

## A VIETNAM STORY

The following story may never be read. I'm writing it for my children or grandchildren who may or may not ever be interested in what I saw and did in Vietnam during my assignment there in 1967-68. Unlike many Vietnam stories, this one is not about disillusionment or despair, nor is it a story of larger than life men doing heroic deeds. Rather, it's about ordinary soldiers at the small unit level doing their best to support the war effort. Accordingly, it's possible that no one will find it interesting enough to finish, or maybe to start. I have, nevertheless, done my part.

By the luck of the draw, I was assigned to a secure area--the Vung Tau peninsula. A good friend from my battalion in Germany, whose career pattern corresponded to mine, drew an assignment to command an Ammunition Company at Long Binh and was killed in his bed by an early morning rocket attack. But for the first letters of our last names that could have been me in that bunk. The only negative feelings I ever have about Vietnam are pangs of guilt because I had it so much easier than so many others, but as I said, such is the luck of the draw.

Our work was difficult and our triumphs were small, but it is the cumulative effect of many small units working hard and accomplishing their missions that make our Army great and enable it to do great deeds. I, and most of the men I served with in Vietnam, took pride in what we did and how we went about it. We considered ourselves to be professionals, and thought we were pretty good at what we were called to do. I still think we were.

### Getting There

I arrived in Vung Tau in mid-afternoon on the fifth day after the start of my journey halfway around the world, the hardest part of which was just getting on that airplane at the Decatur, Al Jetport, and leaving my young wife, Peggy, and six-month-old daughter, Amanda, behind. Like most men, I tried to hide my feelings, but failed, as the plane gently lifted off the runway. I had no doubt about returning safely after my tour of duty in Vietnam—the young never do--but still, leaving one's family for a year, even with the prospect of commanding a company of men in a combat zone, is never easy. If the flight attendants or fellow passengers noticed my unmanly display of emotion, they were

polite enough, or sufficiently disinterested, not to embarrass me further.

The trip, though long, was relatively uneventful: A quick afternoon's look at San Francisco; in-processing and drawing jungle fatigues and jungle boots at the Oakland Army Terminal the next morning; a bus ride to a midnight departure from Travis AFB on what was to be a twenty-two-hour flight, punctuated by a brief stop in Hawaii, a seemingly endless wait in stifling heat on the runway on Guam while a flight of heavily bomb-laden B-52's took off for a deadly mission, and another quick fuel stop at Clark Field in the Philippines. Although Saigon was only about four hours from Clark, a flight attendant explained that the routine was to refuel and re-provision the aircraft there, then at Tan Son Nhat Airbase in Saigon, discharge the passengers and board the outbound group quickly, keeping-ground time, and exposure to rocket attack, to a minimum.

On the Clark to Tan Son Nhat leg, I was annoyed that the flight attendants continued to sell beer and hard drinks to soldiers on the way to a combat zone. My early training had taught that one did not approach a potentially dangerous situation impaired, but I was probably over trained. As a young captain, and probably one of the most junior officers on board, I had no authority or responsibility for the plane or its contents so I kept my mouth shut. Having long since given up on the book I was going to master on the trip—How to Make Money in the Stock Market—sleep seemed like a better idea than fretting over lax discipline. Despite the jovial atmosphere that filled the cabin, I drifted off into what I thought was light sleep.

Jolted awake by a noise, I quickly glanced out of the window to make sure the wings were still on. Reassured, I noticed the almost holiday-like mood had disappeared, replaced with a somber silence. I realized that what had awakened me from much deeper sleep than I expected was the announcement of our final approach to Saigon. As the flight attendants prepared the cabin for landing, every man on that plane quietly contemplated the role he would play in the ensuing year. I knew as well as they did there were men seated nearby who would not be going home in one piece, if at all, but, scanning their taut faces, it was impossible to discern the ill-fated.

As our air speed declined and the craft descended along the glide path, the tension mounted. A vast expanse of dark green jungle canopy spread as far as the eye could see, as if the ocean which had been shimmering beneath us only moments before had suddenly transformed itself into a sea of verdant foliage. Under the azure sky, and overlaid with innocent clouds, the scene was as beautiful as it was menacing. I scanned the horizon for the tell-tale signs of a firefight— angry, billowing smoke, the flash of an exploding shell, perhaps tracers streaming skyward—but all was peaceful on that late September day. Out there somewhere, I was sure, a lone, diminutive but determined Viet-Cong soldier waited with a shoulder fired, surface-to-air missile, ready to take out the now low- and slow-flying passenger liner about to deposit another load of demons on his home land. It was not to happen that day, and a collective sigh of relief was almost audible as the wheels screeched on the runway signaling our safe arrival in Vietnam.

A 2nd lieutenant in remarkably crisp khakis, armed only with a clipboard, boarded and issued efficient instructions and I was soon aboard an air-conditioned military bus on my way to a replacement company at the Long Bihn depot complex. I was pleased to note as we boarded the bus that the windows were covered by a heavy-gauge wire mesh to prevent hand grenades from being thrown through the glass. I had heard that such precautions were taken for good reason. Within minutes we were in the streets of Saigon—the Pearl of the Orient—but I was impressed, not by the city but by its inhabitants. In cheap novels the streets of Asian cities are always described as "teeming." It was, after all, absolutely apt.

The streets, whose potholes would have been perfectly at home in New York City or Washington, D.C., were, indeed, filled with Vietnamese of every size, shape and description going in every direction by every known means of transport. Most notable were the motorcycles, ridden by young men I later learned we foreigners derisively referred to as "cowboys," (although I never knew why), and ubiquitous vehicles called "Lambrettas," which, collectively, made up Saigon's mass transportation system. Basically, the Lambretta was an over-sized, three-wheeled motorcycle with a cargo bed much like a small pick-up truck, except the side walls were a little higher so bench seats could be installed along each side allowing passengers to sit facing each other. There was

a top, but no side panels or back door. The comfortable carrying capacity was about six Americans or eight Vietnamese, but if I ever saw one with less than twenty souls, many having only one foot in a crevasse and one hand clinging to some part of the frame, it was only because it was still in the boarding mode. They appeared to have one speed—wide open—and always seemed to be teetering and about to tip over because of poor weight distribution.

As the bus made its way through the assembled throng, I recalled a scene from the movie "The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse," in which a bicycle-riding French resistance fighter pulled along side a German staff car and deftly attached a small plastic explosive device, secured by magnets, to the moving vehicle, and pedaled off safely before the car exploded killing all the Nazis. I hoped the movie did not have a successful run in Saigon!

After awhile the crowds and buildings began to thin as we approached the outskirts of the city. Soon we were cruising up Highway 1, Vietnam's main north-south artery and an example of U.S. aid put to good use, if one owned a car, could hop a Lambretta, or had a war to fight. Although the road had only two lanes, it was wide, recently paved, and had well maintained shoulders and new bridges capable of supporting heavily laden ammunition trucks or main battle tanks. On both sides of the road, the rainforest and undergrowth had been cleared for a distance of a hundred yards or more to make ambush more difficult. On this day traffic was light, consisting primarily of military vehicles and an occasional civilian truck. The tranquil countryside gave the impression that President Johnson's pacification program was taking root.

About ten miles north of Saigon, the bus made a left turn on a dirt road and almost immediately came to a stop at the 2nd Replacement Company, where I was to wait the next day and a half for my assignment to be confirmed. Department of the Army had assigned me to the 148th Ordnance Company (Ammo), but the Army headquarters in Vietnam could divert incoming personnel to some other assignment by the stroke of a pen. During in-processing we filled out various forms, were assigned bunks in one of the austere, wood frame BOQ's that sat in a neat row on the company street, then issued bed

linens and told to check the bulletin board twice each day for orders and transportation information—otherwise we had no duties. I soon concluded that the real purpose of a replacement company was to bore one so that when orders finally did arrive, you would gladly go no matter how bad the assignment.

The replacement company was situated on the outer perimeter of Long Binh Depot, adjacent to the highway. A low earthen berm topped with several rolls of rusty concertina barb wire ran between the road and the cluster of buildings that made up the company area. There was a wide break in the perimeter berm where the hard-packed, red clay road joined Highway 1, and no gate impeded entry into the area. A solitary guard manned the opening. Trained to observe such things, I noted that the barracks were within hand grenade distance of the perimeter wire, contrary to what I had been taught.

Notwithstanding my concerns about security, it had been over 40 hours since my head had felt a pillow, so I stripped to my sleep uniform—dog tags and underwear—and got some rest despite the heat and humidity that was, after all, no more oppressive than Alabama in August. About dusk, I dressed and walked across the dirt road to a small NCO club, hoping to find a decent meal. I was in luck, because right there on the menu, right there in Vietnam, was pizza--clearly a treat I had not anticipated! Upon being served, however, I quickly realized that any resemblance between what was on my plate and real pizza was merely coincidental. The pepperoni appeared authentic, but the crust was mere biscuit dough, the sauce, spaghetti, and the cheese clearly cheddar in lieu of mozzarella which was obviously hard to procure "in country." It was awful, so I got down what I could and went back to bed.

The next morning, finding nothing on the BB, I walked to the nearest PX, which was a mile or so down the red clay road, the first half of which, at least, was down hill. A PX is a special place for soldiers, especially if it's overseas. You go because it's there, whether you need anything or not. A well-stocked facility with all the familiar American products is so reminiscent of home that, for a while, you can forget where you really are. I needed shoe polish, and I discovered a little shop that could make name tags for my jungle fatigues and affix them, and other required patches, that same day. This was excellent

because I would have to come back in the afternoon and that gave me something to do.

Later that afternoon the BB informed me that my assignment had been confirmed and I should be at the orderly room immediately after breakfast the next morning for transportation to Bien Hoa Airbase. I was so optimistic I went back to the NCO club across the road for another pizza.

At Bien Hoa, the Air Force loaded all the officers and enlisted men destined for Vung Tau in a C-123. A C-123 was really nothing but a modified C-121, a stubby-looking, two engine (prop) cargo plane whose fuselage was "under wing." The craft could fly safely carrying a load up to 12 tons—it just couldn't get off the ground heavily loaded, especially on short airfields commonly found in a combat zone. The modification consisted of the addition of two jet engines that were turned on to assist on take-off but turned off for cruising. Fold-down web type seats installed along the walls were quickly filled with officers and senior NCO's. The remaining troops were seated on the floor six across. I was concerned that they did not have seat belts, but I underestimated the Air Force crew chief responsible for loading the passengers. After aligning the troops where he wanted them, he placed a cargo strap over their out-stretched legs, tightened it, and told the pilots to go.

Cleared for take-off, the pilots kicked in the jets and we shot down the runway accompanied by the deafening roar of the engines, whose thrust seemed determined to tear the plane apart. Shaking and rattling, the aging aircraft lifted off and the crew chief immediately began walking the length of the cargo bay looking out every window. I have always felt safer in military planes than in civilian because I know the planes are designed to take a lot and our pilots are superbly trained, but the racket and the crew chief unnerved me. After a few minutes the jets shut down, but the chief continued his ritual of visually inspecting the aircraft out of the windows. I then noticed that instead of accelerating and gaining altitude we were decelerating and losing altitude. This, I knew, was not good.

After a few tight turns the pilots put the plane safely back on the Bien Hoa runway, or so I thought. We taxied to a row of resting C-123's, the loading ramp dropped

and the crew chief ordered us out. We were, he explained, now at Tan Son Nhat Airbase (a distance of no more than 12 miles from Bien Hoa), and a fresh crew would pick us up soon. With that the pilots and crew climbed in a waiting truck and drove away, leaving us, and our baggage, on the hot tarmac under a sweltering sun without so much as a canteen of water. Since the nearest hanger was over a mile away, we had little choice but to wait and hope soon really meant soon. It did not, and I never trusted the Air Force after that. I concluded that the Army never should have given the Air Force its freedom—which it obviously could not handle. I decided that if I lived to get off that steaming runway I would insult every airman at every opportunity by asking "How are things in the Army Air Corps?" I still do it.

After a couple of hours of sitting on the hard pavement, the shade of a wing providing some protection from the sun's direct rays, but little relief from the heat radiating off the pavement, we decided we had been forgotten, and sent a patrol to look for signs of life, and maybe some food but certainly some water. About the time the volunteers disappeared among some distant hangers, a truck arrived with a new set of pilots. They stopped a few planes away and signaled us to come, and became quite irritated when they had to send the truck to round up the stragglers, whose foraging expedition had been a failure. When all the human cargo was strapped down we took off again to the same racket as before, but this time apparently nothing fell off.

#### Vung Tau

Two images dominate my first impression of Vung Tau from the air—the crystal blue-green South China Sea impelling low, rolling waves and a soft mist toward a tan beach that began at the foot of a rocky hill and seemed to extend to infinity—and a column of black, ugly smoke angrily roiling from an unseen fire off one end of the runway. I wondered if we were arriving just after an attack of some sort. At the shed that served as the passenger terminal, the casual air of the soldiers waiting for flights out was evidence that the fire posed no danger, and I was glad I kept my mouth shut on the plane. While waiting for the shuttle bus to the Pacific Hotel, the site of the billeting office, I casually inquired about and learned the fire was just contaminated jet fuel being destroyed.

After another seemingly endless wait of probably no more than half an hour a bus carried my bags and me to the hotel. I was given a temporary bunk assignment in a large room occupied by one other officer, who was asleep despite the mid- afternoon hour. A phone call and twenty minutes later I was in a jeep on my way through the streets of Vung Tau to the 148th Ordnance Company.

The town of Vung Tau is nestled between two rocky hills that anchor the southwest end of a narrow ten-mile peninsula that juts out from the mainland and runs from the northeast to the southwest. Bounded on one side by the South China Sea and on the other by the more gentle Vinh Ganh Bay into which flows, among others, the Saigon River, the peninsula widens at its southwest end to about four miles to make room for the hills. About a mile apart, and on an almost north-south line, the largest hill rises over 600 feet above the sea, and is more massive than the one to the south that faces the open sea. On their slopes, crumbling ruins of coastal artillery bunkers serve as reminders of the French era in this long troubled region. Between the hills a crescent- shaped natural harbor protects the local fishing fleet from the ocean's constant surf. The town itself, now somewhat seedy, retains its French colonial ambience. Residences, mostly pastel, stucco buildings, sit on tree-lined streets behind walls of masonry and wrought iron. Commercial establishments are housed in mostly single story storefront buildings although some have a second story used as living areas.

While there were a few shops, most goods were purchased in the central market, where everything from excellent French bread to black market American cigarettes could be found. Most of the rest of Vung Tau's commercial establishments consisted of restaurants, bars, steam baths, and massage parlors, whose numbers defy even an estimate. The list of establishments that had been declared "Off Limits" was a full page, and there were hundreds of others, with names like the Texas Bar or the Pussy Galore in honor of the James Bond character, populated by hundreds, if not thousands, of women "working for the Yankee dollar." Allegedly, the VD was high in VungTau so we were ordered to purchase condoms with unit fund money and issue one to each man going to town on a pass, which we did. As far as I knew no man in my unit ever contracted a social disease, but one of the lieutenants in our BOQ did, much to his chagrin.

Well back from the high tide line, beyond the working beach littered with discarded and rotting fishing boats, worn-out equipment, nets spread out for repair, and a palm grove, a flagstone road separates the harbor from the homes, restaurants, and hotels, including the once spectacular Grand Hotel, that overlook the untidy beach in favor of the natural beauty of the cove, protected on either side by the domineering hills. As the road nears the base of the smaller, beach side hill it cuts back sharply to the right and begins a slow ascent. Within a few hundred feet it is elevated to about forty feet above the sea as it continues to circle toward the beach. The coast is rocky here not unlike that of Maine, but no floats indicating lobster traps are to be seen. A little further around the hill, the rocks take the brunt of the white-capped waves of the open sea and they fight back by breaking the waves into pieces and throwing them high in the air. Clearing the final curve, the infinite beach comes into view. Far up the coastline, the beach and the tree line merge, turn sharply to the right, run out toward the open sea a few miles, then suddenly make a 90 degree turn to the northeast and continue on past Camron Bay, the Gulf of Tonkin, Hipong and all other points this side of infinity. Of course from the hill in Vung Tau only about the first 10 or 12 miles of that run are visible, but from about two miles up the coast, which is as far as the beach road goes and as far as one could safely venture, until it disappears over the horizon, the coast is as beautiful as it is mysterious.

As the road begins to descend it is no longer at the ocean's edge. Between the road and the water, palm trees obstruct the view of the coast and provide seclusion to the small inlet where sand meets rock in a place appropriately called "Rocky Beach." Sand dominates, but the large boulders protruding from the sand and sea accent the magnificence of the lagoon. Protected on both extremes by large rocky outcroppings and the trees to the rear, the concave beach is assaulted by a relentless surf much to the delight of those fortunate enough to know its whereabouts and with sufficient station in life to be permitted access. In 1967-68, Rocky Beach was ostensibly off-limits to soldiers in Vung Tau (officially because there was no lifeguard), but it was used regularly by senior officers and their guests from Saigon. Young captains and lieutenants slipped in unnoticed from time to time.

The ocean side of the peninsula was home to two activities—the Armed Forces Recreation and Relaxation (R&R) Center, on the beach at road's end, and a little farther inland and to the south, but still among the dunes, the 1st Australian Task Force Logistical Base. The R&R center was for enlisted soldiers and, so I was told, a first class operation, although I never ventured in to verify that assertion. The Australian log base was a typical facility manned by atypical people. My closest associate was an Aussie captain, about 20 years my senior and superbly proficient, who was Dutch, having immigrated just after WWII. Another friend, this one a major, but closer to my age and a native Aussie, had lived in the states for a year and had become a friend and admirer of George Wallace, for whom, at that time, I had no use.

The bay side of the peninsula was generally higher than the beach side, although it was still sand, and held the only road out. Highway 15 ran from Vung Tau up the promontory through the town of Ba Ria, which sat near the neck and provided protection to our northern flank, then turned sharply to the northwest and intersected Highway I just north of Saigon. Favorable geography and the presence of U.S. artillery fire bases, the 1st Australian/New Zealand Task Force Base, and a "strategic hamlet" on the adjacent mainland reduced the danger of any sizable land assault and made the Vung Tau area a reasonably safe and secure enclave. In addition, just north of the log complex, sat the Revolutionary Development School, home to several thousand Vietnamese Regional Force/Popular Force troops in training—in fact our ammunition supply point (ASP) and the school shared a common boundary separated by a double barbed wire fence. The presence of that training center added to our security.

#### The 148<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Company (Ammo)

From late 1967 through mid-1968, the 148th Ordnance Company was the best ammunition supply company in Vietnam. It might have been the best before and after that time, but I know it was a great unit while I was there, because I made that assertion to every visiting fireman—and there were plenty—and none ever disputed my claim. I knew the unit had the potential to be great as soon as the officer I was to replace told me about the men I would be commanding. How so many of the Army's most knowledgeable and

experienced ammunition NCO's wound up in one small unit at the same time I will never know—I was just glad to see them. I knew most of the key, senior NCO's personally or by reputation from my service in the 84th Ordnance Battalion in Germany in 1965-66 and I knew them to be technically proficient as well as good leaders. My two warrant officers were both special—both had been seasoned explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) sergeants before the war and were highly trained and motivated. My two lieutenants, though young and inexperienced, were nevertheless conscientious and willing. Who could ask for more? During the few days my predecessor remained in charge, I busied myself learning the details of the unit's mission and its current problems and challenges, reviewing personnel files of the men I did not know and familiarizing myself with the company area, the ammunition supply point, and the Vung Tau area generally.

On the day I assumed command I called a meeting of my officers, warrant officers, and NCO leaders in my new office. Traditionally at such meetings a new commander is expected to announce his standards and any changes in policy he desires to implement (which should be few at first unless the unit is in a real mess). My speech was short. I told my men that based on what I knew about them and their backgrounds, competence, and dedication to duty, there was only one thing that could keep our company from being the best ammunition company in Vietnam, and that would be my failure to provide the necessary leadership. I told them I intended to do my part and would do my best to provide them the support they needed to do their respective jobs. My door, I emphasized, was always open and coffee usually available if anyone needed to see me. Finally, I charged them to keep me straight and not let me do anything dumb. In December 1968, the company was awarded a Meritorious Unit Commendation for outstanding performance before, during, and after the January, 1968 Viet Cong TET offensive, and all unit members who served during that time, and any member of the unit in the future, are authorized to wear the red ribbon with the gold border, earned by toil and sweat, as a remembrance of those days and that remarkable group of men.

The mission of an ammunition company is to receive, store, and issue to its customers all of the ammunition they need to conduct combat operations. Support is generally provided to all units fighting in a given area, but no unit presenting the proper

request is ever refused service if the needed items are on hand. My company's support area was the IV Corps Tactical Zone, otherwise known as the Mekong Delta, and the Vung Tau Special Zone, an area lying southeast of Saigon and north of Vung Tau. Our primary customers were the 9th Infantry Division and its "Riverines" based at Dong-tam in the Delta, the 167th Aviation Group which flew helicopter gun ships throughout the Delta, the Australian and New Zealand Task Forces that operated in the Vung Tau Special Zone, and a number of artillery battalions that provided fire support in the area. We also supplied the Air Force and Navy certain munitions and issued some items to the South Vietnamese Army and U.S. Army advisors assisting them.

A 1967 vintage ammo company's wartime authorized strength was five officers and 238 enlisted men. For reasons never explained to me, my company was organized at level 3, which was about 80% strength but full equipment, so I was authorized five officers and 191 enlisted, but we were never more than 90% full. We operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week always in two locations—a small detachment, usually about 20 men were at the 9th Division's base at Dong Tam, and for about 45 days we had about 20 men at a place called Song Be, northwest of Saigon. A number of soldiers were permanently attached to the base security force, and occasionally we had to furnish troops for special details, such as a cook to the officer's field mess at the Pacific Hotel. Since the tour was for only a year, at any given time 1/12th of the men were new and just learning and 1/12th were within one month of going home and were looking to ease up. Each day a few were on sick call and a few were out of country on R&R, which every man got after 6-months "in country." I mention all of this just to say managing personnel and getting enough people to the ASP to get the job done every day and every night was a commander's greatest challenge. Still, when possible, we tried to give every man a day or half a day off each week, our rationale being we could get more work out of them in six days than we could in seven.

Fortunately, most ammunition arrived in palletized loads and was issued or shipped the same way, or we would have sunk. Accordingly, we were at the mercy of our materials handling equipment (MHE); eight 60001b rough terrain forklifts and a 20-ton crane. Twenty-four hour, seven-days a week operations take a toll on machinery as well

as men, and blowing sand alternating with rain and the hot sun exacerbated maintenance problems. The maintenance section worked diligently on these items, often hampered by a scarcity of repair parts, and through yeomen's effort kept us going. A six forklift day was a pleasant rarity, but two forklift days were not rare at all. Sometimes a work shift would start with four or five up and running only to have all become dead-lined at some point in the day. The 20-ton crane, though slow and cumbersome, was used extensively to handle 8" and 155mm howitzer, and 175mm gun projectiles because of their shipping configuration. It was not used as extensively as the fork lifts, but when needed it was invaluable, and sorely missed when not available.

Palletized loads were, however, a mixed blessing in some respects. So many pallets were damaged in shipment that labor intensive re-palletizing was an ongoing challenge. Manhours were always in short supply, banding machines wore out frequently and there never seemed to be enough steel banding material. My NCO's requisitioned, then literally begged, borrowed or stole what they had to have to get the job done. NCO initiative and leadership has made many officers look good in many wars and I, too, was a beneficiary of their competence.

The men who served in the 148th were proud of the fact that the company had constructed the company's living facilities from scratch. The buildings, based on an Australian design, were wood frame on concrete slabs. All had extended eaves to channel the rain away from the building, and allow the screened windows on the two sides to remain open except in the worst storms. Screen doors on both ends also helped air-flow. The "windows" were really the walls which were cut out then hinged at the top so they could be propped open most of the time for ventilation, but lowered if needed. In addition to living quarters there was a company office building which held the Orderly Room on one end and the CO's office on the other, an outstanding mess hall, a shower room complete with running water, a supply room, and a day room, all connected by a concrete sidewalk system. An underground drainage system had been installed to help get rid of surface runoff during the monsoon season, and a canopy had been built over the sidewalk by the mess hall to keep the troops dry while they waited in the chow line. A rock wall was added along the sidewalk for aesthetics. All of the sleeping facilities were protected

by four foot high sandbag revetments, and a 100 man above-ground, timber and sandbag bunker had been constructed at one end of the company area. A company built club house was so elaborate it had been, by orders of higher headquarters, converted into the Vung Tau post enlisted men's club, but it was still known, fittingly, as the "148 Club."

The unit's ASP occupied the northeast corner of the Vung Tau logistical complex that included an airfield, a seaport complete with a DeLong (floating) pier, a hospital, an equipment maintenance facility, the only floating, depot level aircraft maintenance facility in the world (aboard the Corpus Christi Bay, anchored just off shore) and a number of storage facilities for non-explosive supplies. Ammunition has two salient characteristics—it is deadly when used as intended or misused, and it is invariably heavy. Accordingly, an ASP should be large enough to allow wide dispersion and should have a solid base to support a high volume of heavy truck traffic and to support the extremely heavy stacks of items being stored. The ASP at Vung Tau was, of course, built in a swamp! Well, not entirely.

The U.S. log complex began just outside of town, with the airfield taking most of the usable room, and extended about two miles along but east of Highway 15, although the port, of course, was on the other side. The center of the peninsula, from just north of town all the way to the mainland was occupied by a magnificent swamp, complete with enormous lotus blossoms and even more enormous lizards, and it was on the edge of, and indeed, in this swamp, that the Vung Tau ASP was built.

### **THE ASP**

The storage facility consisted of 33 storage pads made out of pierced steel planking (PSP) like that used for air field runway construction. Each pad was about 100 feet wide and 150 feet deep and rested, of course, on nothing but sand. The pads were nevertheless remarkably stable, and withstood not only the heavy weight of the ammunition, but also the wear and tear of the large, heavy forklifts used to stack and retrieve the mostly palletized ammunition. The pads were not covered, although some stacks of ammo were covered with canvas. For fast turn over items shelter was not

needed, and for slow moving items it was of marginal use.

The 600 or so acres set aside for the ASP between the airfield and the swamp proved to be insufficient to provide the separation needed for safety requirements, so it was necessary to build a causeway out into the swamp for the last three pads. This was done with considerable effort and skill by Army engineers using the only material readily available—sand and more sand. This project was ongoing when I arrived and took several more months to complete, but once finished the pads were as good as those built on the existing sand piles.

In order to reduce the distance between the pads and still provide as much safety as possible, berms twelve to fourteen feet high were constructed around each pad, again using sand as the material of choice. As soon as the berms were completed, however, they began to erode away, blown in dune-like drifts by the nearly incessant wind off the ocean or washed away by the heavy rains of the monsoon season. Several methods of erosion control had been tested—one berm had been painstakingly covered with row after row, literally thousands, of sandbags, which worked well but required much too much hand labor to be practical. A concrete slurry applied to another pad's berm proved unsatisfactory for two reasons; water undermined the resulting shell and the concrete fragments were a potential missile hazard if the pad ever exploded. Another failed experiment involved covering the berms with salvage canvas from unserviceable tents but the wind and rain made short work of that idea. The most workable solution was to spray the sand with a tar-like substance used to seal roadbeds just before the asphalt goes down. This technique held up well until someone, usually a guard at night, walked on the crusty surface and punched holes allowing rain-water to begin its destructive work.

Two of our pads were used by the Australians, who erected canvas covers to protect their ammo from the elements. The shade provided by these shelters proved to be enormously popular with the local lizards (the four legged variety) who rested during the day and roamed the ASP at night in search of lizard food, much to the discomfort of the night crew and guards.

The ASP office, which maintained the records showing quantities and locations of all items, and which controlled receipts, issues, and inventory, was just outside the only entrance. Across the road, also outside the gate, was the area where inert items, returned by customers, such as brass shell casings, were checked to insure no explosives were present, then processed for shipment back to the states.

The gate was guarded by the base security force, and several observation towers were manned during the day. At night the tower guards had night observation devices available (although I could never see anything but green fog) and the guards were reinforced with jeep mounted patrols and foot patrols with dogs. During my tenure, the ASP was penetrated only twice at night and, in both cases, the perpetrators were quickly brought to bay by the trained-to-be-vicious dogs. In both instances the terrified detainees turned out to be boys who were in training at the Revolutionary Development School to be part of the Regional Force/Popular Force (RUFPUF) organization. The School was our neighbor to the north, with whom we shared a common fence. The boys, neither of whom was hurt by the dogs, were going AWOL and thought they were breaking out by crawling under the fence when, in fact, to their great surprise they were breaking in.

The ASP was surrounded by a ten-foot-high, barb wire fence that was still under construction when I got there. The portion on dry land was finished but about three-fourths of a mile of it ran right through the swamp. Being a member of the fence construction crew had to be the second worst job in Vung Tau. ( I'll describe the worst later.) The four men and their NCO chief worked off a raft they built just for the job and spent all day either in the burning sun or in (or under) the brackish swamp water emerging when necessary to remove the leeches. The wire was strung underwater to a depth of at least three feet. To my amazement, no snake bites were reported, and the crew actually seemed disappointed when the job was finished and they had to revert to normal guard duty.

### **DONG TAM**

The base for the 9th Inf. Division's Riverine Force was on the north bank of the

Mekong River, at a place called Dong Tam about 45 miles upstream from where the great river emptied into the South China Sea. The nearest town of any size was My Tho, about five miles down stream. The 53rd Support Group operated a Forward Support Activity (FSA) there providing backup logistical support to the division. An FSA was a provisional unit made up of elements of a general supply company, a maintenance company, an ammunition company, and other units as needed, usually commanded by a major from the group staff. The 148th supplied a detachment of about 20 men to operate a small ASP at Dong Tam, and a week or two before I arrived several of the men had been wounded in a mortar attack. I was told morale was low, so about a week after I assumed command my 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. and I paid our troops a visit to see their conditions and hear their complaints.

There was no easy way to get from Vung Tau to Dong Tam, I discovered. The most frequently used method was by air, although you could also catch a ride on one of the resupply boats that sailed from the port early each morning. In theory, flying was faster, and usually in practice it turned out to be, but it was not always. On the first trip, we arrived at the airfield at 0600 as required, and put our names on the list for Dong Tam. After about an hour the air craft crews began arriving and soon the air was filled with the noise of engines sputtering and backfiring and coming to life. The Vung Tau based airplanes were C-7 "Caribous". These cargo planes had once belonged to the Army, but had been transferred to the Air Force to settle an inter-service dispute over missions. Designed to take off and land on comparatively short, unimproved air strips, and equipped with two powerful piston engines, they were not very big, and were characterized by their high rudders, which gave the craft a scorpion-like appearance. The rudder of Vung Tau based planes had a yellow stripe for identification purposes.

Around 0800, a Caribou taxied to the passenger shed, and soon we were winging our way to a transfer point—the airfield at another 9th Div. Base, Bear Cat, located somewhere northeast of Vung Tau and southeast of Saigon. Bear Cat seemed to be the functional equivalent of Atlanta's Hartsfield—you had to go there to get to anywhere else, but in Atlanta a least you had a terminal. At Bear Cat we were deposited at the end of a very long runway, near the perimeter berm, and told to wait, the Dong Tam flight would be along bye and bye. The nearest hangers were at least three-quarters of a mile away, and

from our vantage point no human activity could be seen. There was nothing to do but wait and watch various aircraft come and go. Every so often, a Caribou would taxi up and announce a destination, and soldiers would scramble aboard, while others of us continued to wait. Off in the distance we could see jet fighter-bombers attacking an unseen enemy on the ground, and such diversions helped pass the time. Finally, after an hour or two the Dong Tam special arrived and we were once again airborne. The sight of the pilots did not inspire confidence—one was a completely gray-haired captain, and I thought to myself that if he was that old and still a captain, maybe its because he's not a very good pilot. His co-pilot, on the other hand, was a second lieutenant who looked like he might have finished high school the day before yesterday. I could tell my 1st Sgt. was thinking the same thing.

From the air, Dong Tam was strikingly ugly. Roughly a mile square, and surrounded by lush vegetation, the first impression was that the base looked like a brown postage stamp on a large green envelope. Inside the berm, every square inch seemed to be uniformly brown with not a trace of green, while just outside all was green without a trace of brown. The contrast was stunning. As we got nearer, the plane banked and made a couple of circles around the base as we descended. I could make out buildings and equipment on the ground, but, dust covered, they took on the same hue as the ground itself. On the west side, I could see a harbor that had been dredged to make a port that would be safely out of the river's strong current. Local lore held that the material dredged to make the harbor was deposited on site to raise the ground level out of a marsh, and although the surface was dry several feet down, it was just a crust that often broke under heavy equipment, exposing a slimy muck that seemed to suck the equipment further into the hole. Adjacent to the harbor near the western perimeter was a band-aid that was the Dong Tam International Airport.

The short, narrow strip was at least paved with pierced steel planking (PSP), and was obviously designed for planes no larger that the trusty Caribou. The runway began not far from the river's edge and extended about 400 feet, although there was nothing but more dirt immediately beyond the end of the PSP. Just east of the northern half of the air

strip, and running parallel to it, I could see low stacks of ammo that must be my ASP. On the final approach we came over the tree covered, south bank of the river staying as high as possible until the river was under us. Then the descent became a little steeper. It seemed as though the plane would never touch down—and in fact it never did. At the last moment the pilots realized they were landing long (i.e. too far down the runway) and would not have enough runway to stop, so they gave the engines full throttle and we went around to try it again. We did this twice, but the third approach was good and with full reverse props and brakes applied we rattled to a stop with several feet to spare. After the first go around, I noticed my 1st Sgt. tighten his seat belt and I followed suit. We didn't say anything until we were on the ground in one piece, but we were both sufficiently scared that we hoped we never saw that crew again.

The FSA commander was glad to see us, as was the NCOIC of our operation. We were given a tour of the FSA's facilities, such as they were. I was a little surprised to see that they lived in above-ground buildings since they were exposed to enemy fire regularly. Part of the tour included showing us the barracks where our men had been injured by the incoming mortar. The FSA commander aired his complaints about the ASP operation, saying he had little criticism of the crew there, but felt that the company did not give them proper support. He thought we needed a few more men so the work could be spread around a little more. He saw our visit as a good sign, complaining that he hadn't seen anyone from the company in a long time. Since we were to spend the night, he assigned me an empty bunk in a two-man room in the "BOQ."

Our NCOIC took us to the ASP, which was unsatisfactory in every aspect. It was too close to the airstrip, too close to the FSA's living quarters, and the ammo "pads"—nothing more than wood pallets—were too close to each other, all serious safety violations. Earth berms only about four feet high separated the pads, providing no protection at all. It was dry and dusty, but it was evident that mud was a problem when the rains came. Again, lore had it that the general in charge of the logistical buildup had ordered the ASP be put there and decreed that it would hold 500 tons, and that's how the stockage objective was established. A new ASP was planned and under construction across the harbor on a strip of land between the harbor and the river which would afford

enough distance from living areas and the airfield. It was to be a "Modular" ASP, that is a number of pads or modules laid out side by side in a straight line separated by high earthen berms. They were still too close to each other to satisfy ammunition safety requirements, which simply had to be sacrificed because of real estate restrictions. (I heard later, after I was back home, that one module in the Dong Tam ASP took a mortar round, and the resulting fire went from module to module, passing over the berm as if it were not there, destroying most of the ammo on hand. I have no verification of that.) After showing us the defensive positions they were required to man at night or in case of a ground attack, we went to supper.

After supper, the 1st Sgt. and I met with any man who wanted to see us to hear all of their grievances. There were the usual petty complaints about the food in the mess hall, but there was a legitimate recurring complaint that the Dong Tam crew felt like step-children ignored by their parents. Most were well aware of the relatively easier working conditions, and certainly the safer environment, in Vung Tau and wanted a little more consideration. The men also felt abused by the FSA staff that assigned them a disproportionate amount of extra duty chores. I knew immediately I needed to send an officer and a senior NCO to Dong Tam to resolve some of these problems. The 1st Sgt. also had several suggestions about how to make our rotational system more fair, which we subsequently implemented. About 2100, I felt the day had been long enough, and decided to go to bed.

My roommate for the night was not in, but I could tell the bottom bunk was his so I climbed in the top one. Periodically an artillery unit would fire an H and I (harassing and interdiction) round, but as a former artillery officer, I found the noise more comforting than bothersome. I considered the possibility of an enemy mortar attack, but I looked at the roughly 8'X10' ceiling and figured the odds of a round coming in that little area were quite small, and if a round came in any other place, the odds were also in my favor. Thus reassured, I went to sleep. I awoke later when lower bunk came in but we did not speak, and I quickly went back to a sound sleep. The next thing I heard was the sound of a lot of cannon fire, and the mournful sound of siren warning of an attack—what kind I had no clue. I immediately rolled out of the bunk, and reached out to shake my roomie awake,

and my hand went all the way to the wall. He was gone, and being stupid, I had not located the BOQ bunker before I turned in, so I didn't even know which way to run.

I looked out of the screen window, half expecting to see men in black pajamas running through the area, but all I could see was darkness shattered constantly by flashing cannon fire. I slipped on my pants and boots, and began to lace them when a figure dashed in the room and yelled "Mortar attack—follow me," and he raced to the bunker with me on his heels. Safely in the bunker, I looked around at the other officers, all of whom had exited the BOQ before my feet hit the floor. I was immediately struck by the uniformity of their attire—all were barefoot, all were clad only in their underwear, and all were wearing flack jackets and steel pots. I had the only pants and boots in the room, which afforded me no protection whatsoever, and I was the only one without the armor that would have helped at least a little. I was also obviously the only one who was not a light sleeper.

The Dong Tam veterans had a little fun at my expense, but the ribbing was good-natured and I persevered. Thirty minutes later the radio announced the all clear. A few mortar rounds had been fired from across the river, but there was no ground probe, and these rounds had done no harm. Counter battery fire had attacked the probable mortar site, but the results were unknown. There was nothing to do but go back to bed. The VC, it seemed, were as skilled in the intricacies of H and I fires as were we.

Mid- morning the next day we had finished our visit, so Top and I walked to the airfield to hitch a ride home. Before long a Caribou landed and the crew chief ushered us aboard. To our discomfort, we discovered the same pilots who had brought us in the day before at the controls—old gray hair and young shave-tail Smiling lamely we pulled our seat belts tight and hoped for the best. The plane taxied to the north end of the runway and turned toward the river, not wasting a foot of the PSP. The pilots revved the engines once or twice as if they were trying to warm them up. Then, holding the brakes down as hard as possible they again revved the engines until they were screaming, and the plane was shaking violently, struggling to overpower the brakes. Just when I thought the engines were going to explode, the pilots released the brakes, pushed the throttle full forward, and down the short runway we sped. Just before the PSP ran out the nose lifted off and I

breathed for the first time—but my optimism proved premature.

As we reached the river's edge, surely no more than 50 feet off the ground, the plane suddenly banked sharply to the left. I looked out of the window and was looking straight down at the muddy MeKong, and I braced for a wet landing in the drink. To my surprise and great relief, we came out of the bank, and began to gain a little altitude, but before I could recover my composure, another sharp bank to the left pressed my head to the wall. After we had repeated that maneuver several times, it finally dawned on me what was happening. The wonderfully skilled pilots were trying to spare my life by circling within the friendly confines of Dong Tam until we were high enough to be out of small arms range. Since the enemy roamed the south bank of the Mekong, that first turn just as we lifted off was necessary to keep us on the friendly side of the river while we were still low and slow. Once we reached a safe altitude, a course was set for Bear Cat. I confided in my 1st Sgt. that the take-off scared the daylights out of me, and he confided back that he thought we were going in the river too. We promised not to tell anyone back at the company how chicken their leaders were at Dong Tam, but the story was too good to suppress, and we told all the next day.

I tried to visit Dong Tam once a month to let the troops know their mission was important and that they were still a part of the 148th. The officer and senior NCO we dispatched after the first trip reorganized the detachment, cleaned up the ASP, and generally improved the operation and the lot of the men who rotated in and out every six weeks, but I still needed to check on things. I might have brought bad luck; on my second or third visit three mortar rounds hit the airfield just as we were finishing lunch—in broad daylight.

On one occasion, I went in on a resupply boat, one of the LCM's that took ammo and other supplies in daily. The boat left early each morning, crossed open waters of the South China Sea to the mouth of the Mekong, then sailed up the river to Dong Tam, arriving early afternoon. The open sea leg was particularly interesting since even the relatively calm sea sent waves crashing over the low sides of the cargo bay drenching the ammo and other items on board. I was also impressed at how far out to sea Vietnamese

fishermen sailed in their little boats powered by a sail made of a palm branch.

While getting to Dong Tam was not easy, getting out of there was sometimes down right hard. On the return from the boat trip we hitched a ride on a "flying crane," a large helicopter that looked like a giant mosquito, designed to carry only external cargo loads. The crew space was so limited I sat with my legs hanging out of the back door. On another trip back, I got as far as Bear Cat by Caribou, then had to walk nearly a mile to the hanger area when no pick-up aircraft arrived. The Air Force offered no help so I found an Army helicopter maintenance unit and bummed a ride on a spare parts run to the Corpus Christi Bay, the depot maintenance ship anchored off the Vung Tau port.

On my last visit before being reassigned, I finished my business late in the afternoon and went to the airfield only to find that the last flight out had already departed. On the other side of the base, Chinook helicopters were delivering supplies by sling-load, that is by external cargo nets, so I trudged over to try to get a hop out. The dual rotors kicked dust high into the air, and propelled sand and small gravel that stung the skin and stuck to the sweat on my hair, face, and neck, as I flagged down a pilot to see where they were from, but more important, where they were going. As it turned out they were bringing ammo in from the Long Binh ammo depot, and would be returning to their base at Bien Hoa and would be glad to give a lift. I knew I probably would have to overnight there, but at least the chance of getting an early morning flight home was greatly improved. The roar of the twin rotors was deafening, and the cool evening air blowing through the cargo bay chilled my gritty, sweat-soaked body to the bone. Looking out the window in the twilight, on the ground below I could see tracers racing toward their target—a firefight in progress—and I realized just how lucky I was to be 5000 feet up and cold. I was ashamed for even thinking about complaining.

### **CHRISTMAS 1967**

On Christmas Day in 1967 the Army ceased to exist in Vung Tau, for a few hours anyway. It was unlike anything I had ever seen and was one event for which I was totally

unprepared. A Christmas truce had been announced, and I instructed my officers and NCO's to give as many men as possible the day off, but to remain operational with at least a skeleton crew. We were in the process of receiving ammo being discharged from a ship moored in the harbor and expected the off-loading to continue notwithstanding the holiday. On Christmas Eve, the NCO's organized a party at the beach, which was billed as a cook-out, and it was, but beer and whiskey were also on the menu. The company officers were invited, as was the group ammo officer, a major, who was a good friend. The party was in a palm grove near the enlisted R&R beach, and from our vantage point we could see a Santa Claus bringing good cheer to a large number of highly inebriated soldiers frolicking on the shore. When the party reached the point that the NCO's wanted to throw the major and me in the ocean (I talked them out of the major), it was time for us to leave.

As I drove through town on the way to the BOQ, I noticed the streets were crowded with revelers, more like a Mardi Gras celebration than Christmas. After showering and putting on dry clothes I walked the three blocks to the Pacific Hotel for supper, having left the party before the steaks were cooked. The town was insane. GI's and Vietnamese, most of whom appeared to be drunk, milled around on the sidewalks or in the streets, dodging and cursing motorcycles and lambrettas that sped by. Many soldiers appeared to be going from bar to bar, and the music emanating from the bars was not Christmas carols, but hard rock. Just as I was about to round the corner of the street on which the Pacific Hotel sat, a glowing, red object shot by my left ear, missing by only inches. At first I thought it was a rocket propelled grenade, so favored by the VC, but as the object hit the street and skipped along without exploding, I realized it was a red flare fired from a flare pistol. Regardless, I knew the streets were no place to be so I hurried to the Pacific Hotel, quickly ate supper, and then scurried back to the safety of my walled-in, guarded BOQ.

The next morning, Christmas Day, I slept in and did not head to my company until about 0800. It was, after all, a special holiday, and I had given most folks the day off. As I drove through town, the littered streets were empty, save for the poor souls that lived there all the time, who were just beginning to stir. On the road out to the ASP, I neither passed

nor met any oncoming traffic. On the section of the road that ran between the airfield and the swamp, I was struck by the tranquil beauty of the morning. The airfield, usually abuzz with planes coming, going, taxiing or warming-up, was silent except for a lone helicopter idling almost inaudibly at the far end of the runway. As I approached the ASP gate, I saw five or six trailers loaded with projectiles, lined up and waiting to be towed to the proper pad for off-loading. Nothing unusual about that; the port often got ahead of us since their handling capacity far exceeded ours. I knew, however, we needed to hustle and catch up because we had a running dispute with the port about tying up their trailers too long before unloading them. The port commander often complained to my battalion commander when they got together at the group commander's call, and I heard about it at our next CO's call.

After parking my Jeep in its reserved spot, I walked in my office ready to review and sign the always perfect morning report, before repairing to the mess hall for a cup of coffee. Inexplicably, the morning report was not on my desk, and the ever dependable 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. was not at his. Instead, the previous night's CQ was still on duty in the orderly room. No problem, it's Christmas, and if Top wants to get a little extra shut-eye, why not—he deserved it. The morning report wasn't due at battalion until noon, so no sweat, I thought. I'll just get some coffee. A few steps took me to the mess hall door, and when I tried the door and found it still locked and noticed the lights still off. I began to realize that something was dreadfully wrong. I glanced in every direction and saw no human activity of any kind. I rushed back to the orderly room and asked the CQ where everybody was. He replied that a few were at church, but most simply were not up yet. Didn't you wake the mess crew on shift at 0400 and the duty troops at 0500 I inquired? Well, some were still up then, but when he tried to get the NCO's and others to get up, they ran him out of the building. I didn't believe him so I went to the NCO hooch myself. Sure enough, it was still dark inside, the windows being covered to shut out the bright light of day. The only sound was that of men snoring, obviously in deep sleep. As I incredulously walked down the space between the beds I heard a low voice say "Cap'n is that you?"

One of the magazine platoon sergeants, still in bed but awake, asked what was going on. I quietly explained that there were loaded trailers backed up at the ASP gate and

that no one from the day shift had shown up for work. He replied that he was supposed to be off, but could not sleep because of all the snoring and told me not to worry, he'd get a crew out right away. I suggested that he might want to wake the other NCO's, especially the mess sergeant, since we had a Christmas feast planned for lunch, and had invited guests coming. He might also check to make sure the 1st Sgt. was still alive. Finally, I reminded him he would need a crane operator to off load the palletized projectiles.

In about half an hour he had roused enough sleepy soldiers to make a crew. I was worried that the crane operator was still a little drunk. Drunk or sober he was not happy about going to work, so I cautioned the NCO to keep an eye on him, and to be especially careful with all the men, several of whom were obviously hung over. Back in my office I waited for my company to come to life. In a little while I noticed a stirring in the mess hall, and soon the aroma of coffee at the boil permeated the air. The smell of coffee had a soothing effect on me, and my anger began to subside. I noticed the 1st Sgt. ease in the back door of the mess hall, and a few minutes later he was at his desk with a steaming mug of life cupped lovingly in his hands. I decided I would not say anything until he did. The company clerk finally made an appearance and I heard Top snarl at him for being late. Soon the typewriter was clicking out the morning report. The other company officers came in around 1000, and I told them what had happened. The magazine platoon leader was particularly disturbed because he had given specific instructions for the morning crew, which had been ignored. I pointed out that it was not just his men but the whole company had fallen apart and I was responsible for the company. Since neither he nor I were there at 0600, how could we be too hard on the NCO's and men. Nevertheless, I wanted him at the ASP as soon as possible to make sure we were operational—and safe.

In a little while, Top brought in the morning report for me to sign. He was a short, somewhat stocky man of Italian descent, with a gregarious personality and a gruff manner. He was a great first sergeant, liked and respected by all the NCO's and officers alike for his knowledge, experience, and professionalism. As I was signing the report, he was clearly embarrassed by what had happened to his company, and mumbled something about choking the CQ for not getting him up. No damage done, I replied, and reminded him we had company coming for lunch. Not to worry, we will be ready, and it will be a

Christmas feast that would make me proud. It did, and we never spoke of Christmas morning again.

At the next commander's call at battalion, the colonel reported that the port commander had, at the group commander's call, praised the 148th for being so fast in unloading and returning his trailers lately, and especially on Christmas Day! Go figure.

### **AUSTRALIA DAY / NEW ZEALAND DAY**

My Australian friends were as crazy as they were competent. Serious and professional during duty hours, they were party animals when off duty. A bar had been set up on one end of their BOQ, with a covered patio and tables outside so they could enjoy the unobstructed view of the ocean and catch the cooling breezes in the late afternoon hours. They liked to show visitors the seemingly endless chain made from beer can pull-tops that ran from the lounge area to who knows where. On one visit I realized they were getting a little more rowdy than usual, so I excused myself early and went home. The next afternoon when their Ammo Officer came by for ice cream, as he often did (a well kept secret—an ice cream plant kept U.S. troops well stocked, much to the delight of our Allies) and told me I left too soon because the party really got going later. One of the officers was bragging about the prowess of his fellow airborne troops and himself, of course, and was challenged to prove it by jumping off the roof of the BOQ. He accepted the challenge, provided the "legs" (a derisive term for non-airborne troops) would jump also. A ladder was quickly procured, and soon they were all on the roof. Luckily, they were landing in loose sand, since every one of them, most old enough to know better, made the parachute-less jump. It was so much fun they did it again and again, until one officer—the one trained to jump out of perfectly good airplanes--twisted his knee and had to be helped to the dispensary. Accordingly, when they invited me to a party to celebrate Australia Day on the 26th of January, I quickly accepted, but I had no idea what to expect.

I arrived wearing civilian clothes; an open collared, short sleeved shirt and slacks, only to find all of my hosts decked out in freshly starched uniforms, complete with ties. I didn't even have a tie, so I couldn't go change even if I had wanted to, but it was too late

anyway, I had been spotted and was soon accepting a glass of fine wine. After a little while, someone near the door yelled "Attention," and the log base commander entered, accompanied by the ranking military and civilian officials in the Vung Tau area. The colonel toasted the Queen, and the second ranking officer offered a toast to Australia. We all then sang "God Save the Queen" and the Australian national anthem. Then, on cue, a group of cooks entered carrying a feast fit for the queen herself, including a whole roasted pig, complete with the traditional apple tucked neatly in its mouth! Needless to say I was duly impressed and a little intimidated by these formalities, but I stayed around long enough to get a taste of that pig.

A few days later I saw my counterpart and thanked him again for the invitation to the party recognizing their special holiday. He responded by inviting me to another party on February 6th to celebrate New Zealand Day, and although I really didn't like stuffy, formal events, I wanted to do my small part to keep good relations with our allies, so I enthusiastically accepted the invitation. By Feb. 6th the effects of the TET offensive were waning so I was able to take the time to go to the event with a clear conscience. This time, however, I was ready—I wore my best shirt, neatly pressed slacks, and even polished my shoes. The second I walked in the door I knew I was out of uniform again. I was first struck by a blast of loud rock music, and then stunned by the sight of the revelers all of whom were in costumes ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. I had worn my best, most conservative attire to a costume party! As I scanned the room in amazement I wondered where these crazy people got their wonderful garb. Clearly, some had been shipped in just for the party, such as the gorilla costume, but others were cleverly home-made—men in female nurse's uniforms, women dressed as combat soldiers, and some of each dressed in black pajamas with coolie hats, carrying AK-47's, the weapon of choice for our VC enemy.

Had prizes been given for the most outrageous attire, a major I knew well would have won, hands down. His clearly was the most unique homemade outfit. He was wearing nothing but combat boots and a white, bulk knit turtleneck sweater stretched down and pinned between his legs. The effect was obscene but hilarious. He offered me a drink, and said he had had a couple before the party started to screw up his courage, but

knowing him, I knew the booze was not necessary. I decided to opt for a bitter lemon soda since they had no Pepsi's. The Aussies loved their bitter lemon although to me it tasted more like something one would take as a treatment for malaria, quinine water being the source of the prized "bitter" flavor.

After a little while there was a commotion at the door and we all turned just in time to see three officers dressed as Mexican bandits, complete with huge sombreros, crossed bandoleers of ammunition, and side arms, push their way in the room, draw their pistols and fire them at the ceiling. It was a startling, grand entrance! Then, in character as well as in costume, they elbowed their way through the gaping crowd to the bar, demanded whiskey, then wheeled around and defiantly asked if anyone had a problem. I thought for a moment there would be bloodshed, because by this time many in the crowd had become rather well lubricated, but before anyone could accept the challenge the commanding officer made his grand entrance, and even the banditos were subdued.

New Zealand had only a handful of officers working with the logistical command, and I had not seen any of them so far to offer my congratulations, and it soon became apparent why. With the colonel now in attendance, it was time for the evening's entertainment. Suddenly the rock music was gone and in its place was the rhythmic beat of primitive drums. Again all eyes turned to the door and in came the entire New Zealand contingent, seven or eight officers, barefooted and with faces painted, in aboriginal dress—grass skirts, grass anklets and arm bands, bone necklaces and bracelets, and fierce-looking bone and feather headdresses, all carrying spears and gyrating madly. The crowd, now wild with enthusiasm, clapped and cheered loudly as the tribe made its way to the front of the room and performed what must have been a native war dance, since the spears played a prominent role, as the dancers advanced and retreated in unison. The drumbeat reached a fever pitch, as did the dancer's leaps and thrusts; then as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. There was a moment of silence as the natives struck one last threatening pose, then the winded dancers gasped for air, and their appreciative audience roared its approval, many shouting for an encore, but the dancers were spent. There would be no more native dancing this night. Soon the rock music was again blaring, the colonel took his leave, and the party got down to some serious drinking. I took the colonel's

departure as a signal that it was time for me to leave also. There had been no toasts to the Queen, no national anthems, and no roasted pig, but on the way back to my BOQ I knew I would have a long, long wait before I again attended a party like New Zealand Day in Vietnam. Thirty years later I'm still waiting.

### **TET 1968**

In late January, 1968 I was at Saigon Support Command at the Long Binh Depot complex for a meeting with the command's ammunition staff to discuss the disposition of a fairly large quantity of unserviceable ammo that had been accumulating at the ASP for a long time. We had everything from small arms ammo to such high explosive items as 81MM mortars, bangalore torpedoes, and anti-tank mines that needed to be destroyed or shipped to Long Binh for renovation. I convinced the staff that my former EOD warrant officers were perfectly capable of destroying anything they did not want sent back, and in fact had developed a plan to burn the small arms and other light stuff in one of the old French coastal artillery bunkers on the side of one of Vung Tau's hills that overlook the approaches to the Saigon River. Demolition of the high explosive items could be done safely on one of the uninhabited islands in Vinh Ganh Bay. There were details to be worked out, but it was agreed that we could start a clean-up by immediately beginning to burn the small arms ammo.

I had good relations with the support command ammo staff because the second ranking officer, a major, had been in my Ordnance Officer Career Course at Aberdeen Proving Ground, and the others liked to come down to Vung Tau as often as possible, so we were all friends. Before the meeting they told me that there had been a general lull in combat activity initiated by the enemy, and the feeling at II Field Force Headquarters was that the VC were beaten and that the war would be over soon. After work we drove over to the Vietnamese Officers Club at Ton Son Nhat Airbase for dinner, returning to Long Binh well after dark. To and from dinner we drove through a number of villages and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Although unknown to us, many people from the surrounding countryside were already gathering in these villages to celebrate the Chinese (and Vietnamese) New Year known in Vietnam as TET, as well as to engage in other,

more deadly, activities, as we would soon find out.

Back in Vung Tau we heard on the news that the Vietnamese government and the VC had agreed to a 3-day truce beginning January 30 so everyone could celebrate secure in the knowledge that major combat operations would not mar the most important holiday. There had been truces before, and although there were always violations, they were usually only minor. About half of the Vietnamese Army was given leave, and we issued instructions in Vung Tau for our soldiers to be careful in town and not interfere with the celebration.

On Monday, January 29, I received a call from Cary King, an old friend from my days in the artillery in Europe, who was with the Big Red One, telling me that because of the lull, he had been given a 3-day pass. He and a friend who was a pilot for Air America (a CIA operation we all believed), would be down the next day. I told him to call me from the airfield and I would pick them up. King called early in the afternoon of Jan. 30, and I took them to my company to show off a little, then took them to the Pacific Hotel, agreeing to meet them for dinner later. I promised to take them to the Grand Hotel for Chinese food, for which the Grand was famous, at least locally.

It was just getting dark when we arrived at the Grand, which was just as well, since the old hotel looked a little better in dim light. The hotel had a large indoor dining room and several lounges, and on this evening, as was not uncommon, tables had been set on the wide patio that ran from the front of the building almost to the street. The tables were on either side, the center being left open for patrons to come and go, and also because there was a glass dance floor in the center of the patio. Red, blue, and green lights under the glass added atmosphere as did the colorful Chinese lanterns that had been carefully strung to enhance the holiday spirit. A live combo played softly on the veranda and provided accompaniment for the dancer who would provide half of the entertainment for the outside diners. The tables were clothed in white linen, accented with candles and delicate flower blossoms. All in all it was like a scene out of a David Niven movie, except instead of British officers in their heavily starched khakis and Sam Browne Belts, we were American officers in short sleeved shirts, short pants, and shoes without socks— at least

two of us anyway—I never cared much for fraternity fashion statements.

The other half of the entertainment for those sitting outside was the nightly light show put on for us by the 9th Inf. Div. on the other side of Vinh Ganh Bay. About ten or fifteen miles across the bay sat the lower reaches of a vast area of swamp, marsh, and low lands just barely above sea level covered by mangroves and dissected by rivers and streams known as the Ran-sat. The 9th had a fire base at an old French fort, and perhaps other places in the Ran-sat, and their Riverines and the Navy's RPB's plied the waters regularly. At night we could see flashes of what would have been summer lighting back home, but it wasn't summer lighting over the Ran-sat—it was cannon flashing as the artillery sought out the elusive enemy. Sometimes they would fire illuminating rounds, and sometimes airplanes would drop aircraft flares, and we could watch their brightly lit, lazy descent and reflection on the water. Often we could see tracers streaking from unseen aircraft down toward unseen targets on the ground. The show was strictly visual. Like summer lighting, the mayhem was too far away for its noise to disturb our dinner in Vung Tau.

After an excellent meal, we walked back to the Pacific Hotel. It was still early, but the malaria pill I had taken the day before was causing more problems than usual, so I decided to turn in for the night. Leaving King and his friend in the bar, I walked the three blocks to BOQ-4 and was soon asleep, despite the incessant rattle of firecrackers, although sleep was interrupted several times for quick dashes to the john. When the alarm clock went off the next morning I felt so bad I decided to stay in bed awhile to see if I was going to live or die. I called the CQ and left word for the 1st Sgt. that I might be in later, depending on how I felt.

At about 0830 there was a knock at my door, and to my surprise when I opened it, there stood Cary. He had called my company and was told where I was, and had just stopped by on his way to the airfield to say goodbye. He laughingly told me that at 0330 that morning he had been awakened by the club officer, dressed in civilian clothes but wearing a steel helmet and a flack jacket and carrying a double-barreled shotgun. The club officer told him the VC were attacking all over the place and an attack on the officer's club could occur at any time. Cary, who had seen plenty of combat just said "right" and

went back to sleep. When he went down for breakfast, however, there appeared to still be a high state of excitement, so he had called his unit. He was told all hell had broken loose and he was to get back ASAP! He later told me he spent all day at airfields trying to get home, finally getting to Bein Hoa close to midnight. He called from there and his brigade sent a chopper not equipped for night flying to pick him up. As bad as I felt, I quickly dressed and went to work. I was not sure what was happening, but I was not going to miss it because of a weak colon!

When I got to my office the situation was still far from clear. All we knew at first was that we were getting a lot of requests for ammunition. At about noon I was summoned to battalion headquarters for a commander's call. The battalion commander told us about the same thing Cary had. The area was on heightened alert, but we were to continue to perform our missions as usual. As more information became available they would let us know. There was no need to man the perimeter at this time, but no passes were authorized and town was off limits except for those who lived there.

Back at the ASP business was booming (no pun intended). Units from the Baia area brought news of VC attacks in several nearby locations and reported that the town itself had been shot up pretty badly. The tone of the requests for ammo support was becoming increasingly urgent, and shipment priorities were being assigned that reflected the seriousness of the developing situation. The citation accompanying the company's award of its Meritorious Unit Commendation records the facts, if not the tension and frantic pace of the effort:

[The Unit's] singular performance during the enemy's TET offensive reflected accurately upon their technical proficiency and perseverance. During the weeks following TET, the men handled more than twenty-seven thousand tons of ammunition, responding flawlessly to four emergency resupply demands, one tactical emergency and thirty-one combat essential resupply demands. Because of their willingness to work long and arduous hours, no requests went unfilled. Through their initiative, resourcefulness and dedication, the company's men contributed immeasurably to the United States effort in the Republic of Vietnam.

As the afternoon of Jan. 30 wore on rumors were rampant. There were reports of large numbers of VC soldiers having been seen south of Ba Ria heading our way, but still no full alert order came down. I took my officers and the 1st Sgt. to inspect our segment of the perimeter in the ASP to make sure we knew where we would position our men and the machine guns, and to identify on the ground where we were to link up with units on our left and right. We were to occupy the northeast quadrant of the ASP boundary overlooking the swamp, and in the distance the beach area. Looking out toward the coast we noticed a reconnaissance airplane circling and making repeated passes at a spot up the beach. We were sure this was not good news.

Back at the company area I issued orders for everyone to draw weapons and for our basic load of ammo to be loaded on trucks I had standing by. The night crew went to work, and the day crew sat around nervously waiting for something to happen. Finally, just as it was getting good and dark, full alert status was announced and we dashed to the ASP. Fearing, probably with good cause, that a bunch of nervous logisticians were more of a danger to ourselves than the enemy would be, we were ordered to break out the ammo but not to issue any until so ordered. As I walked the perimeter checking on my men and verifying their fields of fire, I tried to assess how I would react if a fire fight erupted. I could almost feel the presence of the enemy in the swamp, and some of my men were sure they could see movement or subdued lights among the lizards and lily pads. I was as nonchalant as possible making my rounds, purposely exposing myself to the swamp because I thought that was what an officer was supposed to do under the circumstances.

While the day crew manned the perimeter, the night crew continued to operate the ASP, albeit under blackout conditions, making what was, in good light, merely dangerous, downright hazardous. Regardless of the risk, we had ammo that had to be at the port to be loaded on "mike boats" (landing craft, medium) in time for their dawn departure for Dong Tam to resupply the 9th Inf. Div. At about midnight the order to stand down was received, much to everyone's relief. The day crew went to bed, the night crew finished the night's work, and I didn't get to see how I would react under fire, which is just as well. I decided

to spend the night in my office, just in case something unexpected happened. At about 0100 the ASP office called to ask what to do about shipping documents that were supposed to be at group headquarters. Orders had been issued earlier in the evening directing everyone to stay off the roads since the presence of small enemy units or individual infiltrators had not been ruled out. If orders were going to be violated, I decided I should be the one to violate them, so I got a driver, and another man for additional security, and, despite a spooky trip, we delivered the documents to group without incident. Apparently, the Duty Officer made a log entry about our delivery because the next day at commander's call at battalion, rather than being chided for violating orders, word had come down from group that we had done something noteworthy, and were to be commended for our perseverance. We were, after all, just doing our job, but I accepted the compliment anyway.

The next morning my lieutenants and I drove into town to clean up. Our usual route took us on a dirt road that ran between the ASP and the back side of the airfield. As we passed the airfield we gained a greater appreciation of how widespread the VC attacks really were and how safe Vung Tau was. Just about every square inch of space on the airfield was occupied by some kind of airplane! It looked as if every C-130 and every helicopter in Vietnam had been flown down to Vung Tau for safe keeping. Two days later, all the planes were gone and that's when I knew we had won the battle. They never would have risked moving all those planes if the situation had not stabilized. Weeks of fighting and mopping up still lay ahead, and the ammo mission would be intense, but the TET offensive had been a military defeat for the enemy. Little did we know then what a political and propaganda victory they had achieved back home.

### **MAMA-SANS**

I can't speak for all support units in Viet-nam, but I know my company would have been hard pressed to accomplish its mission, and may not have been able to do it without the help provided by our civilian labor force. Since they were all Vietnamese, for security reasons they were not allowed inside the ASP; accordingly, we used them to perform as much of the labor intensive work as possible outside the fence, to free up our

troops for work inside. One of their main tasks was to operate our field salvage return yard, where units turned in brass and other salvageable material for processing and return to the states. All items had to be inspected to insure no explosive components were present, then the material had to be cleaned and packed in Conex containers for shipment. At the port, the containers themselves had to be thoroughly cleaned to remove all sand or other possible environmental contaminants before they would be accepted for transport.

The work crew was made up mostly of little, scrawny old women who, because of a lifetime of hard, outdoor work, probably looked older than they really were. They generally gave the appearance of grandmothers who should have been sitting in a rocking chair resting from a lifetime of toil rather than continuing to perform manual labor six days a week. They were not physically strong—it took two of them to carry one sandbag, for example, but they were incredibly reliable and steady workers who had obviously worked hard all their lives, and were glad for the chance to make thirty cents an hour working for the Americans. Our soldiers, who themselves were not strangers to hard work, treated our "Mama-sans" with the respect they deserved partly because they knew they would be called upon to do all the chores if the little old ladies were not there.

Just before the Vietnamese New Year in early 1968, our Mama-sans had the Vietnamese equivalent of a covered dish lunch to celebrate the holiday. I was honored to receive an invitation, and they were honored by the attendance of the company commander. I spoke no Vietnamese and they spoke very little English but we all did a lot of bowing and smiling and got by. The food, consisting of course of their finest delicacies, was generally not recognizable to me. My hosts wanted me to enjoy some of everything and I did the best I could not to insult anyone or jeopardize U.S./ Vietnamese relations. The Mama-sans enjoyed themselves and had fun at my expense, teasing in French/Vietnamese "beau-coup mop," roughly meaning "plenty fat," and referring to my ample girth which they liked to give a tweak as they laughed. I escaped as soon as diplomacy would allow, and went back to work.

## **THE PILL**

Mondays were special in Vung Tau for two reasons; we had Commander's call at our next higher headquarters, the 2nd Maintenance Battalion in the afternoon, at which we received instructions from on high, and we took our malaria pills at breakfast in the morning, from which we received protection from disease. There were advantages and disadvantages of being an ammo company attached to a maintenance battalion. One disadvantage was that battalion was much more interested in how many home town news releases we shipped back home than the number of 2.75 inch rockets we shipped to the Delta. On the other hand, since they knew nothing about ammo, and were basically afraid of it, they pretty much left us alone.

There were also advantages and disadvantages to taking the malaria pill each Monday. The primary advantage, of course, was that it allegedly prevented malaria. The disadvantage was that for many of us, the pill had side effects in the lower gastrointestinal area that sometimes lasted for days. I wrote a poem about the pill after I was back in civilization in honor of an officer who was about to go over for his first Vietnam tour. The first two verses tell the story pretty well:

### **THE PILL**

You've heard of "the Pill" and how it changed your life,  
It gives you more freedom with mistress or wife.  
But for you, a new pill is now on the scene,  
It stamps out malaria; it's big, orange, and mean.

You take it in country on Monday each week,  
And it takes 'til Friday to get back on your feet.  
You ache and you moan, and you finally call it quits,  
You'd rather get malaria than die of the sh...(put your own  
word here).

One Monday in December, 1967, I convened a late afternoon officer/NCO meeting in my office to pass on the latest information from battalion, group, Saigon Support, Command, 1st Logistical Command, U.S. Army, Vietnam, and I guess, the Joint Chiefs and the President. The meeting had hardly begun when I began to feel that all too familiar rumble in my lower GI that told me trouble was imminent. I tried to hold out but

nature's call was just too powerful. In the middle of the meeting I suddenly stood up, excused myself, and made a dash for the latrine, which was at the down-wind end of the company area. I made it with absolutely no time to spare.

The latrine, like most things associated with the 148th was, for a field facility in a combat zone, a first class operation. The 12 by 14, wood frame structure rested on a concrete foundation and had screened windows on three sides the better to take advantage of the almost constant breezes off the sea. A screen door was centered on one end—the wall on the far end, which was on the outer perimeter of the company area, was solid wood for modesty's sake. The fabricated metal urinal was on that wall, and was gravity drained into a nearby ditch that ran, eventually, to the swamp. It was a six-holer, three on each side and raised high so that a step platform was needed to mount and use the genuine toilet seats (with lids) thoughtfully provided by the builders. The waste fell into 55gallon drums, cut in half with handles welded on to make handling easier.

The facility was in the charge of our lone male Vietnamese worker and his was, in my view, the worst job in Vung Tau but he executed it superbly keeping his domain clean and as sanitary as the circumstances allowed. The outside walls of the latrine were cut and hinged so they could be opened to allow for removal of the cut-off 55 gallon drums from the outside. They were then carried some distance away, diesel fuel was added and the contents burned. Spare containers were always ready to replace the ones in the process of being sanitized. Mr Hahn's job was seven days a week and he never missed a day and, to my knowledge, he never uttered a word of complaint. Because of the unpleasant nature of the job he was paid a little more than the women, but none of them ever complained or demanded that they be allowed to compete for that position.

When I returned to the meeting, somewhat chagrined, everyone pretended that nothing had happened. Most of them had experienced the same reaction from the pill, and besides that I was the boss, and no one teases the boss. I reported the good news that we were leading the battalion in hometown news releases and everyone was pleased, even though six of our forklifts were on deadline. The meeting ended not long after that.

## THE WRECKER CAPER

One afternoon in early March, I had just returned from lunch when I got a call from my motor officer in the motor pool. He asked if I had loaned our 5-ton wrecker to anyone. The question was not completely unreasonable; it was a common practice for units to help each other out in a pinch, but I was surprised and a little irritated that he would think I would loan a major piece of equipment without letting him or his motor sergeant know about it, and I told him so. Well, they couldn't find it, and they thought (hoped) I had let someone use it. I suggested that it was probably in the ASP being used to off load projectiles, because of deadlined forklifts, but he said he had asked the magazine platoon leader and he denied having it. I told him to go check in the ASP himself since it might be there without the platoon leader knowing about it.

He called back a little later and confirmed it was not in the ASP. Concerned but not alarmed, I asked when the wrecker had last been seen. They were sure it was parked in the motor pool like always when they broke for lunch. When they returned it was gone. The man left for security was working inside and thought he heard the engine start and the truck pull out, but he assumed it was going to the ASP, and thought nothing of it. Not to worry, I said, somebody probably borrowed it, assuming they had permission. Call the truck company since they have used it before, and might feel comfortable taking it without asking. He did, but they hadn't. The matter was now getting serious, but I was still confident the wrecker would come home, wagging its tail behind it. Nevertheless, we sent men to look in every nook and cranny of the logistical complex, and notified the MP's and battalion of the possible theft.

It was not uncommon for vehicles to be stolen in Vung Tau, despite the lock and chains on the steering wheel used to make theft more difficult. Jeeps, however, were almost exclusively the target. To combat units in the area in need a jeep, ours were considered fair game. No one, to my knowledge however, had ever stolen a 5-ton wrecker. By late afternoon we still had no wrecker, but we did have a prime suspect.

My magazine platoon leader reminded us that an artillery battalion based north of

Baria was being re-deployed to the I Corps area, and had been in the ASP that very morning turning in excess ammo. They were scheduled to embark on a Navy LST the very next day, with our truck as war booty if our guess was right. We would not, however, give up without a fight.

Early the next morning, my motor officer and I set off for the fire base of the 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery on the only road to and from their area. We stationed one of my lieutenants, the motor sergeant, and several other men in the port to keep an eye out there. I expected to find the wrecker at the base camp either still loading equipment or abandoned; nevertheless as we passed the unit's convoys on their way to the ship, we looked carefully for our truck, which would be easy to spot, even in a moving convoy—or so we thought. When we reached the base camp almost everyone was gone and no wrecker was to be found. The officer in charge was sure they did not have our equipment, but said he would look into it when they got settled in I Corps. Fat chance, I thought as we headed back to Vung Tau in defeat.

As we pulled into port, many of the battalion's vehicles were still lined up waiting to be loaded. We spotted our officer and the NCO's and pulled over to them. They were very excited, and shouted almost in unison, "We just found our wrecker!" They had indeed, and not a moment too soon—it was third in line to be loaded on the LST. When I saw the truck, it was readily apparent why we did not spot it in the convoy. The camouflage job was truly outstanding and would have fooled all but the most trained eye. The most distinguishing feature, the wrecker boom and assembly had been covered with canvas supported by ribs to make it look like a cargo truck, rather than a wrecker. The boom itself had been wrapped in canvas, and appeared to be just some equipment protruding from the back of the cargo bed. On the front, a box had been built to cover the wench, and gave the appearance of cargo being carried externally. Of course, all of the identifying numbers had been painted over and changed, and as the final touch the immaculate truck had been sprayed with oil and doused with red dirt to give it the look of a truck that had spent a hard two years in the field. Soldiers must have stayed up all night working on that truck. It was so good I couldn't stay mad but I pretended to for the benefit of the motor sergeant who would have the chore of putting his truck back in order, which

would be easier than trying to persuade a surveying officer why he should not have to pay for it.

Having served in the 2nd Battalion, 83rd Artillery in Germany some years earlier, I knew how valuable a 5-ton wrecker is to an artillery unit, and under the circumstances I might have tried the same thing myself.

I asked the motor sergeant how he spotted our truck after first missing it. He said he walked by it and something just didn't look right, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He approached the truck to get a closer look and everybody close to the funny looking truck just disappeared. When he realized it was a wrecker, and started asking questions, no one had ever seen the truck before or had any idea how it got there. I told them to get our truck home and to guard all of our equipment until the boat cleared the harbor. They all left and I tried to find the battalion commander, but was informed he was in I Corps with the advance party, just as he should have been. The XO promised to investigate the matter when they got settled, but we both knew he was lying. I told him that I was a former red leg myself, and told him that when he found out who was responsible, tell them I said nice try.

### **ATTACK ON VUNG TAU**

In early April 1968 I was eligible for out of country R&R so I made arrangements to meet my wife and year-old daughter in Hawaii. Peggy did not like to fly, and she was particularly apprehensive about flying all the way to Hawaii with a babe-in-arms, but she was determined to make the trip and they did just fine, arriving before I did. We had a great five days, although our budget, as usual was limited. We sat on the coral beach at Waikiki and compared it unfavorably with "our" beach at Panama City. The ocean and the view of Diamond Head were spectacular, but the rough coral was not as pretty as the snow-white sand of the Gulf Coast. The visit was all too short, but when our airplanes were airborne in opposite directions, I had only six months before my tour would be finished.

On the third day in Honolulu I heard a news summary that reported a rocket attack

on the U.S. in country R&R center at Vung Tau. No other information was reported, and there was nothing I could do but wait until I got back to find out what had happened.

When I got back to the company, four days after the attack, my people were still a little jumpy, but anxious to tell me what happened. At about 0300 in the morning, five 122mm rockets, fired from the same island in Vinh Ganh Bay that we used to destroy unserviceable ammo, slammed into Vung Tau. One hit an NCO billet about 75 yards from our company, injuring several NCO's and a couple of their unauthorized overnight guests. Everyone in the 148th immediately ran to our bunker which proved to be too small to accommodate all of our people, let alone all the soldiers from nearby units who wanted in the only bunker in the area. Tempers flared but fortunately no blows were struck. A second rocket landed at the port and killed a Vietnamese dock worker. One detonated just outside the ASP fence and rearranged some sand, but did no damage. One exploded near a Caribou on the airfield setting it on fire and destroying it. The fifth rocket missed the base entirely, landing in a civilian area and killing two and injuring several others. By the time the island was searched by Vietnamese paratroopers after the sun was up, the island was again uninhabited.

My 1st Sgt. Had already begun plans to construct a second 100-man bunker, even before I got back. Designed to withstand a direct hit of a Soviet-made 122mm rocket, the skeleton was relatively easy, constructed by our company carpenters out of 6X6 and 4X4 timbers, to rigid engineer specifications, but the sandbagging of such a large bunker was a time consuming, labor intensive operation. It was soon evident that the Mama-sans could not do the job without help if it was to be finished before the war was over. The only solution was to extend the duty day for all soldiers who would fill sand bags for the civilian workers to stack the next day. We provided beer and soft drinks for these work sessions, and often cooked out and ate right at the work site, which was a large sand pile - at one end of the company area. When I picked up a shovel and began to fill sand bags the other officers followed suit. Working as two-man teams, we challenged the enlisted men to see who could fill the most bags in an evening, and seldom lost. The fact that we were there working with them, coupled with the still fresh memory of a night of near panic, was all the motivation needed to keep the project moving. Even though it took two Mama-sans

to carry one sand bag, they worked as steady as we worked hard, and in a month the outer layers of sandbags filled with sand laced with dry-mix concrete, were put in place and watered down. When the concrete hardened, it would cause a rocket striking the bunker to detonate before it could penetrate the sandbag walls, thus affording those inside greater protection.

There was no other attack on Vung Tau during my time there, and I always felt I missed out on something by not being there to experience that one, but all in all, I'd rather have been in Hawaii with my family when the rocket's red glare lighted up the night sky in Vung Tau.

### The Official U.S. Army, Vietnam Stripper

The Pacific Hotel served many purposes in Vung Tau. It was a BOQ, a transient billet for those in a travel status, and an in country R&R facility for officers. It housed the officer's field ration mess, and was a combination officer's club/community center, with a well stocked bar and a short order grill for those who grew tired of mess hall food. It had a barbershop, a pool room, and, of course, a slot machine room, where one of my warrant officers once spent 24 hours trying to hit the progressive jackpot on the nickel machine, only to have someone else take it an hour after I made him go back to work. Completely walled off from the outside world, it also had a large patio on one side for outside dining or just talking over a beer, a Coke, or a cup of coffee. At the far end of the patio stood an elevated stage, whose backdrop also served as a movie screen. An even higher fence sat atop the compound wall, and the fence and wall were well covered with a tangle of vines that added to the privacy, if not the security of the patio. Two or three nights a week, live entertainment graced the Pacific's stage.

As a small logistical base, VungTau did not get the top acts—Bob Hope never came, nor did Ann-Margaret. The most famous personality to visit us was Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes, before he was retired in disgrace after taking a swing at an opposing player on the sideline of a bowl game a few years later. A Korean country and western band came through once or twice, as did a Korean "big band" that played Miller

and Goodman swing tunes. Occasionally, a female singer, accompanied by a lewd comedian who acted as the MC, would make an appearance, but mostly we were entertained by a Vietnamese rock band that played once or twice a week.

The local band's repertoire was limited, and I'm not sure they understood a word they were singing, but they pounded four songs into my head night after night—"Sonny," "Black is Black," "Blue, Blue, my Heart is Blue," and "So Happy Together." Even today, as soon as I hear the first note of any of those songs, I am transported through time and space back to Vung Tau and the Pacific Hotel. The sight of a C-130 taking off or landing sometimes has a similar effect. It was not surprising that a great deal of interest and curiosity was generated when a notice was posted announcing a strip show to be performed the following Tuesday at 2100hrs, following a 1900hrs performance at the enlisted R&R center on the beach.

Scuttlebutt had it that the stripper was performing all over Vietnam at officer and enlisted clubs and that her transportation and accommodations were being provided by the Army. I thought to myself that if these rumors were true then this woman, whoever she was, must be the Official U.S. Army, Vietnam Stripper. Why else would she be getting VIP treatment? And if that were the case, how good could her show be? The Army would never condone an act more risqué than what could be seen in movies being shown to the troops none of which, in 1968, involved nudity. I resolved not to waste my time watching a woman stripping down to what amounted to a two piece bathing suit.

On the night of the big show, had supper at the Pacific as usual, then went to my room to read awhile before joining the perpetual poker game that usually got organized around 2000hrs. When I went down for the game, the door was locked. I then noticed the BOQ was as quiet as a tomb. As I walked through the usually noisy building I soon realized that, except for the security guard and me, the building was completely empty. Shaking my head in disbelief, I went back to my room to wait for my comrades to return so I could hassle them about wasting good poker time on a worthless show. Feeling superior, I recalled the episode from Huckleberry Finn, where the two charlatans enticed half the rubes in a small town to see a show that was so bad no one would admit it until the other half of the town had been taken in by the next night's performance. Am I the

only person in this town with half a brain, I smugly thought to myself. At ten minutes to nine I hurriedly dressed and quickly walked to the Pacific.

When I arrived I found the place packed. It was a standing room only crowd, and I was just about the last to get there. I could see the Aussies were out in force, and there were people I had never seen before—probably pilots from the Delta in town just for the show. French doors opened from the bar on to the patio, and it was impossible to get out of the doors because of the mass of male humanity eagerly waiting to be disappointed. I stood back a little from the throng, not wanting to be a part of it, but not wanting to be a second night rube either.

Music announced the start of the show, and the crowd became silent as every eye focused on the makeshift curtain set up on left center stage. Letting the anticipation build, the stripper delayed her entry until she knew the time was right. She then burst on the stage in all her full-clothed glory to a roar of approval from her appreciative, and, by now, slightly intoxicated audience. Tall and statuesque, she was dressed to the nine's, in a high-neck, scarlet, floor-length, rhinestone studded, evening gown, with red high-heel shoes and white gloves that extended beyond her elbows. Long, dark hair cascaded from under a wide-brimmed, red hat. Her face and small patches of her shoulders were the only areas of exposed skin, but that was not to last long. To a skeptical, near-sighted man in the very back of the crowd, she appeared to be quite a handsome woman indeed.

Her routine was performed, fittingly, to the music of "The Stripper," from "Gypsy." The hat was the first item to go and that took about two minutes; each glove about five minutes, and these she flung across the stage. She teased with the dress for an eternity—probably nearer to ten minutes, but placed it carefully on a hanger and a coat rack. Off next came the wickedly dark stockings that she pretended to have difficulty unfastening from a black, lacey garter belt, requiring her to seek assistance from the audience; then the belt itself. The performance lasted about 30 minutes and when the music stopped, the Official U.S. Army, Vietnam Stripper was still wearing her black, lacey undergarments and the red shoes she had slipped back on, and I said to myself "There, I told you so." The rabble, of course, had been worked into a near frenzy, and

shouts of "More, more," and "Take it off" could be heard above the din as the stripper took a bow. Suddenly the music started again, and just as suddenly, a black, lacey bra went flying across the stage! The noise was so loud I almost could not hear myself think "Well, O.K., the bra. But I'm sure that's all—this is an Army sponsored show, after all." Wrong again. It took a while, but before long only the red shoes were between this lady and complete nakedness. With my bad eyes, and from my vantage point, the details of the female's anatomy were not visible, but the guys down in front literally got an eye full. At this point the show, which had been somewhat artistic, turned downright raunchy. At one point she invited an audience member to join her, and like a flash, one of my warrant officers, who must have been there since 1800hrs to be on the front row, was on stage. He was still in his jungle fatigues, and she took off his shirt and undershirt and he would have removed his pants had she not stopped him. She used his T-shirt as a prop, rubbing it between her legs and teasing him with it. After she had made a complete fool of him, much to the delight of the crowd, and to him, in ways I choose not to describe, but that did not involve actual sex acts, she sent him sheepishly back to his seat.

When the show was over, I stayed around for a few minutes, still in disbelief, to talk to my now famous warrant officer, who, because of the combination of beer and the night's activities, was almost delirious. He was wearing his fatigue jacket, but was carrying with tender, loving care, the T-shirt, which reeked with an unholy combination of sweat and cheap perfume. He vowed he was going to sleep with it and never wash it, and he kept that vow until the perfume wore off. The next day he was back to humping (only) ammo.

### A New Command

On the afternoon of June 9, 1968 I was bored. Despite occasional problems that always occur (and justify the existence of officers to begin with) the 148th was running like a well-oiled machine. A new, senior first lieutenant had just come on board, and I had assigned many administrative duties, such as the unit fund and the property book, to him. I had done this for two related reasons: First to train him and second because I knew my days in command were numbered. One principle that was ingrained in me by my early

training was that commanders must insure that they are not indispensable. If the CO is killed, wounded, or merely reassigned, a unit that is well-trained will also be well-led if the commander has trained his replacement. Although I did not expect to be killed any time soon, I knew that I had been in command for over eight months and six months was the norm. I could be replaced with only a few days notice and I wanted to be prepared. I had already been offered a job with the 9th Inf. Division as an assistant S-4 for one of their brigades, but I turned it down. I would have accepted the S-4's job but I would not give up a command position for anything less.

I was so bored that day I decided to do something I had considered, but not done before—inspect the drainage ditch that ran along the company area's northern side, then across an open area, then between our ASP and the RUF/PUF base and on to the swamp. I drove my jeep to the open area and parked across the road from the ASP office. I didn't consider driving cross country because the sand was too loose, much like a dune there, and, moreover, riding would defeat the purpose of going in the first place, which was to kill time and relieve boredom.

I had walked about 500 yards when I heard a horn sound. I turned and saw one of my NCO's frantically waving his arms trying to get my attention. I strode back quickly wondering what was wrong. I was told the 1st Sergeant needed me back at the orderly room ASAP. Not knowing the nature of the crisis, I hurried along. When I got there the first shirt told me the group sergeant major had called and told him to find me and have me call him right away. Curious, and knowing command sergeant majors are not to be trifled with, I placed the call. The CSM told me the group commander wanted me in his office right away, and, also knowing that colonels commanding groups are not to be trifled with, I was in my jeep and on the way. As I drove the two miles to the Rosa Hotel, home to Headquarters, 53rd General Support Group, the command in charge of the logistical apparatus in Vung Tau, and the entire Delta, I tried to figure out which of my many sins of commission or omission had come to the colonel's attention, and how.

When I arrived at HQ, the CSM met me and quickly ushered me into the "old man's" office. My heart sank even more when I saw my battalion commander had been

summoned and was already there. The colonel got right to the point. As I probably knew the group headquarters company had failed its Command Maintenance Management Inspection (CMMI) several weeks ago and was due to be re-inspected within 30 days. In addition he had just received the schedule for IG inspections and the HQ was set for June 21, less than two weeks away. The headquarters company commander, who was present, had told him there was no way the unit could pass either inspection, and was asking for help. The battalion commander was there because they were discussing who might be drafted to take over and try to rehabilitate the company. They needed their best company commander for this job, and thought that was me. They knew I had a great company and did not want to give it up but the situation was critical, if not desperate, because the group HQ could not afford to fail the CMMI again, and didn't relish failing the IG inspection although it seemed too late to do much about it. They anticipated I would need a week or so to wind up things at the 148<sup>th</sup>, and would give me what I needed, but when did I think I could start? As he talked my relieved mind had been racing through mental checklists, and when his question was put I answered, "Tomorrow." Both colonels smiled in disbelief and the group CO asked how that would be possible. I quickly explained that I had been preparing for a change and merely had two OER' s that the change would trigger, and I could do them at my new post. I would assume command the next morning and give it my best shot.

Before leaving the HQ, I called my 1st Sergeant and instructed him to have the officers and key NCO's in my office when I got there. They listened in disbelief as I told them what was happening, and the consensus was that it was not fair to the 148th or me, but as professional soldiers they understood and offered to help in any way possible. The senior lieutenant, who would be assuming command, was nervous but excited, as I briefed him on the status of various aspects of his new command, and reminded him I would not be far away if he needed help or advice. I then cleared my office of the few personal items I always kept close at hand, such as the picture of my wife and infant daughter, and a replica of the "Santa Maria"—a birthday present from my wife that had arrived a few weeks earlier, and I was history at the 148th.

The next morning I was at my new job before 0600. I wanted to observe the

formation and policing of the area, which I already knew to be lax, before reporting to the orderly room. When I went in, the 1st sergeant was expecting me but not so early. Like the lieutenant I was replacing, who stayed on as my XO, he was a good man, but could do only so much without support from the company commander, which had not been forthcoming. The lieutenant was a nice young man and that was a large part of his undoing. In a headquarters company only the 1st Sgt. and a couple of his clerks, the mess section, a supply section, and the maintenance section work for the company commander. The vast majority of the personnel in the headquarters company of a group headquarters work for the colonels and lieutenant colonels who run the staff sections that make up the headquarters, and there are a lot more chiefs (senior NCO's) than indians.

To command such an organization successfully an officer needs three things: Experience, self-confidence, and a clear mandate from the group commander communicated directly from him to his staff. My predecessor was young and inexperienced, a natural self-doubter, and had been ignored by the group CO and XO until things were out of hand. Although he had made his share of mistakes, they could all be excused because of his lack of know-how not his lack of motivation. The unforgivable mistake was making him the CO to begin with and the responsibility for that lay at the feet of the group CO, who now pledged to give me all the support I needed.

I spent the morning assessing the situation. My XO and the 1st Sgt. were aware of many of the problems, they just didn't know how to go about fixing them. My inspection of the company area was discouraging. The barracks were more like college dorm rooms, and I knew old habits would be hard to break. The dayroom was in shambles, many of the sandbag revetments around the sleeping quarters had fallen and no one had bothered to pick them up, the area was dirty, and company administration was poor. The unit fund records were a mess, ration card control was so lacking my XO was afraid he would go to jail, no filing system was in use, and the morning report had problems even I had never seen before. The motor pool was as bad as expected, but the consolidated mess operation was in good shape, as was the company supply room. The group food service officer was a CWO-4 who had forgotten more about mess operations than I ever knew, so I asked him to be responsible for insuring that the mess was ready for inspection, and he agreed. I told

the group CO that if we were to have a prayer of passing the CMMI I needed the best motor officer in the group in the motor pool ASAP working full time. Two days later, an outstanding maintenance warrant officer reported for duty. I told him what had to be done and put him in charge of the motor pool with instructions to let me know what he needed.

I had the 1st Sgt. arrange a meeting of all the NCO's in charge of the headquarters staff sections for the afternoon of the second day. I knew the key to turning things around depended on getting the cooperation, if not the support, of this group of master sergeants and staff sergeants major, most of whom felt they were not responsible for the company's success or failure. I started the meeting with a little white lie—I told them they and their men were the best and brightest in the entire group, why else would they be in the HQ? Because they were the best, there was simply no reason the group HQ was in danger of failing an IG inspection and a CMMI re-inspection. There was much to be done and little time, but if each one pitched in and contributed his expertise and got his men to do the same we had a chance. After buttering them up, I asked them to help. Reading their faces, I could see some were ready while others still looked disinterested. Knowing that different soldiers, even senior NCO's respond to different stimuli, and after all this was still the Army, I next employed a veiled threat by noting I was asking for help now, but if it was not forthcoming, the next time we met I would do more than ask.

At this point the group command sergeant major interjected himself in the discussion. A command sergeant major who knows how to wield his power is feared next only to God. He has the ear of the colonel commanding and direct access to the boss at will. The senior NCO's knew that a word from the CSM could banish them from the relative comfort and safety of Vung Tau to some austere and dangerous outpost in the Delta. When he spoke, they listened. He began by telling the assembled through something I did not know. If the group HQ did poorly on the IG and failed the CMMI, heads would roll. He had it on good authority that the group CO himself was in jeopardy. He instructed his NCO's to help in any way they could, and told them that if they needed any help with the officer in charge of their section, just let him know and he would square things with the old man. He assured me that his senior NCO's would help.

A few days later the 1st Sgt. informed me that he was still having trouble getting the sandbag revetments fixed. I told him to tell the NCO's in charge of each building that either they would supervise their men repairing the sandbags, or I would supervise them repairing the sandbags—it was their choice. The job was done soon after, without my supervision.

From the first day, the 1st Sgt. and I were on a 0630 to 2200 schedule, the quitting time dictated by the local curfew. One of his main concerns was the company's morning report which is the fundamental report of any company since it records all personnel actions such as assignments, reassignments, promotions and the like and keeps a running total of the unit strength by rank. According to our morning report we had about 80 more enlisted men assigned than could be verified by a nose count. Each entry on the report is backed up by orders or some other document, so, in theory, an audit of orders should allow the problem to be solved, but the problem was of so long standing that the more he worked, the more errors he found. I discussed this problem with my old 1st Sgt. at the 148th and he told me the way to address this problem was to have a "muster" and find out who could be accounted for, then make a one-time adjustment to bring the report up to date.

The company's unit fund was an item of concern to me since it is a unit function usually managed by the CO himself. The unit fund is the unit's share of the profits of the military PX system, allocated per capita to each organization for morale support activities such as furnishing the day room, enhancing the appearance of the mess hall, unit parties and other authorized purposes. Since the money is "non-appropriated" it can be used for a wide range of expenditures, but the disbursements must be for the benefit of the enlisted ranks and approved by a council of enlisted men whose decisions must be duly recorded in minutes. Accountability and record keeping requirements are strict. At a glance, anyone familiar with the regulatory requirements would know this fund had been misused and abused, not by my XO, who had done nothing for fear of doing something wrong, but by his predecessor. My first chore was to audit the records and list all of the discrepancies I could find, and this took hours. I placed this list along with the corrective action I was taking in the fund records. The most serious problem was a number of clearly

unauthorized purchases of plaques and other memorabilia which were given to visiting dignitaries by a former group commander.

I contacted the former company commander and told him I had no choice but to forward a statement of charges for these unauthorized expenditures. He pleaded with me not to send anything through channels because of the potential damage to his career. He acknowledged the errors, but said he had no choice since he was told to make the purchases by the group CO. Having known the careerist commanding officer myself, I believed him and accepted his offer to send his own check to reimburse for the misspent money.

Once in Vung Tau, the IG team was to inspect all units commanded by the 53rd General Support Group culminating with the group headquarters and headquarters company on the last day. On the day before we were scheduled, the IG was inspecting the 2nd Maintenance Battalion, and since their mess operation was part of a consolidated mess controlled by my company, the mess hall inspector decided to inspect that operation a day early and took them by surprise. We knew things went badly, and the mess steward was almost in tears, both from anger and shame when he and the group food service officer briefed me on what happened. In such cases the inspector is always right. All we could do was wait and hope for the best.

The IG team is made up of a number of officers and NCO's who specialize in functional areas and become adept at determining a unit's proficiency usually by using sampling techniques. Areas inspected include personnel management, supply management, maintenance management, unit administration, mess operations, training, unit fund, living facilities (especially latrine sanitation) and items of special interest to any headquarters in the chain of command. Often there is an in-ranks inspection of the troops, followed by an inspection of the barracks with personal equipment in a "full field" display on each man's bunk. The in-ranks and full field lay-out were mercifully waived, this being a combat zone, but a thorough look was had at the barracks and latrines all the same.

An experienced master sergeant inspected both the ration cards and unit fund. My

XO was nervous about his ration card files. He had done everything possible to clean them up, but some things just could not be fixed. I instructed him to present his records and not try to hide anything, to answer all questions truthfully, but not to volunteer anything. Luckily the inspection was superficial, and I breathed a sigh of relief when it was over and my XO had not blurted out a full confession. Then came my turn, and a full confession was in order there. I showed him my audit and corrective action memo and he verified for himself what I had found. I asked him to be sure to note for the record that all the deficiencies had been corrected and he promised he would. The whole process took from about 0800 until about 1400 and then the plague of locusts was gone. The next morning, the team would compare notes, finalize their results, and prepare for the exit briefing set for 1400 that day. All we could do was wait.

At the appointed hour the group conference room was packed with group staff officers, the 2nd Maintenance Battalion CO and his key staff, the commanders and 1st Sgt's of all the companies inspected, including my 1st Sgt. and me, all of us nervously waiting for the news, good or bad. The IG team entered and took their seats and when all was ready the group CO was ushered in and the exit briefing began. After the usual preliminaries thanking everyone for their cooperation and hospitality, the team chief gave a unit by unit critique.

There are only two ratings—satisfactory or unsatisfactory and these ratings are awarded based on the number of "gigs," i.e. the deficiencies or shortcomings charged against the functional areas inspected. All of the operating companies assigned to the battalion and group were rated satisfactory although all received some gigs. I listened with pride as the 148th Ordnance Company was singled out for special comment as being particularly well managed, and for a moment I daydreamed I had never left. I was shocked back to reality when it was announced that the headquarters and main support company of the 2nd Maintenance Battalion was rated unsatisfactory. If a good company like that one bit the dust, what chance did we have? It was now time for our assessment, and I studied the toes of my jungle boots intently.

Mess operations were unsatisfactory, the IG intoned, and the unit fund, although

now being properly administered, was rated as unsatisfactory for improper administration over the course of the previous year—overall, however the unit was satisfactory! He then contrasted my company with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Maintenance Bn. HQ's company, saying they were examples of units going in opposite directions. The improvements implemented by Captain Allen were paying dividends and the company was clearly on the upswing, while the 2nd Maintenance seemed to be going down. This concluded the briefing, and the group CO thanked the IG team for its good work and pledged for us all that all deficiencies and shortcomings would be corrected immediately. The meeting was adjourned.

We all felt badly for the officers of 2nd Maintenance, and averted their eyes as they glumly shuffled out, but the joy for our own state of grace could not be long subdued. Hand shakes and congratulations were plentiful. The Group Director for Personnel who, for some reason liked me, pointed out something that had not escaped my notice, and that was that I was the only officer mentioned by name in the briefing, and the fact that he noticed gave my already soaring ego an additional boost. In 10 days we had done what no one thought could be done; we had moved the HQ company and the Group Commander back from the brink of a disaster. Now all we had to do was pass that damned CMMI.

The next day I received a call from the commander of Headquarters Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Maintenance Battalion. He was bitter about what had happened, and complained that he had only been in command 53 days and many of the things he was gassed for were of long standing. He received little help from the battalion staff, which I could believe, and now feared being relieved of his command. Although I did not know him well my impression was that he was a good officer and a good man, and I liked him. I reassured him that I did not believe that they would fire him after only 53 days on the job, and told him to just hunker down and correct the problems found by the IG and he would be OK. I offered to help in any way I could. The next day he was relieved, and the day after that he was transferred away from Vung Tau and we never heard from him again.

The CMMI proved to be anti-climatic. We had 20 more days to prepare, I had a very competent maintenance officer, and momentum was on our side. Although we were

graded as satisfactory on the IG for maintenance management, passing the much more rigorous CMMI, was not a given, but we worked hard and were reasonably confident on inspection day. We got our share of gigs, the best of units do, but we passed and that was what mattered.

In early August, I was called by an MP officer in Saigon who said they had picked up a soldier who had been living in Saigon with a Vietnamese woman for some time, but claimed he belonged to us. I had never heard of him so I asked Top about it. He remembered the name and told me the man had been in Vietnam a long time. He had gone AWOL several times and each time his missing days were added to his one-year requirement. Earlier in this year he again went AWOL and had been gone so long he had been dropped from the rolls as a deserter. The MP asked us to send a detail to pick him up and two men were dispatched the next morning. They returned late the next afternoon, too late for him to be in-processed into the stockade, so the 1st Sgt. made arrangements for the man to spend the night in the orderly room under guard by the "Charge-of Quarters" or CQ as the night duty NCO was called.

The next morning the 1st Sgt. told me there had been some trouble during the night with the prisoner. No, he had not tried to escape. He had been injured and had to be taken to the dispensary to have several stitches to close a cut in his head. The CQ said he had fallen on the way to the latrine, but the soldier claimed the CQ struck him with his rifle butt. I asked the 1st Sgt. what he knew about the CQ and was told he was a good man. He was a staff sergeant (E-6), a career NCO with a family back home, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. believed his story. I asked Top to bring both men to my office so I could hear both stories first hand. Both agreed the incident occurred as the CQ escorted the prisoner to the latrine well after dark. The prisoner alleged that, just a few steps outside the orderly room, for no reason the NCO just butt stroked him with his rifle, knocking him to the ground. The NCO denied hitting the man, and said that when they left the brightly lit orderly room and stepped into the dark of night, neither of them could see where they were going. He said the prisoner stepped off the concrete side walk, which was elevated about six inches, and fell, causing the injury. There were no other witnesses, so I chose to believe the NCO rather than the deserter and ended the meeting.

After a few minutes the CQ asked if he could see me in private. When the door was closed, he told me the prisoner's version of the incident was the truth after all. He said that he had listened to him curse the Army and everything about it, including him, for hours and just could not take any more of it and as soon as they were alone he "butt stroked" him. He was not sorry because soldiers like the deserter gave all black soldiers (both were black) a bad name. Having heard the confession, I was faced with a moral dilemma. The prisoner was less than no good, but his punishment would be decided by a court martial; unquestionably the CQ's conduct was wrong, and he himself could be put before a court martial for his abuse of his prisoner. As his commanding officer it was my duty to take the appropriate disciplinary action, even if it meant ruining the career of an otherwise good NCO. I knew immediately what I was to do. I told the sergeant that the CQ log indicated that the prisoner was injured when he fell in the dark night. As far as I was concerned that was what happened, and he was never to tell anyone what he told me. I thus transferred full responsibility for the brutal act from the NCO to myself, and never doubted for a second that I had done the right thing.

I remained in command of headquarters company until my year in country was up in late September, 1968. In mid-August, a new captain was assigned to the company who was to be my replacement. He was an Infantry officer on his second or third tour in Vietnam but at least this time was not in a combat assignment. He was still recovering from wounds and injuries suffered on his last outing, including gun shot wounds and a broken back received when his first med-evac helicopter was shot down. The Army never should have sent him back, but he was a good career officer and had no complaints. I spent a couple of weeks showing him the ropes, and then decided I needed to get out of his way; I unofficially made myself the group ammo officer since the position was vacant, and spent most of my time at the group headquarters until my rotation date finally arrived.

One day as I was walking out of the headquarters, I met the Director for Personnel who asked me to step into his office. He somewhat apologetically told me that unfortunately the award for service that they had hoped to present before I left had not been approved. He told me the colonel had recommended me for the Legion of Merit, but

higher headquarters had downgraded it to a Bronze Star because I was a company grade officer. The old man was going to send it back and insist on the higher award but realistically there was little chance the general would change his mind. Besides, it might be better to get the Bronze Star, which can only be awarded in a wartime situation, and I could always pickup the LOM later. He was right—the Bronze Star for service was awarded at my next duty station, and I "picked up" a Legion of Merit twenty-one years later when I left active reserve status in 1989.

### Afterword

When I got home from Vietnam, most people were not interested in hearing about what I had experienced over there. Even the officer who debriefed me at my new assignment at the Officer Training School at Redstone Arsenal seemed in a hurry to get on to other things. Perhaps that's because nothing I did was particularly interesting or remarkable, although I thought it was.

In his book *The Caine Mutiny*, Herman Wouk tells of a young Naval officer who is bringing his ship home to be salvaged at war's end. He describes the pride the young officer felt for just having the opportunity to command that small, relatively insignificant vessel for a short time after the fighting was over.

Upon assuming command of the ship he had served on for many months, Willie Keith thought to himself: He knew well that the *Caine* was a dirty old broken-down hulk—and that only because it was such a pitiful caricature of a ship had he been entrusted with it—and yet his blood ran quick with pride. He had risen from his fumbling, incompetent beginnings ... to the command of a United States warship. Nothing could erase that fact. Luck and merit were mingled in the event, but the event stood. It would be on the records of the Navy so long as the Navy existed.

Later he told his crew:

“[The *Caine*] steamed through four years of war. It has no unit citation and

achieved nothing spectacular. It was supposed to be a minesweeper, but in the whole war it swept six mines.... Every hour spent on the Caine was a great hour in all our lives—if you don't think so now you will later on, more and more. We were all doing part of what had to be done ....The hours we spent on the Caine were hours of glory. They are all over.... But we will remember the Caine, the old ship in which we helped to win the war. Caine duty is the kind of duty that counts. The high-powered stuff just sets the date and place of the victory won by the Caines.”

Wouk expresses the mood and sentiment of his non-hero better than I ever could, but I know just how the fictional Skipper felt. I commanded companies of men in a combat zone in a war, and although we were a small, relatively insignificant part of that great failed effort in Vietnam, I will take pride in the 148th Ordnance Company and HHC, 53rd General Support Group, and the men I served with as long as I live.

Richard F. Allen Feb. 1998