soldier could be bumped off the flight, but I never missed a connection. Ann and my folks went

with me to the airport and after some tearful hugs I was off to the next leg of my Army service. I was not thrilled about it, but there was no real choice.

Fort Bragg, the home base of the 82nd Airborne Division, is located near the state capital of Raleigh, North Carolina. There were no direct flights from Detroit Metro to Raleigh so Mike and I spent the better part of a day bouncing from one cow pasture to another in twin engine prop planes flown by Piedmont Airlines. Finally, on 20 May 1968, we reached the Raleigh Airport, collected our duffle bags and secured a cab. We headed to our assigned outfit at Bragg: the 102nd Quarter Master Petroleum Oil and Lubricant (QMPOL) Company. Things did not get-off to a very good start. The cab we rented was a station wagon with a wire screen between the back seat and the baggage compartment. We stowed our duffle bags in the rear compartment. I don't recall how it came to be that we needed to reopen the compartment before our departure, but despite the driver fiddling around for some time neither the window nor door would open. We were not going to report in to our new unit without our gear, so Mike went to a pay phone, called the post Military Police, and asked them to contact the 102nd QMPOL to let them know we were on the base, but would be late reporting for duty. The owner of the cab finally authorized the driver to break out a window. We secured our duffels and found our way to the company area. There was a Sp4 on orderly room duty desk when we checked in, (remember we were just out of basic training and our last experience with a specialist involved carrying furniture out of a barracks), so we were plenty nervous. The specialist was apparently bored, so he entertained himself by teasing us, letting on as if the MPs had not contacted him. Mike and I looked at one another in confusion, both talking over one another while swearing that we had in fact followed the rules to the letter. Finally,

the Sp4 tired of his little game and requested our names and serial numbers. You may recall that our serial numbers are only one digit apart, since we stood one behind the other when we were first processed into the Army at Fort Wayne. At this point he was certain that we had turned the tables and were now fooling around with him. We produced our ID cards, and to his amazement he discovered that we were on the level. We were shown where we would bunk, and when we checked in we found that there were a dozen or so soldiers from our BCT Charlie Company already there. The barracks was similar to the one I was accustomed to from BCT: two stories high, constructed of wood, with a fire escape off the back of the big room. There were two smaller rooms on the end by the stairwell that were designed to give an NCO some private space. Double tier bunks and spacious wall locker/footlocker combinations for every soldier lined both walls. Since there were fewer soldiers assigned to each barracks there was a lot more space allotted for each individual than we had in BCT. When we unpacked our bags I realized that I didn't have any civilian clothes, just Army issue gear. This would be a handicap later when we were given free time to go off post, since none of the others would want to be accompanied by a "soldier." My parents came through for me after I wrote and mentioned my dilemma. They went out and bought me some really nice shirts and slacks, sending them to me in a care package. I even got an alpaca sweater in case I got a chill in the one hundred degree heat of summer in North Carolina.

A Rude Awakening

The first week at Fort Bragg was a study in culture shock. I had just reported in to a new post, I had been twenty years old for less than a month, was six feet tall and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. In other words I was a pencil-thin kid. Exhausted from our day of traveling and anticipating a pre dawn wake up call, and God only knew what else, since that's all we ever had at Fort Knox, I fell asleep shortly after the sun went down.

The first morning at Fort Bragg I woke up to the sun shining through the second story windows of the barracks. Although early morning it was well after dawn, yet no one had come into the barracks to run us out of our bunks. I was slightly dazed by this apparently glorious difference between BCT and AIT. I felt exhilarated; this was going to be all right! We all sat around for awhile looking at one another and wondering what to do next. The first thing on our agenda was a trip to the latrine for the three esses, shit, shower and shave. The latrine is a shock in itself. In BCT the barracks had a latrine on each floor. Here at AIT there was only one latrine, located just inside the front door of the barracks. This latrine consisted of a big room with lavatories and mirrors along the opposite wall, with urinals and water closets along the near wall. There were no stalls or modesty shields whatsoever. If one had to go number two you had to sit out there without a shred of privacy with guys shaving right across from you and men practically walking on your feet. It took some time to learn to casually sit on the closet as if you were the only one in the room, but it was a necessary skill if you wanted to survive. At the back of the room

there was a shower facility, again just one big room with shower heads jutting from the walls. After we satisfied our toilet needs we were hungry, so Mike, another soldier from BCT, Carter Harris, and I ventured down to the first floor and peeked around the barracks area. Unlike the hustle and bustle of BCT there was a decidedly laid back attitude in everyone we could see. Several soldiers were standing around outside in an open area between the buildings talking and smoking. There was only one soldier in the barracks lower area, and he was calmly running a floor polisher. Not knowing what else to do we waited quietly until he looked in our direction, stopped the polisher and then approached us with his hand extended. We each shook in turn, mumbling our names. This floor polishing soldier was shirtless, wearing only an olive drab tee shirt and fatigue pants, so we couldn't readily determine his rank. Still thinking like basic trainees we assumed he out ranked us since we were all three private E-1s, and didn't know how to react to his casual manner. It turned out that he had been at Fort Bragg for six months; waiting for orders to a permanent outfit. He told us he came into the 102nd as a Private E-2 and had been promoted twice in five and one half months, so I calculated that he must be a Sp4. I was very impressed, but he shrugged it off, telling me that "It didn't mean shit around Fort Dragg." That was the first time I heard the fort referred to by its less than flattering nickname, but it wouldn't be the last time.

Apparently he had satisfied his curiosity about the new guys for he turned away and resumed his dance with the electric floor polisher. A few other soldiers materialized from recesses in the building and filled us in on the way things operated at the 102nd. It didn't take too long to learn the sad truth. To my surprise and discomfort the guys who had been there for a few months already told us the 102nd was not a training company at all, rather

it was just a convenient dumping ground for personnel unlucky enough to be caught up in the gristmill that was feeding Vietnam.

We could expect to attend several formations each day. These formations were where jobs were handed out, and inspections were conducted. The First Sergeant, or sometimes even the CO, would check haircuts, shaves and the overall condition of uniforms. In addition, random checks of ID cards or dog tags were made, and names of offenders were taken. The penalty for transgressions was waived if the offense was corrected by the next day. This could be a real problem if a haircut was needed, since, depending on the duty that was assigned; one might or might not be able to get to the barber shop before the day was over. This led to a cottage industry where some of the guys would pick up extra money giving hair cuts that consisted mostly of clipping the customer's hair as closely as possible and shaving their necks with a safety razor. These haircuts could be pretty crude, but once a cap was applied they would do until a trip to the regular barber was possible.

The Army was caught off guard by the need to provide huge numbers of combat trained personnel into the grinder. The upper echelon was devoting most of the available money and other resources to the three Direct Combat Branches: Infantry, Artillery and Armor. Although anyone capable of independent thought could figure out that no front line unit could survive long without support, the so called Combat Support Groups, of which supply was one, were left to fend for themselves as best they could. On paper everything was running like a finely tuned machine, but in reality there were pockets of inertia like this one scattered all over the U.S. All this came as a real shock to me. I wasn't happy with my supply MOS, but I had resigned myself to it and now it seemed it wouldn't make any difference anyway. Somewhere during the first couple of days I got

the obligatory re-enlistment talk. I told the recruiter I wouldn't re-up to be president. He just shook his head and said he wouldn't either. The company clerk told us we would be scheduled for a PT test in the next couple of days. It seems the post commander had decided everybody on the base needed to have a current test score on file. This would have made more sense if I hadn't just taken one in BCT less than a month before, but as I was learning nothing had to make sense at this place and time. It turned out to be no big deal. They padded the scores by giving everyone a perfect score on the grenade toss and the low crawl and I wound up with a total of 463 out of a possible 500. This deliberate falsification was routine at Fort Bragg, and endemic throughout the Army. By its very nature at this point in time the Army was made up of a relatively small number of volunteers, and a relatively large number of draftees. While both segments were committed to an equal total term of service, six years, the draftees served a shorter active service time, two years as opposed to three for the Regular Army soldier. Like any occupation where there are potential career opportunities, the desire to not make a potentially career ending mistake often influenced decisions in favor of making sure one cannot be held responsible for failure. This is called "Cover Your Ass" (CYA.) The top leaders were well aware of the necessity of this strategy; after all that is one way they became top leaders, but they also knew that it could lead to pretense, prevarication and good old-fashion bullshitting. In order to keep the system honest there is an organization within the armed forces called the Inspector General (IG). The Inspector General is a specific organization that conducts inspections and investigates complaints. I experienced an IG while in BCT and would once again during AIT.

Our six weeks of training were supposed to make us proficient in operating office machines, provide an overview of the various supply records and publications, and familiarize us with administrative, packaging, preservation and storage procedures. Instead we would spend six weeks, or longer, doing whatever shitty jobs there were to be found, following the military doctrine that soldiers had to be kept busy lest they get into mischief. I was told that at best I could hope to achieve barracks orderly duty, and spend my days waxing the floor and scrubbing the latrine, or at worst I could end up on a permanent KP assignment in the mess hall. I felt like this was a nightmare, I had suffered through the tight discipline of BCT only to free fall into an inefficient mess masquerading as an Army post. I mused that the only positive note so far was a persistent rumor that they were going to train some of us as truck drivers, radio/telephone operators or medics. After all, God forbid that we actually train in our MOS.

I was broken from my reverie by a commotion outside the barracks door. Curious, I walked out onto the concrete porch and directly into a mess. A little bandy legged Staff Sergeant leapt into my face, and then began to berate me in a loud, comically high pitched whisper. At first I didn't understand what all the theatrics were about, but I looked over his shoulder and realized that there was company formation, with the first sergeant inspecting the ranks. This was all well and good, except here I was standing around outside without my baseball cap on, which would constitute being out of uniform. I quickly figured out it would be a good idea to duck back through the door and out of sight. The E-6 followed me with his eyes, giving me a look that essentially said "I'll deal with you later." This was just great; it seemed I was off to the same bad start as when I fell over the horseshoe stake in BCT earning the baleful glare of Sergeant Scott.

I didn't know quite what to do at this point, so I skipped back up the stairs then slumped onto my bunk in despair.

Sergeant Oates

After a few minutes I felt a presence at my side and looked up to see the same diminutive sergeant staring down at me. He had a small smile playing on his lips, and I wasn't certain of what my reaction should be, but since I was fresh from BCT I jumped up and assumed the position of attention. His smile morphed into a laugh, a laugh that was almost a giggle and so contagious I felt myself fighting a smile. "As you were" he finally said, so I relaxed slightly into a parade rest position, still almost at attention but with both hands folded behind my back. I was aware of the fact that the others in the room were watching cautiously. Shaking his head at such a sight the Sergeant assured me that all of the military protocol was wasted on him "So just sit back down on the bunk." He motioned for the others to gather around, and then calmly explained that he was Staff Sergeant Oates, our platoon sergeant. First thing on his agenda was to tell me the only reason he had been yelling at me was to get me back inside before Top (the First Sergeant) saw me. Sgt. Oates hadn't called us out for formation that morning because he knew we wouldn't be ready for the inspection and would only get ourselves, and consequently him, in trouble. My main transgressions would have been not wearing headgear and not having my boots bloused into my boot tops, (blousing rubbers were taboo). He also told us we needed to be clean shaven. Several of the other greenhorn AITers had celebrated being free of BCT by growing mustaches. By order of the post commander mustaches weren't allowed at Fort Bragg, even though Army regulations

specified that a neatly trimmed moustache was allowed if it appeared on the wearers' ID card. Until he could get us squared away Sgt Oates was trying to keep his new platoon members out of the way of the first sergeant and by wandering out of the barracks door I had unknowingly come close to blowing the whole deal for all of us. Sgt. Oates then proceeded to give us the rest of the bad news. He warned us that all of this was likely to cause us to have "A case of the ass," a common Fort Bragg catch phrase meaning to be unhappy about something and /or someone.

First off, the 102nd Petroleum Supply Company was a paper company, meaning it only existed on paper. Second, we didn't supply petroleum products to anyone, so we would not receive training; not even the On the Job Training (OJT) our phony orders called for. As we had been told earlier, what we could expect to have happen was to stand for inspections and be assigned to work details to pass the time until we were assigned to a permanent duty station. Third, First Sergeant Johnson was a dumb ass who would demand all types of chicken shit regulations be followed to the letter and the commanding officer, Lieutenant Lane, was a certified fruitcake. Finally, the 102nd would soon see an influx of soldiers who were returning from Vietnam to finish out their active duty time. Since we were privates, all of the Vietnam vets would outrank us. We didn't have to answer to anyone except Sgt Oates, First Sergeant Johnson or the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Lane, in other words we were not to let them give us any unnecessary shit.

Sgt. Oates was right on all counts. Everything was upside down from what I was used to in BCT. The first month at Fort Bragg I worked on details for part of the day then hid out until the duty period was over in the afternoon. The work details, consisting of menial

tasks like cleaning the latrine or raking the company area, were handed out at the morning formation. The returning Vietnam veterans began to try and skip the formations but it didn't get them anywhere since the company clerk typed out the duty roster by name. When they didn't respond to the platoon sergeants roll call he just put a check mark next to their names and turned them in to the first sergeant. This usually resulted in them doing KP once they were located. I recall that there was one poor soul who couldn't work in the kitchen due to some disease he had picked up overseas. He would get drunk on cheap wine and then not make the morning formation. First sergeant Johnson tried counseling him, but he was unrepentant, and eventually the pitiable sot was put up for company grade punishment. This punishment, known as Article 15, was used for offenses not serious enough to require courts martial. In record time he was busted down from Specialist 5 to Private E-1. That didn't stop his degenerate behavior, and he finally reached his limit and was given a dishonorable discharge. I really liked the guy and it was heart breaking to see him sink that way; it was like watching someone drown.

Unlike BCT, where sergeants were Deities, from the rank of Private E-2 through Sergeant E-5, I was treated no different than anyone else, regardless of rank. Within a couple of weeks my best buddies were a PFC, Doug Wells, whom I had a lot in common with and a Spec 4, Chris Gasiewski. Doug was a Detroit draftee about my age, and like me he had left a steady girl behind. He was a good guy and we shared a lot of laughs. Chris was a Vietnam vet who became a sort of surrogate mother to me, he was a couple of years older and watched out for me in many ways. He was the barracks orderly and would make sure my bunk was tight and my boots and low quarters were shined and in the proper place under the bunk. He fussed over me when I felt down and encouraged me

when I was on a roll. I owe him a truckload of thanks for all he did. I recall standing with Ski in formation when the First Sergeant paused in front of him and prepared to make a comment on his appearance. Normally Top would address the offender by his last name, but in this case he said “Well specialist”, there was no way he was going to tackle a name like Gasiewski! Since Sp4’s were like Gods in BCT hanging around with Chris took some getting accustomed to, but at AIT he were just as lowly as I was, he just got paid more to perform the same duty, and what duty it was.

Duty Hours

Officially, duty hours at the 102nd ran from oh seven hundred through sixteen hundred Monday through Friday, with a half day on Saturday. This was stateside duty, so Sunday was normally an off day. Extra duty, such as guard duty or KP, could run much longer, and could include full days on the weekend; but there were times when an individual could be released from duty early as well. After the first few days, when we were left pretty much alone, I was required to serve regular hours; including formations, inspections and morning physical training prior to going out on whatever assignment I drew. This was in place of the training I had been promised and contrary to the orders I had received. I couldn’t help but fret over what the consequences were going to be when I was shipped out to my next duty station. A typical day began at oh five thirty when I would roll out of my bunk, stagger down to the latrine and spend twenty minutes performing the three esses. This would be followed by twenty minutes devoted to making my bunk, making sure my boots and belt buckle were shined, lining up my spare boots

and shoes under the bunk, and squaring away my locker. We shared the latrine duty, so a couple of days a month I would stop at the latrine before getting dressed; making sure the latrine was in military shape. The chow hall opened at oh six hundred and I tried to be in the first group through the line, leaving me time to smoke a cigarette before the oh seven hundred formation. Much like the difference between high school and college, we were not herded around like we had been in BCT. We were no longer trainees; we were expected to discipline ourselves to be in the appointed place, at the appointed time and in the appointed uniform. Unfortunately, for those of us who took our duty seriously there was a core group who caused trouble for everyone. I recall a formation where soldiers were shuffling around, scratching, spitting, talking, and almost unbelievably, one was puking. There were supposed to be about forty five soldiers in my platoon, but because someone was constantly coming and going, Sergeant Oates had a hard time knowing just who was supposed to be in formation and who was not. As a hedge against his ignorance he would just look to see if we were at least standing in some semblance of a proper formation, then announce “All present or accounted for” when the first sergeant called the roll. This worked all right most of the time, but on one occasion after Sgt. Oates had called out in his high piping voice “All present or accounted for” there came a herd of stragglers running into the formation. There were in various stages of undress: shirts open, boot laces dangling, one was wearing his shower shoes. First Sgt Johnson looked Sgt. Oates up and down, and then repeated in a mocking tone “All present or accounted for!” I don’t know if this was the last straw but it appeared that way. In what seemed to be an attempt in gaining control of this unmilitary behavior, our CO, Lieutenant Lane, declared that we would have formations at oh six hundred oh six thirty and oh seven

hundred. Since each formation took up approximately twenty minutes start to finish, there was no way to get through the chow line and eat in the ten minutes between the oh six hundred and oh six thirty formations and no way to eat between the end of the second formation and the beginning of duty hours at oh seven hundred, so I routinely missed breakfast.

Needless to say the barracks didn't get very clean either and that would cause Lt. Lane to start acting like a complete imbecile while inspecting the barracks and latrine. He would wait until most of us were gone during duty hours to pull his inspections and he earned the nickname Lunatic Lane for tearing through the barracks, turning over bunks and dumping butt cans onto the bed clothes. Our lockers were kept locked for security purposes so he couldn't do too much damage there, but he would go into the latrine and stick his head up into the urinals looking for a stray hair or calcium deposit. If he found anything other than surgical conditions anywhere he would rip the barracks orderly a new ass, even though he wasn't totally responsible for the latrine. Often, the oh six hundred formation overlapped the oh six thirty formation, while Lt. Lane ranted about the rotten condition of the barracks and latrines. Of course if he had allowed us a few minutes we could have done a better job of cleaning, but that was not really guaranteed, because not everyone pulled his weight.

Unlike BCT where one person's bad behavior was taken care of by the larger element, here no blanket parties were thrown and no one fell over a foot locker. This was every man for himself and Devil take the hindmost. Because of the lack of morale and generally crappy conditions, there was a rash of AWOLs and no shortage of transfer requests, but Sgt. Oates warned us to not follow that bad example. It would do us no

good; only call down unnecessary attention. There were even requests to be assigned to Vietnam as a way out of the 102nd POL. Sgt. Oates said we "Might be getting shit at and shit on here at Fort Dragg, but it was a lot better than getting shot at and shot on over there!"

At the oh seven hundred formation we were assigned work details. These assignments often changed on a daily basis, sometimes several times during the same day. Somehow we were supposed to be responsible for disparate activities at the same time. A couple of examples might be in order. First, after I became a licensed Army vehicle driver I was assigned an M35 deuce and a-half motor pool truck to maintain, drive, and keep detailed daily records. This might have made sense if I wasn't routinely detailed to duties that kept me in the company area all day. Second, I was often detailed to drive an officer around the post, yet at the same time I needed to be back in the company area to prepare for an inspection involving roving guard duty. Each time I was not in both places at the same time I was held responsible by parties at one or the other spectrum of the power structure, until I could either produce written verification of my whereabouts, or could get a verbal explanation called in. On one occasion I happened to be passing the company area and had a Charge of Quarters (CQ) runner chase the jeep down waving his arms and yelling that I was supposed to be standing inspection for guard duty in thirty minutes! I explained the best I could to the officer, a captain whom I drove for often and got along with famously, how stupid my first sergeant was. He graciously agreed to come along on the inspection rather than get me in more trouble. Since I was on roving guard with a jeep I stood inspection with the one I was driving, and then dropped the captain off before reporting in for GD. We must have presented quite a sight, with me

standing at parade rest on the drivers side of the Jeep while the officer sat on the passenger seat.

After the daily assignments were handed out we were given a ten minute smoke break, and then subjected to an AIT version of PT. This was nothing compared to what I had in BCT, just a couple of pushups, some jumping jacks and then a short run around the company area; just enough to break a sweat and ruin a pair of pressed fatigues. Overall this was not turning out to be a positive experience. Lack of proper rest and inadequate nourishment took its toll and I weighed less than when I was inducted. The work details I disliked the most were the ones around the company area. On one occasion I was on a work detail policing up cigarette butts. A full bird colonel came by accompanied by a sergeant major. I had been taught in BCT that if I was on a detail and an officer approached, I was to continue to work while the leader of the detail saluted the officer. This makes sense if you think about it; the leader of the detail is normally standing erect and can look around. When I was policing cigarette butts and small bits of paper my eyes were of necessity on the ground, and my hands were full of debris. None of this made any difference to the sergeant major, who grabbed me by the front of my shirt and lifted me off my feet. He was shouting and spitting into my face, saying that I had better have a damn good reason for not saluting the colonel. I knew better than to try and explain that I was doing as I had been trained to do. I realized that all of the other dumb-asses had dropped anything they had collected and saluted. I told the sergeant major that I didn't want to salute with my fingers curled around cigarette butts and was shifting them to my left hand. He spluttered "Next time shift faster!" I agreed that I

would certainly do so in the future. I never walked around the company area again without looking carefully for that colonel.

The Motor Pool

During the first month at Fort Bragg, before I earned my drivers license, the place I spent most of my on duty time was the motor pool. As the name implies an Army motor pool is a complex where various motor vehicles are stored and maintained ready for deployment as needed. As part of the big charade the 102nd was tasked with assisting with the upkeep of a motor pool containing fifty or so M939 five ton tanker trucks. These trucks were capable of hauling diesel fuel, gasoline, jet fuel (JP4) or whatever the requirement might be. There were also several dozen M35 deuce and a-half, M37 three-quarter ton, (pick-up sized), trucks, M151 one-quarter ton trucks (commonly called Jeeps, or Mutts for Military Utility Tactical Vehicle) and a handful of two and four door sedans. The motor pool was about twenty square acres in size, with a garage/office building, a maintenance shed, fuel storage areas and a huge area to park vehicles.

The 102nd POL's leadership was tasked with supplying a certain number of bodies to the motor pool each work day. In addition to the day labor there were permanent duty soldiers, whose regular work assignment was the motor pool, including a SFC who served as the motor pool sergeant and a first lieutenant who was the motor pool officer. As with most operations there were some buck sergeants who saw to the day to day operations and really ran things. I was assigned to assist a mechanic whose rank was PFC and whose only real interest was in doing as little as possible. He saw my presence as a chance to shift as many of his responsibilities on to me as he could get away with. Since I

was so low in rank and the motor pool was not my permanent duty area, I was looked upon as a kind of slave. One of the first things I learned was how to change and repair truck tires; a hazardous task if not done correctly. My mechanic was all too well aware of the danger of this routine so he wasted no time in making me proficient. The hazard involves filling the patched inner tube with compressed air while fitting the tire onto the rim. These truck tires take an enormous amount of air and if the tube bursts the rim flies into the air; so the secret is to sit inside the rim while inflating the tube inside the tire. If the repairer is sitting inside the rim he just goes for a ride into the air, albeit with a hard bounce at the end. If he is outside the rim he might be struck by the tire/rim as it became airborne. If there were no tires to change, and there was at least one each day, I swept the grounds, changed oil, washed and painted trucks, and anything else the permanent duty guys didn't feel like doing. Once in awhile I was allowed to drive a vehicle around on the motor pools' humongous back lot. I didn't get to do that too often, as it was a legal excuse to sit on my duff and that duty usually was reserved for the men assigned permanent motor pool duty.

As a rule no one was really interested in how well a job was done, what really mattered was making it appear as if all was well. Each vehicle contained a maintenance log book which was supposed to be filled in by the responsible driver or mechanic, with his comments endorsed by the motor pool sergeant. In reality, the practice was for someone like me to fill in the log with phony information that would hopefully make it appear as if the required procedures were being adhered to. For instance, the Jeeps were gasoline powered so regulations stated that the fuel tanks were to be kept topped off so they were ready for immediate use when they were requisitioned. Of course this

requirement was routinely violated because most of the Jeeps were in such poor mechanical condition the amount of fuel in the tank was a moot point. Of course I felt uncomfortable filling in incorrect data into the log books, but the mechanic assured me that it was not a big deal. The only reason the logs were kept up at all was in the unlikely event of an inspection team looking at the records, and that had not happened in the time he had been assigned there.

Around the middle of June I was asked if I wanted to be the night manager. This was described as good duty. Since it was a night job I would be exempt from formations and guard duty, and I would have a room where I could sleep during the day without being too disturbed. I declined, mostly because it would have meant volunteering, and one of the basic Army tenets is to never volunteer for anything. Another soldier whom I knew quite well did take the task; I'll not mention his name for reasons that will become clear. It seems that there was a local woman who called the number to the motor pool desk and wanted to chat with whoever answered the phone. As the story goes she made it plain that she was lonely and didn't reside too far from the motor pool. One thing led to another and the soldier wound up visiting her abode where they made the beast with two backs until he had to return to the motor pool. All of the night shift guys were in on the deal and rotated visits to the merry widow. They said she wasn't very good looking, but she would take on any number of horny GI's without complaint.

The tanker trucks were fairly new vehicles, only a couple of years old, and it appeared to me they were more for show than to serve any real purpose. I didn't have too much to do with them, but I don't think any of them had ever contained gasoline since that would present a hazard and might cause trouble. As a result they sat mostly unused,

parked in neat rows at the front of the lot. The tankers employed diesel engines and could idle endlessly, so every so often someone would start a couple of them up, revving the engines and sometimes driving them around the lot putting on some miles for the log book. Parked behind the tankers were the vehicles most requisitioned for use: the operational deuce and a-half, three-quarter ton trucks and the Jeeps. Behind these were what the Air Force would call real hangar queens, trucks and Jeeps that were parked there because age and neglect had made them too much of a pain to keep in running condition. The log books noted that these vehicles were waiting for parts. As part of the charade these vehicles were kept washed and painted, and every so often inspected for flat tires.

None of the vehicles required a key to start them, instead there was a fuel switch mounted on the dash and a starter button mounted either on the dash, or in the case of the Jeep, on the floor. The clutch was very forgiving on these Army trucks, so even though I was not too familiar with a standard shift I could drive any vehicle almost immediately after getting behind the wheel. There was a standard joke of sorts pulled on all of the new guys when they got into a Jeep for the initial time. The first time I was ordered to drive a Jeep around to the garage the mechanic walked along with me and watched as I climbed into the driver's seat, flipped the fuel switch into the on position, then looked for the starter button. The dashboard on a Jeep is not very big so there wasn't much need to look very far. I must have had a funny look on my face because the mechanic told me to" Push in the clutch, and let's go." Well, I knew that the clutch had to be engaged in order to shift from neutral into gear, so I pushed down on the pedal, but nothing else happened. Finally, my smart-alecky mentor tired of his game and told me the starter button was on the floor above the clutch pedal. The trick was to push down the clutch with your heel

and allow your toe to engage the button. Naturally I could hardly wait for the next new guy to be assigned to the motor pool so I could send him for a Jeep.

After I earned an Army drivers' license I was assigned a specific deuce and a-half to take care of; first as an assistant driver, and then as primary. This was a good thing since it relieved me of the troublesome nature of being the extra man, and a bad thing in that I would routinely be assigned duties that had little or nothing to do with the motor pool. Since I was technically responsible for the maintenance and log book of the truck, I was expected to stand inspection with it. This was absurd since I never knew when I would be at the motor pool and could not accept such responsibility. This would come into play when the IG inspection occurred.

As was the case with most places around the base, rank was treated casually among the enlisted men. As an illustration of just how lax things were, on one occasion I was sweeping the huge parking area in front of the maintenance building when I noticed the motor pool sergeant watching me. I decided that I had best do a thorough job so I was working methodically as he approached me and called out for me to stop. He proceeded to tell me that I was the slowest son-of-a-bitch he had ever seen. Surprised and incensed, I told him that if he wanted to chew someone out he should go find someone who was goofing off and leave me alone. He was still fuming but instead of really chewing me out, he spun on his heel and stalked off, signaling an end to the incident. This strange confrontation only serves to demonstrate how radically lax the discipline was on all levels at this point; there was no way he should have allowed such insubordinate behavior to go unpunished. The only explanation I can think of was that he realized I was right; he wouldn't have to look too hard to find someone piled up dead asleep.

A Costly IG Inspection

Sometime in the second month there was a big flurry of activity surrounding an upcoming IG inspection. The 102nd orderly room clerks and the motor pool clerks and leaders were busy trying to cover their collective asses by creating a cloud of paperwork that would hopefully make it look like they were elite (known in the military as “strack”) outfits. Of course this was next to impossible, that was the reason for the IG, an impartial judge of actual military ready status.

The 102nd didn’t fare too badly; we had devoted time to setting up as near to perfect scenarios as possible for the inspectors to observe. Brand new, unfired M-16 rifles were unlimbered and cleaned of Cosmoline, gas masks had new filters installed and repackaged in cellophane wrap, paperwork was expertly forged and orders written to cover duty not performed and the fudged PT scores were laid out for inspection. We threw GI parties over the weekend where the barracks and environs were scrubbed and raked day and night for nearly the entire weekend. After we made our bunks tight enough for a quarter to be bounced on the blanket and squared away our lockers, we loaded a duffle bag with everything we could stuff in it and then tossed the bags into a deuce and a-half. We were loaded into another truck and spent the day riding around the outskirts of the base. They weren’t going to take the risk that one of us might get caught in the company area and blow the whistle on all the cover-ups that were being perpetrated.

The motor pool fared less well, all of the phony record keeping came home to roost.

The hangar queens were all washed and painted, but I was told the inspectors rolled underneath the trucks on creepers. It was evident that they hadn't been maintained since the Korean War and no amount of forged documents could save the Motor Pool sergeant and officer from being relieved. Ah well, they lived by the forged log book and died by the forged log book.

The really costly part of the inspection was a personal loss. Chris Gasiewski was the barracks orderly; as such, he wore khakis and stood inspection as representative for the platoon. He told me the I.G. spent several minutes carefully inspecting the pictures of Ann on my locker door. Shortly after the inspector departed a soldier in fatigues came into the barracks and told Chris he was wanted in the orderly room (OR), located on the opposite end of the company area. Figuring he must have made a big error, Ski hustled across the company area, only to be told by the clerk that no one there had sent for him. Fearing the worst he hurried back, but he was too late to prevent the four end lockers, including his and mine, from being looted. All our civilian clothes, stamps, cigarettes and electronic gear were taken. There were tire tracks close to the barracks near the fire escape and the MP who took the crime report said there had been a rash of thefts similar to the one we suffered, where a vehicle was driven up close to the back of the building and the loot was tossed down from upstairs. I left the base without ever recovering any of my property.

Off Duty Hours

As I stated earlier, the Army is a job and as such has regular hours; usually eight hour shifts Monday through Friday with a four hours shift on Saturday. Sundays

were off unless extra duty was assigned. At first I tried to hang around the barracks on Sunday, playing cards or just catching up on sleep, but it became evident that there were press gangs that roved the company areas looking for suckers. These groups included an NCO who needed bodies for work details or for KP. I was warned about this practice by a couple of the soldiers who had been at Bragg for a few months, but I only narrowly missed getting caught in this net the first time I witnessed it. The sergeant was most interested in taking those who protested loudly so I laid quietly on my bunk while the argument was joined, then slipped unseen out the back door and down the fire escape. After that experience I would get up at the regular time and leave the company area. I spent the first Sunday walking around the base looking for a pay phone that didn't have a line so I could call my folks or Ann without having to hurry. During my wandering I discovered a snack bar a short distance away from the company area.

There was a lunch counter that served burgers, fries and soft drinks or malts, a menu that was way ahead of what the mess hall was serving on Sunday. In the back of the building there were pool tables, slot machines and pin ball machines for entertainment. I watched one of the guys set a pin ball machine carefully onto the tops of his feet and proceed to run up a bunch of free plays by shifting the machine one way or another with his legs while not tilting. After he finished and left I tried playing the game straight for a few games to find out what the objectives were. It was quite addictive, but at ten cents a game could run up a big bill for someone whose net pay was eighty six dollars per month.

To break the monotony I would sometimes catch a shuttle bus into the local town, Fayetteville. As you might expect Fayetteville was a one horse town, with one main street lined with bars, restaurants and stores that catered to G.I.'s. Due to local blue laws the bars were beer or wine only joints. Wine had to be purchased by the glass, and beer was draft served by the glass as well. This served to discourage G.I.'s from leaving the premises with a bottle. Public drinking was against the law, and there were military police (MP) roving the streets ready to issue a delinquency report (DR) to anyone spotted with open alcohol. Wine could be purchased by the bottle from bootleg sellers and some of the returning Vietnam vets would buy this rotgut and sneak down alleys to get sloppy drunk. The MP's would pour them onto a bus and their buddies would see to it that they made it back to the barracks. It wasn't unusual to see one or more of these poor souls puking into a water closet in the morning. Mostly they were left alone to suffer, but it did make me wonder what they had seen or done to make them drink to excess like that on a semi regular basis.

There was a theater on the base that aired current movies and was a popular pastime on weekday evenings when I didn't have extra duty or had to get ready for an inspection. Other times I would write letters, read, play cards, visit the snack bar or just pass the time making Army conversation. Much like prison conversation Army conversation is casual, "What did you do before you got here?" sort of talk designed to make the endless hours go by more quickly.

Because we were paid by check once per month, budgeting money was a problem. Despite published government claims of how well we were fed and clothed, the amount of money we were required to spend out of pocket on military necessities was

outrageous. The first sergeant had strict standards for company members; our uniforms had to be starched and pressed; caps could not be too stained with sweat; boots had to be spit shined; brass polished and the correct rank and unit insignia had to be sewn on all of our uniform sleeves. I needed extra fatigues, caps, underwear, towels and wash cloths. Hair cuts, laundry fees, boot and brass polish, cotton balls and sewing kits all had to be purchased out of a month's pay that amounted to way less than one hundred dollars. When the personal items such as cigarettes, stationery, stamps and the occasional Coke or cheeseburger were subtracted, I was usually broke long before the next pay. The bank was open during duty hours six days per week, but we were not allowed to go to the bank or post office during duty hours unless we had permission from the first sergeant. This meant that mailing letters had to be done either very early in the morning or on the weekend, while cashing a paycheck could take weeks. Bootleg haircuts, check cashing, or mail pickup could be had for a small fee and were a booming cottage industry.

An Army Driver's License

After a month or so someone decided I needed a driver's license. Since it was a change of pace, I didn't object and soon I was taking drivers' education on every kind of vehicle, from a sedan to a five-ton tractor trailer. These Army vehicles were very forgiving on the clutch and it didn't take long before I could pull away from a dead stop without stalling or pulling a wheelie. The most difficult part was backing up a semi, or a smaller vehicle with a trailer attached. This activity requires a skill involving backing up while steering in the opposite direction of where your vehicle is directed. This seemed

most unnatural to me at first and I was constantly jackknifing the trailer. I was allowed to practice extensively however, and became fairly proficient. I passed the written test on the first try, and was scheduled for the drivers test that afternoon. The Sp5 who administered the written test told me there was a five to one failure rate on the drivers test, but not to worry, I would be allowed to retake it at a later date if I didn't pass. That made me pretty nervous, but I watched a couple of others drive the course before me and it didn't look all that tough. When my turn came the instructor watched while I did a walk around of the semi I would drive for the test. I checked underneath for signs of fluid leaks, flat tires or anything that might prevent the vehicle from being safely driven. He sat in the passengers seat and directed me to pull out from the field where we were parked, make a right turn and proceed up a hill, turning left onto the first street. I double clutched up the hill watching the tachometer and trying not to roll back down hill when I shifted gears. There was a milk truck parked at the curb just around the corner on the street I was to turn onto. Now, let's go over this again from the top. I'm a new driver, being tested on a semi truck I've never been in before; hauling a tanker filled with God only knows what kind of explosive fuel. I'm at the top of a steep hill, almost stalled and making a ninety degree left turn with a milk truck parked almost in front of my cab, and trying not to run over the curb with my trailer. I wanted to panic, but out of the corner of my right eye I could see the instructor slouched in his seat, clipboard resting on his knee while he checked boxes. Miracle of miracles, I narrowly missed the milk truck, while only nicking the curb and somehow managed to not stall the engine in the process. Once I straightened the steering wheel I proceeded down the street, made another left turn, then continued down the steep grade, again watching the tachometer, made a circuit around

the field, ending back where I started. I was not asked to go in reverse, so I didn't mention it.

"When can I try again?" I asked, since I felt as though all the double clutching I had done while going up and down the hill would be considered unacceptable. "You passed" he said, tearing my test score sheet off his pad. I think I must have scared him sufficiently that he was not going to go on another check ride with me. Once field tested on a semi I was licensed to drive every other vehicle in the motor pool from a five ton semi to a sedan.

This was pretty heady stuff for a guy still not old enough to legally drink, but there was one more good news item. The first of June saw a promotion to Private E-2 which was nice except that the payroll personnel didn't get the memo and my pay stayed the same. An E-2 now was required to wear a single chevron, or stripe on ones' sleeves. This was done to recognize the difference in the two Private ranks with an E-1 being slick sleeved, an E-2 with a single chevron while a PFC now sported a chevron with a rocker. Typically, the 102nd recognized this watershed event by assigning me KP on that Sunday.

RATS

The U.S. was in a state of social unrest in June of 1968. There had been riots in towns and cities around the country, so it was decided that a Refresher Army Training School (RATS) was necessary in case things got so bad that we needed to be deployed as riot control. Basically the training revolved around making sure we understood that we were not to kill anyone. We would have rifles and batons but they were for show only, we

were not to load the rifles or hit anyone with the batons. Nevertheless, we were drilled in close order formations just like back in BCT. We were inspected two or three times per day, and there was a lot of bitching among the troops about being gigged for dull brass or dusty boots when we had spent most of the day marching around in the June North Carolina sun on a hard packed sand parade field. I guess our spit shined presence was supposed to be sufficient to deter any bad guys, but the reality was the Army was more afraid of the American media that they were of any potential rioters. At any rate, nothing ever came of it, so this was just another pain in the ass for every one involved.

Driving Major Montgomery

As was the case with most everything at Fort Bragg, having an Army driver's license was both good and bad. There were a relatively few licensed drivers so we were in demand a lot of the time, which was good because it was a legal excuse to get away from the motor pool and the 102nd . At the same time it was bad since it meant that I seldom got any time to goof off. One of the assignments entailed being told by Sergeant Oates to put on starched fatigues and shined boots before being loaded up into a three-quarter ton truck along with five other drivers. We rode some distance across the base before being dropped off at the 3rd Army Headquarters. The headquarters building was a low two story affair that faced a parade ground. The grounds and building were neat in the antiseptic way that only the Army can achieve. There was a Sergeant Murphy in titular charge of what he referred to as our "Under strength squad". He apparently was accustomed to this detail and briefed us on what to expect. Fundamentally, we would be

assigned a Jeep and an officer to drive around wherever they wanted to go. There were a few soldiers standing on the sidewalk on the side of the building with Jeeps lined up along the street. No one seemed to be too uptight about anything so I wandered over to this group and said hello. It turned out these were regular drivers who had assigned vehicles and VIP officers, two Colonels and a Brigadier General in this case. The Jeeps were immaculate and the soldiers were spit shined, with hair cuts that made me want to duck my neck lower into my collar since my haircut was not nearly as fresh as theirs. At first I felt a little shy, assuming these experienced guys would be disdainful of a slick sleeved private from a supply outfit, but in fact they were very genial and answered my questions on what to expect with casual good humor. One of them pointed out that there was a license plate holder on the front bumper of his Jeep. I inspected his jeep and then glanced at the others. I noted that in place of a plate two of the Jeeps' holders contained eagle silhouettes and the third contained the single star of a brigadier general. The general's driver explained something I remembered seeing on marches during BCT; the sign told anyone who was approaching the jeep not only that an officer was on board, but that officer's rank as well. The colonels would not salute anyone except a general, who would only salute a general with more stars. The post commander, a lieutenant general, would only return salutes since he was the highest ranking officer on the post. I inspected the other Jeeps parked farther down the row and discovered there were plates for all ranks tucked in behind the driver's seat. This made sense given that the Jeeps were not specifically assigned and would most likely need different plates for each use.

Sergeant Murphy was apparently miffed that I wasn't sticking with my own group and barked out for me to return to the front of the building with the others. I could tell the

Jeep drivers were not impressed with his actions, but they nodded to me their understanding of my predicament and I returned slowly to the point indicated by Sergeant Murphy. He glanced at the drivers and then at me in disdainful dismissal, then returned his attention to the front door of the headquarters building. After a few minutes his vigilance was rewarded when an officer bounded down the steps. Sgt. Murphy called out:”Ten-Hut!” causing all of us to snap-to. This first officer was a major. He looked expectantly at Murphy who saluted, about faced to me and ordered me to drive the major, whose name plate read Montgomery, wherever he wanted to go. I saluted and got a wave of the hand in return, and then Major Montgomery pointed to a Jeep parked further down the sidewalk and strode toward it at a brisk pace. He was wearing starched fatigues with bloused pant legs over spit shined boots. He wore a garrison cap at a rakish angle and was carrying a map case. I hustled over to the appointed vehicle and did a quick walk around it looking underneath for signs of oil or fluid leaks, and then sorted through the plates behind the driver’s seat until I found one with a gold oak leaf. As I placed the plate in the holder I recall feeling glad I had talked to the regular drivers and knew where to look without having to be told. I observed that this jeep had a radio set in the back and antennas jutting up next to the canvas top. Trying to act cool, I shook the stick shift to make sure it was in the neutral position then flipped the switch on the dash board over to the on position. I was pleased to see the gas gauge move over to full, since I had no idea where the refuel point was located, then eased in the clutch until my toe touched the starter button. The starter cranked briefly and the engine purred into life. My first impression was that this vehicle was better maintained than what I was used to, but of course I remained silent on that topic. I looked expectantly over to the Major who

glanced at me, smiled slightly, told me he planned to do some scouting, and then sat slouched in his seat, one foot cocked up on the dash, looking out the windshield. That's when it occurred to me that not only did I not know where the refueling point was I didn't have a clear idea where anything on this side of the post was located. Since I had been driven over here, I foolishly hadn't paid too much attention to my surroundings. Feeling every bit the complete ass that I was, I stammered out the sad truth. Here I was an alleged driver who had no clue about the geography of the base layout; outside of perhaps the two miles or so around the 102nd company area and a little bit of the area around the motor pool. I fully expected Major Montgomery to order me out of the Jeep, sending me back with instructions to have Sgt. Murphy assign a qualified driver. I could imagine marching back over to Sgt. Murphy with my tail between my legs in disgrace. Instead Major Montgomery calmly reached over and flipped the switch to the off position killing the engine.

I eased my foot off the clutch so as not to jerk the Jeep, since I felt there was one jerk too many all ready. He looked back towards the front of the building. The other drivers were being assigned vehicles and I felt rather than saw Sgt. Murphy looking at me. Seeming to make up his mind Major Montgomery asked me if I smoked. Nonplussed, I said I did, and he said that was a point in my favor since he only smoked occasionally and then it was OP's, "Other peoples" he clarified in case I didn't get it. He opened his map case, climbed out of the Jeep and motioned for me to join him in the front of the vehicle. He spread a map out on the hood, looked at it for a minute then pointed with his finger to a spot near the middle. "We are here" he said, "And I want to look at a patch of woods here" moving his finger some distance north of the first position. I was giddy with

not being dismissed, but I suppressed my excitement and tried to emulate his calm demeanor. I leaned in trying to absorb all of the detail between the two points, but of course that was impossible and he was already rolling up the map anyway. As we climbed back into the Jeep I was still excited, and not a little scared now that I had only the vaguest idea that I was supposed to somehow get us to "A little patch of woods" north of our current location. My mind was racing, but since I didn't know what else to do I restarted the jeep, pulled the shift into second gear, checked my side view mirror, slowly released the clutch while easing in the gas, pulling smoothly away from the curb. Since I knew from the position of the sun the Jeep was already heading north, I decided I couldn't be too wrong by going straight for the time being. Major Montgomery quietly gave me directions out of the maze of side streets until I was on a main thoroughfare.

Mindful of my surroundings, I watched the speedometer and tachometer, glad for all the practice I'd had driving around the motor pool, as I effortlessly shifted through the gears. All was well, I thought. The road was smooth, and so far I hadn't pulled any boners. Then I glanced down and saw that the parking brake was still engaged. The parking brake on a Jeep is a lever located between the front seats. I slowly eased my right had over and pushed the handle into the down position. I might have gotten away with it if the performance of the engine, unencumbered by the brake, hadn't suddenly improved immensely. This vehicle was really well maintained and when engine stopped straining to overcome the drag of the brake it really settled in to a soft purr. "The brake was on all this time?" the Major asked rhetorically. When I admitted it had been he just nodded. If I could have somehow driven the jeep from the roof I would have tried it. The only conversation we had the rest of the way was when he murmured for me to just

follow the main road. This turned out to be something else I didn't expect. The road was blacktop for a number of miles then turned into hard packed dirt for a mile or so and then became just a sandy track before petering out at a stand of trees and brush. I should mention that the predominate terrain feature at Fort Bragg was sand and pine trees. In the company areas the sand had been pressed down into a hard packed consistency, but in the vast wooded areas it was soft, deep, beach-like sand. There were little streams running here and there surrounded by thousands of pine trees, and tons of brush. I had slowed considerably when the road turned into dirt and was just putt-putting along by the time we came to the end.

Major Montgomery got out of the Jeep and looked at the sun which was still fairly low in the eastern sky. He got out his map case and spread a map out on the hood then leaned over it in a now familiar pose. Not knowing quite what to do, I got out, stretched and then asked if it was alright if I smoked. I got a grunt in reply which I took to be a yes, so I shook out a smoke, lit up, set the pack and lighter on the hood, walked a few feet away from the jeep and gazed at the scenery. We had been quiet long enough for the forest animals to resume their normal lives, it was so still I could hear creatures scurrying in the brush and birds chirping merrily. As I suspected would be the case Major Montgomery was smoking an OP while consulting a compass and making marks on the map with a grease pencil. I field stripped my cigarette and walked over to where he was standing. I idly looked at the portion of the map I could see. It was a topographical map, not the one we had looked at before we started out, but one with more detail and smaller grids. This was all right, I recall thinking, pretty easy duty as things go, and the Major seemed to not

be too impressed with himself, although I was sure the parking brake episode would be a concern by the time the day was over.

Major Montgomery rolled up his map and climbed back into the Jeep. I took this to be a signal that he had seen what he wanted, so I started up and reversed around to go back the way we had come. When I shifted back into second gear he pointed towards the woods, and said he wanted to go in to the left of a copse of pines. I couldn't generate enough saliva to spit. I had never driven a Jeep on any kind of ground except pavement until today's expedition, and I didn't have a clue what to expect. With nothing to lose I pushed the lever into four wheel drive, and started out. We bumped along fairly flat ground for a short period and not knowing what else to do I just kept the speed at idle and steered around any trees or big bushes. Major Montgomery was sitting with one foot cocked up on the door frame, rocking and rolling with the terrain. Every so often he would consult his compass, then point out a change of direction. A couple of times he signaled for me to stop, and then he would step out and glass around with his binoculars. I recall one occasion where I revved the engine and got no forward motion. Trying to act cool I pulled the gear shift into first gear and gunned the engine once again. I was rewarded by the Jeep crawling over a stump and a small fallen log as if I knew what the Hell I was doing. In a letter to Ann I remarked that I had driven through everything the woods had to offer, and the only reason I didn't drive through a snow drift is that the major couldn't find one. We came out of the woods into an open area where the grass had been beaten down. It looked as if there had been people there not that long ago. There was evidence that a tent had been erected and a fire pit had been covered with dirt. The major consulted his maps, and then told me to fire up the radio. I was in worse emotional

shape than ever, since I hadn't even taken a close look at the radio, much less considered turning it on and using it. Although I was supposed to be in "Radio School", (discussed in the next chapter) I had not yet been taught anything about Army radios. Nevertheless, I climbed into the back and pulled the canvas cover off the front of the radio. There were dials and switches galore, with a handset plugged into a socket and a little window covered by Plexiglas guarding the dial indicator and numbers underneath. I fiddled with the smaller dials guessing that one of them might be the on/off switch. It was hard to read the lettering on the front since there was only a little light filtering in through the side of the Jeep under the canvas.

My mind was racing as I did a quick visual search for a battery pack. Seeing none I assumed the radio ran on the vehicles electrical power. I didn't know how much power it would draw so I climbed over the seat and started the engine, then crawled back. In a pocket underneath the radio mount there was what looked like an infantry backpack. I pulled the pack out where I could get it open then examined the inside where I found a spare handset along with a battery and Oh Ho! a manual. The cover of the manual told me this was an AN\VRC 46. The first page announced that the 46 did indeed draw power from the Jeep's electrical system and warned against draining the vehicle's battery. I was quickly able to identify the power dial and was rewarded by a satisfying click and the glow of a red power light. This was in the day of tube radios, so it took a few minutes for the radio to warm up. I tried to act like I was on top of all this while glancing over at Major Montgomery who didn't seem to be paying too much attention to me. I fiddled with the dials, switching between frequencies which resulted in some static, but there were some lower numbers that seemed to be picking up FM radio transmissions. Major

Montgomery strolled around to the back of the Jeep, leaned in and took the handset from the holder, then told me the frequency to dial. I nodded when I had the right setting, and then listened while he made a call to what I assumed was a remote station. My soul knowledge of radio protocol was what I'd heard in the movies and what I heard didn't sound all that much different, there was a call sign, rodger, wilco, over and out. I wasn't really able to follow the exchange, especially the received transmissions, but then again I wasn't supposed to, or so I thought. When he had finished the major handed me the handset and I stood holding it dumbly while he climbed back into the Jeep. I didn't know if I should shut down the radio or keep it going, so I just climbed back into the driver's seat, carefully released the parking brake and eased into second gear. Major Montgomery asked how our fuel situation was doing. A glance told me we were still over three-quarters full, which I reported aloud while making a mental note to myself to monitor this from now on without being told. I'll have to say this was very interesting duty, a vast improvement over the usual boring work details that were used as much to keep us busy as to accomplish a real purpose.

We spent the rest of the morning driving around the woods, stopping occasionally while he glassed around and marked his maps. Then we drove to a sort of outpost with several tents set up in an open area. Major Montgomery told me we would eat noon chow here and released me to wander around on my own and check out the area. In addition to several small two man tents, there was a large tent with radio equipment; peeking through the flap I could see an operator seated on a stool. Another tent was devoted to first aid, and a third was a mess hall, although I didn't see a kitchen set up. There was a marked path leading away from the area and when I followed the lane I located a latrine and a

landfill dug into a copse of low brush on the edge of a pine tree area. There were soldiers moving about the area, but I didn't see any officers and no one paid much attention to me. I didn't know what else to do so I sat in the Jeep and some soldiers came by to shoot the breeze. To my surprise I discovered they thought I was a cool dude and acted impressed that I was driving a major around.

Lunch was trucked in and served in the chow tent. I wasn't sure what my status was, so I kind of hung back at first, but a mess sergeant motioned for me to grab a metal tray and get in line. There were only a few officers and they ate with the rest of us, although they sat with the senior sergeants at one end of the tent. After chow Major Montgomery directed me onto a sandy path that wound through the woods and eventually came out on a paved road. Signs directed me south back to the base and I was able to find my way back to the headquarters building. Major Montgomery exited the Jeep and I also got out. I removed the plate and stood at parade rest at the front of the Jeep until the major came around, then I came to attention and saluted. Just as it had this morning with Sgt. Murphy this salute was answered with a motion that might have been waving away a bug. He turned to walk away, then stopped and told me I had done a good job, except for all this unnecessary saluting every time we got out of the vehicle. I certainly didn't recall saluting every time we got out, but I just said "Yes sir, thank you sir." After all, this was the highest ranking officer I had ever had personal contact with and, ironically, he was also the most informal. He appeared to be someone with nothing to prove.

The day wasn't over yet, I still needed to fuel and service the Jeep, and I didn't know where I was supposed to do this. This turned out to not be a big deal, since Sergeant Murphy was lurking and was more than happy to let me know how stupid I was for not

knowing something that I had absolutely no way of knowing. It seems I was to take the Jeep back to our motor pool, wash it, check the tires and fluid levels, gas it up, and then return it back to the headquarters parking lot. A driver from our company ran a shuttle back to the company area, so that was not a concern. The driver, a Sp4, told me not to worry about Sergeant Murphy, that he was just an insecure asshole who had been busted down from staff sergeant and was taking it out on everyone he could. When I got back to 102nd I compared notes with the other drivers. It turned out my goof up with the parking brake was dwarfed by another horror story. In this case the locked brake had started to smoke so severely the Jeep had to be pulled over to the side of the road where the officer had secured a fire extinguisher and fogged down the front of the Jeep. We all got a good laugh out of that one and I went to bed tired, but feeling good about the day as a whole.

The next morning I was singled out along with the driver who smoked the brake to return to the headquarters building. This time we were to see the 3rd Army Sergeant Major. I knew there could only be one reason for the both of us to go. I felt slightly depressed and somewhat disillusioned knowing that Major Montgomery had turned me in for the parking brake incident, despite having told me I did a good overall job. As expected we got our asses chewed out by the Sergeant Major. While the other driver was gigged for the parking brake fire, my sins were really just chicken shit. The first one was for not washing the mud off the underside of the Jeep (guess I must have been the only one who drove off road), and the follow up was because I hadn't replaced and secured the canvas cover back over the radio. Despite all that I didn't feel too badly because the complaints were from the Sergeant Major . . . Major Montgomery hadn't gigged me after all.

Radio/Telephone Training

On 4 June I was called out of morning formation along with fifteen others and told to load up into a deuce and a-half. As we queued up to board the truck we were handed orders by the company clerk. A quick reading of the orders revealed that we were being detailed on temporary duty (TDY) to a signal company for training as radio/telephone operators. According to Army Standard Operating Procedures the Radio operator's course is an intensive ten week course with emphasis on learning to send and receive Morse Code. A trainee was also supposed to receive instruction in radio procedure, field radio sets, operation of tactical radio nets and vehicle driving. We were so excited the air was electric. For the first time since arriving at Fort Bragg I felt like a real soldier. As usual when I felt this way the Army would quickly toss cold water on my ass.

After a typical jerky ride around the post in the back of the truck our uniforms were not as neat as when we left, but when the truck stopped we all craned around, trying to see just what this radio school looked like. The driver came around and unlatched the tailgate, signaling us to disembark, so we all hopped down. Stretching and shaking out my pant legs, I wiped the tops of my boots off on the back of my fatigue legs, checked the shine on my belt buckle, and straightened my cap. I could have saved myself the effort. The truck departed leaving us on the curb in front of some low two storied buildings that could have housed anything from a headquarters to a barracks. No Sergeants were present, so we lit cigarettes, breaking up into small groups to discuss what we thought might be the best strategy. There were a lot more questions than answers. We

were all private E-2 so there was a question of who should take charge. I looked again at my orders, and then scanned the buildings and signs to see if anything seemed to match the unit designation on the orders. Finally a PFC emerged from the building. He was carrying a clip board so we naturally assumed he must be some kind of an authority. All of us had been out of BCT long enough to not be intimidated by a PFC, but still he outranked us, so when he asked what we were up to one of the guys nearest to him showed his orders.

The PFC glanced at the paper then looked at the clip board, nodded and began to take down our names. He told us to form a column of two's and then marched us across a parade field to a low single story building. Once inside it was clear the building was a mess hall. There were no tables or chairs, but the layout of the main dining room and the presence of a kitchen told the tale. There were cans of paint, brushes, rollers, drop cloths and other items stacked in the middle of the floor. The PFC, whose name I don't recall, explained that the training facility was new, and did not have its own support group as yet. He was the unit headquarters clerk, and since we didn't have radios, or even a building to put them in, our first detail was to paint this old mess hall so we could get ready for serving meals. There were cooks supervising the cleaning up of the kitchen area and other soldiers were raking the dirt around the area. Stunned, we all looked at one another and then shrugged in somber resignation. One of the guys in the group had been a house painter in civilian life so we deferred to his expertise on how to get set up, and divided up the work so everyone had a chore. It was hot in that room, so we took turns going outside to smoke and talk to the other soldiers. Everyone to whom I talked was assigned to work detail; none of them were there for training, at least not radio/telephone

school. I suppose that should have run up a red flag, but we were all so accustomed to the way the 102nd was run we just painted away until about twelve hundred hours. The mess Sergeant came around and told us we could get chow at the mess hall across from the one we were painting. Despite our best efforts to keep clean, and after liberal dabbing of turpentine, we all had oil based paint smudges on our fatigues, caps and boots. We broke for noon chow, then came back to the hall and painted until what we figured should be the end of duty time. After we cleaned up the area we wandered back to the area where we had been dropped off. We expected to see the headquarters clerk again, but he was nowhere in sight. Again we broke into small groups, smoking and discussing what we were supposed to do next. We didn't have any way back to the 102nd, where everything we owned was located. We didn't know if the truck was coming back to get us or not, and none of us had paid too much attention to the route we had taken. A Sergeant First Class by the name of Carroll came out of the building and someone asked him what we were to do next. He looked at the condition we were in and asked what in Hell we had been doing. We told him of the PFC and the mess hall detail. Once again our orders were examined, this time by Sergeant Carroll. He just shook his head, told us to wait and then went back into the building. Sergeant Carroll returned with a Lieutenant whose name I don't have a record of. We came to attention and saluted, then assumed parade rest while he explained that he didn't know how we ended up on that mess hall gig, and that we were supposed to have been assembling and putting up tents. They had wondered where we were and calls back to the 102nd had only resulted in being told that we had been dropped off that morning. We were listed as AWOL since no one in higher in authority than a private first class knew where we were. I guess the paint-stained

clothes and boots were proof enough we hadn't been off post drinking beer, so our records were cleared, but we were still pissed off. The PFC was located and after an exchange of information and the Lt. looking at his clipboard things seemed to be resolved. The PFC marched us out to a packed sand field where there were tents, stakes and the like stacked on pallets. I was numb with despair and disappointment. The morning that had started off with such sanguine promise had deteriorated into a nightmare of incompetence and stupidity. There is a common term among Army draftees called fuck the Army (FTA). If I hadn't felt that way before I sure did at that point.

Sergeant Carroll came around and told us this is where we would report in the morning, the tents were where we would be setting up our radio equipment that was to be delivered sometime the next day. We were all sore and bone weary from painting all day, but we had a conference and decided our best course of action was to try and set up as much of our tent city as we could that evening while the sun was not so much of a factor. Even if we only got one big tent up we could work in shifts, as this tent would give us a spot to rest in the shade, or stay dry in the case of rain. The only good thing that came of this whole mess was that we were starting to think and act as a cohesive unit rather than individuals. Everyone pitched in and we shortly had one big and two smaller tents up and staked. The ground was hard-packed sand and easy to work with. It had the added advantage of being porous enough to soak up all but the most severe rain storms so we didn't need to dig deep trenches for run off. The driver who delivered the tents had left his deuce and a-half parked on the edge of the field so we did the first bold thing we had yet done. We fired that baby up and drove back to the 102nd arriving about twenty three hundred hours.

The next morning we reported for company formation, and to my dismay our crew was sent all over the base. Most of the radio school troops went on their TDY duty, but I was inexplicably once again assigned to RATS where I spent the next three days doing close order drill, marching in a straight line with my rifle held at port arms and trying to look professionally fierce. I was beyond trying to understand the big picture or even if there was one. On 10 and 11 June I drove an officer around the post and then, wonder of wonders, returned to radio school on 12 June. Apparently the CO at the signal company had raised enough Hell to get me back where my orders called for me to be.

The tents had been erected, but the equipment was not set up. In fact it was still in crates and boxes stacked inside the biggest tent. Furniture was in all of the tents, pretty standard Army fare: map tables, wooden folding chairs, filing cabinets and desks. As for the radio equipment it was mostly old junk. There were radios of all types, amplifiers, speakers, turntables and miles of cables, with every kind of connection imaginable. Sgt. Carroll was in charge. He was a really nice guy and made sure we felt at ease. There was a lieutenant hovering around and a staff sergeant was hollering about something or other most of the time, but Sgt. Carroll kept a cool head so I tried to attach myself to him as much as I could. He was always ready with a word of encouragement and liked to tell me stories about his early Army days and the trouble he would get into for fighting. Most of his stories ended with him getting his ass whipped, but I somehow doubted if that really happened too often.

After getting all of the electronics divided up into the various tents we were called to stand a formation and Major Ross addressed the group. It seemed that, due to time considerations, we not going to receive any real formal training, certainly not any Morse

code or semaphore. This was to be a quick and dirty On the Job Training (OJT) exercise. There were a number of ROTC companies scheduled to soon arrive at Fort Bragg for training exercises that would culminate in the staging of what was called a “Dog and pony show” for the post commander, Lieutenant General York. The need for trained public address (PA) capable personnel was crucial, and we were to be those troops. Just when you think you’ve seen it all the Army comes up with something to top it.

Over the next few weeks I was taught how to start and maintain a generator, resulting in being issued an generator operator endorsement on my Army license. I unreeled miles of communication wire (known as commo wire), cables and cords, and hooked up and disconnected hundreds of pieces of PA electronics. I had never seen such shoddy equipment in my young life. There were wires sticking out of everything, and most of the inspection covers were open. On top of being second rate, some to the stuff was downright dangerous. On one occasion I was standing on damp ground connecting some wires to an amplifier when I got a shock that knocked me back two feet. Sgt Carroll was twenty five feet away and heard the crack and buzz. He hurried over to see about me; he said I had lit up like a flash bulb. He lectured me on taking more care, and then he picked up two cords and connected them. There was a loud bang and flash as he was lifted off his feet. He dropped the cords and ordered me to go do something else before we both killed ourselves.

After a few days the routine became to load a three-quarter ton truck up with radio equipment which I hauled out to a remote section of the base. It was there I met some of the same people I had seen when transporting Major Montgomery and I realized this was the same place we had driven to on our jaunt through the woods. The big difference this

time was that there were a lot more tents and personnel, with equipment covering the trampled down areas.

Most of the soldiers were 82nd Airborne enlisted men. My only prior contact with these guys had been when we were on our morning runs at 102nd . Our light workouts were especially pale compared to the Airborne who ran long distances and a long period of time. They chanted while they ran, "Up the Hill, Down the Hill, Airborne!" In the 102nd we chanted the same mantra, with the self effacing "Fuck the Hill! Chairborne!" added at the end. I didn't know what to expect from these soldiers, I guess I half expected to be looked down on, since I was a lowly Private who was not Airborne. Just as with most of the soldiers at Bragg, these guys were not all that happy with their lot in life, but they were more apt to lend a hand and not act so much like individuals. An MP stationed where the road entered the compound told where to park the truck. I got out and stretched my legs, while smoking and looking around for someone who looked like they might be in charge. I spotted Major Ross, approached him, caught his eye, came to attention, and saluted. He smiled at me as he returned the salute and told me he was glad to have me on board. He had a PFC show me where to set up the generator and he walked me around the area showing me where the stage was going to be located and generally shooting the breeze about where I was from and other Army talk. I had to move the truck a couple of times while unloading equipment. Each time troops appeared unbidden to do the muscle work, unloaded and helped me set up. I was both amazed and grateful; I had never experienced such selfless activity anywhere else at Fort Bragg. Tents were set up to house the various activities the ROTC would be exposed to. One of the tents was guarded by a trio of 82nd Sp4s who were charged with making sure the glass topped

tables inside were not jostled too much. Each of the cases contained a species of venomous snake native to these North Carolina woods. There were eastern, timber and pygmy rattlesnakes, a copperhead, a coral snake and a cottonmouth (water moccasin.) In addition, there were some of the non-venomous snakes often mistaken for their lethal cousins, such as a rat snake and a banded water snake. I arrived one morning to a great commotion in that area and when I inquired if the snakes had escaped I learned that the guards had decided they didn't want to sleep in the tent with the snakes so they moved the tables out of the tent after evening chow. Unfortunately for all concerned, the cases had glass tops which acted like a magnifier and fried the snakes in the North Carolina sun. The officer who kept the snakes was livid and I imagine the guards were in deep trouble, although I never learned the outcome.

I had to plot out where the speakers and other equipment would be located for the PA system and then string cables and commo wire from one spot to another. One occasion I was wheeling out wire when I heard a weird, quavering, voice saying: "Wireman . . . you-are-in-my-power!" I looked around and there were a group of 82nd guys smiling at me. I dropped the reel, extended my arms and began to robotically walk towards them. This spontaneous action was greeted by gales of laughter, I don't know what they expected but I don't suppose it was that. At any rate there was a lot of knee slapping and good natured banter, one guy even shook my hand. It turned out they thought I was a real radio/telephone man, a job they had the utmost respect for, and, by extension, for me. This perception would lead to a most unexpected and interesting turn of events when the ROTC arrived.

ROTC

The Reserve Office Training Course is designed to produce service ready officers for the U.S. Army. Since a college degree is a requirement for commissioned officers it makes sense to allow college students who are interested in a career in the Army to get first hand leadership training while they are still in school. Accordingly, part of the training program was learning how to follow orders as well as give them. That summer at Fort Bragg a company sized group of ROTC participated in what amounted to BCT like training as they experiencing hands on cadet training. They were subjected to every kind of scenario they could expect to experience in a hostile environment and graded on their performance. They were expected to show leadership skills while at the same time being treated like the trainees they were. The encampment I assisted in setting up was to be where the ROTC would reside as a base camp (BC) and command post (CP) for the next two weeks. They would be addressed by various officers in a welcoming ceremony, then go about the various phases of the training process. My role in all this was to set up the public address system, including a generator, amplifiers, speakers and all of the cords and wires necessary. After that was completed I expected I would have it pretty easy, all I should have to do is make sure the generator had sufficient gas. However, that thinking didn't take into account that I was dealing with the Army.

The next morning I went thorough the three formations on auto pilot, I anticipated going to the motor pool, checking out a vehicle and heading out to the base camp to get the generator checked out and fired up. I went to the motor pool all right, but when I got my deuce and a-half, it was to go in a convoy to pick up the ROTC at a designated point, and then drive them out to the base camp. Even that made some kind of logical sense; I

had to go there anyway, so why not haul a load of ROTC with me. There were three problems as it turned out. Number one was that I had never driven in a convoy, which is not as easy as it might sound. The Army has rules for everything; in the case of a vehicle convoy there are specifications for how closely one vehicle follows another, what the speed of the convoy should be, what to do at stop signs or traffic lights, and so forth. I had no clue. Problem number two, Sergeant Murphy decided to ride in my truck. You may recall that I am not too fond of Sergeant Murphy, as I've said before he is a mean spirited bastard who liked to ridicule others and would hunt excuses to do so. The third problem was that as the trucks were pulling into line for the convoy I discovered that my second gear was not always engaging; causing the transmission to rev up as if it were in neutral. Unlike a Jeep, which started in second gear, a deuce and a-half has no bulldog gear, so it starts off in first. Since second was the gear that was troublesome I would have to go from first to third, a technique that was not a real problem unless one is trying to maintain a set speed and distance from the vehicle in front of it. Sergeant Murphy started his act as soon as we got onto a main thoroughfare and the second gear failed to engage, the engine revved, and I lost ground on the lead truck, while the truck in back of me had to brake hard causing a chain reaction. I braked enough for the truck behind me to see I was in trouble, then waved for him to go around as I then pulled the gearshift back into neutral and coasted to the curb. Once the other trucks had passed I ran out first gear as long as I dared, then shifted into third. By this time the other trucks had moved into forth gear and were accelerating away. Since I was tail-end Charlie I had only to keep the truck in front of me in sight until we got where we were going. Sergeant Murphy mumbled "Well, Jesus Christ!" under his breath but otherwise seemed content to ride in

silence. I felt compelled to comment that my second gear was not always engaging and should be written up for the mechanic to take a look at when we got back. When we stopped for a traffic light he told me to use the clutch while he shifted. After he got the same result agreed that it appeared to be a problem. When we got to the pick up point we dismounted and smoked while the ROTC were marched out and assigned a truck to ride in. Future officers or not, it was apparent that they were green as grass. Their new somewhat wrinkled uniforms were still an unwashed, dark forest green color, and their stiff leather boots, along with heavy duffle bags on their shoulders marked them as new guys on the block. Sgt. Murphy motioned for the drivers to gather around. He told us it was important to do this right. The top brass was going to be watching every move so we needed to look professional. He made a couple of comments about how ungainly the ROTC looked standing at attention while their cadre hollered out commands, then pointed at me and said "Of course we've got this guy who can't keep up." I was disappointed at this unfair comment, but I had been the Army too long to make any excuses or complain. As if he didn't want to hear what I would say to him when we were alone in the truck he slid in with the lead driver. This left the shotgun seat open, so when the ROTC were forming up and a trainee with a gold bar on his helmet asked if he could ride up front I saluted and said "Yes sir." He flushed and told me the bar was just an honorary rank that he wasn't really in the Army yet, to which I just nodded assent. It immediately became apparent that he was impressed with riding up front with a real soldier. I found this somewhat amusing since I did not consider myself anything like a real soldier. All a matter of perspective of course, here was this blue blood kid, not much

younger than I was, playing Army for the first time away from the campus and he's fawning all over me.

When we reached the base camp the ROTC disembarked and then double timed off by the cadre. This gave me time to think about what I was supposed to do next. Should I go over to where the generator was located and fire it up? Should I sit on the bumper of my truck and smoke a cigarette like the other drivers? Should I drive the truck back to the Motor Pool and tell the duty sergeant the truck had transmission trouble? My dilemma was somewhat resolved when I heard someone call out "Private Kirkland!" When I looked in the direction of the shout I saw Sergeant Carroll standing with Major Ross and another sergeant wearing 82nd insignia who was waving for me to come to them. I got a kick out of Sergeant Carroll. He had more rank than my platoon Sergeant, but was completely unimpressed with himself. He was standing with his feet at a forty five degree angle and his hands were down along the side of his legs with his fingers curled under, as if he were at a stance of semi attention. I walked quickly over to the little group, thinking that I could learn a lot about being a soldier from Sgt. Carroll, and a lot on how not to act from Sgt. Murphy.

As I approached I became increasingly less amused. It was clear from his stiff stance and cool demeanor Major Ross was not happy. Sgt Carroll was talking earnestly, but the Major didn't seem impressed. The sergeant I didn't recognize looked me over as I saluted Major Ross and then turned back to Sgt. Carroll as he made the introduction between me and Sergeant Rodriquez of the 82nd. Major Ross returned my salute, then turned and walked away. Both Sergeants relaxed visibly, but the airborne Sgt. looked a question at Sgt. Carroll who nodded and told me we needed to talk. While I remained at what I

thought of as semi attention, Sgt. Rodriguez turned half away and looked into the distance while SFC Carroll told me how disappointed he was in my performance. Bewildered, I listened to his stern tale of looking for me since first light, starting the generator himself, and then finding that some of the cords had not withstood a trampling by some of the 82nd troops who were pulling security and had tripped over the cords. If the PA system failed to work when the brass got there later this morning it was going to be a big embarrassment to all concerned.

I was humiliated, but at the same time my mind was racing. Unlike the rolls of wire, which I could make any length I chose, the cords were of a finite length. They were all run in areas where I didn't expect any foot traffic, such as under the bleachers. Still standing at semi attention my head turned to look in the direction of the stage and the bleachers on either side. When he asked where I had been and what I planned to do about the break in communication I told him I had been assigned a deuce and a-half and drove in a convoy to pick up the ROTC. Now it was Sgt. Carroll's turn to look bewildered. He told me his understanding was that I was the commo man for this dog and pony show, and they needed to be sure I was available when needed. I replied to the effect that I had to follow orders from the 102nd. Sergeant Rodriguez took advantage of the lapse in discussion to ask what was going to be done about the shitty cabling job that had lead to his guys getting tangled up in them in the dark. Sergeant Carroll was less inclined to talk about that issue, he had his own agenda, but I had one as well. I told them I thought I had an idea where the break in the cables was, nodding towards the bleachers. I asked if we could walk that way. They shrugged and we quick marched over to the stage where I saw a speaker lying on its side. Following the cable with my eyes, I waited until they looked

in the same direction, and then walked slowly to the darkened spot where the cable disappeared under the bleachers. I ducked around a post, stopped and sniffed the air. There was an unmistakable odor of urine in the area. It was strongest a few paces in . . . right about where there were two separated cable ends. Bending down I picked up the ends and looked at the two NCOs. They didn't get to be where they were by being stupid. They now knew what I had suspected. The only way these cables could have gotten someone's feet tangled in them is if that person was urinating under the bleachers instead of making a trek to the distant latrine. Sergeant Rodriguez had seen and smelled all he needed. He nodded to me, turned on his heel and strode away, no doubt to eat someone's ass. I reconnected the cable ends pulled a little slack in the one leading to the speaker, then walked back over to the side of the stage and stood the speaker up right. One major problem solved.

I took my time walking the cable system both ways, from the amplifiers out to the speakers, and then back to the generator pulling a little slack where they appeared to have been tripped over, and then double checking each of the connections. Once I was satisfied there were no further immediate disconnect problems I sat on the ground in the shade of a tree near the generator. A couple of the 82nd guys came by to shoot the breeze so I figured there was no hard feelings, assuming they even knew who blew the whistle on their bathroom habits. The other issue, my role in the operation, was not really under my control.

The day passed without incident, and after noon chow it was time to take the ROTC back to their tent city. I was strolling back to where the truck was parked when Sgt. Carroll hailed me. He was carrying a clipboard, and walked along with me asking for the

exact name of the 102nd and the First Sergeants name. In effect he told me that Major Ross was not happy that one of his “radio school” guys was being jerked around and intended to see to it that the company understood that I was to be assigned to this detail and none other during the training period. Not surprisingly, I wasn’t the only one who was being used as something other than an RTO. Sgt. Murphy was waiting impatiently for me to saddle up and get the convoy going, but Sgt. Carroll told him to drive the truck back and he would drop me off when I was done. Sgt. Carroll and I discussed ways to prevent a repeat of this morning’s problem. I explained that I couldn’t bury the cables since the connections were not well insulated, reminding him that both of us had been damn near electrocuted when we plugged connections together while standing on wet sand. Sgt. Carroll had a brilliant idea, one I wouldn’t have thought of in a million years. The ROTC had been issued new M-16 rifles that morning and had spent a good portion of their first day cleaning them. The weapons were packed in crates and wrapped in butcher paper soaked in Cosmoline, a water proofing rust preventative. That same butcher paper tied around the connections would prevent water problems and secure the connections against accidental separation. When we finished with our project, and cleaned the Cosmoline off our hands, it was too close to off duty time to do much more. Sgt Carroll drove his car around to the gate and we headed back to the 102nd area.

Although I had only a little time left on my duty hours I asked if he would drop me off at the radio school training area. He didn’t seem to think this was an unusual request and did so without comment. As I expected, despite being almost on their own time some of the guys were there fiddling with the radios set up for that purpose. I greeted them and engaged in some Army talk, while digging through the stack of manuals on the table. I

selected a manual on specifics that a RTO should know: The Employment of Tactical Radio Sets. I studied this detailed manual for an hour or so that day and then every chance I got afterwards, until I could recite key passages from memory.

ROTC-RTO

One of the exercises the ROTC was required to perform involved navigation through the woods of Fort Bragg while relying on their own wiles and the training they received while at Fort Bragg. The 82nd Airborne crew would play the role of aggressors, setting up ambush positions in areas where experience told the leadership the ROTC would tend to move on simulated patrols. This served two purposes. One, it gave the ROTC a chance to prove themselves against crack troops and two, it gave the 82nd an opportunity to sharpen skills they might need if called upon to deploy overseas. In any combat situation communication is king. The leader who can communicate with other units knows what is happening on other parts of the battle and can react accordingly; otherwise he is blind and deaf, not a good combination when the lead is flying. Since these trainees are learning to lead troops, not radio telephone operation, it seemed to make sense for Sgt. Carroll to volunteer my services; at least it made sense to him. I told him I didn't think I would be very good at it and would probably cause more trouble than I would alleviate, but he wouldn't hear of it. Thus it was I found myself putting on camouflage paint for the first time since BCT.

I was issued load bearing equipment (LBE) that would allow me to mount a PRC-25 portable radio on my back, along with dummy grenades and clips of blanks for an M-14

rifle, along with the rifle. In addition I wore a pistol belt with two canteens and extra pouches for ammo. When I had all of my gear on I could hardly stand erect since I was wearing gear damn near equaling my body weight. The only compromise we were allowed was the use of helmet liners instead of wearing the actual steel pot. This was a great boon for me because the heavy helmet would cause my head to wobble and I kept hitting the back of the helmet on the radio. Sergeant Carroll slapped me on the back and told me I looked like a real tiger. It looked as though my OJT was going to be a Hell of a lot more than I could have imagined; the closest I had come to infantry training was in BCT, and now I would be tossed into the frying pan. Sergeant Carroll might have said I looked like a tiger, but I felt more like a spring chicken.

Since we were not going to head out until dusk, I went over to the commo tent and unloaded my LBE along with the PRC-25. The 82nd RTO was lounging in a folding chair so I took the opportunity to pick his brain. Of course I wasn't taking into account that he thought I was a real soldier who knew what he was doing, and I was caught off guard when he asked me my opinion on his layout. Not knowing what else to do or say, I surveyed the array of radios and related antennas, mikes, and head phones. I sidled along the tables leaning down to check the frequencies. I observed that two of the radios were RT-246\VRC FM radios and two were RT 524/VRC FM radios, with two antennas each. I racked my brain to remember what I had read about this setup in the manuals. I have an excellent recall for detail, and was able to confidently identify this configuration. Simply put, it was commonly used to monitor one net while conducting commo on another by employing the RT 524s built in loud speaker. This combination would also be user friendly since the frequencies of the RT 246 could easily be switched to the RT 524 net.

I commented on the redundancy of the set up, two sets of radios, one in operation and one on standby, which he took as a complement to his expertise. I felt a little thrill run up my spine when it again occurred to me that this trained soldier thought that I was a peer even though I was a leg soldier, (a term derived from WWII lingo, meaning straight leg, as opposed to the bent leg posture required to land after parachuting from a plane), while he was an elite airborne qualified soldier. I relaxed as much as I could and we did some Army talk, and then I asked if there was anything I should know that would help me on the field exercise. He informed me that his base would monitor both the aggressor and defender frequencies, that way there would be a record of events that could be used in evaluating the performance of both sides. In addition there would be referees lurking on the ground nearby to rule on the effects of any encounters. The neutral refs would determine who was wounded in action (WIA), killed in action (KIA) or missing in action (MIA) those who were KIA would be marked as such and have to leave the arena, as would MIA because they were either KIA and un recovered or captured. The WIA would be marked as such, with triage determining their combat effectiveness and further status in the exercise. Medics would be on hand, including an MD, in case of real accidental injuries. And, he said, there would be real RTOs with a nod in my direction and a wave of the hand over his net, to facilitate communication. The ROTC candidates were supposed to be proficient in hand signals and the use of runners, but they would rely on me when the inevitable wireless communication was required.

Every so often he would acknowledge a radio transmission. I noted that he used his call sign as well as the call sign of the other party and enunciated slowly and carefully so there would be less chance of a miscommunication. Things were beginning to pick up

and he was becoming increasingly busy so I rose to leave when he asked if I wanted to do a radio check. I hadn't even thought of that, in fact I hadn't even turned the radio on to see if it worked. Feeling more like an idiot than ever I said "Of course" and proceeded to untangle the radio from the LBE, located the power switch and set the frequency to one I had observed on his RT-246. I keyed the mike and then went blank. I didn't have a call sign, or at least not one that I knew of. Although he was sitting with his back turned he heard me click the mike, called breaking squelch, and then let go. As if reading my mind he consulted a sheet on a clipboard and said, "You're Greenhorn niner one, the candidate designated as platoon leader will be Greenhorn 6." My request for a radio check resulted in an answer of five by five.

All this was fine as far as it went, but I still had a problem. I had checked out a three-quarter-ton truck from the motor pool and I was responsible for getting it back; refueled, washed, and the log books filled in before I went off duty. This turned out to not be a big deal once Major Ross called the motor pool and arranged for the truck to be picked up, or it didn't seem like a big deal at the time. But of course nothing is simple in the Army. I had forgotten about the ubiquitous duty roster.

Duty Roster

The duty roster, also known as Department of the Army (DA) Form 6, is a document prepared by the company clerk, and approved by the First Sergeant, that lists the names of soldiers required to perform extra duty. This extra duty was rotated around thorough

the company and battalion level and consisted of details such as: Kitchen Police (KP), Guard Duty (GD), or Charge of Quarters (CQ). A copy of the DA 6 was posted at the beginning of the month and was required reading for all ranks E-6 and below. Failure to be at the appointed place at the appointed time in the appointed uniform, unless excused for cause, was reason for company grade punishment under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The excitement surrounding the arrival of the ROTC, combined with my RTO duties, had caused me to not read that month's DA 6, which specified that on the same night I was scheduled to be ROTC RTO I was also supposed to be on Guard Duty with the 102nd . I was told that Sergeant Murphy came over with another driver to get the three-quarter ton truck and asked around for me, but since I was expecting to be out all night I was crashed in the back of the commo tent, trying to get forty winks. Even though it was unlikely anyone would have thought to look for me there, I doubt whether he tried too hard anyway; he was probably delighted at the thought of getting me into trouble. As an example of what a first class prick Sgt. Murphy could be, he would ask a question such as, "Where do you call home soldier?" When he received an answer he would come back with something like, "I hear there are a lot of whores in that part of the country; are you related to any of them?" Since I knew how cruel he could be, this DA 6 scenario created a bit of a scare on my part when I learned of my error. There was a brief flurry of excitement over my AWOL condition, but, much to my relief and amazement, the situation was resolved when Sgt. Oates reminded First Sergeant Johnson that I was on Temporary Duty (TDY) to the Radio School; a legitimate reason for missing a company detail. Of course they made up for it by scheduling me for KP and GD on weekends. As my old buddy Frank Maxa would have said "FTA, boy I'm telling ya!"

Night Patrol

When I was at last cleared to continue on my assignment with the ROTC, we saddled up and moved out from the base camp towards the woods just before dusk. I was the only RTO, although there was a ROTC sergeant assigned to shadow me in a training mode, and we both stuck close to the trainee designated as the platoon leader. I don't have a record of his name, but he was assigned the rank of first lieutenant. He had a single white stripe painted on the back of his helmet liner, making it easier for those behind him to see his rank while shielding his status from an enemy soldier to the front or side. When we reached the edge of the woods the lieutenant called a halt, checked his compass and used hand signals to let me know we were at the first checkpoint. I radioed back to base reporting our status in a stage whisper. I felt a little silly doing this since we were just inside the wood line and it was unlikely any enemy elements were within ear shot, but it seemed like the right tactic. This maneuver was repeated a couple of more times until we reached the point where we were to set up an initial position in the fading light. It would be a moonless night and when darkness fell it would be really dark. The Lt. ordered the NCOs to establish a defensive perimeter, and then went around checking to see if everything was satisfactory. I was impressed with how things had gone up to this point. It appeared that they were able to translate what they had learned in a classroom into an effective field exercise.

This changed somewhat when we moved from this first night position to the second. It was very dark this time and that seemed to cause a lapse in noise discipline. There was a

good deal of clanking of equipment, and stage whispering while we stumbled around in the dark. It was cold as well as dark and I found myself wishing I had worn a field jacket although the thought never crossed my mind in the heat of the day. After moving through the dense brush a short distance we came across a trail. Although it was only about three feet wide, the trail offered a much easier lane of travel as long as it allowed us to travel in the general desired direction. We had just started going on the trail when there was a *Bang!* followed by a blinding flash that seemed to envelope me. There were explosions to our front and automatic weapons fire to the right. We all instinctively fell to the ground. I took my M-14 off my shoulder and prepared to return fire when whistles began to blow and spot lights lit the area. The referees came out of the tree line and assigned WIA and KIA designations to those they thought appropriate. Both the Lieutenant and I were KIA. We had been at the front of the formation and were dead when this L shaped ambush was expertly sprung .The Lieutenant had tripped a wire which was judged to have killed us. A rather sobering thought, even if it wasn't real. I wasn't involved in the after action report but I talked about the experience with other ROTC officers later. The consensus was that we were probably in trouble beginning with the noise discipline break down during the first night move. Of course the convenient trail leading in our anticipated direction of travel should have told us we were being suckered, but under the circumstances with none of us having any field experience, it was an understandable error. And a valuable lesson learned.

Although I made a half dozen more patrols over the next two weeks we never walked into such an easy ambush again. I would attribute this to the sharp learning curve of the young men I had the pleasure of working with. They were not allowed to ask me for

advice, which was just as well since I didn't feel I had any to give. For my part the first hand experience I received made me the undisputed object of awe and envy from the other radio school participants. No one else got this kind of hands-on experience. Most of them were glorified generator operators, and a few were abused by the units they were supporting. I recall one soldier complaining about being forced to police the latrine area; while others were used as common laborers.

CBR

In the section on BCT on mentioned that I was subjected to being gassed as part of the training. As fate would have it one of the exercises the ROTC participated in while I was with them was gas mask training. I naturally assumed that I would sit that phase out, but alas it was not to be. The key element was the manner of which the training was administered. In BCT there was a Quonset hut set up for this training, but there was no such facility at Fort Bragg, at least not in the area where the exercise was being conducted. Instead we had to double time through an old shack located in an open field. Since I was the RTO I ran through the shack with the ROTC lieutenant, in the back door and out the front. Once everyone had done this we circled back around and repeated the sprint, only this time an Airborne soldier tossed a CS grenade through a window. By the time we got into the building, the room was filled with the nauseas gas, and we stumbled into the walls and one another trying to find the exit. By the time we got out we were crying our asses off and had snot legs from our noses to our chins. I didn't appreciate this in the least, but I wasn't given a choice, and so I had my second CBR experience. It wouldn't be the last.

TDY Winds Down

As our TDY to radio school wound to a close there were three personally gratifying occurrences. The first occurrence was when I met Major Montgomery while I was hovering around the area during a presentation for Lieutenant General York. Major Montgomery approached me from the side, and when I spotted the gold oak leaf I snapped to attention and saluted. He gave me a more formal salute than in the past, perhaps the presence of so much brass made him feel the need for formality. For my part I was in starched fatigues, with my brass and leather gleaming, and Major Montgomery seemed genuinely interested in my current role as a public address specialist. He told me to return to my work attitude by saying "As you were." He looked around at the set up, the generator and amplifier, with the cables and wires bundled and routed to disappear under the bleachers and stage. I watched him anxiously, wondering if he would find something to criticize or praise. He merely nodded as if appreciative of what he saw and asked if I had worked out the layout on my own. I demurred, telling him I had to give the credit to Sgt. Carroll since I had never encountered an assignment like this in my life. He knew Sgt. Carroll of course, it seemed as if everyone did around the area, and told me he would be pleased with my performance. My chest swelled with pride at this unexpected praise and I involuntarily stood a little straighter. Then he asked me if I was Regular Army and how long I had been in the service. I felt strangely awkward, as if being a draftee was a shameful thing to admit, and my relative lack of service time seemed to be another black mark. Finally, he turned to go back to his group, telling me to "Carry on." I don't know if that encounter influenced the next event or not, but as I packed up my

equipment to leave the area for the last time I was called to see Major Ross, who told me I was “A good, steady man” and that he was going to write a positive endorsement letter for my personnel jacket. I recall thinking that with that letter and twenty five cents I could get a Coke at the snack bar. The last event, which might seem mean spirited because it pleased me, was when Major Ross caught Sergeant Murphy verbally abusing a truck driver and told him that he was writing a negative endorsement letter for his personnel jacket. I don’t know if I earned my letter, but I’m sure Sergeant Murphy earned his.

The Cast of Characters

While BCT tried in every way to prepare us for the future, for the most part AIT failed miserably. I reported to Fort Bragg under a set of orders that expressly assigned me to a training company that only existed on paper. There was literally no chance of my being prepared to fulfill my assigned MOS when I completed training. I thought AIT would prepare me to be a valuable cog in the machine. Instead I was tossed into a war zone with only knowledge largely gained by luck and happenstance. Nevertheless, there were some good men who deserve recognition, and a few not so good men who deserve dishonor. Sergeant First Class Carroll, Staff Sergeant Oates, Majors Ross and Montgomery and a host of other solid individuals of whom I did not record the names deserve accolades as top soldiers. For those who did not shine I was tempted to assign pseudonyms so as to protect any embarrassment to their families, but in the end I decided that I didn’t say anything I didn’t believe to be true, so I just called a spade a spade. Looking back on it now I would like to think that Lieutenant Lane was most likely a career soldier who was

caught up in a mess of an assignment that was driving him nuts. But I recall an incident when we had just arrived and I called him Lieutenant. He tore into me and made sure I understood that I was lower than whale shit and that he was God-like. “You will call me sir!” In reality he was a demigod who couldn’t have held a candle to Major Montgomery’s understated leadership. First Sergeant Johnson was an old fat cat living off of the system, and Sergeant Murphy just needed a good ass whipping.

Processing out of AIT

As my training period came to a close it was time for me to prepare to go overseas. I was one of the last to “finish my AIT training”, and most of the guys I had reported with had been reassigned for leave before going overseas. Some went to transportation outfits as truck drivers, others had done ten weeks of field medical training and others had done stints of OJT similar to what I had experienced. There was more nonsense to come before I could wave a not so fond farewell to Fort Dragg.

On 23 July I reported to a rifle range with the rest of my platoon to qualify with the M-16 rifle. With typical Fort Bragg incompetence there was only enough ammunition for six of twenty, so I was postponed. This turned out to mean cancelled and I was sent overseas without having qualified with the basic weapon I would be issued in Vietnam. On 31 July my pay stub noted that I had completed my AIT, and on 4 August I received orders to become PFC E-3. Apparently Major Ross’s endorsement was worth more than I thought. The next day I received orders to report to Fort Ord in California for processing to report to my next permanent duty station: The Republic of Vietnam.

I processed out of Fort Bragg on 16 August with little fanfare. Amazingly they sat me down with the recruiting officer to talk about reenlistment. How anyone could think I would want to reenlist for another three years of the kind of bullshit I had just experienced was beyond me, and I told the recruiter just that. While that portion was uneventful, I came close to making a giant screw up with my personal life. I figured I would just catch a plane home and surprise my folks similarly to when I came home from BCT. What I didn't know was that my parents were in Tennessee and planned to drive over to Fort Bragg and surprise me. They didn't know how far it was from Knoxville, Tennessee to Fayetteville, North Carolina but they thought since Tennessee and North Carolina bordered on one another it would be just a couple or three hour drive. In fact it is almost 300 statute miles between the two cities and when the mountains are figured into the equation it is closer to 360 actual miles. This is about a six hour drive and they were exhausted when they arrived that evening. They contacted the MPs at the gate who directed them to the Company area. I was called to the orderly room by a runner, and much to my surprise, my father was there. I was due to leave the next morning and I was nothing short of shocked, yet pleased to see him and mother. It was awe inspiring to think that in just one more day they would have been there at Fort Bragg while I was flying home to Detroit. All's well that ends well however, and when I finished out processing I left Fort Bragg in my rear view mirror for the last time. I would visit my grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles in Tennessee, then drive north to Detroit where I had forty five days of freedom before I had to report to Fort Ord, California on my first leg to Vietnam. I was twenty years-four months old, stood six feet tall and weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds.

Part Three The Republic of Vietnam

The Calm Before the Storm

This time the leave seemed to go by in a blur. I drove my parent's car through the North Carolina Mountains, leaving Fort Bragg behind with an uncertain future ahead. We stayed a week or so at my grandparent's house, although I was anxious to get back to Detroit where I knew Ann was waiting. Once back home I just hung out, all of the younger guys were now either drafted, had enlisted, or were Four F for medical reasons. It appeared that the draft dodging National Guard guys were not quite so impressed with themselves anymore. I had attained a glorious suntan while working in the hot summer sun, and in their eyes they beheld a bronzed warrior. It became evident from their attitude that they perceived me to be a trained killer who was soon departing on this great adventure in Southeast Asia; and leaving them behind. I sensed that for perhaps the first time they doubted the wisdom of the path they were traveling. I didn't disillusion them, in fact I got a kick out of the misconception that my AIT was a grueling journey through purgatory, when actually it was a nearly worthless pain in the ass. For Ann's part she never wavered in her support and although the future was far from certain she was the anchor I needed to keep from drifting on a sea of uncertainly while I continued this journey into the unknown. My parents were nearly paralyzed with the idea of their baby being sent into a charnel house.

26 September 1968 found me back at Metro Airport, this time accompanied by my parents, Ann, and my sister Glenda. In all of the confusion I somehow left my garrison

cap back at the car and my dad backtracked to get it. Time passed and he hadn't come back so Glenda went to see what he was doing, while in the meantime he returned. I remember he was a little ticked off that we didn't have much confidence in him, but all he said was that he wished he could be like President Johnson and send someone else's son instead of his own. Finally, it was time for me to board, and with much hugging and a few tears I was off on the first leg.

I had a travel agent plot my path to the west coast, making sure the schedule allowed for the maximum amount of leave time. My date and time of departure, coupled with the military standby status, led to a flight from Detroit Metro Airport to the Cincinnati, Ohio Covington, Kentucky Airport. This leg was about a half hour in duration, almost amounting to a takeoff and landing. From Cincinnati/Covington I would catch a non-stop flight into San Francisco, California, then on to Fort Ord. There was a layover at the Cincinnati airport and I met up with another soldier from Fort Bragg who was also on his way to California. I didn't know him very well. Although we had been in the same company, he was in a different platoon and I only saw him in morning formation. He was a quasi familiar face and it beat being alone, if only a little. For some reason I didn't record his name in any of my extant letters home, so I'll call him John Doe. John was a little guy, and by that I mean he was shorter and weighed less than I did. He was there with his wife, who was also tiny, and I couldn't help but note that he didn't seem as upset about leaving her as I had been about leaving Ann. We had time to kill in the boarding area and he displayed a rather bizarre side when he made a running commentary on the women within our range of view. His comments were so ribald that I was a little put off, but of course I just kept quiet. There were a couple of middle aged women sitting not too

far away whose eyes were as big as saucers as they caught parts of his monologue. He seemed to take my silence as approval and kept up the observations for most of the time we were waiting to board. When we finally got the call to board the plane, he scouted out the person who was seated next to me and sweet talked him into changing seats by telling him we wanted to sit together. Since both John and I were in uniform it was easy enough to believe, although only partially true. This began a strange partnership that would lead to some even stranger events once we were overseas, but for now it he made a faithful sidekick.

We arrived in San Francisco without any real trouble, except that I got heartsick part way and wound up going into the restroom where I cried for the first time since I was about ten years old. John pretended not to notice, although he got a little nervous when I pulled out the barf bag. He relaxed and drifted off to sleep when he realized I was going to use the bag to write a letter, since I didn't have any stationary with me.

We didn't have to report in until the next day so we checked into The Sutter Hotel, an old cracker box that had to be a million years old, but our room had comfortable beds and a full bath for $5.25 per night. John had a reservation at another hotel, but he just blew it off, and since I had a double room he bunked in with me.

Fort Ord

Before we left fort Bragg we were issued a list of uniforms to take to our next duty station. Accordingly, my duffle bag was packed full of underwear, socks, fatigues, and kakis. I was wearing my dress greens. From the Sutter Hotel we loaded our duffles into a cab and rode back over to the San Francisco Airport. My travel agent had me booked

onto a helicopter flight across San Francisco Bay to Oakland International, so John purchased a ticket, and we flew over the Bay. The chopper was quite a surprise; it was a dual rotor Sikorsky Piasecki H-21 that was set up for civilian use. We donned life vests and there were rafts mounted on the walls for quick dispersal out the rear door of the airship. In the long run it was only technically a helicopter ride, nothing like what was to come once I reached Vietnam, but it would still play a role later. We arrived at Oakland International where there was a bus that made a loop to the east gate of Fort Ord. Once we disembarked, there was an MP on the gate who directed us toward our first destination, a corridor with a six foot high barrier serving to separate soldiers returning from Vietnam from soldiers getting processed to go overseas. Apparently the powers that be didn't want the veterans fraternizing with the FNGs. We emerged into a big room with squares painted on the floor. Each square was numbered and there was a piece of cardboard with a string attached matching the number on the floor. The process was to set the duffle down, take the number, hang it around ones' neck and then sit in sets of bleachers lining the walls. John and I had gotten up early and eaten breakfast at the hotel, so we were some of the first to arrive, but within a couple of hours the bleachers were full of nervous soldiers. A sergeant arrived and called for quiet. He proceeded to tell us the general information we needed to know. He marched us over to the sleeping area where we were assigned a bunk that corresponded to the number on our cardboard tags. Once there he showed us where the latrines and the Canteen snack areas were located. We were allowed to use them any time we wanted. Next was a trip to the mess hall, and after morning chow we marched back over to the bleacher area where our duffles were stored. Each square now contained a cardboard box, open on one side. On the flaps of the boxes

were labels where we were instructed to write our home address with an Army Post Office (APO) as a return address. We were then sent through a Quarter Master line much as we had at the in processing prior to BCT, and loaded up with new uniforms and other gear. We had to take out of our duffle the clothes we brought with us, and replace them with jungle fatigues, a floppy hat called a boonie hat, pistol belts with canteens and ammo pouches, and other miscellaneous gear. We were to pack the clothes we unpacked into the boxes to be shipped back home. I wasn't surprised, it was typical of the disconnect between what the Army at Fort Bragg was doing and what was the right thing to do. It was obvious that Fort Bragg wasn't the only stateside base that made this error, there were soldiers from Forts all over the country and we all had the same orders. The one thing that was not exchanged was our underwear. We had worn white underwear while at BCT and AIT but we were told to dye our underclothes and socks olive drab for use in Vietnam, so my mother when out and got several boxes of Rit olive drab dye, and colored all of my stuff. The only problem was that olive drab is really forest green when it's new, so my underwear was an embarrassing pea green color. One of the key elements in the Army is the uniform and here I was with funny colored tee shirts; not a good start to say the least.

We spent the next couple of nights in this uninsulated warehouse furnished with rows and rows of double tiered bunks. The situation was pretty informal, no one pulled rank or aggravated us too much, so we just sat around smoking, writing letters and engaging in Army talk. The bunks had only a bare mattress and pillow, but I noticed some to the guys checking out sheets, blankets and pillow cases. Since it was sunny California and I didn't think I was going to be there much more than one night, I just lie down on the bunk and

fell asleep. Big mistake as it turned out; the temperature dropped precipitously in a few hours, and I woke up in the middle of the night shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. All I could do was curl up in as tight a ball as possible and listen to my teeth chatter. The next morning I checked out bedding and made my bunk. That night was much more comfortable since I slept wrapped up in a wool blanket. On the morning of 28 September, we packed our duffle bags on a truck headed for the airport. Word was we were headed for a ten thirty flight out. Unfortunately, the sergeant who had given us the time was twelve hours off, it was really ten thirty at night or twenty two thirty hours in Army time. That wasn't a big deal; except my cigarettes were packed in my duffle and it would make for a long day without a nicotine fix. One of the soldiers stationed at Fort Ord understood our predicament and passed around a clipboard where we could request our brand of smokes by bunk number. A pack of cigarettes was less than a quarter in the PX so most everyone who smoked kicked in a buck for three packs and he kept the change for his trouble. John didn't smoke but he ordered my brand of cigarettes and kept them for me. I was like his big brother at this point, and he wanted to stay in my good graces. It's funny how some things work out. Here I was just a skinny, green soldier who was as clueless as could be, yet in his estimation I was a totally together trooper who would be able to save him from trouble if he stuck with me. When the time finally came to board the bus for the ride to the airport a civilian driver told us we couldn't smoke on the bus. There was a moment's silence, then most of us lit a cigarette, and a chorus of "What are you going to do; send us to Vietnam?" went up. The driver just sighed and closed the door.

When the Army first deployed to Vietnam they literally shipped troops over on board ships. The trip would take thirty days and one of the problems was keeping everyone in

decent shape and keeping them out of trouble. By the time I was heading over the procedure was to lease civilian airplanes, complete with stewardesses. These flights were called Freedom Birds when soldiers returned on them after their tour in Nam, but on the way over they felt like flying hearses. We landed for fuel in Hawaii and when we crossed the International Date Line on 29 September I got confused as to the day. When we landed in Guam I asked if we would have time for a church service and was rudely told it was Monday 30 September, not Sunday 29 September. The advance in dates didn't adversely effect us; we were credited with having entered Vietnam on 29 September. Finally, we arrived at Bien Hoa (pronounced Ben Wah) in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). When the plane descended through the clouds on approach, we all gawked out the windows, getting our first look at the exotic place where we were to spend the next twelve months. Assuming of course we didn't get our asses blown off in the interim. This wasn't a vacation in Cancun baby, this was a war zone.

Vietnam

In 1956 Vietnam was divided along the Seventeenth Parallel into two separate countries called North and South Vietnam. The original Geneva Convention called for a political solution that would eventually reunite the two Vietnams into one country. For various and sundry reasons the countries remained separate and by 1965 the escalating conflict over the division resulted in a civil war called either The Vietnam War, The Second Indochina War, or The American war, depending on the perspective of the person applying the label. Because of the limited number of main roads, and the danger of

driving in areas controlled by the enemy, the US Military relied heavily on helicopters; thus the war is sometimes called the Helicopter War. Bordered on the east by The China Sea and the west by Laos and Cambodia, the geography of banana shaped South Vietnam varies from heavy jungled, lightly populated areas in the north to a heavily populated alluvial plain in the south. There are several cities located along the Costal Regions, but the mountains are less hospitable and thus less populated. The southernmost area includes the Mekong Delta, a lowland with a predominate feature, The Mekong River. The Delta's rich alluvial soil supported a population of six million people, approximately thirty five percent of the total population of South Vietnam.

By 1968 the United States had become immersed in the conflict, committing an increasingly larger number of ground troops in support of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, who had been elected in 1967 to what was supposed to be a Democratic Government. North Vietnam was a Communist Party dominated country ruled by Ho Chi Minh. The soldiers who fought for the south were called ARVN's, an acronym for The Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The communist soldiers were divided into the local guerrilla fighters, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, known to US Armed Forces as the Viet Cong, (also called VC, Victor Charlie, Charles, and Chuck), and The Vietnam Peoples Army, known to US Armed Forces as The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

The climate in South Vietnam varies greatly from north to south. Tropical Monsoons, a term derived from the Arabic word Musim, meaning season in English, are common and drench the county in rain. Monsoons occur from May to October in the North and

South and September to January in the center. It is almost totally dry throughout the rest of the year.

For the purposes of the US Military, South Vietnam was divided from north to south into four separate areas called Corps I, II, III & IV. I served my stint in the southernmost part of the country designated as IV Corps, from 29 September 1968 through July 1969, largely with D Troop 3rd Squadron 5th Cavalry, which was attached to the 9th Infantry Division at Bearcat and Dong Tam. When, in late July 1969, 9th Infantry was rotated back to the states, D Troop was attached to 1st Aviation Brigade, part of the 7th Squadron 1st Cavalry at Vinh Long. I completed my overseas tour of duty on 9 September 1969, serving a total of eleven months and ten days.

In Processing

We had no idea what to expect when we landed in country at Bien Hoa, we had heard every kind of story as to what we would encounter, most of them wildly incorrect. In fact, if you think about it, how dangerous could it be if the Army was flying civilian aircrews and aircraft in and out? We were greeted at the bottom of the loading ramp by a smiling Air Force enlisted man who welcomed us to sunny Vietnam. Bien Hoa was just a big airport, not unlike Detroit Metro. It was a sprawling space, with multiple runways, hangers, terminals and other support buildings. We were formed up in columns and marched to an open area covered by an overhead canopy to block the intense Asian sun. Under the canopy were folding chairs set up in rows facing a table and a projector screen. It was winter time in that part of the world and heavy rain storms could brew up with

little notice, but we didn't know that as yet. While we were sitting around this area, no one seemed to pay too much attention to us. One of the first strange things I noticed was that I had the sniffles. Apparently we all did; some kind of reaction to the transition from the filtered aircraft air conditioning to the tropical climate of this part of Asia. The second thing that was apparent after some nose blowing was that there was a permanent, invasive, scent to the air. Mixed in with the smell of jet fuel was the faint but unmistakable smell of shit. This was a county that relied on rice as a staple, and the rice paddies were fertilized with the cheapest, most available source; thus the pervasive smell. We were told we would become accustomed to it and that if the smell was the worst thing that happened to us we could count ourselves lucky. Somewhere along the line a couple of soldiers came in and talked to some to the guys. I recall they had rifles and faded fatigues and I was very impressed. John hung close to me the whole while we were there and after an orientation talk from an officer we were again formed up and loaded on buses for a trip down the road to Tan Son Nhut; the military airport near Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. There was some doubt on John getting on the same bus as me, but he surprised me, and I think even himself, by pushing past a couple of others and jumping onto the platform just as the driver was closing the door. The bus had sandbags on the floor, chicken wire on the windows and an armed guard who stood in the doorway. This was to help prevent our friendly local VC from killing us by setting off a road mine, tossing a grenade through the window, or storming the bus unopposed by an armed guard standing in the doorway.

Any doubts we might have harbored about the reality of the war zone situation while at Bien Hoa were dissipated by the practical way we were being transported. I for one

wished I had a firearm, and felt a little naked without any way of self protection in this potentially hostile environment. This was my first look at the people I was being sent to rescue from the clutches of Communism. We traveled slowly through the crowded streets of Saigon, the driver constantly blowing the horn at the population of a city teeming with people of all ages, traveling on foot, on motor bikes, scooters, bicycles and even pony powered rickshaws. Even through the closed windows we could hear the hustle and bustle of thousands of vehicles and the thousands of voices which rose in the sing song fashion used to pronounce the local language.

After a trip down Highway One we arrived safely at a replacement depot (called a repple depple) located near the Tan Son Nhut airport, unloaded and were formed up and allowed to smoke while the powers that be decided how to handle this group of what was commonly referred to in Vietnam as Fucking New Guys (FNGs). This was not an insult, merely a defense mechanism against getting too friendly with green troops since the attrition rate among replacements was outlandishly high. A FNG could be defined as anyone with one less day in country (or in a unit) than yourself. It was decided that we should be fed, but it was between morning and noon chow so they broke out some “C” rations.

Charlie Rations

Meals Combat, Individual (MCI) came in a case that contained twelve boxes of canned goods. Each box contained one canned meat item, one canned fruit, one bread or dessert item and one accessory packet. An accessory packet contained a pack of four cigarettes, matches, chewing gum, coffee, powdered cream, sugar, salt and pepper, toilet

paper and a plastic spoon. There were four can openers, called P-38 or John Wayne, per case. After awhile we figured out it was a good idea to hang a P-38 on the chain with our dog tags. In theory each box contained everything a GI would need to stay alive, including 2000 calories, but the people who designed them obviously had no clue as to what was really required for someone to survive on a steady diet of this garbage. In 1958 the MCI's replaced the C rations that were standard Army issue up to that point, but the name stuck. No one ever complained about eating MCI's, they complained about eating "C-Rats." I hadn't eaten them too much before, so it was fairly novel, but I would soon come to dread them as a source of nutrition. As we were to learn, the indigenous Vietnamese people were very familiar with C's and valued them the same way we did. I smoked unfiltered cigarettes in those days, I had learned it was easier to field strip a cigarette without a filter. Once it had become too short to smoke, I could put out the flame, peel off the paper and let the tobacco drift onto the wind. The tiny piece of paper that remained could be balled up and stored in a pocket until it could be disposed of. The brand of cigarettes in each box was random, but since they included Camels, Lucky Strikes, Pall Malls, and Chesterfields it was usually easy enough to swap a pack of filtered cigarettes with someone who had unfiltered. Many of the Vietnamese were addicted to menthol cigarettes, with Salem brand being preferred. We quickly found this to be a good medium of exchange for local booty, such as beer or Cokes.

Some of the meals were palatable, the boned chicken or turkey for instance, while the chopped ham with eggs was so awful as to be beyond description. Fruit was a favorite, while the cookies could have been used for hockey pucks. It was a good idea to heat the meals if possible, and we learned to use a bit of C-4 explosive as a fuel. The cardboard

box would be torn into strips and set afire with one of the matches. Then a bit of C-4 would be added, the burning C-4 supplying intense heat. Some inventive souls came up with ways to make a little C ration stove, and authored “Charlie Ration” cookbooks that were designed to make the meals more palatable with creative use of Tabasco sauce and hot peppers.

The Repple Depple

The replacement depot at Tan Son Nhut was a huge place, with two story barracks type buildings used to house all of the green troops coming into Vietnam at this point in the war. John and I moved through a crowd of soldiers as we were directed to the second floor of a barracks. It was late in the morning and we were tired. All I wanted to do at that point was get a bunk and lie down until noon chow. I dumped my duffle bag onto a bunk and looked around. There was one soldier already present who I guessed was the barracks orderly, so I asked if he could fill us in on what to expect. I was rewarded by an informative dissertation on what a shit hole this place was. He told me that he had been there for weeks, held in limbo while he waited for assignment to a permanent duty station. He was burning shit and pulling KP in addition to this barracks orderly gig. Another soldier came in and echoed what the orderly was saying. The secret to getting out of duty was to not report to the morning formation since that is where they picked the suckers for the details. Then it was important to blend in with the rest of the troops coming and going here and there because they checked the barracks and collected stragglers from there as well. I decided it might be a good idea to get out of the barracks at that point. John of course followed whatever lead I made. We walked around the area,

checking out the buildings and trying to look like we were going or coming from someplace. No one paid us any mind, either they didn't want to be bothered or they just didn't care. Then it started to rain. I had never seen rain like this, it was as if the clouds just opened up and dumped buckets of water. The ground quickly turned into a quagmire and water was running down what had been the main road which was more like a small river at this point. There were wooden sidewalks running along the sides of the buildings, but crossing the road would have been a risky venture. We just ducked into the first floor of a barracks and waited it out. There was no wind to speak of and the rain came straight down. As quickly as it began it stopped. The street drained quickly but left behind sticky mud that sucked at our boots as we tiptoed across to the mess hall.

At noon chow I met some other guys I remembered from Fort Bragg. We nodded at one another and without a lot of fanfare we sat together and introduced ourselves. I decided to not mention what the barracks orderly had told me, that kind of information needed to be acted on alone; a crowd skipping the first formation would only attract unneeded attention. A sergeant came in and said anyone who came in today was to report back to their barracks after chow, we would be called out by barracks to be issued some needed equipment. I hoped the equipment would include a rifle, even though this was a big place, I was in Vietnam and would like to be able to defend if necessary. I had to admit that so far this was just a lot like being in the states.

A Rifle Called Buster

The Tet Offensive must have been fresh on the minds of the officers in charge of the repple depple for one of the first orders of business was to issue rifles to the FNGs. John was a trained as a corpsman (MOS 91E20) and my primary MOS was still supply clerk, (76A10) but my secondary was RTO (05B20). There was a gargantuan Master Sergeant in charge of issuing the rifles. As we neared the front of the line I watched him walk either to his left or right to get a weapon, and noticed that there were two separate racks of rifles. One looked newer and had a noticeably different "flash hider" on the end of the barrel. A flash hider is just what it sounds like. One of the ways a defensive position could be given away was the powder flash emitted when a bullet leaves the barrel of a firearm. Thus a device designed to reduce the amount of detectable flash. I had been engaging in Army talk with the two guys ahead of me. They had done their AIT in Fort Polk, Louisiana and were infantry MOS 11B20. When my turn came the Sergeant looked at my orders, running his finger down the line where the MOSs were listed. He reached into the rack with the newer rifles, racked open the bolt and showed me the empty chamber. He wrote the serial number on my orders and told me to memorize it; this was my rifle for the duration of my tour. I took it without comment, but when John was given the same treatment he suggested there must be a mistake, that he was a medic. The Sergeant snorted and said "Ya'll ain't nothing but infantry boy!" making a gesture to encompass John, me and the two guys in front of me. Stunned, we moved along in relative silence while we were issued ammo magazines and bandoleers. No live ammunition was issued at this point. In the possible, but unlikely, event of a ground

attack we would be issued what we needed then. I decided on the spot to call my rifle Buster, my father's first name. I figured he had always looked out for me and now I would depend on my rifle to save my bacon this go around.

Morning Formation

I slept fitfully, and then got up very early the next morning, went to the latrine and took care of the two of the three esses. I skipped the shower since it was crowded and there was a line to get in. John kept right on my tail, I wondered if he even slept for fear I would go somewhere during the night. I was debating whether to go to morning chow, I wasn't sure if the formations were before, after or during chow, like they were at the 102nd POL. I decided that if I was going to skip the first formation I needed to eat, there was no telling what the rest of the day might bring and a sergeant had used meal time to announce our gear issue the day before. After chow I wandered nonchalantly out into the formation area where soldiers were standing in small groups, smoking and engaging in Army talk. I made the turn around the building where the KPs were dumping garbage and sneaking a smoke and tried to walk as if I had a destination. After a block or so, I turned into a shadowed spot between two buildings. John was not nearly as nervous as I was, because he had confidence in me; which was a lot more than I could say for myself. But I believed what the orderly had said, and I didn't want to spend the day burning shit or in a hot kitchen. I had seen enough detail sweeps at Fort Bragg to become an expert on laying low until the hustle and bustle settled down and then just fitting in with the people moving around from one spot to another. I could hear a voice droning over a PA system,

calling out names and mentally patted myself on the back for not getting caught up in the detail assignments. Suddenly I jerked with a thought-they were calling names! That meant they weren't randomly assigning duty, they knew who was supposed to be there. Right about the time I peeked out between the buildings a group of guys came thundering by our hiding spot. I instinctively ducked back, and then decided I had better see what was going on. I trotted after them and asked if there was anything I needed to know. One soldier slowed down enough to turn and point back to the parade ground. He told me I had better get my ass over there, because they assigning us out to our duty stations. He said they were headed to the 1st Infantry Division. Picturing the Big Red One patch of that division I raced to the back of the formation, slowed and slipped into the back row. And not a moment too soon either, within a couple of minutes my name was called out, followed by: Troop D, 3rd Squadron/5th Cavalry-9th Infantry Division. The 9th was nicknamed "The Old Reliables" and had been in Vietnam since 1966.

I trotted around to the front of the formation where a sergeant checked my name tag and handed me a set of orders along with a 9th Infantry shoulder patch. The shoulder patch design was called an "Octofoil" and consisted of eight foils with a dot in the center. The Octofoil is red on the top, blue on the bottom and the dot is white. Red and blue represent the colors of an infantry headquarters flag, white is the color used in division flags, and the circular background is olive drab. Legend has it that the design harks back to Medieval times when it was customary for each son to have an individual mark of distinction. The Octofoil was given to the ninth son, with the foils representing eight positions of the brothers surrounding and protecting the ninth son, represented by the dot

in the center. The subdued version I was issued consisted of olive drab and black for less visibility when used on battle dress uniforms (BDU).

I was to leave right away on a convoy so I double timed back to the barracks, grabbed my rifle and duffle bag and then almost ran over John as I turned to go. He grabbed his bag and rifle and beat feet after me. It wasn't until we were on the deuce and a-half before he admitted he hadn't waited for his orders, just chased after me. I was astounded, and told him he couldn't do that, he would be AWOL. He didn't seem too concerned, just kind of smiled and looked around like all was right in the world. He said he was sure the 9th Infantry Division needed medics and he could work something out when we got there. I wasn't so sure, but didn't know what else to do, so I just shrugged and decided to wait and see what would happen.

Convoy to Camp Bearcat

We were seated on wooden benches arranged along each side of a deuce and a-half for the trip back up Highway One then back south and east on Highway 15 to Bearcat. There were about a dozen soldiers per side, most of us were replacements going out for the first time, but there were a half dozen or so who had been away for one reason or another and were being reassigned. The trucks had sand bags packed two deep on the floor of the cab and three deep on the bed. Once we were clear of the repple depple we were issued bandoleers with magazines of 5.56 MM rounds pre loaded. One of the experienced soldiers started popping the cartridges out of the magazines and reloading them. One of the FNGs asked why he was doing that, so he explained that the capacity of the magazines was technically twenty rounds each, but experience had shown that loading

more than eighteen weakened the spring and caused misloads. Since he hadn't loaded the clips himself he felt it would be a good idea to check them out. He pointed out that every fifth round had a red tip. This round was dipped in red phosphorus and was called a tracer. When the weapon was fired on full automatic the red tracers would determine whether the aim was true, and assist in walking the rounds onto the target.

Most all of us followed his example, and I discovered that whoever had loaded my bandoleer knew what he was doing. One of the other veterans produced an olive drab plastic bottle and passed it around for us to see. It read "Lubricant, Small Arms," (LSA). He told us we would find this invaluable in keeping our rifles in good working order in the tropical climate. He suggested we liberally squirt it into the chamber of our weapons to discourage them from jamming at an awkward time. I later read a report in the 9th Infantry Magazine, Octofoil that armorors at Fort Benning Georgia blamed excessive use of LSA, especially when it came in contact with the cartridges in a magazine, for the frequent jamming of the much maligned M-16. At any rate all this advice was sounding good, with the one problem being that although I had handled, and even stripped and cleaned an M-16, I had yet to fire one for record.

We got around to asking one another what our MOSs were, the majority were 11 Bravo, (infantry) with a couple of 91A (medical corpsman) and one each 12 B (combat engineer), 096 (Protestant chaplains assistant) and 05B (radio operator). I didn't want to admit the 76A (supply clerk) role, so I substituted my secondary MOS. After a few minutes thought someone opined that we were in fine shape should we come under attack, what with the combat engineer, all the infantrymen and two medics. As a bonus, we had a RTO to call in artillery, and, if things really got tough, we could have the padre

call on the Almighty. We raced through the country side at fifty miles an hour, laughing and slapping one another on the back in good humored comradelier. After awhile we settled in; mostly just smoking and engaging in Army talk with the guys on either side. I was a little nervous about masquerading as an RTO, but I figured I could pull it off if nip came to tuck. For his part John didn't have too much to say, but it was clear he was very pleased to be in such elite company. We had to relieve ourselves on the move. A piss wasn't too much trouble; one just had to go to the tailgate and aim a little off to the side so as not to soak the windshield of the truck behind us. Number two would have been more of an adventure and if anyone had to go number two they must have corked it.

I watched as the Vietnamese landscape passed quickly. There were a lot of civilians riding bikes or walking along the side of the road but little of note occurred until we arrived at our destination, the US base known as Bearcat.

Bearcat

Also know as Camp Milton Cox, Bearcat was the first Vietnam Base Camp for the 3rd Brigade Headquarters and the 3/60th Infantry Battalion, 9th Infantry Division, along with elements of the 104th Royal Australian Signal Squadron; 709th Maintenance Battalion and the 720th Military Police Battalion. Later, when the 9th Infantry battalions were moved to Dong Tam The Royal Thailand Vietnam Forces, Cobra Division, and Black Panther Division would occupy the camp. Strategically located in the boundaries of the Binh Son Rubber Plantation, the base was a thorn in the side of the guerrilla element of the Communist National Liberation Front (NLF), more commonly known as the Viet Cong (VC). The VC had owned the Mekong Delta since 1963, and considered

the Plantation to be their personal territory; even establishing Rest and Relaxation (R&R) camps for North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and VC officers. The main reason the communists felt so confident was that The Binh Son Plantation was still in operation by the Michelin Tire & Rubber Company. The United States had agreed to pay one hundred fifty dollars for each tree we damaged. Needless to say the VC had no such idiotic agreement and thus no restrictions; if they happened to blow up a tree the US was held responsible. As a way of letting the Allies know they weren't pleased with their presence Bearcat was the target of frequent mortar and rocket attacks as well as probing ground attacks by local VC sappers.

When the convoy pulled in to Bearcat the MPs who had been escorting us began to direct traffic, and it wasn't long before we unloaded onto an open area where we milled around, smoking and gawking at the strange new sights. There were sandbagged bunkers around the perimeter, and some sandbagged wooden buildings scattered around within eyeshot, along with some sandbagged tents. After a few minutes several sergeants came around and arranged us into a loose formation. They told us to have our orders ready and as I pulled mine out of a leg pocket of my BDU's, I glanced over at John. For the first time the portent of his decision to tag along with me seemed to register. What should he do now he wondered? I shrugged and told him to just play dumb, tell them his orders were misplaced, and maybe they would cut him a new set. This seemed to be the answer he wanted and that's how it went. The sergeant who looked at our orders wasn't concerned about John's lack of orders; he smiled and said the Army could screw up anything. The returning soldiers were sorted out from the FNGs, then we were directed to a tent that was sandbagged on all sides with corner posts holding a roof made up of

sandbags and what looked like oblong wooden boxes. The tent contained rows of cots with mosquito nets. John and I were directed to drop our duffle bags and other gear onto the wooden floor and slide them under the cot. We then slung our M-16s over our shoulders. The sergeant told us we would begin training the next morning, but for now we could walk around the area and get some chow at the mess hall. He said there were hardened positions nearby and if a mortar attack were to occur we should get under cover right away. The roof over the tent and sandbagged sides were designed to keep us from becoming first round casualties, but quick relocation to a hardened bunker was a must.

We asked for directions to the mess hall and found they were serving C Rations. I wanted to find the Post Office and PX so we got directions and visited both. I bought cigarettes and stationery at the PX, then learned from a Post Office clerk that outgoing mail did not require postage when mailed in a war zone. I saw some of the soldiers from the convoy gathering near a muddy pond and went over for a closer look. There was a platform that could be reached via a set of steps made from boards nailed to one leg of the platform. The water hole was spanned by a heavy rope tied to the platform at either side of the pond. Scuttlebutt had it that the training schedule had been moved up and that the first phase would be a hand over hand trip across the water via the rope. This was not good. I harkened back to BCT and the trouble I had with the parallel bars. In addition I couldn't swim, and although I expected that the water was shallow, I didn't know that. A sergeant appeared and told us that if anyone wanted to volunteer for guard duty they could go back over to the tent and get some sleep before dark. One of the first rules in the Army is to never volunteer for anything. I stepped right up and told the sergeant I would be happy to pull perimeter guard, and so would John.

Perimeter Guard Duty

We were roused from a deep sleep about an hour before dark, and loaded into a three-quarter ton truck. The truck dropped off three troops at each of the bunkers along the perimeter. The bunkers were constructed of layers of sandbags and the more experienced guys warned us that they tended to be havens for mice, rats, spiders and even the occasional rat hunting snake. There was a raised sandbag tower\booth on top of the bunker that afforded a better view out over the berm and into the no mans land beyond the concertina wire. There were claymore mines located in the concertina wire with an electrical wire running back to a detonator located in the bunker. One of us was supposed to be either in the bunker looking out the firing slit, or up in the booth. The other two could get some sleep. I wasn't very sleepy so I went for the first two hour stint in the tower. The sergeant of the guard went over the items in the tower and instructed me on what I needed to know about them. I would pass the information on to the guy who relieved me. The most important rule was to not smoke while on watch, the flare of the cigarette would degrade my night vision for several minutes after each puff. If I needed to smoke when not on watch do so below the level of the berm so the flare of the match and glow of the cigarette wouldn't attract the attention of any VC scouts lying in weeds outside the perimeter. They had been known to fire a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) at the glow from a cigar or cigarette. There were some hand held flares and a field telephone on the floor of the tower. I checked the flares and learned that two were red and two were green. The red were to signal a ground attack and the green were to signal a false alarm. At one point in time a green was used to signal an all clear after a mortar

attack, but it was soon learned that the VC figured this out and would pause a mortar attack until the green flare went up and then start up again. There were crude field phones that had to be cranked with a handle that would send a small current to the remote phone. This current moved an “eye” on the phone from hooded to an exposed position, alerting the receiver that a call was coming through. We were to call back to the main post every so often as a safeguard against the whole crew falling asleep at the same time. There was an M-60 machine gun mounted on a tripod in the bunker, but we were told to not shoot off the flares or fire the gun unless we called back to headquarters and got specific permission. I guess it wasn’t unusual for green troops to get excited and shoot at shadows.

If we didn’t call in a timely manner someone would come out to check on us and our asses would be had if they found all of us asleep when they got there. The only acceptable reason for not calling in was a faulty phone or connection. The last thing he told us was that there are gecko lizards native to Vietnam who made a mating call that sounded remarkably like someone saying “Fuck you.” After the sun went down the lizards would sit out in the dark and grunt this sound back and fourth, so it was vitally important for someone to warn the FNGs to expect it. Otherwise it would be natural to assume Charles was out there messing with our minds.

The night passed without any problems, the VC left us alone for once, although I foolishly violated one of the cardinal Bearcat rules by sleeping on the sandbags outside of the bunker. We were supposed to sleep in a hardened position at all times so as not to become first round casualties in a mortar attack, but I wasn’t crazy about lying down in a damp bunker with rats running over my feet. If a vehicle came down the road I would get

up and stand inside the bunker door until it passed. The next morning saw the beginning of the promised training, but first we were introduced to an important new item.

Anti Malaria Drugs/Disease Preventions

Disease could take a soldier out of action more quickly than an enemy bullet. Although we had been inoculated against such diseases as bubonic plague and small pox before we left the states, the first hard and fast rule was the taking of Chloroquine-Primaquine pills (CP Pills), an anti malaria drug. We should have been issued anti malaria drugs at Fort Ord, but of course that didn't happen, so my first dose was at morning chow on the first day of training. There is no cure for malaria, but drugs have been developed to lessen the effects of the disease once it is contacted. Malaria is carried by the female mosquito and is one of the biggest killers in this part of the world. Since mosquitoes tended to swarm after dark it was especially important to use a good mosquito net at night. We were issued insect repellent in a two ounce bottle which was often carried in the band of a helmet. Some of the veterans told us it was not recommended when in the field since the scent could be picked up by the VC, but I never verified whether that was fact or myth.

It was said that if chloroquine was taken at morning chow on Monday, one could expect to have the trots until Wednesday and then stay plugged up until the next Monday. I may have had some mild negative side effects, but I never contracted malaria.

Field sanitation is another critical area of health concern. A soldier who had dysentery was knocked out of action, no less than a soldier with a bullet wound. We were issued Halazone tablets to add to our water, two to four tablets per canteen full of water, depending on how dirty the water was. We were told to shake the canteen vigorously and then wait a half hour for the chemicals to purify the water. These tablets gave the water a horrible iodine taste, and we learned to add pre-sweetened Kool Aid to help combat the taste.

Drinking dirty water was not the only way a disease could be contracted, Vietnam was a wet country and the Mekong Delta was crisscrossed with waterways of all sizes. The main problems were leptospirosis caused by bacteria, and schistosomiasis caused by parasitic worms. Leeches, while not venomous, caused slow healing ulcers and had a horrific habit of crawling up inside a soldier's penis, blocking the flow of urine. Emersion foot, caused by not being able to keep ones' feet dry was a major problem; while fungi related diseases such as athletes' foot, and ringworm were also a threat. The Army manuals' solution to these threats was to not swim in water unless it had been treated by chlorine and to swim only at beaches. This was incredibly naive when the actual combat conditions of Vietnam was taken into account

The Reliable Academy

The 9th Infantry Division had been in Vietnam since 1966, and by the time I arrived on 29 September 1968 the problems created by a steady flow of ill trained replacements were all too evident. The original 9th Infantry troops had trained together and were mostly

Regular Army. Since the length of an Army tour in Vietnam was twelve months the original contingent had rotated back to the states. By 1968 there were more than 536,000 soldiers stationed in Vietnam, the majority of them citizen soldiers who had been inducted through the draft. The inadequate training received in the stateside AIT programs was producing green troops who were a hazard not only to themselves, but to the combat veterans as well. The casualty rate among the FNGs had reached a point where the 9th's leaders felt they had no choice but to take the initiative to train the newcomers in the survival skills they would need. Thus every soldier under E-6 who came into the 9th Infantry was subjected to two weeks of intensive classroom and hands on training called The Reliable Academy; a name derived from the division nickname, The Old Reliables.

The school consisted of both classroom and hands on training. On the first morning we were directed to a tent classroom where there was a stage with a podium, and rows of benches for the students. No attention was paid to rank or MOS, it had been proven by the Tet experience that this was a war without front lines, and that any soldier could be called on to confront the enemy up close and personal at any time. The instructors were sergeants E-6, E-7 or E-8 who were on their second or third tour of Vietnam and, in theory, could speak from experience. The lessons varied from social skills that the ugly American would need to know in order to cohabit with the civilians in this foreign land, to weapons theory to deal with the less social populace. While there was a lot less chicken shit than in the states, the military requires a uniform. Because we had been moving around so much in a short time it was not possible to get my soiled clothes into the laundry. This resulted in my being forced to wear the tee shirts my mother had dyed

with what Rit Dye called olive drab. One of the first classroom courses was on Vietnamese culture, which differed greatly from what we were accustomed to. For instance it was not unusual to see two men walking down a path while holding hands. Of course we associated hand holding with sexual attraction. In Asian culture this activity is no different than one Western man placing his arm around another's shoulder in a show of brotherly fondness. They had other, less endearing habits, as well. For instance, we would learn that it was not unusual for a male to continue to walk along while simultaneously producing his penis and urinating off to one side.

The sergeant in charge of the instruction pointed to me and said, "You, in the pea green shirt, where do you call home?" I told him I was from Detroit, Michigan. He turned to one of the other instructors and said, "Well, we don't have to teach him anything about killing people do we?" Then he became serious and said to try and imagine that the U.S. was a communist country, and as an average citizen I only knew what the propagandists wanted me to know. How would I react to being told that an enemy had invaded Florida and was determined to rape and murder all the way to Michigan? I told him that if I was in the Army I would want to get down to Florida to try and stop them. This was exactly the correct answer. The Vietnamese had been at war for centuries, repelling attacks from the Cambodians and Chinese, being colonized by the French until WWII when the Japanese took over. Following WWII the French tried to move back in and were in turn expelled. Now the North Vietnamese saw the US as just another invader to be defeated at all cost.

There was one instructor who stood out because of his high pitched voice, which became a falsetto when he got excited and wanted to make a point. We entertained

ourselves between classes shouting in falsetto imitations of his lectures. In reality he was no one to mess with, he was a combat veteran who really knew his stuff and if one could get past the incongruous voice the lessons were priceless. One of the lessons he taught was on the terrible danger involved with cohabiting with the indigenous women. The US Army medical corps had an epidemic of venereal disease in Vietnam. In theory the contraction of these socially communicable diseases could result in company grade punishment, but because of a male dominated system and a "boys will be boys" attitude this rarely occurred. One solution to this epidemic was available through the routine issuing of condoms, but for some reason the leadership just looked the other way and pretended the problem didn't exist. A second, more insidious problem was when the individual was tempted into sin by a VC sympathizer. The role of these women was not to infect the American soldier with gonorrhea, (commonly called a dose of the clap); they wanted to kill or maim him. One inventive and horrific technique was to bend a bottle cap around a single sided razor blade and then insert it into her mouth, or vagina. To get the more cautious trooper, the blade could be held between the fingers, or inserted into a pineapple on a stick. I thought back to the ride here on the convoy, there had been women in conical hats offering pineapple on a stick to the troops as we hustled down the road. I never accepted this offering during my tour based on what I learned in this training.

Another technique used to discourage us from being promiscuous, was the propagation of what has since been exposed as a myth. But at the time we believed in the tale of the terrible Black Syphilis. We were told those unlucky souls that contracted this unspeakable form of syphilis would have their member turn black and eventually rot off. The victim would be listed as Missing in Action (MIA) and there were a couple of places

where the afflicted were sent for the rest of their pitiful lives, either an island in the pacific or a hospital ship, depending on who was telling the story.

The last caveat on cohabiting with the Vietnamese women was an early version of the suicide bomber. This deadly lady was a woman who had the Black Syphilis or some other fatal disease, and decided to take a GI with her to Hell. This evil witch would encourage the unsuspecting victim to put his member out the zipper of his BDU trousers so she could give oral pleasure, then she would grab a hand grenade off the soldiers pistol belt and kill them both.

There were quite a number of other unusual dangers for us to watch out for, crushed glass in food, poisons in liquids, and of course the ubiquitous booby traps which could consist of almost anything. The rule of thumb was to not get in too big of a rush, and that if something looked out of place or didn't fit the terrain or the situation, don't touch it.

Weapons Training

In addition to the classroom training we had hands on training with almost every man portable and stationary mounted weapon that we could possible encounter. We fired M-16 Rifles, M- 60 Machine Guns, M-2 Fifty Caliber Machine Guns, M-72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAW), and M-79 Grenade Launchers. We set up and set off M-18 Claymore mines, and learned the care and use of TNT, Detonation Cord and C-4 explosives. Homage was also paid to the identification and proper use of fragmentation, concussion, incendiary, white phosphorus, smoke and CS grenades. Much to my chagrin the latter was used to gas my poor ass . . . again.

The M-16A1 Automatic Rifle

You may recall that I was sent overseas without qualifying with an M-16. I didn't know whether or not to bring this up when we reached the portion of the training, so I took the safest route and remained mute. The way the instructor started from the very basics of what materials the rifle was constructed I figured there were most likely quite a few of us in the same boat. He no doubt knew if he was telling us something we already knew, fine, if not then we really needed to learn all we could about our primary means of offense and defense in a combat situation. The M-16A1 automatic rifle was derived from the Colt AR-15. Firing a 5.56 x 45 MM NATO round, the rifle is a lightweight, air cooled, gas operated, magazine fed, shoulder or hip fired weapon designed for either automatic or single fire through the use of a selector lever. The weapon has a fully adjustable rear sight and either a three prong or bird cage flash hider. There were a couple of main points about the M-16A1. One was that due to design flaws and lack of user education on cleaning it had a tendency to jam with only a small amount of dirt in the chamber. Second, the lightweight nature of the composite stock and forearm, coupled with a high muzzle velocity, precluded firing all but short bursts when on full automatic. Any more than a three round burst would cause the barrel to climb to a point where the rifle was being fired into the air. The rule of thumb was first round foot, second torso; third head, fourth, squirrel hunting, fifth and beyond duck hunting. When the instructor was satisfied we knew what we needed to know, we moved over to a sort of rifle range where there were narrow lanes separated by dirt revetments held up with pierced steel planking (PSP) which was then covered by a couple of layers of sandbags. Looming over

the arrangement was a tower where sergeants could look down into the lanes. First we established a zero with the rifle at twenty five meters. Once we had a good shot group, we began the auto rifle portion of the training. It was explained to us that the lanes were surrounded by vegetation out of which pop up targets would appear at random. Some would be full height, and some would simulate kneeling ambushers, while other targets consisted of only a head and shoulders popping out of a spider hole. We would be issued three magazines of ammo and given a time limit to complete the course. If we took too long or ran out of ammo before we completed the course, we would be considered to have failed. If we came out on time and had at least one round left we would be rated on how many targets we located and put down. We were to set the selector on full auto since this was an auto rifle qualifying exercise.

The first thing I did when I was handed the three magazines was to strip the rounds out and count them. As I suspected there were sixty cartridges. I carefully reloaded all three magazines with eighteen rounds each, placing the remaining six in the side pocket of my left leg. I noticed that others were also reloading the magazines, but I didn't observe anyone else holding back a few rounds. Another thing I failed to notice was that John was not hanging around nearby. He was such a shadow most of the time I didn't have to look for him; often he was within eye shot when I came out of the latrine. At any rate there was nothing I could do for him here, I needed to concentrate on my own business. When my turn came, I walked just inside the lane, peering into the shadows as I loaded a magazine, put the selector on auto and released the safety. In just a couple of steps a full body silhouette target made to look like a VC with a terrible snarl on his face popped up right next to the trail. Even though I was prepared my sphincter loosened

slightly and a thrill shot up my spine. Nevertheless, I swung the barrel around and fired a long burst, too long of course, and the rifle climbed as advertised. I cursed and vowed to be more disciplined. I moved slowly but steadily down the twisting lane, sensing more than hearing the targets pop up, sometimes left, sometimes right, sometimes at some distance to the front and sometimes behind me. I moved and fired, my head swiveling, not wanting to fail to kill every target I saw, just in case I missed seeing any. I didn't know if that would count against me or not, but I couldn't worry about that at the time. When I reached a cleared area at the end of the lane, I racked open the chamber and removed the magazine as we had been instructed. This was the third magazine, so I reloaded the round I had ejected along with the six from my pocket. A sergeant with a stop watch greeted me as I exited the sandbagged area. He checked the watch and took the magazines, noting that one of them held cartridges. I don't know final score, but I qualified as a Marksman with an Auto-Rifle Bar.

The M-60 7.62 MM & M-2 (Ma-Duce) .50 Caliber Machine Guns

The M-60 was a lightweight, air cooled, disintegrating metallic link-fed, machine gun that fired a 7.62x51 MM NATO round. The weapon featured fixed head space which permitted rapid changing of barrels to prevent overheating. It had a maximum fire rate of 550 rounds per minute of ammo fed from a 100 round bandoleer. It could be shoulder, hip or underarm fired, or from a built in folding bi-pod. I would later become familiar with the M-60D, an aircraft door mounted variation that featured spade grips and ring pull triggers. We first fired from the bi-pod so we could get a feel for the recoil and rate

of fire. Then we were allowed to fire a bandoleer from the shoulder and hip positions. I found it to have tolerable recoil, but the weight was more than I would have cared to deal with on a regular basis. My accuracy was acceptable from the bipod, but degraded once I had fired from the hand held positions due to arm fatigue. We were not rated on this weapon, at least I wasn't and I assume the 11B's had qualified in the states.

The M-2 Browning machine gun is a WWII era automatic, disintegrating metallic link belt fed, recoil operated, air cooled, crew served, machine gun. It is equipped with a leaf type rear sight, flash suppressor and a spare barrel assembly. Due to its weight it is only hand portable for short distances and is normally fired from a fixed position, or vehicle mounted. With a small adjustment it can be fed from either the left or right and if solidly mounted is accurate out to 1,000 meters. I found it to be an awesome weapon with a massive report and a slow cyclic rate that made for *a boom-boom-boom* cadence as it fired the asparagus length cartridges and half inch bullets. We fired the M-2 from a fixed sandbagged position at a group of sandbags and it really tore them up on impact. As with all of the automatic weapons I fired in the 9th Infantry school, every fifth round was a tracer which helped me walk the rounds onto the target.

The M-72 Light Antitank Weapon & M-79 Grenade Launcher

The M-72 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW) was a lightweight, self contained, anti armor rocket, packed in a launcher. It was man portable, could be fired from either shoulder and was issued as a single round of ammo. A tubular telescoping case was made of plastic-impregnated fiberglass and was meant to be disposable. Experience proved this

to be a poor practice however since the VC tended to turn anything that was carelessly discarded into a booby trap. The inner tube was made of aluminum, making it a waterproof weapon ideal for the tropical climate in Vietnam. It is an open chambered weapon and has no recoil. It needs 10 meters to arm and has a back blast cone of 40 meters. Damage to equipment or serious injury to personnel can occur if within the back blast area. We fired this weapon at a wooden structure from an area with a sandbagged backstop to preclude anyone from getting too close to the back blast. I found it to be an easy to use, accurate weapon with devastating power when fired into the wooden structure.

The M-79 40MM Grenade Launcher is commonly known as the blooper or thumper because of the sound it makes when the grenade leaves the barrel. It is a single shot, shoulder mounted, break barrel weapon firing a spherical 40MM diameter grenade, in a choice of high explosive (HE), double aught buck, smoke, CS gas or flares, loaded directly into the breech. It had a large flip sight situated halfway down the barrel and a basic leaf sight at the end of the barrel. I found it to have a fairly heavy recoil, somewhat mitigated by a rubber recoil pad mounted on the end of the stock. We were handed one grenade and loaded it in the presence of a sergeant who pointed out the distant target. I had no idea how to aim so I just closed the barrel, aimed into the air and fired off a round. It must have sailed some distance past the target since I got a strange look from the sergeant when I handed the weapon back to him.

The M-18 Claymore Mine

The M-18 Claymore Mine was a directional fragmentation mine eight and one-half inches long, one and three-eights wide, three and one-quarter inches high and weighed three and one-half pounds. It contained 700 steel spheres of about the size of # 4 buckshot and one and one-half pounds of C-4 explosive initiated by a #2 blasting cap. Primarily a defensive weapon, it could be employed in an offensive mode in an ambush situation. The effective blast area was a fan shaped pattern in a sixty degree arc and a radius of 100 meters. The back blast was 16 meters. It was equipped with two scissors like feet on the bottom and had “Back” embossed on one side and “Front towards enemy” on the other. Our training on the use of the M-18 Claymore was very basic. We were shown an unarmed training mine and then we taken over to a spot and shown a live mine placed on end and mostly covered with a pile of wood. We then went behind a pile of sandbags and the sergeant hit a detonator. After a minute or so we were allowed to stand up and look over the sandbags. The boards were gone, not a sliver was left in sight, anywhere.

TNT, Detonation Cord/M-112 C-4 Plastic Explosive

The course on explosives was set up as an outdoor classroom with benches located under a tin roofed canopy instead of the usual tent. Although I didn’t record his name the sergeant in charge of the training was another one who left a lasting impression on me.

When he spoke he enunciated each word slowly and carefully so there was no doubt as to what he was saying. He told us about the different explosives and how they could be used. Most of them were safe until they were armed with a fuse of some type. He set a chunk of M-12 C-4 plastic explosive on fire to show us that not only would it not explode when on fire, it made a great fuel for heating C-Rations. He showed us a ten or twelve foot length of what looked like cord but was really a plastic covered compressed powder explosive called Penitrite. The cord itself is commonly known as Primercord or Detonation Cord (Detcord for short). The sergeant proceeded to string the Detcord between two posts set in front of the classroom. As he stretched out the rope like material, he narrated a story about how he promised his mother-in-law that he would put up a clothes line for her, and here it was. He attached a fuse to one end of the cord and lit it with a Zippo lighter. He casually strolled back to where he had been standing in front of our group when with a loud *Bang*! The cord disappeared. He explained that Det Cord could be used for purposes such as cutting down trees to prepare a landing area for a helicopter, cutting the pylons under a bridge, or detonating other explosives.

While he was talking to us he took a block of Trinitrotoluene (TNT), packed a hunk of C-4 around it and then wrapped Det Cord around that. He stopped talking and looked intently back into the classroom. He pointed back to the rear and told someone to “Poke that guy in the ribs!” I was seated with John in the front row and had to crane around to see who he was referring to. A buck sergeant was the subject of his attention. Apparently the sergeant had fallen asleep, which did not please our instructor. He asked what the Hell the offender thought he was doing, setting an example like that, to which there was a reply that the sergeant was on his second tour and wasn’t impressed by this 9th Infantry

School business. The instructor said that if this character knew so damn much that he should be up there with him. Accordingly he had the buck sergeant join him, and then he handed over the ball of explosives along with a detonator. He instructed the offender to walk back behind a sandbagged area located to our front, pull the cord on the detonator, set the ball down on the ground and then walk slowly back. If he ran back he would do it again until he learned to walk. We watched with great interest while the buck sergeant reluctantly performed the assignment. When he was part way back the instructor joined us under the tin roof. There was a huge explosion and mud flew fifty feet into the air, coming down in a sheet over the area, drenching the smartass in filth while leaving those of us under the roof clean and dry. Later I figured out that this was staged, they were both most likely trainers and took turns being the teacher and the sleeper.

This lesson culminated in a hands-on experience where I somehow managed to perform the usual bone headed deed that got negative attention. We were given a block of C-4 and a detonator. The sergeant showed us how to use a crimping tool to close the C-4 around the end of the fuse on the detonator, and then he reached over and hooked the tool onto the front of my load bearing equipment (LBE). I don't know if I zoned out at that point because of fatigue, or what, but as I was crimping the detonator I realized that he was hollering at me in outrage. His eyes were standing out of their sockets and the veins in his neck were prominent as he asked me who had told me to use the tool. I looked around and for the first time realized that everyone else had used their teeth to crimp the detonator as he must have told them to do. I flashed back to BCT and the horse shoe pit, the front porch of the barracks in AIT; just another disappointing moment with a sergeant marking me down as dud. The point of the exercise was for us to walk single file down a

path to a sandy area with depressions in the sand set at equal distances apart. We were to pull the pin on the detonator, set the block of C-4 down on the sand and then step back into line. If the detonator did not fire the fuse, we were to replace the pin and try again. Only when all of the fuses were lit and the blocks in place were we to right face and walk slowly away from the area. The detonator worked on a friction principal, pulling the pin would rub across a flint striker much like a cigarette lighter. I almost threw my elbow out of place pulling the pin and to my relief the fuse began to burn merrily. I set down the explosive, stepped back and then looked down the row to see what else was going on. A couple of others had misfired and were reloading, so I gauged the remaining length of the fuse and was gratified to see it was burning very slowly and had a long way to go. I tried not to make eye contact with the sergeant, but I could feel his eyes burning into me as he no doubt expected to find me fumbling with the pin on the fuse. When everyone had their fuse lit and explosive placed we walked slowly back. Since I was first in line on the way back I made sure to stroll nonchalantly. After we were well away the initial explosions could be heard, first in a staccato burst and then a couple of much delayed bangs with the last explosions coming after we were all the way back to the training area.

We were then instructed in the use of various types of hand grenades, including the aforementioned M-61 fragmentation grenade and shown demonstrations of the effective employment of concussion, incendiary, white phosphorus and smoke grenades. We then experienced a practical application of the CS Grenade during CBR training.

Hand Grenades

The word grenade is most likely derived from the original shape, which resembled a pomegranate. Early grenades were metal balls filled with black powder, employed an external fuse and did not fragment to any great extent. There were several types of grenades employed in Vietnam, the most popular being the M-61 Fragmentation Grenade. This grenade is the same one I described in the BCT section of this story, with one important addition, the jungle clip. Although never a design intent the grenade arming lever has long been used as a convenient carry hook when clipped over web gear. Experience in Vietnam showed that jungle growth had an unfortunate tendency to snag hand grenade safety pins. The jungle clip was used as a secondary back up safety device, clamping the arming lever to the grenade in the event the pin was accidentally pulled.

While Fragmentation grenades are often employed during offensive operations, they propel fragments farther than they can be thrown, so the thrower needs cover or a defensive position. Thus these are sometimes called defensive grenades. Another type of hand grenade is the Concussion grenade. These grenades have no significant fragmentation value, instead relying on the blast of their explosive filler. Their small casualty radius allows use while advancing, thus these are also called offensive grenades. While there may still be incidental fragmentation from the casing, the primary value of a concussion grenade is when it explodes in an enclosed space, such as a bunker. The shock waves can rupture an ear drum and disable an adversary without lethal force. Incendiary grenades and white phosphorus grenades contain thermite, phosphorus or a similar burning agent. While sometimes used to create smoke, in Vietnam they were most

often employed against personnel or to destroy the grass hooches commonly used by the VC. Smoke grenades produce smoke for concealment or signaling. In Vietnam they were used to mark a target so another asset such as artillery or Air Cavalry could shoot up the area. The smoke isn't harmful to humans or animals, although its aroma is not pleasant. Unlike the baseball shape of M-61 Fragmentation and M-67 Concussion grenades, the M-14 Thermite grenades were a red canister, with black markings; the M-18 Colored Smoke grenades were OD Canisters with a colored top (Yellow, Red, Green, Violet); M-25 CS canisters, also known as Riot Gas, had a light gray body, with a red band & markings; while the M-34 White Phosphorus canisters had a light green body, a yellow band, and red lettering.

CBR Training

It seemed that no training regimen would be complete unless it included torturing me with riot gas. Although the VC had not employed Chemical, Biological or Radiological weapons in Vietnam, the US and their allies routinely used CS. Apparently the US military doctrine was to be prepared for the prospect that roles could be reversed. As with the other training at Reliable Academy the emphasis was on practical application. Effectively, they let us gas ourselves. This procedure was carried out in a long narrow thatched grass enclosure typical of what the indigenous populace would use. There was a small door on the entrance side and a big door for the exit. We were lined up single file and marched into the hooch. One of the leading squad members would have a CS grenade hanging from his LBE. Once inside a trainer, who was wearing a gas mask, would "accidentally" pull the grenade from the victims LBE, pull the pin and toss the grenade

onto the floor. At that point we were to wait for a count of ten, holler out “Gas” and briskly march out of the bigger door. The size of the door allowed for some jostling and confusion, without excessively backing up the line. The hooch was porous and the gas leaked out in all directions so it wasn’t as bad as it had been in more solid enclosures, but it still produced the same horrifying effect. Once outside we were guided by gas mask wearing trainers to an area free of gas to recover. I wrote home complaining that I had been gassed *again* and wondered not for the first time who the real enemy was anyway. We were told that the VC would urinate on a cloth and hold it over their faces as a crude gas mask, but thankfully this was my last experience with CS so I never had to resort to such extreme measures.

Helicopter Training

On the morning of 7 October 1968 we were loaded into deuce and a-half’s and were hauled out to an airfield where six Huey C-Model helicopters were arranged in a line. We off loaded from the trucks and were broken up into squads of eight. A sergeant walked us around the aircraft pointing out the danger of the tail rotor and told us that if the rotors were cranked up it was a good idea to crouch a little to make sure we remained under the spinning blades. We practiced crawling on board and getting back off a couple of times, and then the choppers were cranked up and we lifted off and flew out over the airfield at a fairly high speed, but only for a relatively short distance. It was 123 degrees Fahrenheit that day and the air blowing through the open doors was heavenly. The helicopters flew in line formation, and then flared while losing altitude and coming to a hover a couple of

feet off the ground. The door gunner and crew chief motioned for us to exit, which we did by dangling our legs out the door until our feet touched the skids and then we hopped to the ground, ran in a crouch for a few yards, and then laid down on the ground facing out away from the helicopter. After the choppers lifted off we grouped into squads again. The Hueys circled around and came back in, repeating the landing sequence while we reentered the aircraft. This was repeated several more times, then the choppers returned to the airfield where we formed back up into a platoon size unit, boarded the trucks and headed back to the training area. I knew I was headed for a Cavalry unit and thought this was the kind of operations I would most likely be involved in, so I appreciated the hands on training. It made the concept less frightening when I was given a chance to become familiar with the physical activity, reassuring myself that I had what it took. Of course I still had to learn how I would react when I did this under fire, but that seemed as if it would come soon enough.

Work Details

Of course, this being the Army, there were work details. On one occasion I was grabbed for a detail involving cleaning the 9th Infantry Commanding General's Quarters. Because of the critical nature of the task the same sergeant who taught the explosives portion of the weapons training personally supervised the cleaning. I was the mop man, so I was leaning on the mop waiting for the broom man to finish up. Enunciating everything he said very slowly and clearly, the sergeant said to the broom

man, “Let me show you how I want this done.” The sweeper replied “I know how to sweep.” I don’t know what possessed him to say that, but he did. The sergeant then said “Well, then I guess you know how to mop too!” He looked over at me and said, “You can leave.” I dashed out of the door and doubled timed all the way back to the tent.

I wasn’t so lucky on the KP detail. It was the usual long sixteen or seventeen hour day, but the work was easier than BCT or AIT since there were Vietnamese women washing dishes and scrubbing the pots and pans. A second reason the detail was less physical was that there were a lot more American KPs than there would have been back in the states. Three-quarters or better of the platoon was assigned to this KP detail, spreading the work load out so we could move at a semi leisurely pace, and still get everything done. I was running a potato peeling machine that more or less bumped the skin off of the potatoes. All I had to do was dump in a bag of spuds, wait until a timer buzzer went off, then open a door and let the peeled spuds fall into a tub. The tub was then picked up and taken away by a Vietnamese, and I started the process again. At some point I stepped out for a smoke and watched one of the women moving towards the garbage with a big tin can in her hand. I assumed she was going to dump something into the garbage, but it was the opposite; she dipped the can into a pile of spaghetti and used her off hand to rake the tin can full. Then she looked over at me and poked her hand into the garbage can. She retrieved a hand full, and then turned away, still looking over her shoulder in my direction while munching away on her pasta.

Another difference was the presence of what was called a KP pusher, (the term KP pusher was really a misnomer; he was there to keep an eye on the indigenous labor rather than push the GIs.) In this case it was a Sp4 who had been in one of the infantry

battalions until he was wounded in action (WIA) in an ambush. The pusher was bored and liked to talk, so we engaged in Army talk while I waited for the potato peeler to finish. After a while he disclosed that he had been wounded and looked a little sheepish when he explained that he was shot in the ass, through both cheeks, actually. The painful wound kept him out of the field for quite some time, after he was patched up at the local MASH unit he eventually went to a hospital in Japan where he got plastic surgery to close the big hole on the exit side. It wasn't the wound, painful as it was, that got him a job in kitchen; rather it was the fact that out of his entire squad he was the only one to survive the ambush. He had been walking the point when the machine gun that wounded him continued to traverse, mowing down all those behind him. He couldn't bring himself to go out anymore, so he took this crappy job. One would think that his ignominious wound would lead to a joke or two, but anyone who looked into his eyes while he talked about his lost squad would have to be pretty dumb to believe there was anything funny about it.

I only worked one other detail during this training period. I don't recall what the point of the detail was, but it involved driving metal re-bar stakes into the ground with a sledge hammer. There were several of us on the detail, but we only had one hammer so we took turns driving the stakes. When my turn came I took a couple of mighty swings, but I wasn't strong enough to guide the heavy hammer head, and snapped the hammer handle on the stake. At first the others were pissed off at my incompetence, but then it occurred to them we were done working until a new hammer was procured, and I became a hero of sorts.

Some of the guys were caught trying to goof off and wound up on latrine detail. Due to the outhouse nature of these community latrines this was a much nastier job than it would have been in a tiled latrine. The latrine itself consisted of a tin roofed wooden building with several holes cut into a raised platform. Of course there were no stalls or doors, but most everyone should have been used to this after AIT. Standing underneath the holes were cut down fifty-five gallon drums to catch the offal and paper. Periodically these drums were pulled out into the open where a mixture of diesel fuel mixed with a little JP4 was splashed on to get the fire burning. Urinals (called piss tubes) were made from 105 MM howitzer shells that had their ends cut off and then were buried in a pile of sand located over a pit. Every so often the pit would get full of urine, and would be filled in with sand, and a new pit dug. This was usually a punishment detail reserved for GIs who found themselves in trouble for reasons not bad enough to warrant company grade punishment or courts martial.

We trained or worked rigorously from before dawn till after dusk every day, then spent a good part of the night huddled in bunkers while Charles mortared and/or rocketed the base to harass us. Every so often it would cloud up and begin to rain. Often the rain was so drenching that the air seemed to have turned to water, I learned to hold my hand cupped over my mouth and nose to keep the rain from drowning me. After two weeks all of our hard work culminated in a full dress final exam. This final test was in the guise of an actual combat ambush set up in the rubber plantation.

John Doe Departs

I was allowed to return to the tent for a rest before the next phase of training. I spent some time in the latrine since the anti-malaria drug was working its way through my system, and was a little drained. When I got to the tent the orderly was looking at me with kind of a strained look on his face. Wordlessly he handed me a hand written note and left the tent. I looked at the note, and then immediately over to where John's gear should have been. I felt a shot of adrenaline as I saw that his cot was empty and his duffle was gone. The note told me he would try to get back to the 9th , but if not he would contact me through my parents when we started to get mail. I walked out where the orderly was standing smoking a cigarette, and asked if he could tell me what had occurred. He said all he knew was that a sergeant had come into the tent and located John's gear, checking the name and serial number against a sheet of paper he was carrying. He had hefted the bag and left going towards the orderly room. I had been expecting John's orders to catch up with him sooner or later, but now I felt a hollow feeling in my chest. My sidekick was gone. When I finally got to D Troop, I got a letter from John who had written my mother, and asked for my address. He told me not to worry about him, that he was stationed as an orderly in a hospital in Cam Ranh Bay, a peninsula jutting out into the Pacific coast. He said the place was considered so safe he had been issued an old M-14 in place of his infantry M-16 and the rifle stayed locked in a rack, the way they had in BCT. I was very relieved to learn he was in such a good place, and although we wrote a few more times, I never saw or heard from him again after

Vietnam. He was only gone a short time when the other guys in the platoon noticed his absence. Of course we hadn't told anyone of his real status, so I told the others he had been called home on a Red Cross emergency. Because of the personal nature of such an event, that answer kept me from having to field awkward questions.

Ambush Patrol/Daylight Position

We knew the night before that something unusual was coming, we were told to not mention anything about an ambush if we wrote home, in case the mail was intercepted. We spent some time practicing our field craft inside the base, creeping along single file down well defined paths through wooded areas, and along simulated rice paddies. We were supposed to be on the lookout for anything unusual. One occasion we were shuffling along through a muddy area when I noticed a LAW situated so the business end was sticking out between two bushes along the left side of the formation.. I looked at it as I moved along and decided it was too obvious to present a simulated threat. So I didn't do anything that would cause the patrol to drop prone into the mud. After we had all passed it without comment, a sergeant came out and raised forty kinds of Hell because none of us had reacted to the "threat." Someone spoke up and said the same thing I was thinking, that it was too obvious to feel threatening. The sergeant became even more incensed, telling us that he suspected that none of us had said anything because we didn't want to get dirty. He followed up by having us march back the way we had come and shouted, "Ambush, Get Down" forcing all of us to drop into the muddy water. That seemed to satisfy his anger, and we were allowed to continue. Now that we were all covered with

slime from head to toe, the point man started to holler “Get Down” if he so much as thought we were in a simulated danger zone. After a couple of these episodes the sergeant again got pissed off and told him to stop acting like an asshole or he would a create a new one for him This was serious business, and the trainers were trying their level best to convince us; but I suppose we were all too green to really get the big picture.

Since we expected to be up all night on the ambush patrol we had the day free to sleep and get our gear squared away. It was difficult to sleep, but I did fairly well and felt fresh when we boarded deuce and a-half’s for the trip to the daylight position. We traveled for an hour or so on a road leading southeast down through the Binh Son Rubber Plantation. It was remarkable to look down a line of trees that were so precisely aligned that when you looked at one tree it was hard to believe that there were thousands perfectly lined up in the same row. We off loaded, assembled on the side of the road, and then marched single file into the plantation for a few hundred yards. Once there we halted and the sergeants explained that this was the daylight position. It was expected that Charlie would have spies around to tell him where we were. Accordingly, we would eat and rest up here and then move into position after dark.

We hadn’t been there too long when several ragged young Vietnamese boys showed up. They attempted to beg food or cigarettes from us, telling us that their sister, who was a virgin, desperately wanted to have sex with us. This proffered tryst was called “Boom-Boom” and we allegedly only had to travel a little way to the nearest village to consummate the act. If we were not into young girls, then their mothers, (also virgins) were available. These proposals were couched in Pidgin English, alternately accompanied by either a finger thrust vigorously through a circled thumb and fore finger or by cupped

hands held an unlikely distance from their chests. These little urchins had to be watched closely, lest they dart in and snatch a pack of cigarettes or a can of C-Rations, but they didn't even come close to our weapons and other gear. They couldn't read, but they knew the letters on C-Ration cans. If we tried to give them a can of eggs with chopped ham they would toss it back telling us we were "Numba ten GI!" On the other hand anyone offering fruit was considered to be "Numba one, or beau coup good GI!"

Our platoon sergeant was the same one who taught the explosives course. He said, "If you have to shit or anything, you had better do it now." I wondered what my shit would smell like if I could go. It was finally sinking in that we were really going to do this, and my ass was so tight you couldn't have pulled a needle out with a tractor.

I was assigned as an assistant gunner in an M-60 machine gun crew. Basically this meant that I got to carry a can of ammo in each hand along with being weighed down by my rifle, grenades, and load bearing equipment. We had a pack containing a set of clothes, some canned food, our poncho and poncho liner. The poncho was a camouflage patterned rain slicker and had a camouflaged silk liner which was most welcome in the cold night air that followed the sweltering daylight weather. We had a pistol belt with two canteens, and ammo pouches containing magazines for our M-16s. When we move to the night position we would leave the pack, wearing the poncho and liner and taking only our rifles and ammo along with a couple of grenades and one canteen. The grenade types varied from one person to another, some carried two fragmentation, some one fragmentation and one white phosphorus (called Willy Peter) some one fragmentation and one smoke, and others one fragmentation and one CS. A few of the guys, me included, carried an M-18 Claymore and one fragmentation grenade.

The light was fading quickly in the trees and the Vietnamese boys slipped away into the shadows. We finished cleaning our weapons and buried any C-Ration cans we had used. I walked a distance away and urinated against a rubber tree, idly wondering if the US would have to pay a fine if the tree came down with a disease. The sergeants came around and told us to saddle up, it was time to move out.

Ambush Patrol/Night Position

We gathered up the gear we were taking to the night position and moved out in a single column. I was carrying my rifle slung over my left shoulder and a can of M-60 ammo in each hand. It was slow moving in the dark and when we crossed a small stream I had a personal disaster. As I jumped to ford the small rivulet of water, the rifle swung down off of my shoulder and stuck barrel first into the mud on the opposite bank. I quickly pulled it up and back over my shoulder, but the damage was done. My clumsy actions caused a minor domino effect behind me, but no one saw the actual screw up. I suppose they just figured I had momentarily lost my balance. I fretted about the consequences that might result from a plugged rifle barrel if we got into action, but there was really nothing I could do until we got wherever we were headed.

After what seemed like hours of toiling through the jungle growth, sweating and bitten mercilessly by mosquitoes, we reached the predetermined area. This was to be an X shaped ambush wherein our adversaries' point man would be allowed to cross the center of the X then we could enfilade the entire area. Since I was carrying a Claymore mine along with the machine gun ammo, I set both cans of ammo down, unhitched my pistol

belt and laid my poncho down on the ground next to the gunner's poncho. One of the NCOs signaled for me to follow him, and watched while I pulled out the scissor like feet and then directed me to set the mine up at the base of a tree. I checked to see that I had the mine facing the correct direction and then played out the wire back to the ambush position. All this was accomplished in the dying light and it was really dark by the time I got back to the gun. I felt around in the dark for my poncho, but all I could feel was the damp ground. I finally decided I must have laid my pistol belt on top of it and couldn't risk making a racket getting it out, so I wrapped up in my poncho liner and lay down on the left side of the gun. The gunner had opened one of the ammo cans, fed the end of belt of 7.62 through the M-60 and racked the bolt so all he would have to do was pull the trigger to open fire. The sergeant who had supervised setting up the Claymore mines was equipped with an AN\PVS-2 Image Intensification Device, commonly known as a Starlight Scope that turned the night into daylight with a green hue. He had the Claymore wires gathered together in one spot so he could use a blasting cap to ignite them all at once. The idea was that should an enemy cross into the X the sergeant would pop the Claymores which would be our signal to open fire. Of course this assumed that I could fire a rifle with a barrel full of mud. I never felt so stupid in my life. All of the dumb stunts I had pulled up to this point were embarrassing, but this one could be deadly.

After a few minutes I felt around until I got a hold of a twig and started probing the bird cage flash hider on the end of the barrel. I felt the mud loosen and pushed the twig sideways through the flash hider, using my finger to brush out the loosened soil. I tried to move so slowly that my movements would go unnoticed, but the gunner motioned that I should put my head down and try to sleep. We had a two on, two off, arraignment where

there would be one of us awake at all times. I couldn't argue and just my put head down, thinking there was no way I was going to be able to sleep under these conditions. Just about two hours later he was shaking my shoulder to signal it was my turn on watch. I remember that we had been told that the guy who was awake was supposed to be on the gun, but after he determined that I was alert he nestled his head down behind the gun and didn't offer to move. I stared into the darkness, seeing movement behind every bush and was surprised at how hard it was to keep my eyes open. Here I didn't think I would be able to sleep at all and now I was struggling to stay awake. I occupied myself poking the twig through the flash hider. I was not encountering much resistance at this point, so I directed my attention into the end of the barrel, probing gently to see how deep the mud was without pushing it down into the action. Again I used my little finger to see if I could feel how much good my efforts were yielding, but it was difficult to say for sure. I at last decided that if we actually spring the ambush, I would throw my hand grenade and concentrate on making sure the gunner had a non-stop supply of ammo for the M-60.

The night passed slowly. At the first sign of light we heard the sing-song tone of Vietnamese voices approaching. Damn it, I though we were home free and now we had some careless enemy soldiers stumbling into our trap! The word was quickly passed down to hold our fire; it was only the young kids coming to see us. It was little wonder the VC hadn't fallen into our net, it was obvious that since these kids knew where we were, everyone within miles must have known. That should be the end of this episode, but there was a sad note yet to come. It was full daylight when we picked up our gear and I went to retrieve the Claymore. When I came back the gunner had unloaded his M-60, and put the ammo back into the can. I was soaking wet from lying on the damp ground,

and I was cold all the way through to my bones. The gunner had been chosen for this task mostly because he was a big strapping fellow. This behemoth was grinning at me and holding out my poncho. It appeared he had taken advantage of my being gone to set up the Claymore to put down his poncho on top of mine to better insulate him from the cold ground. I stood staring open mouthed at him; I was stunned that someone would pull a stunt like that under those circumstances. My mind was reeling as I was weighed my options, trying to decide the best course of action, when a voice came from behind us. I instantly recognized the unmistakable slow, articulated, cadence of the sergeant. He asked if there was a problem here, and as I turned I could see that he was looking at the exchange, taking in the sneer on my antagonists face, and the soaked nature of my poncho liner. Juxtaposed with the gunners' dry clothes it told a sad story. I intuitively knew that the sergeant had deduced what had occurred. He stepped in close to the bully, telling him a stage whisper much louder than if he had shouted, that we had not seen any action this time, but the next time we just might. If so, when the shooting started I might be behind his dumb ass, and what did he suppose I was going to remember? From the contortions of his face I would say that the bully was struggling with a decision to try and lie his way out of any fault, while it was slowly sinking in that the sergeant was telling him. The sergeant continued his ass chewing, saying this was a serious, deadly situation, not some high school outing. The sergeant turned his gaze on to me, seemingly making sure I too understood what he was telling us. If the sergeant had examined my rifle he would have known that any damage I could have inflicted would have been by using my M-16 as a club.

We didn't get any sleep that day, we were going to be moving on to our permanent duty assignments and we had to pack up our duffles and clean up the area for the next group of 9th Infantry School trainees. I was destined to depart on the next leg of my journey in to the unknown. Thus far my time in Vietnam had been a whirlwind of contradiction. I had disembarked from a chartered jet expecting to jump right into combat and found Bien Hoa Airport to be no more dangerous than a stateside airport. I risked getting into trouble in order to avoid a rotten situation at the Repple Depple because I believed a stranger who told me that I was in the same crappy situation as I had been at Fort Bragg. I learned that we could not trust the supposedly friendly civilian population when my trip through Saigon occurred on a bus with chicken wire on the windows, sandbags on the floor, and an armed guard on the door. 9th Infantry School was a blend of intensity and boredom, mixing confusing and sometimes demoralizing classroom activities with brilliantly instructed and exceptionally informative teachings.

I had been inspired by a terrific sergeant and treated like a high school nerd by another enlisted man during a combat ambush patrol. I had yet to see an enemy soldier, yet I had been under fire almost nightly as the guerrilla tactics of the VC called for a shadow war. Their war meant hitting, and then running to fight another day. There were no front lines, no territory to take and hold. I was terrified, and sure that I wouldn't survive very long once I left the relative security of the training areas and sloshed out into the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta. The only thing I had been told about the 5th Cavalry was that nothing good was going to come of my assignment. As we were sorted out and most of the guys I had trained with were loaded onto the deuce and a-half's forming into convoys, I was told to sit tight, and was left pretty much alone, sitting forlornly on my duffle bag

by the side of the road. A Jeep with a wide white stripe with a thin red stripe running through it pulled up and a sergeant got out and looked around. He seemed interested in the fact that I was sitting alone and I stood as he approached. He read the name painted on my duffle, compared it to a piece of paper he produced from his shirt. Grinning brightly, he offered his hand in welcome and introduced himself. Much to my astonishment he then picked up my duffle bag, loaded it into the back of the Jeep and motioned me to get into the passenger seat. I thought I had seen everything there was to see, but it was only starting, for now I was headed off to the Cavalry. As I would later learn, the 5th Cavalry Regiment came into being as C Troop 2nd Cavalry. C/2 fought with distinction in every armed conflict the US Army participated in beginning with the Indian wars of 1856. In August 1861 all Army units were redesignated. C/2 was assigned as part of the Army of the Potomac and was redesignated the 5th Cavalry. This 5th Cavalry Regiment was eventually assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. In 1966 it was fragged off to the 9th Infantry Division as part of the "Mobile Riverine Force."

The Third of the Fifth Cavalry

The Sergeant, whose name was Richard Long, sported a grand handlebar mustache and had a twinkle in his dark brown eyes. He seemed genuinely interested in me and we exchanged in Army talk as he maneuvered out of the training area onto a main thoroughfare. He asked if I had any questions and of course I did. He provided some really good detailed answers. First of all, ever since the Repple Depple I had been a little bewildered about being assigned so far south, since every one was telling me that the 3rd of the 5th Cavalry was working in the far Northern regions of I Corps in Quang Ngai

Province, while I was being assigned to Bearcat, located in the far Southern region of IV Corps in Bien Hoa Province. The second mystery was just what a Cavalry troop was and how it fit into the scheme of things. Sergeant Long explained that in Army organization terms a Troop is the equivalent of an Infantry Company, a Squadron is the equivalent of a Battalion, with the Cavalry Regiment designation equating to a Brigade.

As it turned out the rest of 3rd Squadron 5th Armored Cavalry (usually written as the 3/5th Cavalry), A, B, C, and Headquarters Troops, equipped with M113 Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles (ACAV) and M48A3 Main Battle Tanks, came to Vietnam with the 9th Infantry Division in 1966 and fought all over Vietnam from the Mekong Delta to the DMZ. Over time they were fragmented off to various infantry units, an association which caused the 3/5th Cavalry Regiment to become known as the "Bastard Cav." Since D Troop was equipped with UH-1C, UH1D and OH-23 helicopters they took longer to organize than their armored brothers and didn't become an operational part of the 3/5th until 1 March 1967. Later that year D troop was separated from the rest of the 3/5th by being requisitioned by the 3rd Brigade of the 9th Infantry as their Air Reconnaissance Unit, thus becoming the "Little Bastards of the Bastard Cav."

Throughout history the Delta Troop of a Cavalry Squadron has been the reconnaissance unit of a Cavalry Squadron. In Vietnam D 3/5th took this concept much further, and became more of a search and destroy component although scouting was a big part of that avocation. Over time the UH-1C Hueys being employed as a gun platform were replaced by AH-1G Bell Cobra gunships, while retaining their *Crusader* callsign. Conversely, the OH-23-Raven equipped *Spooks* changed the callsign of the scouts to *WarWagons* when they changed over to the OH-6A Cayuse. The lift platoon began flying UH-1D (later

UH-1H) Hueys (know as “slicks” due to their only armament being two M-60 machine guns) and changed their callsign from the *Black Knights* to the *Long Knives*. Quite a bit of information to absorb in a Jeep ride, but he took his time driving around the base perimeter a couple of times while I chewed on this new and exciting idea. I had put in for scout back when I finished BCT, and wonder of wonders, it looked as if I was going to get what I wished for after all!

D Troop/Maintenance Platoon

On 12 October 1968 I finally arrived at the Troop Area. Sergeant Long told me his nick name was “Long Dick” and I was to call him Dick, not Sergeant Long. He took me around to the supply room to meet the guys and left me there while he lugged my duffle bag up to my barracks. It didn’t take ten minutes for me to be sorted out by the supply sergeant, he told me he had all the clerks he needed and that I would be assigned either to the Maintenance Platoon called the *Scavengers* or the Aero Rifle platoon, called the *Doughboys*. The maintenance platoon was in charge of aircraft maintenance while the Aero Rifle platoon was the infantry segment of D Troop. I just looked around as if someone might come along and save me from myself, since I knew less than nothing about aircraft maintenance and the only infantry training I had was what I picked up in The Reliable Academy. The supply sergeant picked up a field phone and made a call to the orderly room, and then he proceeded to ignore me as he went about his business. A clerk from the orderly room came in and introduced himself to me. He walked me over to the headquarters building, engaging in the ubiquitous Army talk as we walked along. The clerks and sergeants really run things in Army outfits like this one and he reassured me

that I wouldn't be put in a position where I wasn't able to function. After he processed my orders I was officially a member of D Troop. He told me when noon chow would begin to be served and pointed out the location of my barracks. I was assigned a bunk on the second floor of the Maintenance barracks. He told me to just go there and rest, that someone would come by after awhile to tell what to do and where to report in the morning. Meanwhile I was free to unpack and get my gear squared away.

I went over to the barracks and found that Long Dick had left my duffle leaning up against the wall next to a bunk with a mosquito net over it. Behind the bunk was a shelf with a rod underneath it and in front was a foot locker. I unpacked my duffle and shook out my wrinkled uniforms. I put under clothes and my toilet items in the foot locker, and my extra boots under the bunk, using the padlock from my duffle bag to secure the footlocker. I noticed that the other guys had folded uniforms, towels and such on the shelves behind the bunks so I laid mine out the same way, and set a framed picture of Ann against the wall. I leaned Buster up against the back railing on the bunk. I didn't have any sheets or blankets for the bed so I laid my poncho liner over the mattress cover and lie down. I must have fallen asleep because sometime later I awoke to a clatter of foot steps on the stairs leading up to the barracks. I sat up and observed four shirtless soldiers entering the doorway, all looking curiously in my direction. This was the group I would later write home and describe to Ann as "a motley crew." They shuffled over to where I was sitting and went about inspecting me and my gear, some more open about it than others. They were all interested in the picture of Ann I had put on the shelf, it seemed to raise my stock somehow. The leader of the squad was a fellow named Prader, a Sp4 whom I later described as "big as a bull and about as dumb." The rest of the squad

consisted of a PFC named Tony who was from the Bronx and had the accent to match. Another PFC named Pete, a Mexican-American from California who has a tendency to brag. And Frank, an African-American who was an eight month Vietnam vet and held the rank of Sp4. Due to Frank's superior time in grade and his time in Country I made a connection that he should have been in charge instead of Prader. It became evident that Frank was an easy going type and Prader was used to using his brute strength to gain control, thus he held the "leadership" position. Our official duties were to help maintain the Troop's wheeled vehicles, but we were more often employed as a labor gang.

At first I had nothing to do with wheeled vehicles other than occasionally riding in one from one work detail to another. The base was under often under attack at night from mortar and rocket fire and it was imperative that we spend portions of the day hardening our positions with sand bags and rocket crates filled with sand. Since I was a lowly PFC my first days were spent filling and stacking bags of sand and wrestling heavy wooden boxes filled with dirt. The handles of the boxes were made of rough rope that tore my hands to shreds until I developed enough callus to harden them. I had to drink water almost continuously and kept my shirt on in the blistering heat for fear of getting debilitating sunburn. One of the high points was a shower with a tank heated by the sun. I learned that it was best to either use the shower first thing in the morning or at night when I almost scalded my ass the first time I got under the water in the afternoon.

Overall I was as miserable as I had ever been in my young life. I wasn't getting enough sleep due to the motor attacks, I had a dumbbell for a squad leader, the work was back breaking, the sun was brutal, and the food was passable at best.

Tony Acerino

One of my first good buddies in D Troop was PFC Anthony Acerino. Tony hailed from the Bronx in New York and had the classic accent to prove it. Before long guys were calling him New York, pronounced the way he did “New Yuak” and he started calling me Detroit, again with the Bronx accent, so it came out “De-trot.” and pretty soon that was my nickname while I was in the maintenance platoon. Tony was a true friend who stuck by me when I got bumped around from one barracks to another and let me use his bunk with the mosquito net when he wasn’t in it himself. We shared good times and bad, and when his girl suddenly stopped writing him I asked Ann if her Sister Mary could see her way fit to write him, if only once, so he wouldn’t be so down. The first time she wrote to him she addressed it to me and I almost opened the letter before I saw the handwriting and scented the perfume. Tony was so nervous he smoked five cigarettes while reading it and at least that many more when he wrote a reply. I recently asked her if she remembered writing the letter and she said she did. I’m sure he still does as well.

Tony was in flight operations for awhile, but there was no real chance of his becoming an RTO because of his accent. Pilots wanted a voice they could recognize and understand clearly under stress, and a Bronx accent did not lend itself well to that need. After I made sergeant our relationship became strained and we didn’t see each other too much since our conversations always became stilted when he insisted on calling me “Sarge” instead of “Detroit or Kirk.” Tony had a little more time in country than I, and when he left he

didn't come to say goodbye. Tony, if you ever read this I want to say I'm sorry I missed you, and hope you are doing well.

POL Driver

My records specified that my primary MOS was 75A10, a POL supply clerk, and when Prader finally got around to looking at my orders he asked incredulously if I really had an Army driver's license. When I assured him that I did, he leered at me, and said he had a job for me; they needed someone to drive the truck that was used to refuel the helicopters as they returned from flying missions. This was a relief from filling sandbags so I took the new assignment without protest. The airfield at Bearcat was called The Roundtable. There were no permanent fuel bladders on the airfield, so I was given a requisition for a load of jet fuel, called JP-4 or Av-gas, and directed to the fuel dump. The truck itself was a deuce and a-half adapted to play the role of a tanker. It had an electric pump that moved the fuel through a series of metal lines and finally through a hose to the helicopter being refueled. This was good duty, all I had to do was drive up to the helicopter, flip the power switch for the pump, signal the crew chief, then sit back and wait. Of course the truck itself ran on diesel fuel, but in typical Army fashion I was not given a requisition for diesel fuel. I had to remind the clerk in charge of the refuel point, a harried Sp5, that I was going to be sitting in the middle of his operation with a full load of Jet Fuel, not able to move due to lack of fuel for the truck engine. We solved our dilemma by agreeing that he would fill out a requisition for diesel and then I would scribble an illegible signature on the authorization line.

I was much happier in this role. While the rest of the squad continued with their duties, including KP and perimeter guard duty, I was exempt from duty (ED). Because I had to be at the flight line at various times of the day or evening, I could sleep during the day without the first sergeant rousting me out for a work detail, and I made friends with one of the cooks, so the food improved. I got to know all of the aircraft crew chiefs, and that led to my being able to know when I could be away from the line for awhile. I used some of this time to walk to the PX where I bought a fan and an ice cooler. I could get ice from the mess hall, and I would set the cooler at the foot of my bunk and let the fan blow over it. This lowered the temperature into the high nineties so I could sleep during the afternoon. I was happy with this assignment, so I wrote home and told my folks not to worry, that I had this nice safe job driving a fuel truck. My Dad almost shit a brick. He wrote back that I must be out of my mind to volunteer for duty sitting on what was for all intents and purposes a firebomb. I showed Prader the letter, and he agreed to take me back into the maintenance platoon. Afterwards I figured out that he wasn't being all that beneficent. Since the 9th Infantry was in the process of moving to Dong Tam the helicopters would soon be landing there instead of Bearcat. The word was that Dong Tam had central refueling bladders, so D Troop wouldn't need a POL truck anyway.

In Transition

The 9th Infantry, and the rest of D Troop might have been moving to Dong Tam, but the motley crew was still at Bearcat. With the vehicles gone and no POL work to do we set about dismantling the base. The flight operations building, the orderly room, the mess

hall, and the latrine were still intact, but little else. The mess hall was down to one cook so we were on a steady diet of C rations, and the shower truck no longer delivered water so we had to wash in cold water from the potable water tanker. The barracks had been torn down and shipped to Dong Tam, so we were living in moldy, sagging tents. I had accumulated quite a bit of extra gear since I had been there, the fan and ice chest, some clothes hangers, and other stuff too bulky to stuff into my duffle bag. I assumed I would have to abandon anything I couldn't pack into my bag. Although the winter season was almost over, it rained every day and the mosquitoes were swarming, as if they knew they needed to get in their last bites before we got out of range. Our motley crew was kept busy scrapping anything that we could not take with us, but might be useful to Charles. We burned anything that would light, and buried everything else. The engineers had bulldozed a gigantic hole in the ground that served as a land fill, and we dumped truckload after truckload of tax payer dollars into the abyss. When it was pouring rain we couldn't do much outside, the ground was a quagmire and everything was coated with a thick layer of mud. We sat out the rain storms in one the few buildings left standing, flight operations. The crappy weather, combined with not knowing what was going to happen next, left me feeling slightly depressed. I inched over closer to where the radio operator had his setup, and eyeballed the configuration. The operator ignored me, continuing to read a paperback, occasionally lowering the book to speak into a handset and make notations on clipboard. The radios were mostly silent, the only traffic would have been from stray aircraft entering or leaving Bearcat, since most of the helicopters were now based at Dong Tam. I was leaning on the railing surrounding the radio area when a new, and as it turned out, significant, person entered my life.

Sergeant Larouch

Sp4 Prader was still in charge of the squad, but the flight operations sergeant, a SFC named Larouch, was in overall charge of the enlisted men still at Bearcat. Sergeant Larouch was a typical Army lifer. He was shrewd, and had a good eye for detail, especially when it will benefit him in some way. He made sure his paperwork was in good military "Cover Your Ass" (CYA) mode, while shifted as much responsibility to the lower ranking sergeants or specialists as possible. A big fleshy man, he came into the radio area from another area of flight operations, blocking out the light from the other room as he passed through the doorway. He eyed me suspiciously, and then spoke to the radio operator, an Sp4 named Geek, who murmured a response. I stood up straight, and made to move away, but Sergeant Larouch stopped me by holding up a hand, palm out, and fingers up. I looked over to the doorway in time to see the rest of the crew slipping out into the rain. Sergeant Larouch gave me a friendly grin to show I was not in trouble and asked if I was interested in the radio traffic. On an impulse I told him I'd had a little radio school training in AIT and that my secondary MOS was 05B20. The RTO looked up for the first time and asked what I was doing with the maintenance group. Feeling emboldened I told them I had come into D Troop as a supply clerk, but was rejected. I mentioned that I had an Army drivers' license which really got the interest of Sergeant Larouch, and apparently of Sp4 Geek. Geek told me they were short one qualified operator. Sergeant Larouch quickly said he didn't need anyone right now, but when we got to Dong Tam I was to tell the maintenance sergeant that he wanted to see me at flight

operations. I felt a thrill of excitement for the first time in weeks, and walked back out into the drizzly rain with a light step; right into the clutches of a roving press gang. The sergeant in charge of rounding up a work detail stopped me short, and smiling wolfishly, told me that I was needed for a project. There were a couple of other miserable looking privates already in the work crew who shrugged in resigned sympathy. Now that I was captured the sergeant motioned for his crew to enter the building where he could keep an eye on us. Once inside he spoke to Sp4 Geek, who listened silently then rose and called out to Sergeant Larouch. After listening intently for a minute or so, Sergeant Larouch quietly and firmly explained that his radio man was on duty, and with a glance in my direction, so was his runner. He explained that the land lines were not operational and that I was taking messages between flight operations and the orderly room. The press gang sergeant pointed out that I was not carrying a packet or clipboard, and thinking quickly, Sergeant Larouch told him that I was conveying verbal communication. The radio man was grinning at me and I couldn't help grinning back, further frustrating the press gang sergeant, who threw up his hands and left the way he came. He motioned for the two victims he still had in tow and called back that I should have a set of orders with me to preclude further confusion. Sergeant Larouch blithely sailed back into his office and Sp4 Geek told me to take a seat next to him by the radios. He instructed me to listen to the radios and see how much of a transmission I could pick up. I guessed this might be a test of sorts, and set to concentrating, scribbling furiously onto the scrap of paper attached to the clip board. After awhile I needed a trip to the latrine, so I told Sp4 Geek where I was headed and carried the clipboard as a sort of shield. It had started to rain harder, so I hopped into a three-quarter ton truck we had been using to haul scrap to the

land fill. Along the way I spotted Frank and offered him a ride. It seems the crew had scattered when they saw the press gang roving the area and were to regroup back at the barracks tent area. I wasn't paying enough attention to the route I was traveling and got into a really deep depression near the edge of the path. I was gunning the engine and fishtailing when Prader appeared on the opposite side of the road. He asked if I needed him to get me "Unstuck" and I said I wasn't stuck yet. I pulled the gear shift into first gear and slowly pulled free of the mud. The confused look on Praders' face, accompanied by Frank's delighted laugh forms a memory that stands out over many others. By 19 October 1968, Pete, Frank and I were the only ones left from the original motley crew. Sergeant Larouch told me that Pete was going to another section when he got to Dong Tam. This was good news, Pete liked to brag and it could get annoying quickly. The bad news was that Captain Breed decided that Frank and I weren't needed, and might as well transfer to the Aero Rifle Platoon. But good old Sergeant Larouch came through by telling Captain Breed that "Frank was to 'short' to go (meaning he only had a little time left on his tour of duty) and "Old 'Kirk' here will come in handy as a radioman." That was the first time anyone used a nickname that would become more used than my first name. I wrote home as often as I could, but there was very little to tell. There was just not much going on, and I didn't want to go on about the mortar/rocket attacks lest I worry the folks back home more than they were already.

Mortar Attacks

The base was being repopulated with Thai soldiers from the Royal Thai Cobra and Black Panther Divisions. This led to an interesting development regarding the VC mortar attacks. With the reduced number of soldiers at Bearcat the chances of a ground assault by the VC was a real risk, so we had taken to carrying our M-16's along with an extra clip of ammo with us from one spot to another, day or night. The Thais instituted patrols out into the jungle surrounding the base, leaving just before dark and coming back just after daylight. I never saw this myself, but the story was they were putting VC heads on sticks at intervals around the base perimeter as a way of saying in Vietnamese *nguh heim* meaning "Extreme danger." The number and duration of the mortar attacks decreased, so I have to believe at least some to the scuttlebutt was true.

This was especially good news since mortar attacks by their very nature are carried out from a distance; at unknown and unpredictable times and intervals. In Vietnam a mortar attack could consist of a single harassing round lobbed into an allied military base, all the way up to several minutes of pounding. These longer barrages were not only intended to demoralize, but were often meant to soften up a target prior to a general attack. The noise generated varies with the relative proximity of the explosion, but even at a distance there is a loud report, and up close the noise is deafening. It's been said the round that would prove fatal was one the victim would not hear, but I disagree, I heard plenty of explosions followed closely by the *Whack*! of shrapnel hitting solid objects some seconds later. The *Whoosh-Bang*! of the 122 MM rockets, the *Thud-Boom*! of the

mortars and the *Zing-Bam*! of the B-40 rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) are haunting sounds that you never become accustomed to, and certainly never forget.

When I was newly arrived at Bearcat a group of us were sitting on some bleachers while we were waiting to be sorted out. Without any warning there was a really loud *Thump-Whoosh!* and all of the FNG's jumped through our skins. Later, we learned the sound had emanated from an 88 MM mortar battery located on the far side of a building, out of our view. The veterans in our midst all started slightly, but didn't panic, instead they crooned "Outgoing!" When we realized they weren't scrambling for cover, we recognized our mistake and sheepishly reseated ourselves. We all chuckled in embarrassment, and the experience soldiers assured us we would learn the difference between "Incoming and Outgoing" soon enough. While this was accurate, there were times when I was driving or walking past a battery of howitzers when they unexpectedly fired a salvo and scared the living shit out of me. I might have known the difference, but the thunderous concussion still caused me to duck.

Convoy to Dong Tam

We had been warned during our time at The Reliable Academy about the dangers of riding in convoys, and I had convoyed between Tan Son Nhut and Bearcat, but this was unlike anything I could have imagined. The good news was that since there were so few soldiers left to transport to Dong Tam, we were allowed to pack our foot lockers and other gear on to the trucks. The bad news was that section of road between Bearcat and Dong Tam was supposed to be patrolled by the local units of Army of the Republic of

Vietnam (ARVN) but in fact they tried to stay off the road as much as they could. I don't suppose I could blame them since the VC would ambush them on a regular basis. The most common bushwhack technique involved blowing a bomb up under one of their vehicles and then shooting up the stalled convoy with automatic weapons fire and RPGs.

The Transportation outfits had been running small fast convoys back and forth for a quite awhile now, and the odds of getting hit were growing by the day. The truck I was on had what I had learned to call a *Ma-Deuce;* a fifty caliber heavy machine gun. This particular gun was mounted on an M-36 Truck Mount. The mount consisting of a cradle with a roller carriage on a semi-circular track located above the roof of the cab, which would allow the gun to traverse about one hundred and eighty degrees side to side. The gunner could stand behind the trucks' cab and use pressure on the spade grips to move the gun in a semi-circle. The elevation of the gun could be changed by releasing a pintle, but it was best to keep it at the set elevation to prevent depressing the barrel too far and shooting into the front of the truck. There was only a driver and dozen or so passengers on my truck and we were told to pick someone to tend the M-2. No one else seemed to be too interested so I clambered up and inspected it. There was a can of ammo sitting on the sandbagged bed of the truck, and when I lifted the lid I saw that it was filled with belted fifty caliber cartridges. Every fifth round had an orange tip indicating a tracer round. I remembered how to load the gun from The Reliable Academy, so when we were well out onto the road I opened the breech and fed the belt into the chamber. The gun was now locked and loaded, all that would be required to fire was to pull the charging bolt and squeeze the leaf trigger. I experimentally traversed the gun back and forth a few degrees, then locked the positioning lever and settled in for the ride.

There were double rows of sandbags on the bed of the truck with bags stacked three high right behind the cab, I perched on the higher level looking back towards the rear, I didn't know any of the guys on the truck and didn't feel like I wanted to. I had been in Vietnam long enough by this time to have been separated from everyone I cared about, and was content to keep to myself. We drove very fast most of the time, but every so often we would come up on a slow moving vehicle, or a civilian with a water buffalo. On one occasion the trucks stopped along the side of the road where Vietnamese women and kids swarmed the trucks offering Cokes, Ba Muoi Ba (Thirty Three brand) beer, and blocks of pineapple on a stick. I remembered the admonitions from 9th Infantry School, and ignored the sales pitches. After awhile some of the drivers who had disappeared into road side hooches came back out, and I realized they had stopped to get their ashes hauled. I wasn't interested in that either, I couldn't look at one of these women without mentally imaging the woman eating out of the garbage at Camp Bearcat.

When we reached the point in the road where we made a big curve southwest towards Dong Tam we had our first bit of excitement. We had to slow down to about twenty miles per hour, and I was sitting lost in thought, smoking a cigarette when I heard truck horns blowing and saw what I thought were green flares passing over the trucks to our rear. Someone yelled "Taking fire!" and everybody ducked down onto the sandbags. My first reaction was to duck as well, then for some reason I thought "Fuck This Noise", and stood up onto the higher bags, unlocked the traverse lever and pulled the charging handle on the big gun. What I had mistaken for flares were green tracers from the automatic weapons of the VC firing at the trucks as they made the turn. I pushed the back of the gun to the right which caused the barrel to traverse left. Once the gun was facing in the

general direction of the tracers I pushed down on the leaf triggers. I was rewarded by a satisfying *Boom-Boom-Boom-Boom* from the .50 caliber as I swung the barrel back and forth through a short arc. Spent cartridges as big as asparagus were being ejected, rattling off the top of the truck's cab. I couldn't see anyone to shoot at, but in the back of my mind I figured anyone on the receiving end of these half inch hunks of lead was going to want to keep his head down, and might not be able to fire accurately. Besides, I was thrilled, excited, scared and crazed all at the same time. My bowels felt liquid, but my butt cheeks were clinched too tightly for that to be an immediate problem. I was shouting something unintelligible and my testosterone was off the charts. Within about ninety seconds we cleared the turn, and I wasn't able to swing back far enough to fire any longer, so I relocked the traverse lever. I realized my legs were shaking so I sank back down onto the sandbags. That's when I looked around and saw the wide eyes of the rest of the passengers. My adrenaline was so high my eyes were probably just as wide, but I felt good; I had been able to put the training we received at Reliable Academy to first-rate use.

About that time we all dived for the floor since there was a shit storm going on; first on one side of the road, then the other. A Cobra gunship was making passes up and down the road, firing 2.75 MM rockets, 7.62 MM from an M-134 Minigun and grenades from a 40 MM launcher. The *Ka-Whack* of rockets pounding the trees and ground, the *Rhaaaaat* of the Minigun and the *Thud* of the grenades were monstrous; seeming to render my efforts pitiful by comparison. Some of the others gave me side-long looks, but no one seemed to know what to say, so none of us said anything until we reached the road between My Tho and Dong Tam.

As we approached the village the trucks slowed down considerably, coming to a walking speed due to the civilian traffic around the village. A first lieutenant swung up onto the rear bumper of my truck. He yelled out that he wanted to know who had been shooting the .50 when we took fire going around the curve. Everyone looked at me, so there was no point in trying to duck. Dammit, I had acted instinctively, and of course that is discouraged in this man's Army (Uncle Sam Ain't Released Me Yet). The lieutenant clambered on board, crawled over to me, and asked who had told me to fire the gun. I admitted that I had done it on my own, at which point he extended his hand, grasped mine and shook vigorously, telling me that was then kind of initiative "We" needed more of. He pulled a notebook out of his pants pocket and took down my name, serial number and the outfit I was assigned to. Then he slapped me on the shoulder and told me he was going to put me in for an award for my quick thinking. After I told him my name, serial number and unit I didn't know what else to say, so I just dumbly nodded my thanks, and offered a salute. He snapped off a salute in return as he hopped off the back of the truck and disappeared into the crowd surrounding the convoy. I tried to act cool the rest of the way, but I didn't need to ride anymore, I was floating on a cloud.

I thought for awhile that I would write home and tell someone about it, but then it occurred to me that there was no one to tell. How could anyone back home understand that we couldn't ride down a highway in a truck without someone trying to kill us? Dad was afraid for me to drive a POL truck, and yet here I was shooting a heavy machine gun at an unseen enemy from the back of a deuce and a-half. Perhaps even harder to explain was the fact that I hoped I had blown the asses clean off of the sons-of-bitchs.

Dong Tam

Dong Tam, a term which translates into “United hearts and minds” in Vietnamese, was built deep in the VC infested Mekong Delta. The US Army command did not want to displace the civilian population or share space with the ARVN. Accordingly, the base was established four miles west of My Tho, on inundated rice paddy land on the north bank of the Song River, adjacent to the Kinh Xang Canal. In 1967 The Army Corps of Engineers pumped out silt and sand to six feet, then dumped eight million cubic meters of sand and sedimentary soil over 600 acres. They increased the ground level by five to ten feet above the surrounding area to allow for changes in the tide and drenching tropical rainfall. Nevertheless, when I arrived there in late October 1968 the Monsoon rains, combined with the alluvial nature of the Mekong Delta, had combined to turn the base into a huge mud hole.

Maintenance Platoon

When I arrived at the base I was dropped off at D Troop headquarters where I dismounted the deuce and a-half into ankle deep mud. Any movement was slow and painful; the mud nearly sucked the boots off of my feet until I could get to a wooden walkway. I didn’t see anyone I knew for awhile, but at last I was told by the company clerk I would be in the maintenance platoon barracks. When I got there I was relieved to find that Tony had saved me some space. Most of the guys had been there for awhile and

were spread out more than they should have. My space was just inside a door of the barracks, and there was a lot of traffic coming and going past my bunk. Prader was his usual overbearing self and quickly let me know he was in charge. I was still a PFC, so I went out with Tony and Frank to the motor pool. The viscous mud caused all of the vehicles to become mired whenever they tried to move; only four wheel drive capability allowed any movement at all. Even then the strain placed on the transmissions, engines and drive trains left the mechanics with a daunting task keeping the vehicles running. Tony was still calling me Detroit, it sounded cute in his Bronx accent. It was hot and humid as hell and we seldom wore shirts, so in the absence of my name tag the nickname was as good as any.

As it was back at Fort Bragg, the low ranking enlisted men were treated like slaves, doing whatever work the skilled mechanics didn't want to do. I had a drivers' license, so when ever a vehicle needed to be test driven or otherwise moved it fell to me. One of the more hazardous tasks was to drive a vehicle up onto a set of ramps designed so the mechanic could work under the vehicle without using a hoist. What made it perilous was the slippery nature of the ground around the ramps. I had to get a pretty good head of steam going to get a vehicle up the ramps, which were only a little wider than the mud packed tires, and it was dicey as to whether or not the tires would skid as I hit the ramp. Once I was on top the duty was good, I couldn't get out of the truck so I just waited until the oil was changed or whatever else was being done, and then drove back down. I got in some pretty good naps perched up there, there was no way an officer or NCO was going to catch me, so I took full advantage. I guess I figured this was the best duty available, so I just settled in to the routine. Other than the nightly mortar attacks, where being close to

the door has some advantage in exiting the barracks, I was about as secure as I was going to get and still draw combat pay.

Vietnam Pay Scale/MPC

I continued to draw my pay once per month just as in the States, the biggest difference was that in addition to being paid according to rank, coupled with time in service, I now received incentive pay. At the height of my promotions I was earning E-5 pay, overseas pay, combat pay (officially known as imminent danger pay), and flight pay. The total came to three hundred ninety-five dollars and seventy cents per month. There was a further advantage in that Vietnam was a declared “tax exempt zone” and only Social Security tax was deducted. In order to avoid devaluing the local currency US troops were paid in what was called Military Payment Certificates (MPC). This script was all paper, with denominations as low as five cents. The certificates were highly stylized to prevent counterfeiting and were changed without prior notice. One day it was legal tender, the next day it was worthless paper, at least to non US military personnel. The latter was done to circumvent the large amount of MPC that inevitably fell into the hands of the Vietnamese..

One morning Dong Tam was abuzz with the news that something very strange was afoot. The local villagers who worked in the laundry or mess hall were not trucked onto the base and we were all locked down. No one in and no one out was the rule. Later in the morning we were told to gather up our MPC, we would be exchanging it for the new issue. There was one caveat; there was a limit to the amount that could be exchanged.

This created a huge stir since most everyone had a lot more that the published upper limit. The major reasons I had accumulated MPC were twofold. One, I didn't need much money to exist and didn't spend very much. Postage was free, cigarettes were cheap, I was fed and clothed by the Army and my parents sent over CARE packages with lots of goodies. Two, there was a statutory limit to how much money I could send home in Postal Money Orders each month. I suppose this was to prevent money laundering, but this being the Army, the total amount was less than my monthly pay by quite a bit.

Needless to say there was quite a bit of angst over what could be done about the excess cash, but it turned out to be not a huge concern. There was some kind of allowance for excess money won in card games and other quasi legal methods of attaining money that could be signed off by the CO. I don't remember if the senior officer's were held to the same standards as the junior officers and enlisted men, but since the CO was the one performing the certifications, I'd say probably not.

Headquarters Platoon/ Flight Operations

I thought about what Sergeant Larouch had told me about looking him up, but that seemed a distant memory now. The chances of being assigned to the infantry platoon seemed to have passed and I had settled into a routine to put in my time. That all ended when a runner from the orderly room came around to tell me that, per the first sergeant, I had to move from the maintenance platoon barracks to the headquarters platoon barracks. I didn't want to move, I was bunked in with Tony and I didn't know any of the guys from the headquarters platoon. I figured there was probably less room in that barracks than the one I was in since I would be a FNG there and probably seen as a foreigner. I had built

myself a little desk out of some short pieces of two-by-four and a scrap of plywood. It was a shabby little thing, but I ate and drank on it and used it to write letters to Ann every day.

Sure enough when I got to the headquarters barracks that night I was met with stares and muttered curses at my unwelcome presence. The guys had been there since D troop had arrived at Dong Tam and they had even built some walls between the areas. I had to go back to the maintenance barracks and get my cot, there was no place to put my foot locker, but I brought my ice chest and fan and set them up at the end of the cot. I nailed a two by twelve on the wall above my cot, and put some pictures of Ann on it. After a few minutes I almost wished I hadn't put the pictures up because they caused a stampede. Guys would come back two or three times just to stare for a minute or so. I guess I wasn't the only one who was starved for the sight of a good looking, round eyed woman.

After I got settled in I went over to flight operations (FO) or "Ops" for short. Or I should say where the FO bunker would be. The Army leadership had commissioned the Corps of Engineers to rough in Dong Tam, but the actual building of the base was left to each individual unit. At that point Flight Ops consisted of twelve Conex containers, five on each side, touching, and one each at the ends. A Conex is a big heavy Sealand freight box, about one-third the size of a boxcar, solid steel, with corrugated sides. They were left behind wherever ships unloaded them, and they were plentiful in Vietnam. There were wooden pallets for a floor between the Conex's which had the doors removed and each was used as an individual room. Sergeant Larouch was there, as was the RTO, Sp4 Geek, whom I had met at Bearcat. Sergeant Larouch was a short timer, in fact his replacement, SFC Pratt was being told his duties in anticipation of Sergeant Larouch's

departure. He said he wanted to make sure I got in before he left. I thanked him for remembering me. Sp4 Geek was to train me on the requirements of being a Cavalry RTO; but first we had some building to do. I quickly learned that when Sergeant Larouch said "we" it did not include him. Sergeant Long came around and showed me a huge stack of sand bags and an even bigger pile of mud encrusted dirt. There was a shovel sticking out of the pile, and I could guess from the angle that it had been stuck into the pile sometime back, waiting for a lowly private to get his hands wrapped around the handle. And so my assignment as flight operations RTO got off to a Fort Bragg-like beginning. I couldn't help but wonder in I had been rescued or condemned.

Sergeant Pratt

A few days after I was assigned to Flight Ops, Sergeant Larouch departed and Sergeant Pratt assumed his duties as FO Sergeant. There couldn't have been two people more different. Sergeant Larouch was tall and big but he was soft, and somewhat effeminate in his mannerisms. Sergeant Pratt was less than six feet tall, but he was square shouldered with a craggy face and unabashed male pattern baldness. He came out of Flight Ops one morning and saw me all alone, desultorily filling and stacking sand bags. I realized he was looking at me and figured I was going to have trouble. My experience with sergeants was not always positive, they usually felt I was not working fast enough or hard enough or efficiently enough. To my amazement Sergeant Pratt took off his shirt and grabbed a sand bag, which he held out for me to fill. When I was alone I had to try to balance a bag on its end while I filled it, and to just have a bag held open was a great relief. I picked up the pace now that I had good help, and we finished more

than double the amount I had filled and stacked the two or three days before. The rest of the Flight Operations crew were either E-5s or had jobs that precluded working on hardening the Conex bunker. Oddly, Sergeant Pratt had all of them outranked, yet he was the only one to join in the hard labor.

The VC had rockets that would penetrate a building's roof or walls before exploding, so it was a good idea to have an air gap between the layers of sandbags or other hard protection. In order to provide this air gap we fitted two-by-fours across the roof of the Conex boxes. On top of the two-by-fours we laid interlocking sheets of steel, called Pierced Steel Planking (PSP). I was on the ground and Sergeant Pratt was on top. I would grab a section of PSP by one end and then swing the other end up onto the edge of the Conex roof, where he would grab it and move it into position. There were powerful 10 kilowatt electric generators set at one end of the complex, with wires running all the way around. At some point I tossed a sheet up onto a bare hot wire, and felt as if my arms were being squeezed. I tried to shout, but I was unable; I just threw my head back and stared at the sky. Sergeant Pratt recognized what was happening and quickly kicked the PSP out of my hands.

One morning there were pallets of empty rocket crates that had been delivered overnight. These boxes were filled with dirt and then stacked on top of the Conex complex to add another layer of protection. This was backbreaking labor; the boxes had hemp rope for handles which quickly tore my callused hands until they bled. I tied burlap around my palms to give them some protection until they could heal and harden up again. Once again it was just Sergeant Pratt and I doing all of the hard work, and I was deeply grateful to Sergeant Pratt for his selfless assistance.

In addition to being an unassuming guy, he had a terrific sense of humor. We would make comments and tell each other jokes, and a few times we had to suspend our labor while we leaned up against the piles of sandbags, our eyes filled with tears of laughter, our arms weak with mirth. One of us had a magazine with jokes in it, and there was one rather stupid story that became an inside joke between us. It seems that there was a fella who had a rare disease for which the prescribed treatment was fresh mothers' milk. He put an ad in the local paper asking for assistance from a lactating woman. When he got a response he met the donor, and was delighted to find she was a buxom blond. She lowered her top and he commenced to nurse. After a brief period her breath was coming fast, and she asked huskily: "Is there anything else I could give you?" He raised his head and said "Do you have any cookies?" For weeks after we read that silly assed joke we would laugh till we were sick whenever someone got a CARE package from home, and asked if we wanted a cookie.

A word on what we called CARE packages might be in order here. The term CARE was derived from the humanitarian organization of that name. In my case I would write home to my parents or girlfriend telling them certain items would make my pitiful existence a little easier. My father would do a yeoman's job of assembling items and carefully packing them so the parcel could make the trip over the ocean and arrive in one piece. Favored items were canned olives, kippered herring, hard candy and packets of pre-sweetened Kool-Aid. Dad would wrap these goodies in towels, wash cloths and underwear to help protect them. Of course these practical wrapping items were also coveted, as cotton tended to rot quickly under the harsh tropical conditions. My girl Ann would also assemble CARE packages containing magazines and paperback books so I

would usually have a pretty good supply. These goodies were routinely shared, and everyone benefited. I guess it was only natural that the folks back home took a little training on what to send, and what not too. For example my mom would bake cookies which usually arrived in the form of crumbs, and my girlfriend would send packets of regular Kool-Aid. The cookie dust could be mixed with a little water and eaten as a paste, but I didn't have access to a bag of sugar, so the Kool-Aid was less useful. The upshot was that they felt as if they were contributing to the war effort in one of the few ways they could, and we certainly were grateful for the effort. Thanks to everyone who contributed.

As for my days with Sergeant Pratt, unfortunately, all good things must end, and one day Captain Breed came around and told Sergeant Pratt he was paying him to use his head, not his back. Sergeant Pratt put on his shirt and went inside. We had filled enough bags to protect one side of the Conex structure and both ends. Captain Breed must have been getting impatient with the progress, because a squad of Doughboys appeared after lunch and things progressed much faster. My education needed to be accelerated since the other RTOs were getting to be what we called "short", meaning they had less than ninety days left on their tour.

Since this was a Cavalry Troop one of the most important areas of training was the unique role of the helicopters and the men who crewed them.

The Long Knives

At the time I arrived at D Troop the lift platoon, (Long Knives) flew the UH-1D Huey helicopter, but they were being transitioned into the UH-1H. This model was an

improvement in the respect that it featured an enlarged main cabin and a more powerful engine. This helicopter was originally designated as the HU-1A thus the nickname Huey. The Army uses a Native American tribal name for helicopters, and the Huey was designated the Iroquois, but this name was almost never used in practice. The Huey has several distinctive characteristics, including its rounded nose, the twin blade rotor and the loud *whap, whap, whap* noise it makes when flying forward. This chopper is exceptionally noisy due to the blades breaking the sound barrier, creating a small sonic boom. The Huey weighs 5210 lbs empty and is capable of speed up to 127 MPH, with a range of 276 nautical miles. The nose art on some of the D 3/5th aircraft depicted an 1860's era Cavalry officer holding a long saber with blood dripping off the blade. (The aircraft maintenance platoon slick had "Scavenger" and a buzzard painted on the nose). In practice the Hueys were normally employed as a cargo or troop transport, and as a command and control (C&C) ship. UH1's were also used for People Sniffer missions, or to insert or extract troops, and there were also some other special operations that I'll describe in later sections.

The Crusaders

D Troop first arrived in RVN with UH-1C Hueys. Nicknamed "Charlie Models" these gunships were well equipped with an assortment of rocket pods and four flexible forward firing M-60 machine guns. The Huey platform was not the best choice for a gunship, but they filled the role until the AH-1G Cobra (also called a Snake) came onto the scene as the gunship platform. These helicopters were designed to carry weapons, and target them

accurately. They were great in the role of ground support or escorting the Huey slick troop transports during combat assault operations. Equipped with M-158 seven tube or M-200 nineteen tube 2.75 inch rocket launchers, and a turret containing an M-134 7.62 MM Minigun, and a M-129 40MM grenade launcher, (commonly referred to as 40 Mike-Mike) the Cobra was an awesome weapon. At only 38 inches in width it offered a much lower target profile that the 100 inch wide Huey. The Cobra could attain a maximum speed of 190 MPH and had a max weight of 9500 lbs. It has a range of 326 miles. On Air Cavalry missions teams of two Snakes normally flew protection above a pair of low flying Oh-6A LOH scout helicopters. The Crusader logo was a white medieval shield inscribed with a red cross.

The WarWagons

The Oh-6A Cayuse was the scout helicopter in use when I joined D Troop. Commonly called LOACH for Light Observation Helicopter (LOH) they were most effective when used to fly low and slow trolling for fire. When enemy fire became too intense the lead scout would call “Taking Fire” on the radio while leading the trail aircraft away from immediate danger. Then the Snakes would roll in and pulverize the target. In practice the D Troop scouts did more than just observe and report, they aggressively attacked targets with a M-134 7.62 MM Minigun mounted on the port side. An observer sat in the left seat with an infantry type M-60. The observer, also called a gunner or crew chief, had a field pack full of grenades sitting atop a ceramic armored plate lying on the cockpit floor between his feet. The Oh-6A weighed 1,229 lbs empty

and had a maximum take off weight of 2700 lbs. A testament of the strength and durability is that statistics showed most loaches took off at nearly 300 hundred pounds over the max allowed gross weight. It could cruise at 150 MPH with a range of 380 miles. The Warwagon Logo depicted a heavily armed Stagecoach adopted from the John Wayne Movie of the same name and was shown in Cavalry colors.

The Officers/Pilots

Since D Troop was a helicopter equipped reconnaissance unit we had dozens of pilots who were Commissioned officers and Warrant Officers. A normal Army unit would have a captain or lieutenant for commander (CO) and assistant (XO), but because we had so many captains and lieutenants our CO and XO were majors. At the point in time when I was assigned to D Troop the CO was Major Brofer and the XO was Major Whitworth. At the onset the headquarters' radio callsign was changed each month, however when Major Swindell assumed command he initiated a permanent headquarters call sign: Lighthorse. The commanding officers' callsign was followed by a 6, while the executive officers' callsign was followed by 5. The flight operations officer was 3 and the assistant FO officer was 3 Alpha. Other flight segments had their own callsigns and numbers which I will describe in more detail in a later section. Because of a shortage of qualified commissioned officer copter pilots, the majority of our pilots were warrant officers. Creating Warrant Officers allowed the Army to select candidates who did not have college degrees and train them as technicians in a number of career fields. Thousands were trained as helicopter pilots. They were formally addressed as Mister. All of the

pilots came through Flight Operations at one time or another for mission briefings. The majority of them were good guys who had nothing to prove by harassing an enlisted man. Actually many had been enlisted before being selected for flight training. After an initial introduction these individuals were either cordial or just ignored me. Unfortunately, there was a minority group that seemed to resent the fact that they were flying into danger, while I was sitting in a bunkered radio room. I knew better than to debate anything with an officer so I would keep my answers to "Yes sir" or "No sir," Or I don't know, but I'll find out sir," as required. This didn't always work. Sometimes Happy Smiles 3, Captain Breed, would want to talk to me about what I had learned that day, or Happy Smiles 3 Alpha, Lieutenant Fuller, would want something done. In these cases I carefully worded my replies, keeping my answers to the minimum. There were dozens of officers and enlisted men whom I interacted with during my tour. All of them made an impression on me in one way or another, both good and bad. I would like to include them all, but I've tried to narrow the scope of this narrative to include enough information to allow the reader to gain a flavor for what occurred, while still maintaining a flow that moves the tale along. The officers are listed in order of rank and chronology. This is how I remember them, for better or worse.

Major Brofer

I didn't have a lot of personal interaction with the Troop Commanding Officer, Major Brofer who was the commanding officer when I came into D Troop, but the interaction I did have was not positive. I've heard that he was a good pilot and as brave as they came,

but in my estimation Major Brofer was universally disliked as a person. Perhaps it was his idea of leadership, but he came across as mean spirited and was sarcastic to the officers and enlisted men alike. One incident that stands out is when he told Sergeant Pratt that he wanted commo wire strung between flight ops and the orderly room. For some reason he wanted me to personally string the wire and he wanted it either buried six inches under ground or suspended twenty five feet in the air. I studied the situation, and determined that that FO and the OR were offset nearly ninety degrees from one another with a barracks in between. I got some two-by-fours and nailed them to the corners of FO, the barracks and the OR then rolled out enough wire to make it all the way around. The weather was mild and dry so I was able to get the job done in a couple of days. When the connection was established, he looked up at the job. It was within his spec so he had no complaints about that, but he still made a snide comment about how long it took. I waited until his back was turned and thumbed my nose at him. His executive officer Major Whitworth was also an exceptional character.

Major Whitworth

Major Whitworth was the flight operations officer when he was a captain, then moved into the XO position when he was promoted to major. His nickname was Chicken-Man after a radio character featured on a popular Armed Forces Radio show. The radio show Chicken-Man was a comic pseudo super hero dressed up in a chicken suit. His civilian name was Benton Harbor and he took a bus to crime scenes. The show would start with a falsetto cry of "*Chicken-Man! He's Everywhere! He's Everywhere! Ba-Bluck--Ba-Bluck!*

Sergeant Long disliked Major Whitworth and sometimes when Long was off duty, or even if he was on, he would stagger into the FO radio room and shout *Ba-Bluck--Ba-Bluck* into the microphone. Major Whitworth earned his nickname by often returning from combat missions early with some type of helicopter malfunction. On one occasion he decided he had radio failure and called back to FO accusing the RTO of not answering him. In this case the RTO was me and for some reason I was the only one present. Chicken-man was in state of panic and assumed because he couldn't receive we couldn't either. He was shouting that he wanted an RTO on the roof of the FO bunker so we could do our duty. He ranted that he was going to lock us all up in a Conex for a week without any water and other ridiculous statements. One of the hard and fast rules of the FO radio room was that a strict verbatim log be kept of any and all radio transmissions. Of course this was routinely violated since RTOs and pilots tended to be chatty when not in intense action and not every comment was worthy of recording. In this case I maliciously recorded his transmissions word for word, and put my proper "Rodgers and Wilcos" in as I responded. I waited until he was on the ground and climbed up onto the roof with a hand held radio. He was running for the FO bunker with his pilot (whose name I don't recall) trailing along a short distance behind, when the pilot looked up and saw me on the roof. He got a huge smile on his face, grabbed the majors' arm, and pointed. Major Whitworth couldn't believe his eyes, but he continued to run to the door then threw something up on the roof. I was so pissed I ran to the edge to throw it back, but he had ducked into the doorway and the pilot was standing in the doorway giving me a big two thumbs up. I climbed back down and entered the radio room. Major Whitworth was sitting in Captain Breed's chair. He calmly asked me if I knew where the aircraft repair

requests were located, and I just as calmly replied that I did not, but I would find them for him if he liked. Months later there was a question on where we were operating on that day, and Major Whitworth looked at the radio log. He never said a word to me, but one of the officers told me he laughed his ass off at my audacity.

On 8 February 1969 Major Whitworth was flying the C&C aircraft when he decided at sixteen hundred hours (4 pm) he needed a remote radio operator, commonly called a Nine One Zulu, at Tan An. I cussed enough to send myself to Hell, loaded up on a slick and flew to the assigned area. I set up my radio station, checked in and got my ass chewed out because I wasn't at Ben Tre about fifty kilometers in the opposite direction. Two of the choppers had developed oil leaks, so the third slick took me back to Dong Tam where it too broke down. Major Whitworth radioed into Flight Ops, and said he wanted me at Ben Tre if I had to get in a sampan and paddle down there. I managed to hitch a ride there in an Oh-6A scout aircraft. I had been there for twenty minutes when he called me and told me to close up shop and head back to Dong Tam. Captain Breed was so pissed off about it he told me to take the next day off altogether. When Major Whitworth received orders to Germany, Sergeant Long said the "The Lighthorse Fives of this mans' Army are alive and hiding in Europe!"

Major Swindell

When Major Brofer turned over command of D Troop, I remained unimpressed with the new CO. Major Brofer had been a good pilot, but I didn't feel as if his leadership skills were very acute. As a sergeant I had my own hooch, a room at the end of the

barracks that separated me from the lower ranking enlisted men. It didn't have a door as such, just a bead curtain that gave some semblance of privacy from passersby. I had inherited a refrigerator from a former tenant, so my room was a popular hangout since I could keep cold beer and soda handy. One evening there were several guys from flight ops sitting around shooting the breeze when we sensed a presence at the curtain. We all looked in that direction expectantly, I said come on in, and then we jumped to our feet when Major Swindell came through the curtain. He immediately told us to remain as we were. He said he had asked around, and learned where the sergeants hung out figuring this would be a place he could get a cold beer. This was true, but officers had their own bunker where he could get all the beer he wanted. We all sat back down, and I got a beer out of the fridge for the CO, but none of us knew what to say. I should say none of the NCOs knew what to say, because Major Swindell took the initiative to tell us a story about being a young lieutenant who attended a party with lots of VIPs and their wives present. He said he had a couple of drinks, and was feeling pretty good about himself. The room was full and the noise was constant, but there was a sudden lull just as he said "Rat fuck!" This seemed to get the attention of everyone in the room, including his CO. We all laughed out loud, and for a long time. None of us had any idea he was going to break the ice like that. He asked what we had been talking about before he walked into the barracks, it seems he had heard laughter, and wondered what the hilarity was about. Someone told him that I had been regaling them with ribald stories, and he said he liked a good joke as well, so I got him another beer, and proceeded to tell a few dirty jokes, all of which caused him to laugh so hard he had to hold his sides. After a while he said he was going to hit the rack, he needed to be alert in the morning, and then he left. This was

leadership at its best. He could have not come to my hooch, or come in and acted like he was way above us like Major Brofer would have. We all went back to our roles of commanding officer and subordinate NCO the next morning, but that night was what the sergeants remembered when we needed an example of leadership.

Major Swindell led the troop with a steady hand. He was the one responsible for the Lighthorse callsign. He didn't get permission from division or brigade; he just showed up one morning as the C&C aircraft commander and introduced himself as Lighthorse 6. There were some questions asked about who had given us permission to use that call sign, since it didn't match the signal operating instructions (SOI), but given the mission and morale of D Troop it was a name that would stick for several more years. When he gave over command after six months the troop gave him a rousing change of command ceremony. I will say without reservation that Major Swindell was the best commanding officer I served under. He called me "Kirk" and made me feel like everything I did was important. If he had given the command I would have followed him straight through the gates of Hell.

Major Owens

If Major Swindell was the best CO I had during my short stint in the military Major Owens was the worst. He seemed low key when he first took over the troop from Major Swindell, and he appeared to have the credentials. He was an experienced Armor officer who was getting his combat ticket punched. As everyone in the troop was to learn he was really a caricature of a Cavalry officer. Once he felt he was grounded in his role as CO

his true colors began to emerge. His idea of leadership was an iron fisted, take no prisoners approach. This might have been a positive approach in a unit with low morale or one that was underachieving, but D Troop was an elite unit, with pilots constantly applying to get in. This changed once major Owens took root; now men who had planned on extending their tour in Vietnam saw going back to the states as a blessing. Perhaps he perceived the previous CO's approach to be too friendly with the troops, and was determined to go one hundred and eighty degrees the opposite direction, I don't really know. What I do know is that he stormed around like a bull in a china shop, micromanaging flight operations, and disrupting time proven techniques to the point of inducing chaos. He was what I would consider to be a coward of the first order, and I am not alone in this opinion. He was disliked to the point of hatred by nearly everyone of lower rank who came into contact with him, and couldn't lead a thirsty horse to water.

On one occasion I was alone in the flight operations radio room. Major Owens was flying C&C that day. I received a radio transmission with his call sign, informing me he was on the helipad and wanted a case of white phosphorus grenades brought out to his aircraft. This was a ploy to keep from having to be anywhere in the vicinity of the AO, not a real need. In the months I spent as the flight ops RTO only two times did I get ridiculous orders like this one. The first time was Major Whitworth wanting a pitcher of ice water and now this nearly impossible to accomplish edict. I was stunned, all I could do was acknowledge the order, and with my head spinning, try to come up with some way to comply. I was alone so leaving my duty station was out of the question. I could face courts martial for abandoning my post in a combat situation. I got on the land line to the Orderly Room. I talked to the company clerk asking him if he had any idea how to go

about getting grenades from the armory delivered to the flight line. He said he supposed a signed requisition would have to be presented, but the supply sergeant would most likely know the answer. I thanked him and dialed the supply room. The radio is squawking, its Major Owens demanding to know why the grenades are not there already. I acknowledged with “Rodger, working, over.” I waited, but got only silence so I used the land line to call the supply clerk, who told me the ammo was delivered to the flight line each morning, and the crew chiefs loaded up the aircraft. The radio was going off again, the CO is yelling madly into the microphone wanting to know what kind of an incompetent asshole I am; that I can’t even follow his simple orders. He’s demanding that I personally deliver the grenades. I don’t want to give out the fact that I’m alone in flight ops over an FM channel as that would be reporting troop strength on a frequency that could be monitored by the enemy. I acknowledged again with “Rodger, working, over.” This drives him into a frenzy. I could imagine him frothing at the mouth as he tells me my days as flight ops RTO are at an end, if I said “Rodger” one more time he will have my ass. “Lighthorse 6, this is Lighthorse 91, transmission received, and noted, over” I replied. Again he went ballistic, telling me that I had better not be recording this in the radio log. I was not, but I was making notes of times and whom I spoke to both on the radio and on the land line, so I could recreate the scenario when the inevitable blow up later occurred. I took some comfort in the fact I was sure the officer flying as pilot for the C&C aircraft was noting all of this as well. I don’t recall who it was, but he didn’t like this irrational behavior any better than I did. Finally, I was able to radio out to the C&C with directions to the rearming area; something I’m sure the crewchief on board could have told him if he had asked. Major Owens radioed one last time telling me that it was

about time, that “There was a war going on out there!” I responded with “I’m well aware of that, over.”

That evening the assistant flight operations officer, Mr. Winsett, came over to my hooch and asked what had happened that afternoon. He had just come from the operations room, where he had been summoned by the CO. It seems Major Owens had come in to the OR with steam coming from his ears and demanded to see Lighthorse 3, the flight operations officer. He was still out on a mission so Mister Winsett stood in. Major Owens was demanding that I be given company grade punishment and demoted to Sp4 for failing to do my duty in a timely manner and acting in an insubordinate manner by saying I “Was well aware of that.” Fortunately, the first sergeant got wind of what was going on, and somehow talked Major Owens into letting the flight ops officer handle the situation. I was the best RTO they had at the time so I was given a mild ass chewing, advised to keep out of the CO’s way as much as possible and to make sure I was super strack if I did have to deal with him. I spent the rest of my time in D Troop having to eat my tongue around this sorry excuse for a commanding officer, lest I say something I would regret.

I was back in the world when I received the only letter I would get from Vietnam. It was from Mike Galvin telling me the sad news of Major Owens’ reign of terror. He was running scared, changing aircraft at the last minute for fear someone might booby trap the one he was assigned to fly. He instituted Saturday barracks inspections, and formations several times a day. This meant that in a combat unit when soldiers should have been engaged in attacking the Viet Cong they instead had to polish boots and iron fatigues.

The worst condemnation came from a detailed account Mike wrote about an incident where a scout aircraft was shot down, and shot up, while Major Owens tried to get up enough nerve to go down and rescue the crew. The pilot, Mr. Bloodworth, shot two VC with his M-16 as they closed in. According to Mike, it took ten minutes for Major Owens to gain enough guts to do what he should have done without hesitation. There was a brief flurry of hope that he would be charged with cowardice in the face of the enemy, but nothing came of it. In my opinion Major Owens was a disgrace to D Troop and doesn't deserve to be remembered as Lighthorse Six.

Captain Breed

Of all the D troop officers I had dealings with, I had more involvement with Captain Breed than any other. Captain Breed was Lighthorse 3, the flight operations officer for most of the time I was with D Troop. He initially wanted to assign me to the Doughboy Aero Rifle platoon, but Sergeant Larouch convinced him to give me a chance as flight ops RTO. Tough but fair he was largely respected by everyone, and after I spent a rather shaky breaking in period, he seemed satisfied with my progress as a RTO. A big, rangy, raw-boned man he had high cheek bones and a shaved head giving his face a menacing appearance. He had a big mouth with teeth to match, was quick to laugh, and could be loud and profane when he chose to be. I remember him saying he had gone to Officer Candidate School (OCS) to attain his commission, after having served as an enlisted man attaining the rank of E-6. He didn't pull any punches, telling it as he saw it, causing him to once remark that he had no illusions as to his military future. He laughingly said that

he might make major, but there was no way in Hell he was ever going to make light colonel. Captain Breed flew for the Long Knives as C&C as well as just about every other mission, and then he did a stint as a scout with the War Wagons. As with most all of the pilots I came into contact with he was extremely courageous and unflinching in the face of enemy fire. I'll mention Captain Breed often in this remembrance, and he deserves the repeated mention. He was a good leader and a fine Cavalry officer. In modern lingo, he had the right stuff.

Captain Bryan

Captain Bryan was one of the most popular officers I encountered at D Troop. Along with his counterpart Ace Cozallio, he was a swashbuckling Cavalry officer in the true tradition. He cultivated a sweeping handlebar mustache and strutted fearlessly through situations that would have made lesser men shrink away. He treated the enlisted men with respect, and when off duty would often show up in flight operations to pass the time much as an equal would.

One of my favorite memories was a juvenile moment that only Captain Bryan could have pulled off. The pilots were receiving the pre-flight briefing from Lieutenant Fuller. He was droning on about intelligence reports when a rotten stench began to seep into the closely packed area. I was standing by ready to hand out the SOI packets when the smell assailed my nostrils. Lieutenant Fuller asked "Who cut the cheese?" Immediately everyone began to curse, and wave their hands in the air. The briefing quickly ended as Captain Bryan sidestepped to me, took his SOI, and whispered "The first one who smells

it!" Then he dashed out the door. I busted out laughing and was rewarded by an evil look from Lieutenant Fuller.

Captain Bryan flew both Cobra gunships and the LOH scouts and was tireless in his pursuit of taking on the most dangerous missions. He was always understated in his words but balls to the wall in his aggressive flying. I would have to say I idolized Captain Bryan, and when the call came in at 1140 hours on 25 February 1969, from Crusader 32 that Warwagon 16 had just crashed into the ground and burst into flames my heart stopped. He had gone in on a gun run and just never pulled up. The jet fuel in his aircraft caught fire and he died a horrible fiery death along with his gunner Sp4 John Grose. Captain Bryan will live in my memory for the rest of my life.

Captain Cozallio

Captain Ace Cozallio was one of those rare people who was truly a legend in his own time. I don't suppose there was anyone who ever had any dealings with him that wasn't amazed at his ability to raise those around him to a higher level. He performed acts that were so heroic they sound like myths when related, yet all of these exploits have been well documented and witnessed by at least one other person. He never boasted about things he did; he didn't have to, others would do it for him. As with most legends the stories grew in the telling, and sometimes when he was asked to recount a tale he would debunk some of the "facts" with the way it really happened. Captain Cozallio was the first one to wear a yellow neck scarf, his grandmother made it for him. He began to hand them out to other pilots and crewmen who earned them. Overtime there were ways to

earn a scarf, but Ace was the originator. Other traditional Cavalry accessories began to become more commonplace; Tan colored cavalry hats made by Stetson joined the scarves, and then cavalry uniforms and even sabers appeared in common use. This leads to the tale of the use of a saber by Captain Cozallio to capture a suspected VC.

Many of the D Troop pilots had taken to wearing sabers purchased and shipped in from Meyer Insignia in the States. I think Captains' Bryan and Cozallio were two of the first, although that may not be accurate. Captain Cozallio was flying in an Oh–6A on a reconnaissance mission when a military age male began to take evasive action. Believing him to be armed Ace circled back around for a better look just as the Gook jumped in a canal and disappeared under the water. Ace landed in a position where his gunner, "Wilt" Chamberlain, could cover him with the aircrafts' M-60. Ace got out of the Loach and waded into the canal. He began to poke in the muck with his saber. After a brief period he felt something solid and poked harder while lifting up. The suspected VC came rising up with the reed he had been breathing through held in his hand. Although no weapon was located, Ace turned his captive over to the MPs as suspected military, and let them sort it out. This is the only documented use of a Cavalry saber being used on a VC that I know of, probably making it a landmark event in the Vietnam War.

Bigger than life, Captain Cozallio extended his tour in country so many times that he was refused his last extension request. He ignored this little detail, until one day he returned from a mission. He was met by MPs who took him to the airport, and stayed on the plane with him until the doors were ready to be closed for the last time. Only then did his escort exit the plane.

After throwing himself into harms way with reckless abandon in Vietnam, Ace survived the best the VC and NVA had to give. Captain Cozallio passed away on April 30, 1993 after a failed heart transplant surgery. A real Cavalry officer was finally laid to rest, but I like to think he's at Fiddler's Green with Captain Bryan by his side.

Lieutenant Fuller

Lieutenant Fuller was an administrative officer who did not fly, and he seemed to have a personal vendetta against me. He would often come up with duties that took me away from the radio room, as if he wanted me to fail. He must have looked at my personnel record, because he knew I had an Army drivers' license. We had a Jeep assigned to FO and Lieutenant Fuller would often decide he needed to go somewhere or other and would order me to drive him. The starter on the Jeep was balky and I sometimes had to recruit by standers to give the Jeep a push until I could get some speed, and then pop the clutch. Lieutenant Fuller would tell me I was useless for not keeping the Jeep in better condition, that I was embarrassing him. I told him I was an RTO, not a mechanic. He smirked and said I was an RTO wannabe. I refrained from telling him he was a pilot wannabe, and an asshole to boot. Occasionally I would get a minor victory over my tormentor. One such opportunity occurred when I was asked to drive one of the pilots to the medical facility so he could have an aching tooth looked after. As I was leaving Lt. Fuller came barreling out of flight ops, demanding to know my destination. He insisted on accompanying me, for no other reason than he thought he had me caught in a falsehood. Of course I was headed exactly where I said, and drove around to the Bachelor Officers Quarters to pick up my passenger. The pilot was a nice fellow and offered his hand for me to shake when I

presented myself at the door to his hooch. His jaw was badly swollen and he probably couldn't speak very well, but I didn't expect him to. Lt Fuller should have just admitted his mistake and walked back to flight ops, but instead he climbed into the back seat and rode along. What happened next is what makes me remember this incident so well. I was often detailed to drive someone here or there on the base and knew my way around pretty well. As we drove up parallel to the hospital complex I slowed, but continued on for a few yards. There was a ditch between the road and the complex, with a small foot bridge located near each end. Lt. Fuller told me to "Pull over!" then became incensed when I didn't stop right away and began to shout and curse. I knew from experience where the dental offices were and I also knew that if I let the pilot out where Lt. Fuller wanted me to it would result in a long walk to the nearest foot bridge, and a longer walk back to the dental office. So I coasted for a little with my foot off of the gas, then applied the brake, pushed in the clutch and shifted into neutral. I said that I had might as well drop my passenger off at the bridge, eliciting a smiling eyed look from the pilot, despite his great discomfort. Lt Fuller was really pissed, yet he saw that I was right and probably caught the look from the pilot as well, so he was more frustrated than he was angry. When my passenger had exited I called out that he could call flight ops and I would come back for him, to which he offered a wave of acknowledgment. I sat idling for a few more seconds, and Lt. Fuller wanted to know what the Hell I was waiting for. I said I thought he would want to get into the front seat. That set him off again, probably because he hadn't thought of it, and told me to "Just get going." When we got back to flight ops he got out and looked back through the passenger door at me. He told me that I had made him look like a fool and while he knew I thought I was hot shit, he was watching me and I had better

mind my P's and Q's. I just said "Yes sir," I kept to myself the thought that he didn't need any help looking foolish, he could take care of that all by himself.

Lieutenant Maddy

I didn't know Lieutenant Maddy very long, but the short time I got to know him left a lasting impression. As I recall he had transferred into D Troop at the end of January as the Doughboy platoon leader. On 3 February 1969 I went to Tan An with the Doughboys as RTO. Since I didn't know Lieutenant Maddy, I made a point of talking to him about himself and his experience as a platoon leader. He had been in Vietnam for awhile, but this was his first combat experience, and was he very hopped up about it. He was a Hell of a good guy, completely unassuming about the difference in our rank, and trusted me to keep him out of trouble with his radio communications. We showed each other pictures of our women, me of my friend Ann, and him of his young wife.

The scouts had killed four VC in some tall grass, and the decision was made to insert the Doughboys to collect the weapons. We flew to the insertion area and jumped off of the aircraft. There was a sergeant, whose name I don't recall, with the doughboys, he was experienced and didn't want me to go into the high grass because I might be needed to communicate with the C&C helicopter. Lieutenant Maddy agreed, if they wanted to radio back a message he would send out a runner. He turned back just before he disappeared into the grass, smiled and waved. It was the last time I saw him alive. It turned out that two of the Viet Cong were badly wounded, but not yet dead. Lieutenant Maddy walked right up to one of them and he was killed by automatic rifle fire. The other Doughboys

returned fire killing the two VC, who were determined to not surrender. When the doughboys came out of the grass carrying Lieutenant Maddy's body I could see in their sad faces that not only did they feel responsible, but that they had confronted their own mortality.

On the trip back to Dong Tam we were cruising at an altitude above small arms fire range. One of the Doughboys was holding the AK-47 used to kill Lieutenant Maddy when we crossed one of the branches of the Mekong River. On an impulse he tossed the rifle out of the port side door of the slick, and we watched it spin end for end down towards the wide expanse of water. It appeared to get smaller and smaller until it finally landed in the trees just on the far side. He cursed vehemently; as several others assured him that nothing could have withstood a fall into the trees from that height.

Med Cap Mission

Once we were attached to 1st Aviation things were a little different than what we had experienced while opcon to the 9th Infantry. The biggest thing was that sometimes our pilots were detailed to fly for 1st Aviation using their aircraft. On one occasion Sergeant Haskins was hobnobbing with one of his senior sergeant buddies at 1st Aviation HQ. The up shot of his interchange was that I was loaned over to 1st Aviation as a RTO for a Med Cap (Medical Civil Action Program) which was part of the overall American policy of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population. On this occasion we flew into a village about thirty Kilometers southwest of Vinh Long called Huynh Cai Lay, where a medical unit in conjunction with the local leaders had set up some tables on the porch of the main village building. There was a doctor and a five or six medics there to

treat any and all villagers who needed medical attention. We had a couple of slicks loaded with medical supplies and one or two with food. There was no threat level expected on this mission since intelligence indicated that there was no enemy activity in this area.

Things were progressing smoothly, although I for one didn't travel without my flak jacket and a rifle. When I was going out in the field I normally carried my M-16, but I had acquired an AK-47 tanker model with a folding stock for crew missions because it fit under the seat. Since I was going on a different mission, sort of a hybrid, I borrowed an M-2 .30 caliber carbine and four magazines from one of the Doughboys. This seemed like a good idea because the M-2 is shorter than the M-16 and not as unique as the folding stock AK-47; thus not so likely to appear aggressive on what was scheduled to be a strictly peaceful mission. I helped unload supplies, and then set up my radio station near my airship. From experience I knew I might be called on to break down and pack up on short notice, so I kept my LBE on along with the two smoke, one fragmentation, and one CS grenade. Since I had the spare magazines jammed into pockets in my pant legs I took some kidding from the medics who told me they were glad they had a real live warrior along in case one of the little kids or mama sans got too aggressive. I had two frequencies to monitor, one would alert me to any unusual enemy activity near the area and the other was to the 1st Aviation radio room. I began to think I might need some medical assistance when my stomach began to cramp; I'd had this uncomfortable feeling before, and it almost always led to a loose bowel movement. I dug around in my bag, and retrieved a box of C-Rations, then sorted out the packet of TP. With the carbine slung over my shoulder, and carrying an entrenching tool, I motioned to a soldier who was taking a

smoke break that I was going around to the back of a hooch, gripping my midsection and grimacing. He nodded his understanding, and gave me a half salute.

When I got about ten or fifteen feet in back of the hooch I saw a vegetable patch and decided the soil would be a little easier to dig in that section. I spaded out a scoop or two, and then squatted over the shallow hole. I was only able to start to relax when I saw a corner of the nearest hooch begin to move. It bulged out a foot or so and then a head appeared from underneath. Quickly a set of shoulders followed the head; it was a Vietnamese male. I put my left hand down on the stock of the M-2, and waited. The military age male climbed out of the hole and reached back, when I saw the sling of his weapon being lifted out of the hole I had seen enough. I raised the carbine, drew a sight picture on center of mass and fired twice, the small caliber rifle making a C*rack-Crack* sound, as he fell over. Since he had dropped the weapon back into the hole and someone had been handing it to him, I jerked up my pants far enough to waddle over near the hole and tossed my CS grenade in. Within a few seconds a second head appeared through the nauseous cloud reaching up with one hand while holding the sling of the weapon in the other, not taking any chances I fired into his head hitting him at the top of his forehead and dropping him back into the hole. By this time, there were others coming cautiously around the corner, with some approaching from the back of the hooches. I backed away from the hole. Seeing that there were other armed GIs present, I pulled my pants the rest of the way up.

There was a lot of shouting and excitement; I was asked a lot of questions, several people talking at once, until the captain in charge silenced everyone long enough for me to tell what had happened. I had the distinct feeling that I was going to land on the wrong

side of this mess, after all we were supposed to be on a life saving mission and here I was shooting people. What moved the meter over to my side was the fact that the rifle sling I insisted I had seen turned out to be just that. Only it wasn't attached to a rifle, instead it was being used for a sling on a bag. The village leader told us the two military aged males were a tax collector and his guard, the bag contained their records. They had been caught out when we came swooping in with our choppers and expected to hide until we left. The main hooch where the Med Cap was set up was connected to the next two hooches by a narrow tunnel, and they apparently decided to make an escape while everyone was busy in the front. Of course neither they nor I could expect to meet face to face. I was something of a celebrity as well as something of a problem. The pilots wanted to take credit for the body count, but not the paperwork that would go with it. The two VC were put into body bags while we pondered what to do with them. One of the medics kicked a bag, and asked the aircraft commander how he planed to explain how they were killed. He said it didn't take a doctor to see they were shot from the front. The AC chewed his lip for a few seconds, then shrugged and said "So they were running backwards."

Ultimately the solution was reached by agreeing to bury the bodies in a cemetery near the village. One of the elders told me I was "Numba one" and took both of my hands in his, pressing a pebble sized object into my palm at the same time. I glanced at the object then dropped it into the pocket on my right leg. After we got back to Dong Tam I pulled it out and saw it was a little Buddha, which I guessed was made of brass or copper. I bought a gold chain for it when I got to Bangkok and wore it around my neck for a few weeks. I had to stop wearing it when Sergeant Collins told me that Top didn't like my use

of unauthorized neckwear. Sadly it disappeared somewhere along the way, I don't know for sure just where. I do have a picture of me wearing it, but I don't have a date on the picture for reference.

Dick Long

The first D Trooper with whom I came into contact was Sergeant Dick Long, and he was also, bar none, the biggest character. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for a sergeant to pick me up in a Jeep, take charge of my duffle and treat me as an equal. Yet here I was being ferried around the base and told to call him "Long Dick" not Sergeant Long. I was more baffled by this activity than I was by any single event up to this point. Dick stood over six feet tall, with wide shoulders and a long, athletic stride that was difficult to keep up with. His hair was just a shade longer that military spec, he had a magnificent handlebar mustache and his brown eyes always seemed to have a glint of good humor.

Although he was proficient in the radio room, he had little to do with that activity, and thinking back on it I'm not sure just what activity he did have a lot to do with. As time passed his bigger than life persona would take up portions of my existence, but he never once treated me as if I were an inferior. I learned a lot of things from Long Dick, not all of them good. He could put away a prodigious amount of beer in a short period and was often insubordinate in a way that probably would have gotten anyone else in trouble; but he was also a good soldier when he needed to be and could be on his best behavior when it was required. The rest of the time, look out.

There were a couple of notable events, which perhaps say as much about Major Whitworth as they do about Sergeant Long, although the two seemed to be inextricably tied together like actors in a Shakespearean farce. The first event occurred when Major Whitworth was sitting on the helipad after having returned from the area of operations on some pretense or other and was haranguing the flight operations radio operator, insisting that some impossible task be carried out. Sergeant Gulbranson had taken the handset and was patiently listening, occasionally laughing, then keying the microphone button and saying "Rodger." Dick came out of the flight ops sergeants office with a Reader's Digest, and began showing around a drawing of a baby chicken while pointing to the flight line. We all nodded and smiled, which must have encouraged him because he came back with the little chicken pasted on his forehead hollering, "*Ba-Bluck--Ba-Bluck*! while dancing around, his arms folded at the elbow flapping them like chicken wings. Outrageous behavior for anyone, much less an NCO, but since it was Long Dick we just laughed it off.

The second event beats any I could have imagined. On this occasion Chicken-Man decided to come back to Dong Tam because he was thirsty. He radioed in and ordered that a pitcher of ice-water be delivered to the aircraft out on the helipad. We had a refrigerator/freezer in FO so I got a metal pitcher, filled it with ice and then water. I was going to have to double time out onto the helipad in the blazing sun and I figured most of the water would be sloshed out and the ice melted by the time I got there. Since I was by myself again, I called the orderly room to roust Sergeant Long to relieve me on the radios. By the time Long got to flight ops Major Whitworth was pretending to be livid at how long it was taking for the water to get to him. In reality the longer it took the longer

he could sit in safety out on the helipad. Long had been at the NCO club and was pretty unhappy when he finally arrived. When I told him what I was doing he became enraged, and told me he was going to take the water out and dump it on Chicken-Man's head. Fortunately, Dave Geek, now an E-5, came in and talked Dick into not doing anything rash. Although somewhat calmed he was undeterred from taking some form of action. He took the pitcher in his right hand, reached into his pants with his left, and then flicked sweat off his fingers into the pitcher. Both Geek and I watched helplessly in shocked disbelief as "Long Dick" lived up to his nickname. He reached back into his fly, produced his penis and swirled it around in the now mostly melted ice water. He pushed me off onto my mission, and I sprinted out to the waiting aircraft. I ran around to the port side of the helicopter where Major Whitworth quaffed a long drink. Then, and I sincerely apologize to the pilot, door gunner and crew chief, whose names I don't recall, he directed me to offer them a drink. There was no way I could not do it, but I felt really bad about it nevertheless.

Somewhere along the line it was decreed that no one could sport a mustache unless it was on his ID Card. Most everyone in D Troop had some form of lip hair, I even had a wispy little cookie duster myself. This edict lead to a lot of really white upper lips, lips that seemed to come to a point in their newly naked state. Long Dick complied with the order, but not without protest. He first shaved off all but a mustache that would have made Hitler proud, and then went around goose stepping and throwing up the Nazi salute. Of course he soon shaved the rest of the way, and it was if Delilah had shaved Samson. Without his moustache Long seemed diminished somehow. When his DEROS date came up and he departed D Troop he came to me and told me that when I inevitably made E-5

to make sure I picked up a lower ranking soldier with the Jeep, carry his duffle for him and treat him with respect. I solemnly promised that I would and when the time came I in fact did just that.

The Radio Room

The arrival of the Doughboy work gang freed me from the slave-like duties of almost single handedly bunkering Flight Operations, allowing me time to sit in the radio room with Sp4 Geek. He did the same thing he had done at Bearcat, gave me a clip board and suggested that I see how accurately I could monitor a frequency. I didn't remind him I had been involved with radio work in the states. It seemed best to remain quiet on that front, just in case I stumbled. I figured that if I appeared to slowly, but steadily improve it would look better than to try and appear proficient right away, and fail altogether. Captain Breed was still rumbling about sending me over to the Doughboys, and I had seen enough of that platoon to know that in addition to acting as the infantry platoon they also were the main forced labor gang, KP bitches, and the first sergeant's favorite shit burners.

The radio room in fight ops consisted of a single Conex with a bench built out of two-by-fours topped with two-by-six boards along the back wall. The front of the Conex featured a railing with a doorway on the left side. The furnishings were Spartan. There were two swivel chairs, a low table with a field phone. A heavy safe sat on the floor with the door opening back into the Conex. The radios included four FM frequency radios and a VHF radio. The FM radios were set on different frequencies so as to monitor the troop transmissions as well as the net of any infantry units being supported. The VHF radio was

used as an intercom within the troop, and would often include language that could not be used on the official frequencies.

Because of the different transmissions being received at the same random times, it seemed a cacophony of noise to the untrained ear. That was what made it important to just listen. Over time the brain will begin to separate the important sounds from the unimportant ones, the way a ticking clock is tuned out after awhile. Sp4 Geek was experienced enough to read a book, or carry on a conversation and still know when a transmission was important. Another factor was learning the sound of the different pilot's voices, they had callsigns of course, but these sometimes changed and knowing the voice was valuable. The radio log was an official document, and had to be filled out correctly. The log sheets were divided into three areas. First was a section for the time in the twenty four hour military manner, a second section was where the callsign was recorded, and a third for the transmission itself. The pilots didn't have a lot of time to transmit, and they often expected prompt, crisp transmissions and no nonsense; so it would be awhile before I could be trusted to actually talk on the radio. But I wasn't worried, since I knew from my time at Fort Bragg that I was up to the task.

I think it might have been the first day on the radios that the scouts spotted a Vietnamese woman running away when they flew overhead. Helicopters were as common as buses over there, so if someone evaded it was likely they were up to no good. Sure enough the helicopter crews were on the radio discussing what to do. They reached a decision, and one of them followed the woman, who was attempting to hide, while the other scout held back. Within a few minutes fifteen to twenty military aged males came out from hiding, and ran for a kind of grass house (these structures were commonly

referred to as a “hooch.”) The first scout immediately shot the woman, who was clearly a VC guide, while the Cobra gunships proceeded to shoot the Hell out of the hooch. The scouts stayed a few meters clear of the hot zone and shot anyone who ran out.

Soon the radio room was surrounded with GIs listening to the radio traffic. “*Shoot, Shoot, there’s two of them*” one of the pilots shouted over the radio. “*Got em*”, came back the response, and the room erupted with men shouting and clapping with glee. I didn’t join in the mirth, I hadn’t been there long enough to know anyone except Sergeant Pratt, and I wasn’t certain what my reaction was supposed to be. It was contagious in a way, but I hadn’t even told anyone about being shot at on the convoy, and wasn’t sure if wouldn’t sound like I was trying to be a bad ass if I told about returning fire with the M-2; so I just sat quietly, watched and listened. Sp4 Geek assumed my sedate demeanor was because I hadn’t been able to clearly understand the transmissions, so he related them back to me. I raised my eyebrows, and nodded in appreciation. He told me I would get used to it soon enough. I said I sure hoped so.

I wrote home and told the story of the Cavalry in action, and the effect on the Flight Ops crew. I don’t know what kind of reaction I expected, but it went over like a fart in church. I didn’t think it was a big deal since I was sitting in a radio shack when it happened, and wasn’t in any direct action. But it scared the living bejesus out of the folks back home anyway. I resolved to make sure my future letters didn’t include any more war stories.

One of the duties of an RTO is to know the phonetic alphabet. Each letter of the alphabet has a unique word associated with it; the first letter of the word contains the corresponding letter and can be enunciated so as to be unmistakable. For instance, A is

Alpha, B is Bravo and C is Charlie. The Classified Access Code (CAC) codes demanded an intricate knowledge of the phonetic alphabet since it had to be recited smoothly in order to keep transmission time to a minimum. These codes contained numbers 0-9 and all the letters of the alphabet. They were used to convert grid coordinate numbers into a simple letter code, each page only used for one twenty-four hour day . There was a technical problem with my transmitting the CAC codes, or even seeing them for that matter; I didn't have an interim clearance for rumors, much less for documents with a security clearance of confidential. This elephant in the room was blithely ignored because there was no way I could perform my job and not have access to the codes. Of course the safe also contained documents classified secret, a clearance only granted to the flight ops sergeant, the first sergeant and the officers. Again this requirement was just ignored. I recall one night when Mike Galvin was in flight ops typing up an after action report when a messenger came in with a Secret document. When the messenger asked Mike if he was cleared to sign for Secret documents Mike told him that if he wasn't he didn't know what he was cleared for! The envelope was turned over to him. I wandered in that later that morning and he handed over the document. I opened the safe and tucked it in and it was only later in the day that I remembered to tell Sergeant Haskins it was there. He opened it right away, leafing though the documents quickly. He told me the safe was too full of redundant paper; he didn't like to have a lot of copies of documents because he felt it increased the chance of a copy falling into unauthorized hands. I thought that was kind of odd since I was an unauthorized person myself. But an order is an order so I started sorting documents, keeping only one copy of each and took the rest out to the burn barrel. I carefully burned the classified documents, rolling the drum and poking through the

ashes until I was satisfied that they were consumed. There was no reason to think of this again until one day the CO came into flight operations with a Lieutenant Colonel. They went to the safe and began to look at documents. I busied myself around the radio room, acting like there was nothing unusual going on. The up shot of the discussion was that there was only one copy of the secret document they were discussing. Of course there had originally been more copies, but they were now in the ashes of the burn barrel. I could have spoken up and told them the truth, but I had been in the Army long enough to know where that path would lead. The whole process of leadership was based on where to place the blame. Since I didn't have any kind of security clearance, officially I couldn't even open the safe; much less get access to the documents inside. I remained relentlessly silent on the topic, playing the role of the dumb enlisted man who, like the infamous Sergeant Schultz, "Knew nothing!"

The lack of proper clearance was a necessary evil, I was being placed in positions of importance and promoted so quickly that the Army couldn't react fast enough. My security clearance was finally approved in September 1970 while I was on active reserve status.

Formations

Someone with too much time on his hands, most likely the first sergeant, decided we needed formations at oh seven hundred, twelve thirty and nineteen hundred hours. My usual work day was twelve hours from oh five thirty to seventeen thirty, seven days a week. Since the formations occurred after I started work and ended after I should have been off duty, all they served to do was mess up my free time. I had to leave the radio

shack at oh seven hundred and twelve hundred and then stop whatever I was doing on my own time at eighteen forty five hours. Of course there were inspections at each formation, so I had to somehow keep my boots polished and get a haircut every couple of days. Here I was in a war zone, and the brass still wanted to act as if we were still in the states. Of course it was only the enlisted men who had to submit to the formations. The officers, who, in my experience, were much more apt to pull one dumb stunt or another, could do most anything they wanted; at least when they were off duty.

The only good part about the formations was that I got to see Tony a couple of times each day. I would see Prader and Frank as well, but we were on a nodding basis only. At the first formation I was assigned to burn some shit, the only time I was to do so. It wasn't too bad as duty goes; I just had to splash some diesel fuel into a half barrel, and then add a small dose of aviation gas to get it going. After the fuel was poured I just stood back and tossed a lit match. The fumes of the aviation gas ignited the diesel fuel, and then I stayed up wind of the smoke until the fire burned down. I told Sp4 Geek about it when I got back. He said I wasn't supposed to have to do any work except an occasional KP stint. It seems the RTO is supposed to be Exempt from Duty (ED). Geek must have said something to Sergeant Pratt, as he came around and said he had spoken with the first sergeant about my status. I didn't have to bother with formations either, because my hours were different than most everyone else. This was the end of October and things settled into a routine. The weather was mild and the food was good. My weight stabilized since I was not losing water through perspiration, and was getting sufficient nutrition.

November was more hard labor, but I was getting some time on the radios each day. We had a pup running around; this seemed to offer some lighter moments. The dog

population was limited and there was a lot of inbreeding so we got an idiot pup every now and again. 6 November 1968, was Election Day and although I was old enough to get shot at, I was not old enough to vote. I was disappointed that Michigan voted for Hubert Humphrey, I blamed the democrats for this whole Vietnam mess and figured Richard Nixon would get us out of the war. The next day I was left unaccompanied in the radio room for the first time. I was nervous, but I could handle the relatively small amount that came up, and all went well. The middle of the month saw a hard rain storm for the first time in weeks, leaving huge ponds of water everywhere. This made getting around a real pain as the mud sucked on my boots to the point of making just getting to the mess hall or latrine an exhausting excursion. Vehicles were stuck in the mud as if it was a snow storm back in Michigan, and I was glad I was no longer with the motley crew.

Call Signs/SOI

Another of the critical things I needed to learn was that each group of aircraft had a call sign, while the pilots/officers themselves were assigned a number. The call sign was derived from a Signal Operating Instructions (SOI) booklet which was really a set of pages captured between two stiff cardboard covers. There was a string attached to the covers so the pilots could wear the SOI around their necks. Taped onto the back cover was a morphine syringe to be used if the individual was in dire need of a pain killer. Because the SOI contained all of the 9th Infantry division frequencies and call signs, along with a set of coded numbers and letters used to send messages via radio, (CAC) it was assigned a confidential security clearance. The data in the SOI was changed each

month or more often if it was deemed to be compromised. As I've said before although I didn't have a security clearance this was handled in a casual manner by the flight ops team. I suppose they didn't believe I was much of a risk to pass information to the VC.

There were several distinct call sign designations within the troop. Since I am going to describe callsigns I'll start from the top. The CO and XO were assigned the number 6 and 5 respectively. The flight operations officer and his assistant were assigned numbers 3 and 3 Alpha. These were considered to be the headquarters officers. Flight Operations RTO was assigned the number 91, (pronounced nine-one) with remote operations designated as 91 Zulu. The C&C used whatever call sign the SOI specified for that month. For instance the callsign for October might have been *Happy Smiles*. In that case the CO would be Happy Smiles 6, or just Smiles 6, the XO would be Smiles 5 and so forth. Among the flight groups the UH-1H Huey equipped lift platoon callsign was Long Knife, the AH-1G Cobra gunships callsign was Crusader, the OH-6 Cayuse light observation helicopters (LOH) callsign was Warwagon, and the aircraft maintenance platoon callsign was Scavenger. Each individual pilot was identified by a unique number such as Warwagon 14. The infantry platoon leader was a lieutenant who answered to the Doughboy 6 callsign.

This was the end of November and I was becoming more confident every day. Of course this was the Army, and things never went as smoothly as I would have liked. Captain Breed had decided it was time for his new RTO to get a feel for being a Cav man and I was going to get a taste of flying in a helicopter.

First Flight

It was early on a morning in November when I walked out to the flight line and looked around for a slick with a certain tail number. When I spotted the aircraft it was sitting on the PSP helipad just outside of a low wall, commonly referred to as a revetment. The crew chief, Johnny Hutcheson, was doing a preflight inspection along with the pilot. I don't remember the pilot or aircraft commander's names; we were so all so young, and it didn't seem important at the time. When we took flight I was seated on the canvas seat facing outboard on the starboard side; I wasn't buckled in and had no flight suit, chest armor or helmet. This was only a check flight, I thought of it as sort of a carnival event, just for fun. We took off, and immediately the pilot put the nose down and picked up speed as we flew out over the edge of the helipad. The weather was really clear that day, and I could see for a long distance once we got some altitude. I was like a tourist, just looking around and down as we flew pretty much straight and level. All at once we made a hard turn to starboard and then dove towards the ground. After a gut wrenching turn back to port the chopper seemed to flip on its starboard side and I was looking right down at the ground. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a wrench; it was lying on the deck of the aircraft, not moving an inch. I wanted to make a big deal out this maneuver, and grab hold of anything close. I remember thinking "Is it worth dying to look cool?" But that wrench was lying on a steel deck. If it didn't move, I wasn't moving. So I just hung on to the seat between my legs with my fingers and soon the violent maneuvers ceased and we came back in for a landing.

The officers were genuinely disappointed that I had not panicked or puked, but Johnny seemed satisfied that I had acted like I was enjoying myself One of the pilots said that I must have flown in a helicopter before, and thinking back to the flight across San Francisco Bay, I affirmed I had. I left out the fact that it was a flight in a Sikorsky rigged for civilians. At any rate, they seemed pleased that I was not shaken up because I was an experienced flier. I flew with Johnny many times after that day, and he never again left anything on the deck of an aircraft.

Field RTO

One of the disadvantages to FM radio is its limited range. As November wore on the Troop was taking missions that were farther and farther from Dong Tam, and most of the time the helicopters were completely out of range. The solution was to have an RTO haul a couple of radios out to a location within radio range, so an accurate record of the action could be kept. As the lowest ranking member of Flight Ops the assignment fell to me. I would get up before daylight, what we called “oh dark thirty” and straggle over to the mess hall for morning chow. After a trip to flight ops where I picked up an SOI, maps and a clipboard with radio logs I would saddle up with the rest of my gear. Over my flak jacket I wore load bearing webbed equipment (LBE) modified to allow me to carry a PRC-25 radio on my back, a bag with spare batteries, and some dried rations (called LRRP’s because it was the same rations carried by Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol). Around my waist I had a pistol belt with two canteens, four colored smoke grenades, and two ammo pouches with 5.56 MM clips. I wore a steel helmet, slung my rifle over my

left shoulder and carried a second radio from a strap slung over my right shoulder. All of this gear weighed as much as I did, and even after I slung half of it onto the deck I still had to be helped into the helicopter.

These trips made for long brutal twelve to sixteen hour days. The tropical sun was relentless. Even with two canteens thirst and dehydration was always a concern. I was dropped off at a point where I could get a good view of the surrounding area, away from any tree lines or places where Charles might be holed up. Sometimes I had the Doughboys with me, but most of the time I was left with a Cobra and her crew, the extra snake would act as backup in case the scouts ran into some hot action. If that happened the Command and Control slick would call me on the radio and have me dispatch the Cobra to a set of grid coordinates. Once it was on station one of the other Cobras could go back to rearm, and refuel. Sometimes a dark rain cloud would pass over drenching me to the skin and then the sun would come back out, and steam would rise off my soaked clothes bringing blessed temporary cooling from the thermal exchange.

I did a good job most of the time, and as these things go all my good work was taken for granted, but any mistakes were magnified. On November 16, I was at a place called Go Cong on the extreme East end of our Area of Operations (AO). There was a dirt road and the lift platoon was sitting on the road along with the spare Cobra. It was getting late in the day when I got a call from Crusader 36 telling me to send the slicks back to Dong Tam and dispatch a Cobra to some hot action. I got so distracted with taking down the grid coordinates and alerting the gunship crew that I wasn't certain of the first set of orders. I radioed back to Crusader 36, saying, "Understand return to Dong Tam." He was shooting at the time and merely replied, "Affirmative." Somehow I must have thought he

meant he was returning to Dong Tam, thus the order to crank up the spare Cobra. At any rate, about twenty minutes later I got a blistering radio message from Major Whitworth asking me what the Hell we were doing. He had told me to go back to Dong Tam with the lift platoon, so just what were we doing still at Go Cong? I just acknowledged his transmission and rounded up the flock. All the way back to base I worried that I had really blown an important assignment, but Major Whitworth never mentioned it again. The funny part of this is that here I was a lowly PFC, yet all of these officers had complete faith that I knew what the Hell was going on at all times. Seldom did anyone question anything I said; I suppose they assumed if I was yelling to them to take off and go somewhere it was because someone with more authority had ordered it.

I knew all of the crew chiefs and regular door gunners on the slicks by now, at least to nod to. As far as they were concerned I was a headquarters guy, since we tended to hang out with the soldiers from whatever barracks we were assigned to. Nevertheless, I always felt there was a mutual respect between us, each of us had a job, and it was up to the individual to do it to the best of their ability. I learned from a cook that at least some of the helicopter crews considered me to be “combat”; a term of respect reserved for someone who took dangerous assignments in stride. I used to write home and tell my friends and family that I was perfectly safe, because as far as I was concerned my worst danger was thirst and heat stroke. It should have dawned on me that no one else was volunteering for this mission, and with good reason. As recently promoted Sergeant Geek said in a candid moment, “It’s a good way to get your ass killed!” As time passed I found out there was real danger, but for now I basked in my blissful ignorance.

There were a couple of verbal interactions that stood out. The first involved a Doughboy platoon staff sergeant. This particular sergeant was quite a character; he went around as if he were a war movie actor; always making a lot of noise and drawing attention to himself. On this particular day he was parading around near the spot where I had my radio setup. He was making a big deal of the fact that if a call came in he was going to get his platoon loaded up on the choppers as quickly as possible. I didn't have any objection to that, but he was also fiddling with the radio dials, not changing frequencies of anything, but I had to keep looking to see if he had. When he wasn't checking the dials he kept picking up the handset to listen to incoming transmissions. I was tuned to the infantry freq as well as D Troop, and I knew that most of the traffic was not directed to me, but he didn't know that and was anxious to get the word on what was going on. I had been in the Army long enough to not try and tell a sergeant what to do or not do, so I was mostly going about my business with the unconcerned manner of someone who is comfortable with his job. Finally, the call came for the Doughboys to saddle up for an insertion. I listened attentively, acknowledged the call and gave the appropriate information to the aircraft commanders. When I again looked at the staff sergeant he was standing frozen in place looking at me with wide eyes. It was clear that all of the radio transmissions had been Greek to him; he had no clue as to what to do next. I calmly told him to get his bunch loaded up, it was time to go. He went into action, now confident in his role. Before they pulled out I happened to look him in the eye again, and he was looking at me as if seeing me for the first time. He treated me with respect thereafter, and didn't interfere with me or my setup. The second incident was kind of funny. I was once again set up at one of the remote locations with the lift platoon and the

Doughboys, when one of the infantry guys wandered over. He nodded and then just sat quietly listening to the static from the FM radios. There were a lot of random noises included with the actual transmissions, despite the radios being equipped with squelch dial that would allow me filter some of it out. Keying the mike would initiate a hissing sound called breaking squelch, but most of the noise was just interference from the low frequency of the radio bandwidth. Once in awhile someone would transmit, but it wasn't directed to me, so I listened with no real interest. The Doughboy asked me if I knew what they were saying. I thought about how mystified the sergeant had been, and just said that I did. "What are they saying now?" he asked, and that's when I realized he thought the static that escaped the squelch was some kind of code. I listened solemnly for a moment, then said that it was just routine traffic. He nodded, seemingly satisfied, and wandered off. I basked in the knowledge that my position as radio mystic was now firmly entrenched

I knew the pilots personalities a little better, since I would see them come and go at flight ops. Some officers were very friendly, some were coldly indifferent, and a very few were openly hostile. These types tended to glare at me, and sometimes made derogatory remarks that angered me. Early on Sergeant Long had advised me to not get too close to the officers, even though they often seemed friendly. His opinion was that they would only abuse my trust, turning on me when it suited them. I listened and heeded his advice up to a point, but mostly I avoided getting too close to anyone because there was a very good chance of them crashing with extremely bad results, and I felt worse than I would have if I hadn't gotten to know them. I wasn't perfect at it and there were two particular tragedies that stand out.

Mr. Roy Williams's wings were folded on 25 July 1969 when the main rotor on his Cobra stopped while in flight. He calmly said: "Going down, going down." I like to think both he and his pilot, Lieutenant William Elbracht, were attempting to restart all the way down because I know they had the right stuff. Mr. Martin Taber along with his pilot, Mr. James Waldowski, died when they flew into the ground on a night rocket run in Kien Hoa Province on 20 August 1969. They are all refilling their canteens at Fiddler's Green, Cav men one and all.

Seadog Six

D troop would often go on missions were we were under operational control of the 9th Infantry as a reconnaissance unit. On these occasions there would be a battalion lieutenant colonel in charge of the overall operation. If the scouts or C&C aircraft saw what looked like enemy soldiers they would call in to the battalion commander for permission to engage. The interchange might sound something like this: "Saggy Bottom Six, this is Warwagon One Six; three military aged males evading, over." "This is Saggy Bottom Six; ah . . . Kill over." This was so routine it became a normal part of daily life, then out of the blue came a gravely voice that added a whole new dimension.

Without warning a voice that sounded like he had been eating nails came over the FM radio. "Any asset on this frequency this is Seadog Six" he said in a calm voice. There was a pregnant silence while everyone digested this new corporeal presence. Saggy Bottom Six responded with a request for authentication, which was transmitted in CAC code. Once it was established that Seadog Six was the new Brigade commander, a bird colonel, the lieutenant colonel was in an unusually bad position. Effectively his boss had just

showed up on the job to critique his performance. The D Troop pilots didn't care, we were the recon group, and were pretty independent anyway.

The scouts had what appeared to be a substantial number of VC on the run, so Saggy Bottom put the call in for a company of infantry to act as a blocking force to the north of the kill zone. The lift platoon had just dropped the infantry into position when we heard a calm voice say something like: "Saggy Bottom Six this is Seadog Six." Saggy Bottom responded in a confident tone, and then still in a calm voice, "This is Seadog Six," and then he began to sputter in frustration and shouted "Goddamn It! Get those troops on a straight line and move them out towards the Fucking tree line!" There was a stunned silence on the frequency, and then Seadog Six began cussing up a storm, telling Saggy Bottom that he had never seen such a stumble fuck in his entire life and began shouting orders to be relayed to the ground commander. He was totally micro managing the operation. The VC soldiers were trying to slip through the infantry elements that were straggling along through the mud of the rice paddy they had been dropped into. At about this point they began to take heavy fire from the VC who were trying to get close enough to the Americans to discourage the Cobras from making the gun runs that resulted in the VC being viciously chewed up.

Seadog Six was apoplectic at this point. He had the FM frequency tied up with his tirade, so the D Troop pilots were communicating on the VHF frequency, laughing their asses off at the ridiculous antics of this foul mouthed colonel. He had the poor battalion commander so messed up that nothing of any value got done, and the majority of the VC escaped the trap. Fortunately, someone must have complained to the colonels' boss as he came out a couple of more times and then went back behind a desk where he belonged.

Waking the Pilots

The pilots were some of the bravest men I have ever had the pleasure of being associated with. In some ways they were what I believe the WWI pilots must have been like, sort of a live for today; for tomorrow we may die attitude. This way of living manifested itself in the consumption of alcohol whenever they were off duty. One of the duties of flight operations was to make sure the pilots who were flying on a given morning were up and about on time. This presented a real challenge, since they were all officers and were almost always badly hung over and not wanting to rise much less shine.

It was usually a good idea to begin by pounding on the door until a verbal response was garnered. At that point the door could be opened a crack and a request for attention shouted in. Most often this was met by a curse, and perhaps a boot or other object being chucked in the direction of the door. Sometimes this was the extent of the interaction, as the pilot in question would surrender to the inevitable and get up. Other times more drastic action was required. If the pilot did not respond to verbal demands then physical attacks had to be mounted. Again the amount of abuse had to be carefully weighed since these were officers, although not necessarily gentlemen at the moment. Sometimes only one of the officers had flight duty that morning, and often the other would offer suggestions on what might work. One such technique was to hold one hand over the sleepy pilots' mouth while pinching his nose with the other. This would bring him out of his bunk swinging, so it paid to know when to release and back up. Another time I

accidentally came across a solution when the officer had been recently promoted. He had received a rousing promotion party the night before and was really pissed off when I mistakenly and repeatedly called him lieutenant instead of his new rank of captain. Probably the worst scenario I encountered was coming onto the second floor balcony and finding a naked officer balanced over the railing. Once I ascertained that he was snoring gently, I went to the hooch of a pilot who was like a buddy. He insisted that I call him by his nickname when higher ranking officers weren't around, and would often stop in my hooch for a beer. He was one of the easier individuals to rouse, so when I had him sitting on the edge of his bunk I told him of my dilemma. He looked thoughtful, stood up and looked out his door. With a sigh of resignation he motioned for me to stand on one side of the acrobatic sleeper while he ducked underneath and plucked the passed out individual off the railing. The sleeper never moved as he was carried to his bunk. Fortunately for all involved, he didn't have to fly that morning.

Despite threats ranging from courts martial to death when they first were awakened, when the pilots finally made it to the flight line they would always say thanks for not giving up on them. To all of them I'd just say "You're welcome, sir." I knew they didn't mean the evil threats, but sometimes it was a risky business, and proved combat pay can be earned in mysterious ways.

Night Duty

At the beginning of December, I was told that I needed to go on duty from eighteen hundred to oh six hundred hours. Again I was the low man on the totem pole, so I had to

do whatever anyone else didn't want to do. Sergeant Gulbranson had been the night man and used the daytime to get drunk, so I wondered if this was an intervention of sorts. The first night Sergeant Gulbranson was supposed to come in about twenty one hundred hours and show me what to do at twenty four hundred. He did, but he was drunk, so it didn't make a lot of sense. I suppose the powers that be anticipated this since Sergeant Long came in shortly before midnight, and went over the routine in detail. The biggest problem is that the code in the SOI has to be changed every night at twenty four hundred, and the code is stored in the safe. Since I don't have a security clearance I'm wasn't supposed to know the combination. Long treated this with distain, he told me "There's no way he's coming in here every night to open this fucking safe."

In addition to making up the new SOI's I had to mark up maps for the next day's mission. The areas of operation had to be drawn on the map, along with the location of any friendly units. The AO were assigned a code name, such as AO Snoopy, and they included zones designated as "free fire zones." These were areas where the scouts could open fire without asking permission. This was enormously important, any errors could lead to disaster, and here I was a lowly PFC with soul responsibility for getting it done with one hundred percent accuracy. I had to learn to read a map that was detailed to six digits, learn two different ways to use a confidential code based on twenty six numbers and letters, and learn to use the phonetic alphabet forwards and backwards without having to stop and think. I was deathly afraid that I would blow an assignment and get someone killed, but to my amazement all went well, or so I thought.

I've repeatedly said that being the lowest ranking soldier in flight ops got all of the crappy jobs, but it also got me into some really interesting assignments as well. It hadn't

occurred to me at this point that someone had been doing this stuff before I got there, and I was just paying my dues. Since I was already on nights, I was the perfect candidate for a new mission someone had dreamed up. As a Cavalry troop we had been running operations during daylight and with the exception of a pair of Cobras who were on standby, hunkering down at night. This had to change so some of the more creative officers came up with innovative ideas. The original idea had been developed using a slick and two shooters equipped with AN\PVS-2 Starlight Scopes mounted on M-14 rifles. These shooters, whose magazines were loaded with all tracers, would lie on the deck of the aircraft, one on the port, and one on the starboard side. The slick then would fly in slow circles above a suspected VC stronghold, and if the shooters saw something suspicious they would direct fire on the target. The door gunner on that side would zero in on the tracers and begin to fire a long burst. Since the M-60 machine gun had a tracer every fifth round it would look like a straight line in the darkness. A gunship would then roll in on the tracers, and work out with rockets and Minigun fire. Ideally the target would be a concentration of enemy soldiers who would shoot back, and the green tracers would give away their relative strength and approximate position. The obvious problem with this, other than getting shot at, was that the M-14 and M-60 fire had to cease before the Cobra got within range. This meant the last part of the gun run was done with no reference for how close the gunship was to the ground. The main idea behind this new mission, called Eye in the Sky, was to mount a spotlight on the deck of a slick, and use it to pinpoint targets for a cobra to make gun runs on at night. This had the added advantage of giving the pilot a much better view of the ground and allowed them to stay on target longer before they had to pull up. The mission I was tapped for was this improved

version. My job was to cycle the light on and off on cue. This was kind of the dumb part of the mission, I mean everyone else got to fly, or shoot, or both, and here I was playing best boy.

It turned out to be a dud mission, we shot up some old bunkers, and on one occasion our target turned out to be a big hunk of bamboo sticking out of the mud, although it did look like a mortar tube. We came back in just before daylight and I trundled over to the mess hall for chow. I figured I would grab a quick, cool water shower and then get some sleep. The first sergeant caught me in the mess hall and assumed I was trying to get out of something. I was too tired to argue, so I went over to flight ops and sat in the radio room until one of the sergeants told me to go get some sleep. I was awakened at fourteen hundred hours, and told to get up and go to work. Dead tired, I wanted to sleep in the worst way, but there was no chance. When I got to flight ops I could tell right away that something was wrong. The place was a shambles, papers and files were stacked everywhere and Sergeant Geek had the drawers out of a filing cabinet, looking down inside the casing. He brought me up to date by whispering that an SOI was missing and they had been tearing the place apart looking for it. Sergeant Pratt finally told Captain Breed. They ultimately decided they had best call an Army Intelligence Team in to investigate. I was still only a PFC, so I figured there was no way I was going to have any responsibility. Once again I was wrong. There was a Sp4 by the name of Hank Bretz, who served as the electrician. Hank didn't have much use for Sergeants Long, Geek or Gulbranson. He considered them to be ass kissers who had gotten rank by being toddies. I didn't believe that was true. Perhaps he was just jealous that he was still a Sp4 even though he had more time in Vietnam, I never really knew. I did know that Sergeant

Gulbranson had gotten his buck sergeant's stripes going the wrong way; he had gotten drunk at the wrong time, and was busted down from staff sergeant. Although I stayed around the area till evening I was not interviewed by the investigation team, and the situation seemed to be resolved. Sp4 Bretz told me that everyone had been instructed to testify that the missing document had been inadvertently placed in a burn bag. As an unfortunate result the PFC had burned the SOI by mistake. Since there was no missing SOI there was no security breech. There was one glaring problem with this scenario; I had been several kilometers away riding in a helicopter when this accidental burning had supposedly occurred. Since no charges were preferred it was considered best that I not know about their deceit. I was really pissed off at first, but I got over it; they were just performing standard CYA tactics. It wasn't personal, just business.

Praying Mantis

I was sitting in a silent radio room one night when I spotted what appeared to be green leaf stuck high on the wooden wall. Upon closer examination I determined it to be a praying mantis. She just sat there perfectly still, so I ignored her until a sharp movement of her head caused me to look closely. A beetle was crawling out from under a floor board, cautiously feeling with its antennae. The mantis had seen the movement, and snapped her head around to focus on it. When the beetle had fully emerged from the crack the mantis dropped to the floor and seized the insect in a lighting move of her forelegs. Once the beetle was secured she bit off the head, and then ate the bug like a submarine sandwich. When she finished, all that was left was the legs, antennae and wings. She proceeded to wash her face, and then resumed her praying stance. When

daylight came I picked her up with a pencil and set her on the radio table. As others came sleepily into flight ops I would call them over and show them the mantis. I told the story of the VC beetle over and over, each time referring to its remains as evidence. After awhile I was off duty and left, but I came back later for some reason, and the mantis was still in the same place. I wondered what would happen if I put a fly where she could reach it. I found a swatter, killed a fly and brought it as an offering. She ignored the fly, even if I placed it within easy reach. On a hunch I swatted next to a fly, stunning it, then pulled off one wing and set the fly down next to the mantis. When the fly recovered and began to move, the mantis's head snapped around. She grabbed the fly and munched away. I repeated this demonstration several times before I eventually tired of my game and left.

When I came back that evening she was on the floor. I must have been pretty bored because I kept feeding her over and over. I don't recall exactly what happened in between, but somewhere along the line others began to do the same thing, and I lost track of how many flies and moths she consumed. At any rate I retuned to the room somewhere close to the end of the day to discover the mantis lying on her side with her thorax split open. I believed at the time we had fed her to death. My thinking was that she did not normally have such a steady diet of readily available food and continued to eat until she broke open. I've since had someone say that wouldn't happen, that she would get full and refuse to eat like any other creature. I suppose it's possible that some jerk stepped on her, but I don't suppose I'll ever know for certain.

Ben Tre Bond Fire

On 9 December, I went out to Ben Tre for remote RTO mission. I've been picking up quite a bit of flight time, but all of it has been as a passenger. I mentioned to Captain Breed that I would like to get some time in as a door gunner, but he told me that the gunners come from the Doughboys. Besides, they need me as an RTO. I couldn't argue, although any of the sergeants could do the RTO duty, and in fact they did when I was not on. At any rate there have been improvements made to the Ben Tre site. This is an old airstrip with an asphalt runway mostly overgrown with vegetation, but still serviceable for the most part. Fuel bladders filled with Av-Gas have been added, and the Cobras can get rearmed at an ammo dump on the opposite side of the runway. I've got myself a little hooch built out of PSP and rocket boxes. It's crude, but it provides shade and some protection against small arms fire, not that I expect an attack. I don't know what headquarters was thinking when they ordered the improvements; I mean Charles had to know we were building up the area. I suppose the brass took into account the ARVN compound nearby, and assumed they would provide security, but this didn't happen.

As usual I got dropped off early in the morning, and after I got set up and made a radio check, I settled in for another boring day. The choppers were coming in for refueling when I heard the unmistakable sound of a mortar. *Sa-Come*! It cracked in across the runway from the fuel bladders, and caused the choppers who had not yet landed to flare away. One slick and one LOH were on the ground, but they got airborne quickly. *Sa-Come*! Another round cracked on the opposite side of the runway, throwing dirt and

water into the air. The explosions were close enough that I could see the red center as they ignited, but the ground on either side of the runway was saturated, and smothered much of the shrapnel. The C&C aircraft radioed for me to pop smoke so they knew where I was located. I was hustling to get my LBE on with the radio flopping, and had to stop in order to wrest a smoke grenade from the pistol belt. I tossed the grenade, a Violet colored one, out towards the perimeter fence. Then I grabbed my rifle and the other radio, and then hustled past the smoke which was blowing back toward me. “Roger victor smoke” came the calm voice of the aircraft commander. “That’s affirmative”, I managed to rasp back. It occurred to me that neither of us had used call signs, and I abstractly wondered if I should enter the transmission into the radio log. That’s when I realized the log was back in my hooch. There hadn’t been any more mortar rounds, so I hustled back, and grabbed the clipboard and maps. The slick hovered over the smoke. When I got to it both the crew chief and gunner leaned down to pull my overloaded ass onto the deck. I would like to think they loved me, but more likely they just wanted to get out of the area. There are few better targets for a RPG then a hovering helicopter. As we pulled out the cobras were working on the tree lines, but the damage had been done. We landed at Dong Tam, and looking back southeast I could see tall columns of thick black smoke rising up from fires burning all those miles away.

Christmas Blues/Bob Hope Entertains the Troops

The month of December began to congeal into what seemed to be the same thing over and over. For the first time in my life I was away from my family and the Christmas

music playing on Armed Forces Radio just made me feel worse. I still think of Vietnam whenever I hear the lyrics to “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” It was a melancholy time, I was still low man on the totem pole and further promotion seemed to be out of the question as I hadn’t been in the Army long enough to warrant another bump in pay grade. The only exception would be on merit, and I didn’t think I was doing anything that could earn such consideration.

The troop as a whole had a yearly body count of nine hundred and ninety-seven by the middle of the month, although action was really slow. Charles was laying low and we were having a hard time digging him out. Even the nightly mortar attacks had lessened. Charles was entertaining himself by trying to jam our radio frequencies. They’d pick a channel and sing or whistle every so often to try and disrupt our communication. We didn’t acknowledge it, we simply switched to a pre arranged frequency. This practice is called jumping, we would merely move to the next alternate channel in the current SOI.

There were a surprisingly small amount of casualties among our troopers, one of the Long Knife gunners, Sp4 Brewster, had been shot through the mouth, and a pilot slightly wounded by shrapnel when Captain Breed was lured into what turned out to be ambush. A Warwagon crew chief was wounded by Plexiglas fragments when a bullet penetrated the bubble on his OH-6A, but that was about it.

There was some good news, I got an early Christmas present, Lieutenant Fuller got transferred out, and a young second lieutenant took his place. The amusing part of this exchange is that where Lieutenant Fuller thought of me as a useless green horn, this new guy thought of me as seasoned veteran who should be deferred to. Christmas came and went without a lot of fanfare. I got some great CARE packages from home, and I was out

of my funk and in good spirits when Bob Hope and the USO came to Dong Tam for a Christmas visit.

The combat units got the best seats, and D Troop was the second unit from the front of the stage, only about four rows back. Bob knew what we wanted; there were plenty of beautiful young women in short skirts dancing around. The dance group was called Honey LTD. Ann Margaret was the featured actress, she seemed tired, but she was still exceptional, and was the recipient of some pretty good wolf whistles. Bob told some jokes that wouldn't make the TV anytime soon, but we laughed appreciatively.

Some of the guy's families had written to Bob asking if he would say a special hello to them when he got to Dong Tam. They had been contacted ahead of time and Bob had them come up on to the stage with him. One fellow's mother had written that her boy had the best singing voice ever. Bob asked him if he would like to sing something. He said White Christmas was his favorite song, so Bob made some comments about Big Crosby. Bob told the guy to go ahead, but warned him he would be cut off after a few bars. He began to sing, and much to Bob's astonishment the guy's mother was right; he had a wonderful singing voice. Bob let him sing the song all the way through and seemed to really enjoy it. I too was very impressed and entertained.

Every once in awhile an artillery barrage would sound off, and we would call out a chorus of "Outgoing" so Bob and the rest of the act wouldn't panic. After awhile the sound of incoming fire can be distinguished from outgoing, but they hadn't heard enough to know the difference, and that was definitely a good thing. Overall the show was everything it was cracked up to be; lots of great looking young women, good jokes by

Bob Hope, and an unexpectedly terrific amateur singer. Bob's show made all who attended feel better, and will always be fondly remembered.

Dave Geek

When I first met Dave Geek in the radio room at Bearcat he was a Sp4, but within a few weeks he had been promoted to sergeant, and most everyone was pleased to see it happen. Unlike his counterpart, the boisterous Sergeant Long, Geek was a quiet person by nature, and I learned that it was a good idea to listen attentively when he spoke. His advice was sound and well founded, and he did his best to keep me out of trouble. Over the months he turned out to be a very good friend and mentor. On one occasion Captain Breed decided his office needed to be given the GI treatment. Of course I was the one to whom the task fell, but Geek helped me move the desk and file cabinet out onto the wooden pallets that served as a floor. I swept and mopped, dusted and shined. Once I felt I was done I asked for help getting the furniture back into the office. Geek went around the area giving it the white glove treatment, so I asked him when he got to be so conscientious. He replied with "What's the difference between conscientious and responsible?" I still use that thought to help govern my actions. He was unbelievably patient with my questions, and gave me studied advice regarding my tendency to be a smart ass at inappropriate times. The young second lieutenant who taken the assistant flight ops officer's position was a breath of fresh air after the oppressive Lieutenant Fuller, and I tended to take him a little too lightly. One occasion he bummed a cigarette and a light. I asked him if he wanted a kick in the chest to get it started. He thought that

was hilarious, saying he couldn't wait to use the line with one of the other officers. When the lieutenant wandered away I was feeling pretty proud of myself. Geek took me by the shoulders and shook me until my teeth rattled. He told me I was lucky I didn't get my ass in trouble. This young officer was still an officer, Goddamit, and I was lucky I wasn't busted back to private.

Geek was a short timer in January of 1969. I was happy he was getting out of Vietnam and the Army, but I was sorry to see him go at the same time. When a soldier got down to ninety days left in country they became a *short timer*, commonly known simply as *short*. The practice most often followed was to draw or trace a silhouette of a seven forty seven jet (a Freedom Bird) or a shapely woman containing ninety numbered squares. This short timer's calendar was then prominently displayed, and the days colored in each evening. These calendars were much coveted and greatly admired by soldiers who hoped to live long enough to obtain this exalted status.

I didn't write home about this, so I don't have the date, but we were alone together at night when a mortar attack began to crash along the flight line. Since flight ops had been hardened with sandbags and dirt filled ammo boxes it was supposed to be a shelter against shrapnel, but a direct hit was sounding like a distinct possibility. The mortar rounds were walking closer and closer to the bunker; the noise increasing from a muffled thud to an outrageous blast that was shaking dust down from the ceiling. Since we couldn't abandon our duty station, we donned flak jackets and helmets, and then crouched under the radio table. Geek made sure his body was between me and the wall as we huddled in a terrified embrace. An explosion of monumental sound and fury caused the radios to jump, and Geek shouted, "SHORT! Get out of here!" I closed my eyes and

wondered if the pain would be too great. We waited for the one that would rain Hell on us. The seconds ticked by slowly as the silence became increasingly deafening. As if his shout had been a command, the attack had ceased just short of dropping a mortar on our warren. Once enough time had passed for us to be reasonably certain the attack was over I climbed out into the open and brushed myself off, covertly checking to see if I had a wet spot where a few drops of pee had leaked out somewhere along the way. The field phone was lying on its side, the hand set off the cradle. It was buzzing insistently so I picked up the hand set and said "Flight operations sir, PFC Kirkland speaking. Captain Breed was checking to see if the "Flight ops bunker was still standing." He was laughing in relief to find out we were still alive, since he "Didn't want to have to train a new RTO."

The night before he left Vietnam Geek gave me all of his uniforms, his stationery, and quite a bit of stuff that I had no real use for, but took anyway. It pleased him to give me the stuff he couldn't take with him, so I enthused over every item even if I really didn't want it. I owe Dave Geek more than I could ever repay, and I was a better soldier and person for having known him.

A New Year and a New Specialist Four

The end of 1968 didn't have much to offer, the peace talks in Paris were causing a quiet time in the Mekong Delta, although D Troop ended the year with 1, 072 confirmed VC killed by air strike (KBA). I spent New Years Eve at flight ops with Sergeant Geek whom had become a close friend, despite the difference in our rank. At midnight I

walked out onto the flight line and fired off a green flare. The land line was buzzing; it was Major Whitworth telling Geek that he was going to be in big trouble if that happened again. Of course Geek told the major he had no idea what he was talking about. The bottom line was that as the NCO on duty Sergeant Geek was responsible for what happened at flight ops, and that was that. Fortunately no one else shot off any fireworks near the bunker and nothing came of the incident.

I was off duty on New Years Day, folding the uniforms that Geek had given me, when Sergeant Gulbranson came into the barracks. He said that Captain Breed was on rampage, that he had gotten his ass chewed by the commanding officer, and wanted to see me "On the double," meaning immediately, if not sooner. I couldn't imagine what I could be on the carpet for; the New Years Eve flare couldn't be proved, and the CO wouldn't have been involved in a small matter like that anyway. As soon as I walked in to flight ops everyone was staring at me. Captain Breed stormed out of his office and ordered me to come to attention. I locked my heels and listened in disbelief as he read me the riot act. He said he was sick and tired of all the sloppy work I had been producing. I was to take the PFC pins off of my collar and put them in my pocket, he never wanted to see them again. I was shaking and felt like crying, all that time in grade down the drain, and I didn't feel I was deserving of this humiliating public demotion. Just then Captain Breed produced a set of orders promoting me to Specialist 4. He laughed his big hearty laugh and said "Congratulations, you're a Spec 4!" If I hadn't been so weak with relief I think I could have killed him.

When I got back to the barracks with the set of orders, I saw the bump in rank was accompanied by an assertion that my primary was MOS 05B20; I was a real RTO at last.

Of course the first sergeant made sure to tell me that if I wanted to keep the rank I had better have Sp4 insignia on my shirt the next time he saw me. One of the helicopter mechanics was nearby when this happened. He motioned for me to follow him into his barracks where he produced a clean shirt with Sp4 insignia and no name tag. He said one of the other mechanics had gone home and given him his old uniforms. I took the shirt back to my barracks where I quickly sewed on a name tag. Now that I was in proper uniform I took all of my old shirts over to the laundry to have insignia sewn on, with the exception of the shirts from Geek. It cost me a serious piece of coin, but I had my name put on the shirts with the sergeant's stripes. For the first time I figured it was a real possibility that I could soon wear them legitimately.

It turned out the first sergeant had a reason for his insistence on the proper uniform. To my surprise, late the following morning Sergeant Gulbranson told me to "Get strack" and report to the awards ceremony formation on the Troop parade grounds. I figured they needed some extra bodies to stand at attention, but to my amazement I was called forward and had an Army Commendation Medal pinned on my chest by an officer. The orders specified that the medal was for "Meritorious action while under enemy fire" and was dated around the time I arrived at Dong Tam. I hadn't though too much about the convoy, and the officer taking my name, number and unit assignment, but apparently he really had written a recommendation for an award. I hadn't told anyone about firing the fifty caliber MG, mostly because it didn't sound like much when I thought about it. Nevertheless, everybody I saw the rest of the day seemed to be pleased with my promotion and medal; truth to be told I was pretty pleased myself.

Sergeant Gulbranson

Dale Gulbranson was a Sergeant E-5 when I met him. He told me he came by the rank backward, that he had been reduced from E-6. He was something of a mystery to me in that he was obviously a career soldier, an expert at his job and respected by the officers; not the kind of soldier to be demoted. After he told me of his rank status he pretty much ignored me. I was the low ranking man in flight operations, and it seemed as if I was in solitary confinement. Once I began to be allowed to sit in the radio room I came under his steely gaze more often. His eyes were a pale green color, and like many of the sergeants he cultivated a bushy mustache that made his mouth difficult to see. He was witty, and had a good sense of humor with everyone except me, at whom he only glared. I didn't like him very much, but he didn't seem to care what I thought so it was no big deal either way.

After a few weeks of training by the patient Dave Geek, I was left alone to man the radios, and the leaders began to send me out into the field alone as 91 Zulu. Despite a few small gaffes I was feeling pretty cocky about my ability to handle myself. The officers all knew my voice by this time, and they were much more friendly, often nodding, and smiling at me when they came in for the morning briefing. Right about this time my nickname changed from Detroit to Kirk as the officers noticed the name stitched on my shirt, and began to address me by name. Sergeant Gulbranson still called me boy, or kid, but I was becoming used to his gruff attitude, and I was more and more a subject of his tutelage. He hovered around the radio shack when I was on duty, checking the log and grunting comments on the action being reported. At this point the troop was under

operational control of the third brigade, so there were two FM radios tuned to the frequency of the lieutenant colonel running the show, two FM radios tuned to the D Troop frequencies and the VHF radio used by the troop for intercom. Sergeant Gulbranson could effortlessly monitor all of the radios simultaneously, his eyes darting from one to another and back to my log as transmissions flew fast and furiously.

I was sure my techniques and abbreviations were accurate and proper, Captain Breed had checked my work every day at first, and Geek had coached me on making sure I was accurate in recording grid coordinates, as a single digit error could change the reported location a great margin. Adhering to Geek's training, I made notes on a separate sheet, and then transferred the details onto the log when things quieted down. Sergeant Gulbranson told me that a real RTO could remember details as long as he needed to, that there was not always going to be a convenient piece of paper to write on. He was obviously trying to teach me a lesson, so I told him that Geek had taught me to make notes in order to make sure I got the long strings of numbers accurately recorded. He shrugged and said that I would only be an ordinary RTO if I needed to scribble notes, but to suit myself.

I wasn't sure what made me care what Sergeant Gulbranson thought one way or another, Captain Breed was the one I had to impress; no one else. Nevertheless, I gnawed on his comments about being an ordinary RTO. I knew there was no way I could get long strings of numbers mentally down pat when there was so much information to process without error. I wanted to talk to Geek, but he was gone, and Sergeant Long was one of Sergeant Gulbranson's beer drinking buddies so that was out. I couldn't sleep, so I walked back to the flight operations bunker after dark, there was a new radio operator, a

Sp4 who had just come into the troop from a signal unit. Sergeant Long was showing him the paperwork that had to be done, and they pretty much left me to myself as I poked around the Conex containing the office supplies. I had an idea nagging at me, but I couldn't bring it to fruitarian. I didn't find the answer in flight operations; it was the only next morning when the officers came in for the morning briefing that I had an epiphany. I was standing in the doorway of the radio shack when the solution hit me. It had been right there all along, I just hadn't seen it. The officers had to remember a lot of numbers, and they didn't always have a piece of paper handy. What they did have was a board they wore strapped to their thigh, called a knee board. They wrote on it with a grease pencil and could erase it with the sleeve of their flight suit when the information was no longer needed. After they left for the flight line I had time to go over to the supply room, where I told the clerk Captain Breed wanted a knee board. This was a common practice I learned from Sergeant Long, whenever we wanted something it was always Captain Breed who wanted it. I brought my prize back to the shack and strapped it on. I grabbed a black grease pencil from the office supplies and I was in business. Sergeant Gulbranson came in later and crashed into a chair in the radio room. His eyes were bloodshot, and he stank of the beer he had been swilling the night before. I had decided that his drinking was most likely the reason he was an E-5. He most likely had gotten drunk and done something that left the CO with no choice but to bust him down a stripe.

He didn't say anything at first, just slurped coffee and stared at the radios as if the noise was making him angry. It was when the first calls of contact with the enemy came across the radio and I wrote the coordinates on my knee board that he perked up. I had expected some reaction, but his loud cry was more one of a wounded bull than anything

human. He seemed to find my new equipment the most hilarious thing he had ever seen, he laughed so hard there were great tears running down his cheeks, and he stood in the doorway waving anyone who would listen in to look at what I was wearing. I felt humiliated, and wished I could take the board off and hide it. I just blushed and tried to act like nothing unusual was happening, but I couldn't help but grin when it finally occurred to me that he wasn't making fun of me, he was bragging about my creativity. He slapped me on the back hard enough to knock out a lung and told me he had never seen a young soldier who was as clever. From that time on he took me under his wing. No one was allowed to mess with me, not even the officers. The first sergeant came around one afternoon when the helicopters were standing down for maintenance, and hinted that a Sp4 should be working on a detail, not sitting in a silent radio room. Sergeant Gulbranson told him that the only reason I was a Sp4 was that the headquarters people were too dense to recognize the fact that I should have been promoted already, and given the kind of responsibility I was capable of handling. I learned from Sergeant Long, that Gulbranson was bragging at the NCO club about his "Prodigal student" who was going to be better than he was before all was said and done.

In due time Gulbranson was promoted back to E-6 and when I made E-5 he would insist that I go to the NCO club with him. We never really became friends, I don't think he liked to get too close to anyone; it was more of a big brother thing with him. He continued to watch me closely, but he was not as intimidating anymore. This was not to say he wasn't hard on me if he thought I was getting lazy. Some of the headquarters RTOs were careless about the transmissions, giving out radio frequencies in dollars and cents, or telling the listener they were changing from frequency such and such to another

one in the clear. They tended to talk too long as well, using a lot of unnecessary words in their transmissions. This drove Gulbranson nuts and he would rail at length about loose lips sinking helicopters or some other tortured simile. One of the operators on the infantry frequency had a habit of saying “Good copy” after he received a transmission. Just to get Gulbranson’s goat I used that line instead of the standard reply of “Rodger.” He slapped me in the back of the head so hard my glasses flew all the way across the room.

One occasion he came into the radio shack roaring drunk, he told me I was useless and he was sick of all of the critical mistakes I was making. I told him he was not only a drunk but a lard ass, and that with all of the mistakes he made he had no room to talk about anyone else. He left shouting that I was done as flight ops RTO, he was going to have me transferred out to the Doughboys. I wasn’t worried. He wouldn’t remember anything about what he said or did, and he had no authority over me anyway. He was drinking more and more, and one day he was harassing an officer who turned to me and asked if I couldn’t control him. I said he wouldn’t listen to me either. About that time Dale ripped his own stripes off his arms, and held them out for the officer to take. The officer stared at them for a heartbeat then took them and handed them to me. He told me to get them sewn on my sleeves, that I deserved them more than Gulbranson ever would. This seemed to have the desired effect. Dale’s eyes would seem to sag when he was very drunk, sort of a sad picture of Dorian Grey effect. He nodded his head and doddered off to his bunk. One day orders came through transferring Gulbranson to Germany. He left on cloud nine, dreaming of all the German beer he would consume and the Bavarian women who would serve it. I never heard from Sergeant Gulbranson again, but he shook

my hand the day he left and said I was the best pupil he ever had. I'm sure he was the best radio instructor I ever had.

An Accidental Encounter

I had struck on an idea that would allow me to fly in the gunner position without conflict with Captain Breed's wish that I concentrate on the RTO job. With the tacit approval of the pilots I would trade places with one of the gunners while we traveled out to remote locations. This worked only if the slick I was riding on was going to set down, and stay for a time, on the road or airfield where I was going to be setting up my miniature radio station. If they were going to merely insert me and take off again there wasn't enough time to change from a gunner, who must dress for the job, to a passenger, who can quickly exit the aircraft.

All this careful planning went out the window one morning when the aircraft I was temporally crewing was diverted to fly a mission prior to dropping me off. The scouts had uncovered a suspected cache of enemy supplies, and the Doughboys were being inserted to check it out. If it appeared that the cache was well protected a company of infantry would be inserted to tangle with the enemy force, but indications were that it was either unprotected or only lightly guarded. I had flown in the right side gunner's seat several times up to this point, but the only time I had fired the M-60 machine gun was to test fire it into a canal on the way out to a remote location. After we inserted the Doughboys into a clearing, we took off and circled around the area. We were cutting doughnuts as it was called, flying a wide and then a smaller counterclockwise circle.

Since I am on the right side I am looking at the sky most of the time, if I want to see the opposite side I need to crane my neck around the wall protecting the Huey's engine and transmission. We usually tuned in to Armed Forces radio when we were flying back or forth, but now we were on intercom. The pilot leveled the helicopter and swooped down to a lower level. I later learned that they had decided I needed some gunnery practice. I heard one of the pilots call for 'Kirk" to shoot that pile of rocks coming up, or shoot that tall tree, things like that. This took a little doing, but I have good hand eye coordination and within a minute or so I was able to determine how much to lead, but I couldn't seem to actually hold right onto a target while allowing for forward movement and the arc of the bullet. We made a few passes with first the crew chief and then me shooting short bursts at the selected targets. On the last pass an enemy soldier with a backpack and rifle rose up from the high grass and began to run. Without being told to shoot, or even thinking about it, I pulled around and fired a long burst in his direction. One of the bullets must have struck his arm, and another his torso, as he tossed the rifle into the air, turned part way to the right, and then collapsed like a rag doll into the foliage. No one said a word for a few seconds, and then I said I might have shot a VC on that last pass. The aircraft commander said that I "Damn well had," and swung back around as the crew chief dropped a smoke grenade on the spot. The pilot was yammering on the radio like there was no tomorrow. We whipped back to the spot where we had dropped off the doughboys and prepared to extract them, while the gun ships worked out on the area of the smoke. The CO, who was flying the C&C aircraft still didn't know I was flying gunner on the lift aircraft, and was bitching that I wasn't answering as 91 Zulu. The

aircraft commander told him that they had not dropped me off because of being diverted, which calmed him down.

When we got to the remote airfield I returned the chicken plate and helmet to the real door gunner. Even as I hurried to set up the radios I was shaky. My adrenalin was coming back down, but my mind was racing. Geek had said going out into the field was a good way to get my ass killed, and I wondered what he would say if he knew of this latest escapade. It turned out that our accidental flushing of the NVA soldier opened up a battle that lasted most of the day. Two infantry companies were inserted to block the enemy's escape, and the scouts and gunships racked up their usual impressive body counts. Second Brigade killed one hundred seventy enemy soldiers in the first twelve days of 1969, with D troop accounting for one hundred and two, sixty percent of the total. I had contributed my single KBA, an accidental one at that, but it was the most celebrated of all. I was slapped on the back so many times I was staggering most of the night. Of course the amount of beer I poured down my throat might have had something to do with it as well.

I was very sick the next morning. I wasn't much of a drinker, and remembered why not when I awoke to a vicious hangover. But this was still the Army, and still Vietnam, so there was no calling in sick. Breakfast was out of the question so I reported early to flight ops where I found things buzzing. Sergeants Gulbranson and Long were not looking too good either, but I took little comfort from that. Captain Breed motioned for me to come into his office. I stepped through the doorway and stood at attention. He said there was no need for such formality; he just wanted to go over the radio log from the day before. He said he had heard a story that he couldn't confirm because there was no mention of it in

the log, and looked at me expectantly. It occurred to me that he may have been hung over although I don't recall if drank alcohol. I told him the log was started a little late, that the slick I was riding in had been diverted to insert the Doughboys before it inserted me into position. He nodded thoughtfully, sighed, and then asked if I remembered him telling me I was too valuable as an RTO to be screwing around as a crewmember. He reminded me that the door gunners were former Doughboys, and said if I wanted to be a Doughboy RTO he could arrange that as soon as the new radio man was up to speed. My head was hurting something awful, and I was beginning to wonder if I might have to dive outside and vomit. I managed to hold it together long enough to explain that I only wanted to see what it was like to fly in the gunners seat, if I had known it was going to cause a problem I would never have done it. He said he understood, and that if I wanted to eventually transfer into gunner he recommended that I volunteer as a scout observer. I told him I wanted to earn an air medal, and perhaps an air crewmembers wings; but I hadn't had time to come to grips with what had occurred yesterday. I realized it was really quiet in the rest of flight ops. This could have been attributed to hangovers, but I suspected it was because everyone else was eavesdropping. Once again Captain Breed nodded, and said he understood. The upshot was that I hadn't done anything underhanded, and I would be allowed more free rein once we had someone else reliable to take a spot in the radio room. As much as I wanted to get more air time, the RTO job had to come first.

M-3 Personnel Detector- AKA-People Sniffer

Originally designed as a man carried device in 1970, the XM-3 became the M-3 personnel detector, a standard-issue item used almost daily in UH-1H Long Knife helicopters. The M-3 was mounted on the floor of the slick just behind the pilot's seats with a reader clamped onto a skid. The usual flight formation consisted of a pair of OH-6A Warwagon scouts (flying 500 feet above the sniffer) and a C&C ship (flying 1,000 feet above the sniffer) with two AH-1 Crusader Cobra gunships providing cover for the sniffer and the scouts. The command and control ship logged results and controlled the formation maneuvers, while the scouts dropped smoke grenades to identify the wind direction in preparation for the Cobra delivering rockets and Minigun fire on identified personnel locations.

The sniffer aircraft carried a second lieutenant who took the readings. The idea was to fly over areas that were not supposed to be populated, allowing the people sniffer to detect any ammonia exuded by concentrations of unwashed bodies and to detect smoke from cooking fires. However, there was a problem with distinguishing between occupied areas and recently abandoned areas since effluents hung in the air for many hours. Another problem was the sniffer could not differentiate between human ammonia and animal ammonia and some concentrations were almost certainly from water buffalo herds. The rational was that if there were large concentrations of these animals in an area they were most likely used by the VC for pack animals. If the C&C believed an area contained sufficiently high readings a recommendation was made to higher headquarters

to put on an artillery fire mission or even a B-52 air strike. Following the artillery bombardment or air strike an infantry company would be inserted to evaluate the damage. The discovery of dead enemy personnel and destroyed bunkers usually validated the belief that the people sniffer was an asset that could be relied on.

Because the sniffers had to fly just over the treetops and at a slow speed they seemed like a fat target for an enemy with an AK-47, but the VC and NVA became familiar with the M-3 and attempted to avoid detection by not firing on sniffer missions. They also hung buckets of mud mixed with urine, and started fires in an attempt to create decoys and confuse readings. I went out one morning with Captain Breed flying as aircraft commander in the sniffer. The mission itself was routine, the sniffer operator would occasionally call out “Hot area” when he got a certain reading then when we were leaving the area he would call out “Cool area.” Since these were free fire areas the scouts would mark the area with smoke and sometimes toss fragmentation grenades and shoot their M-60s into an area if they spotted bunkers or partially concealed hooches.

When we came off station to refuel Captain Breed decided to practice his auto rotation technique by rolling the throttle back, then adding power just before setting down on the heliport. The sniffer technician almost shit his pants when the aircraft descended rapidly and jumped off the aircraft as soon as we hit the ground. Captain Breed thought this was hilarious and when the Butterbar told him that the next time he intended to pull that stunt to let him know so he could jump out. Captain Breed said he had no problem with that request and told me when it happened I was to toss a loaf of bread out at the same time so we could have second lieutenant sandwiches when we landed.

Mike Galvin

Mike came into D Troop early in 1969. Originally destined for the Doughboy platoon, he was instead assigned to flight operations as a clerk/typist due to his ability to type quickly and accurately. This took a load off of me; I had been often spent late nights typing up after action reports after my other duties were completed. Mike was a treasure for the Flight Operations unit; he was very intelligent and quickly established himself as invaluable in all facets of the operation; even filling in as an RTO in a pinch. He got involved in the troop missions as well, volunteering to fly missions when he was off duty from flight ops. Mike had been a free lance photographer in civilian life, and his wife was a model. He bought a 35MM camera from the Post Exchange (PX) and began to take pictures of everyone and everything. At first no one paid it too much mind, then he began to get his photos developed and we all saw something of what he was seeing. The officers loved his photographic skills, and he was utilized as the troop photographer on a regular basis, he even had “Photo Mission” painted on his flight helmet.. When Major Swindell left the Troop he was presented with a scrapbook, of which a good portion of the contents were photos that Mike had shot. His importance and extensive involvement caused him to be swiftly promoted to sergeant E-5, surprising no one. He did inadvertently cause a small disturbance on one occasion, when he walked into flight ops carrying a set of gold colored staff sergeant stripes. The assistant flight operations officer, a warrant officer named Mr. Winsett, was shocked. He did a double take, and then raced into the radio room to see what stripes I was wearing. When he saw that I was still wearing subdued E-5 stripes he told me to come and look. I came out and looked over at Mike who was

cutting the rocker off of the stripes with a pair of scissors. The upshot was that Mike was going to Hawaii for R&R, and needed a set of gold E-5 stripes for his dress uniform. The PX didn't have the right insignia, so he got E-6 stripes then just cut the rocker off. Mr. Winsett didn't know whether to be relieved or sad. He would often see Mike and me together and say: "Two buck sergeants; Goddamned if that isn't better than having a bird colonel around here!"

His wife often modeled nude, and would send Mike tasteful examples of her black and white photo shoots. He placed one of the pictures on his desk, and would respond to reactions of appreciation by telling the viewer that it was his wife. This caused quite a stir at first, then we all adapted to it. He would sometimes show me stacks of photos that she would send over to him for his comments. He would ask my opinion on lighting or costumes, and after awhile I could actually look at something besides her fabulous body, and give coherent answers. At some point he got a life size poster of her wearing a pair of cowboy boots, a Stetson, a gun belt, and nothing else that he put up on the wall behind his bunk. Most everyone who saw it thought it was great, although I remember Major Whitworth being shocked.

Mike and I became the best of friends, and I cared about him like a brother. No matter what really hot action he got involved in he would always tell me that I was "The Man." One occasion when I returned from the field with grass stains on my clothes and blood on my right hand and forehead he said "Goddamn Kirk you are look really combat!" He took a picture, but the light was bad and didn't come out. Fortunately, he did take some pictures that came out exceptionally well. I have some group shots of pilots from Mike that I couldn't have gotten on my own.

When I went on R&R to Bangkok Thailand I took a camera and shot a roll of film. Due to my incompetence the roll became exposed, and even Mike's best efforts couldn't save it. We shared many experiences together, Mike was the one who drove me to the airport when I left D Troop and was the only one to write a letter after I returned home. I was able to get in contact with Mike through the Lighthorse web site and we've corresponded via email a few times. As I said in the prologue I hadn't talked about my time in the service, and it's nice to reminisce a little with someone who could identify. Mike is living in Hawaii and taking life as it comes. Typically he hasn't let any moss grow under his feet and is just as witty as ever. In our first exchange of emails he commented that he hadn't talked too much about Vietnam with anyone either, that when he began to relive a D Troop adventure he could see in the eyes of the listener that they thought he was telling an exaggerated version of what really occurred. He said that it didn't mean he couldn't have a private smile now and then thinking about some of the things we did back in the day. He said one of his fondest recollections of me was an occasion when we had a chopper down and weren't receiving prompt help from battalion. He was as shocked as anyone when I got on the radio and imitated the base commander, getting some tail feathers shaking! Mike said it best when he opined that there were MASH episodes that were only slightly less believable that the stuff we actually pulled off on a semi regular basis.

White Owl

I wasn't much of a drinker in those days, so it didn't take too much to get me high. The enlisted men were allotted only so much alcohol per month; we had a ration card that

we had to get punched at what was called the Class VI store in order to pick up beer. However, there were quite a few guys who didn't drink and they would sell or sometimes give away their ration cards. Flight operations had a big refrigerator that we would stock with beer, and sometimes we would sell some cold beer to other less fortunate souls. We took the profits and purchased more beer or sodas with it, so effectively we were drinking for free. At any rate, we had so much beer that it was drawing attention so we threw a bash one night and invited everyone to join in. I was feeling the spirit before too long and the next day I woke up out on the flight line lying on a blanket under one of the slicks. Apparently I had decided that since I was supposed to fly the next morning I would just lie down next to the helicopter so I wouldn't be late. I awoke to the banging and crashing of the crew chief loading gear into the aircraft, and when I got up my head felt like it would explode. I walked back to the tail of the aircraft and began pissing a long stream onto the revetment when I saw a bug whose eyes bulged out on stalks from its head scurrying towards a hole in the PSP. I redirected my aim to allow forward lead, and was tracking well when my stream weakened, and then dribbled to a halt. Feeling a little better I turned back to see that a ribbon of urine was tracking inexorably towards a low spot, where my blanket was crumpled. Cursing, I staggered over and grabbed at the blanket, succeeding in further raking it through the gathering puddle. Looking around to see if I had any witnesses I stuffed the blanket up under the seat on the starboard side of the slick.

The crew chief was satisfied with the state of the aircraft before the pilot ever came out and did his pre flight inspection, but he walked around with him anyway, as was the custom. I checked the guns and ammo cans, then perched on the seat and strapped in. I

put on my helmet and hooked up my intercom, when the pilot asked if we were clear I looked back at the tail, called out “Clear right”, and then settled back as the rotor whined into motion and the aircraft shuddered as it warmed up. After takeoff we swung around onto a course for Ben Tre, and spent some time cutting doughnuts over the scouts. They had found an area that had been heavily used by the NVA. Although there were no enemies currently in evidence, there were *nguy hiem* (danger) signs posted up telling the locals to watch out for booby traps. This meant they had been through this area recently and were expecting the Americans to insert soldiers to follow them. One of the scouts shot up some bunkers and thought they had seen what looked like a antiaircraft gun so the Cobras rolled in and shot rockets into the area. Our aircraft moved off a little ways so as to stay clear, and I was just enjoying the sights when the aircraft commander decided he needed to get a little lower to take a look at what looked like a trail heading into some tall grass. There was a tree on each side of the suspected path obstructing the view from up higher. He came down into a hover and then sagged lower and lower, all the while he kept asking the crew chief if he could see anything. I had a cigar clamped in between my teeth to try and absorb some nicotine. With the helicopter almost to a halt I decided to light it up for a couple of quick puffs. Just about the time I got it lit, we lifted up away from the ground and green tracers started coming up all around us. One of the bullets came through the floor so close to my left foot it bounced my foot into the air and I felt a hot burning sensation low in my left thigh. Oh Sweet Jesus, I thought to myself I’m hit! It really hurts, burning and . . . . smoking? I lifted my leg up and bent over to look. I had bitten that cigar in half and it landed on the seat and rolled up under my thigh. I cursed and used my still damp blanket to beat out the smoldering seat as we gained altitude and

Di Di Maued out of there. I was wearing a fire resistant Nomex flight suit so no permanent damage occurred. Mike Galvin got such a laugh out of the story that night it was embarrassing. He asked if I hadn't learned in BCT to not piss up hill with my bedroll at the bottom. I told him that I believed it certainly should have been part of the curriculum.

Latrine Humor

The latrines I encountered in Vietnam all shared the same characteristics. They were constructed of wood, offering little protection against incoming, and they all stank. The enlisted men had one public side consisting of three or four holes, while the officers had a private single seater. Apparently the officers were gentlemen who were not suspected of masturbating, while enlisted soldiers would choke the chicken if left alone too long. These were out houses in the truest sense, once you were in you wanted out! The collection container was a fifty-five gallon drum cut in half. The half drum's vile contents were subjected to being doused with diesel fuel and set afire on a regular basis. I only was assigned this task one time, but that was plenty.

Because the seats were made of wood, and no one wanted to sit on urine we used 105 MM howitzer shells with the bottom cut out for piss tubes. The D Troop field first sergeant had a special platform built with a real porcelain urinal that drained into a trench underneath. I recall him telling us at a morning formation: "I don't piss in your ashtrays so don't put cigarette butts in my urinal!"

Despite the foul nature of the latrine, it still attracted some of the best graffiti artists. I first found out that “Kilroy had been here” in Bien Hoa and written high above the hole in a Dong Tam latrine was the admonition: “Don’t bother looking up here, the joke’s between your legs.” My all time favorite was one I saw at Vinh Long. The remark was written in small letters near the hole on the far end, slanting farther and farther down. You would have to keep leaning farther over to read it and when you did it read “If you can read this you are shitting on a forty-five-degree angle!”

An Unlucky Shot

I was in the flight operations bunker on the evening of 25 March 1969 when Charles started to mortar and rocket the base. We were taking a real pounding, the *thump, thump, thump* of the mortars was relentless, and dirt would sift through the heavily timbered ceiling whenever one hit close by. I was sitting on a milk crate listening to someone, I think it was a warrant officer, tell me about something he had been involved in that day. Without warning there came an explosion of such massive proportions it shook the bunker, bouncing me off the crate and onto the floor. I though we had taken a direct hit from a rocket and looked up at the ceiling to see if it was going to cave in. The officer later told me my eyes were as big as saucers.

Our bunker had not taken a direct hit, but the main ammo dump had and the resulting explosion’s colossal force was felt all over Dong Tam. Nearly 100 soldiers were killed or wounded in the barrage, and twelve helicopters were reduced to junk. One of the choppers was headed inbound to the refueling point and was blown clean out of the sky.

The dump cooked off for hours with every type of munitions from 5.56 MM to eight inch artillery shells blasting hot shrapnel into the air, joining with the metal being distributed by the enemy fire. When the barrage ended it became eerily quiet. I ventured out to the flight line to see if any aircraft were damaged. It wasn't a matter of if, it was how much. Most of the revetments had holes in them and there was a lot of broken glass and sheet metal damage, but most of the aircraft were in flyable shape and went out that morning.

Sergeant Gulbranson went over to another unit to see a buddy, and came back ashen faced and shaken. He said the orderly room had taken a rocket through the roof; it had exploded inside killing the first sergeant and an officer who happened to be there. He said it looked as if someone had just started shooting a shotgun loaded with buckshot while turning in a circle. Even the REMF's earned their combat pay that night, along with a Purple Heart.

Birthday Gift

1 April arrived without a lot of fanfare, I had been in the Army for fourteen months and in Vietnam for just over six months. My twenty first birthday was coming up on 8 April, but that was more a source of melancholy than celebration. I had received a carbon copy of a letter from a colonel at 2nd Brigade HQ telling me that I could have my birthday off with the best wishes all my fellow soldiers, but a day off didn't mean much to me under the circumstances. I sent the carbon to Ann in a letter, and since there was no signature on the copy, I just wrote the colonels name on the bottom. Of course she recognized my spidery handwriting and wondered if the letter was genuine, or if I was

merely trying to make her feel better by having her think I had my birthday day off. I told her I hadn't thought about it, just absently filled in the colonels "signature" since the letter looked incomplete without it. She didn't understand that a day off in Vietnam wasn't like a day off in the states; I couldn't leave and go to the beach or anything. Most likely the result would be the first sergeant aggravating me needlessly, so when the day came around I just went in to flight ops and hung out.

Unlike the sandbagged tent arrangement at Bearcat or the temporary Conex bunker, Dong Tams' permanent FO bunker was a spacious building with high ceilings and a generous amount of room for all facets. There were two entrances, one on each end, leading into a large area that was used as a briefing room. A wall running down the center of the bunker separated the briefing room from the main office portion, with a window cut into the wall so business could be conducted without everyone having to enter the office area. The radio room was separated from the office area and there were spaces for the flight operations officers on the far side of the bunker.

When I saw the field first sergeant come in and look around I was only mildly curious, it was quiet and I was feeling a little depressed. He saw me and came over with a serious look on his face, stopping in front of where I was standing in the radio shack and said "Aren't you supposed to have the day off sergeant?" I shrugged and started to reply that I was just hanging out, when Sergeant Pratt stuck his head around the corner and said that he didn't see any sergeants, just a soldier with Sp4 insignia. That's when I got confused even more. It must have shown because they both laughed and the field first handed me a copy of a set of orders dated 1 April. There was a line with a red circle around it that read, "To be Sergeant E-5: Sp4 Kirkland, Stephen E." followed by my social security

number and the designation 05B40. I didn't know whether to shit or go blind. After much hand shaking and grinning on all sides, I was told I was out of uniform and handed a set of E-5 pins. I took off my shirt and removed the E-4 patches, then pinned on my new rank. After the first sergeant departed, Sergeant Pratt allowed as how this called for a small celebration and brought out a beer which he poured into a couple of coffee cups and we toasted my good fortune.

I was prancing about like a prize pony when Sergeant Collins came in to see Sergeant Pratt. He said hello and perched on the edge of the desk. After a bit he squinted at my collar, then he leaned in for a closer look at my sergeants pins. He asked what in Hell that was on my collar, and I went as shy as a spring bride. Sergeant Pratt spoke up and said that in his day they called it buck sergeant stripes. Collins was a career soldier and had just made E-6 after years of holding Sp5 rank. He marveled at the way I was being promoted, and I was again in an "Aw shucks" mood. That evening I went to the NCO club for the first time. There were some other new E-5's there but all of them were specialists. I remember one of the guys I knew from the maintenance platoon marveling at my hard stripe pins, saying in his Southern accent "Ya'll made sergeant!" That attracted the attention of a Doughboy platoon sergeant who said "Oh Hell, they'd make anybody a sergeant!" Of course he was another lifer who thought he had an entitlement because he was a staff sergeant. I was still feeling shy, but that kind of pissed me off so I told him that he had no idea what I did or didn't do, so he could go stuff it. He wanted to act like a bad ass, but he was booed down and was shamed into letting up. Later, after many drinks had been purchased by the new E-5's, he was hanging on me and telling me how what a fine fellow I was. For my part I had to go on duty the next day and slipped

out to get some fresh air. We were mortared off and on that night, so I relocated into the flight ops bunker and crashed. I got up before daylight, took a cool shower and donned a fresh shirt with sergeant's stripes. Mike Galvin wanted to get a shot of the new sergeant, so I leaned against the bunker wall and made sure the stripes showed prominently in the photo.

In Country R&R in Vung Tau

In July I took a three day in country Rest and Relaxation (R&R) also known as Intercourse and Intoxication (I&I) because that is what most of the soldiers used it for, But I wasn't a big drinker and had a girl waiting at home, so I just wanted to get away from Dong Tam and all of the crap that went on there. I figured that a change of scenery couldn't be any worse than what I had seen thus far. I didn't have anyone to go with me, but I met another sergeant on the flight over and we hit it off right away. He was on his second tour and had been to Vung Tau before, so I let him take the lead on what we should do when we arrived. The first thing he recommended was to check in at the R&R center and have them put our money in their safe. We had Military Payment Certificates (MPC) that exchanged for a five to one rate, so a couple of hundred bucks would go a long way. We had bunks at the reception center, which serves as a sort of military YMCA, so we wouldn't need to rent a room. They served meals there as well, for a nominal fee.

I explained to the other sergeant, Tom, that I wasn't much of a drinker and had a steady girl that I wanted to have faith in me, so I was more or less looking for some

entertainment that wouldn't cause me a lot of embarrassment. Of course I had shown him a snap shot of Ann and he agreed that I was on the right track by not doing anything too risky. Nevertheless, he knew his way around and wanted to get his ashes hauled since he had no such constraints. Accordingly we changed fifty MPC into two hundred-fifty Dong (universally called Piasters) in Vietnamese currency. We divided the money into four piles then stuck the folded bills into different pockets as a hedge against getting picked. After securing our cash we headed off into the depths of the city. Within a few minutes I realized that I was seeing fewer and fewer Americans, which I pointed out to Tom. He said that was the idea; that I should relax while he showed me the real city. We came to a building with an open door leading into a large dark room. There were several pre-teen boys hanging around the doorframe and two of them peeled off and followed us as we made our way to the bar. Tom ordered two beers, and told me not to worry, they watered the beer so much there was no danger of getting drunk on it. He said they didn't make any money on drunks; all they did was bring trouble from the MPs.

In a short while our eyes adjusted to the dark room and it was easy to see that there were several Caucasian men in the room. One table had a card game going on and from the accent it seemed we had some Australians in our midst. I sipped the cool beer and contented myself with smoking a cigarette while Tom had an animated conversation with one of the pre-teen boys. Tom's Vietnamese was passable, or so it seemed to me. When I listened more closely I realized the conversation was a mixture of English, French and pidgin Vietnamese punctuated by wild gestures. After more discussion they turned to me. Tom told me to show the kid a picture of my girl friend. I was bewildered but I complied since I couldn't see any harm in doing so. The Vietnamese boy held the picture up into

the air to get a better look, frowned and said something I didn't get. Tom laughed and told me the boy had said, well ok, but she was not here and there were lots of women to be had. It came down to a matter of economics; he didn't care if I wanted to participate in his business, except for the fact that he wouldn't make any profit from me sitting at the bar. Tom said I needed to do something, so he suggested I check out one of the card games that were going on. I understood he wanted to take off for a while and didn't need me to tag along. This is really awkward for me, because I'm not much of a gambler either, I just didn't have much experience in it. Finally, the Vietnamese kid said that if I sat at a table with one of the girls and bought her a drink he would be mollified. So that is what I did. The girl was attractive as Asian women go, but no great beauty by any standard. She was drinking a cup of what looked like whisky, but that I guessed was tea. The price of the drink was the same as whisky of course. Her English wasn't too bad, a lot better than my Vietnamese and we were able to carry on a cursory conversation, most of which centered on why I didn't want to dance.

There was plenty to do in Vung Tau, but the best part was that I got to see a different side to the Vietnamese people. Up to this point my only contact with the local populace was negative. Other than a certain Capitalist attitude about profit making I had nothing but positive experiences. Geographically Vung Tau is on the tip of a Peninsula into the China Sea, and the beaches consist of fine white sand. It was sunny the whole three days, and I spent most of my time sight seeing and hanging out on the beach during the day, and hanging out at the club or going to a movie at night. I was careful to stick to Western food, with the exception of eating several pounds of the locally grown fruit and

vegetables. All and all it was a Hell of a good break from Dong Tam; Rest and Relaxation at its best.

When I returned to Dong Tam I was still dreamy with the freedom of being away from Dong Tam. Bone numbing boredom punctuated with periods of manic activity is common in a combat unit during wartime. I remembered reading of WW-I soldiers who would leave the trenches to go on leave, and then return to the horrible conditions when leave ended. I wondered why they would return. Now I knew; they were soldiers, and that is what soldiers do.

Ron Stevenson

Ron, AKA Peanuts, AKA Sonny, Stevenson, was another of my closest friends at D Troop. He worked as a cook in the troop mess hall and his specialty was creamed-chipped beef on toast, commonly known as shit on a shingle. Ron used hamburger instead of chipped beef and it was the best I've ever had. He would fire up a stove and feed me regardless of what crazy hours I was working, before daylight or after dark, he made sure I got a hot meal at least once per day. Another exclusive privilege I was extended was that he would freeze a canteen of water mixed with Kool-Aid so I could have cool water most of the day when I was remote RTO. He got the nickname Peanuts when got hooked on eating nuts from a Circus brand peanut can. I think it more the salt he desired than the nuts, but the constantly visible can that spawned the sobriquet. The nickname Sonny was I think a self designated one, although it's possible one of the first sergeants was responsible for that one.

When I went on R&R to Bangkok, Thailand, one of the officers/pilots, Captain McCloud, arranged for him to tag along. With one small exception he was a great companion the whole trip, he fell hopelessly in love with the girl from the hotel in Bangkok and it eventually was the cause of him being transferred to 3/5th Headquarters Company in I Corp near the DMZ. The day he left, I said my last goodbyes and then noticed he had left his reel to reel tape player behind. I radioed for the chopper to hold up for a minute, grabbed the tape player and raced towards the helipad in the flight ops Jeep. It was the Monsoon season and had been coming down in sheets all morning. There was a break in the clouds and the chopper pilot was anxious to get going while the weather was clear. I could see the Huey with the doors closed, an unusual sight, but no door gunners were required for this hop over to the airfield at Tan Son Nhut. In my haste I didn't think about the consequences of blasting thorough a muddy puddle of water just short of the helipad, but when I hit the water I quickly realized that this was no shallow puddle, this was a deep hole in the ground. The Jeep lived up to its reputation this time, as I quickly switched to four wheel drive, and climbed the steep bank almost before the water had time to rush back into the hole. I skidded to a stop next to the aircraft and handed the recorder to Ron. He had a bemused look on his face that confused me for awhile. It was only after I got back to flight operations that it occurred to me that he probably hadn't forgotten the tape recorder after all. There was most likely a message for me on it to be listened to after he was gone. I'll never know one way or another.

Ron was the only one of the guys I served with that attempted to look me up after I left the Army. He found my parent's phone number in the Detroit Phone Book and got my number from them. When he called he told me he was ill and was traveling around

looking up the old gang while he still could. We agreed to meet, but he never appeared, and I had no way of knowing what ever happened to him. I hope he is alive and well and living the good life.

Out of country R & R in Bangkok, Thailand

When it came time to decide where I wanted to spend my out of country R&R my choices were limited by rank and marital status. The higher the military rank the better the choices, with the married guys having Hawaii as one of their choices since they could meet their wives there. Quite a few of the single officers went to Sydney, Australia, and they recommended it to me as well, but a lowly buck sergeant would have to wait two tours to get a chance. In the end the choices came down to Taipei, Taiwan or Bangkok, Thailand. I wasn't all that crazy about taking an R&R by myself, but that looked like what would happen since the allocations were division wide and we already had several sergeants going at the same time. As I've said Captain McCloud, the flight operations officer at the time, got the okay for Ron Stevenson to accompany me on the trip.

Bangkok is only a short plane ride from Bien Hoa; we flew on a Thai Air 727 and felt very much like tourists. When we landed we were bussed to the R&R center where were given a list of dos and don'ts by the Air Force personnel who manned the center.

One of the most important things to know was to not go outside the city limits. The best bet was to stick to the downtown area; the businesses there depended largely on the tourist trade and had a vested interest in seeing that the GIs had a good safe time. The general population did not necessarily see it that way and might not be so hospitable.

Beer was readily available, and the liquor laws were such that drinking in public was not a crime, so we could expect to have beer offered to us in almost every venue. The down side was that the beer was eighteen percent alcohol by volume, very potent for the Western palate. Needless to say girls were available, the Asians didn't have Western puritanical values when it came to cohabitation, but if there were married guys in the group who chose to not participate there were also male or female guides available. Either way a companion was advised because they would be able to act as a tour guide and interpreter.

The main street was called Petchaburi; it was similar to Young Street in Toronto, Canada since it offered any thing that would be desired by the average male soldier. In order to make sure we didn't all try to crowd into the first hotel on the street there was a table with the names of the hotels labeled on boxes. In the boxes was a reservation card for that hotel. Once there were no more cards in a box then one could select from another box. Ron and I wanted to be in adjacent rooms so we picked rooms in the Petchaburi Hotel. Once we were assured lodging we exchanged our American dollars for Thai money, called Baht, at a five to one exchange. We were allowed to take up to five hundred dollars American, so I had twenty five hundred Baht to spend anyway I desired.

These hotels were first class and really inexpensive; they cost just pennies a day once the exchange rate was factored in. We checked in and put most of the money in the hotel safe. I had a bell hop that carried my bag up to the room, and explained the things I needed to know. Number one was that the water from the sink was not potable. There was a big pitcher of ice water in the room already and more was available when ever I wanted. I wrote home and described my room. It had two twin beds, desk, chair, sofa, a

small refrigerator, and most important to me a full bathroom with a tub and a real honest to God toilet. I indulged myself with a hot bath, ran the water a second time and soaked for a long time. I used the toilet and then called Ron to see what he was doing. He said his bell hop had said he recommended a massage, and I said that sounded all right to me, so I called the desk and told them to send up a masseuse.

After a short while there was a knock at the door, and when I opened it there was a tiny woman looking up at me. A real little doll with long dark hair and almond eyes, she was much different from the wizened Vietnamese women I was used to seeing. I don't know her name so I'll refer to her as Dollie. I stepped back and swept my arm in welcome, then turned and sat down on the nearest bed. I didn't really know what to expect, but I had my shirt off in anticipation of the massage, I assumed she would want me to lie down on my stomach, but I figured she would tell me. To my surprise Dollie was sitting on the easy chair with legs crossed at the knee, looking at me skeptically. I wasn't exactly Charles Atlas but I had a decent build and wasn't ashamed of my naked torso, but here my masseuse was sitting on the other side of the room, popping her chewing gum and looking at me like she wasn't impressed. Well, I didn't really know how to react, but I was a soldier fresh from Vietnam and I didn't feel like putting up with any shit from a girl. I got up and pointed at the door. "You can go" I said. She looked like she had swallowed a frog. Her eyes bulged from her head and she gawked at me in disbelief. She looked like a fish out of water, her mouth was working but no sound came out. I felt kind of bad, but I was committed, so I just pointed at the door. She left in a huff, leaving the door ajar in her wake. Not really sure what else to do I closed the door after looking up and down the empty hallway. I looked out the window leading onto the

balcony trying to think of what to do next. After a half hour or so I dialed the front desk and asked to be connected to Ron's room. I told him I thought I had fucked up by tossing the masseuse out on her ear. He was in good spirits, telling me that the one who came to his room was very attentive. He suggested that I just call down stairs and order up another one, after all, the customer is always right. Although this seemed a little unseemly I did as he suggested, and when the knock came this time I was determined to not do the same thing.

The expected knock came and when I opened the door I saw a tall woman with the requisite long dark hair and almond eyes, but with a white scar running from her eyebrow across her cheek and down on to her neck. She kept her head down as if she was expecting a rebuke. I stepped back and swept my arm into the room in welcome. She hesitated and came in as I retreated to the bed. I had put my shirt back on, and waited to see what her reaction would be. Apparently we were gauging one another since this went on for some time, until finally I thought to offer her a glass of water. She went to the pitcher and poured a little in a glass, sipping it while looking over the top of the glass at me. The scar seemed wider as seen through the glass and she touched her throat as if conscious of my gaze. I admitted that I didn't know how this was supposed to go, to which she asked in unaccented English if I wanted to bathe. I told her I had, twice in fact and planned to do so again, but right then I was expecting a massage. She sat down on the opposite side of the bed and pulled out a rate schedule. Sounding like a waitress explaining a menu she told me that the massage was five Baht, but the tour of the downtown area was twenty Baht. If I paid for the tour, the massage was included, but if I took the massage and later wanted the tour it would be twenty Baht extra. I did the math

and figured that this was going to cost the equivalent of four dollars US. Since I expected that I would want to see the sights and would need a guide anyway, I agreed. We went down the barber shop, where I paid the twenty Baht. People were coming out of other office rooms to get a peek at me, so I figured I must have made a name for myself by refusing the first masseuse. Apparently all was forgiven, and although I didn't see Dollie, everyone else was very kind; the guys giving me a knowing, worldly look, as if to say my secret was safe with them.

The guide/masseuse, who I will call Lilly, told me she needed to pick up her bag with the lotions and such, so I could go to the bar and wait, and then we could go eat, or I could go back up to the room. She walked with me back towards the hotel lobby and then in a very serious voice told me that if I wished she could arrange for my sexual needs to be met. She could do so discreetly, no public fuss needed to be made. I told her I certainly appreciated her desire to accommodate, but that I was married to a girl back home, and had my needs "Well in hand." To say she was astounded would be an understatement. How could this be? After I had tossed out Dollie she had run back to the barber shop and told them I was a flaming faggot! I didn't know what to say to that other than when she met my companion she could ask him about my martial status. I produced a picture of Ann, a favorite of her sitting in front of a lagoon in Hawaii. She remarked that I was very lucky to have someone so lovely waiting for me. I must have been tracing her scar with my eyes because she asked if I wondered about its origin. Taken aback, I must have stammered because she assured me it was okay, she said it was the result of a fall into a plate glass window, that she was just glad it hadn't cut her head off. At his point there seemed not much else to say. I told her I wanted to see what my partner,

Peanuts, was going to do, so I would meet her at the hotel restaurant in a half hour. She said to call the desk when I wanted to go eat, since she wasn't allowed to eat in the hotel restaurant. I felt that was pretty shitty, but it wasn't my hotel, and I had caused all the trouble I wanted to for awhile. I went up to my floor and knocked on Ron's door. He said it was unlocked, so I came in and stopped short. The masseuse I had rejected was sitting on his lap with a cat who ate the canary smirk on her face. I must have looked very surprised, but Ron didn't seem to notice, he was smiling broadly and was obviously very pleased. I had the distinct feeling there had been more than a massage going on, but I recovered quickly and only nodded to the girl, and told Ron I was going to get dressed in civvies and go out to eat. He said he would meet me in the lobby shortly.

While I waited our driver introduced himself, and explained that he lived downstairs in what was effectively a covered outdoor patio. This meant he was available whenever I wanted to go somewhere, even in the middle of the night. His fare was charged back to the room, but I understood that he would expect a healthy tip if I was to want to be driven around at strange hours. I didn't anticipate any problems with him; he was an experienced driver who knew the city inside and out. When Ron came down from his room, he had the satisfied air of a county baron who was about to embark on a tour of his estate. I noticed he had the girl close at hand. I called the desk and when the driver came around Lilly appeared from someplace nearby. She gave Dollie a long look and received one in return. I remember thinking that it looked as though an unspoken message was passed between them. Somehow I got the feeling that they were not the best of friends, but I didn't think that was a big deal, if it didn't work out we could always get different girls to take us around. Yeah, like Ron was going to let that happen.

We crammed into the little car, and then off we went for a wild ride through the downtown Bangkok area. I quickly learned that the drivers in this city only knew two things, the gas and the horn. Traffic lights were treated as a nuisance and it was a white knuckle flight all the way to the restaurant the girls had decided on. When we dropped off at the curb I got out grateful to have survived and remarked to Ron that I had been on attack runs in a helicopter that had not been as thrilling. The restaurant itself was off the beaten track, but we were welcomed with big smiles, a cold towel and bottles of the famous high octane beer. Lilly explained that the food was very good here without the exorbitant prices charged by the eateries on Petchaburi Street. She ordered a traditional dish for herself and a very bland meal of boiled rice and very thinly sliced meat for me. There were different bowls of sauce on the table and she took care to point out the ones that were mild, medium, hot and lava-like. The mild was none too cool, and I can't begin to imagine what they considered hot and crazy hot. I stuck to this kind of meal the whole time, supplemented with fresh vegetables and fruit. I tried a couple of mixed drinks, but found that water or beer worked best for me. I never contracted an intestinal problem, thanks to Lilly's guidance. After the meal we when back to the hotel, there was an outdoor pool, and although I couldn't swim I waded in the shallow end and basked in the sun. It really felt great to be able to relax without worrying about snipers or mortar attacks. The girls were not allowed to accompany us to the pool, so we gave them a couple of bucks and told them to go get their nails done and we would see them for supper and go out on the town for a tour of the famous Petchaburi Street night life. The clubs were nothing special really, mostly just sweaty GIs and bar girls, with a Thai band attempting to play what they interpreted to be the current Western hit music.

The days and nights passed quickly, Peanuts was in love, or so he thought, and I was content to live an easy existence with my guide. She could read and write English as well as Thai and spoke French, although I am no judge of how well. My driver was amazed that we kept the same companions for the whole week; he said the GIs always were like Butterflies, moving from one flower to another. I showed him a couple of pictures of Ann and explained to him that I was "married." That Ron was thunderstruck didn't need to be explained. Our driver has other useful talents, which he demonstrated when I needed some US dollars in order to ship home some souvenirs. With the help of Lilly as a medium I was able to select some really nice goods to send home to Ann and my relatives. Handmade table cloths and such that would have cost a pretty penny in the States were very inexpensive in the markets. The post office on the base could only accept US currency but technically we were not allowed to possess US money since an infusion of dollars would weaken the Thai Baht. Of course money was available on the black market for a price, and my driver was able to make the exchange. No one at the Post Office seemed to be the least bit interested in how I came up with the green backs and the transaction went smoothly. Ron didn't have anyone he wanted to send anything to, he had gotten a Dear John letter months before and was really only interested in Dollie anyway. Our guides were quite a contrast, Lilly was serious minded and wanted to make sure I got the most value out of my vacation. Her scar was a distraction for a little while, it had been badly repaired, and caused her left eye to appear to slightly sag. But after the initial tendency to stare I looked past it to her rather broad, flat face. Her eyes smiled and her teeth glittered and I felt comforted to know she was someone who had my best interests in mind. She had big hands with long fingers and when she massaged she would

chop and dig into muscles as if she had a personal vendetta against tension. Dollie on the other hand clung to Ron whenever I was with them, she had a little knowing smile that she gave me whenever he wasn't looking, and I would have gladly cut her loose if I hadn't known it would cause trouble between me and Ron.

Everywhere I looked there were decorative spirit houses outside all the buildings whether they were hotels, apartments, shops, or houses on stilts. Looking like elaborate birdhouses adorned with colorful garlands of flowers, incense and candles, Lilly explained that these shrines are believed to accommodate the territorial spirits who were displaced by the building. Ron and I went on tour of a Buddhist Temple, one morning, it was something most Westerners see only in books or films, and was an impressive sight, to say the least. Surrounded by a high wall, the temple is like a city within a city, and actually consists of several buildings including a Wat, a central sacred sanctuary housing a statue of Buddha. Monks sat in front of the figure chanting a mantra, and worshipers came in with sacrifices of chickens or fruit. Once again the guides were not allowed to accompany us, but we were coached to take along a pair of spare socks, since shoes were not allowed to be worn in the temple, and we had to be careful to not let the soles of our feet be directed towards the Buddha.

The best part of the sightseeing was a trip on a boat to an island surrounded by buildings on stilts, and boats tied together to form a floating market. The buildings were made of bamboo and thatch with swaying bridges made of ropes and woven straw mats. On the island there was an elephant that would kneel down on command allowing a person to climb on its neck for a ride. I was a little intimidated, but as I couldn't let on, I paid a few pennies and then was handed a small bunch of stunted bananas. The trainer

said some words and waved a small stick to get the beast to kneel. I climbed onto the elephant's leg and then onto its neck. My legs were stretched wide apart and the trainer motioned for me to slide down closer to the head. The neck was not so wide at that point and was easier to sit. The elephant began to move slowly in a circle and lifted its truck back over its head, wiggling the finger-like tip of its trunk in a suggestive manner. I got the hint and broke off bananas and fed them one at a time. When I had just the stub left and had fed that to the lumbering behemoth the trainer brought it to a halt and had it kneel once more so I could climb down. Peanuts went for a similar excursion. We took pictures with my Petri thirty-five millimeter, but unfortunately the film ripped and the photos were ruined.

All too quickly our idyllic trip came to an end, and we were on a plane back to Vietnam. We were quarantined for a day when we arrived to see if we were going to be sick right away from any strange food or drink we might have ingested. While we were there we were warned not to bring any flora, fauna, food or weapons from outside of the county into Vietnam, as one officer sarcastically said, the "US government didn't want us bringing in anything we could use to kill somebody!"

We wound up at the airport in Tan Son Nhut where we had to wait for the first available transportation going to Dong Tam. The pecking order for transit was based on rank, the highest rank getting first choice. There was a bird colonel in the group, so I just sat back, figuring it would be awhile before we were called. Then I heard the buzz of rotors, and here came a LOH with D Troop Cavalry stripes. Everyone looked on interestedly as the pilot got out and walked over to where we were standing. He shook hands with me, and then Peanuts, and then helped us stow our bags in the back of the

aircraft. I waved for Ron to get in the left seat, and then climbed into the back seat. As we took off I looked back over where the VIP officer was watching, the look on his face was priceless.

We reported back to D Troop still dreamy from our experience, but the harsh reality quickly set in. Peanuts had to be up early the next morning to be at the mess hall, and the radio room was anxious to get me back out into the field. Ron couldn't stop thinking about Dollie, and drove me just about nuts trying to enlist my help in securing another trip back so he could see her again. I just didn't have the heart to tell him what I knew to be true, that she had forgotten about him minutes after we left. He stayed so persistent that the first sergeant eventually arranged for him to be transferred out of D Troop to stop him from trying to go AWOL. As for my part some months later I got a letter from Lilly, it had been everywhere since all she knew was that I was in D Troop 3/5th in Dong Tam. Against all odds the efficiency of the US mail prevailed, and it arrived with more post office stamps than I knew existed. In essence it said that I had treated her with great respect, and if I could to return to Bangkok someday she would show us the rest of her beautiful country. I put the letter in the burn barrel, I didn't want the first sergeant to find out about it and get ideas about transferring me up north with Sonny.

Fifty Caliber Experiment

I suppose every Cavalry troop has experimented with trying to put as much firepower as possible on target. The early Cavalry Troops employed Charlie model Hueys loaded up with rocket launchers and multiple M-60 machine gun mounts in order to shoot the

maximum ordinance. Of course D Troop wasn't any different, and when Sergeant Pratt came up with an idea that we could mount an M-2 Browning fifty caliber machine gun on the deck of a slick it was endorsed by the CO. Sergeant Pratt, a Staff Sergeant named Collins, and I worked on our project during our off time. On 15 March we took our experiment out for a test flight. I didn't record the manner in which we mounted the machine gun, and I don't know if we ever did it again. I've talked to another VN vet who said when they tried it in his Troop it shook bolts loose on the helicopter, so we may not have used it a second time.

Inexplicably, I broke my vow to not write home about any combat related activities. I wrote to Ann that night and described the event this way:

"I went up on a little test fire mission. We wanted to test fire a .50 caliber machine gun we had mounted onto the deck of a helicopter. We spotted 2 VC hiding in the bushes, so we shot them, and sank their sampan (a little canoe like boat.) It was pretty cool. Sergeant Pratt fired the .50 cal. and Sergeant Collins fired the M-60-I was shooting my M-16. (I had been on the M-60 earlier, but not being used to it I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.) But that old 16 was really barking, we shot up that whole area real good, shot that sampan all to pieces. We could see the upper part of 1 VC's body and the legs of the other guy sticking out of the bushes. They were both dead. That .50 caliber really tears a man up. But enough of this stuff. I don't know why I even wrote that. I just wanted to tell you about it I guess, for some obscure reason. I love you. Please don't feel badly of me."

I finished the letter by telling Ann that I was tired and thought I would go to bed early and get some extra Z's. Apparently I wasn't worried about any nightmares concerning

my day time activity. I had become anesthetized to killing, but apparently I was still somewhat aware of the effect on the folks back home. There is no way for people who haven't been there to truly understand the experience.

D Troop Dogs

In the time I spent at Dong Tam we managed to adopt several dogs, one of which I was most fond. I suppose there were some species of cat in Vietnam, I've heard stories concerning Tigers for instance, but I never saw a single cat the whole time I was there. Dogs on the other hand were plentiful. One of them was a bitch called Suzy. All of the dogs were mongrels, and Suzy was the epitome of the term. She was short legged and fat, seeming almost as big around as she was tall. She spent the daylight hours lazily hanging around the mess hall looking for handouts. It wasn't unusual to see her laying in the shade of the roof overhang, seeming dead to the world. But one occasion I happened to be passing by when a rat stuck its snout around the near corner. Instantly, Suzy's head came up and the two adversaries gave each other a long look. Suddenly, the rat turned and headed around the building. Suzy leapt to her feet and rocketed off after it. I started to continue on with my journey, when the rat appeared around the near corner of the building running full out, and here came Suzy, hot on its tail. This was not at all what I expected, I didn't have any idea this little dog could generate that kind of speed, especially in a prolonged chase. On the second leg of the life or death race it was clear the rat was losing ground and halfway through Suzy caught it in her jaws, and shook it until it was limp. She seemed to lose interest at that point, merely slinging it against the

wall before once more lying down in the shade. Within seconds one of the female Vietnamese KPs slipped up on the rat while cautiously watching Suzy, who ignored her. The woman looked at me with big grin, picked up the rat and scurried away. I watched her to make sure she didn't take the rat into the mess hall, then walked over and said "Well done Suzy." She beat her short tail on the ground in response.

One of the bitches was looking for a place to have her pups, so we penned her up under the stairs to the headquarters barracks second story. This way we knew she wouldn't whelp the pups on someone's bunk, and we could try to keep the Vietnamese from stealing the newborn pups. She gave birth to three males and one female. I don't remember all of the boy's names, but I think one was called Bear. The bitch we called Maude. I don't recall how we came up with the names, but for some reason Maude adopted me. She would come tottering into my hooch and want to be picked up and put on my bunk. Often she would come in and want up with me during the night. When we had mortar attacks I would snatch her up and run out into the barracks area hollering "Incoming---Red Alert!" All the while I was carrying that little pup. When I was sure everyone was out of the barracks I would run for the bunker, and come skidding in with the pup riding in the crook of my arm like that was the most natural place to be. Some of the guys laughed about it at first, but when I set her down and she meandered around by their feet, most everyone would wind up petting her or picking her up. When it came time to go back, she would squirm and want down, then come over to me to be picked up and carried back. Whenever I sat still for a few minutes she would make a sneak attack, jumping on me with her muddy paws. If I scolded her she would sulk and pretend not to

hear me if I called her. But if I walked over to her crooning softly she couldn't resist, she would start jerking and her tail would start wagging uncontrollably.

Vietnam was a cruel place in most every sense of the word, and my experience with the dogs was no different than most others. We gave all of the male dogs away, but everyone knew Maude was my dog. She would follow me out to the flight line on the days I flew, and when the helicopters started to come in she was waiting for me to return. When she was about three months old she became sickly, refusing to eat and lying around more that normal. One morning when I was getting ready to leave for the flight line, I picked her up and carried her to flight operations. Even when she was tiny she had never once gone poop indoors, it was as if she was born housebroken. I set her down and went about getting my gear together when I heard Sergeant Gulbranson cursing up a storm. This was not unusual in itself, but he was calling Maude a "Bad dog" while he was doing it. I hurried over to see that she had vomited on the floor. I said I would take care of it, but when I started to clean up the mess I realized the vomit was flecked with bright red blood. Maude was lying on her side panting and jerking. Mike Galvin was looking at her and said this didn't look good. Sergeant Gulbranson said he would take her to the vet later in the morning. When I got back that night, Maude was not on the flight line and no one would look me in the eye. I asked if they had taken her to the vet, and Sergeant Gulbranson said he had taken her to a Vietnamese who was good with animals, but that he wasn't able to save her. I said I understood, and went to my hooch to be alone. I wrote home to Ann and told her. One of the guys in the barracks asked if I knew why the MPs had been in the Troop area that morning. I told him I had been flying all day, and that was the first I had heard of it. I was really down, and didn't think of it again until the first

sergeant told me Gulbranson had shot Maude with a pistol, and the MPs had come to investigate a report of gunshots. He saw how pissed off I was, and said not to be angry at Gulbranson, someone had poisoned her and that it was the easiest thing for her.

My parents felt so bad about my dog dieing they bought a little Pomerian bitch, which they named Goldie, thinking they would surprise me with her when I got home. They fell in love with the pup, and couldn't part with her when the time came. I understood completely.

Ben Tre Hot Seat

One day at Ben Tre during the rainy season I was set up just outside of a dilapidated sandbag bunker. I had built a shelter out of rocket boxes and PSP, but it had gotten dismantled by parties unknown . A platoon of ARVN's had been set up here recently and they had left behind the usual mess of chicken feathers and junk. They would get off of an insertion helicopter with live chickens, pots and all kinds of stuff and almost immediately they would wring the chicken's necks and start boiling water to cook them in. I used to call this the "Picnic posture" because they would do this while lead was flying. They seemed to have complete confidence that the big Americans had everything under control and were going to win the war for them.

A dark cloud appeared, and I knew I was in for a cloud burst. I usually just sat out the storms, they would come and go quickly leaving me soaked, but then the sun would appear and steam would come off of my clothes. For some reason I decided to duck inside the bunker, although it was as leaky as a straw hat. There was an L shaped wall in

behind the entrance designed to stop an enemy from firing directly into the door. I waited just inside the doorway until the worst of the storm passed; listening to the chatter over the radio, hoping my callsign wasn't called until the rain let up. Because the clouds were widely spaced it was entirely possible that it wasn't raining where the scouts were operating, but I would have to be outside in order for the short antennae on my Prick-25 to be effective. I had just started up the slight incline from the doorway when a mortar or rocket hit on the other side of the sandbags. It created a sort of vacuum that sucked me back against the wall of the bunker, momentarily stunning me. I slid down into a sitting position, and then radioed out to the C&C, pilot Captain McCloud. One of the Crusaders, I think it was Lieutenant Zimecki, told me that the C&C was off station on his way back to Ben Tre to refuel. I told him that I had just received incoming, and they might be trying to hit the POL refueling point again. The Crusader pilot told me he thought Lighthorse 3 was on the infantry frequency, but my radio was outside the bunker, and I wasn't ready to go there just yet. Meanwhile the mortars were pounding down, although a little farther away. At this point I suspected they were after an ammo cache on the east side of the airfield. The bunker wasn't the best protection but it was better than being outside, so I stayed put.

A voice I wasn't familiar with came over the freq; it was a Carrier based jet who said he had some anti-personnel ordnance on board and wanted to know if ground units needed some air support. I don't recall his callsign but it was something like Wolf Pack 23. The jet driver asked for any element on this freq to respond, so I did. I told him I was a ground element located at the north end of the airstrip. I suspected the incoming was coming from a tree line to the north west. I duck walked over to the firing slit at the front

of the bunker and shot an azimuth with my compass. After consulting my map, I asked the jet, known as a fast mover, if he could hit the tree line. He asked me to pop smoke so he could get my position. I called the Crusader pilot and let him know what we had in mind so he would stay out of the path. Then I went out of the bunker and tossed a yellow smoke grenade over the top. “Roger Yankee smoke” radioed the jet. When I confirmed the color the fast mover made a run on the tree line with a slick bomb, so called because they tumble onto the target making them easy to put just short of the intended target. The napalm did the rest; spreading in its horrific manner, sucking up oxygen and burning so hot I could feel the heat even from a respectable distance. Things got quite a bit quieter for a moment or two; the jet made another run from the opposite direction then called out that he was on his way out. I thanked him and decided to get the hell out of Dodge. The only problem was that the ammo cache was cooking off. The C&C had landed was waiting for me on the other side of the airstrip, near the POL point. I picked up the other radio and ran in a crouch, diving to the ground occasionally as I felt the need. I had taken off my steel pot and put on a baseball cap to help keep the sun off my face. I didn’t retrieve the helmet when I made my dash, just the radios and my rifle. After what seemed a week I reached the aircraft and tossed my gear in. As I was scrambling in my cap flew off tumbling away on the port side. The crew chief, whose name I don’t remember, retrieved my cap. Climbing back in, he handed it to me with a grin. I thanked him sheepishly, feeling a little dorky for nearly losing all of my headgear in a three minute span.

Sergeant Haskins

The time at Dong Tam was winding down and Sergeant Pratt was due to DEROS, so a new NCOIC was due in. I had a whole crew of RTOs in flight operations by this point and as the senior man I pretty much just supervised the goings on in the radio room. When Sergeant Haskins came on board I had been in country almost ten months, and knew what to do under just about any circumstance. Unlike Sergeant Pratt who knew me as a PFC and became my good friend, Sergeant Haskins saw me as a competent NCO who should be entrusted to responsibility while he got grounded in his new job.

The biggest difference for me was that he expected me to act like a sergeant. Up to this point I was treated pretty much as an RTO who happened to wear three stripes. Sergeant Haskins referred to me as Sergeant Kirkland, not Kirk or Steve, and expected me to carry out the command duties a real Army NCO would routinely do. I wrote home and said that I was a little scared at first, but after a bit it was kind of fun to "Play Sergeant." One of the reasons I was able to carry out his orders without a lot of flak was that most of the guys who knew me before I was promoted to sergeant had either moved to Vinh Long, or had been sent back to the states with units that were being extracted from RVN.

My name was on what was called the *critical list.* This was a list of personnel considered critical to the success of the operation. It was pretty heady stuff considering that higher ranking personnel, such as Sergeant Haskins, were not on the list.

We had a new RTO who was not performing up to standard, and I determined that it was the lack of positive attitude, not his ability, that was holding him back. After a short

mental debate I decided his lackadaisical work ethic was going to get someone killed, so I told Sergeant Haskins that I wasn't satisfied with Sp4 Johnson's performance. Sergeant Haskins had a talk with him, then said to me "Sergeant Kirkland if you don't have any objections I am going to transfer Johnson out today." I had no objection.

The only down side to playing sergeant was seeing the wary look come into a lower ranking enlisted mans' eyes when I approached him. I thought back to all the times I had been perfectly happy with my duty, only to have a Sergeant come around with some bullshit detail. I tried to think back to how Sergeants Carroll or Pratt would handle each situation. It was important for me to motivate the people under my charge to act because their training and inclination lead them to do so, not because I had brow-beat them into it. Of course I did whatever it took to accomplish the task. I adopted a relaxed stance and tried to keep my eyes neutral the way the sergeant at the Reliable Academy had done. I practiced his slow cadence when I was alone, but I quickly learned it didn't work for me, it made me sound as if I was weighing my words cautiously. Through watching reactions I learned the best thing for me to do was demonstrate that I wasn't asking for anything I wouldn't do myself. For instance if I had a work detail building a bunker around a generator, I took off my shirt and grabbed a shovel to show how I wanted it laid out. I also learned that with the reduced amount of personnel at Dong Tam there was more focus from people like the new CO, Major Owens.

One occasion I was demonstrating how I wanted a task performed when the CO approached the group. He told me to put my shirt on and that he was paying me to lead, not to labor. As usual he interfered with my actions because he was too egocentric to

understand that I *was* leading. Rank does have its privileges, although I soon learned privilege is easily abused.

The first morning after I was promoted to sergeant I went to the mess hall where there was a short queue. Noting that all of the guys in line were FNG's I barked at them to make way for a sergeant! I was only trying to make a poor joke, and if it had been guys who knew I had just been promoted they would have understood; but these new guys only saw the stripes and moved aside. I felt like a heel and there were a lot of raised eyebrows from the cooks, but it was too late to do anything else, so I grabbed a tray and stepped to the front of the line. The head cook made a point of asking "How do you want your eggs, Sarge?" Humbled, I asked if it would be too much to cook them, which seemed to lighten the mood.

Sergeant Haskins was a fine career NCO, and thought I had the potential to follow in his footsteps. I believe he was one of the people who referred me to the reenlistment officer when we got to Vinh Long. When I got my DEROS (Date Eligible Return from Overseas) papers his comment was that "The voice of combat will be sorely missed and long remembered."

Omer Jones

Omer Jones, also know as Jonesy, came into flight operations at a time when I was ascending to the throne. All of the sergeants who had been in flight operations had DEROSED by this point, leaving me as the top sergeant. Jones was a Sp4 when he came into flight ops, but he was a career soldier who had served in a radio capacity in Germany

before coming to Vietnam. Since I was already a sergeant and was practiced at working the flight ops radio room he deferred to me and treated me with respect. NCOs are supposed to bunk separately from the lower ranking enlisted men, but all of the rooms were occupied by staff sergeants or above. Having to share quarters with the guys you were supervising undermined the process and was counterproductive. As a result, headquarters put out an edict that sergeants were to share a hooch, this effectively doubled the available number of rooms. Since Jones had recently made buck sergeant we were paired up together. That was when we began to have friction. When Jones began to question my background in radio, I told him that I was anointed rather than ordained; I didn't have any real training other than what I had picked up on OJT. At the risk of sounding mean spirited I have to say that Jones was not a highly intelligent person, instead he survived on guile and the ability to leverage information. Oddly enough these dubious qualities would later stand him in good stead with Major Owens.

We did share one particularly memorable event together. One day there was a daylight mortar attack, a rather unusual even in itself. These were relatively small mortars, and they landed in the midst of a bunch of vehicles, flattening tires, breaking glass, and butchering canvas. Jonesy was detailed to go out and restore some communication lines that had been cut by shrapnel. I went along as security. Standard Operating Procedure was for a work detail to be covered by an alert guard while they were working an area that had recently been under attack, in case the mortar attack was the prelude to a ground attack. The theory was that the soldiers performing clean up duties would have their hands full and would be easy targets for armed attackers. Jonesy was splicing wires and I was idly gazing about when a mortar round landed nearby *SA-Cum*! We looked at one

another and both had the same thought: the last attack blew these wires down, so the next one just might be zeroed in on the same place. Omer dropped what he was doing and dashed for a sandbagged generator bunker with me hot on his heels. Unencumbered by carrying a rifle he dove over the top, while I opted to run to a larger bunker just to the left of the one protecting the generator. Just as I reached the corner of the building another round impacted so close that I could hear the shrapnel make a *Whack*! sound right behind my ass. After what was deemed to be a safe period I emerged and collected Jonesy from his bunker. He was laying on his back smoking a cigarette, and was skeptical of my story about almost getting a load of hot steel in my rear end. I took him over to the spot and dug a couple of pieces out with his linesman's pliers. He eyes widened and he whistled slowly. When I recounted the story that night Jones didn't dispute anything directly, just said he didn't witness it because he was prone behind some sandbags at the time. I took this to be a typical response from him. If it didn't raise his stock he wasn't interested.

I don't mean to imply he was a bad guy, just not a close friend. We did have our lighter moments. In the rainy season the flies would come indoors in droves to avoid the drowning rain. They were a major annoyance and it kept us busy with a swatter trying to put a dent in the population. On one occasion I had a swatter working when Mike Galvin grabbed one as well and we started playing scout team. I was the lead making gun runs on targets of opportunity while Mike was trail, cleaning up any wounded and getting the stragglers. The real fun started when Omer grabbed a towel and played the role of the Cobra gun ship. The gun runs by Mike and myself would get the flies swarming in huge clouds allowing Jonesy to snap the towel in their midst killing dozens at a time. Who said you couldn't have a good time once in awhile?

This last event is an illustration of how Jones could go one way, and then without any real warning, go another. One night when Jones was fairly new I was teaching him how to set up the flight schedules for the next day. I had scheduled myself as a crewmember and hadn't had any alcohol that night. Ironically, the pilot who had the Officer of the Day duty wandered into the radio room with a bottle of Mateus wine in his hand and offered us a drink. I declined but Jonesy took the bottle and held it up as if drinking, but I could see his thumb was blocking the top. He lowered the bottle and made a comment as to how he didn't think he was too good to drink with a fine officer and pilot. This implied that I thought I was in fact too proud. The officer was too loaded to get a line as subtle as that one, so he saluted and wandered back out. I went about my business without comment, but this incident only reaffirmed my thinking that I needed to watch my back around Jonesy. In a letter from Mike Galvin that I received after I was back in the States, he talked about how Major Owens had set Jones up in a radio room not under operational control of flight ops. I wasn't surprised; he and Major Owens deserved each other.

Flight to Vinh Long

I made sure that anyone who had any influence knew that I had already suffered through one transition and did not want to be one of the last to leave Dong Tam. I argued that I was the best man to see that the radio room was set up correctly at Vinh Long, so we could get right to business. Secretly I was thinking that I was too short to be fooling around at Dong Tam, where the VC were becoming increasingly bold in their mortar and rocket attacks as the number of American soldiers dwindled. Whatever the reason, I got

my wish. Sergeant Haskins made sure I was put in charge of a platoon of soldiers in addition to the PRC-25 I was carrying on my back, so I was a sort of RTO platoon leader. We were going to travel in a Chinook helicopter so I marched my charges out to the flight line in a column of twos and we did what soldiers do best: hurry up and wait.

The group I was in charge of was diverse, I had a headquarters clerk who was a buddy of mine, some cooks and supply clerks, and a smattering of new infantry types recently assigned to the Doughboys, the senior ones having already gone on to Vinh Long. I told them to set down their duffle bags and relax. Someone asked if they could smoke and I told him he looked too green to burn. That got a perfunctory laugh and then we settled down. I was in my combat gear, flak jacket, steel pot and I was carrying my M-16 in addition to the radio on my back. I was looking in the direction I expected the Chinook to make its approach, but in my peripheral vision, I could see one of the grunts making a dismissive wave in my direction while talking to a couple of his buddies. Figuring I had better nip any insubordination in the bud, I turned what I hoped was a steely gaze on him. His cronies noticed it first, and then he looked in the direction of their eyes. In fairness to him he looked slightly abashed, but I wasn't satisfied. After looking back in the direction of the expected helicopter approach, I slowly sauntered over to where he was squatting. Once there, I looked down and softly told him to stand up. He levered himself into a position of not quite attention. I continued to look at him for a few more seconds, aware that all eyes were on me. I glanced down at his rank, PFC, then at his name tag. Using his rank and last name, but with a deliberate emphasis on the word Private, I asked him how long he had been in the Army. He replied with an answer of less than eight months. Then I asked him if in that time he hadn't learned that the worst thing he could do was to piss

off a sergeant. He reddened, but his eyes remained defiant. He said he hadn't done anything to piss off a sergeant that he was aware of. I told him that his awareness level had better get a lot better really quick if he expected to survive his tour. I gestured toward my stripes and my aircraft crewman's badge. I told him I expected he didn't think he needed to respect me because I wasn't 11 Bravo, but that he had better respect those stripes. Finally, I said that this was a Cavalry outfit and that I had shot at and missed more VC than he was going to see if he didn't get his head out of his ass. The defiant look faded and was replaced by one of bewilderment. I turned away and saw the headquarters clerk looking at me as if he was seeing me for the first time. This was certainly a different me than he had ever seen before. I wasn't satisfied that I had handled the situation correctly, but the radio crackled with a callsign from the Chinook, looking for direction. I answered as 91 Zulu, telling him our location and relationship to his aircraft. He answered in the laconic voice pilots always seem to adopt and set his aircraft down in front of the platoon. When I turned back to my charges they were already on their feet and lined up in a column of twos. I said all right men; let's move out just like John Wayne. When you get to the ramp the load master will direct you where to stack your bags and where to sit. When we get to Vinh Long and disembark, form up in this same formation and wait for further instruction. No one had any questions or comments.

Vinh Long

Once we arrived at Vinh Long I turned my troops over to the first sergeant and went about reconnoitering the area. My preconceived notions were that Vinh Long would be like Dong Tam when I first arrived there. I couldn't have been more mistaken. This

was no crude mud hole; this was an established Army base. There were wooden buildings all over the place, and in place of the bunkers I expected to see surrounding the perimeter, there were areas of nothing but barbed wire fences, designed more to keep the enlisted men from sneaking into town than to keep VC out. I reported to the flight operations area, only to find that I was the flight operations sergeant. Sergeant Collins outranked me, but he knew next to nothing about what needed to be done. I walked over to the orderly room and told the clerk I needed to see the first sergeant about a work detail. He seemed to want to make a comment about my pulling rank, but he just smiled and said he would pass the word along. The first sergeant's reaction was to send back word that I could round up my own work party, but he did tell me where to find them. When I arrived at the suggested area I realized that it was the Doughboy barracks. I squared my soldiers and marched in. I looked around until I spotted the rooms at the end of the barracks, and walked back to a door marked platoon sergeant. I knocked on the doorframe and walked in. I was relieved to find a sergeant I used to drink beer with at the NCO club at Dong Tam. We shot the bull for a few minutes, and then I told him what I was after. He just needed to know where and when I needed my gang. Once the PFCs and Sp4s learned they had been betrayed by one of their own sergeants things went pretty smoothly.

On one occasion Top told me to gather a detail, he had some shit that needed to go to the dump. I got my usual gang of troops together, and then I went to the motor pool and requisitioned a three-quarter ton truck to haul our load. To my amazement the next destination was the enlisted latrine. It seems the half barrels couldn't be burned down any farther, so we were actually going to haul shit to the dump. The first sergeant told me to not get caught by the MPs and off we went. There was a guard shack next to the entrance

to the land fill, with MPs lazing around. One of them came out and opened the gate to the dump so I could drive in. We had attempted to camouflage our illicit cargo by loading some empty rocket boxes on top of the drums of waste, but it wasn't needed as the MP wasn't too interested in our cargo. All seemed to be going as planned when we drove around to the back or the land fill to push the drums out of the back of the truck. What I hadn't taken into account was the local Vietnamese tendency to see our trash as their treasure. A group rushed over to the half-drums and dived in with both arms. Of course they came back out just as quickly, enraged at what they saw as a terrible practical joke. My first reaction was to drive quickly away, but they chased after us with fire in their eyes. Realizing that a row would attract the unwanted attention of the MPs, I came up with another idea. I pulled to a stop and produced a pack of Salem cigarettes. Seeing what I was doing the other soldiers also pulled out packs of smokes, and we began to pass out a couple of cigarettes to each of our would be attackers. This quickly mollified them and as we drove slowly away the Vietnamese smiled and slinging the dung off of their arms as they waved goodbye.

My only objection to the new base at Vinh Long was that the site assigned to flight operations was essentially a twenty by twelve foot room. This wasn't even enough space for a separate radio room, but it was what I had to work with, so I made do. I was amazed to learn that no sandbagging or hardening was required. Charlie did not mortar the base. I guess the VC were running the black market in Vinh Long and didn't want to ruin a good thing. Sergeant Collins was actually living off post. He asked if I wanted to drop him off at his hooch, I would have to come back to the base since I was an E-5, but I could hang out with him for awhile off post. I took him up on his offer and after we were

in the tavern for a little while Collins admitted that he actually had three girls living with him, although two were boarders. I was amazed at all of this peaceful atmosphere, and having a good time, when a young Vietnamese woman came over and began to talk in an animated fashion to Collins. He gave her a dismissive wave of his hand, and said something that seemed to set her off, as she began to shout at him. He ignored her until she wound down and stalked off. He said she was one of his boarders and had told him she wanted him to bring “four eyes” home when he came. He said he told her I was a short timer, and wasn’t interested, which was an insult to her I guess. I got a kick out of it anyway.

I had too little time left on my overseas tour to do any field work once we reached Vinh Long, so my routine settled in to what would have been a relatively enjoyable existence if it wasn’t for the aggravation of Major Owens. He insisted in sticking his nose into the details of flight operations, usually with near disastrous results. He was constantly coming up with ideas that had already been thought of by someone else. If they were good ideas we were already doing it, if they were bad ideas we had already discarded them.

There was another major disadvantage to being assigned to Vinh Long; we were no longer the darlings of the 9th Infantry Division commanding general. We were now under operational control of the 1st Aviation Brigade, part of the 7th of the 1st Cavalry. Much like the 5th Cavalry the 1st Cavalry has a storied past and a great deal of pride. The 1st Cav wore black Stetsons and had big yellow and black patches on their arms. One of the first edicts by 7th of the 1st leadership was to for D Troop to get rid of the silver belly (tan) Stetsons and our yellow scarves. We took to wearing the scarves inside our shirt collars

when we were on post, but that quickly was noticed and banned as well. Some of the pilots went into the officers club wearing their scarves and before long a fist fight started between the two units. Since they are supposed to be gentlemen as well as officers this was quickly hushed up, but we all knew of it. There was a sign on the door of the NCO club that read “Dogs and D Troop Stay Out!” and you have to know that started another row.

Two warrant officers, Mr. Rasberry and Mr. Callison co-wrote a satirical piece describing an event that captures the flavor of the times at Vinh Long and epitomizes what D Troop ultimately was all about. One occasion the scouts caught an entire battalion of new NVA who had come over the Cambodian border and didn’t get enough distance before daylight. They thought the helicopters were on their side until the shooting started. The resulting shoot out resulted in a body count of over one hundred. The brigade operations officer, a colonel, didn’t believe the numbers and basically accused the D Troop pilots of lying. He said he was going to check us out. The next day he was surprised when he was given a chicken plate to put on and refreshed in the use of an M-60. He was put in the gunner seat of a Warwagon flying the trail on the two ship team. He was told to fire into bunkers while the lead scout made hand grenade runs and pretty soon he was shooting and dukeing it out toe to toe with NVA soldiers who didn’t take kindly to being shot at. He was also unnerved by the Cobras following up on the scouts gun runs with the *Raaaaat* of the Miniguns and the *Thump* of rockets impacting right behind him. After a bit of this he had the loach land so he could urinate and then he jumped into the C&C aircraft, which was carrying the regular gunner in anticipation of this happening. The colonel was in for another wild ride, as our C&C pilots got right down in the weeds,

and were often instrumental in directing scouts onto promising areas to hunt. When he got back that night he laid down the law. No more flying low and the Cobras were ordered to pull up from their gun runs a lot higher. Of course our guys got together and talked this over with the final result being a consensus of fuck em' and continued to work the same using the same proven methods we had been successful with for a long time. Eventually the troop was so effective that when the yellow scarves and tan Stetsons gradually reappeared there was only moderate snarling. There was also a marked increase in 1st Cavalry requests to transfer into D Troop, and no D Trooper requests to leave early.

Since I was so short on time I was torn between staying in Vietnam a little longer and getting out of active duty five months early, or exiting with an outfit that was shipping back to the States and spending the rest of my time in some backwater post like the Fort Bragg. Other than the CO being such a pain in the neck the duty was easy at Vinh Long, we were not subjected to mortar or rocket attacks and I was no longer flying, so the danger level wasn't much different that what it would have been on an American post. I told the first sergeant that I wanted to stay with D Troop until just prior to my tour being up. He asked if I wanted to trade places, saying he would gladly go home in my spot. Instead, Top sent me to the personnel department at 1st Aviation HQ where I was passed from one clerk to another as I told them my desire to not leave Vietnam too early. They all asked if I wanted to trade places, including a warrant officer who was in charge. Ultimately they understood my position and when my orders came through for transfer to The 9th Signal Battalion for out processing the same envelope contained a second set of orders rescinding the first set.

I had to report to flight operations every day even though I needed to process out. Sergeant Haskins was still hopeful that I would change my mind, reenlist and extend. The first sergeant seemed to be more realistic, and when I had seven days to go he released me to process out. I checked into the supply room where they cleared all of the stuff I was supposed to have been issued and never was, they just wrote it all off to "Lost in combat."

There was a brief awards ceremony where I was given the rest of the medals I had earned along the way. That night I was packing them away when Sergeant Jones came into our hooch. In a rather sarcastic manner he said he supposed I was going to claim to be a big hero when I got back home. I told him that I had nothing to be ashamed of, that I had done a job like everyone else. As I've said before I never liked Jones very much, he always seemed to be trying to gauge where he stood in flight operations in relationship to me. This made me uncomfortable and I was almost always wary of him.

Reenlistment Pitch

One evening I was lying on the bunk in my hooch reading one of Donald Hamilton's Matt Helm novels when the first sergeant came in and told me he had an assignment for me to complete the next day. He said to shave close, wear clean fatigues and get a haircut. Then I was to report the 1st Aviation Headquarters at a time later that day. I was curious about what this was all about, but all he would say was that the flight operations sergeant was aware of my orders. The next morning I requisitioned a Jeep and drove over to the assigned building. When I got there a clerk directed me into an office where a

second lieutenant was seated behind a desk. There was a wooden chair facing the desk, and after I saluted and reported in the lieutenant smiled and told me to have a seat. He told me to smoke if I wanted to and looked down at a file on his desk. He was very friendly for an officer, and seemed happy to have me in his office. He went on to explain that if I were to reenlist for three years and extend in Vietnam for one year I could expect an immediate promotion to staff sergeant, a substantial bonus, and thirty days leave anywhere in the free world. In addition, after my year extension I could choose my next duty station. I listened to all of this with quiet, respectful, silence. When I was sure he was finished I told him I wasn't interested. He looked startled, and than perplexed as if he had thought this was a formality leading up to me thanking him and signing on the dotted line. After consulting my personnel file once more he said, "According to what I see here your best skills include killing people sergeant, what you are going to do back in the states?"

"Espionage sir" I replied. I had been reading Donald Hamilton's spy novel and it was the first thing that popped into my mind. I hadn't really given too much thought to what I was going to do for a living when I got out of the Army and didn't have a serious answer. The lieutenant got an exasperated look on his face and said "With an answer like that maybe you had better get out temporary Sergeant Kirkland." I hadn't been in the Army long enough to be a sergeant and he obviously knew that. I suppose my answer was borderline insubordinate, but I was so used to being around officers that I had lost some of my fear of rank.

When I got back to the troop area I went to flight ops where I was met by Sergeant Haskins. He waited expectantly for me to tell him the result of my trip to headquarters,

but I figured he knew that I been to see a recruiting officer and would know my response. This was not the case however; he was surprised when I told him that I had declined the offer. Both of the first sergeants were equally surprised. I can only surmise they saw something in me I didn't see in myself. The sergeant's reaction explained the exasperation on the part of the recruiting officer. It was likely they had put their heads together and decided that I had the makings of a career soldier and would appreciate the promotion. What some of the guys knew, but the leadership didn't, was that Ann was still waiting faithfully, and my folks were worrying themselves sick. I had taken conscription as the shortest path to getting out of the military, and nothing I had seen so far had changed my mind.

Out Processing

Finally, after what seemed several lifetimes the day had come. I had cleared all of the paperwork hurdles, and was in flight operations one morning in mid September, when the first sergeant came in and told me to pack up and get ready to clear out. I knew I was getting close, but this still came as a surprise. There were some people I wanted to see before I left. One of the Doughboy sergeants, I think his name was Garcia, had told me to be sure and see him before I left so I tracked over to their barracks. As I ascended the stairs to the second floor a PFC was standing on the landing. I couldn't help but notice the guardedness in his hooded eyes as he saw a sergeant approaching. I was careful to smile and ask if he knew where I could find Sergeant Garcia. He remained wary, but told me that Garcia was out on the flight line. When I asked the PFC if he would tell Garcia that Kirk had come to say goodbye, he brightened noticeably. His eyes lit up when I told

him I was going ETS (Expected Termination of Service). He shook my hand vigorously and wished me good speed. Another soldier I wanted to see was the HQ clerk, whose name I don't recall. He wouldn't let me go until he made sure my records reflected all the awards to which I was entitled were properly recorded. I willed my refrigerator to him, along with the .38 caliber pistol I had been left by Sergeant Geek.

Mike Galvin drove me over to the helipad where one of the pilots took me in a Loach to the airport at Vinh Long. I was traveling as a sort of VIP, everyone wanted to take care of a guy who was a short timer. There was an Air Force Caribou prop plane leaving for Tan Son Nhut so the Air Force Sergeant at the terminal arranged for me to fly out on it. This is a no frills aircraft that was popular for its ability to take off and land on a short airstrip. The cargo master had me strap in to a canvas and aluminum seat along the port side. The engines revved up for take off and we shot down the runway. At the same time the load master began firing a machine gun out the starboard waist window. After we were airborne he explained that we had been taking fire from the tree line. I remember thinking that the sons-of-bitches were still trying to kill me!

I arrived at Tan Son Nhut without further incident, and was still being afforded the VIP treatment by everyone who saw my orders. It may have had something to do with the air craft crewman's badge above my U. S. Army tag, but it seemed anyone who had anything to do with flying treated me like a colonel rather than a lowly sergeant. I caught a ride to Bien Hoa on a Chinook, and was quickly assimilated into a crowd of soldiers who were headed home. At one point I passed a group of FNGs. One of them asked if I knew what they were supposed to do next. When I told them I didn't know, that I was headed home, they actually cheered my achievement. There was a sergeant in charge of

the roster and it was immediately clear where his sentiments lay. As he called out the names in the priority of those who would go out first every name was preceded by the title of sergeant.

There was one last unpleasant piece of business to take care of. In order to keep us out of trouble by taking narcotics or other contraband back to the states, we were subjected one last time to lecture on what we could and could not take with us, and left alone with a barrel to into which we could anonymously toss our illicit material, no questions asked. After the one chance to dump our illegal goods we would have our persons and luggage searched. If we were found to be in possession of anything on the contraband list we would be detained. I had an envelope with some of the shrapnel from the time it hit the bunker directly behind my ass. I hadn't thought to get a clearance for it, and since I didn't want to take a chance on being detained, I tossed the envelope in the barrel. I often wondered what the cadre must have thought when they opened the envelope and found pieces of jagged metal.

At last, a group of NCOs were loaded onto a bus and we rode out to the airfield where a big beautiful 727 was waiting. As we boarded we were greeted by round eyed stewardesses who seated us with smiles that were almost as wide as the ones we wore. The plane was airborne for some period of time, and then the Captain came on the intercom and told us we had exited Vietnamese airspace. We erupted in pandemonium.

Return to Fort Ord

After a twenty hour trip with stopovers in Osaka, Japan and Anchorage, Alaska,

Including a return crossing of the international dateline, I left Vietnam on 9 September 1969 and arrived in California on the same day. We were able to buy liquor in Osaka at duty free prices; a gallon of premium whiskey costing what a quart would in the states. When we arrived in California, we were bused to Fort Ord where we were met with a rather surprising welcome home. Most of the soldiers in my group were NCOs and the soldiers in the processing group were privates. This didn't seem to matter to the privates, they seemed to know we were not going to cause a lot of problems this close to discharge, and treated us as if we were a pain in their collective asses. A staff sergeant was assigned as a defacto platoon leader. We were in the fundamentally the same set of bleachers I had sat on when we were leaving for Nam, we had our duffles in the same squares on the floor, and did a lot of sitting and waiting for something to happen.

At one point we were lined up and a doctor had us lie on a gurney then checked our spleen. I guess there was a parasite in Vietnam who had been causing trouble for returning vets and they wanted to nip it in the bud. Another time we were marched over to an area where we stripped off our fatigues and underwear. We tossed our clothes into hampers after which they were disposed of I suppose. After it was too late to retrieve them I learned that I could've kept my jungle boots but I didn't hear anyone say that and tossed them in with my clothes. All of the Caucasian guys stood there naked with our ridicules half tanned bodies. From the waist up we were almost black and from the waist down we were as white as a ghost. We were herded into a room with tin walls and shower heads sticking out of the walls. I'm here to tell you that there wasn't one of us who didn't wonder if they were going to gas us right there, just like the Nazis did to the

Jews in WWII. Then, much to our collective relief, the water came on and we washed ourselves with the coarse disinfectant soap from the dispensers mounted on the walls.

After the water ceased to flow the doors opened, and we came out to fresh towels and stacks of underwear with sizes listed on labels. Next we were measured up for class A uniforms, and passed by a table with medal ribbons, various badges and patches from all of the major Army units who served in Vietnam. I selected all of the awards that I knew I was entitled to, along with E-5 sergeant chevrons and a 9th Infantry shoulder patch. Technically, my last unit patch was the 1st Aviation Brigade, (the 5th Cavalry Regiment does not have a shoulder patch) but I felt like more like a member of the Old Reliables having spent most of my tour attached to that infantry division.

We sat in the bleachers until our dress greens were ready, got dressed and then sat there some more. The city of Oakland was buying a steak dinner with all of the trimmings for all returning veterans, but the privates seemed to get a perverse pleasure out of denying us this meal. Finally, the sergeant in charge of my platoon had us stand up and form a column of twos. He then marched us to the mess hall where civilian servers were more than happy to cook up T-bone steaks to order, with baked potatoes and steamed vegetables. For dessert we had all of the pie and ice cream we wanted. After we were all sated the sergeant marched us back to the bleachers, glaring a warning to any privates that wanted to try and give him any lip.

There was paperwork to fill out, and, almost unbelievably, a re-enlistment pitch. Finally a steel door rolled up and we were free at last. There were gypsy cabs sitting out side of the door and four of us shared a cab over to San Francisco International. Someone

opened a bottle of Chivas Regal and we passed it around, even the cab driver took a hit. I got to the airport in one piece, and then found a pay phone to make a collect call home.

Back in the World

I don't know if it was fatigue or just ignorance, but when I called my parents I got the time zones mixed up, and was four hours off. It was early in Detroit and when Mom answered the phone I could tell she was sleepy. When I told her that I was in San Francisco she let out a whoop and yelled to Dad, "Stephen's home!" The way their house was arranged their rooms were on opposite sides of the stairwell and Dad almost fell down the stairs trying to get to the phone. I told them when I expected to be in Detroit, (wrong as it turned out,) and asked if they would call Ann and tell her I was home. They said they would bring her with them to the airport. Ann told her Dad she wasn't going to work that day, much to his disapproval.

I went into the airport lounge and sat at the bar. It wasn't particularly busy, but the bartender was occupied at the other end wiping a glass or something and didn't seem inclined to any hurry. I lit a cigarette and waited. Finally he wandered down to where I sat and wiped the bar in front of me. It was obvious to anyone who knew anything about the military at that time that I was fresh home from Vietnam. The deep tan, the uniform with the 9th Infantry patch and the fruit salad on my chest were obvious. I ordered a beer and the bartender asked if I had any ID. I shrugged and showed him my Army ID card. He held it by the edges as he examined it, comparing the picture with my face. Reluctantly, as if he was hoping I would just leave, he poured a draft beer and then left me alone again. I remember thinking that if this is the kind of welcome I could expect

that it was going to be a long time before I felt at home in a place I had longed for on what seemed like a million occasions over the last year.

I thought I would watch my plane take off from San Francisco, but before the plane began to taxi I was asleep. One of the stewardesses had me lie back, put a pillow under my head and covered me with a blanket. I slept all the way home; she woke me by calling out “Mr. Kirkland, Mr. Kirkland.” I hadn’t been called mister in over almost two years, and it sounded odd, but I was able to sit up and buckle in for the landing. When I departed the plane I called home again, to find that they had been waiting all day because of my time zone screw up. I met a fella in the airport who was a veteran, he shook my hand and said “Welcome home.” While we were talking I saw a flash of red off to my right, and when I looked it was Ann’s hair. She had tossed her long hair across her shoulder. I walked in the direction they were approaching and could see that each one was trying to let the other one go first. I decided the order myself by hugging my father, much to his surprise and mortification. Men just didn’t show affection that way in his generation. I then hugged mother, and finally Ann got a long hug and an even longer kiss.

My parents lived on a short block, and when we pulled in there was a banner in their front yard that read *Welcome Home Steve* with all of the neighbors standing on either side of it. I’d have to say one of the reasons I was able to adjust as well as I have is unlike the majority of returning Vietnam veterans, I received my welcoming parade. I had spent just short of nineteen months on active duty, eleven months and ten days in Vietnam. I was twenty one years, five months old, stood six feet tall and weighed one hundred and thirty five pounds.

Glossary

AC Aircraft Commander. The pilot who flew in the left seat and was in charge of the aircraft.

Aircraft Crewman's Badge A badge awarded to crewmembers of Army aircraft.

Air Medal A decoration for sustained flight over enemy territory.

AIT Advanced Individual Training.

Alpha Phonetic for letter A.

AO Area of operations, often a free fire zone where anything that moved was fair game for the Cavalry.

AK-47 A Russian or Chinese 7.62x39 MM rifle that was the standard infantry weapon for the enemy.

Army Commendation Medal A decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service in combat.

ARVN Pronounced "Arvin" Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army.

Autorotation Emergency procedure for landing a helicopter without power.

Baht Thai currency.

BCT Basic Combat Training, the initial training all soldiers receive.

Beau Coup Much or many.

Ben Tre A South Vietnamese city. In this remembrance it refers to a small airstrip used as a remote refueling station located within the Ben Tre AO.

Berm A wall around a defensive position. In Vietnam a berm was usually constructed from sandbags.

Bien Hoa A huge airport located in Southeast Vietnam. Most of the troops assigned to IV Corp entered and left Vietnam via Bien Hoa.

Bird Colonel See Colonel.

Body Bags Plastic bags used for retrieval of bodies on the battlefield.

Booby Trap An explosive charge hidden in a harmless object which explodes on contact or by remote detonation.

Bravo Phonetic for letter B.

Brigadier General The lowest rank of Army general, one Silver Star, O-7.

Bronze Star A decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service during combat.

Bunker A hardened position which offers protection against enemy fire, sometimes used as perimeter defense position.

Captain The third highest Army commissioned officer rank, two silver bars in a railroad track configuration, O-3.

Charlie Phonetic letter C, also see Viet Cong.

Charles See Viet Cong.

Chevron The upper stripes worn by Sergeants.

Chicken Plate The vest worn over the chest area of an aircraft crewmember.

Chief Warrant Officer The second though fourth highest Army warrant officer ranks. The rank insignia is worn on the collar. WO2 a brown bar with two gold stripes, WO3 a brown bar with a silver stripe, WO4 a brown bar with a two silver stripes.

Chieu Hoi Vietnamese for “open arms” a program wherein VC could turn themselves in for reprogramming

Chinook CH-47, a twin rotored Sikorsky helicopter. Also known as hook, short for shithook.

Claymore Remote detonated antipersonnel mine, used in ambushes and defensive positions.

CO Commanding Officer, in a Cavalry troop this was a major.

Cobra The Bell AH-1G attack helicopter. Also known as a Snake.

Collective The control stick held in the pilot's left hand, for adjustment of throttle as well as the angle of attack of the main rotor blades.

Colonel The sixth highest Army commissioned officer rank, sometimes referred to as bird colonel, Silver Eagle, O-6.

Combat An engagement fought between two military forces. In Vietnam often used as a slang term of respect for a soldier who was not afraid to step up when it was required.

Concertina Wire Barbed wire or razor wire in a loose coil that can be expanded like a concertina. Used around a berm in defensive positions.

Conex (con-ex) Containerized Express: corrugated steel containers for storage and transfer of equipment and supplies.

Corporal An E-4 who wears two chevrons. Considered an NCO rank, it was little used in Vietnam. See Specialist.

Crew Chief Huey or Cobra crewmember that maintains the aircraft.

Crusader The call sign for the Cobra gunships in D Troop.

CYA Cover your ass. The art of deflecting blame.

Cyclic The stick held in the pilots right hand, rising from the floor between his legs; controls the tilt on the main rotor plane.

Delta Phonetic for letter D.

DEROS Date eligible for return from overseas.

Deuce and a-half The M35 US Army two and one-half ton truck

Di Di Mau Hurry, move quickly.

Dien Cai Dau Vietnamese slang for crazy.

DMZ Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ ran east-west spanning an area on both sides of the North-South border of Vietnam. More than a hundred kilometers in length and a couple of kilometers wide. Although it was nominally described as being at "the 17th parallel," almost all of the zone actually lies to the south of the parallel.

Dong Vietnamese currency. See Piasters.

Door Gunner Aircraft crewman whose responsibilities included aircraft defense and supporting fire through the use of a door-mounted machine gun.

Doughboys, The D troop infantry platoon members.

Doughboy Six The call sign of the D Troop infantry platoon

Duffle Bag The oblong, unwieldy bag in which troops transport clothes and other gear.

Echo Phonetic for letter E.

Enfilade A method of directing fire so as to envelope the enemy.

ETS Estimated termination of service; the date of separation from active duty.

Field First Sergeant The senior NCO in overall charge of field operations, usually an E-8.

Field Stripping Limited dismantling of a piece of equipment or weapon. When used in relationship to a cigarette this means to tear the paper, toss the tobacco into the wind and then save the paper to be disposed of later.

First Lieutenant The second highest-ranking commissioned officer, single Silver Bar, O-2.

First Sergeant the senior NCO at troop level, three chevrons, three rockers with a diamond in the center, E-8.

Five Radio number for D Troop Executive Officer.

Flack Vest A heavy vest designed to stop shrapnel.

Flare Illumination projectile

Flight Operations The facility responsible for tactical conduct involving flight.

Frag Short for fragmentation, as in fragmentation grenade.

Fragging An unfortunate event endemic to Vietnam where unpopular leaders were taken out by their own troops.

FM Frequency modulation; the low frequency radios used for ground to ground and air to ground communications.

FNG Fucking new guy, replacement troops of any rank.

Fox Mike FM Radio.

Foxtrot Phonetic for letter F.

Freedom Bird The plane that would take a serviceman home from Vietnam.

Free Fire Zone An area designated to contain no friendly populations.

Frequency commonly shortened to freq, the radio band being used to transmit.

Friendly Fire A euphemism used to denote casualties caused by fire emanating from a soldiers own compatriot.

FTA Fuck the Army. A pejorative term used to express dissatisfaction.

General The highest Army general officer rank. Four silver Stars, O-10.

GI Government Issue. Used as a slang term for a soldier.

GI Party a slang term meaning deep cleaning, usually employed over a weekend to prepare for an inspection, or as a punishment detail.

Go Cong A city in Vietnam. In this remembrance it refers to an area in radio range of the AO.

Golf Phonetic for letter G.

Gooks In Vietnam this was a slang term intended to dehumanize the enemy. Some times used as a pejorative for the general Vietnamese population.

Grenade An explosive device thrown by hand or launched by a specialized device. It is thought that the word 'grenade' is derived from the Old French (pome) grenate ('pomegranate'), in reference to the general size of early grenades, and because its shrapnel pellets reminded soldiers of the seeds of this fruit. Sometimes used to refer to a device that uses concussion, smoke or other chemicals as a medium.

Grunts Infantrymen.

Guerrilla Also referred to as insurgent, a member of an irregular unit that employees unconventional tactics.

Guerrilla warfare Low-cost, economy-of-force, unconventional warfare conducted by irregular units.

Halazone tablets Water purifying used to make local water safe to drink.

Hanoi The capital city of North Vietnam.

Hooch Slang word for any dwelling in rural Vietnam and military housing on a base.

Hotel Phonetic for letter H.

Huey A Bell UH-1 Helicopter. Officially designated the Iroquois but almost never called by this name in practice. Originally called the UH-1A thus the nickname.

Incoming Indirect enemy artillery, mortar or rocket fire aimed at friendly positions.

I CORPS Northernmost military region in South Vietnam.

II CORPS Central Highlands military region in South Vietnam.

III CORPS Military region between Saigon and the Highlands.

IV CORPS The southernmost military region in South Vietnam located in the Mekong Delta.

IG Inspector General an independent entity that would conduct inspections to determine the true status of military readiness.

India Phonetic for letter I.

Jeep A one-quarter ton utility vehicle.

Juliet Phonetic for letter J.

KBA Killed by air strike.

KIA Killed in action; a dead soldier of either side not killed by air strike.

Kilo Phonetic for letter K.

Latrine Any Army restroom facility. In the field often a tin roofed wooden structure used as sanitary facility; although in some situations it could be as rudimentary as a slit trench and a board.

LBE Load Bearing Equipment, the harness that allows extra equipment such as a radio to be carried on a soldiers back.

Leptospirosis an infectious disease caused by a particular type of bacteria called a spirochete. It is contracted by exposure to infected water or soil.

Lieutenant Colonel The Fifth highest Army commissioned officer rank. Silver oak leaf, O-5.

Lieutenant General The third highest Army general officer rank. Three silver stars, O-9.

Lighthorse The D Troop command call sign instituted by Major Swindell.

Lima Phonetic for letter L.

Loach Light observation helicopter; although several aircraft fit this description in D Troop it meant the OH-6 Cayuse.

LOH See Loach.

Long Knives The call sign of the D Troop lift platoon. Slick drivers.

M-14 A firearm loaded for 7.62X51 MM NATO. The standard rifle used in BCT.

M-16 A firearm loaded for 5.56X45 MM NATO. The standard rifle used in RVN.

Major The forth-highest Army Commissioned officer rank, gold oak leaf, O-4.

Major General The second highest Army rank of general, two stars, O-8.

Mama San An elderly Vietnamese woman.

Master Sergeant Highest Enlisted grade outside of headquarters level, three chevrons, three rockers, E-8.

MED CAP Medical Civilian Action Program. A doctor and medics would visit a local village and offer medical care for the populace.

Medic The soldier responsible for conducting field dressing of combat wounded soldiers. Usually the first responder in combat injuries.

Mess Hall The building where meals are served.

Mike-Mike Millimeter.

MOS Military Occupational Specialty.

MPC Military Payment Script A script that replaces greenbacks to reduce currency manipulation.

Napalm A powder mixed with gasoline, it is a tactical weapon used to remove vegetative cover and instill fear. People who are impacted are killed by immolation or asphyxiation.

National Defense Medal A decoration awarded for at least ninety days of active military service.

National Liberation Front The guerrilla element of the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. More commonly called the Viet Cong.

NCOIC Non Commissioned Office in Charge.

NCO Non Commissioned Officer; a corporal E-4, all sergeants of any grade.

Nguy Hiem Vietnamese for extreme danger.

Nine One The radio number of the flight operations RTO.

Nine One Zulu The radio number of the D Troop field RTO.

Nomex Flame-retardant material, a polyamide fiber used in flight suits and gloves.

November Phonetic for N.

Number One Used by Vietnamese to mean good.

Number Ten Used by Vietnamese to mean Bad.

Number Ten Thousand Used by Vietnamese to mean very bad.

NVA North Vietnamese Army.

OH-6 Cayuse, light observation helicopter used as an aerial scout and to carry VIPs also called a loach.

OJT On the job training.

One-Five-Five A one hundred fifty-five Millimeter canon or the projectile it fires.

One-O-Five A one hundred fifty Millimeter canon or the projectile it fires

Operations the segment of the organization in charge of planning and accomplishing the tactical mission.

Ops Operations.

Orderly Room Commonly known as OR, this is the headquarters building of a company sized Army Unit.

Oscar Phonetic for letter P.

Outgoing Indirect fire aimed at the enemy.

P-38 Tool used to open canned C-rations, also called a John Wayne.

Papa Phonetic for letter P.

Papa-San An elderly Vietnamese man.

PAVN Peoples Army of Vietnam. See NVA

PFC Private First Class, Army enlisted pay grade, one chevron, and one rocker, E-3.

Piasters Universal term for Vietnamese currency. A throwback to the old Colonial days.

Pilot Sometimes know as Peter pilot, the pilot flew in the right seat of a helicopter, usually an inexperienced officer.

Piss Tube A howitzer shell with the bottom removed, usually partially buried in a sandy trench. Used as a crude urinal.

Point Man The lead soldier in a unit who is constantly exposed to the danger of tripping booby traps or being the first in contact with the enemy.

POL Petroleum, oil and lubricants.

Poncho rubber coated fabric poncho with hood. Although useful as a shelter or ground sheet, users often ended up as wet inside the poncho as they would have been without it.

Poncho Liner A lightweight, camouflaged quilt intended for use inside a poncho.

Pop Smoke To mark a target, team sight (location), or Landing Zone (LZ) with a smoke grenade.

Port The left side of a vehicle or aircraft facing the front.

PRC-25 Pronounced prick twenty-five, the standard infantry radio used in Vietnam.

Private Lowest enlisted Army grades, E-1, slick sleeved & E-2 single chevron.

PSP Pierced Steel Plate; sectional interlocking steel panels used to produce a hard surface on air fields or as a layer in a bunkers protection.

PX Post Exchange, a retail facility on the order of a general store.

Quebec Phonetic for letter Q.

REMF Rear echelon mother fucker, any soldier who stays as far away from the action as possible.

Revetment Minimal protection for an aircraft consisting of two low parallel walls.

Rocker the lower stripes worn by sergeants.

Romeo Phonetic for letter R.

ROTC Reserve Officers Training Course

RPG Rocket Propelled Grenade; also know as a B-40 rocket.

R&R Rest and relaxation. Time away from the combat zone.

RTO Radio Telephone Operator. A job that sounds a lot easier than it is; the cemetery is full of RTOs.

RVN Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam Government.

Saigon The capital city of South Vietnam. Renamed Ho Chi Minh City when the Communist victory was complete.

Sampan Small canoe-like craft used on canals and rivers.

Sappers North Vietnamese Army or Vietcong demolition commandos.

Scavengers The call sign of the D Troop maintenance platoon.

Schistosomiasis a disease caused by parasitic worms.

Second Lieutenant The lowest grade of commissioned officer, sometimes called Butterbar because of the single gold bar worn as rank insignia, O-1.

Sergeant Also known as buck sergeant, the second highest NCO rank, fifth highest enlisted grade, three chevrons, E-5.

Sergeant Major The highest Army rank of NCO, three chevrons, three rockers and a star in the center, E-9.

Sierra Phonetic for letter S.

Six The radio number for D Troop Commanding Officer.

SFC Sergeant First Class, seventh highest Army enlisted grade, three chevrons and two rockers, E-7.

Slick UH-1 helicopter armed only with an M60 machine gun on the port and starboard side doors.

Slick Bomb A free-fall, non-guided bomb. Often used to dispense napalm, these bombs are used in the majority of bombing operations where maximum blast and explosive effects are desired.

Snake A Cobra attack helicopter.

SOP Standard Operating Procedure.

Specialist, Sp or Spec A rank equivalent to an NCO without the command responsibility, begins with E-4 and ends with E-7. Teardrop shaped insignia with eagle. A stripe above the eagle is added for each rank E-5 through E-7.

Staff Sergeant The sixth highest Army enlisted grade, three chevrons, and one rocker, E-6.

Starboard On the right when facing forward.

Starlight Scope Night-vision telescope, used by snipers and base camp defense troops to see in the dark.

STRAC Military readiness or perfection.

Tan An A South Vietnamese town. In this remembrance it refers to an area within radio range of the AO.

Tango Phonetic for letter T.

Tan Son Nhut The airport near the South Vietnamese Capital of Saigon.

TDY Temporary duty.

Tet From a Vietnamese word meaning the first morning of the first day of the New Year, is the Vietnamese New Year.

Tet Offensive This was was a military campaign conducted between 30 December 1968 and 23 January 1969 when forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army mounted massed simultanious attacks on Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the United States, and their allies during the Vietnam War. The purpose of the offensive was to strike military and civilian command and control centers throughout South Vietnam and to spark a general uprising among the population that would then topple the Saigon government, ending the war in a single blow. The communist leaders also thought that the South Vietnamese soldiers, called ARVN's would change sides and attack the American invaders. They were wrong in their precictions and the offensive was largely a suicide mission. While the military objectives were not succesful, the Communist leadership did use the offensive as a propaganda tool to convince the American public the war was unwinnable and caused many Americans to turn against supporting the military effort.

The World Anywhere outside of Vietnam, especially back in the States.

Three-quarter ton vehicle A truck about the size of a heavy-duty pickup.

Top, Top Kick Nickname for a first sergeant.

Trainee A soldier who hasn't finished BCT.

Trooper A Cavalry soldier.

Troop A Cavalry unit of company strength.

UHF Ultra High Frequency.

Uniform Phonetic for letter U.

USO United Service Organization, provides troop entertainment, such as when Bob Hope visited.

VC Viet Cong.

Victor Charlie Viet Cong.

Victor Phonetic for letter V.

Viet Cong Vietnamese communist soldier, unit or party member.

VHF Very High Frequency, a radio frequency that could not be picked up on an FM receiver. Most often used for inter Troop communication it was not uncommon for "private" messaging to occur over the VHF frequency.

Warwagon The call sign of the D Troop scouts. LOH drivers.

Whisky Phonetic for letter W.

White Phosphorus An element that ignites upon exposure to oxygen, produces volumes of dense white smoke. Used in artillery and hand grenades.

WIA Wounded in Action.

Willy Peter See white phosphorus.

WO1 Warrant Officer One or just WO the lowest Army Warrant Rank, a brown bar with a gold stripe in the center, W-1.

XO Executive Officer, second in command behind the CO. In D Troop a major.

X-Ray Phonetic for letter X.

Yankee Phonetic for letter Y.

Zulu Phonetic for letter Z.

Frank Maxa spit shining his combat boots.

Glen Ono and Walt Noechel cleaning their M-14 Rifles.

The author cleaning his M-14.

The author on his first day home on leave from BCT.

The scene of the mess hall painting debacle during AIT.

A deuce and a-half truck in front of a company barracks.

Chris Gasiewski

The sign in front of the orderly Room at Fort Bragg.

Mike Galvin with his ever present camera, in front of the Flight Operations bunker.

Sergeant First Class Pratt at his desk in D Troop Flight Operations.

Ron Stevenson, aka Peanuts in the radio shack at Dong Tam.

Lighthorse 91 in the radio shack at Dong Tam.

D Troop Flight Operations Bunker at Dong Tam.

Mortar crater from round that exploded right behind the author's rear end.

Omer Jones repairing downed communication lines after the first mortar attack.

A trailer victimized by mortar shrapnel.

Author posing with new Buck Sergeant stripes.

Urinal built in honor of the field first sergeant. Smoke in background is from human waste being burned at Dong Tam.

Author's short timer calendar at Vinh Long. Note flack jacket and helmet on the locker.

Beer fridge in author's hooch at Vinh Long.

Kirkland in Rocket Crater at Dong Tam

F-U Gecko in Frag Bag at Bearcat

L-ELIGIBILITY FOR DISPLAY RECOGNITIONS AND REPLACEMENT MEDALS

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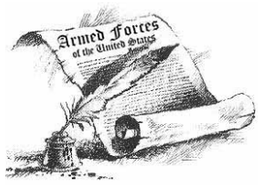

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C	M	R	B	T	C=Certificate; M=Medal, R=Ribbon, P=Pending, B=Badge, T=Miniature
X					Advanced Individual Training
X	X	X		X	Air Medal
X					Appreciation of Honorable Service
X	X	X		X	Army Commendation
X					Army Unit Service Acknowledgement
X					Basic Training
X	X	X		X	Bronze Star
X	X	X			Cold War
X			X		Enlisted Promotion
X			X		Honorable Service Lapel Pin
X			X		Marksman
X					Military Service Discharge
X	X	X		X	National Defense
X					Ocean Crossing
X			X		Overseas Service Bar
X		X			Presidential Unit Citation; 3d Sq 10–21 May 69, DAGO 9, 79, amended DAGO 16, 72
X			X		Professional, Signal Corps
X					Training Completion
X		X			Valorous Unit; Trp D 6–12 May 68, DAGO 43, 70
X		X			Vietnam Air Service
X	X	X		X	Vietnam Campaign
X	X	X		X	Vietnam Service Medal
X	X	X		X	Vietnam, Civil Action; Trp D 19 Dec 66–28 Jun 69, DAGO 43, 70, amended DAGO 59, 69
X	X	X		X	Vietnam, Cross of Gallantry, Indiv
X		X		X	Vietnam, Cross of Gallantry, Unit
X					Vietnam Combat Campaign: Counteroffensive Phase V
X					Vietnam Combat Campaign: Air Offensive Phase IV
X					Vietnam Combat Campaign: Counteroffensive Phase VI
X					Vietnam Combat Campaign: Tet 1969 Counteroffensive
X					Vietnam Combat Campaign: Summer-Fall 1969

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~ Any Enclosed Registered and Certified Certificate(s) Are A Personal Testament Of Your Individual, Faithful and Loyal Service To Your Country. These Document(s) Are Your Family's Military Legacy and Heritage. You Are Instructed To Forever Faithfully Keep And Officially Preserve These Document(s) In Such A Manner That They Can Be Passed Down From Generation To Generation. ~ *The American War Library*

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