

Service In The Field Artillery In Germany

My command in West Germany was of a 155mm self propelled howitzer battery. We were located in the historic and idyllic town of Bamberg.

The Army sent me to their German language school so that I could perform civil affairs duties if necessary. Since I was able to speak German, my duties were not solely limited to technical aspects of being an artillery officer and a battery commander. I was actually called upon to be the civil affairs officer they needed from time to time and was required to translate at various social affairs on the post that involved German civilians and German military officers.

One of my most interesting duties was to patch up our biggest blunder. On a cold, icy and snowy morning, a convoy of our self propelled howitzers was moving through a German village near the Kaserne on the way to field maneuvers. One of our biggest guns started slipping down the hill leading into the village and turned sideways - thus projecting its large cannon over the side of the road.

As much as the crew tried to get it stopped, they were not successful until the cannon took out the entire side of a German house and destroyed 150 feet of fence. Our boys thought it was quite funny to see the startled German family sitting at their table having breakfast completely exposed to the elements from one side of the room.

However, the American and German officials were not quite so happy, and I was sent as a representative of the Army to deliver the humble apologies of the command and to reimburse them financially for the damage to their property.

Perhaps one of my most pleasant duties in Germany was to play the role of Santa Claus or Kris Cringle for two Christmases at the German orphan's Christmas Party. The German Santa Claus differs from the American version in that he wears a red stocking cap and sports a brown rather than a white beard. Instead of having a big black belt around his gigantic stomach, Kris Cringle does not need to be quite so fat and gets by with tying a white rope cord around his waist. So, that was me – good old Kris Cringle.

The first year that I was Santa Claus, we had about 60 orphan children come to our mess hall for the affair. I particularly enjoyed the fact that our battalion ladies organization obtained the services of a number of local fraulines to assist in handling the children and communicate with them. I not only had fun communicating with the children in German but also established some good relationships with the fraulines.

We arranged to give each child three gifts. The first was a toy, the second an item of clothing to wear and the third a small parcel of candy and fruit. The children were just overjoyed for having any gifts sat all for Christmas, and they particularly enjoyed the games organized for them by Kris Cringle.

By the time the second year of my stay in Germany in 1965 rolled around, my reputation as Kris Cringle had grown far and wide and I had 135 orphans for my second annual Christmas party.

Back To America At Last

After arriving back at the caserne from our final European vacation, I learned that I had orders to join an artillery battalion in the states that was preparing to move as a unit to Viet Nam. Two weeks later we were on a Transworld Airline Boeing 707 on the way back to the Air Force Base in New Jersey. It was about an 8 hour flight on the TWA Boeing 707 from the Rhine Main air base in Frankfurt West Germany to the field in New Jersey.

We arrived in the dark of midnight, and Melissa and I went to sleep after getting off the plane in the quarters that had been provided for us. It was like a dream, just a few hours before we had been in the foreign land we had lived in for three years. We had transgressed through a dark tunnel in the night. When we woke up in the morning, we were back in the United States.

I will always remember catching the bus to go over to Philadelphia to pick up my automobile at the ship yard. It was such a joy to see a sign in English and to board and pay for the fare in real American money. The driver even spoke English. As a matter of fact, all of the people around me were speaking English.

It was a beautiful fall day at the end of 1966, and all of the trees were turning color in the high class suburban communities that we passed through on the way to Philadelphia. It was the time of the morning for the local children to go to school, and their conversation with their old friend the bus driver as they got on and off the bus was music to my ears. I was so happy to be back in America, and until that moment I did not realize how much I had really missed it and what a good country it is and how much it has to offer.

As I looked around me in these early hours as the sun was just beginning to illuminate the new day, I saw many things that I had missed for the three years that I was overseas. I was so happy to be back, I got chills up and down my back and tears of joy came to my eyes.

Melissa and I split our 30 days leave between our two families and then headed for my new assignment at Ft. Bragg North Carolina. We purchased a house there because we knew it was where Melissa would be staying while I would be serving in Viet Nam with my new unit.

My first three months with the new outfit were spent in quiet yet busy and hectic preparation for overseas shipment to Viet Nam. Finally, all of our equipment was packed and on its way, and the dreaded night had come that I was to depart for a year's separation from my family.

There were no bands or cheering crowds to hail our departure. It was as if we were going on another training mission a short distance away. It was not World War I or II or Korea, it was just a battle that was going on in that distant Asian land that nobody in the states really gave a dam about and wanted to wash their hands of. I got the feeling from passers by as we left that they were just glad it wasn't them that had to go.

I had never been able to cry, but the tears welled in my eyes and streamed uncontrollably down my face as I had to say goodbye to Missy and my 18 month old baby daughter. She was able to conceal her emotions and hold her tears back much better than I. After saying goodbye, I had to walk alone in the darkness of the night to dry my eyes and gain enough composure to face my troops and make the move to the flight line for take off.

To most of the younger men in the battery, going to Viet Nam was a great adventure. They had not yet acquired the ties of a family and children. However, I could see that the strain of going away from their families for a year had taken its effect on our senior noncommissioned officers. Their eyes were as red and puffy as mine, and all of us were polite enough not to look each other in the eye. We just went about our business to get the job done.

Odyssey to Viet Nam

We started our long journey to Viet Nam from Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina and flew nonstop across country in our C-130 transport plane to Travis Air Force Base in California. We stayed there just long enough for refueling and processing and to get some free time to take in the acts of Carol Doda and some of the other topless Go-Go girls in San Francisco.

From this point on in our travel half way around the world, our aircraft became a veritable maintenance headache. We landed at Hickham field in Hawaii and were delayed for 2 days while various fuel line problems were being taken care of. I did not object because we were not only able to see Pearl Harbor but the gorgeous scenery at Waikiki Beach as well.

Our next stop was Kwajalein which is a remote island spot on the water in the Marshall Islands. In fact it is such a small spot that as we landed on it in our C-130 we could see water on all four sides as the plane taxied and made the various turns on the runway. The only current reason for Kwajalein existence is that it is the end of the Air Force missile testing range and the point from which the Nike Zeus and Sprint missiles are launched.

All Kwajalein amounted to was a piece of volcanic rock sticking up out of the ocean topped with huge radar masts and missile launching areas. This god forsaken place was actually a duty station for some people, and they certainly had to be a special breed of animal to put up with it. We were delayed again at Kwajalein for mechanical difficulties with our C-130 but we were able to pass the time by feeding ourselves with steaks at the officers club and getting some exercise in the swimming pool.

Our final stop was Guam which at that time was the primary base for the launch of B52 Bombing Raids against North and South Viet Nam. We spent three days there because one of our four engines on the aircraft had to be replaced. As I think back now, we were quite lucky that we didn't all end up victims of an air crash some where in the middle of the Pacific. The only thing to pass the time at Guam besides eating steak

and drinking at the officers club was to learn as much as we could about the B52s and their crews.

Another captain and I buddied up with one of the crews upon arrival at Guam. The next night they slipped us aboard their aircraft to go along on a bombing mission which was to drop a load of bombs on suspected enemy concentrations along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Even though it was an actual combat raid, the air of the whole thing was quite relaxed because the crew knew that there would be no resistance met during the entire 21 hour mission.

Once they got the bird into the air, they slipped it into automatic pilot and began cooking their TV dinners, reading books and playing chess to while away the hours. The actual bombing run was quite routine and could be controlled automatically by remote radio control stations that locked us in on the target. However, the bombardier took the system out of automatic and let me push the button to release the bombs. I never did find out what effect our raid had. Nevertheless, I am sure it came as a surprise to some poor unsuspecting Vietnamese, because we were flying so high we could neither be seen nor heard from the ground.

Although I had navigation courses at Annapolis, I marveled at the ability of the crew to find that tiny island of Guam out there in the middle of the ocean as we returned. The sight of all those B52s lined up on the island was quite awesome as we made our approach. Each aircraft was isolated in its own revetment with its tall black tail stuck up above the walls like a mysterious yet powerful shark slithering through the water yet showing its fin.

Two days later, we took off on the final leg of our 12,600 mile journey to our ultimate destination, the air field at Pleiku in the Central Highlands of South Viet Nam. Our group was a small battalion advance party of officer sand men. The mission was to put up a headquarters and prepare an area for the arrival of the rest of the battalion.

None of us had been into combat before, and we each had our own visions as to what we would see as we touched down in Viet Nam. I pictured a highly guarded Air Field surrounded by considerable defenses. I fully expected to have our C130 get shot at as we attempted to land and that I would hear rifle shots and artillery resounding in the background as we got off the aircraft. I further envisioned that the air field would be cut out of the virgin jungle and that after debarking from our craft we would travel through the woods to another area that had been hewn out of the virgin timber.

I then assumed after an initial briefing we would be dropped into yet another area to clear away the trees, strip the vegetation and establish our headquarters command post. My comrades and I discussed these very thoughts we were having, and they imagined much the same things as I did.

We were all quite excited when the crew informed us that the coast of Viet Nam was in sight and we would be passing into the combat zone. Like the big heroes that we all were, we donned our flack jackets, steel helmets, camouflage gear, ammunition belts, hand grenades and weapons and nervously awaited our first combat landing. Nobody talked too

much, and we all understood what was going through the minds of others. We pretended to be very brave, but deep inside we were all scared to death. At least I was!

The landing we made in the C130 was the first of quite a few of the same type I would experience in my year in the war zone. Rather than make a long straight-in approach, the pilot flew the airplane at an altitude of several thousand feet right over the air field and then spiraled down so that the aircraft would be exposed to areas outside of the defense perimeter for the minimum length of time. Enemy snipers just loved to bring down 7 million dollar aircrafts with a few automatic rifle shots.

My first landing of this type was probably the most difficult of all, because the aircraft was loaded to the gills with heavy equipment that we had brought from the states. Making the spiral decent, the pilot literally stood our big four engine monster on its wing and rapidly spiraled it on down to a short approach. This maneuver was followed by the application of full reverse thrust of the propellers and the heavy application of brakes. All in all, it was a very skillful operation and quite thrilling for the first time.

In our preparations for debarking the aircraft, we had even given out assignments for manning the perimeter and for unloading the equipment.

Much to our dismay, upon taxiing up to the parking area, we found it to be a bright warm sunshiny and generally rather pleasant day in Pleiku, South Viet Nam. The temperature was in the high seventies, and there were no sounds of combat activity in the area.

We were met very casually by two jeeps which carried the artillery group commander and his operations officer. We were very shocked to see that they did not have escorts and their armament was limited to their 45 caliber pistols and steel pots. No flack jacket, no hand grenades, no ammunition belt, just their pots and pistols. I was quite relieved at this sight, but some of the younger fellows were dismayed that they would have to wait a few days to kill their first Viet Cong.

Soon, a few other vehicles arrived and loaded our personal gear to head for the group headquarters area. Other crews were to come out later to unload the aircraft. It turned out that the area was really quite quiet and that it was generally harassed only during hours of darkness by enemy sniper, mortar and rocket attacks. We found that the name of our new home was to be Artillery Hill which was just a ten minute ride from the air field. The artillery group headquarters sat on the top of the hill and the headquarters of its assigned battalions were sprawled along the hillside and around the circumference of the hill.

The characteristics of this central highland plain were just the opposite of what I had imagined. There were a few bushes and shrubs, a few rice paddies and lots of open fields. There were probably only about ten trees on the entire artillery hill complex. It turned out that the area that we were to live in was either dry and very dusty or wet and very muddy. Both conditions were quite undesirable.

After a hot meal and a few get-acquainted drinks in the officer's hutch, we were assigned an old vacated building as our headquarters and

the area around it at the foot of artillery hill for our base camp. We moved out smartly to the area and pitched our tents to get ready to bed down for the night. Fears ran high again as nightfall descended upon us because we were really not sure what to expect.

The perimeter of the camp consisted of triple concertina wire and defensive fox hole dugouts every 50 feet. It was manned by walking patrols during daylight hours, and every fox hole contained two guards during hours of darkness. The wire was also well ensconced with claymore mines that could be triggered from the foxholes, booby traps and tin cans with rocks in them that would rattle and detect the presence of an enemy soldier trying to cut his way through. The defenses of artillery hill were actually quite good because we always kept a few cannons on hand to sock it to anybody who decided to get bold and attack. As a matter of fact, prior to the time we arrived the hill had never been under severe enemy attack.

As darkness settled upon us, we crawled into our sleeping bags with our rifles and grenades in easy range and waited to see what would happen next. Within the hour, there was a tremendous rat tat tat noise outside of the perimeter, flashes and flares, and we thought certainly that we were under attack. After re-containing our hearts which had jumped into our throats, we were able to scramble out of bed, dress and see what was going on.

It turned out that all of this activity was merely the highly routine process of test firing the 50 caliber machine guns and other weapons that defended our whole complex. We soon were to get used to these noises and the sight and sound of perimeter flares going off at regular intervals.

We immediately became quite involved in the details of arranging for the arrival of our main body of men and supplies. They were due to arrive at the port of Qui Nhon within the week and travel over land by convoy with our Howitzers and heavy equipment to Pleiku. I was certainly glad that being in the advance party I would not have to face the dangers of such a convoy during my first few days in Viet Nam.

My duty instead was to set up the communications network and get power lines run from our main camp generator down to our headquarters area. The power lines and the communications antennas etc. had to be run on telephone poles. After completing an extensive tour of the Pleiku Air Base, the 4th division camp, the city of Pleiku and any other place I could think of, I was unable to find any power poles.

I soon learned from the group communications officer that the nearest available poles were in Qui Nhon and they had to literally be stolen or midnight requisitioned. So, even before my friends in the main body of our battalion arrived, I was trapped into making the overland trip from Pleiku through Ankhe and on over to Qui Nhon with the group communications officer – otherwise known as Dirty John.

John had been in country for almost 10 months by this time, and he was not too concerned about the danger of the trip. As a matter of fact, he was quite successful in alleviating most of my fears by relating that he had not been shot at once since he had been in this part of Viet Nam. He also told me of the many female contacts that he had in Qui Nhon

and said that he would be happy to take me along on a few escapades in the big city if I was interested.

Being the hunter and seeker that I am, I told him that yes, I would certainly be interested. I also asked that he do his level best to get me to Qui Nhon safely. The trip was a distance of about 200 miles, but because of the poor conditions of the shell pocked roads, it took us every bit of 8 hours to make the trip.

There are few times that I can remember that I felt as insecure as I did traveling through no mans land not knowing if we were to be waylaid by an enemy patrol or sniper or not. Large parts of our route were well cleared, and there was a good distance between the road and the tree line. On the other hand, there were other areas where the tree line came right to the edge of the road, and in these places we had very little visibility to see what was in store for us ahead.

My constant companion, the M16 rifle, was fully loaded with a double clip set and in the full automatic position for any emergency situation. Although it was quite a tense trip for me, we didn't encounter any suspicious individuals and met only a hand full of army vehicles that were traveling the other way.

This trip was the first real close look that I had had at the Vietnamese people and I got a good chance to see how they lived, as we passed through or near the quite primitive Montagnard villages in the highlands which slowly transitioned to regular Vietnamese villages as we drew close to the seacoast and the port of Qui Nhon.

I am thankful that the trip was quite uneventful and served mainly as a get-acquainted tour for me. After getting settled in a transient officers billet in the city, Dirty John and I made a tour of the local logistics complexes to try to locate our telephone poles.

God, On My Own Little Island

Within two short weeks, I completed my duties of coordinating the setup of the base camp and battalion headquarters. Just at the time I had completed these tasks, one of my fellow officers who was in command of the C Battery was wounded. I was given his command. I would not have received this fascinating job under other circumstances, because I had already submitted my resignation twice.

My commanding officer knew I would be released from the Army upon return to the states or shortly thereafter. In spite of this, I was the senior Captain in the battalion and really was the one most qualified to take command. The battery was located among the remains of what used to be the village of Duc Co at a position just a few kilometers from the border of Cambodia and the famed Ho Chi Min Trail.

Contrary to most of the American public beliefs or understandings, the Ho Chi Min Trail is not just a single road, but a whole network of roads and trails that wind their way down through the triple canopy jungles from North Viet Nam and Laos to provide the main supply arteries for communist offensive operations in South Viet Nam. Quite a number of these trails were located in the Duc Co area, and the mission

of our fire base was to be an island in the midst of the enemy from which allied search and destroy operations were conducted.

It was quite an interesting game of Russian roulette we played with our friends with the slant eyes, sandals, shorts and bags of rice. Our Infantry and armored patrols conducted their operations during the hours of daylight protected by the umbrella of artillery support that my Howitzers provided. The enemy knew it would be this way and holed up in their scattered hiding places during the day. They were difficult to find out there in no man's land, and we seldom ran across more than 4 or 5 of them at a time.

After a long day of struggling through the rice paddies in the sweltering humid heat, our men would return to their camps within our well defended perimeter. Their noisy departure, of course, was the signal for the turnover of the territory to the bad guys. They again commenced their operations under the cover of darkness. Nevertheless, I am sure they lived in constant fear of being hit by the barrages of our Howitzers which sent artillery projectiles thundering through the heavens in the darkness like small locomotives running completely out of control.

In spite of the harassment and interdiction by our artillery, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars still managed to slip their supplies through the area right under our noses and continue their offensive operations and well known terrorist attacks.

We fully expected to have our fire base mortared about three nights a week, and it happened on a very regular schedule. All of our control points and sleeping quarters were well dug in under ground and covered with thick layers of sand bags. Thus, it took a direct hit through an entrance to our underground quarters to produce casualties on our side.

Once the enemy began to fire mortars at us, we either visually or by radar pinpointed their firing locations and fired our own counter-battery program which generally silenced the threat. We were never in fear of being overrun by any enemy force – whatever its size - because we had our six artillery pieces positioned in a circle with each of them covering a 60 degree piece of the perimeter pie. Our beehive rounds were also available at all times right next to the breech of each gun. These were special antipersonnel rounds which contained many thousands of little round pointed flechettes which when fired spread around the center of the firing line and far to the left and right. They literally blew down everything in range. To my knowledge, only one sizeable enemy force ever tried to overrun one of our artillery firing bases, and it met with the terrible, devastating defeat.

One of my friends (whom I had met at nuclear weapons school in Germany) commanded the artillery battery and fire base that the enemy tried to overpower. He had his troops fend off the attackers as best they could by conventional means using rifles, machine guns and claymore mines. When it could be seen that the enemy force probably numbered well over 200 and that they were starting to make headway, my captain friend gave the order for all pieces to load one beehive round and stand by.

It was soon seen that the battle was about to be lost. As the enemy started forging their way over the wire, he gave the command for all hands to stop firing and hit the deck. An instant later, he fired all six Howitzers at once covering the entire 360 degree perimeter with barbed steel flechettes.

When I talked to him afterward, he said that after the roar of the howitzers died off into the night, there was almost complete and utter silence on the battle field. In that there was no moon, all that he and his men could hear were the wailing screams of the Orientals who had not been killed instantly by the barrage. The remaining hours of darkness were filled with the sounds of the surviving North Vietnamese dragging their casualties off into the jungle and concealing their dead.

As the sun came up in the morning, the entire perimeter was encircled with stains of red interrupted only by pieces of flesh and uniforms that could not be carried away. Further, there were 15 or 20 bodies that had become entangled in the barbed wire that the enemy could not take with them. It was estimated that of the force of 200 who attacked the artillery base only 50 survived.

The word got around quite rapidly to the enemy about the awesome destructive capability of the beehive round, and none of the artillery batteries in the entire First Field Force had too much difficulty with mass attacks from that time on.

The command of my fire base was really a considerable responsibility. It was entirely surrounded by terrain that was "no mans land" during the daytime and the enemy's at night. Our fire base could be reached only during the daylight hours by armored convoy or helicopter. In addition to my artillery battery of 120 men, I had command over two mechanized infantry platoons, two M60 tanks and crews and some Vietnamese mercenaries.

We also had a Green Beret Special Forces intelligence unit that camped with us. However, these guys were so stuck up and elite that we didn't talk to them. By special order they were relieved from the responsibility of sharing the guard duty. Our only good communications with the battalion headquarters and my commander was over the radio which, of course, could be monitored by the enemy. Thus, it was my responsibility to feed, clothe, arm and motivate my men as best I could because I was the senior officer present.

Aside from those few excruciating minutes when we were under attack each week, the routine of operating the fire base was really quite dull. It wasn't as exciting and inspiring as a lot of young men think. As a matter of fact, like a lot of wartime activities, it was really very boring.

There was one incident when I had to make perhaps one of the biggest decisions of my life. We worked our men quite hard around the clock, and one morning the whole world came to a frothing disappointing head for one of my men. He picked up an M16 rifle with a double clip of ammunition on it and started taking pot shots at everybody within the perimeter.

The thing that made it particularly difficult is that he decided to do this right in the middle of a fire mission when we were supporting one of

our infantry platoons that was in contact with the enemy. Thus, it was essential that we get our rounds on the way and right on target in the most expeditious manner possible. Our executive officer turned the guns over to the chief of the firing battery and approached the young Specialist 4th Class and tried to talk to him. He didn't have much effect upon the man, because the Specialist shot and killed our mascot dog and then pumped a round into our ammunition dump.

Through the opening in my bunker, I saw him train his M16 on my Exec, and I immediately picked up the radio to call my battalion commander for instructions. I quickly outlined the situation to the Colonel. Being 35 miles away, he said nothing except that the situation was entirely in my hands and that he would back me to the hilt no matter what decision I might choose to make.

I then came out of the bunker and stood around the corner out of sight where I could hear what was going on. I discovered that the moment was near when this errant young man was going to empty his rifle into the body of my executive officer. I drew my 45 caliber pistol and stepped around the corner at the specialist's right rear and fired a shot intending that it hit the boy in the right shoulder and knock the rifle from his grasp. Fate then came into play because as the hammer in my pistol was about to make contact with the round, he raised his right arm to shoot my lieutenant. My bullet was already well on its way and it entered his rib cage under his right arm killing him instantly.

Five minutes before, I had been quite bored with my existence, and now my whole life had turned into a messy quagmire as I moved to determine the condition of the man whom I had just shot. Tears started to uncontrollably run down my face.

My lieutenant looked into my eyes, understanding immediately my plight. He said "It was either him or me, and I am glad it's over". We could both hear the background call on the radio for another fire mission, and my Exec left me standing there with one of my own troopers dead at my feet.

After what must have been just a few minutes, but a period that seemed so long to me, I recovered my senses and asked two of the other men to carry the body to the medic tent. I called the Colonel on the radio to inform him of what had happened. He took the call in flight in his helicopter as he was already on the way to the base.

He took the body back with him to battalion headquarters and wrote the boy's parents to describe how heroically he had died in combat in the service of his country.

I was greeted the next morning by a board of officers from the Field Force Headquarters headed by a Brigadier General who was appointed to investigate all of the happenings of the previous day. After a thorough review, I was exonerated from wrongdoing, and it was concluded by the Board that the right action had been taken. They considered, as I had, the criticality of the situation and the fact that many of our own troops could have been killed in contact with the enemy without support of an artillery battery that was being shot up by a berserk soldier. Later I

learned that the autopsy revealed a cerebral hemorrhage in the man and that this, among other things, was probably the cause of his actions.

Vacation Spa and Hard Work Too

Soon, I was only two weeks away from coming to the end of my 6 month command period. I was visited by the Field Force Artillery Commander who I learned to my pleasant surprise was my old Division Artillery Commander and that we had served together in Europe. We had always hit it off quite well, and he offered me a position on his staff in Nha Trang. Needless to say, I was ecstatic at this offer and accepted it on the spot. My replacement flew in two days later, and two days after that I found myself getting off a C130 in Nha Trang to join the Artillery staff at First Field Headquarters.

Nha Trang itself was a former Vietnamese seaside resort town surrounded on three sides by the defenses of the feared South Korean White Horse division and on the fourth side by 30 miles of gorgeous white sandy beach. This port was well defended by the US and Vietnamese Navies. The main avenue of the city ran right on the shoreline and was lined on both sides with beautiful palm trees and the most civilized buildings that I had yet seen in Viet Nam. The architecture was of the French motif. This was a secure area that showed few signs of the war that was going on around it. The officers and men of the US and Vietnamese forces in the corps area always looked for an excuse to come to Nha Trang on official business so that they could enjoy the pleasures of the city.

We often suspected also that the city also served as a rest and recuperation area for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars as well. If any of them were able to make it into town, they certainly could not have been easily detected among their Vietnamese countrymen. I reported into the field force headquarters for assignment. It was located in a large hotel complex that was right across the main thoroughfare from the beach. My job would be as operations officer in the war room. It was my duty to relay the orders of the General's Staff to the field units and insure that communications and the flow of information between the field and the headquarters was well kept up.

I was given a room in a nearby hotel that housed approximately 25 of the junior officers who worked on the Field Force Staff. I then had to get adjusted to my 15 to 18 hour a day work routine 7 days a week.

Bad News in Nha Trang

Upon arriving back in Viet Nam after the long flight, I was dismayed to find that the situation in Nha Trang had deteriorated considerably. The Vietnamese lunar New Year, or Tet as it was referred to, was arriving. It was predicted that the enemy was massing in the countryside for a combined offensive against a great number of cities and towns throughout South Viet Nam. Curfew precautions were tightened down considerably, and at the same time, the length of my duty hours was extended.

My first personal indication of the seriousness of the entire situation came when a Viet Cong mortar squad infiltrated through our defenses and launched an attack which was meant to destroy the four C130's that

were frequently parked at our end of the air strip. I was on duty in the war room the night when the attack started. There were no windows available for me to observe what was going on around the building, but it sounded from my location as if an entire new world war had broken loose all around.

I was in the middle of reporting the attack to the Field Force headquarters and directing our local Howitzer crews to fire their counter battery program when a round fell short of its C130 targets and landed in the very next room. The shock of the blast knocked my duty sergeant and me to the floor. After recovering and trying to see if we were still all there, we completed our report to headquarters from the underside of our heavy wooden table.

We later found out that our switch board operator down the hall was doing his job from under the table as well. Somehow, we knew our report did actually get back to headquarters as our howitzers started firing at the enemy. They were driven off in short order. There were only three of us on duty in the artillery headquarters that night, and I remember feeling quite insecure being armed only with a .45 caliber pistol and not being able to tell whether there were good guys or bad guys around the outside of the building. As a result, we just held our posts and hoped for the best.

The long night finally came to an end, and we went to inspect the results of the attack on the runway and around our headquarters. All of the rounds had fallen short of the valuable C130s. The only enemy thrust that did any damage was the stray round that impacted right in the center of the colonel's office next to the war room. The colonel's biggest complaint was not the damage to his office, but rather the destruction of his air conditioner which had been so difficult to scrounge.

At this point, the entire city was becoming quite tense as it prepared in the best way it could for the threatened enemy attacks.

The activities of our off hours were a few thousands of hands of contract bridge. I will always remember the night in our officer's hotel when the celebrations for Tet began. We could hear fire crackers going off in the air all around. We watched for a while and then settled back to a rubber or two of bridge.

However, it soon became evident that there were rounds of rifle fire and other weapons mixed in with the celebrations. The game ended quickly when we heard shot gun and rifle shots on the street below. We were dressed in our shorts and tee shirts as usual in the warm tropical evenings, and most of us put on our steel pots and flak jackets and grabbed our weapons without bothering to put on any more clothes. We returned to our rooms and took up defensive positions that had been worked out earlier.

We then decided that the roof would be the safest place in the hotel. As we peered over the top rim of the wall, we could see two Vietnamese armored personnel carriers moving down our street along with several squads of foot soldiers. I saw three shadowy figures moving along the courtyard wall in back of the hotel and managed to empty the contents of my pistol into their midst before they fled.

There was also an old abandoned school house kitty corner across the street from the hotel. It appeared that the Vietnamese were going after some enemy troops that had been trapped in the school. Upon trying to communicate with the headquarters, we found that our phone line had been cut out. We had no choice but to view the war from our vantage point on top of the hotel. The two old Vietnamese men who served as our door guards then reported to us that the first shots we had heard were reports of their shotguns.

They had killed two North Vietnamese troopers who were but a small part of the enemy force that had moved through the alley in back of the hotel and down the street toward the compound which housed all of the general officers. We could hear a great amount of rifle fire and the reports of exploding rifle grenades from the vicinity of the general's compound, but we didn't know what was going on. When morning finally came, we were still out of communications with the rest of the world and decided that it was best if we stay put until someone could come to get us. We would have moved out on foot together infantry style, but we didn't have enough weapons to provide a proper defense in the open.

Late in the morning, we were finally evacuated by armed MP convoy and taken to our jobs at the headquarters building. We were horrified to find that a force of 180 to 200 North Vietnamese regular troops had infiltrated past our hotel on the way to their target which was the general's compound. It was their mission, we found out, to either kidnap or kill the generals. Between our compounds and theirs, the bad guys had lost their bearings and were checking their maps in the abandoned school house behind the general's quarters when they were discovered.

One of the NVA had fired at the general's driver who was on guard duty on top of the villa. The driver shot back after reporting the presence of the enemy and proceeded to kill 5 of the NVA in succession as they tried to get shots off at him from over the courtyard wall. The military police put the enemy under great strain by firing rifle grenades into the school house, and they kept up the constant barrage all night long. By morning, those NVA who had not fled the area literally had been pounded into bloody hamburger.

The generals did not realize the magnitude of the danger to their lives until the next morning. We also realized that we were quite lucky. The enemy did not know of our presence in the hotel. They could have simply dropped a squad off from their main attack to mop up our hotel, and they would have had no difficulty whatsoever with our limited defenses. The fact that our lights were on and we were playing bridge when the main body of the enemy passed by probably made them think that we were Vietnamese civilians and could not have been army troops. Needless to say, we were quite lucky.

Several days later, we managed to obtain enough weapons and munitions to defend our hotel as if it were the Alamo. I became even more nervous than my comrades because I had- only about 10 days to go on my whole tour at this point of greatest danger. I carried an automatic rifle and my pistol and a double ration of ammunition. Fighting broke out in all parts of the city for the rest of the week, and a Navy destroyer

was called in to the bay outside of Nha Trang to lend fire support by blasting away at suspected enemy positions in the hills and mountains behind the city. The huge shells from the Navy guns made quite a terrifying sound as they thundered through the skies over our hotel like great locomotives racing to their destination.

Helicopter gun ships also operated in the area during the day and could react to put down an enemy force anywhere in the city on short notice. During the rest of the week over 800 Viet Cong and NVA were killed in the City and the nearby villages and hamlets. I was very fortunate to be able to slip out of the whole mess and make my way to Cam Ranh Bay for my long awaited flight back to the United States.

I arrived at the replacement center two days early and found that because of repeated enemy attacks that almost all of the flights were departing one or two days late and that I could not count on getting home on time. This was quite a great disappointment as it would be to any man after being in the war zone so long. Although, I will admit that my trials and tribulations were not quite as serious as those of many others. There wasn't much to do while waiting for my return flight to the states so I spent most of the time swapping stories with two of my captain friends who were scheduled for the same flight.

Because of the poor luck of our compatriots on other schedules we decided that we would settle down and wait out the situation and not get our hopes up and get excited about going home until we actually walked up the steps on the airplane.

Home from Nam at Last

The time for our flight finally came. As a matter of fact, the one before it and the one immediately after it were delayed 48 hours because of the continuing hostile activities of the Tet offensive. Our aircraft, a beautiful Pan American Boeing 707, was able to slip in during a lull in the activities, and we were soon on our way with a crew of 7 Kimono clad Japanese stewardesses to our first stop in Tokyo. Just like in any other flight departing Viet Nam, all of the fellows were full of vim and vinegar and gave the poor lovelies quite a hard time.

After the 4 hour flight to Tokyo, we were left on the plane in the taxiway while the crews changed. This was arranged so that we would not have to go through customs during the stopover. We took off again within the hour and began our 12 hour great circle route across the Bering Sea and near Alaska to our destination at McCord Air Force Base in the state of Washington. It was such a relief to get on the ground and come in contact with American soil again.

After processing through McCord I took a real live civilian United Air Lines flight to Chicago and through Atlanta to my temporary home in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Missy and I enjoyed our well earned leave, sold our house and moved to my final assignment at Ft. Polk, Louisiana where I was to serve 8 months in the training center despite my repeated attempts to resign. I could never understand why the government spent so much money on me moving my family all the way to Louisiana and then from there to my civilian address just to have my services for a mere 8 months.

In that I was one of the senior captains on the post and on the Major's list, I thought sure that I could land a soft staff job at the post headquarters. However, I was very dismayed to find that the civilian type personnel officer had assigned me as company commander of a training unit in advanced individual training - perhaps the most rigorous assignment that I could have gotten. I expressed very strongly my dismay at this type of assignment and asked for an appointment to see the commanding general. Upon reporting to him, I explained in some detail my situation and the fact that I had been extended on active duty against my will and had been away from my family long enough. I was not ready at this time to accept the grave responsibility of an advanced training company and the long hours of work that it entailed to do a good job. The General was very sympathetic to my views but informed me he had no choice but to give me the assignment in that there was a shortage of veteran officers who were qualified to give realistic Viet Nam oriented training to the recruits. I could see that I would get no where and resigned myself to do the best job possible. The General dismissed me, and I saluted in obedience to his command and the assignment.

One of the Chief Tigers

My command in Tiger Land was the advanced training area was referred to) was with the toughest training company on post. It employed such a terrifying reputation that I found considerable bribes were offered to the assignment personnel at headquarters to prevent apprehensive troopers from being assigned to our company. Our Negro First Sergeant was a seasoned veteran of 18 years in the service, and his cadre (which was also 65% black) was the roughest toughest group of dedicated combat experienced drill sergeants I had run across. They had been running the unit pretty much on their own, because there had been a lack of experienced officers in the command.

I was aware of this situation, and during my first meeting with my first sergeant, I leveled with him and explained my situation to him. It was understood that he and his cadre would run the unit according to the training schedule and take care of all the minor disciplinary actions. I told him I didn't want to bother with giving men KP and latrine cleaning for screwing up and so on. If a man was presenting a particularly difficult disciplinary problem, I instructed the first sergeant that I wanted to be briefed on the matter before hand. If the man was to come into my office to talk to me about it, he would come out with either an Article 15 or a court martial. In addition to the discipline, I would handle the administration of the company and would be responsible for the morale and the well being of the troops. I also told the first sergeant hot to expect me in the office except between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. during the time I would be with the company. During my presence, however, I would give 100% of my effort to the company.

The first sergeant had been around a long time and understood my position right away. He knew that if I scratched his bank he would scratch mine. If he made things look good for me, I would make things look good for him. We quite rapidly began to work together as a team doing our best to motivate and inspire the troops but also the cadre. We piled a great deal of responsibilities on the cadre with relish. The more

important we made them feel, the harder they worked.

Things developed finally into the situation where we were scoring very high with our men on all of the prescribed tests and sailing along quite smoothly. All of the NCOs quickly established the position of company commander as some sort of god, and I think they taught the troops to fear me as well as respect me. Whenever I met with the troops and spoke with them, they were spirited and gave me their undivided attention.

The area around my orderly room was set up as some sort of sanctimonious, sacred grounds, and none of the troopers dared make any unnecessary noise or conduct any horse play in the area for fear of disturbing the CO. Because of this quite interesting set up, I was able to carry out most of my duties in about half of a days work and had time on my hands. END Of EXCERPT.