Vietnam 1970-71
Confronting Challenges

A memoir by

Robert Olson, MD

Forward

The author of this volume is Dr. Robert Olson, who I know as my Uncle Bob. Over the years I heard him tell stories of when, fresh out of medical school, he served as a Navy doctor in Vietnam. Now, over the last 12 years, he has worked at putting words to paper to capture the remarkable experiences of that life-changing year, and he has collected photographs of that time, taken by himself and others.

It has been my privilege and honor to assist Uncle Bob in assembling this book. While he is a master storyteller, he is not a master of the modern tools of writers. But as you will see as a recurring theme in so many of the stories that follow, he took on that challenge in his signature manner—head on, picking up what he needed, as he needed it, to accomplish the task. Microsoft Word, hardly an intuitive editing tool, was Bob's choice to render his material and turn it into text.

Which he did.

The modern tools of writing allow for easy revisions. And he made many of them, carefully crafting each story for impact and detail, augmenting them with photographs to illustrate the locations, people and world context of the times.

When it became apparent that he would not be able to take on the final task of assembling the stories and photographs into a full book and actually publishing it, I offered to help. I obtained his large "working folder" of the many files he had created over the course of a decade. Despite failing strength and plummeting hemoglobin levels, he confirmed the titles of his stories, eventually to become chapters in the book, which I then used to locate their most recent versions.

As I performed my new role as copy editor and typesetter, I learned the backstories and more complete details of these events, many of which I had never heard before, and I was struck by a recurring theme. It is hard to express succinctly, but it has to do with how we respond to events that are not under our control, not what we expect, not what we want, outside our experience or skill, and sometimes even frightening.

This sort of event happens to all of us: life is unpredictable, and stuff happens. In these stories, we see a response that does not shy away, but rather, meets the challenge head-on. It is more than just "making lemonade from lemons"; it goes

beyond "rolling with the punches". It is a full embrace of these unexpected and undesired events; an acceptance and a firm resolve to do the best you can in a difficult situation.

And in the end, two results obtain: the outcomes are better, and *you* are better.

I am struck, but not surprised, that Bob considers these difficult, challenging moments to be among the highlights of his life. I hope that after reading this book, you will understand why.

Thor Olson
September 2022

Prologue

In retrospect, it seems a bit strange that after saying tearful and emotional farewells to coworkers and colleagues in the afternoon, I went back to the University Hospital the night before my departure for the war in Viet Nam—a war where each day they announced the death of scores of American soldiers (50,000 to date). I went back to the hospital to be certain I had no outstanding/incomplete charts in the Record Room. I stayed until 3AM finishing them. Why would this be important to me? I am not that "Type A" (well, perhaps a *little* Type A). I went back because in this life more than anything else we desire the approval and respect of our peers and mentors—be it in school or in our life's work. You will do what they expect of you. And in this case, residents did not leave with work undone. I planned to return one day to resume my studies—and if I didn't, it seemed important that they remember me.

After I finished this always-grueling task, I walked the three blocks to the interns' parking lot, put the top down on my Mustang convertible and slowly drove to my parents' home—to spend one last night (or what was left of it) in my childhood bedroom. In a rare display of sympathy, overcoming Protestant-work-ethic, my mother let me sleep in. It was close to 10:00 when I arose, but she served me breakfast anyway. It was her standard pre-cholesterol-obsession breakfast: eggs, bacon and sausages (this was a treat—to have both), toast, orange juice and pancakes with real maple syrup. You'd think I was a lumberjack going out to fell trees in subzero cold, rather than a twenty-nine-year-old young man about to drive to California. But this is the way of mothers. I'm sure she saw it as a last chance to feed "her son who lived at home"—which I had done for the past year.

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June 1969 to June 1970 was a one-year period of grace the government granted me before entering the military. All young recently graduated doctors were drafted during the Vietnam conflict. Doctors already in practice in the community were almost never conscripted. The government did not draft interns; however, once the internship year was over, the gloves came off. Either you volunteered and hoped for a temporary deferment or you were drafted.

After the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the draft was ratcheted up several notches and teaching programs in medical specialties were devastated by the loss of resident trainees in the middle of the year with no hope of replacing them. The Program Directors were not about to let this happen again; no program worth its salt would consider an applicant who did not have a guaranteed deferment. So, during the internship year people signed up with the Berry Plan, where you agreed to enter the military service. Berry Plan applicants' names were placed in a lottery for partial or complete deferments to complete specialty training prior to induction. Everyone signed up. Well, almost everyone.

Sumner Seibert, a good friend from my internship, had a plan—Sumner always had a plan.

He opined that because everyone was signing up, hoping for a temporary deferment, they would no longer be drafting doctors—there would be no need with all the "volunteers." It made some sense and had us all wondering if Sumner might just be on to something.

He wasn't. Within three weeks of completion of the internship, Sumner got his draft notice—and assignment: The Army infantry in Viet Nam.

I fared better. I got the Navy and a one-year deferment to study Internal Medicine at the University of Minnesota. My duty assignment was to follow.

I had hoped for the Air Force—everyone wanted the Air Force. It had the plushest bases and the easiest/safest duty for physicians. But perhaps this was OK. Navy bases always were on the coast, and therefore likely to be in nice locations. Airfields so often were in the middle of nowhere—like Minot, North Dakota. So, this may actually be better. And the Navy didn't go to Viet Nam.

Once I got notice of my allotment to the Navy, I stopped thinking about it, because nothing was going to happen for a year—or rather I thought of it only in the abstract.

My spirits went up a bit further when Dr. Jack Vennes, chair of the residency program, heard I was going into the Navy. Dr. Vennes said he could help. He had been a WW II Navy fighter pilot and his good buddy Commander Thorne was the detailer in Washington—the guy who handed out the assignments for doctors.

"I can't get you out of serving, but we should be able to get you a good assignment," Jack told me. "Where would you like to go? Just put it on your request sheet and I'll tell Commander Thorne."

Jack Vennes

I looked the application form over and studied the possibilities carefully. Finally, I put down:

1. Europe
2. The Caribbean
3. (In a pinch) San Francisco.

The interns at the University of Minnesota were a very select bunch—all in the top 10% of their class at prestigious medical schools (Harvard, Michigan, Johns Hopkins, etc.). As a resident, it was my job to supervise them but keep my hands off the patients unless absolutely necessary. Making sure the interns didn't mess up was easy—they rarely did; maintaining *laissez-faire* regarding the patients was hard. The difference between a good intern and a good resident can be a large one. They require different skills. The good intern takes

care of everything—no one else should be writing orders and progress notes. Ideally other entries would say, "Agree with intern's note". The good resident allows the intern to do his job—that is, manage the patient's care. But letting go can be very hard—especially if you were the intern a few weeks ago.

Being a good resident became easier in May when I got my letter from the Navy with my duty assignment. I remember the day well. For some reason the letter had come to the Internal Medicine Office at the University—all the rest of my Navy communications had been sent to my home address.

It was a thick envelope—all military letters are thick envelopes—and it had the return address of the US Navy Detailer in Washington. No mistaking what this was.

Anxiously I opened it. I was hoping for Rota, Spain. But you had to be practical. Jack Vennes' friend could only do so much. Rota was probably what all the regular Navy officers coveted. Somewhere in the Caribbean would do nicely.

The envelope contained four copies of my orders. Each copy was six pages long. But the first single-spaced page was the important one, it told where you were to report for duty.

It wasn't Rota. Drat!

It said Coronado, California. Well, that wasn't so bad. It wasn't San Francisco, but San Diego was supposed to be very nice.

I read further—the part after Coronado, California: "...for counterinsurgency training with Riverine Assault Forces prior to deployment in Viet Nam."

Wham! I had **not** been prepared for this. It must be some sort of mistake. I called Dr. Vennes immediately to see if somehow this could be corrected. Jack Vennes was surprised, too. He called me back an hour later and said that there were no billets open in Rota and the Caribbean, and the ones in California were being held for Medical Officers returning from duty in Asia. In addition, I was single and they tried to keep the married doctors out of the combat zones. Much as Thorne would have liked to help, this time he couldn't.

Coronado, a beach community on the San Diego Bay

Then Jack tried to put a good face on it and cheer me up, "You know this may not be so bad. Seeing combat activity up close can be very valuable to you in your career…".

At this point I wasn't hearing anything. I was in shock and feeling empty and scared. I hadn't been prepared for this at all.

After a sleepless night and a day of moping I started to come to grips with the situation. In a while I grew to accept my lot—and found some advantages in this turn of events.

To start with, it was clear that I could change my lifestyle for the next six weeks. Prior to this, I had lived a semi-monastic existence. I went to the hospital every day—weekends included, faithfully studied medicine texts each night, and only on occasion went out on weekends with friends. It was time to end that, and this was an ideal rotation for it—White Medicine at the University. Steve Bookin, my intern, was a young Dr. Kildare—he could do anything. My main task to date had been to keep subspecialty residents from horning in on his cases so Steve could experience "the thrill of the chase" solving the interesting problems.

"But we can get the answer quicker," the subspecialty residents would say.

"Quicker, but not better," I would reply and threaten to tell our attending, Dr. Ebert (the Chief of Medicine) that we were being subjected to high powered unsolicited consultation. That was *very* effective. Everyone feared the truculent and acid-tongued Dr. Ebert. He was an anachronism—he thought good internists seldom if ever needed consultants. He was adamant on this subject.

So, I took care of Steve—and Steve took care of me. I let him know I wouldn't be at the hospital until attending rounds with Dr. Ebert at 10AM. That was fine with Steve—he liked the idea of running the service solo and Dr. Ebert never caught on. And so, some nights I stayed out until almost sunup—sowing wild oats and experiencing the dissolute life. And I got good mileage out of some pretty lame lines: "I'm going to Viet Nam in a few weeks, who knows if I'll return…" proved a most excellent "hitting on" intro.

A downside was telling Penny Baran I wouldn't see her anymore. Penny and I had dated in college before she married Steve Thuet. A year later Steve was drafted. He died in Viet Nam. That was two years ago. Now, her grieving finally done, Penny was easing back into the social scene. We had been on dates and it was wonderful—just like the old days. Golly, she was charming. Our relationship threatened to become serious. This was OK when I was going to Rota, Spain, but not now. Penny said it didn't matter, but it did. I couldn't be party to Penny sending another "special person" off to the war. (I called Penny the week I returned from Asia. Her mother told me she was married the week before—to Senator Dave Durenburger)!

Charm School

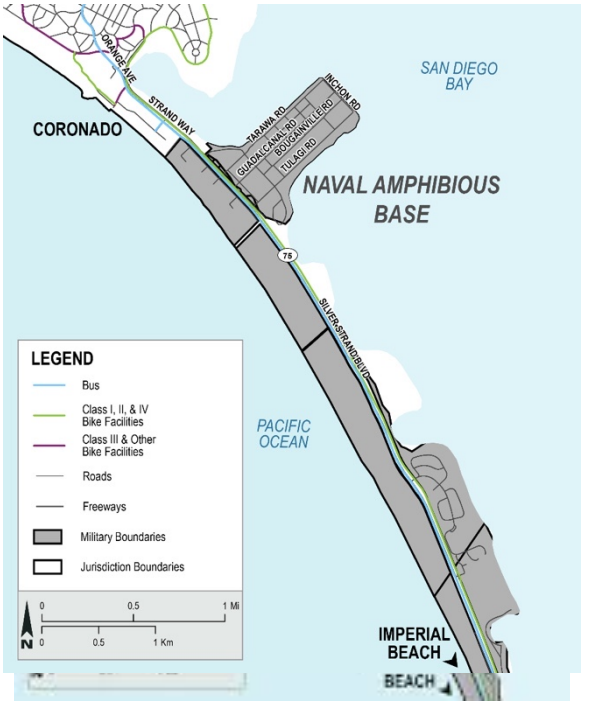
After a leisurely breakfast with my mom and dad, I loaded a few things into my car—I didn't need much. After all, I was going to be wearing uniforms for the next two years.

It was a gorgeous day in late June. Picture perfect for a "last day at home." The temperature was in the mid-70's, the sky deep blue. That day the neighborhood of my youth seemed in a timeless moment. It was like almost every other summer day since I was 10 years old. It didn't seem sad at the time; it seemed "normal".

Departure time was hard on all of us. So we did what we had done forever. My mother held herself against my chest and in a mournful tone said, "Why do you have to go!" And I, feigning embarrassment, pretended I was above all this maudlin stuff. My dad insisted on photographing me and Mom (holding Susie our toy poodle). He took forever setting, checking and resetting the dials on his camera—and that, too, was his persona. Finally, he shook my hand and tried to say something "manful" about duty and his days in the military. They stood in the alley and waved until I was out of sight. The freeway was only a few blocks away. I drove slowly past Mrs. Bjorken's place, past the Olwins', and past Ray Johnson's house and to the freeway entrance. Navigating to California is easy on the freeway: get on 35W going south and turn right at Des Moines.

It was a long drive in my Mustang convertible, the first car I ever owned. My mother had loaned me $1875 to buy it new when I graduated from medical school—cars were a lot cheaper in those days. But this was to be the Great Adventure—for some reason going to Vietnam didn't seem to frighten me anymore.

Coronado is on a spit of land just across the bay from San Diego. A new graceful highway bridge arced up and across the harbor to go directly from San Diego to the Naval Air Station at the northernmost tip of the peninsula. From there it was just a mile or two down a well-maintained blacktopped highway to the "Phib School".



The San Diego-Coronado Bridge

It was a beautiful warm sunny day with azure blue sky and puffy white clouds as I pulled up to the gate in my Sea Mist green Mustang convertible (with the top down, of course) and showed my papers to a guard on sentry duty. If the guard thought anything about my decidedly non-military attire and bearing, he certainly didn't show it.

He politely directed me to the building where the Officer of the Day was stationed. It was a Sunday, and the base was quiet—very quiet. Only an occasional car could be seen, and they seemed to be moving at a snail's pace. The sign said Speed Limit on Base 20 mph. That had to be a joke; it must be a hospital zone or a school—something like that. How could grown men drive 20 mph? And where were the Amphibious Assault Troops? Do they take weekends off?

The base at Coronado was gorgeous. The buildings were Spanish mission-style, tan adobe with red tile roofs. Directly across the road was a long stretch of white sandy beach—it also belonged to the military.

All the structures were in immaculate condition and the base was totally free from litter. The grass was well-tended, white picket fences surrounded many buildings and in general it resembled a Disneyland concept. We were housed in the BOQ where the rooms were like an upscale motel. Each had its own patio or balcony. This was a very nice place.

One of the first things to do was to get some uniforms. Presenting a copy of my orders to the clerks at the PX (post exchange) was necessary—I had wondered why they had mailed me six copies. The orders were in "government speak" and didn't contain much useful information—like which uniform would I need. I got the tropical khaki uniform (a couple of them) because that's what most of the people walking around the base were wearing and I was going to the tropics; and I got one of tropical whites because others were wearing that one—and it went better with my eyes and hair coloring (at least that's what the clerk said). And finally, I couldn't resist getting the dress whites. They were terrific. Dress whites had white duck cotton pants and a starched white jacket with a high-tight color—with my gold wire-rimmed glasses and moustache I looked just like Sergeant Pepper. The whole caboodle cost less than $150—including the shoes. I got the Corfam shoes; they didn't "breathe" like leather, but you didn't have to polish them.

I met some of the other young draftee-type doctors in the officers' mess hall. It wasn't a mess hall you'd see in the movies; it was like a country club. They had tablecloths with napkins, served drinks at lunch and on good days people ate outside on the patio. The food was cheap and plentiful. The newly drafted docs dined here prior to shipping out to Viet Nam. Many of them I would see again over the next two years.

Most people entering military service go to boot camp where they become physically fit and learn how to become soldiers (or sailors). In their wisdom (or perhaps from adverse experience) the Navy chose not to send doctors to basic training boot camp. Instead, they assigned newly inducted doctors to a special induction course in San Diego. That was certainly OK with me, I wasn't anxious to do a lot of running and pushups. Still, there were things that one needed to know in order to be a Naval Officer—like how to put on your uniform. And you needed to be able to recognize the different military ranks by their uniforms, so you would know whom to salute. This training seemed quite acceptable. After all, I wanted to fit in and do a good job.

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Steve Marglin (who had a BOQ room adjacent to mine) became a fast friend, which was a bit odd because he wasn't particularly friendly—he was morose (but eloquent) rather than affable. Steve was from Boston and had a CV that trailed sparks: Exeter, Harvard, Yale Med School and residency at Stanford. Steve was slender, darkly handsome and poised. He seldom smiled, had piercing brown eyes and didn't tolerate fools gladly. But for some reason we got on from day one.

We met as a group for the first time on day three at 8 AM. The meeting was held in a fairly standard-looking classroom, except there was an elevated stage in front where the speaker had a podium. On the stage, an American flag stood in the corner and today a portable blackboard was positioned in front of a large screen on which slides were projected. Our group of thirty-five pea-green Navy doctors was seated at individual drawer-less desks in front of the stage. The desks were arranged in neat rows and firmly secured into the floor to prevent any deviation from this shipshape arrangement.

Commander Broyles, a crusty seafarin' man who once commanded a destroyer off the coast of Viet Nam, was our designated babysitter. He was lean, leather-skinned (I assumed from spending too many days at sea) and had bright blue eyes below large gray eyebrows that matched close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair. He looked like a sailor from central casting! He turned out to be the perfect choice for our "indoctrination group", as we called our basic training coterie, much to the consternation of the Navy regulars. The commander appeared to ignore our purposefully pejorative term but did get the drift and referred to us by a term which we preferred to "Charm School".

Cmdr. Broyles sized us up very quickly. We were a pretty motley bunch, coming with widely varied mindsets in addition to being various sizes and shapes. Some were ersatz hippies, who when the chips were down, chose to abandon their "Hell no! We won't go!" posturing and came here rather than bolt to Canada and risk reprisal from the establishment. Others were surly and determined to have a bad experience—and make it distasteful for those around them, but most were resigned to their fate, while not particularly happy about it. No one was gung-ho military.

Cmdr. Broyles, crusty Navy line officer (line officers do what you think naval officers should do—they are in charge of sailing ships), introduced himself and let it be known he would be our leader/babysitter throughout our orientation

and training. His khaki uniform hung just right; it was quite neat but seemed casual. Although smaller and thinner, he looked quite like John Wayne in those aircraft carrier movies. He talked like John Wayne, too.

Cmdr. Broyles became our best friend at "basic training"—or what passed for basic training. He had an uncanny knack for sizing up a group and tailoring his leadership methods to meet the situation. Ours was not your run-of-the-mill collection of conscripts. This bunch was quite bright, not likely to tolerate foolish activities, would prove impervious to rudimentary psychology and was capable of great cunning if challenged. Cmdr. Broyles figured this out the first morning and worked it to his advantage.

Our first lecturer was a feckless junior petty officer who was to direct us in filling out required forms. He began: "Good morning. I'm yeoman first class Clark and I'm going to help you with the Department of Defense forms. We will start with DD form 601 which is in the front of your packet. On the first line is a space that says 'name', write your name there." Then he paused for at least four or five minutes before going on: "The second space says 'date of birth'. Write your date of birth there…"

He went on like this for fully 45 minutes, oblivious to the people in the front row reading the newspaper while others were sleeping in the back—all having long since completed their DD 601 forms.

The group was becoming even less polite (feet up on desk and paper airplanes) after two more "instructors", before we broke (two hours) for lunch. When we returned, Cmdr. Broyles announced that we should finish our packet of forms, turn them in and then take the afternoon off. Steve Marglin and I took off for the beach to get some rays. It was a novel experience for me as I hadn't spent an afternoon at the beach in years; but for Steve it was a way of life. He was a self-admitted sun worshiper—as his tan would attest. By evening I was more than a little bit burned; meanwhile, four hours of blazing sun reflecting off surf and white sand hadn't laid a glove on Steve.

The next morning Cmdr. Broyles announced he was rearranging our schedule. We had only two of the listed lectures for the day—one on the $10,000 life insurance policy provided by the government for personnel in a hostile fire zone (that would be us in a couple of weeks) and the other on

military courtesy. Then we were told to fill out the forms for the day and we were free to go.

"But it's only 10AM!," said someone.

"Right. You're free until tomorrow morning."

"What are we supposed to do?"

"Go to the beach."

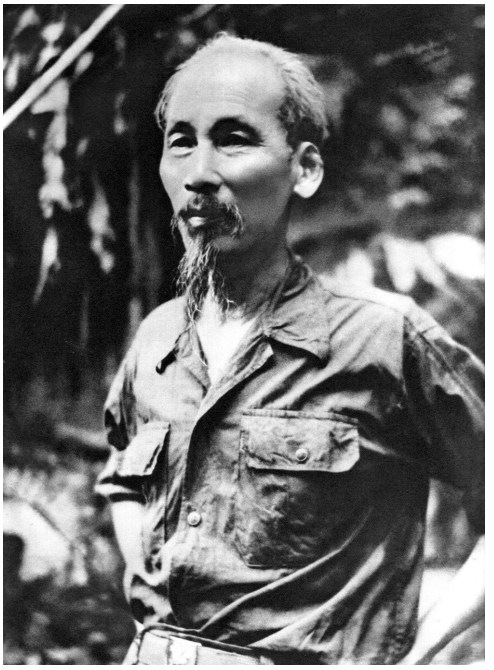
I was sunburned already and not eager to chance a second outing to the beach, so I joined a couple of others and we went on sight-seeing tours and tried some of the local ethnic restaurants for lunch and returned to the base for supper. We did this for several days. The Mexican restaurants were great—the Italian and Greek restaurants less than great.

But it got us out and about. San Diego was a wonderful place in 1970—there weren't many people living there and they didn't have traffic jams. The naval officers lived in Coronado, not far from the world-renowned Hotel Del Coronado; today you can't touch a home there for under $1 million!

Hotel Del Coronado

Most days we stayed pretty close to home on base and attended a few carefully screened classes (meaning ones that didn't insult our intelligence). Most were pretty interesting.

We were given a rather even-handed (instead of indoctrination) history of the Vietnam War. It turns out that the Vietnamese fought on the side of the Allies in WWII (at that time the country was called French Indochina) and for this they were promised independence from France. Their leader was Ho Chi Minh, a Marxist.



Ho Chi Minh

After the war, the French refused to comply with independence for French Indochina. So, Ho organized a guerrilla army to fight for independence. In 1954 they stunned the world when an army, led by the logistical genius General Giap, had men dismantle and hand carry artillery pieces to the tops of the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu—a key stronghold of the French.

Vo Nguyen Giap

With these artillery and anti-aircraft pieces in impregnable bunkers they were able to fire at will on the French and they eventually overran the huge base, capturing thousands of elite French troops. After this humiliation, the French surrendered and agreed to withdraw from Indochina, with the proviso that the country be divided at the 17th parallel into two separate countries, the one in the North led by Ho, the South ruled by Emperor Bao Dai.

The Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh (justifiably) felt betrayed—again. However, he was a Marxist, and the Western governments did not want communists to claim all of SE Asia as they had done with Eastern Europe after WWII. In 1954, SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) was formed to prevent communist expansion in Asia and Eisenhower sent a token force of 700 advisors to South Vietnam. This number was increased by Kennedy in 1963, and grew to be a huge force under Lyndon Johnson with 500,000 troops on the ground in the mid-1960's.

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Intriguing American adaptations for fighting this jungle and river war were the "Deuch" Boats and the Zippo. The former were armored boats that had powerful pumps that could wash away the muddy banks where the foliage grew down to river's edge—and where the Viet Cong liked to hide in ambush. The latter were boats with powerful pumps that could shoot streams of burning napalm on these locations.

Another very interesting tactic was how the U.S. Government printed "perfect" counterfeit North Vietnamese bank notes and dropped them from airplanes over North Vietnam.

More ominous (although it seemed an awfully good idea at the time) was the use of Agent Orange to defoliate large areas of jungle under "Operation Ranch Hand" — authorized by President Kennedy in 1961.

Graduation Day

After a little over four weeks of training, service men going to Vietnam were usually sent to Warner Springs for a weekend. There they were released into a wilderness at sundown. and soon captured by "the enemy" (who knew the area well and had night vision googles). They were taken to a POW enclosure and subjected to abuse calculated to resemble what the real enemy would do.

It was decided they would not send the new doctors to Warner Springs. I went to San Francisco for the weekend. A much better option.

But the "docs" *did* have to go to a Graduation Ceremony along with other groups who were finishing their indoctrination and training. Cmdr. Broyles assembled our rag tag group and announced, "At the graduation ceremony the various groups march in and assemble in formation. Graduation is two days away, and I will not attempt teaching you how to march in formation, if you agree to play ball with me."

Vigorous agreement erupted! There was no way we wanted to practice marching for two days. The Commander told us that we were to meet him at the parade group 45 minutes before the graduation, looking our very best. Faithful to our commitment, we gathered at the parade ground as agreed and found the Commander waiting for us.

"I have made "X's"on the field where you are to stand. You will stand at attention while all the others march in and assemble around you. DO NOT MOVE OFF YOUR SPOTS! The Admiral will review the company, including you. When he is finished, all groups will leave in the order they came in. DO NOT MOVE until they are all gone."

It worked like a charm. Commander Broyles was indeed a clever man.

Following the ceremony, we all got our orders to report for duty in Vietnam—all but Steve Marglin and me. The Commander explained that there were only 30 billets and we had 32 in our group. We should consider ourselves lucky. It was a shocker, to say the least. And frankly a bit of a disappointment.

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The SEALS trained on the base and we could see the 'Tadpoles' carrying rubber rafts at double time gait while chanting SEAL slogans. There must have been some officer Tadpoles but apparently, they were not allowed in the Officers Mess or Bar on base. Our Trainee Group was allowed both places. That was a real benefit. Of course, the Charm Schoolers tended to eat together most of the time. But in the Officers Bar there *was* mingling.

And so Steve Marglin and I had an auspicious encounter. We were joined at the bar by a SEAL officer. He was a bit unprepossessing—he was shorter than me and rather slim. I had expected some sort of muscle-flexing Adonis, I guess. But he was quite affable and responded colorfully to our naive questions. He asked us about what we were doing. So, we told him we were in Charm School and described it. He laughed, of course. Then we added that those in charge of the group found they had 32 young doctors in the group and only 30 billets in Vietnam. Two docs were excluded and left with no orders. He roared with laughter and added he wasn't surprised, but he bet we were! Then he started to leave saying he had to get up early.

Reluctant to part with his company and his stories, we pleaded with him to stay. He said he enjoyed it, too, but… So, I challenged him to arm wrestle. If I won, he would stay and would remain for another round; if he won, he would leave with nothing but good wishes from us. I won.

Later as he was departing, he asked if we had really wanted to go to Vietnam. We told him we had been mentally prepping for weeks and had said goodbyes to our loved ones. We had been primed to go, and frankly there were a couple of Fellows in our group who clearly were ill-prepared and it was doubtful if they would be able to perform well. They stood out like a sore thumb! We should go in their stead.

He said, "Really!"

On his way out of the Club we could see him talk quietly to a Lieutenant Commander and point to us.

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The next morning we were escorted into the Admiral's Office outfitted in our cleanest khaki uniforms. The Admiral—seated at a large oak desk—was resplendent in his tropical whites. Two flags flanked the Admiral's desk, an American flag to his right and some sort of Naval flag to the left.

He cut a commanding figure.

"So you're the two doctors who want to go to Vietnam," he said; looking up at us as we stood at attention, trying to look respectfully military.

"Yes, sir," we replied crisply.

"And you'd like me to help you," he continued.

"Yes, sir." (although we may have been feeling a bit less intent on it in the bright light of morning).

He picked up a phone and told someone he wanted the Detailer in Washington, and placed it on its cradle. He had barely had time to ask us where we were from when the phone rang.

"Shanahan," he said.

"Jim," he continued, "we have two bright young doctors who want to go to Vietnam and they are being denied. Can you fix this?"

"Right, I'll have their paperwork sent to you."

"Thanks Jim."

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As we came in over the Pacific Ocean we could see the lights of the city below. It was like a birthday cake at the edge of total darkness. Minutes later we were on the tarmac of Tan Son Nhut Airport and taxied to a stop in front of an open-to-the-sky wire-fenced "cage" adjacent to the terminal.

No one was allowed to disembark until our luggage was unloaded—and that was practically criminal. We'd been entombed on the plane for over 20 hours; the air-conditioning had been turned off and we were tired, hot, sweaty—and scared.

Finally, word came to release us and we scrambled down the gangway and headed towards the cage where our luggage, such as it was, had been taken.

The evening air was stifling—hot, humid and sticky. I could feel sweat running down my armpits and chest making large blotches on the starched khaki shirt that soon became plastered to my skin. In barely 10 minutes my hair began to curl like Harpo Marx's and perspiration was running down my face and into my eyes. The luggage was a line of 150 identical green duffle bags lined in a row. "Good luck finding yours!" I heard someone grumble.

I had no problem—my girlfriend, Sydney, had driven me to Travis AFB—where all military planes to Vietnam embarked. Sydney's father was a career soldier, and she knew about such things. She took the pink ribbon holding her ponytail and tied it around my duffle saying, "You'll thank me in Saigon." Then she kissed me goodbye and with tears rolling down her cheeks said, "I will miss you. Promise me you'll write--and promise me you'll come home."

Finding my duffle was the only bright spot of the evening. An olive drab bus with screens resembling a batting cage over its windows took us down darkened streets where we imagined Viet Cong guerrillas lying in wait at every corner.

Eventually we came to a transient hotel, The Annapolis. The street in front was pure mud; a continuous line of 55-gallon oil drums filled with concrete supported a heavy chain link fence surrounding the building. In the street, the cacophonous din of a diesel generator blared without letup and was giving me a headache. Heavier screens and a second set of concrete bunkers were just inside the concrete barrels and large steel bars covered all the hotel windows.

A hundred and fifty strong, we paraded through a serpentine entryway and once inside were issued towels and assigned rooms. I shared my tiny cell with three others. The heat was oppressive, the floors were filthy—and Lieutenant Marglin found a dead cockroach on his bunk.

Lt. Marglin finds a cockroach on his bunk.

Building a Better Clap-Trap

In the fall of 1971, the Navy base at Nha Be was a favorite stopping off place for the "Brown Water" Navy physicians just arriving in Viet Nam as well as those departing. It was close to Saigon, but relatively laid back—you wouldn't be hassled by Head Quarters types here. Consequently, the manpower situation was feast or famine. The docs going on R & R would stay just a day or so; but those who had just arrived in-country would spend a week— sometimes more—getting their bearings before shipping off to the boonies. Those about to DEROS (date of estimated return from overseas) back to "the world" regularly found a way to spend a week or two with us (once they sucked it up enough to leave the friendly confines of their duty stations). Curiously, wherever people were stationed, they wanted to stay put—perhaps it was "better the Devil you know than the Devil you don't know". The sole exception to this was Solid Anchor, a SEAL and Marine outpost in the heart of a VC stronghold—the U Minh Forest—almost one hundred miles from the nearest Americans. No one liked staying there for long. As a result, Nha Be sometimes had a glut of five or six physicians, falling over each other trying to be helpful. But mostly there were the three regulars: Bob Subers, Paul Levine and me.

Bob Subers was the most senior of us conscription-docs. He had earned his spurs at Solid Anchor where he actually rode along on the Swift Boats and manned a machine gun when they were ambushed. He must have loved it because after a year in country he volunteered for another. But Bob wasn't foolish, he insisted on spending the second year at Nha Be so he could buzz around Saigon on his days off, which were many. Bob Subers was about five-foot-nine, rather slight of build and with nondescript sandy hair —quite unprepossessing. Some of the in-country physicians had top-notch pedigrees from Yale or Stanford. Subers was from lowly Loyola in Chicago. But he was in his element in the Navy Medical Corps. Bob could handle chaos and he could handle men—both the enlisted men (who worked for us) and the line officers (for whom we nominally worked).

Subers had replaced Russell Stumacher (whom the line officers kept calling "stomach-er"), trained at the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Medical School. But Russell couldn't handle chaos or men. He went to pieces after less than a week at Solid Anchor and was exiled to a ship offshore for duty. Russell

had panicked in a crisis and the word was out. He was not welcome at any duty station in Viet Nam. Subers, who grew to be revered by the men at Solid Anchor, covered the remote outpost until a replacement came from the US.

The Dispensary at Nha Be

At Nha Be, Bob Subers assigned himself to making up the Med Cap assignments--these were visits by helicopter to remote villages where medical care was given to civilians, and to heading up a program for Vietnamese corpsmen-in-training. The Vietnamese corpsmen were to be our legacy. After we were gone, they would have to suffice for the Vietnamese military—there were no Vietnamese doctors here--they were all in Paris or Saigon. And in the

process of organizing this humanitarian effort, Bob found a lot of reasons to go to Saigon and spend the night.

Paul Levine, a clean cut and unbelievably naïve fellow from New York City, was serious to a fault. He insisted he was second-in-command because although on paper we had the same day of enlistment, he had spent a summer with the ROTC program in college—and that should be the tiebreaker. Only Paul seemed to care about this; and once it was learned that being second-in-command meant that on those frequent occasions when Subers was elsewhere you went in his stead to evening report in the Commanding Officer's office and stood Reveille with the enlisted men at 6:30 AM, it was conceded by all physicians passing through that indeed ROTC was the tie breaker.

Paul, for his part, was quite pleased with this. Paul was a short, plump fastidious man with a baby face and Brooklyn accent who invariably wore a pressed khaki uniform—even in the boondocks. He was scheduled to begin a fellowship in cardiology at Georgetown when he got out of the Navy. His life was a model of planning and organization. He wrote his fiancée, Lucille (of whom Paul's mother approved) every day and received one or two letters from her in return. Paul didn't smoke, he seldom swore, he drank in moderation if at all and in general was a bit of a goody two-shoes. In other words, he and I had nothing in common.

Paul found a niche in the dispensary: he started a Thursday afternoon Leprosy Clinic which he ran for much of the year—and reluctantly turned over to me when he DEROS'ed. He also was the doctor for the Navy's Drug Amnesty program (which carried the curious name of Operation Cookie Crumb), where sailors using drugs could turn themselves in and get treatment instead of a court martial. It turned out to be quite a job.

And so by default I became the "VD Officer". It sounds like drawing the short straw, but like so many other things in Viet Nam (and in life) it was anything but. A bit of swagger creeps into your step when you stroll down the streets of Nha Be and have wide-eyed children point and call out softly to each other, "bác sĩ bệnh lậu"—pronounced bak-see-bin-la-o (loosely translated = doctor gonorrhea). This isn't a title lightly given, you must earn it.

It was a good time to be the VD Officer. There were plenty of patients—over a hundred cases each month. And the Vietnamese sailors also came to see Johnson (my aptly named corpsman who ran the day-to-day aspects of the VD program) and me; some of the cases were extraordinary.

Dave Johnson was soft-spoken with red hair and freckles reminiscent of Opie on the Andy Griffith Show. Despite his youthful appearance, at age 23 he was one of the more senior Navy corpsmen. An E-6 (petty officer first class) who planned on a career in the Navy, he was organized, efficient, and could be relied upon to handle details well—and anxious to get a good fitness report. But most of all he was savvy to the ways of the world; and more important, to the ways of the Navy. Johnson was exactly what I needed.

Unlike the US Navy, getting VD was a punishable offense for the Vietnamese sailors. So, they were eager to get their treatment from the discreet Americans; and their commanders seemed happy to foist this on us. The Vietnamese did not come early in the course of their illness, and on occasion we found men with huge lymph nodes in their groins that oozed pus through fistulas to the skin. Fortunately, we could cure them. As a matter of fact, we cured just about everyone. Providentially, there were no resistant organisms yet. All the gonorrhea and syphilis microbes were susceptible to fairly low doses of

penicillin and just about all the other forms of VD we could treat with tetracycline.

Still, there was quite a problem. The navy base had only 800 men and there were 100 cases of the clap each month—that's 1200 a year. So, seeing as by order of the Department of Defense everyone stayed in Viet Nam exactly one year (and no more), your chances of getting VD were 150%.

Well, of course that wasn't true. There were recidivists. Some guys were getting it three and four times while the chaplain and Paul Levine weren't getting it at all. Nonetheless, clearly there was a problem here. From the very first, it seemed we could do better.

Outside the base at Nha Be was a shantytown composed of bars and brothels—most were both. There was little other industry. There was a laundry where you could have your clothes done by hand if you so chose, and a small tailor shop. But nothing else. At the edge of town were open-flooded fields and rice paddies. Unlike the city of Saigon, the rice paddies were relatively untouched by the war. From the roadway these flooded, closely planted fields of rice stretched as far as the eye could see. Occasionally draft animals, water buffalo, wandered onto the road and would stop traffic until the children (often no more than 10 or 11 years old) charged with tending the huge beasts could shoo them to the roadside.

Having seen adventure movies where John Wayne shot charging tropical buffalo in just the nick of time, I was astounded at the cavalier manner with which these children herded buffalo with small bamboo switches. (Later I learned there is a decided difference between a wild African Cape Buffalo and the docile domesticated Asian animals). In the spring, families would wade into the thigh-deep waters and stoop all day planting the crops. In the fall, we saw them in the center of the paddies beating the shorn rice stalks against a board to remove the seed kernels. In the late October afternoon sun, they rather resembled an Asian version of Jean Francois Millet's painting "The Gleaners". Despite centuries punctuated by invasions, civil wars, the yoke of colonialism and most recently the influence of the technology-crazed Americans, this farming process remained unchanged— and looked as if it would continue to do so.

Harvesting Rice along the road to Nha Be

But this georgic scene changed abruptly at Nha Be. The road to the Rung Sat Special Zone ended here, and all was mangrove swamp, forest and rivers beyond. There was in effect no solid ground. The base and the town of "camp followers" were on a man-made island of sand and silt—pushed together by bulldozers. The same was true of the road to Saigon. Even the graves were above ground—New Orleans style.

And though the tiny village owed its existence to the rowdy leisure activity of off-duty sailors from the US Navy base, by day it was not a pit of licentious depravity. A majority of the bar girls were commuters, and as a result Nha Be was a surprisingly decent and ordinary-by-day place. It was a village of families with old people who sat on porches and lolled in the sun while small children happily played in the street. And if these children weren't the most beautiful on earth, they must have been among the most resilient. Despite knowing no life other than an unending war (dating from the Japanese occupation in WW II), they had smiles like toothpaste ads and their shining large brown eyes could melt the hardest of hearts—and they were perpetually happy. Their good spirits were contagious; leaving the military base and strolling down the blacktopped street of the village where the children played

with their grandparents was like stepping into a patch of sunshine on a gray day.

But it was a different place by night. Then it became a virtual Tijuana West—where the economic base was cheap beer (ba-me-ba) and women of the night. But unlike Tijuana, the prostitutes here came from "respectable families", and turned their modest earnings over to the extended family. Despite low fees ($2 short time or $5 all night) these petite fine-featured girls were often the major family breadwinners. The wartime economy had wreaked havoc upon their family structure.

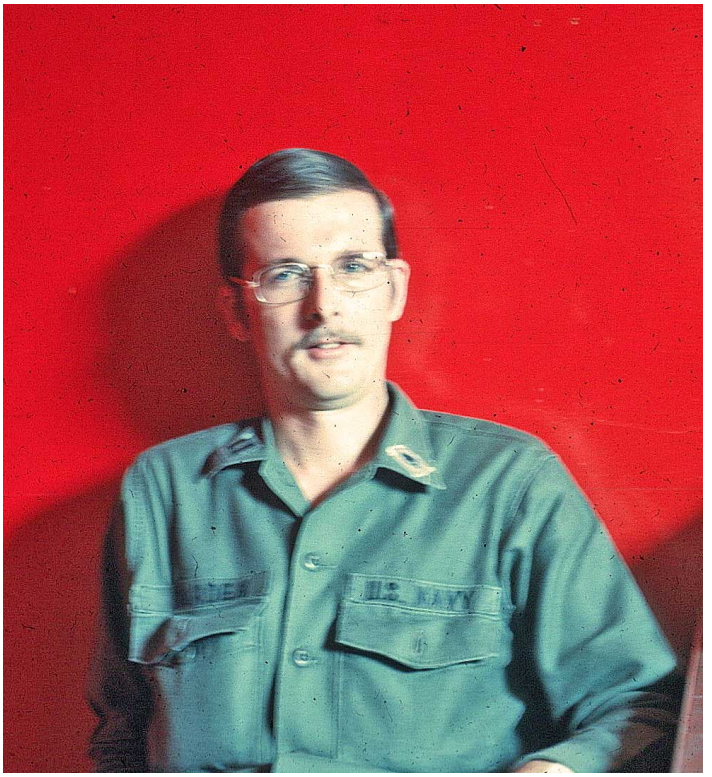
The madams (almost all the bars and brothels were run by women) were another matter. Most of them were commuters too; many came the twenty-odd miles from Saigon each day and brought their girls with them in a tiny bus-like vehicle with wire mesh sides. The madams had cold blood in their veins. They ran their bars like sweatshops—pun intended.

For six months a repair ship named the U.S.S. Tuitiulla (TOOT-a-WHEEL-a) was anchored in the middle of the Long Tau River at Nha Be. The Song Long Tau was the largest division of the Saigon River which split into branches as it passed through the Rung Sat—an impenetrable jungle hideout where for centuries pirates attacked ships bound for Saigon and the Viet Cong sabotaged shipping now. The poor sailors aboard the Tuitiulla were pretty much in a floating prison. They couldn't go ashore except when given "liberty"—which was only a couple of times each week. When they got to Nha Be, they went wild. The "Toot's" VD rate was alarming to say the least.

As was the Navy custom, a list of infected men (with duty stations) was posted at the Nha Be base gate. All personnel leaving had to show military ID's and the Shore Patrol wouldn't pass those on the "confined to base" list—the Tuitiulla's crew was unrivaled on this roster. The ship's captain took a ribbing from all the other brass in the Rung Sat about his men's "unclean habits", and he didn't like it one bit. At one point he accused me of fabricating the low VD rate for the shore-based sailors. I assured him I would have chosen a better number than 100 cases a month if I were fudging records.

The Toot had its own doctor, Judd Darden, a slender fellow with wire rimmed glasses, which were the rage among a Hippie-wannabe pre-Yuppie generation

of young doctors. He had a Charlie Chaplin moustache—all the facial hair the Navy would allow. Judd was a strange man. He only came ashore to visit the dispensary and the other physicians—and to find a place where he could smoke some dope undetected. Judd was under great pressure from his captain to control the VD problem. His response was a crash program to keep the men from getting the clap. Judd correctly determined that recommending abstinence wasn't going to work; he had to get into education and prevention.



Judd Darden

First, all sailors leaving the Toot were issued prophylactics. This hardly made a dent in the VD List. Then he had mandatory lectures for the men, in which he gave them directions for something they might actually do. Before boarding the launch to return to the Toot they were to buy two beers. They were to drink one, and to use the other to wash their genitals. The theory being that yet another beer would produce prompt urination and flush the urethra, and there was enough alcohol in the beer to kill most of the organisms on their genitalia.

This didn't work either, but it was quite innovative. Judd's approach to almost everything was like this—quite clever, but weird, and unlikely to work.

Judd was sent home early on compassionate orders when his wife was hospitalized with severe depression. He was given duty at Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay, so he could be close to the Oakland Naval Hospital where his wife was confined. But Judd's problems didn't end here. One day he didn't show up for work at the dispensary. It took a week to find him.

He was a patient under an assumed name in the intensive care unit at San Francisco General Hospital. Judd had been using heroin. In order to avoid telltale marks on his arms he had been injecting the drug into the femoral vein in his groin; but one day he missed the vein and injected his femoral artery with disastrous results. He was on a respirator and in kidney failure. Judd lost part of his leg and later was court martialed.

But, despite all his shortcomings, Judd's take on the problem in Nha Be was accurate. No improvement was going to occur until we did something more than lecture drunken sailors and treat cases of VD as they came in. And the solution was obvious. We had to go after the source of the infection.

So, Corpsman Johnson went out to locate the prostitutes and offer them free screening and discreet medical care for infections. Nada—no interest. Johnson was then sent to talk to the "bar owners", a euphemism for pimps and madams. They had less interest than the girls. I guess this shouldn't have been a surprise. After all, the girls did not become symptomatic until quite late in the course of the disease, so they had little interest in an uncomfortable examination, and the proprietors of brothels are seldom into public health. A different strategy was needed, and it would require the cooperation of the local government if we were to succeed.

I told Johnson to set up a meeting with the province chief and the chief of police, naïvely thinking they would be interested in the welfare of the girls and the health of the sailors. They were less interested than the girls and the bar owners, if that were possible. But God often smiles on the halt, the lame and naïve midwestern physicians like me. When in the course of protesting I chanced to say, "But there are 135 girls out there who are potentially infected!", they snapped bolt upright in attention.

"How many girls did you say?"

"135. Johnson has them listed in his card file. And any one of them may be infected."

"Does he have the name of the bar they work at in his card file, too?"

"Of course he does. That's how we keep track of them—by where they work."

"We thought there were only 65 girls working here."

"No, there are 135. No question about it."

Suddenly, I saw the light. The bar owners had been cheating the government officials out of their share of the take--"skimming" was the term mentioned. By the end of the afternoon, we had hammered out a bargain. Johnson would have the duty assignment of his dreams: keeping track of the local prostitutes full time (and all the potential side benefits it would provide). He would provide accurate up-to-date counts of the girls and where they worked for our records—which would be available to the chief of police. We would offer a "voluntary VD program" to the community, and the police chief would encourage cooperation.

A few days later the province chief and the chief of police held a meeting with the bar owners. They announced our new public health program (a joint effort by the Vietnamese government and the United States Navy) that was designed to control communicable diseases in the community. To participate establishments would be required to join the new Nha Be Bar Association—and pay monthly dues. Participation was entirely voluntary.

It started slowly, but after the police chief's men closed some bars for "health violations" and beat up a few uncooperative bar owners, we had 100% participation in our voluntary program. Now not only were the girls required to be checked, but if they had gonorrhea, they had to be treated in order to have their Johnson Cards stamped. And without a Johnson Card you couldn't work in Nha Be. It all worked amazingly well. The VD rate plummeted to two or three cases a month (and just about all of those were acquired elsewhere), no longer were the province chief and the chief of police being cheated, Corpsman

Johnson became one of the most powerful figures in the community, and I was known as Bac Si Benh Lau (AKA Doctor Gonorrhea).

Corpsman Dave Johnson

Everything seemed to be falling into place. The VD rate was almost non-existent and the Vietnamese bar owners were happy because business was booming. Once the word got out that the girls in Nha Be were clean— certified by the U.S. Navy—people were driving out from Saigon to use our bordellos. The politicos were pleased, the commanding officer was happy and even the Captain of the Tuitiulla, who didn't like anyone, gave a grudging thumbs up. Things were going very well indeed, until the press arrived on the scene.

CBS's Howard Tuckner showed up one day and said he wanted to interview me. He was dressed in a tailored khaki bush outfit and looked like a poor man's Ernest Hemingway. His Vietnamese cameraman had a shoulder-mounted TV camera—something I had not seen before. Howard Tuckner said

it was common knowledge that we had the lowest VD rate in all of Viet Nam and he wanted to know our secret. So, I told him.

It was on the national evening news with Walter Cronkite a few days later (January 6,1971). A lot of my friends back home saw it. One of them called the TV station in Minneapolis and told them the Navy doctor was a "hometown boy" (Howard Tuckner's broadcast had only identified me as "Navy Lieutenant Robert Olson") and they should run it again on the local evening news. They did, and even my mother saw it. I'm not sure that was so good.

Walter Cronkite and the CBS Evening News

Then, days later, something happened that I knew wasn't good. I was summoned to Saigon to see the Admiral in charge of all U.S. Naval forces in Viet Nam. The Nha Be commanding officer didn't know what it was for, but he made me get a haircut and change into a clean outfit before going. I even got to go in his car—the only one with air conditioning. It was wonderful.

The Admiral's headquarters were rather plush by RVN standards. They were in a relatively new building, that appeared to be freshly painted, and the floor was spotless. Everyone here wore starched khaki outfits and looked positively military. The Admiral's adjutant ushered me into a large room and sat me in front of a TV set. He started a tape and left me to watch it alone. It was the Tuckner interview. When the adjutant returned, he said, "Do you have

anything to say before the Admiral comes?" I asked if I could see the tape again.

Finally, the Admiral arrived. He actually seemed like a pretty decent man. And he didn't say anything about my haircut or uniform. He got right to the point.

He said, "I received a message from CHNINFO (Chief of Naval Information) saying 'someone purported to be a Navy lieutenant is engaging in clandestine political intrigue with the Vietnamese nationals'. What do you have to say about this?"

It was clear that he didn't like getting such messages from Washington, and he liked even less having to horse around with stupid stuff like this. So it was not likely he would look favorably on a person who caused him this grief. This seemed an apt time to take the craven sailor's tack —"equivocate and deceive if at all possible."

So I said, "I did this interview, but there has been some clever and artful editing going on—why this tape actually appears to discredit the U.S. Navy."

He looked at me for a while. I don't think I fooled him for one minute (there was a reason he was a young admiral instead of an old captain).

He finally said, "Look, getting rid of VD is good. But these men have mothers, sweethearts and wives at home—and they don't want to hear that the U.S. Navy is cleaning up towns so men can get their ashes hauled. They want to think of them as hunkered down, staying safe and spending their free time on craft projects and writing letters home. Don't do any more interviews! Now get out of here."

I went home grateful that I had dodged the bullet. But maybe not. A week later I got orders to relieve Terry Scherke at Solid Anchor—the worst location in Vietnam for the US Navy, manned almost entirely by SEALS and Marines with by far the largest number of casualties and only one doctor.

Nha Be Babies

I spent my first two years of medical school in the classroom learning chemistry, physiology and other basic sciences. The only contact with humans was in the anatomy lab where med students dissected cadavers and memorized the names of body parts. Wisely, the professors didn't let us near live patients until our final two years. Then the world changed. No more theoretical problems, each with a "correct answer". We were now to apply the principles of physiology learned by rote memory to the practice of medicine, and despite a lot of brave posturing we were very nervous about it.

Everyone wanted to start on pediatrics where they couldn't pick out a new doctor wannabe (well the parents probably could—but at least the kids wouldn't). But alas, there wasn't room in the pediatrics clinic for all 120 third year medical students. So we were spread over all the specialties and even some subspecialties. My first clinical rotation was in obstetrics, and with good reason was I scared. These were the olden days, before extensive government regulation, and the word on the street was OB could be trial by fire.

On day one I entered the OB Classroom on the 10th floor of the Mayo Memorial Hospital on the University of Minnesota campus feeling a jumble of eager anticipation and dread. Exhilaration at finally "becoming a doctor"—or at least a student doctor, and near panic at the thought of emulating an obstetrician when armed with little knowledge and fewer skills. Like the 15 others in the room, I was proudly sporting a short white busboy-like jacket, the badge of the medical clerk. You would have thought a clerkship was going over records and filing papers, but no, it is what the medical school called the med student rotations in the various specialties.

At 8AM sharp an Ichabod Crane look-alike sporting a crisply starched (long) white coat burst into the room, strode smartly to the podium and in a booming bass voice announced, "This is the OB clerkship 137, if you're in the wrong room leave now!"

No one moved. He was intimidating. If I were in the wrong room, I think I would have waited for an intermission to leave rather than be the focus of his attention for even a brief period.

After a short pause he continued, "You know nothing now, but you will be learning Obstetrics during the next eight weeks. You will not master Obstetrics in eight weeks—that will take a lifetime."

This guy took himself very seriously. He was pompous with a capital "P"; but as he rambled on telling of what great work they did in the department we hung on his every word.

Finally, he mentioned the Call Schedule and put a transparency with names and dates on one of those overhead projectors—the ones where a light shines from the bottom of the box, passes through the clear plastic transparency, and is bounced by a prism onto a screen in front of the room.

After regular hospital working hours at the University Hospital, the staff physicians went home and left the medical students and interns in charge. We were "on call" for all the problems that arose, including obstetrical emergencies. This was a bit daunting, but there was comfort in the knowledge that we were backed by the resources of a modern state-of-the-art hospital and senior residents (residents are "real doctors" who are engaged in specialty training).

Students had an additional duty in 1967, which was to cover the General William Booth Salvation Army Hospital for unwed mothers in St. Paul. I discovered this little-talked-about responsibility my very first night as a student-obstetrician. The Booth Hospital phoned me at home.

"Is this Robert Olson?"

"Yes…"

"One of the girls is starting into labor."

"Why are you calling me?"

"You need to come down here."

"Are you sure you want me? I'm just the medical student."

"Yes, that's why I'm calling. The clerks *[the euphemism for medical student in vogue in the 1960's]* come down and attend the deliveries. Your name is on the call list."

"Don't the residents come, too?"

"They come when they are needed."

This was a bad dream come true. I had been an OB student for eight hours, and we had spent all of that time in orientation. Not only hadn't I seen a delivery, I hadn't even read about them.

In a flush of inspiration, I got the call schedule, phoned the OB resident on the call list and said we were needed at the Booth Hospital hoping he would go with me. He didn't buy it.

"You go there, examine the girl and report back to me. I'll come later if you need me. That's the way you learn."

If you need me! That's the way you learn! I couldn't believe he was saying this. He must not realize this was my first clinical rotation ever.

I told him, "I wouldn't know what I was doing. I don't know anything about delivering babies--I've never even done a pelvic exam."

"You'll do fine," he replied.

Well maybe that's the way he learned, but it seemed more than a bit cavalier to me. The medical credo was supposed to be: "see one, do one, teach one" —not "wing it by yourself".

After a shocked silence, I said, "O.K., I'll go over and examine her and call you with the results."

"Now you're getting it."

Booth Hospital

Armed with a "Cliff's Notes on Obstetrics"-type handbook, reading it at stop signs, I drove to the Booth Hospital in St. Paul. It wasn't really a hospital. It was a seedy-looking old mansion on Como Avenue and resembled the haunted houses in Peter Lorre movies. I had to check the address to make sure this was the right place. All this scene lacked was a thunderstorm. I was met at the door by the nurse-on-duty. Eight girls in the final stages of their pregnancies were staying here. The Booth Hospital rules were that in exchange for medical care and a place to live in the days before delivery, girls were to give birth here and put their babies up for adoption.

In the main hall bare bulbs on long cords hung from the once-white high ceiling giving surprisingly good illumination. At one time this had been an elegant residence, but now converted to a home/birthing center for teenagers it had become shabby and worn. Drab pea-soup-green paint was peeling off the walls in several places and detracted measurably from an otherwise splendid gilt-framed portrait at the foot of a large staircase. I assumed the bearded man in the portrait was General William Booth—at least that's what the nameplate said. A similar stern picture (this one of a Victorian vintage chaste-looking

woman—perhaps Mrs. Booth) hung at the top of the stairs. No doubt she was silently guarding the girls who lived in the upstairs rooms until they went into labor. There were no other adornments on the walls, and the place was clean. Sterile and cold, but clean.

In a similarly stark room on the main floor, I found the girl in labor. She was on a hospital bed. There were no blankets, only a sheet and she was on top of it. But it was a very warm night and the Booth Hospital didn't have air conditioning. For that matter the University Hospital didn't have air conditioning.

The girl was rather plain looking with mousy hair soaked in sweat and she wore a thin pinstriped hospital gown. She took in great gulps of air as a wave of contractions subsided, and then she fell back panting. She was oblivious of the nurse and me as we entered the room.

"This is Janie," said Ms. Brown waving her arm backhand and adding a little flip of the wrist emulating a maître de. It was the most flamboyant thing I would see her do. Then without introducing us further added, "Her contractions are twenty minutes apart."

"I see." It was the only thing I could think of to say. Then, in a burst of inspiration added, "Where's her chart?"

"Over here, doctor," said the mirthless nurse.

Doctor! She couldn't think I was a doctor. I looked at her suspiciously trying to detect any sarcasm. There was none. Well, what the heck, if she wanted to call me doctor, I'd let her.

Meticulously going through her chart to get the scant details, I was plotting the only reasonable course of action I could think of: report immediately to the resident on call and get him to come down here. The details: age—17, weight—135 lbs., height—5'3", gestation—39 weeks, first pregnancy, no medical risks identified.

I examined the 17-year-old girl as best I could and called the resident.

"The contractions are 20 minutes apart and she seems to be dilated about 5 centimeters--but I'm not very sure of my findings. It would really help if you could come down and confirm things."

He said, "I'm pretty busy right now, call back later as things progress."

On it went like that all evening.

He never did come. The nurse wasn't much help either. However, when the birth was imminent, she pronounced we couldn't wait any longer; we had to go to the delivery room.

"I'll get the gurney, where is it?" I asked excitedly.

"We don't take the girls to delivery on a gurney—rules say they walk."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"No, they walk—rules."

And so, with each of us holding an arm, we guided the waddling expectant mother forty feet down the hall and onto a delivery table. Contractions were coming very fast now—only a few minutes apart—as we hastily draped her and prepared for the baby.

I delivered the baby pretty much reading the directions in my manual as we went. The poor patient must have been petrified. Thank goodness there were no surprises. It went just as described in the Cliff's Notes—only quicker. I had to put the book down when crunch time came. The book said you needed to do an episiotomy (make a cut in the vaginal wall to enlarge the opening and prevent uncontrolled tears when the baby's head came though), so I did.

The tray had two big syringes full of Novocain. I used both injecting all over the target area as deep as the short needle would go. I think the girl's adrenaline was pumping hard because she didn't seem to notice when the needle sticks were made, she had other things on her mind. Then with one last glance at the book inserted two slightly spread fingers into the vagina just where the diagram indicated, pulled the tissue towards me and made a cut an

inch long between my spread fingers. Immediately the entire vaginal opening enlarged.

The baby's head crowned twice and retreated, but as she bore down with a third big contraction the entire child emerged. It's a good thing they had a small tabletop just below the end of the delivery table, because the slippery mucous-coated baby squirted into my hands and for a second I was afraid I would drop it, so I cradled it like a small football.

A rubber bulb-syringe was on the tray to suction the mucous from the mouth; into the world it came, screaming/crying with gusto—no need for holding this baby upside down by the feet and spanking it like in the movies.

Then, with no further references to the book, I remembered to clamp the cord in two places and cut between. And made sure the entire placenta was delivered (bullet points seven and eight in the manual).

Mother and baby did well, but in the excitement a few things were overlooked. When the new mom asked, "Is it a boy or a girl?" I was flummoxed and could only say, "I don't know, I never looked."

Over the next few weeks, I got to deliver a half dozen other babies. But those were closely supervised, none was like the night at the Booth Hospital. That had been trial by fire.

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I didn't have another rotation on OB for the remainder of medical school, nor during my internship and residency in internal medicine. So, for all practical purposes, my knowledge and experience was gleaned during those eight weeks. There were a few hours of review when cramming for the medical license board exam, but that was pretty much in one ear and out the other.

So in the fall of 1970, when a crafty local Vietnamese midwife started sending me her obstetrical complications to salvage, and high-risk pregnancies to deliver, I was not thrilled. But, like other tasks foisted on our Nha Be dispensary that year, this proved to be among the best and lasting of memories.

Our dispensary had no textbook on OB and much of the time I was the only doctor, so it was pretty much "remember what you were supposed to be learning in those dull lectures" in medical school and wing it when faced with anything more than an uncomplicated pregnancy. Actually, this OB approach was a paradigm for many things that year.

It is humbling to discover how helpless and impotent you become when trying to practice medicine without the aid of a laboratory and X-rays. And it is even worse when you can't speak your patient's language. But that's the way it was.

After a few dreadful experiences where we sent people with minor injuries to the Vietnamese hospitals in Saigon only to have them return with amputated arms and legs, it was clear that even if we didn't know much about what we were doing, the patients were better off staying right here.

Once the word got out that we delivered babies free at the dispensary, business boomed—we took almost all the cases away from the wily midwife. It was poetic justice. She was trying to cherry pick the normal uncomplicated

deliveries, but she couldn't compete with our price. We had so many babies that we began to let the corpsmen do the deliveries—they loved it.

And then the circle grew wider. Ted Fletcher, a lieutenant in charge of engineering projects, lived in my BOQ. We often played chess late into the evening. One night as we were playing, the dispensary called my room to say that a woman in labor arrived. Ted asked if he could come and watch. It was the woman's third child, a pretty routine case. So I said, "OK, come on along. You can pretend you are another physician—she won't know the difference."

Lt. Ted Fletcher

It was only a few steps to the Dispensary from the BOQ. While the facility was adequate (but not exactly state of the art) for minor trauma and sick call, it was not at all outfitted for maternity cases. So we improvised. We had a trauma table in one of our small treatment rooms equipped with jury-rigged stirrups the Swift Boat repair shop made for us. They worked surprisingly well. We needed them for the VD checks on the bar girls and they did double duty for OB cases.

The corpsmen had become adept at draping the patient and we always had a sterile OB tray, so everything was ready when Ted and I got there. The big OR light (which was clearly out of place in our small-time dispensary, but we loved it) provided terrific illumination. It was light years (no pun) better than the gooseneck lamp I had been forced to use as a medical student in the OB/GYN clinic.

I described what we were doing as we went along, including the episiotomy. Ted was fascinated—transfixed would be a better description. As the baby was about to crown, I said, "Ted, why don't you deliver this baby?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

He could barely get his gown and gloves on before the baby came spontaneously—Ted pretty much caught the baby as it delivered. But he was aglow with pride and satisfaction. He came the next day to have his photograph taken with the child, still on a high. One can only imagine how Ted's version of this story has grown over the past 40 years.

After that, I was approached by some of the most unlikely people—grizzled old chief petty officers for example—saying, "If you've got any more of those babies that you need help with, think of me." We didn't have any more "layman deliveries" and maybe the first one wasn't such a good idea, but delivering babies was a very good thing for our dispensary and for our base. It brought out the best in our men and it caused the villagers to think of us as a valued resource.

All the deliveries didn't go so well. I sweated bullets over the twins when they surprised us; and when the midwife sent a breech baby it was panic time. I knew breeches were big trouble and back home in America they often did C-sections for them. But that was not going to be possible here. We didn't have any anesthesia; I had never even seen a C-section and if I ever read about how to do one, I had no recollection of it.

All I could remember was what my medical-school-girl-friend Cookie told me four years before about breech babies. Her OB resident said that when the body is out but the head remains in the uterus (this is the problem with

breeches: the head is the largest part of the baby and when the cervix is dilated enough to pass the torso, it may not be dilated enough to pass the head) you put a finger on each shoulder, press down on the abdomen above the uterus, and pivot the head out. "How do you know you have a finger on each shoulder instead of some other body part if you can't see what you're doing?" she had asked.

"Put your ring finger on one shoulder, your index finger on the other and your middle finger in the baby's mouth."

I'm sure there is more to it than this, but it got me through the first breech delivery we encountered. And I said a silent, "Thank you, Cookie!" that night.

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Twin Babysans delivered at LSB Nha Be . . .

Dr. Robert C. Olson (Lieutenant, MC, second from left) gazes approvingly at the mother of twin boys who visited the LSB, Nha Be dispensary on Dec. 28. Hospitalman Third Class George R. Burris (left) and Hospitalman Michael A. Robbins (center) assisted Dr. Olson in delivering the second of the twins. A midwife in Duc Binh Khanh village, Quang Xuyen district, assisted Mrs. Huynh Thi Lanh (resting) in delivering the first boy. It was decided to bring her to Nha Be, when it appeared there might be difficulties in delivering the second boy, a breech baby. The twins' father, Private Vo Van Hung, ARVN, is assigned to guard duty at the nearby Shell Oil Co. Facility. (Photo by JOSN Robert Joffee)

BREEZY COVE VIETNAMIZED

Operation Tran Hung Dao Ten, a joint U. S.-Vietnamese Navy effort designed to intercept enemy traffic and pacify the An Xuyen Province area, was transferred to Vietnamese Navy control at the end of December.

Vietnamese Navy Lieutenant Commander Pham Thanh Nhan relieved Commander Cyrus R. Christensen, USN, as commander of the inland naval operation.

Formerly known as Breezy Cove by U. S. Navy forces, the operation was officially turned over during a ceremony at the advance tactical support base at Song Ong Doc, located in the southern tip of the Mekong Delta, about 180 miles southwest of Saigon.

The operation began in September 1969, to halt infiltration and enemy activity along the Ong Doc River and its tributaries below the U Minh forest.

Vietnamese Navy units have been patrolling the operational area since the end of November 1970.

Representing the two navies at the ceremony were Vice Admiral Jerome H. King Jr., commander of U. S. naval forces in Vietnam, and Rear Admiral Tran Van Chon, Chief of Vietnamese Naval Operations.

Afro Hair Stylist Grooms Servicemen

The dock landing ship USS Thomaston (LSD-28) was recently the scene of a profes-

. . . And Ten born at ISB Quin Nhon

It is pretty strange to see a birth announcement tucked in among the hundreds of official

offspring at Qui Nhon, 270 miles northeast of Saigon, it said.

importance because John and Amelia are part of Operation Helping Hand, a program started

Vietnam's 50 naval bases are taking part in the animal husbandry portion of that program.

Stars and Stripes Newspaper

The real powder keg was when a forty-year-old woman came for her tenth child. The labor had not gone well and the sly midwife told them to take her to Nha Be—probably thinking "better she dies on their hands than mine."

I was watching the daily officer's movie when the corpsman came to fetch me. Each evening, rain or shine, there was a movie shown for the officers, and a separate one for the enlisted men. They were not very good movies and the film kept breaking, but it was a ritual and a break from the monotony that wore upon all of us. Sometimes we saw the same movie three times in a week, but still the audience attended faithfully. That night we were seeing "Easy Rider" with Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson for the second time in two weeks so it wasn't hard to leave.

As soon as I got to the dispensary and saw this poor old woman (she was probably only forty, but she seemed very old and tired) red flags started to go up.

By now I was considerably better at examining near term women—at least considerably better than I was six months before. Something about this was very strange. She was supposed to be in labor, but she didn't seem to be effectively contracting her uterus—she had strange sporadic contractions. And she looked terrible. Something very bad was happening here, and I wasn't sure what.

Because she was full term it seemed safe and even prudent to get an X-ray from our sometimes-working Roentgen machine to check the position of the baby and see if something bad was happening in her abdomen. It was. The woman had the worst of all OB possibilities, an old flabby worn-out uterus and an "arrested transverse lie"—one where the baby is stuck in a jackknife position and the rear end is going to try to come out first with the arms, legs and head trailing after. This won't happen, the opening will never get big enough to allow this; either the uterus will rupture or labor will stop with the baby stuck halfway out. In either case baby and mother are going to die. Again, back home in America, all is not lost. They do a C-section—every time. This was a very bad scene.

I was not about to open her abdomen while reading the directions from a book (if I had a book)—and especially without anesthesia. That would be the very

last choice. And we didn't have to. It is amazing how resourceful you can be when you have few options and none are good. Crisis is a good motivator. I remembered when I was at the county hospital in Oakland the interns on the OB rotation were talking about "habitual aborters" (women who went into premature labor and lost their babies). The obstetricians were putting them at bed rest and stopping their labor with intravenous alcohol. I could try to do the same. Having no idea about the proper dilution or rate at which to run the IV, I chose an arbitrary dose and started an alcohol drip very slowly. Then we waited. In five minutes, the contractions slowed, and in twenty minutes they ceased—miraculously, her labor stopped.

Now what? This wouldn't last forever. She still needed a C-section and there was no way to do one here. So, we loaded her into our ambulance and drove slowly to Saigon—carefully titrating the alcohol all the way. By the time we arrived in Saigon, she was drunk as a lord. The nurses at the American hospital were aghast at our farfetched tale of OD'ing a pregnant woman on alcohol. But nurses everywhere are pushovers for aiding a mother-in-troubled-labor. They got her into an OR. The Army Third Field Hospital saved the day.

The last babies I ever delivered were in Nha Be. That was forty-five years ago, but it is something you don't forget. It was the best part of being there.

Zelmo

The triangle-shaped base at Nha Be was on the tip of a short peninsula, protected on two sides by the convergence of branches of the Long Tau River. On the landward side a chain link fence separated the military compound from the town of Nha Be. A company of Marines lived in barracks just inside the fence. The Marines preferred to be quartered by themselves, and the rest of us were glad they did. It was nice to have a company of combat-hardened Marines between us and any possible assault on the base.

The Marines were present as advisors to the Vietnamese Marines, most of whom lived in the surrounding villages (or even as far away as Saigon) and commuted to the war each day. Vietnamese Marines are quite different from the American variety—they are not very aggressive. Despite constant coaxing and prodding by the US Marines, they seldom went on a patrol; and on the rare occasions they did, never seemed to encounter the enemy. This was a source of great frustration to their Western counterparts, but the Americans would never come right out and speak disparagingly of those they were mentoring—it must have been some sort of international Semper Fi unity (never criticize a fellow Marine).

It is not possible, however, to keep a group of leathernecks in the doldrums. They found other ways to occupy themselves productively. For example, they spent days drinking beer and playing poker in their quarters. Another, less frivolous, pastime was their Psy-Ops program (Psychological Operations). Once they saw how well the Vietnamese civilians took to the free medical care rendered by the U.S. Navy Dispensaries, the Marines divined a program where medical care was brought to remote villages—especially ones in potentially VC territory. The hope was that by providing humanitarian services they would "win the hearts and minds of the populace" in these pivotal areas.

Another pastime for these (seldom-) fighting leathernecks was their pet snake, Zelmo. He was a twenty-foot python who lived in a chicken wire pen just behind their quarters (or "hootch" as they called them). Zelmo wasn't much to look at; he spent all day sleeping in a corner all coiled up. At least he spent much of his time doing this—most days he was like a hypothyroid three-toed sloth. But every other Sunday he would perform. That's when the Marines fed him a chicken. Sailors came from all over the base as well as ships anchored in the River to see Zelmo in action. The Marines called him Zelmo to spoof the sailors—at the time the CNO (chief of naval operations) who directed Navy activity all over the world was Admiral Elmo Zumwald.

Like everyone else I went to see Zelmo one Sunday afternoon armed with my new Konica Auto Reflex T camera to get some action photos. They said they would start the activities at noon. Knowing the Marines are punctual if nothing else, I got there at 11:45. And it is a good thing I did, because very few front row spots remained at the edge of the chicken wire pen. All of the spectators seemed to be holding cameras. Japan was the epicenter of inexpensive high-quality cameras. Consequently, at overseas Base Exchanges all SLR cameras

(ones with interchangeable lenses coveted by professional and serious amateurs alike) were $112. And this was the heyday of the first point-and-shoot cameras that anyone could operate--they were almost giving them away at the PX. Zelmo had his paparazzi.

This was something different to capture on film. It did not take long to have photos of your barracks, the perimeter of the base, some boats in the river and a helicopter landing; and unlike teenage girls, young men—vain though they may be—just aren't keen on lining up and having their picture taken. Once you had covered the base, barracks and boats, plus a shot mugging with your best buddy and scenic road to Saigon, there just weren't that many things to photograph with your new expensive top-of-the-line $112 Japanese camera. Zelmo was a welcome photo op.

We didn't have to wait long. At high noon the Gunnery Sergeant, accompanied by an entourage of Jarheads (enlisted men in the Marine Infantry, otherwise known as "ground pounders"), stepped out of the Marines' hootch. He carried a chicken in a wire cage. The bird wasn't a very impressive chicken; rather scrawny, dull-looking brown and white feathers and it didn't seem very energetic. This was clearly no fighting cock. But glancing over at Zelmo, he wasn't much to look at either. Apparently, he was "sleeping in" on this Sunday morning. He was at the bottom of a shallow depression in the shaded

corner of the enclosure and hadn't moved a muscle since I arrived. He was just a big bundle of coils. This didn't look to be a very memorable encounter.

Gunny Wilson stood in the center of the enclosure holding the chicken cage aloft and shouted in his Fight-Night-Announcer voice, "Today we have an impressive match up. One we have all been anticipating. In my hand I hold the challenger "Rung Sat* the Rooster!"

[*the Rung Sat was the name given to the huge mangrove thicket on the other side of the river—a place where bandits had preyed on travelers for centuries. Rung Sat literally means: Forest of Assassins]

Rung Sat the Rooster?? This scrawny bird didn't even look like a rooster, much less a ruthless assassin. The crowd cheered politely anyway.

"And in the far corner, the undisputed champion of the Mekong Delta, unbeaten in twenty-four matches, The Great Zelmo!"

Thunderous applause. Zelmo was clearly a crowd favorite.

Then, with great fanfare, the Gunny placed the birdcage on the dirt floor of Zelmo's enclosure, unhooked the bottom plate and lifted the top free with a flourish.

The Gunny was a showman, but Zelmo and the chicken weren't. Nothing happened. The chicken stood there looking dumbly at his feet and Zelmo continued his siesta. After a minute or so at least the chicken began to move a bit; he ventured a foot or two off the bottom plate and looked around. Zelmo continued his beauty rest. This threatened to be a long afternoon—a shaggy snake story so to speak.

But this crowd was patient. And soon Rung Sat rewarded their fortitude with a bit of movement. The spectators hushed and stared expectantly as the bird slowly and cautiously began to move about. Rung Sat, getting no reaction from Zelmo or anyone else, started moving more freely. Head bobbing up and down he strutted about, stopping to peer menacingly through the chicken wire from time to time and seemingly establishing territorial rights to the premises. Perhaps he had some spunk after all. Rung Sat even ventured over to Zelmo's

corner. An audible gasp escaped the now-excited mob as he leaned over and peeked at the python in the depression. Still, no movement from Zelmo.

Once having staked out his claim to the enclosure Rung Sat settled down to do "chicken work." He zigzagged about, head down, carefully inspecting the ground for grain and worms—or whatever chickens look for.

Just as people were starting to leave this boring event, thinking Zelmo was sleeping off a bender or just not hungry today—or perhaps dead—a flicker of life came from the coiled constrictor. Zelmo moved; just a coil or two, but he moved. Then his head slowly rose from the center of the coils and the bloodthirsty mob resumed their posts.

Zelmo's beady black eyes seemed too small for his head, and his head too small for his mammoth body. His tongue flicked in and out of his mouth as he rotated his head about. I think he had an olfactory (smell-sense) organ in his tongue and was ascertaining if prey was amongst the cacophonous odors of tobacco, beer and sweat. He sensed something because his coils started to uncoil as his head ventured out of his personal snoozing pit—perhaps to search further for the sleep-arousing stimulus.

He must have identified chicken odor because after a short tongue-wafting pause his whole body began to lengthen and he oozed out of his pit.

An expectant crowd held their cameras at the ready, Zelmo was on the move and heading for the chicken. But, alas, it was not to be—at least not now. Rung Sat paused in his head-bobbing, pecking-at-the-ground system of foraging for edible morsels, as Zelmo wended his way across the wire enclosure. Curious at first and then wary, he waited until Zelmo was five or six feet away then made a beeline for the other side of the pen and resumed his quest for grub. This threatened to be a long afternoon, the chicken was far faster than the snake, and now that he was alerted, it seemed impossible for the python to get close enough to cause any harm. The element of surprise was gone. But Zelmo persisted. He quietly turned and headed for Rung Sat anew—and the chicken moved as soon as Zelmo came within five feet. It went on.

Then we began to understand. The snake had a strategy: each time he approached the chicken and the bird fled, Rung Sat ended up in a spot where there was less room to maneuver when Zelmo approached. Zelmo was herding

him into a corner. And when at last the newly established distance between them was rather short Zelmo coiled himself and hissed at the chicken. Rung Sat panicked and tried to sprint between the coiled snake and the chicken wire fence--back to the larger portion of the enclosure. There was a gap of about three feet and with Rung Sat's speed he looked a good bet to make it. But as he darted past, Zelmo struck with an astounding swiftness. His coiled body acted as a giant spring, catapulting his head past Rung Sat. Then in one smooth motion he turned his head back on his body—neatly entrapping Rung Sat's legs. It was the beginning of the end.

Zelmo paused as the chicken made a terrible clucking/screeching noise. Panic-stricken, Rung Sat flailed his wings and lurched his body this way and that, desperately trying to extricate his legs from the muscular coil. No chance of that. After a minute or so the chicken stopped his noises and ceased his futile attempts to free himself. Only then did Zelmo resume action. In a short series of coordinated contractions, Zelmo worked the entrapped chicken legs a bit further down his body. The chicken seemed oblivious to this and passively lay supine on the ground, his head bent slightly up and sporadically turning from side to side. Then Zelmo wrapped a second much thicker coil around the hapless chicken's body. Finally, Rung Sat caught on to what was happening. He squirmed and thrashed anew, only this time he could barely move his restrained torso.

Zelmo delivered the coup dé grace as camera shutters clicked and flashbulbs exploded (he was a consummate showman after all). With one terrible swift motion, Zelmo's body elongated, the coil about the chicken contracted and Rung Sat's body was crushed. Thump!

Silence.

This wasn't so wonderfully entertaining as expected; in fact, it was gruesome. Only a few drunken sailors cheered. Others looked on stunned, and most turned and quietly slipped away—not waiting for the final act where Zelmo turned his head and swallowed the freshly killed chicken headfirst.

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The next time I saw Zelmo was equally memorable.

One quiet evening at the dispensary, Corpsman Johnson and I were going over strategies for simplifying the ever-more-complex problem of lowering the VD rate in town (and thereby on the base) when four marines burst in the door carrying Zelmo.

Corpsman Johnson

"Doc, you got to help "Z", he's hurt bad!"

"What happened?"

"He's cut bad."

"How did it happen," asked Johnson, "was one of the chickens packing a stiletto?"

"Not funny, Johnson!" said a half-drunk Marine corporal.

"Well, what did happen?" I persisted, hoping to get back on subject.

"Best we can tell some gooks snuck into his cage and tried to steal him. I think they wanted to eat him! But "Z" resisted, and they tried to kill him with a shovel we had there. Cut him half in two. Fortunately, Heckle [private first class Hector Martinez] went outside to whiz and caught them in the act."

"Good thing you marines don't use the indoor plumbing," observed Johnson. He just couldn't pass up an opportunity to jibe the Jarheads. But this time they weren't paying attention, or just let it pass.

"The gooks got away in the dark. But Heck got a good look at one of them. When we find that dude, we'll feed his nuts to "Z"."

Zelmo was indeed badly cut. There was a big gash in his side about seven feet from his head and some ribs were visible it wasn't immediately apparent if his intestines had been punctured. This was more than just a cut.

"Look, Zelmo's been pretty badly injured," I said, "but we don't do snakes."

"Doc, he could die if you don't do something," said a surprisingly emotional Marine corporal. Goodness gracious, if they were like this with a snake what were they like when one of their comrades was shot?

"Get him to the vet in Saigon."

"We called. The vet's on tem du [temporary duty orders] in Da Nang—looking after some guard dogs. The only other vet is in Binh Thuet and that's quite a hike from here. "Z" won't make it that far. Please doc—you gotta."

"We don't do snakes."

"Doc, if he dies the gooks who did this are gonna die, too! And I'm not kidding. Gunny Wilson is drunk and very angry. He was loading up to go into town after 'em right away. But we told him you'd fix "Z", and everything would be OK. But now, if you can't…I just don't know."

[Sigh] "Let's have another look at Zelmo."

It took all four of them to hold Zelmo as I probed his wound and after a while announced, "Okay, we'll give it a whirl—but no promises. I have no idea if snakes respond like humans do to surgical repair."

"Right on, doc! We knew we could count on you," said Hector.

"Johnson, get me the surgical kit and make sure it has both cat gut and nylon sutures."

"Wait a minute, doc," cried the private, "aren't you going to give some anesthesia to "Z"?"

"Yeah!" piped up Hector. "You can't just sew his guts up without anesthesia. That ain't humane."

All four were hyped up about this point. Johnson looked at me and said, "how about it, Lieutenant? Maybe we should give him something."

Oh, good grief, now I had Johnson siding with four drunken Marines on the need to anesthetize a snake. Who knows what snakes feel anyway. I'll bet Zelmo wouldn't care if it was painless or not—he just doesn't like being restrained. And what dose would you give him? Well, maybe it's dose-related-to-weight just like in people.

"How much does Zelmo weigh?"

"What?"

"Zelmo, how much does he weigh? He's about twenty feet long, and …"

"Christ, doc, how would we know how much he weighs?"

"Well, guess. You had to carry him over here. Could you have carried him by yourself?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. He struggles you know."

"How much does he weigh?"

"Oh, all right, I'll guess 100 pounds. How about it guys? Hundred sound about right?

"Ya, about that", someone mumbled.

"Okay! Johnson get me 50 mg of Demerol."

He scurried away and came back with a syringeful of narcotic.

"How are you going to give it," Johnson asked.

"You're going to give it, I have my gloves on. Give it I.S."

"What's 'I.S.'?"

"Intra-skin."

"Aye, Aye, sir."

Johnson had a quick wit, without cracking a smile he jabbed the short needle into Zelmo's side and emptied the syringe.

Then we proceeded.

The Marines were kept busy holding Zelmo like a fire hose—two on each side of the surgical site; and for a while Zelmo struggled against them. He stopped after a few minutes, either he didn't care anymore or, as the marines thought, the anesthesia was working. I feared he was playing possum and would strike with a sudden and terrible fury when we least expected. So, Johnson and I worked quickly on the repair. Only a short cleansing of the wound site. I hoped snakes were like rats. You have a very hard time infecting a rat belly from an operation, even if you are careless and dirty. Dogs, on the other hand, are a bit trickier. I was counting on snakes being more like rats.

He indeed had a hole in his intestine. But I could only find one hole. I removed the ragged tissue at the edges of opening in the intestine with a pair of sterile scissors and sewed the now-smooth sides closed with the nylon suture. He

may have a constriction there in the years to come, but that will be then and now is now. Then on to the skin. I used the catgut on the skin. It all went surprisingly well. We were done in twenty-five minutes, including the wound dressing—we wrapped his girth with a band of gauze, like old inner tube. Then put an elastic compression bandage around the whole thing. Lastly, I said, "Johnson, give him a million units of penicillin I.S. and they can take him home.

Turning to the Marines, I said, "No physical exertion nor sex for Zelmo for the next two weeks", making very sure not to crack a smile.

"Right, doc, whatever you say."

"And only water, no food for two weeks or even a bit longer. We want that anastamosis to heal."

"Right, doc. No food for at least two weeks."

"Someone should look in on him from time to time tonight."

"Of course. We'll set up a watch schedule. And thanks, doc. Thanks a lot. There are some places that wouldn't have done this."

"Well, you're dealing with the U.S. Navy medical corps here, corporal. We take care of our own—and especially our Marines, and their mascots."

Without further ado, they left. When they were safely out of earshot Johnson started laughing. "The men aren't gonna believe this! I don't believe this. This is too wild. Too wild."

Then he turned to me and said, "But why did you use catgut on the skin and nylon on the inside. That's the reverse of what we usually do. You want to have the catgut inside where it will dissolve, and nylon on the skin where you can take it out and not leave scars. That's right, isn't it?"

"Right, Johnson, that's how we do it for people. But we haven't done any bowel resections here; we only suture soft tissue inside--muscle and fascia. If the catgut dissolves a bit early it's not the end of the world; but if a hole in the intestine re-opens, it's curtains. So we used nylon. But who knows how fast

snake bellies heal anyway. Probably they heal like greased lightning; I sure don't know. Better to have a real margin of safety. And the skin? I don't care if the cat gut stitches breakdown early and Zelmo gets a big scar—but we certainly don't want him coming back in ten days for suture removal!"

We both laughed. It actually had been rather fun—especially being able to pull the Marines' chain while we were working on Zelmo.

And Zelmo did well. He did come back for a follow up visit despite our efforts at keeping him away. The Marine CO, Major Jennings, wanted him given a thorough going over before discharging him from our care (he wanted him "vetted" so to speak). It was easier to unwrap his elastic bandage and remove his gauze wrap than it would have been to fight the Major. So we inspected the wound, everyone (especially the Marines) admired Zelmo's scar, and we wished him God's speed. And we hoped that was the end of it. And it was until…

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Some weeks later when an officer from the Inspector General's Office came on a routine visit to go over our narcotics log he came across the name "Zelmo the snake—50 mg Demerol"

"What's this!" He demanded "Who is Zelmo the snake?"

Curses! Why hadn't Johnson just put Marine Pfc. (python first class) Zelmo in the book. Why did he have to be a wise ass? I could envision going to Portsmouth Naval Prison over a narcotics rap.

He looked at Johnson and me curiously as we told the Tale of Zelmo. And he stared at us for a while afterward. Then he burst into laughter, saying, "This is too ridiculous. It must be true. No one would make up a dumb story like this."

But he did make a visit to Zelmo and the Marines. They, for their part, were impressed with the follow up "house call" from the Inspector General's Office to check on Zelmo the Snake.

Solid Anchor

*In military-speak Tem Du denotes a temporary duty assignment. In Viet Nam, Tem Du was not considered a boon. It made little difference where you were to be sent—unless the assignment was in Saigon, you'd rather stay put.

In early 1971 I had become quite comfortable at Nha Be, a Swift Boat support base. It was in a mangrove thicket, but it was a relatively secure mangrove thicket and not far from Saigon.

Nha Be—at the confluence of two rivers

One cloudless, lazy day I returned from my leisurely lunch at the Nha Be Officers' Mess Hall cursing the oppressive heat and thinking a nap might be in order. This comfortable reverie ended with a thud. For as I entered my tiny office, I spotted a thick manila envelope lying in the center of my desk. It had the unmistakable look of Tem Du orders. For a long time, I considered this packet from a respectful distance, much as one might treat a letter from the Unabomber. But eventually I gathered my courage, and with heart pumping full throttle, opened the envelope.

Halfway through the first paragraph it was as if a bolt of lightning had struck the room—deployment to Solid Anchor! I quickly but carefully read the rest of the cover letter. This was a disaster. This was my worst nightmare—deployment to Solid Anchor. Frantically I began thinking of ways to get out of it; why someone—anyone—else should go. But this was hopeless and I knew it. There was no way Captain Lineberry, the feckless titular head of Navy medical forces in Viet Nam, would let me off the hook. He wasn't going to let me out of Tem Du to Nam Can (Solid Anchor), the worst duty assignment in the Brown Water Navy. Earlier, I had tried, without success, to avoid Tem Du to Da Nang—and that was a nice place.

But, as they say, on occasion capricious Fate has a benevolent purpose. It provides opportunity, a chance for adventure. Circumstances compel us to assume risks we would not seek; and often this makes our lives richer—that is if we survive the unsought "adventure." Going to Solid Anchor proved to be just such a case for me.

In 1970, less than a year before coming to Asia, I was on campus at the University of Minnesota wondering why the student war protesters were protesting. The most avid didn't appear particularly scholarly and it was a bit hard to accept them as experts on foreign policy. They seemed more interested in smoking grass and trashing the dean's office—just like generations of students before them. Other students wore black armbands and proclaimed they were "on strike". They were striking against the university—refusing to go to class. That seemed rather quixotic. But tuition was dirt cheap in those days (it cost me only $190 a quarter to go to medical school) so it wasn't a very expensive "statement." Still, nothing about the controversy was easy to understand, and since none of it affected me, I chose not to think about it.

Now, after a bizarre series of happenstances, I was in Viet Nam and going to "the end of the world"—at least that's what we called Solid Anchor, the remote outpost south of Nam Can.

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Nam Can is an abandoned village in Ca Mau province at the very tip of South Viet Nam. It is nearly 100 miles by air from the nearest American base at Binh Thuy, and in the heart of the U Minh Forest—a forbidding mangrove thicket/mosquito-infested wasteland. This was the Navy's loneliest spot in Viet Nam. It is a place even SEALS spoke of with respect and trepidation. Jesse Ventura, a self-proclaimed Naval hero, once hinted he was stationed there in the winter of 1971 —not likely.

Swift Boats (top left) and PBRs (lower right)

The Brown Water Navy is what we called the task force assigned to the brackish waters of Viet Nam's tidal bores. They patrolled the myriad canals and rivers interlacing this flat wet country. For most of the year these waterways were the only reliable transportation routes between villages in the Mekong Delta. The Navy used a small quick version of the WW II PT Boat to interdict the movement of supplies by the Viet Cong. It could operate all day at speeds in excess of 25 knots. It was officially called the PCF (Patrol Craft Fast), but they became better known as the Swift Boats. Heavily armed with fifty caliber machine guns and a mortar, they were much more effective than standard Coast Guard Cutters.

PBR (or Patrol Boat River)

But even the Swift Boats had limitations. Like most of the Mekong Delta, the marshy/jungle terrain in Ca Mau Province made roads a rare commodity. And here there was an additional problem: the canals were especially narrow and waterways quite shallow. At low tide, turning around at all, much less keeping off sand bars and avoiding underwater impediments, was a nightmare. So the

Navy turned to a designer of specialized small pleasure craft in Washington for a solution. He created a radically different boat—innocuously named the PBR (Patrol Boat River), which among other things made Pabst Blue Ribbon the beverage of choice for brown water sailors.

Dual Fifty Caliber Machine Guns on a PBR

The PBR's were designed to operate in very shallow water. Because they had neither propeller nor rudder, at top speed their draft was less than ten inches. PBR's were propelled and steered by a jet of water projected out the stern by a

turbo diesel-powered Jacuzzi pump. They were not quite as fast as the Swift Boats (Swifties could do 35 knots) but they could turn on a dime by rotating the water jet to one side. They were ideal for patrolling these treacherous places. PBR's were particularly good vehicles for inserting (and extracting) SEALS on their mysterious operations—or "ops". They weren't completely noiseless like kayaks, but they were quiet and very fast.

Solid Anchor was the Brown Water Navy at its best. It was a place talked about incessantly at military briefings in Saigon's plush air-conditioned headquarters buildings. MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) considered it a coup to have a Navy base in the very heart of Ca Mau Province. The Marines, who were present there in largest numbers, would never call it a Navy Base; they called it a Forward Fire Base, which is actually a better description. Ca Mau had belonged to the Viet Cong since 1945. On rare occasions senior officers flew here for the day (always during daylight hours it seemed) to inspect the facilities and report—usually with a bit of a swagger—on the state of affairs at Solid Anchor.

Aside from the political value, the base made no sense at all. It was almost impossible to maintain and supply, even with America's overwhelming superiority in air power and logistics. Originally the base was a series of anchored barges chained together in the middle of a great river, the Song Cau Lon. Corrugated iron huts were erected atop the barges giving the appearance of a twentieth century Merrimac (or is it Monitor?). They called the initial garrison Sea Float. The shore belonged to the enemy who occasionally lobbed mortar shells at the foolish sailors and Marines in the center of this wide fast-flowing stream whose name no one north of Ca Mau seemed to know.

You wouldn't want to fall into this river when the tide was running--the current was like a millrace and you would drown for sure. A constant parade of flotsam (and a little jetsam) came past--usually bushes and tree parts, but at other times we saw half submerged bottles and broken-up boats.

Sea Float was nothing but a primitive floating island without plumbing and with only periodic electricity from a jury-rigged generator; still this "base" was deemed far better than being ashore where there was no security. However, the flotilla of barges wasn't as secure as everyone thought. Initially nervous sentries were berated for throwing concussion grenades into the torrential waters. These craven sentinels claimed they saw "sappers" hidden amongst the

brush and trees coming downstream and became the subject of ridicule. But when the SEAL Team II arrived, one of their first tasks was to inspect the underside of the barges. The bottoms were covered with plastic explosive. Somehow VC frogmen--without SCUBA gear--had planted mines, but miraculously hadn't been able to detonate them. The sentries hadn't been so paranoid after all. Even at a later date, hearing about these stealthy bomb planters was disquieting.

Soon the base moved ashore. Low prefabricated buildings were built on the bank of the labyrinthine river channel and MACV (pronounced Mack Vee) renamed the place Solid Anchor. All the drafted Madison Avenue-types must have been detailed to MACV, they had a catchy name for every operation. Solid Anchor was only nominally secure. It was in the midst of a tropical forest—a low scrub forest, but nonetheless a forest. Mortar attacks were an almost daily event.

Things got better when an enterprising commanding officer hired local woodcutters to clear away the forest and create a buffer zone between the base and the dense undergrowth—undergrowth that could hide almost anything. The woodcutters had been at it for two or three months by the time I arrived and there was nearly 300 yards between the barbed wire (concertina wire in this case) perimeter and the forest. It was further still between the short landing strip and the forest.

Small fixed wing aircraft landed three days a week on a regular milk run schedule, bringing mail and "rush" supplies. And there were sporadic visits from VIPs and others with specific missions and enough clout to get a special run. But the most useful portion of the landing strip was the helo pad. Huge helicopters called Jolly Green Giants brought in large loads of supplies and men; and the pad was vital for the small, swift and fearless "Dust Off" helicopters. Dust Off Birds were medical evacuation choppers that brought the wounded to be triaged and stabilized at our bare-bones dispensary and then airlifted them to Third Surgical, the big trauma hospital in Binh Thuy. The hospital was much too far for a direct flight from the field.

Captain Lineberry's yeoman had made a "reservation" for me two days hence on a supply chopper going to Solid Anchor. So, I hurriedly packed a few items, wrote a letter to my Mom thanking her Mt. Olivet Church Circle for sending cookies and candy for the Vietnamese children, and headed for Saigon. All

military flights emanated from an air terminal adjacent to the civilian airport at Ton Son Nhut.

Inside it was reminiscent of the old Wold Chamberlain Airport in Minneapolis situated at 60th street and just off Cedar Avenue. (Fifty years ago it was replaced by the gigantic Lindbergh Airport at the other end of the airfield). It was one big room reeking of stale smoke and body odors. Metal-tubing chairs with black Naugahyde-covered seats were neatly lined in rows in this otherwise totally tacky room. The classic metal stand ashtrays were at the end of each row—and overflowed with cigarette butts. However, there were no butts on the floor; this place was tacky and smelled but it was not dirty.

In the very front of this large room were two well-worn wooden tables where clerks signed-in people for flights. The clerks who wore jungle camouflage fatigues looked a bit strange when most of the travelers were wearing regular khaki uniforms or plain green drab fatigue outfits. I wondered who gave their "uniform of the day" orders. No doubt someone who had Walter Mitty pipe dreams of defending the terminal against Viet Cong attacks by blending in with the wood tables and brown-checkered vinyl tile floor.

When I finally made it to the front of the queue, the bored camo-clad clerk asked where I was going.

"Solid Anchor."

"Where?"

"Nam Can."

"We only have a helicopter going there today."

"That's the one I'm supposed to be on."

"Let's see your Tem Du and your In Country Travel Orders."

In order to be off base traveling anywhere, you needed to have ICTO's, but just about everyone had them. All that was needed was to ask the base yeoman and give any sort of song and dance (such as "I'm going to try to see the skin doctor

in Saigon about this rash I caught from the bar girl at that restaurant just off base") and he would give them to you.

"We only have a supply helicopter going there today."

"Yeah, that's the one I'm supposed to take."

"Your orders say Priority ONE. I'm changing that to Priority 3."

"But I could be bumped with a 3."

"One is top priority. Are you carrying important documents?

"No, but they have no doctor there and are starting an op—they need someone pronto."

"Well, I'll give you a 2, but no way can you get a ONE—not unless you're transporting critical documents."

"How many people are signed on for the flight?"

"No one."

"Well, I won't be bumped if no one else is on the flight."

"True, but I can't give you a ONE. No way without couriering documents."

"Why are we having this discussion? It doesn't make any difference what priority I have—there's no one else on the aircraft."

"I still can't give you a ONE."

My head was spinning as I sat down to await the departure. Fortunately, the other clerk called my name for the flight 45 minutes later and I didn't have another interaction with my friend at table one.

We stopped to refuel at Binh Thuet and to my surprise Will Marten, the Navy doc at Binh Thuet was at the terminal. He came to visit for the half hour delay while they readied the aircraft. I had met Will at Coronado where we got our

Charm School training to be Navy Officers. Will was all by himself at the Navy post here and he didn't get much business—almost everything went to the giant Evac Hospital run by the Army. He was bored to tears.

"Why don't you just miss the plane and hang around here for a few days, people miss these planes all the time?" said Will.

"I think Lineberry thinks this is important—I know so, 'cause he called to make sure I was going to be at Ton Son Nhut this morning. I think he would have me placed in irons or keel hauled—or whatever they do in the Navy these days if I miss the plane. Why don't you go for me? They don't know me down there—they'll never know the difference."

"You're a nice guy and I like you, but I think I'll stay right here. It may be boring but they don't shoot at you here."

A Jolly Green Giant refuels

An hour later our lumbering Jolly Green Giant was almost to Nam Can. We circled above the U Minh forest and out over the Indian Ocean before coming back fifteen miles inland to the "relatively secure" base.

Over the U Minh forest there was a long stretch where Agent Orange had been deployed. The foliage was gone from everything. It was in a half-mile-wide straight line extending for two miles or more and only ended at the coast. God only knows why they would go to all the trouble to defoliate this forsaken spot where even the VC seldom went, but a lot of things over here defied conventional logic.

A Strip of Jungle "Defoliated" by Agent Orange
(Indian Ocean in the distance)

The helicopter engine's ear-splitting cacophonous roar prevented any conversation; most of us wore ear protector headsets. They weren't equipped with radio reception, but we knew instantly when Solid Anchor came into view. It was a stark white blot in a sea of green along the river.

Solid Anchor

There had once been a POW camp two kilometers—"two klicks" in military-speak— from the end of the runway; and you could see parts of it still if you were brave or foolhardy enough to fly low over the dense forest as you approached the taxi strip. SEAL Team II liberated the camp, and forever secured their place in the lore of Solid Anchor. No Americans were in the POW camp; it was a prison camp for ARVN soldiers. But still, it had been liberated in a daring attack—the only prison camp in the entire war that had been, and so it was a legitimate excuse for some chest thumping and

swaggering at our base. Still, it was a sober thought (and a bit unnerving) to think the Viet Cong had such distain for us they would operate a POW camp under our very nose.

As we approached the base, we could see the short fixed-wing landing strip extending laterally away from the riverbank. Adjacent to the runway was a square helicopter-landing pad with a red bull's eye in the center. The landing zones were rimmed and separated by concrete & sand-filled steel revetments. These gave the landing strip the look of a roofless stable with stalls for the helicopters and planes. Revetments could contain a mortar or rocket explosions to a small area. During the infamous 1968 "Tet" offense, the Viet Cong staged a countrywide assault, temporarily capturing the lower floors of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and wreaking havoc on the Ton Son Nhut airfield. The Air Force discovered that without safeguards like these revetments, a lone terrorist with one satchel charge could knock out a half dozen aircraft if they were neatly lined up in the center of the runway. We had learned a lot from these wily opponents—much of it the hard way.

Revetments at Solid Anchor

The white sand base looked hot, parched and foreboding. It was the hot-dry season, as opposed to the other season— hot-wet. Which was good, I think. There wouldn't be torrential rainstorms two or three times a day. When the wet-season storms came, the sky opened up and a wall of water came straight down, beating a tattoo on the roofs. There was no sense in having an umbrella. The sheets of rain would surely crush it flat. Fortunately, you were never going anywhere in a hurry once you got in rhythm with the pace of life in Viet Nam. Better to just wait a while; the rain would soon stop, and the sun would come out again. Mother Nature gave a demonstration on my first day in Vietnam. Like many of the newly constructed buildings, the mess hall in Saigon had a roof made of corrugated iron. As Steve Marglin, my buddy from new officers Charm School in Coronado, and I were gazing out the mess hall's screenless windows, the eye-searing midday sun abruptly disappeared. Moments later a monsoon rainstorm dumped unbelievable amounts of water on the roof. You could see only a blur of translucent light through the wide-open window and the noise on the steel roof was deafening. Elsewhere rivers swelled to overflow their banks and swept small trees, shrubs and other debris from the shore— and the rains continued to do so until October. The good side of the May to September wet season was that it became muddy and treacherous everywhere and for a while hostile activity came to a stop, or at least slowed down. But this was February, the dry time, when the action was going full bore. And this is why some of us were coming to Solid Anchor on Tem Du orders.

There is no soil here. The entire encampment is built on sand barged-in for the express purpose of creating a military base. To use sand as the foundation for buildings was more reasonable than you might first think. The natural environment provided only muck and ooze. That is considerably worse than sand, and it would be a long hike to get rock and dirt to provide ideal underpinnings for buildings. Sand was in virtually unlimited quantities in sand bars only a few miles away; it was easy for the Seabees to dig and transport it here. We saw them in action as the Green Giant slowed to a crawl and dropped towards the big X in the center of the bull's eye.

A supply ship was virtually beached on the shore. It was an LST-type ship that dropped a ramp from its prow when the cargo was ready to unload. By pushing sand out with a bulldozer, a Seabee crew had built a ramp into the water right up to the LST. Bobcats and mechanized forklifts then raced about loading and unloading things over the short metal ramp. It was ingenious: a

method of bringing vast quantities of supplies securely to this remote and otherwise-untenable location.

The corpsmen waiting at the helo-pad were worried (as was the commanding officer) that there wouldn't be a doctor coming--again. The base commander always wanted a surgeon here, but no one wanted the assignment and more than once they had been shortchanged.

However, it was here that reputations for the doctors were made. Bob Subers was practically a legend. Not for his medical skills, which were arguably a bit less than the average Navy doctor, but because he had fearlessly embraced the lifestyle on Sea Float where others had cowered.

Russell Stumacher had the opposite reaction. He quite simply couldn't adapt to life here and under a cloud was transferred to a safe billet--on a hospital ship off the coast. Russell panicked when faced with the primitive medical facilities and the constant strain uncertain physical security creates. It all came to a head when a Vietnamese woman in labor arrived. Her delivery was imminent. But Russell told the shocked corpsmen that she must be sent to the local midwife because he wasn't adequately trained in OB. This was beyond comprehension to the marines and SEALS. Not only didn't they recognize there was a wide range in medical backgrounds among the drafted docs, they clung to the romantic but naïve notion that a good doctor could do anything—and everything.

It hadn't helped that Russell had the misfortune to follow the charismatic (to the Navy officers) Bob Subers. Subers thought he was capable of dealing with almost any and all problems. Further, Russell was (probably correctly) perceived as being aloof and arrogant, while Subers was "one of the boys," not only drinking with them in the officers' quarters, but driving patrol boats up and down the Kai Knaph canal with the riverine assault forces--manning a machine gun and trading bullets with the VC in a fire-fight. He was given the combat action ribbon and the bronze star for that escapade.

Russell Stumacher must have thought he entered a very bad dream when he arrived. Subers gave him a truncated intake briefing in the forty-five minutes allotted for refueling the fixed-wing aircraft. The fixed-wing did not delay

Bob Subers (far right) with Nurse Susie and Corpsman Steve Husai in Saigon (Bob Olson just out of photo on left)

departure for anyone. This was not a problem for Bob Subers. He was quite off-handed in his explanation of most things and was not disposed to give a detailed plan of action to his less-than-intrepid replacement. Poor Russell, he was the last person in our physician's group that you would want to send into a potentially hazardous situation. During our stateside indoctrination at Coronado, he became almost hysterical at the thought of going to Viet Nam at all. His deployment to Solid Anchor was a disaster.

After the midwife incident the base commander sent him out on the next plane in disgrace, choosing to go without a doctor until a replacement could be sent. However, I'm pretty sure that Russell didn't feel any disgrace about it. When I saw him briefly before his transfer to a "safe" (for everyone) billet offshore, he had rationalized the entire situation very effectively. He was utterly convinced (and could be quite persuasive) that the entire blame lay with unrealistic expectations and poor planning on the part of the military.

Russell Stumacher at Coronado "Charm School"

Shame was felt by the career Naval medical officer, Captain Lineberry, who felt "one of us" had acted in a cowardly fashion; and for the rest of us—the reservists who had been in the doctor draft—shame was felt that "one of us" had refused to take care of a poor sick woman. Russell moved beyond this—but no one else seemed to. We all felt inadequate and ill-trained for this military medicine job and its unrealistic demands. It was frustrating. If these civilian patients were to show up at a hospital back home, amazing things could be done. But here… it was a hard life-lesson. Ultimately you had to suck it up and do the best you could. Because if we didn't try, then no one would.

Solid Anchor was doubly blessed when Terry Scherke was sent as the replacement for Russell Stumacher. Blessed because they got another doctor reasonably promptly (only four weeks) and more so because Terry Scherke was a bona fide surgeon. And not just any surgeon, he was fired in the furnaces of the Oakland General Hospital ER/Surgery. There he trained during the peak of violent confrontations between the Black Panthers and the police—and the internecine wars of the Panthers. But even a trauma-ready hot surgeon is fairly helpless when it comes to major war wounds if you have no anesthesia, blood, or OR. Here it was just the doc and four rookie corpsmen in a small dispensary, with neither an X-ray nor laboratory, against the world.

However, Terry had a wonderful confidence-inspiring presence. After he took care of a few nasty appearing minor trauma cases, he won everyone's

admiration. But he underwent an apotheosis when he attended the Marine's dog, Chesty [Puller*]. Chesty broke his leg in an altercation with some Vietnamese civilians. Chesty had been molesting their chickens and was beaten with sticks. Fortunately, the ill-advised chicken owners slipped away, melting into the forest as the marines arrived or there would have been gunplay for sure. Terry examined the injured animal, made the obvious diagnosis of fractured right rear leg, and put a walking cast on Chesty--instant and widespread acclaim followed.

[*General Louis "Chesty" Puller was the legendary commandant of the Marine Corps; winner of the Medal of Honor and in command of the fabled winter march out of the Chosen Reservoir in Korea—where despite being surrounded by a huge Red Chinese army no one was left behind; even the dead were carried out.]

Now here I was, the doctor to follow Terry Sherke. At least he didn't go on night patrols up and down the canals like Subers did. Actually, the Commanding Officer wasn't going to allow any more doctors to do that—they needed someone "at home" when the casualties came in, not another potential casualty. Doctors weren't very good fighters in the first place and the Geneva Convention forbade them from engaging in combat. (The North Vietnamese were not signatories to nor abiders by the Geneva Convention, but that's a different subject).

An anxious-looking corpsman approached me as I jumped down from the giant helicopter, olive drab duffel bag (still sporting the pink ribbon Sydney Ayotte tied on it back at Travis Air Force Base) in one hand and Tem Du orders in the other.

"Are you Lt. Olson, the new doctor?"

"Ya, where's Terry Scherke?"

"He left on a fixed-wing early this morning. Said he had to make connections to get to Hong Kong for R&R and couldn't wait."

"Did he leave instructions for me?"

"I don't think so."

"Nothing?"

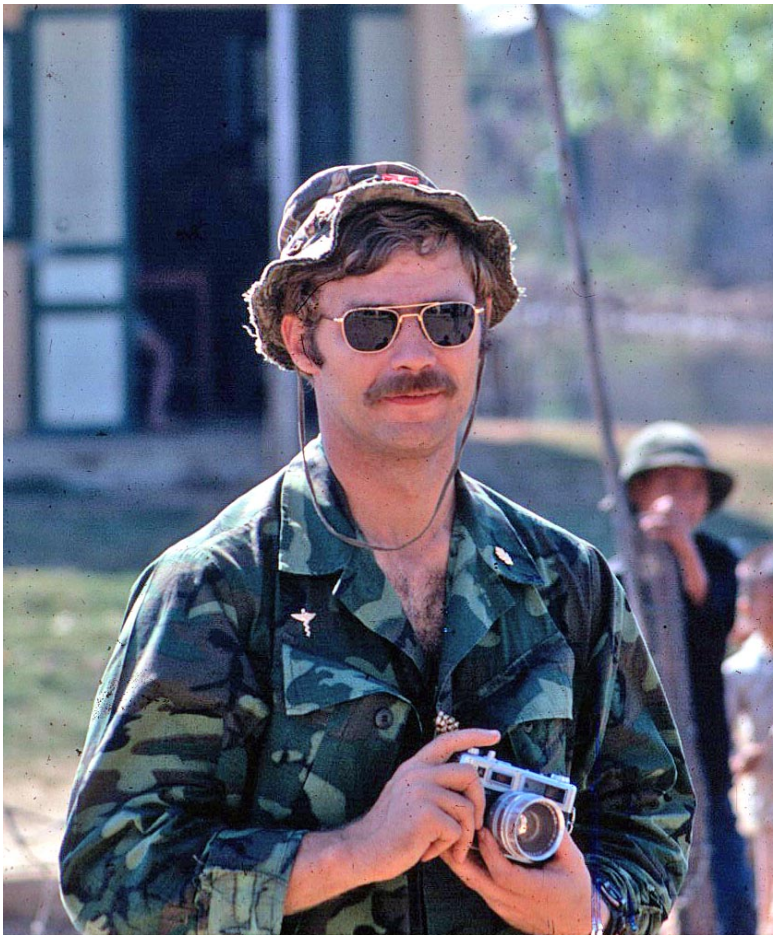
"Doc Sherke isn't much into paperwork, and he was in quite a hurry to get out of here. He said you trained in Oakland too, so everything would be fine."

Swell. Yes, I was at the general hospital in Oakland along with Sherke. But I was an internist—I took care of people there with TB and heart failure, not gunshot wounds. My trauma experience was two months in the ER. Granted, there were lots of knife and gunshot victims—this was an eye opener coming from Minnesota where ER's meant auto accidents and drownings. The Oakland ER was one wild place and not for the faint of heart, but still my job was just to stabilize injured people until the trauma surgeons got there and took them to the operating rooms. Solid Anchor was for a real trauma expert—not an internist. But it wouldn't do to tell my corpsman that on day one. Better that he thought I was like Terry, unflappable and in total control—no matter what.

It is an urban myth that doctors react coolly in times of crisis, but the best ones appear to. Arnie Kaplan, the charismatic Chief Medical Resident at the University had this aura, but when we asked how he stayed so calm at otherwise frenzied cardiac arrests he said, "I'm not calm at all—usually I'm terrified. However, if you guys think I'm calm and in control everyone relaxes, and all goes smoothly. Once people suspect I'm panicked, everything goes in the tank—all order and discipline is gone." He was telling us that the perception of having rock-solid leadership was the key to everything.

"I don't have to know how to do all this stuff," he went on. "All I need to know is 'who *does* know how', and make sure everyone else gets out of his way. "And", Arnie added dryly, "in the worst-case scenario—where *no one* knows what to do—to keep anyone from discovering it."

Browning, the corpsman, helped me with my meager luggage—I hadn't brought much, hoping I wouldn't stay here long. It was hot and sticky and my a-bit-too-long hair began to form little sweat-soaked curls. Thank goodness the baggy fatigues didn't show armpit stains like khaki uniforms did in this sauna-like country. But, not to worry, stains wouldn't matter here; the denizens of Solid Anchor were not into starched-and-pressed uniforms. They were keen on



Does this man look "cool and imperturbable"…or what?

discipline, but low key on almost everything else. Everyone shared a common shower facility, but woe be unto the enlisted man who addressed an officer by first name.

The buildings were made of unpainted wood. They were raised two-and-one-half feet off the ground to keep snakes, rodents and moisture from coming up through the floorboards; and each building was covered by one of those omnipresent corrugated iron roofs—the ones that looked like washboards. A three-foot-high fence of sandbags surrounded most buildings, a second row of sandbags was adjacent to the buildings.

"What's with the sandbags?" I asked, "Do you have floods?"

"No floods," said Browning, "they're in case of mortars. Every week or so the VC sneak in close and lob mortar shells in for twenty minutes. Then they hightail it into the mangroves before the Marines can chase them down."

"Why not go after them with the Hueys? A helicopter could be up and after them in five minutes."

"You can't see them from the air. The shells just rise out of the woods. Then we all dive for cover."

"Why two rows of sandbags?"

"When there is 'incoming' [rockets or mortars] you're supposed to jump inside the nearest fence and get up close to the outside sandbags. The inside row

Double rows of sand bags surround the barracks at Solid Anchor

keeps flying debris from getting you if they hit the building—or from shrapnel coming under [the raised buildings] and hitting you from the other side."

So, mortar shells would not only have to hit within the perimeter of the sandbags, but would have to land on your side of the hut in order to nail you. A clever defensive concept, but not comforting.

Likewise the open-pit urinals. Actually these were oil barrels (empty ones) partially immersed in the sand; only about 10 inches protruded above ground level. They were strategically placed throughout the base. The idea was that it was often necessary to relieve yourself during the day and the base had only one "flush-type" toilet (it was in the medical dispensary, thank goodness). Consequently, it was outhouses for everyone. You didn't want to be trapped in the privy during a rocket attack--and they weren't going to be building brick ones--so if you only had to pass water this was a quick and safe way to do it. Not exactly a European pissoir, but it would do in time of war.

Browning took me straight to the dispensary; it was at opposite end of the base from the helo pad. This turned out to be a planner's mistake as far as we were concerned. It was almost 150 yards away. We had to drive an ambulance to and from the pad when causalities came for stabilization, and repeat the process for dust off to a surgical hospital. This was more than a nuisance--valuable time during the "golden hour" could be lost here. The time between when a serious injury occurs and when trauma teams get a patient in the OR is crucial. After approximately 60 minutes, the survival curve falls rapidly. When serious wounds can get to surgery within the Golden Hour it makes a world of difference. There appeared no chance of meeting this target time here. Binh Thuet, the nearest place capable of major life-saving surgery, was an hour away by air.

The corpsmen took their jobs very seriously. They lived at the dispensary rather than in the enlisted men's quarters. Neither location was much to get excited about, but at the dispensary they were their own masters. In the enlisted barracks there was a strict seniority-driven pecking order—and the dispensary had a flush toilet. Living at the dispensary also fostered the perception that corpsmen are extremely professional and dedicated to their jobs. The other sailors liked thinking their corpsmen were dedicated zealots, so it worked out well all the way around.

By now there was a mishmash of military groups deployed at Solid Anchor, and the rest of the living quarters were a bit strange, too. There were actually more Marines here than anyone else. The enlisted Marines bunked as a group, of course; while the mysterious SEALS were all by themselves--and felt answerable to no one except their own officers. A handful of sailors remained, and they were responsible for the patrol boats, base maintenance, the medical dispensary and, most importantly, the mess hall. No one would put the Marines in charge of food. A sizable contingent of South Vietnamese Marines was billeted here, too. But no one took them very seriously. Perhaps because they were in a combat role for the duration of the war rather than a one-year term like the Americans, they were not particularly aggressive in engaging the enemy—which by all accounts had us badly outnumbered. And all personnel were under the direction of the base commander—a psychotic American Marine Colonel (a redundant term).

There wasn't room for me at the dispensary and it wouldn't do to bunk with them anyway. It would be contrary to good order and discipline—that sort of thing. Browning showed me where the officers lived—Marine and Navy officers. Except for the commander, all officers lived in a pair of unpainted wood structures designated as the BOQ's. The Bachelor Officers Quarters designation must have been tongue-in-cheek—each was one big room. Sixteen officers were billeted in my Spartan building. It was dormitory-style with beds lined up in two rows. The floor was plywood and the walls louvered slats of wood covering a fine-mesh screen that allowed air circulation while keeping insects out. Again, an ingenious plan for minimizing discomfort in this perpetually hot muggy place. The instant a new uniform was donned, you sensed it becoming limp, damp and sticky. My hair curled unmercifully as soon as I left the cold-saltwater shower. Handheld hairdryers hadn't been invented in 1970.

With these "cooling" systems, screens and outdoor saltwater showers, it became clear why a fence of sandbags surrounded each structure. When the mortars came at night you didn't want to try to wait it out in this thin-walled place, the screen would fly around like shrapnel. Being outside, naked like a jaybird, wasn't much better. The plan was to dive for cover between the sandbags, a sort of "eye in the hurricane."

They cut me some slack with the living arrangements; I got the "doctor's bunk" which was close to the door—a plum selection. There was no privacy of

course, but it was indoors and it was your own bunk. In the Sea Float days, there was a "hot bunk" system. There were not enough cots to go around, so each man was assigned a number of hours to a bed with no break for age, rank, or designation (job). This was considerably better than that. I wouldn't like to try sleeping under the time pressure of getting it done within my eight-hour shift (in actuality they were probably twelve-hour allotments—at least I hope so).

One BOQ had a fifteen-foot-long section separated off by a plywood wall. This small common area was an oasis--not only did it have a refrigerator that was always full of beer (we ran out of drinking water, but never beer), it was air-conditioned! The crude unit was a bit noisy and clunky, but it actually cooled the entire room when it was jammed with chain-smoking, beer-guzzling and freely farting officers and gentlemen.

This was the Officers' Club. In the evenings we would sit in here to eat popcorn and converse. It was not exactly 'spirited repartee'. The talk was mainly on what a godforsaken place this was and plans for R&R. A corollary was how much time one had "in country" and when were you going home ("how short" you were, to use local parlance). Rarely, there was opportunity to discuss other matters. The SEALS for example were far less apt to talk about "short time"—sometimes I almost felt they liked it here.

One day I walked into the "O" Club as Lt. Jim Thames, who led one of the SEAL platoons, was holding forth on competitive swimming in Florida. Determined not to let the conversation drift back to "short timers calendar jokes" or similar drivel, I waded right into the conversation. Two of my classmates in med school had been All American swimmers (Steve Jackman had been a national champion), so I knew some names, and followed the NCAA swimming. Thames was not visibly impressed—or, maybe he was, because suddenly we were in a one-on-one debate.

"You're from Minnesota, what would you know about big time swimming?" He scoffed.

"That's right, I only know about swimmers who can read and write—and win, not southern swimmers."

Suddenly we were trading barbs—and becoming friends. He was very quick-witted and possessed an enviable vocabulary that freely intermixed crude expletives and seventy-five-cent words. Our initial conversation wasn't erudite, but at least it was a new subject, and it led to others.

Over the next weeks when we were alone, he told me stories about SEAL boot camp, where the new recruits were called Tadpoles (a throwback to the Frogman days) and they were hazed and harassed day and night. He told the apocryphal tale of why SEALS no longer went to "survival school." Before departing for Vietnam everyone else went to Warner Springs, the obstacle course where you are captured in the desert and sent to a make-believe POW camp. There you are interrogated and roughed up by guards. A SEAL platoon going through had overpowered the guards, killed the dogs and was finally rounded up by the M.P.'s drinking and carousing in a local bar. A far-fetched story, but I loved believing it. It all sounded glamorous to me—even over here where nothing was glamorous. I was an immediate SEAL groupie. And in exchange I told him of our Thursday afternoon leprosy clinic in Nha Be, immunizing children in remote villages on Med Cap missions and the ribald stories sailors told me about how they got their VD.

One day, shortly after sundown, I saw him quietly slip past the dispensary towards the river with five men. They were wearing camouflage fatigues, black ski-type caps and their faces were smeared with grease paint. They set out in kayaks, two to a boat, heavily armed, and slowly paddled down river—staying in the shadows close to the bank. They must have been gone a long time: Jim wasn't in our barracks when I went to bed.

The next day I asked him about it.

"Where did you guys go skulking off to last night."

"We didn't go anywhere. What are you talking about?"

"Yes, you did. I saw you from the back window of the dispensary. You were all gussied up in cammo gear and left in kayaks."

A long pause ensued. Then Jim looked at me very seriously and said, "We had somewhere to go. Don't ask about it. Please, don't."

It became a tacit boundary to our otherwise free flowing "gloves off" conversations. He never would tell me where they went and what they did, and I soon learned not to press him on it. I heard enough "good SEAL stuff" when we had several beers and were just talking randomly.

Each evening the officers would watch "the movie" in the O Club. It was often the same movie each night, but we watched it faithfully. I think it allowed our minds to escape this bizarre Asian war for an hour or so—whatever the case, it was a ritual. The projectors were shopworn and the film more so. A few films were first rate --like Easy Rider with a new young actor, Jack Nicholson. Most were not. And all cheesecake was long-since removed--spliced out (someone in Vietnam had a large collection of partial film strips). When such a movie came to the moment of potential "skin", the splice-point would come apart, stopping the projector and generating a chorus of groans. Our films weren't much, but in this cultural vacuum, no one missed "the movie".

One night, after we had finished off the old maids in the popcorn bowl, the campaign map on the wall was turned around (we used the back side as the projection screen) and we prepared to start the projector, John Friendly (whose name is a misnomer) came into the ersatz officers club (ersatz club--not officers). John was aide-de-camp to Colonel Frank Tief, the despotic Marine Colonel--another redundant phrase—who commanded Solid Anchor. "The colonel is going to watch the movie in his quarters tonight," he officiously proclaimed. "Box it up. I'll take it over to him," he said.

This ignited no end of discord. Navy officers viewed Marines with suspicion and only grudgingly accepted being commanded by one. The SEALs were particularly put out by this blatant abuse of rank. Down here in this place of depravation and relative hardship, this one little perk—the grade B worn-out film—was seen as important. For some, its loss constituted a major disruption in their daily routine; for others, its sudden disappearance was a keen disappointment to say the least.

This is what prompted Jim Thames sputter out, "It isn't it enough they named half the streets in San Diego for you Marines--now you want our (expletive deleted) movie, too!"

"What do ya mean, 'half the streets in San Diego'? " asked a puzzled John Friendly.

"ONE WAY!", shouted Thames.

Then the fight started.

It wasn't much of a fight—more like a lock-arms-and-shuffle move with a good deal of grunting and other macho posturing by the both of them; and they were almost immediately pulled apart. But it was a message. The colonel would get the word that Navy officers in the company were very displeased by his commandeering the movie—irrationally so. If he had any savvy about morale at all (and most Marines were quite into this sort of thing) he would be on the alert. The colonel was no fool, he wouldn't gratuitously create friction in a combat zone. But for today, his toady had the snarfed up movie and that's all there was to it.

Such was the way of life around here and elsewhere in Viet Nam. There was a rivalry, which existed between services and within branches of service that was good in the overall picture but at times presented real problems. These small things seemed very real and of great (but obviously exaggerated) importance to everyone at the time. Creature comforts were few and leisure time was all too plentiful.

Boredom was as big a problem as logistics--only it was insidious. On paper the movie existed for diversion and to keep the troops occupied, but in reality, these were the only respite from the dull but ironically dangerous world in which we lived. Here if you weren't alert at the appropriate times, you could be dead—unfortunately you weren't sure which moment that was.

• • • • •

The climate at Nam Can was enervating: hot, sticky and sultry. Ambition was soon sapped if you had to stay out in the sun for an extended period. In air-conditioned buildings it was far more comfortable, but there weren't many such buildings on firebases—and none at Solid Anchor. Besides you were not really facing up to the problems posed by this trying climate if you worked in an air-conditioned environment. To thrive here one had to find a way to embrace dreadful situations and make the most of them. Only a few could do this regularly, but most of us were able to have moments where life was enjoyable here (or at least rewarding).

The servicemen who lived and worked in the total safety and relative luxury of the giant bases like Long Binh were looked upon as being out of contact. They had no concept what was actually going on in the world of Viet Nam. Living in Saigon was about the same--it wasn't absolutely secure, but pretty darn close to it, and probably a safer place to be alone and on foot after sundown than Chicago or Oakland. However, living in Saigon was considerably more enriching than spending your tour on the base at Long Binh.

Saigon was once known as The Pearl of the Orient, but that was long ago before the Japanese occupation in WWII. Looking at the architecture, the French colonial influence was immediately apparent. This was no modern glass and steel new metropolis of Asia like Singapore or Hong Kong. This was an ante-bellum French Indochina throwback. There were few traffic lights, mainly the traffic circles like the ones in Paris; only here the traffic was even more chaotic and the drivers more aggressive—and some of them were heavily armed. Saigon was a fine place to walk in the evening. Especially a stroll past the innumerable brothels and sleazy night clubs on Tu Do Street and then down past the fancier night spots on Avenue Van Dan Dong until it ended at the river where a statue of Tran Hung Dao (Viet Nam's great Naval hero) dominated the French-influenced traffic circle.

Most places were not like Saigon, but many had pleasant features to enjoy—be it picturesque rice fields or a quaint hamlet with colorful villagers. Only a few were like this one—Nam Can, where you worried about being overrun by the enemy some night. Without question the Viet Cong could do it, but there would be a heavy price to pay. Should an attack begin in earnest (not just a few mortar shells and B-40 rockets like they usually did) the Black Ponies would be here within an hour to lay down a lethal blanket of ordinance and napalm on any attacking force. We hoped the Ponies would be closely followed by a bevy of additional air support and mobile ground troops, so we would only have to hang on for a couple of hours. (But that is what we hoped the MACV response would be).

Further, this place was not only home to two hundred US Marines, but it was the focal point of SEAL Team II—and those dudes would not easily take to flight. That was a source of comfort to me and I'm sure to many others who were not so actively involved in the fighting: the helicopter mechanics, the Seabees, the crew that ran the radio equipment and the mess hall. Supposedly

we were all schooled in the arts of combat, but in reality, it would be a disaster if we became the sole defenders of the compound. That was not the case here, we had almost three hundred well-armed Marines and SEALS supported by a pair of Huey helicopter gunships.

And so, Solid Anchor was not an ordinary base: the men didn't drink themselves into oblivion each night. To be sure we drank beer in the evening, but rarely to a point where a person became impaired. Unlike elsewhere, getting drunk at this base would draw harsh criticism from everyone.

At Solid Anchor everyone's conditions were cramped, and officers and enlisted alike ate in a common mess hall unlike the larger bases where the dining facilities were physically separated, usually in different buildings. The concept of avoiding fraternization was strictly followed, however. The officers stuck to their own tables while the enlisted men had another section. It was clear that the Navy and the Marines wanted to keep the lines of authority intact no matter where they were. Not having reason to do otherwise, even the irascible doctors followed the dictate. They had no problem with officers-only dining rooms, perhaps because in those days the idea of a doctors-only dining room was common and widely practiced. (In a few years, however, the hospital administrators and health care businessmen would put an end to that elitist practice in civilian life.)

Early on the morning of January 19, a corpsmen awoke me to say, "A SEAL Op is underway. The OD (Officer of the Day) says we should be on standby alert."

This seemed a strange way to send me information. Jim Thames could have just told me this last night; after all we slept in the same room. There was little danger; Solid Anchor was not a place where people could go into town for the evening and let a secret slip while romancing a trollop. Few people at this base went to town often. They never went after dark—and I didn't go at all. Nonetheless, receiving the message in this manner was characteristic of the schizophrenic way of the Navy down here—informal iron discipline.

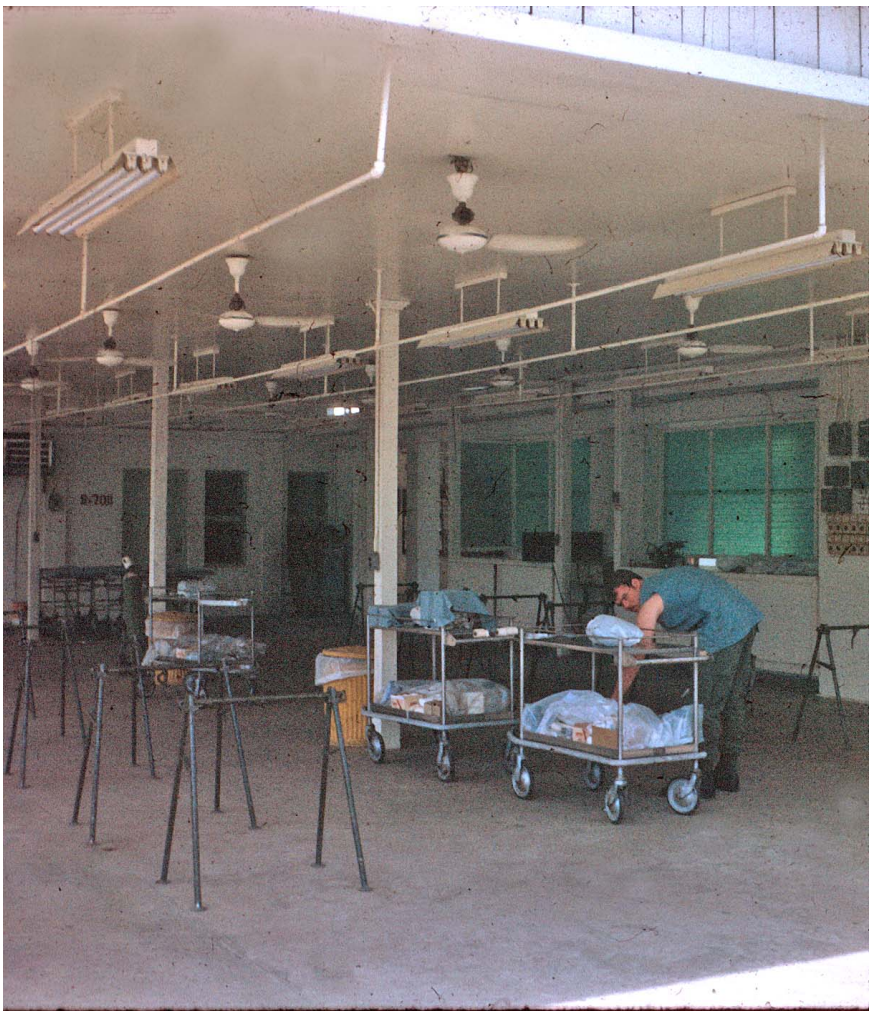
The mess hall was not open for business at this hour so all I could get was a leftover stale sweet roll and cold coffee from our makeshift "O" club. The sun was just coming up, but it was already hot. Today would be a scorcher. We were eight degrees from the Equator. Hard to believe this was the dry season.

It seemed awfully humid to me, but the weather people insisted there would be no rain until May.

A typical clandestine SEAL op in the dense mangrove swamp

The dispensary was 40 yards from the room I shared with my sixteen roommates, so it did not take long to get there. All four corpsmen were hustling to prepare for possible casualties. Metal sawhorse-like supports for stretchers were positioned next to I.V. poles in the warehouse area that housed our sickbay. The rather sizeable space was covered, but almost open-air when the doors were swung wide open. It made a very effective triage area, not unlike the one at Third Field Hospital in Saigon; but compared to Third Field was of miniscule capability. We had no anesthesia, no operating facilities, and no trauma surgeons. We had ourselves—four young corpsman and me. If faced with major trauma the best we could do was temporarily control bleeding arteries, give I.V. fluids and the little plasma we had in our refrigerator, and temporize some of the lesser chest and abdominal wounds. Major head injuries were out of luck. The head injuries would be out of luck in Saigon, too.

However, if we could just stabilize the chest and abdominal wounds, the trauma surgeons up at Binh Thuet were dynamite. But we had to get them there alive and in a timely fashion—it was 100 miles; and that was enough to keep us racing full tilt with everything we encountered. They had to be there within the Golden Hour.



Third Field Army Hospital Outdoor Triage Area

The Golden Hour is actually closer to the first 80 minutes; after this a sharp drop off in survival occurs each half hour. But Golden Hour has such a appealing ring to it that all the articles continue to imply 60 minutes is the break point. So we had a little cushion—and we would need it all. Our job was to resuscitate casualties and quickly get them off by helicopter to the

miraculous trauma centers. It didn't take us long to get set up this day—it was still before 7 AM and we were as ready as we would ever be. Then all we could do was wait.

I sat on the wooden step in front of our small dispensary smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee as I looked out at the swift-flowing but peaceful Cau Lon river a few dozen yards away. It was very quiet sitting here and rather pleasant. It reminded me of a hot summer "day at the lake" in Minnesota. I just sat there for a long time, smoking cigarettes one after another—getting up only to refill my mug with burned coffee from the dispensary urn. Suddenly explosions cracked the silence—and they were not far away.

An Alpha Boat batters a VC position

Men raced to the riverbank, leaning out over the water in a vain attempt to see around the bend. Automatic weapons fire reverberated from somewhere just downstream. We could hear it all, but we couldn't see anything. It was maddening.

Two Huey-1 attack helicopters were in the air, racing to the sounds. We could see them darting and circling not 800 yards away. Tracer bullets came up from

the ground towards them. The Hueys responded with a deep-throated static-like continuous roar as they poured thousands of rounds from their Mini-guns down into the canopied forest. PBR's raced toward the firefight and disappeared around the bend in the river. More automatic weapons fire. Then silence, and the Hueys started off downriver in pursuit of something.

The quiet was broken ten minutes later when the PBR's burst into sight again, this time coming full throttle towards the pier at Solid Anchor.

I turned to the corpsmen and said, "Browning and Peters—get some vehicles and get down to the boats. Now!"

"Bailey! Thomas! You two get the plasma and I.V. fluids out of the refrigerator and ready to go."

I took off my camouflage shirt—better to work in a T-shirt—and started opening up surgical kits, placing them next to the sawhorses.

Then the casualties started coming. Browning and Peters had used all six stretchers to transport wounded men on to the dispensary where we placed them on the sawhorses and I begin triaging them.

"Peters! Start some lactated Ringer's on this guy. Run it wide open until his pressure gets up. And make sure that compression bandage is tight!"

"Browning! This man looks good—make sure he doesn't have any shrapnel wounds somewhere we can't see with him on his back. Then get him out of here."

The third man had a deep leg wound but the bleeding seemed controlled with the pressure dressing, so I started the I.V. myself and left the thing running wide open—he was young and strong and it would be very hard to over-hydrate him under these conditions—and I moved to the final man. He was only slightly wounded in his arm, so after a quick assessment I sent him to the dispensary to lie down. Then back to recheck the first men. More casualties came.

Things got hectic. They were calling for still more stretchers—and we were out. So the least serious injuries were moved into the warehouse to lie on the floor until we could get back to them. We needed their stretchers.

"Did someone call for the dust-off helicopters?" I shouted to no one in particular.

The Marine Colonel Frank Tief himself shot back, "They're on their way." He was here, personally overseeing the transport of the wounded to the triage!

The marines were waiting at the pier for the PBR's and running double-time with the stretchers to the dispensary.

All told fifteen wounded were brought to us in less than eighteen minutes. Some injuries were minor, but not all; some men were going to die if we didn't do something for them and do it now. The Golden Hour was passing quickly. We had to stabilize them and get them to a trauma center. As I struggled to pack saline-soaked gauze into an abdomen torn open by shrapnel, they came with the last of the litters.

"Doc! It's the lieutenant. He's wounded bad!" cried the marine stretcher barer. Two corpsmen dropped what they were doing and raced to him and started thumping on his chest.

I looked up. It was Jim Thames. He looked more than bad. I ran over. He had three big holes in his chest. He wasn't breathing. He had no pulse. His eyes were wide open and grains of sand were on his corneas. There was no hope.

"We can't help him. It's too late."

"But doc, it's the lieutenant."

"We can't help him! Get back to the others. Now! They need you."

I returned to the man with the open abdomen and got him ready for the dust-off helicopter.

A dust-off bird was there in twenty minutes. I have no idea how they got to Solid Anchor so fast. We barely had time to get the I.V.'s going, and the

bleeding contained before they were calling for the injured. I designated the six worst cases and the corpsmen, aided by the marines, raced them to the waiting helicopter. Less than twenty minutes later two more dust-off birds were there and I sent all the remaining casualties—including Jim Thames in a body bag—to the helo pad.

And I was alone again.

It had all been so fast. Fifteen men maimed or killed. Yet in all this pandemonium, excited men shouting everywhere, there had been order. The corpsmen had been unflappable—they came of age today. We had never practiced for this, yet somehow the wounded got here and immediately were on their way to the dust-off choppers when we gave the word to ship them out. And the Marine colonel "had his shit together." I have no idea how he got those dust-off choppers here so quickly. He was the one that got them to Binh Thuet in the Golden Hour. The SEALS and the Marines had their sometimes-bitter rivalries, but when the chips were down they were a Band of Brothers—not unlike Shakespeare's:

> This story shall the good man teach his son;
> And [this date] shall ne'er go by,
> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remembered -
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he today that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother…
> And gentlemen in England now a-bed
> Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon [this] day.
>
> Henry V (Act IV Scene 3)

I sat down on the dispensary steps, alone amid the debris where all had been chaos three minutes before. It was strangely quiet. Only one stretcher remained, it was propped against the side of the dispensary. Blood had made its way to one end of the canvas stretcher and slowly went "drip, drip, drip" forming a dark red puddle in the dirt.

Many times since then I have thought back to that day. In this life most of your days run together, they are rather monotonous. But a few days like this stand out—they are in Technicolor. I have worked in Emergency Rooms and seen people terribly injured—some have died. But it wasn't like this. It wasn't friends I had dinner with the night before. I am only glad that it wasn't even close with Jim Thames—he was dead when he came in. There is no second-guessing, thank god. But still each time I am in Washington I go to The Wall and look for his name. And usually I cry.

Epilog

There was another foray into the U Minh Forest the next day and the day after that. The result was the same. In total we sent thirty-one wounded American Marines and SEALS by dust-off helicopter to Binh Thuy—most of them on Day One. Of those, all but one who were put on the helicopter alive, lived.

Two Viet Cong were killed, two wounded and one captured. We gave them care, too.

A hole in the side of Jim Thames boat where the lethal B-40 (rocket) struck

On Day 4 Colonel Tief called a halt to the futile attempts at "attacking Charlie where he lives".

Terry Sherke returned on day 8, and I was sent back to Saigon.

Epilog II

Out of the clear blue sky on Christmas Day 2006, thirty-five years later, I received an e-mail from Bill Chris, a Naval officer who had been stationed with me at Solid Anchor during that week in January 1971. He asked if I would like to share information about Solid Anchor. I replied immediately. I told him I would be very interested in sharing recollections of that time and asked, "How did you ever get my e-mail address?" A few days later he sent this message:

> December 24-27, 2006
>
> Bob:
>
> Merry Christmas! Thanks for responding.
>
> I got your email address while showing my 11-year-old grandson the Vietnam Memorial Internet site. For the first time, I looked up Jim Thames name and saw your 2004 entry. I have visited the wall a number of times to say hello to Jim, the last time being at Thanksgiving to show my 12-year-old grandson Jim's inscription. On that day, we also visited the WWII Memorial and the Arlington gravesite of another friend, Lt. Dave Pearson, SC, USN Ret. He was in Saigon at the same time we were. He died in 1988 while living in the DC area.
>
> You wrote [on the internet Memorial Page], "The recollection for some things and events is indelible, for others my memory is a blur. I think the human mind is a marvelous instrument--it causes us to focus mainly (but not entirely) on the happy events in life. Consequently, I recall much of Viet Nam as "the good old days."
>
> Bob, I too look back on the past much in the same way. I feel that much of my service in Nam was worthwhile and that I did make some positive differences. I know that while helping you and your Corpsmen on January 19, 1971 you saved a number of lives that day. Thank God that you and your men were there. Terry [Scherke] and I, because his sick bay was in my warehouse and across from my office, had formed a friendship that enabled me to help him and his corpsmen on the occasions when there were more than a couple of casualties. I

would help move stretchers, get whatever was needed and ensure that water, juice and etc. were available for those wounded that could ingest them. After action we would spend "quality" time together. I appreciated that you afforded me the same opportunity to do what little I could do to assist you and your corpsmen. I assisted your corpsman more than once that day to place stretchers with the least likely possibility to survive against the wall. The "triage" will always be with me but the process saved lives that would have otherwise been lost. We had 15 casualties come in from the ambush. More casualties than the number of metal stretcher stands that were on hand. Those with extremity wounds or similar minor wounded -were placed on the warehouse floor. Your description of the other wounded such as the "sucking chest wounds" coincides with my memory of the fellow who had part of his back torn away exposing a pumping lung – he died very shortly. You also had to amputate the leg of one wounded. Even though he had been given morphine, his screams are forever seared into my mind. Besides the loss of Jim that day, the other incident that stands out in my memory is the medical care and compassion you afforded the 15 year old Viet Cong boy that had fired the RPG round that had killed Jim and the others. I have often thought of that scared kid with the compound arm fracture and prayed that somehow his arm was able to be saved and that he is doing OK. Before he was evacuated by helicopter, we gave him whatever we could to make him comfortable: water, juice and maybe even something to eat. In contrast to some of the stories coming out Iraq, I feel good about what we all did that day in caring for that wounded enemy.

On the 16th or 17th, the day before, Jim, as the Vietnamese SEAL advisor, went out on a one- or two-night ambush mission with the Vietnamese Seals, he and I stopped the war for about 4 hours and talked about family and meaningful issues. Jim had recently been divorced and spoke well of his ex-wife. He also talked about his son who was about the same age as my son – one and a half. None of us know when it is our time, but I believe that Jim, based upon our conversation that day, was in a good space and was a good person.

Being 68 years old and suffering from "Halfheimer's", I had forgotten that you were filling in for Terry. I also am confused about some of the incidents surrounding the 19th. A fisherman brought in a body a few days after the firefight. Whoever the individual was you did what was necessary. He was placed in a body bag outside of my office door until he could be transported.

You or one of your corpsmen offered to open the bag to see him – I declined. I remember paying the fisherman for the body. This payment was common practice/policy set in place to encourage the return of bodies in order to reduce the number of MIAs.

Colonel Frank Tief, Marine Corps, had relieved Captain Finke before Christmas at Solid Anchor. Vice Admiral King COMNAVFORV had to fire Frank because he refused a direct order from the Navy Rear Admiral in Binh Thuy to come to a meeting that was attended by the Vietnamese IV Corps Commander. Frank was directing the ambush relief efforts on the 18th from a helicopter and had relayed to the Rear Admiral in no uncertain terms that he was fighting a war and that his men's well-being took priority over the meeting. After being fired and upon returning to Saigon, Vice Admiral King told Colonel Tief that he was still his favorite Marine. Frank later made Brigadier General and retired as Commanding General Camp Lejeune, NC. While on CINCLANTFLT staff in 1975 I called Frank on the Marine Corps birthday and I spoke to him via phone in Washington State around 1994. He was doing well.

Other experiences:

Per our phone conversation on the 27th you related to me that you were at Solid Anchor when the Village nearby had an outbreak of cholera and you remembered attempting to save a 1-year-old boy. I remember you getting mad and exclaiming that only if you had gotten the boy a ½ hour earlier that you would have been able to start an IV and save him. Another interesting side story to this experience was the number of sailors that came to sickbay requesting a cholera vaccination. Their shot cards reflected that they had had the shot prior to deploying to Nam; however, they explained that extraordinary entries had been made and that observing the sick and dying villagers that they wanted the shots now.

Solid Anchor/Nam Can Lore:

I was told that the SEALs poisoned Nam Can wells following Tet of 67. During the same period, the area had also been carpet bombed. And, as a matter of record Admiral Zumwalt had authorized in 1996; "the Cua Long River in the area where we placed Sea Float is only about 400 yards wide, so

despite all our precautions, the jungle afforded the enemy too much protection when he decided to strike at us. That was why I wanted the area around Sea Float, and many riverbanks in the Ca Mau Peninsula, to be sprayed heavily with Agent Orange. I gave the order to do it." * Sea Float later became Solid Anchor and then Nam Can again.

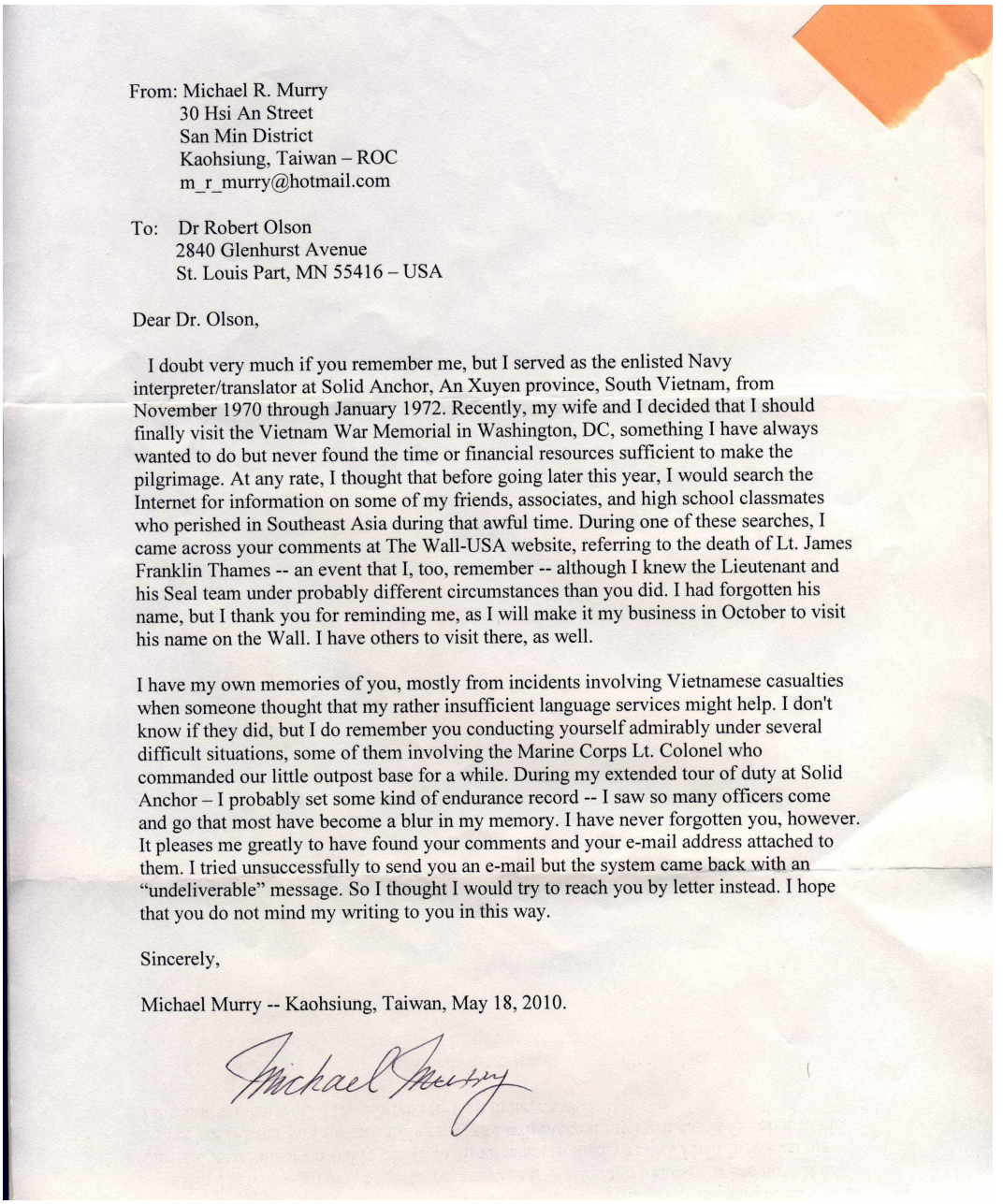
* My Father My Son, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr. & Lieutenant Elmo Zumwalt III, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1986, pp 65,66

Post Vietnam:

After 23 years; four years as a sailor and nineteen as a commissioned officer, I retired from the Pentagon as a Commander in 1984. It was a great career with little or no regrets. This is my second marriage. Jan and I have been married 27 years. She had 3 children from a previous marriage and I had 2 children, which she helped raise. Life has been exceedingly good. We are blessed.

Epilogue III

In June 2010 a letter arrived. It was from an enlisted man who had been at Solid Anchor in the winter of 1971.



From: Michael R. Murry
30 Hsi An Street
San Min District
Kaohsiung, Taiwan – ROC
m_r_murry@hotmail.com

To: Dr Robert Olson
2840 Glenhurst Avenue
St. Louis Part, MN 55416 – USA

Dear Dr. Olson,

I doubt very much if you remember me, but I served as the enlisted Navy interpreter/translator at Solid Anchor, An Xuyen province, South Vietnam, from November 1970 through January 1972. Recently, my wife and I decided that I should finally visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, something I have always wanted to do but never found the time or financial resources sufficient to make the pilgrimage. At any rate, I thought that before going later this year, I would search the Internet for information on some of my friends, associates, and high school classmates who perished in Southeast Asia during that awful time. During one of these searches, I came across your comments at The Wall-USA website, referring to the death of Lt. James Franklin Thames -- an event that I, too, remember -- although I knew the Lieutenant and his Seal team under probably different circumstances than you did. I had forgotten his name, but I thank you for reminding me, as I will make it my business in October to visit his name on the Wall. I have others to visit there, as well.

I have my own memories of you, mostly from incidents involving Vietnamese casualties when someone thought that my rather insufficient language services might help. I don't know if they did, but I do remember you conducting yourself admirably under several difficult situations, some of them involving the Marine Corps Lt. Colonel who commanded our little outpost base for a while. During my extended tour of duty at Solid Anchor – I probably set some kind of endurance record -- I saw so many officers come and go that most have become a blur in my memory. I have never forgotten you, however. It pleases me greatly to have found your comments and your e-mail address attached to them. I tried unsuccessfully to send you an e-mail but the system came back with an "undeliverable" message. So I thought I would try to reach you by letter instead. I hope that you do not mind my writing to you in this way.

Sincerely,

Michael Murry -- Kaohsiung, Taiwan, May 18, 2010.

Michael Murry

Michael Murry,

What a pleasant surprise to hear from you.

I only barely recall you serving as our interpreter for the Vietnamese civilians. But I certainly don't recall any marginal interpretation.

You did an admirable job under extremely adverse conditions.

It is remarkable how many people seem to be reflecting on the days in Vietnam after four decades. I have received several contacts as a result of the message on the wall. And perhaps there would have been more if the local Internet service hadn't sold to a larger company--and changed my e-mail address.

I have been to the Wall in Washington a couple of times, and it is very moving. You should go.

It is amazing to me how I recall mainly the good times in Vietnam--with a few exceptions, like that terrible day at Solid Anchor where we took all those casualties. I recall a group of normal men (some of them larger than life characters) who when placed in an almost impossible situation faced up to it with a grace and resourcefulness that belied their years. They performed with remarkable skill and poise. I am proud to have been with them. And I don't mean just the combat. At other bases where I served, we dealt with the Vietnamese civilians to an even larger degree than in Ca Mau Province. There we delivered babies, gave children their childhood immunizations, cared for the elderly with heart disease, diabetes, TB and at Nha Be we even had a Leprosy Clinic that met on Thursday afternoons. All of this done by a handful of Navy doctors and their Corpsman--and the interpreters without whom we would have been stymied--sometimes having to hand check the base commanders to do it.

Now as I near retirement I think back over my life and count the year in Vietnam as one of the best in my life. I hope you can look back and feel the same.

Thanks again for your letter. It came at a good time.

Bob Olson

Dear Dr Olson,

Thank you for your kind reply to my letter regarding ATSB Solid Anchor and certain events that transpired there in early 1971. I, too, remember some of the men I served with in "larger than life" terms, especially those like yourself who had to "hand check the base commanders" (as you put it) in order to function properly. As an enlisted man, I never possessed the rank to do that, so I had to adopt a strategy of passive-incomprehension.

I've thought of you often over the years, although I long ago forgot your face and name. Perhaps I have confused (or amalgamated) you with memories of other Navy doctors who may have served at Solid Anchor during my time there (November 1970 to January 1972). Whatever the case, I wrote an essay several years ago in which my memory of you (or some part of you) figured prominently. A retired professor friend of mine in Canada recently asked to publish it in his Internet web magazine (*http://www.bewilderingstories.com*). I said OK, and so in the current issue -- BWS #388 -- my mini-memoir, "The Hero with a Single Face," appears. I thought I'd let you know in case you ever thought that your life had passed without leaving a rather significant impression on others around you. I just don't want you to think that.

Enjoy your retirement. I certainly do enjoy mine.

Mike Murry -- Kaohsiung, Taiwan

The Hero with a Single Face

[http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue388/hero.html]

by Michael Murry

Even in the most unexpected of circumstances, genuine heroes do appear among us. I can remember one such instance when I worked with a truly brave, principled, and compassionate man during my service in Vietnam. As the base translator/interpreter at our remote river outpost, I often had to work with a young Navy doctor who ran our little base medical facility. I can't remember the lieutenant's name anymore, so many years have passed, but I do remember his wispy blond hair and well-trimmed mustache. He would sometimes call on me for translation assistance anytime a wounded or injured Vietnamese required medical attention and the doctor needed important information from the patient.

One time, a Marine colonel brought in one of his wounded American soldiers along with a wounded Vietnamese, supposedly an enemy prisoner. The lieutenant did what any good doctor would do and immediately determined which patient needed what treatment and which one needed attention in the most urgent way.

The wounded American had taken a bullet in one of his legs or arms, as I remember, but otherwise he seemed able to manage for the moment. The Vietnamese, for his part in obvious agony, had a gaping wound in his abdomen and had clearly lost a lot of blood. So the doctor quickly gave the American soldier an injection against infection and discomfort, stopped the bleeding from his injury, and turned to treat the more severely wounded Vietnamese.

Then the shit really hit the fan, so to speak.

The wounded American soldier tried to attack the wounded Vietnamese man lying on his back on a wheeled operating table, and the Marine colonel told the doctor not to treat the Vietnamese until the man had "talked first." As an enlisted man caught between two superior officers and facing the prospect of participating in the forced interrogation of a badly injured man, I didn't know

what to do or how I would do it. Things had suddenly gotten really bad really fast.

The young doctor saved everyone involved with a display of resolve such as I had rarely witnessed. He told off the Marine colonel in no uncertain terms: said that he ran his dispensary and said who did what in it; and told the colonel to get his man under control or take him elsewhere.

Things then proceeded as they should have; two injured people got the treatment they required; no one died; no interrogations took place under illegal or immoral conditions; and I didn't have to find out if I had the courage and sense of honor sufficient to stand my ground and do the right thing as the lieutenant had done.

I've never forgotten that experience, nor several others like it that I remember from days I would just as soon forget. I only know that I try to keep the memory of a young Navy lieutenant alive in my mind as a constant reminder of how ethically and courageously some people can act when the situation calls for it. I have no doubt that such heroes still exist in this world and that they go about their daily jobs little dreaming of what good they will do when someone else, enemy or friend, needs them the most.

The late Joseph Campbell wrote a book on mythology called The Hero with a Thousand Faces. I think of that title whenever I think of that young Navy doctor who served so many different people so well and quickly, so long ago. I can't possibly say that I've seen all the thousand faces of heroism, but I know that I've seen one of them.

The Party

The Nha Be Medical Dispensary Party requires two long tables

In an effort to keep morale high in a hostile-fire zone, a party was authorized for work-sections once a quarter (every three months). This was one of the better ideas to come out of the base commander's office.

For most sections, the standard party was a barbecue cookout with frozen hamburgers, buns and several cases of beer. But after a couple of these, work-sections with a little moxie gravitated towards more sophisticated outings.

The Seawolf helicopter squadron invited guests and served fresh shrimp hors d'oeuvres. The shrimp was procured during a clandestine landing at an otherwise inaccessible fishing hamlet at the very edge of the Rung Sat—a place where Americans hadn't yet distorted the crustacean price structure. Ten dollars got you a washtub of fresh-caught jumbo shrimp. They invited selected

guests for free beer, grilled steaks (they invited the supply officer) and all-you-can-eat shrimp soiree. It was a social coup.

Fortunately, no one kept good records about these shindigs, or much else at Nha Be. So whenever commanding officers changed (which seemed to be rather frequently) the Medical Dispensary, along with everyone else immediately applied for party authorization from the new CO. He would have no idea when the last quarterly party was held.

Once the brownshoes (Navy fly-guys) broke ranks with their indecorous garish affair, the gloves were off, and it became of test of Cumshaw Power. And the medical section wasn't about to be upstaged by a band of well-heeled helicopter pilots and their conspicuous consumption.

Corpsman Johnson had immense Cumshaw and knew how to use it. Cumshaw means something like "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours". He and Bob Subers (one of the other MD's currently on base) were adamant that we had to push the envelope beyond the ken of "ribbon clerks"—the brownshoes included. And soon The Great (Section) Party concept was born.

It came as a result of our more extensive contact with the civilians. Our VN corpsmen-in-training ran an afternoon sick call under the watchful eye of a senior Navy corpsman and a Navy doctor. Most of the visits were rather pedestrian (like the sick call for the U.S. enlisted men) and consequently the doctor was laissez-faire about the whole thing unless a significant problem was encountered. Our Vietnamese Corpsmen Trainees took to the task with alacrity and pride. It was only logical to include them in our "quarterly" party. And that was what we told the CO—it was a sort of "Hands Across the Sea" thing. The unsuspecting doofus bought into it.

We sent our requisitions accordingly—requesting 80 lbs. of chicken and 10 cases of beer for our party (no steak). The Vietnamese didn't care much for steak, but they loved chicken—and especially American corn-fed chicken flown in from the U.S. (as was all of our food, including fresh vegetables on occasion).

If certain corpsmen went for the food and the right enlisted men were on duty, we got a little extra chicken, because we had Cumshaw. If Johnson went, it didn't matter who was on duty at the Food Locker—they all knew Johnson and

VN Corpsmen give immunization shots

wanted to be on his good side. The chicken was our trading stock. We didn't eat the chicken. Huá, the PRU Medic, and I went to a favorite (his favorite) Vietnamese restaurant on the road to Saigon and negotiated a sit down eight-course dinner for 30 guests—which for all intents and purposes was the entire restaurant. The chicken was our bartering chip.

Huá could have been a used car salesman. As he jabbered back and forth in his heated bargaining match with the restaurant owner, he turned to me and spoke in English from time to time (for supposed approval of a deal). When he did, it was to give me instructions in English to: "look angry", or "shake your head 'no'," and the clincher was "get up and start to walk away." In the end we gave the restaurant the entire case of chicken and two cases of beer (we'd need the other 8 cases for our guests) and the owner looked quite pleased. Huá was, too, but he didn't show it to his adversary.

Transportation to the restaurant was arranged when Bob Subers checked out two pickup trucks and piled our men and a half dozen VN Corpsmen in the

rear. When we arrived at the restaurant, additional VN Corpsmen were already there—including some that didn't work with us. Apparently, word was out that the Dispensary was having a killer party.

Chả giò and nuoc mam sauce

And so we started with catfish soup (which the Vietnamese loved above all others—and their American counterparts were not at all partial to) and a funny little salad. This was followed by shrimp and crab—which everyone liked, and then "deer" meat that we wrapped in lettuce and egg rolls (at least we thought they were egg rolls) called Chả giò dipped in nuoc mom (a sauce made from rotted fish squeezings that tastes surprisingly good).

By this time a chug-a-lug contest was underway. The men devised a game they called "crab claw". It was begun once the crab course arrived. The dishes came on plates with metal covers. A crab claw was placed on an empty plate, it was covered with the metal lid and shaken wildly in circles by The Crab Master—usually corpsman Michael Kelley. Then it was placed in the center of the table—or at one end of a long table and the lid removed. The person the crab claw was pointing at had to stand and chug-a-lug his entire glass of beer—and the glasses were very large.

Even Susie chugs

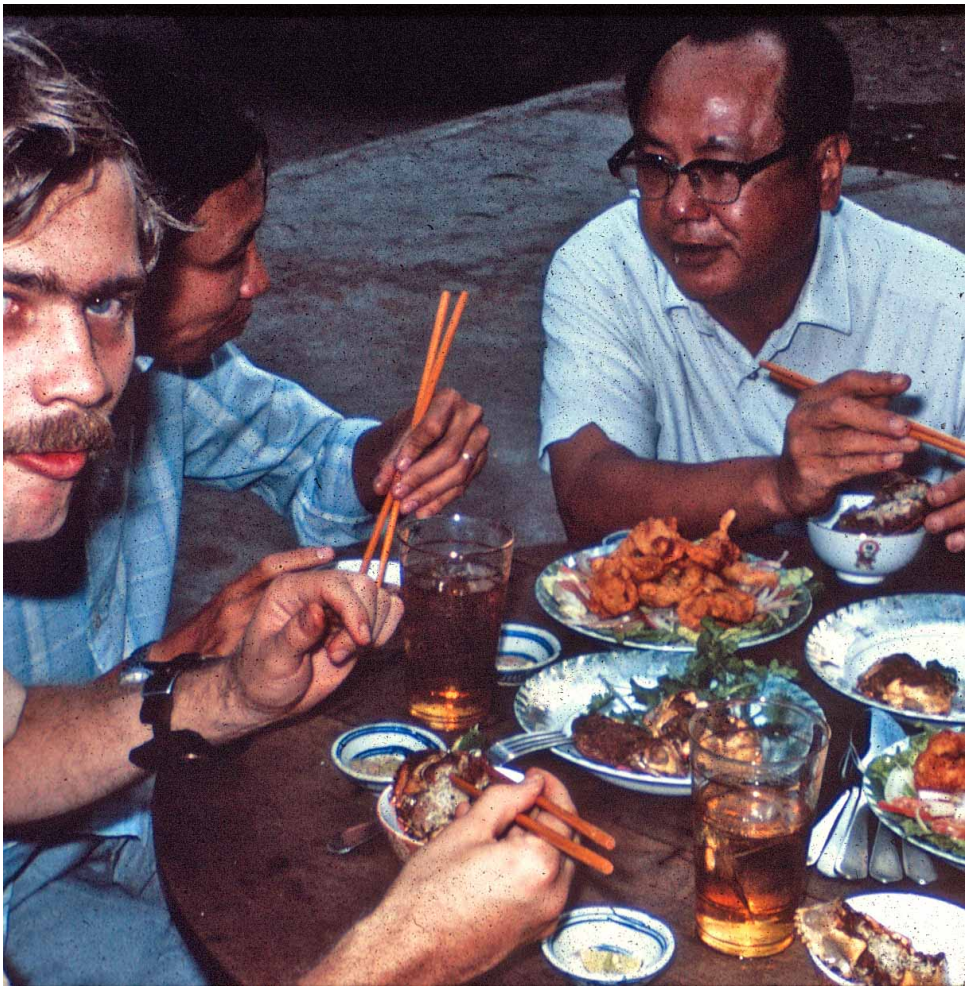
The parties deteriorate rapidly once the chugging begins. The Vietnamese were diminutive people and not given to Western-style drinking. They would down one or two huge glasses of beer quickly and either develop uncontrolled

vomiting or quietly pass out. The American corpsmen were not much better—except it took four or five to do it. Once the Crab Claw game deteriorated into a Chug-a-Lug contest the first party ended rather suddenly—with only Subers, Levine, Huá and me left standing.

The Chug-a Lug Contest ends badly

There was little option. Subers and Levine somehow loaded the thirty or so dead-drunk sailors and passed-out Vietnamese trainee corpsmen into the two pickup trucks and drove them back to the base. Huá and I were left to settle the account with the restaurant owner (someone had insisted on ordering cognac and put it on our tab). We also were served a course of rice, yams and baked shrimp for twenty-five—there were leftovers.

Huá and I slowly finished our meal, smoked cigars (Huá tried hard to get the knack of smoking, but it was the one thing he wasn't very good at) while sipping Napoleon brandy with the restaurant owner until it was long past dark. It was very pleasant sitting in that open-air restaurant in a small remote village where the rest of the world seemed far away.



Bob and Huá finish their food and drink brandy with the owner

Then I suddenly remembered I had no way to get back to the base!

"Huá! I have no way to get home!" I anxiously blurted out—breaking the silence.

"No sweat, Bác sĩ," replied Huá, "I'll take you back on my Honda."

• • • • •

An hour later I was riding down a jungle road on the back of Huá's tiny Honda scooter. A gentle rain quietly fell on us—and it was very dark. I had no idea where we were, but as usual in my brandy-induced golden haze I felt

invulnerable. Nonetheless when a group of armed men standing beside a truck suddenly came into view a sudden disturbing question flashed through my mind, "Do you suppose this is how a guy becomes a P.O.W.?"

It was just a group of ARVN soldiers fixing a flat tire in the rain—but still I was very relieved when a few minutes later Huá dropped me off in Nha Be at the front gate, and I felt even better once inside.

Cumshaw

Cumshaw = An Asian term dating from the British Navy during the opium wars; meaning the ability to do favors (usually in anticipation of a return favor at a later date—but never a quid pro quo); or loosely, "I'll scratch your back—and someday I may ask you to scratch mine." In military parlance cumshaw refers to the ability to obtain (and give) things outside the usual chain of command.

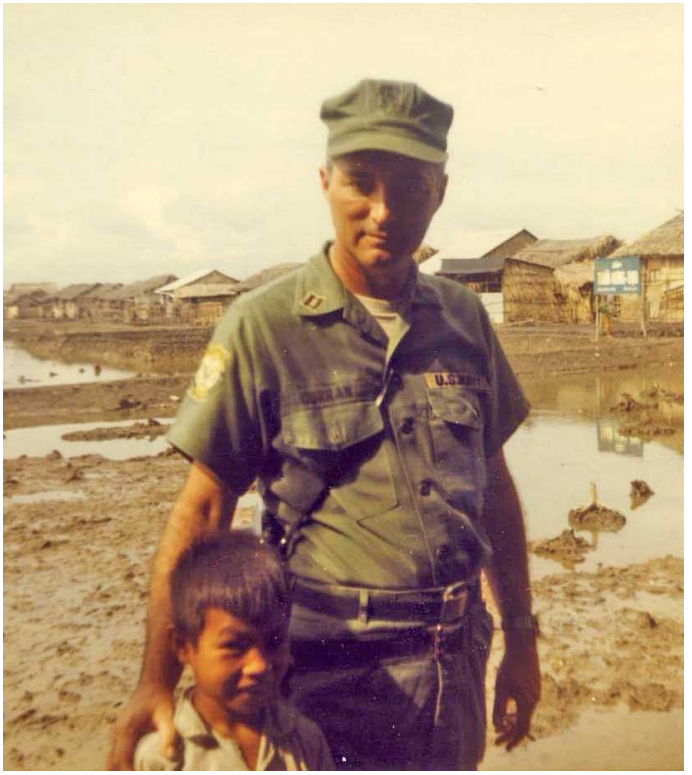
Seabees had big time cumshaw, and not just with me. Just about anyone at a combat or support base in Asia was well advised to be on good terms with the Seabees.

Seabees fixed your plumbing, repaired leaky roofs, and built the small projects on most bases. And at dangerous places like Nam Can, the Seabees built the entire base (elsewhere American civilian contractors who were well connected with the Washington establishment became filthy rich by building military bases). If you needed something done, it was usually the Seabees who did it.

But the medical service was not without cumshaw potential. In fact, we turned out to be among the heavy hitters, right up there with the quartermaster. If you were an enlisted man and wanted a "social problem" dealt with quietly you sought out Johnson, the aptly named VD corpsman—and no entry need be made on your record. If you were an NCO (noncommissioned officer, e.g., a Marine sergeant or a Navy chief petty officer) or an officer, for that matter, and wanted to impress the family back home, we could take you on a Med Cap with us. Meaning you went with a physician and corpsman by helicopter to a remote village where you would spend the day rendering medical care.

The children would be lined up and a "glamour shot" taken of the officer (or NCO) giving baby shots to small, beautiful children. This was a very popular outing—but it cost big-time cumshaw. These arrangements were not unlike the Godfather or Boss Tweed.

There is cumshaw that is a universally (well almost universally) respected and time-honored tradition. In the military one does whatever is necessary for your group or team to succeed. Without cumshaw you would be doomed by circumstances in some settings. In this case it is required--and it is admirable.



For example, Corpsman Johnson got a huge case of chicken for our departmental party by virtue of his relationship to the Quartermaster mate; it was good cumshaw—his entire section benefited.

I used some cumshaw credit with the Seabees for feathering my own nest—literally. I don't know if it was admirable or not. It all started innocently enough.

The officers' BOQ at Nha Be was like every other Navy BOQ in Viet Nam—at least the basic floor plan was. They were white wooden buildings with louvered slats on the outside walls. The inside wall contained a mesh screen that kept insects out. The floor was single concrete slab. Inside, the building

was divided into individual cells about eight feet wide and fifteen feet deep. These were the individual officer's rooms. Twenty rooms (ten cells on each side of a small central corridor) were in each half of the building.

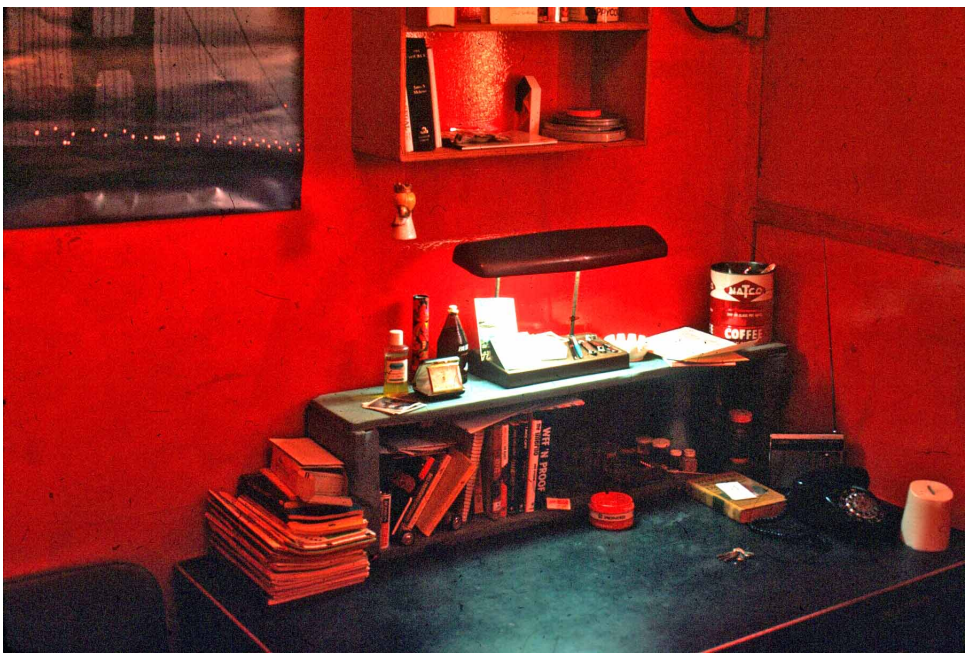
A communal shower/shaving/toilet area separated the two mirror image halves. This communal wash area was curious to greenhorns like me. One portion of the wash up area had the traditional set up: doorless toilet-stalls on one side and urinals on the other. The second portion was also one open room with shaving basins on one side and a row of shower heads opposite. What I wasn't expecting was that both portions were "open air". Although a screen separated us from the outdoors, nothing else did. Passersby were free to glance in, or even enter through a screen door. That took some getting used to. Particularly when the commandant hired women from town to clean the BOQ each day. They were older widow ladies, but still it was a shock the first time Mama San burst through the screen door when you were showering. The Mama Sans for their part could have cared less about beefcake—as if we possessed any such allure. And so soon it became accepted practice and no affront to modesty.


PLEASE TURN OFF WATER
XIN HAY ĐÓNG VÒI NƯỚC LẠI

The cleaning arrangement worked so well that along with the others I hired my own Mama San. She cleaned my room and made my bed--for five dollars a week. She even did my laundry and did a much nicer job than the base facility. She was a tiny woman. Widowed, about forty-five years old, with jet-black hair, prematurely wrinkled skin and betel nut-stained teeth. She had five small-to-teenage children and was thrilled to have this well-paying job. Her English was non-existent, but we communicated through gestures and if something important or complex was to be conveyed found a fellow cleaning-lady-Mama San who spoke some English. There are times I miss her.

Our individual cells, or "hootches", had no doors. Rope-like strings of beads were hung in the doorway to create the sense of boundary, but the rooms were only semi-private. The walls separating one hootch from its neighbors did not

go floor to ceiling. There was a 10-inch gap at the top and bottom to allow for better air circulation. It was effective, but despite these creative artifices the rooms weren't cool. Even with fans you sweated all night long in your bunk. In addition, you weren't exactly getting off by yourself when you went "home" to your hootch. Privacy was quite hard to come by in Viet Nam and a very prized commodity. There was considerable room for improvement here, but at least there weren't any bugs.



When it came to cumshaw, the Seabees were at the top of the heap. Everyone wanted to be on their good side. It was nice to be at the top of the priority list when you needed your plumbing fixed. But it also was good to be a VIP when it came to avoiding a "social problem." And so it was no surprise that many of the Seabees became close friends with Corpsmen Johnson—who kept the VD records for the bargirls. There were other alliances, too. Robbie wrote "excused from guard duty" chits for his Seabee pals for some rather flimsy reasons. They didn't pull this stuff when Paul Levine was the Medical Officer of the Day—he insisted on personally reviewing and signing all excused-from-duty directives. I was more laissez-faire by nature and Corpsman Johnson told me early on it would pay dividends for the dispensary if we honored the tradition of

cumshaw. Johnson was as savvy about the workings of the Navy as anyone I ever met. So, the marginal calls were steered to my duty days.

Leonard Heavican (whose name was practically onomatopoetic) came from Detroit. "Heavy", as he was known, was almost as wide as he was tall and sported a full beard. He was perpetually laughing; and when he did, his bright blue eyes literally sparkled. Heavy had thick sausage-like fingers and always carried candy bars—which he shared generously. He presented a surprisingly well-turned-out image; bulky khaki fatigues in XXL fit him snugly, so he avoided the "wrinkled and baggy" look the rest of us had. Heavy was a most lovable Seabee. And it was no wonder the base commander, Daniel Moss, asked him to play Santa for the children at the Vietnamese/American Christmas party. Heavy was a terrific Santa.

But, perhaps most importantly to the base at Nha Be, Heavy was our plumber. At times it was a bit disconcerting to have a plumber with chocolate smeared on his fingers, but he came promptly when asked, was a pleasure to have around and did an excellent job. Heavy was a favorite all over the base.

However, a problem arose one evening when Heavy was on guard duty. A big problem. The Watch Officer caught him barely arousable and reeking of alcohol. Now our base was not exactly on Red Alert, nor a likely target for an amphibious assault by the VC. Nevertheless, the Navy dealt very harshly with being drunk on guard duty, especially in a combat zone. Heavy was in deep Kimchi.

Charges were being prepared and things looked grim indeed. Then a most amazing thing was "discovered" by the investigating officer. Medical records indicated that Heavy had been given a powerful antihistamine for symptoms of a head cold the day of the incident—one that could make him quite soporific. And shortly thereafter the report of the blood alcohol drawn at our dispensary (at the insistence of the Watch Officer) came back negative. The case against Heavy collapsed.

After that the dispensary's cumshaw status went off the charts. Grizzled Chief Petty Officers winked at me and called out, "Well, done, sir," as they passed by; the notoriously tight-fisted administrative yeomen were buying rounds for the corpsmen at the Enlisted Men's Club, and the quartermaster actually called to see how our supplies were holding out.

I got Corpsman Johnson alone and said to him, "People all over the base think I had something to do with Heavy's blood alcohol level coming back normal."

"Well, you were the duty officer that night, sir."

"But I didn't tell anyone to 'fix' his blood test."

"No, sir," said Johnson, "you said 'take care of Heavy'."

I looked at him a long while trying to read his inscrutable face—unsuccessfully.

Finally, I said, "Johnson, I don't know what you and Robbie did after Heavy left us that night. I don't want to know. Maybe someday—but not now. However, people shouldn't think I was behind it. I can handle the officers—even the Watch Officer, who is pissing rivets incidentally. He's not very good at meetings—he gets angry and acts paranoid. Then he attacks other people in the room and ends up with everyone unloading on him. He won't be a problem. And the Commander will be OK—I think he's secretly pleased things worked out like this. He likes Heavy. I can protect you guys.

"But the chiefs and enlisted shouldn't think I was behind this—they won't respect me."

Now it was Johnson's turn to look at my inscrutable (I hoped) face for a while. And finally he said, "Sir, with all due respect, I think the less said about any of this the better." Then with a small smile he couldn't suppress added, "And I wouldn't worry much about the men respecting you—not now."

And so I took Johnson's unfailingly good counsel and held the officers at bay (including the Boatswain who had been the Watch Officer) and simply, but honestly, denied any wrong doing at the dispensary—becoming positively indignant at the mere mention that hijinks may have occurred on my watch.

Weeks later I was seeing a Seabee Chief Petty Officer at sick call whose diarrhea had been worsening for months. Johnson, who was practically the personal physician for the Seabees and Storekeepers, had unsuccessfully tried to find a parasite or infection. Johnson had even tried empirically treating him for such problems—usually the last resort—but without benefit. After

eliminating all the medications, the Chief was taking (including his anti-malaria meds) without any effect on his symptoms I sat down and talked with him at length about his symptoms. Just exactly what were they and how long had they plagued him? The result was surprising. He began having trouble before he came to Viet Nam. Finally I asked him, "Chief Jones, do you drink a lot of milk?"

"Three or four glasses every day."

"You know Chief, a lot of black men don't tolerate milk once they get over thirty years old. It can give you lots of gas and diarrhea. Let's stop all the milk for a week and see what happens."

"Is beer OK?"

"Well, not for breakfast."

It was a minor miracle. Chief Jones was cured. He was so pleased he came back one evening two weeks later and said, "Lieutenant (some career Navy men seemed to think this was a more dignified address than Doctor), it was like turning off a light switch. I can't believe it! I was sure I had some damn incurable parasite—or cancer. Something like that. I can't tell you how wonderful this is."

Goodness he surely made my day. As he was leaving, he made my day even more—or at least I hoped he might. The Chief said, "Lieutenant, why are you here so late at night?"

"It's so hot in my room I can't sleep until after midnight. I can't even read. So I come here because it's air-conditioned."

"You should get an air conditioner for your room."

"There aren't any. Only Commander Moss and his Executive Officer have air-conditioned quarters."

"Really?" said the Chief, smiling slightly as he left.

Early the next week when I returned to my hootch to sneak in an afternoon nap I found two Seabees with tape measures and a clipboard busy at work.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Chief sent us over to take measurements."

"What are you measuring for?"

"See what size air conditioner is needed. You know we're going to have to do a lot more than just put in an AC."

"You're putting in an air conditioner?"

"You wanted one, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah—of course."

"This is going to take more than you realized. We have to close up the walls and put in a door. It'll be pretty dark in here. But don't worry we'll give you some top-quality fluorescent lighting—you want it to go on when you open the door?"

"Holy Cow. Are you sure this is for me?"

"Chief said it was for 'Hawkeye'—that's you isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's me." [The corpsmen started calling me "Hawkeye" after the movie M*A*S*H made the rounds as the base movie of the week—presumably because of wearing an unauthorized jungle hat adorned with military bric-a-brac and a putative less-than-military demeanor].

"Then we're at the right place."

After a few more questions they left. I was in a daze.

Nothing happened for several days, but one afternoon Ted Fletcher, who had the room next to mine ran up me as I crossed the base heading for the officers' club.

"What's going on in your room?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"There's two carpenters putting a door up and extending the walls all the way to the ceiling—what gives?"

"Oh, just some minor alterations I requested."

"Well, I hope you know what you're doing--your place is going to be like an oven."

"I think it'll be OK."

By sundown it was finished. They even had a doorknob with a key lock built in. It was pretty dark inside without any lights on and I worried about knowing when it was time to get up in the morning, but it was cool inside. The machine was too big for my room, and it made a bit of noise, but I surely wasn't going to complain. It was a glorious night—I went to bed early and woke up when I heard activity around me. After a few seconds of disorientation, I got the fluorescent light on and everything was glorious again.

It would just take a bit of getting used to I figured. And it certainly made my hootch the talk of the BOQ.

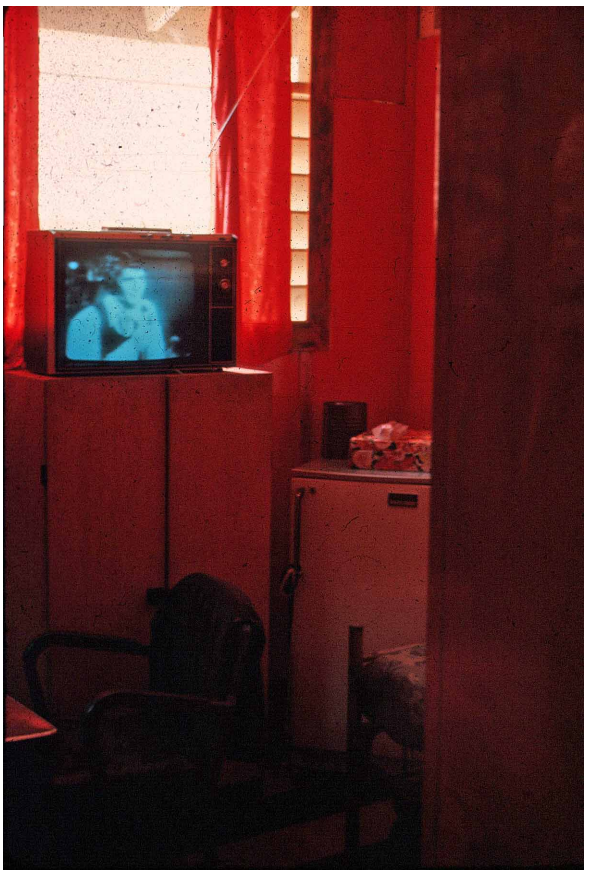
This was not the end of it, however. When I saw the Chief, I thanked him profusely and told him how he had made a real difference in my life.

He beamed and said, "It really is nothing. I knew we had one of those AC units over at the warehouse in Saigon. It was designated for Phu Bai, but they closed down with the force reduction. It didn't belong to anyone—so we just found a good home for it. Glad you like it."

"Like it, I love it," I stammered. Then added jocularly," The only problem is I sleep so soundly now that without any light coming in, I miss reveille."

It was of course a joke—missing reveille was like being replaced for latrine cleaning detail, but the chief was clever in his own right, "Well, we don't want to be responsible for you missing reveille. We'll have to do something about this." He walked away laughing to himself.

But an even more remarkable thing occurred next. A few days later when I returned to my room it was no longer dark! A window had been made in the wall of the BOQ! The inside was now bright and friendly. Note the TV set and the small refrigerator. This was becoming a much more pleasant place to repair to, and there was privacy.



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Commander Moss, the base commandant, was not pleased when he heard of this. He called it an "unauthorized ship alt". He continued in his paternalistic condemnation of the window. "Do you realize how dangerous this is? If a grenade were to go off shattered glass would be everywhere, and you'd be cut to pieces. Even small weapons fire would do it! Now what do you have to say?"

"Commander, it's made of one-and-a-half inch Plexiglass. It will stop 60 caliber machine gun bullets."

Cumshaw, Part 2

On the other hand, there were some groups with no cumshaw and it really grated on them. The lawyers in the JAG Corps were a prime example. My good friends at the JAG Office repeatedly chided me for engaging in "favor trading" as they put it. Their leader, Commander Slater, was one of my regular bridge opponents—opponent because he was always on the other team. Dick Slater was very competitive, and he knew I was, too. He also had a devilish streak, and Dick would conspire to stick me with the chaplain as my bridge partner. Our chaplain was just what you would expect--a nice fellow/terrible bridge player. Dick knew you can't get angry in public at the chaplain for poor play, even if he was a clueless card player. The chaplain was, of course, oblivious to all of this; he thought these were social outings. Dick Slater and I knew different.

So, when Chaplain Thorne made one misplay after another I would quietly open another can of beer and openly sulk while Dick Slater would smile gleefully as he added up the score. But more often than you might expect, the chaplain and I would actually win (Commander Slater wasn't the world's best bridge player either). Then Dick Slater would grind his teeth audibly in a vain attempt to keep his face from registering frustration as he tallied the score. Those rare victories made the painful losses worth it—or more correctly observing Dick Slater's reaction to "losing to the chaplain" made it worth it.

During these friendly games, especially when he was behind in the score, the Commander would mention that "favor trading" was not just frowned on by the Navy, it was an actionable offense. He would turn to me and sternly say, "and you, sir, are riding a fine line."

And it wasn't just once he said it. He was a pretty good actor because at one point I was convinced he had the goods on me and was about to turn me in. He wouldn't have, but golly he could be convincing--and he got my goat. The young lawyers in his charge quickly picked up on this and added fuel to the fire, saying, "We're under directive to keep an eye out for possible favor trading; and there is to be Zero Tolerance. Any such offense is to receive prompt disciplinary action." They got my goat, too.

But what goes around comes around. One day Paul Sullivan, a JAG Lieutenant, came to the dispensary and insisted on seeing me. Paul, in his official-JAG-representative-voice, told me he was there as a representative of the JAG Office.

"Cmdr. Slater heard that steak was issued to the dispensary for your quarterly parties, yet when I went to the petty officer in charge of the food locker to get steaks for our party, I was told only hamburger was authorized for departmental parties. Is some hanky-panky going on?"

Well, of course hanky-panky was going on. We sent corpsman Johnson to get our food. Not only had Johnson known petty officer Wilson since basic training, Johnson also was the VD guru. A month earlier a food locker man faced a serious situation; he was to meet his wife on R & R in Hawaii in four days--when he developed "a social problem." In a panic, he sought out petty officer Wilson who hustled him over to corpsman Johnson. Once the diagnosis was confirmed, Wilson and the locker man were given a stern lecture on how the petty officer should have come to their friend corpsman Johnson before going to town (to obtain names of the most recently cleared-as-not-infected girls). Then he was told "not to worry", all would be OK, but this was cutting it pretty close and exceptional measures would have to be used. Followed by (intentionally painful—better patient perception of efficacy if it is painful) daily injections of penicillin and a handful of pills to take up until his plane landed in Oahu. This is the cumshaw you dream of—the food locker man owes you.

Now I wasn't going to tell Paul Sullivan that's why we got whatever we wanted for our parties. Instead, I told him the truth. "We didn't get steak, we got chicken. Did you want chicken? I'm pretty sure they'll give you chicken."

"You got chicken instead of hamburger—or steak?"

"It's a much healthier food, Paul. Far lower in cholesterol and…"

"Never mind. Chicken, huh?"

"Chicken."

And actually, Johnson *had* asked for chicken—80 pounds of frozen chicken. Tired of those outdoor steak fries behind the dispensary, Huá the PRU medic

and I had gone to Huá's favorite restaurant two villages away and struck a bargain for a catered banquet. Huá should have been selling used cars, because when he finished his negotiations, we were swapping four cases of American beer and 80 pounds of chicken for an eight course Vietnamese dinner for 32 people. Instead of grilling steaks in the hot sun on base, we were renting out the restaurant for a party and inviting guests.

But the JAG corps and steak thing didn't go away. There was an ulterior motive behind Sullivan's inquiry. The Navy JAG corps for some reason had been placed in Nha Be rather than Saigon. Now, an Admiral was planning a site visit. It wasn't just any admiral; it was the man in charge of all JAG activity in the Pacific. Cmdr. Slater, who was up for promotion, wanted everything to go perfectly— including a memorable reception and dinner. They had gone so far as to clean out all the premium liquor at the big Army PX in Cholon (four bottles of Johnny Walker Scotch, two of Jack Daniels Bourbon and three of Charles Martel Cognac) —not much liquor by lawyer standards but a respectable offering. Plans were proceeding apace until once again they went to get some steaks. The food locker man said "hamburger" in no uncertain terms, and they were powerless to change his mind. Cmdr. Slater was desperate. And he couldn't go over Wilson's head. The base commandant, Commander Moss, was no pal of the law office, and the lawyers would not be getting steak out of him.

This was a quandary—normally an officer would go to his chief petty officer and say, "fix it—any way you can." And the grizzled old chief petty officer would "fix it". But the lawyers didn't have any grizzled old petty officers—they had only smart young and energetic yeoman/typists and--the lawyers had no cumshaw.

But lawyers everywhere are resourceful and persistent if nothing else. And when faced with necessity they will devise the most amazing tactics. After weeks of merciless teasing about "favor trading" investigations and Zero Tolerance policies, Dick Slater and Paul Sullivan were not in a position to come to me for help. But they still had an ace in the hole.

In this case they sent my traveling buddy, Tony Derezinski, to see me. Tony and I had gone on leave to Hong Kong and Tony proved a terrific travel companion. Tony was second in command to Cmdr. Slater. This was the Good Cop approach. And Tony was quite skillful at sizing up situations. He did a

most remarkable thing, even for a desperate lawyer--he told the truth. Dick Slater was wedded to the idea of putting on a steak-dinner-in-a-combat-zone for the Admiral's visit. It was to be the piece dé resistance to their proposed agenda. And a successful visit was vitally important to all of them—Tony, Paul, Bill Hannan, and the rest—not just Dick Slater.

"Can you help?" asked my friend Tony.

What could I do? Aside from the physicians on base, these were the only guys I could have a meaningful conversation with. In fact, I didn't have very meaningful conversations with the other physicians about anything but work. The JAG guys were my intellectual lifeline. And now they were putting this on a personal level. But you can't just give cumshaw—even to your intellectual lifeline people. At the very least you need the possibility of something in return.

"I'll need a guarantee of immunity from prosecution for this 'favor trading'."

"No problem."

"And sometime in the future I may need to ask for some extraordinary help from the JAG Office."

"No problem, all you have to do is ask." (and unwittingly the JAG Office had just become cumshaw co-conspirator).

"Would you rather have lobster?"

Delivery proved a bit tricky. No one wanted to deliver irregularly obtained goods to the JAG Office. Therefore, it seemed best to do the job myself; after all, I had a "lawyer's promise" of immunity. So, in a glow of naiveté the morning of the gala event I met petty officer Wilson at the frozen food locker and a carton containing 40 lbs. of T-bone steak was placed in a mail sack. It was only a short stroll to the JAG Office, but the sack was getting heavy (and cold) by the time I got there. Tony's office was on the second floor and it took some effort to appear nonchalant carrying my poke down the hallway past a roomful of clerks madly typing briefs and writs and up the stairs. There was no one in the hallway upstairs, thank goodness. I quietly leaned the mail sack against Tony's office door and beat a hasty retreat to the safe haven of the dispensary.

From the sanctuary of my office, I called Tony's phone and without identifying myself said, "Open your office door now, before your package melts."

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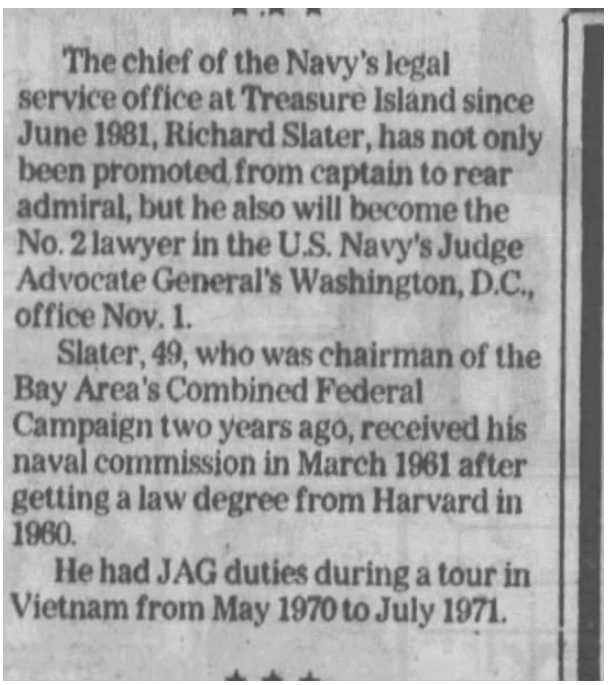
Later Tony and Paul told me the visit was a total success, and the Admiral admired their resourcefulness at getting Charles Martel cognac and T-bone steaks in the boondocks. Cmdr. Slater was beaming the entire evening.

It must have been very difficult for law-and-order Cmdr. Slater to bring up the subject of the steaks at our next card game. So, he did it obliquely, "I think I may have something to thank you for, doctor."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," I replied.

Then, in a rare instance of what was for him jocularity, he winked and said, "Right!"

And we went back to the card game, with the chaplain as my partner.



The chief of the Navy's legal service office at Treasure Island since June 1981, Richard Slater, has not only been promoted from captain to rear admiral, but he also will become the No. 2 lawyer in the U.S. Navy's Judge Advocate General's Washington, D.C., office Nov. 1.

Slater, 49, who was chairman of the Bay Area's Combined Federal Campaign two years ago, received his naval commission in March 1961 after getting a law degree from Harvard in 1960.

He had JAG duties during a tour in Vietnam from May 1970 to July 1971.

Mr. Ai and Mr. Hanh: The Dogs of War

"And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war"

Shakespeare (Julius Caesar)

Rung Sat Special Zone was the name given during the Vietnam War by the South Vietnam Government and American forces to a large area of the Sác Forest (Vietnamese: Rừng Sác). It was also known as the "Forest of Assassins." The Sác Forest comprises approximately 485 sq mi of tidal mangrove swamp including over 3,000 mi of interlocking streams located approximately 22 mi south-southeast of Saigon. Its boundaries in 1962 were Nha Be District to the north, and the South China Sea to the south. On 8 June 1962, the South Vietnamese Government organized the Rung Sat Special Zone as a military region in order to defend the Long Tau River, the main shipping channel from Saigon to Vung Tau and the sea, to prevent the Viet Cong using it to transport supplies and/or as a sanctuary.

The Green Berets were a product of Viet Nam who gained celebrity when President John Kennedy overruled Army bureaucrats and personally authorized their non-regulation headgear. Together with the newly formed Navy SEALs, they were the acknowledged elite fighting units in Viet Nam.

At Nha Be there were no Green Berets, and SEAL Team II was much further south at Sea Float and Solid Anchor. The Marines were the official assault troops at Nha Be, but they were only a token force. They were here to train Vietnamese Marines (a ragtag non-"Semper Fi" bunch of conscriptees) who were slated to commence combat activities in the Rung Sat—some day. And the Swift Boats and PBR's served primarily as a patrol function.

Consequently, the most effective offensive fighters in the Rung Sat were not American at all. They were the "Prews" (PRU = Provincial Reconnaissance Unit), a band of Chinese and Vietnamese mercenaries. And if the Green Berets

or SEALs had been at Nha Be, in all probability the Prews would still prove the most effective group.

The Prews excelled at their grim trade not because they were fierce and fearless (and known by the Viet Cong to be fierce and fearless); they excelled because they had a far better strategy than other combat units. The Prews "bought hits", which is to say they paid substantial bribes to villagers willing to rat out the Viet Cong. The PRU's would set a night ambush or, equally effectively, flush the VC from cover and into a killing field as the late afternoon sun was going down.

I first heard of them from a Seawolf (Navy) helicopter pilot. Clint Davie burst into our ersatz Officers Club just before dinner one evening and began to babble exuberantly about a rare-for-him event: a supremely successful combat operation. Clint had been in the Rung Sat for a long time (four months); and,

like the other Navy pilots flew combat support for the Marines—the Vietnamese Marines in this case. They never seemed to run into anyone—nor did it appear they wanted to. No kills, but no casualties either. Today, however, because of a scheduling snafu the Seawolves (rather than the Army Razorback helicopters) worked with the Prews.

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The Nha Be Officers Club was a white, wooden, clapboard one-story affair in the exact center of the base. Inside it was dark and dingy with a red and black linoleum-tile floor--and it reeked of stale smoke. It was not unlike a thousand cheap blue-collar bars across mid-America. The club opened promptly after the base "stood retreat" (At four thirty, a bugle played To the Colors as the American flag was lowered. If you were outside you froze in your tracks at the first note, turned to face the flagpole and saluted until the flag was completely down.)

No matter how remote the base nor how primitive the conditions, the flag was ceremonially raised and lowered each day. Everyone respected this tradition (including the otherwise-cynical medical officers). But as soon as it was over, the barflies swarmed at the entrance of the Nha Be "O" Club. When the door opened, they rushed in to assume their usual chairs and stools, apparently fearing someone would poach their prime locations, and ordered several drinks. Beer was ten cents a can and mixed drinks were twenty cents—except during Happy Hour on Friday when everything was half price.

Later, more casual drinkers would enter and have a couple of belts before dinner. The helicopter pilots were a bimodal group. The Navy helicopter pilots were commissioned officers, and college graduates. The Army pilots were warrant officers—and not college graduates. Department of Defense rules said that to command an aircraft one must be an officer, and to be an officer you had to be a college graduate (or go to a lengthy book-learning OCS—officers candidate school). The Army needed helicopter drivers and they needed them now, so a loophole was found. Enlisted men selected for appropriate skills and aptitudes were given a "warrant" from the Secretary of the Army: they were Warrant Officers. But in reality, they were 20-year-old kids with million dollar hot rods. Not surprisingly the Army helo pilots were regulars in the bar before (and after) dinner, but not so Navy pilots. Consequently, it was an unusual

event when a Seawolf (Navy) pilot burst into the room and offered to buy a round for the house.

"I've never seen anything like it!" Clint blurted out. "We've never had a day like this. Never! We must have nailed twenty VC and trashed a dozen of their little [expletive deleted] boats."

He talked faster and his animated gestures became increasingly wild as he told of catching an entire platoon of VC in the open running pell-mell towards their sampans, abandoning all pretense of evasion and mindless of any menace from the sky.

"It was all over in fifteen minutes—probably less. We burned the Cong with the miniguns and used the big machine gun to trash the boats. Blew 'em apart. Then the Prews appeared out of the tall grass and went to [ransack] the bodies. Never seen anything like it. Never!"

Razorback Attack Helicopter with rockets and minigun

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The Prews were a sight to behold. Tiny little men in black boots, camouflage jungle outfits and, curiously, bright-red scarves around their necks. Sometimes they marched right past the medical dispensary on their way to the helo pad. Most had standard U.S. infantry M-16 rifles, but more than one had an M-60 machine gun. M–60's are very large weapons. And it was a lethal but comical sight to see the pint-sized Prews with out-sized ammunition belts festooned across their chests a la Mexican bandits and huge guns over their shoulders. The PRU activities were coordinated by an American named Felix Rodriquez. It was said that he worked for the CIA. To us he didn't look very Hispanic, and we wondered if that was his real name; and he looked like a drunk, so we wondered if he really was a CIA agent. Rodriquez only went with the PRU when they were inserted by helicopter, and the pilots said he never left the aircraft. Apparently, he wasn't much into on-the-ground action--so maybe he was CIA after all.

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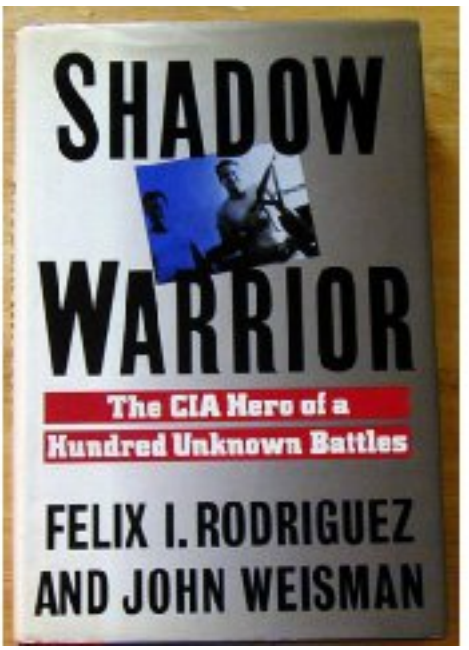
Felix Rodriquez



Rodriguez, Felix I. and Weisman, John. Shadow Warrior: The CIA Hero of a Hundred Unknown Battles. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. 283 pages.

In this autobiography, Rodriguez details his relationship with the CIA and the anti-Castro resistance. After escaping Cuba in 1959 he joined the CIA-backed Brigade 2506. Rodriguez missed the Bay of Pigs, having been with a special squad trained to infiltrate into Cuba. In 1967 the CIA recruited him to head a team to hunt down leftist guerrilla Ché Guevara in Bolivia. When Ché was captured it was Rodriguez who interrogated him. After his execution he took Ché 's Rolex watch as a souvenir (he still wears it today). The book includes a photo of Ché with Rodriguez the day he was captured. In 1971 Rodriguez helped train Provincial Reconnaissance Units for Operation Phoenix in Vietnam. During the 1980's he trained soldiers in El Salvador, and became involved with the Nicaraguan contras, Don Gregg, and vice-president George Bush.

Felix I. Rodriguez: Retired CIA Agent and Author of Shadow Warrior: The CIA Hero of a Hundred Unknown Battles
Keynote Presentation: Thursday, August 28, 0800-1100hrs
Experiences of a Shadow Warrior in Special Operations for the CIA
Topics will include: surviving inside enemy territory while working for a democratic resistance in Cuba as well as details of why the Bay of Pigs failed, which draws on inside information and experience; Felix's personal experiences while an intelligence adviser to a Bolivian military unit during the pursuit and capture of Ché Guevara, and a discussion of developing a positive relationship with the host government; a textbook study in counterinsurgency--advising indigenous special operational units in Vietnam to stop the rocketing of Saigon and the rocketing of friendly ships arriving into the port of Saigon, as well as the development of a tactical helicopter attack concept used to seek and destroy terrorist units in Vietnam, a concept that Felix later used with great success against communist guerrillas during the 1980s war in El Salvador. Felix will also touch on some details and analysis of the so-called Iran/Contra scandal, as seen from the inside.

The Felix Rodriguez we knew was definitely a self-promoter and given to telling far-fetched tales in the officers' club bar, but he hardly stopped rocket attacks on Saigon—however he did wear a Rolex watch, so maybe….

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I only saw Prews as they went to the helo pad; most of the time they were inserted by boat and took a different route to get to the waterfront. On the rare occasion when the PRU took casualties they were airlifted from the field to our dispensary where Huá, the sole PRU corpsman, directed their care. Huá was

very good, better than any of the VN Navy corpsmen assigned to train with us. And he spoke almost flawless English.

Huá didn't have a uniform, and if he had a red neckerchief, he never wore it. Usually, he was in civilian khaki pants and a light blue plaid shirt. He didn't ride in the helicopter nor did he go on the boats when the Prews were inserted, but he always showed up at the dispensary just before the PRU casualties arrived. Huá had ways of knowing things that was almost spooky. He came to the dispensary at other times, too. Sometimes to hone his skills at treating patients, expecting to get pointers from the American doctors. And in exchange for this tutelage, he was omnipresent when we needed him. He proved to be a priceless resource over the course of my year in country.

The Prews were led by Mr. Ai. He was a tiny man—but their unquestioned leader. It was said that for almost 20 years he was a Viet Cong, but then "Chieu Hoi-ed". (Chieu Hoi was an amnesty program where VC or NVA soldiers came over to the Saigon government side, usually to form special fighting units—like the Kit Carson Scouts—as mercenaries). Mr. Ai bought the hits and organized the ambushes. Rodriguez would arrange for boats or the helicopters—they used large ASPB's (ASPB= Assault Support Patrol Boat—called "Alpha Boats"; they were heavily armored attack boats with cannon that could rain down fire on shore-based Viet Cong without coming within range of their RPG's). Mr. Ai preferred these to the smaller and more maneuverable but more vulnerable Swift Boats and PBR's.

And he preferred the Army Razorback helicopters to the Navy Seawolves. That was surprising, because the Seawolves were far better trained and had better equipment. Perhaps it was because the Razorback crews bordered on recklessness, just as the Prews did.

A favorite ploy of Mr. Ai was to learn where a band of errant VC was bivouacked. Only a handful of places in the Rung Sat met the needs of a group of twenty, so they usually selected the same places—flat dry ground within a hundred yards of a riverbank site where boats could be concealed, yet quickly launched in case of trouble. Local villagers might be reluctant to sell out their relatives or neighbors, but they had no qualms about telling Mr. Ai of strangers passing through—especially if a large amount of cash changed hands in the process.

Mr. Ai—small but deadly

PRU's about to board an ASPB—a "floating tank"

The Alpha boats—heavily armored and sporting canons

Once they knew the location of their quarry, ASPB's quietly inserted the Prews on one of the bends in the river above the bivouac.

The PRU positioned themselves in a spot with a short level field between them and the VC. Mr. Ai then radioed for the Razorbacks who were hovering low over the jungle, unseen but only minutes away. With the Razorbacks en route Mr. Hanh, Mr. Ai's second-in-command, was given the signal to charge the Viet Cong bivouac (Mr. Ai never left the command post radio—he was wise). Mr. Hanh jumped up, gave a bloodcurdling scream and raced across the field shooting a machine gun from the hip. The others followed throwing grenades like snowballs and firing M-16's and AK-47's as they ran. The legend was that in the five years he had been with Mr. Ai, Mr. Hanh had never hit the ground during an attack. No matter what, he kept running towards the enemy position with his equally-berserker men close behind.

The VC weren't stupid. When they saw these nut cases racing towards them propelling grenades and hosing the entire field with automatic weapons fire, they took off in the opposite direction for their boats. Only they never made it. The Razorbacks came out of the setting sun, low over the treetops, and with their Miniguns (electric Gatling guns that fired 4000 rounds a minute) mowed down everyone in the open. That is, everyone who wasn't wearing a red

handkerchief. Then the Prews looted the bodies, keeping all valuables and weapons. One time they hit the jackpot; they nailed a VC paymaster and didn't return to work for two weeks. And so the stories went. They were marvelously successful fighters. And Mr. Ai was quite a wealthy man as a result. He once told me how much he respected the capitalistic system.

Mr. Hanh—scourge of the Rung Sat

Mr. Ai was a man of many interests and was used to indulging them. He was a curious man, too. And like so many others he wondered about the many faces of America. How there could be such a massive army sent to fight in his country and yet he saw on American TV widespread opposition to the war was tolerated? And who were these "Hippies" people kept talking about? Mr. Ai was very curious. He wanted to meet a Hippie.

Somehow, he came to the conclusion that I was one. He heard that Commander Moss, Nha Be's commanding officer, often called me a "damn hippie" (usually when the Commander was after me to get my uniform pressed and my hair cut). But the pièce de résistance came when Huá told him enlisted men called me "Hawkeye", and that it was the honored name of a movie star Hippie Doctor who once fought in Korea.

So one evening Mr. Ai sent Huá to fetch me. Huá came to my Spartan 6 x 12 foot room in the BOQ and said, "Bác sĩ [doctor], you must come. You must come now to see Mr. Ai."

Then Huá, who was always very respectful, sheepishly added that I was to bring some American beer when I came. He gave no inkling of why I was to go. But no American I knew had ever spoken with Mr. Ai, yet alone spent an evening with him. So, armed only with a case of Budweiser, I went to see the warlord.

PRU return to the Alpha Boat after a mission

Mr. Ai's primary residence (he also had a pied-à-terre in Saigon) was in the Vietnamese Army compound adjacent to the Navy Base. He lived alone in a fairly large Quonset-type "hootch." For a modern-day Shogun-wannabe, Mr. Ai did not cut a very imposing figure. He was small—smaller than most of the other Prews, which made him positively diminutive. And had a nice round face, jet-black hair and dark brown eyes. But they weren't sweet, warm and fuzzy brown eyes; they were piercing eyes that made you feel uncomfortable.

He wore neatly tailored olive drab fatigues and shiny all-leather black boots. However, indoors he wasn't wearing his trademark floppy jungle hat. Except for his eyes (and imperious bearing) he might have been "cute"—but if just some of what they said about him was true he was anything but cute.

Mr. Ai motioned for Huá and me to join him at a small round wood table in the middle of the room. A single bright light with a wide opaque shade was suspended directly above us. Mr. Ai chain-smoked Salem cigarettes and the place reeked of stale tobacco. Huá and I sat in metal folding chairs with "U.S. Army" stenciled on the back. It was like being invited to sit at a poker table, but we weren't going to play cards.

Huá, acting as the interpreter, unfortunately was not given to strong drink and the beer foisted on him by Mr. Ai soon turned his face bright red. To his credit Huá never wavered, either in his rapid fire and precise translation/ interpretation or in chugging glasses of Bud when Mr. Ai gestured "drink up".

Mr. Ai said (via Huá) that he had heard a lot about Hippies and wanted to meet me. It was a bit disingenuous to pass myself off as a Hippie, much as I wanted to talk with Mr. Ai. My insular life in medical school was bereft of contact with the true dropouts from "the crass and materialistic lifestyle of our parents' generation." I understood the Hippies about as much as I understood the war protesters—less would be a more accurate description. I hadn't heard of the Hippies until I went to San Francisco for my internship. Once in Baghdad by the Bay, of course I went to Haight and Ashbury to see the mobs milling about. I even got out of my car and walked around a couple of times—all the while snapping photos with my Kodak Instamatic. The folks in Golden Gate Park had colorful outfits to say the least—psychedelic was the preferred term.

By this time, they were becoming a part of American folklore, and I had seen them in situ. Consequently, I felt a certain obligation to portray Hippies accurately. So, I endeavored to be circumspect and respectful of their "scene" while giving a reasonably good account of what was going on—and how someone from mid-America perceived them. Eventually I told him something like, I wasn't a real Hippie, but I could describe them for him:

The original Hippies were an admirable group of philosophically committed people who questioned the value of pursuing material riches at the expense of

more meaningful things—like relationships with others. The Hippies so much rejected materialism that they chose to live a very Spartan lifestyle, not unlike Thoreau and other intellectuals who came before them. This became a very popular concept on college campuses and with young people everywhere. Those with similar life views congregated in several locales, the most popular was San Francisco. But somehow psychedelic drugs got mixed in with this culture and, worse, troubled teenagers with little insight and comprehension of the overall philosophy flocked to San Francisco and adopted the outward trappings of the Hippie lifestyle—and particularly the drugs. And this posturing became an end in itself.

I told him this, or something quite like it, which was my concept of the Hippie scene at the time (not to be confused with an accurate depiction of the true course of events). In any case, Mr. Ai liked the story. He particularly liked the part about the early Hippies being admirable philosophers.

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I did not see Mr. Ai again for many weeks. But one day things went badly awry at an ambush. Several Prews were sent to our dispensary with gunshot wounds-- it was rare for them to get even a single casualty. This was a catastrophe—one man had a chest wound that was beyond anything we could do at Nha Be, he needed a thoracic surgeon. Huá was beside himself, he had not lost a man in over a year. This Prew needed to go to the U.S. Army Third Field Hospital in Saigon—by helicopter. And this was not possible. After a December edict from MAC-V no Vietnamese could be sent to an American hospital. All medical care was to be turned over to the Vietnamese as part of the Exit Strategy. He was going to die.

"Bác sĩ, we have to do something!" cried Huá.

"There's nothing we can do, Huá."

"Bác sĩ, please—you must. We need you."

After a long moment I said to Corpsman Johnson," Send for the dust-off helicopter."

"But they won't take him."

"Send for dust off—and give me the phone when you get them."

Huá and dying PRU mercenary

This was another in a series of ham handed "tough-love" strategies put into effect by the military command where we in the boondocks had to suffer the consequences of across-the-board application. As an officer and gentleman (by act of congress) I was duty bound by their decision. So, I did the only honorable thing. I lied.

In a simulated (or perhaps not so simulated) panic I told dust-off, "… a drunk American shot a Vietnamese VIP. The provincial military commander is going batshit; he's mobilizing his ground troops as we speak. This is a potentially explosive political incident—in fact it is exploding. This guy [the Vietnamese VIP] has to be treated at the American Hospital or the fallout will be catastrophic."

Incredibly, it worked. The Third Field Hospital took him. But not all of them believed me. A week later I got a call from my by-now-old-friend Major J.A. Anderson at Third Field who said, "What's the VIP Horseshit? This guy isn't even Vietnamese, he's a goddamn Chinese hitman!"

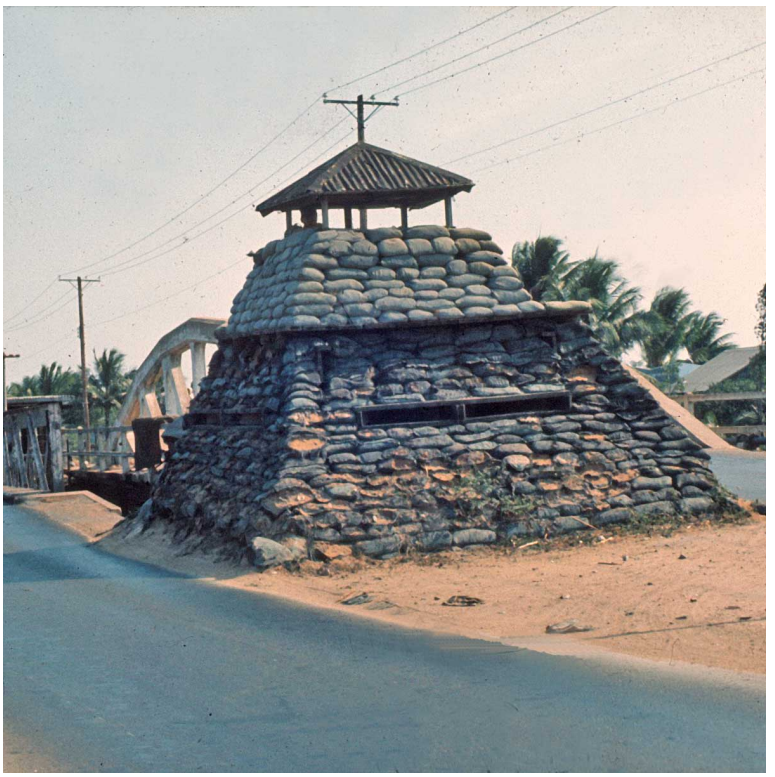
• • • • •

Two weeks later Mr. Hanh, who functioned as the cat's paw for Mr. Ai, came to see me. Mr. Hanh spoke little English, so he brought Lai, a Prew from Cambodia, who spoke English passably—apparently this wasn't a visit worthy of getting Huá. They said we were going Saigon to meet Mr. Ai at a restaurant. Their body language and mannerisms indicated it wasn't a subject for discussion. They weren't dressed for fancy dining out. Mr. Hanh was wearing a white T-shirt and same olive drab fatigue pants he used for flushing the Viet Cong from hiding. They were cleaner than usual but that was all. Lai wore a matching outfit.

Mr. Hanh at leisure

Mr. Hanh had an American jeep (it said U.S. Army on the side)—no American I knew had his own jeep. This appeared to be Mr. Hanh's personal transportation. We sped along in his open jeep (Mr. Hanh liked the top down)

at breakneck pace--or as breakneck as one could be on a two-lane congested road blocked by an occasional water buffalo in lust. We sailed past heavily fortified check points where guards were napping, and into Saigon proper.



Check Point on Saigon Road

Mr. Hanh finally stopped across from a hotel on Tu Do Street, a main thoroughfare where the nightlife action was found. Tu Do Street was widely known for its red-light district. Mr. Hanh jumped out of the jeep and started across to the hotel with Lai at his side while I lagged behind. "Hey, you left the keys in the ignition. Aren't you worried about it being stolen?" I called out.

"No sweat," said Lai, who pointed to the marquee above the hotel entrance. On top was a small man in camouflage greens was squatting. He was wearing a bright red scarf around his neck and holding an M-60 machine gun across his lap. Mr. Hanh had parking lot security par excellence.

Inside Mr. Hanh went directly to the dining room and told an obsequious waiter we were ordering drinks. I had the cheapest thing on the menu, ba-me-ba (Beer 33), while they ordered Charles Martell cognac. Mr. Hanh and Lai handed me the bar tab—as was their custom. We were there for a long time, almost two hours, drinking beer and cognac, but no sign of Mr. Ai. Poor Lai was in his cups and Mr. Hanh was mumbling something about helicopters in a brandy-slurred monotone. It was not a very intelligible nor interesting conversation we were having. Finally, I said, "Where is Mr. Ai? Why is he not here?"

Mr. Hanh said something to Lai, who in turn said, "Mr. Ai is in Cholon. He will be here soon."

Now I was mad. Cholon was where the call girls entertained high rollers. I said, "You mean I have to wait here while Mr. Ai goes 'Boom Boom' in Cholon!"

Mr. Hanh's eyes grew wide. "You not tell him we told you he in Cholon going 'Boom Boom'!"

"I think I tell him."

"You not tell him!"

"Oh, yes, I think I tell him Mr. Hanh say I wait while Mr. Ai go 'Boom Boom' in Cholon."

A very large pistol appeared in Mr. Hanh's hand. He pointed it across the table at me and Lai, and said, "I don't think you tell him." This was one of those Hallmark Moments for me and Lai. I think Lai was more frightened than I was (unlikely as that seemed at the time), but then he knew Mr. Hanh a lot better than I did. After all, I just thought of Mr. Hanh as a heavily armed, half-drunk sociopath with poor impulse control who had been provoked. In any event we all agreed that Mr. Ai was not to hear of this conversation.

When Mr. Ai did show up, he said nothing about being late and no one asked him. He and I talked for a while as we ate a late supper. It was difficult conversation because our interpreter, Lai, was pretty far-gone and Mr. Ai spoke no English. So Mr. Ai had the waiter send over a bar girl to interpret for

us. She of course ordered a glass of champagne for herself before beginning. She had a second glass and was ordering a third when Mr. Ai said something loud. I think he cancelled the order, because no one said anything more about drinks—even Mr. Hanh. I, for one, was pleased with this. It had become a very expensive bar tab.

The gist of the evening's conversation was that Mr. Ai was very pleased that his man was at the U.S. Army Hospital and getting well. Huá had told him how this happened. It was good that this had happened.

Then Mr. Ai said it was a very bad group that they fought that day—some didn't run and they had to kill them where they stood. They were not the usual VC—they were hard-core and very bad. They fought more like NVA, but they were VC.

He also said he enjoyed learning about Hippie philosophers and that sometime we should spend another evening talking about these things. He hoped I would remember the PRU when I went back to America, perhaps the Hippies would like to know about him.

Finally, Mr. Ai himself said in slow tortured English, "This for you—my friend, the very good Hippie. So you do not forget the Prew!" Then he gave me the VC battle flag they captured during the fight. I still have it in my dresser drawer.

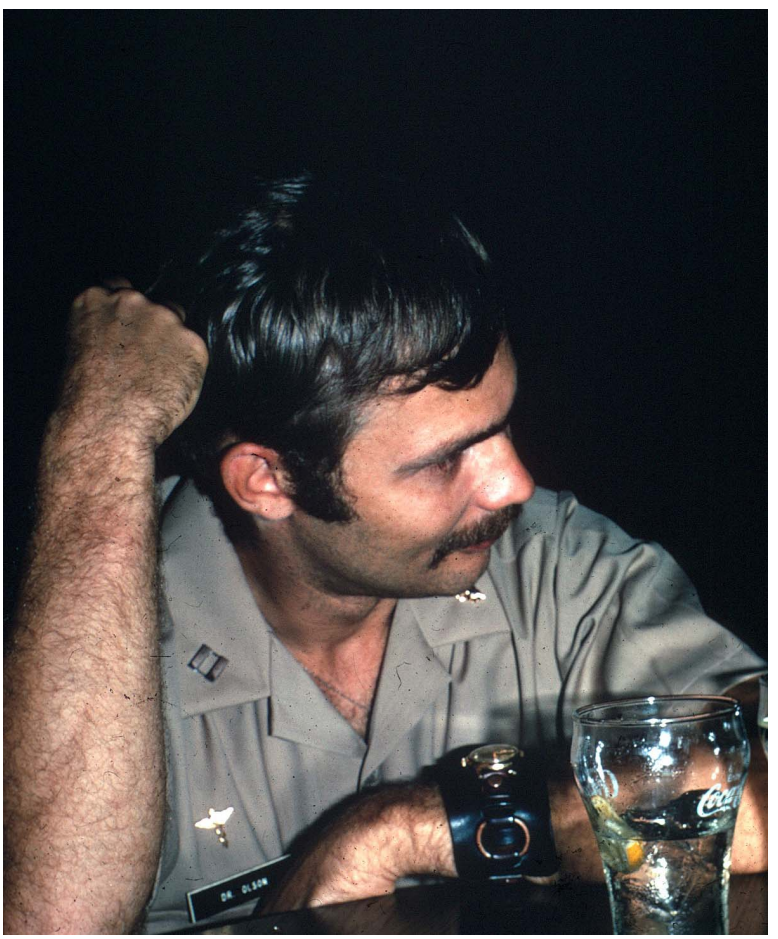
One Night at the Club…

There were a limited number of diversions at Nha Be. We could watch TV re-runs of *Leave it to Beaver* in the Officers Club—which was really an Officers Bar because no one ate or did anything else there—or you could go to the nightly officers' movie in a meeting room across the street. When I got my own TV set via a friend at the Base PX I could watch TV in my room. But there is no sense of camaraderie watching *Leave it to Beaver* in your room. So, like the others, I went to the O-Club or the movie almost every night. Drinks were cheap--20¢ for liquor and less for beer (except during Happy Hour when they were half price)—I'd give Co Phan a dollar and she'd give me two cold six packs to pass around at the movie. Social activities were quite limited here.

Co Phan: the bartender at the "O" Club

The USO shows didn't come to the boondocks; they only hit the big spots like Long Binh, the largest US Military Base in the world outside the US. I had been to Long Binh a couple of times. They had three movie theaters, a Chinese restaurant and grass grew behind white picket fences. You felt like you were back home in Georgia or a similar Southern state. We joked that this place was so big, that if Charlie fired a B-40 rocket over the fence he'd have to pick it up where it landed and fire it a second time if he hoped to reach the center of the base. If there was a secure place in Vietnam, it was Long Binh.

But every now and then Nha Be got a show—and when that happened it was a real diversion. Our shows weren't Bob Hope or American Movie stars, we got Filipino Bands and strippers. However, the bands were better than one would have thought; at least we thought they were terrific.



When a band played, the O-Club was crammed to the gills. Extra chairs had to be brought in and we were elbow to elbow—spectators were hanging from the rafters. But that added to the carnival atmosphere. It was a hot smoke-filled sweaty room with incredibly loud music and vocalists that did great imitations of American singers. For an hour or two you forgot about everything.

This was a good gig for these bands, too. Usually, they played to unusually appreciative audiences on successive nights—first for the Enlisted Men at the White Hat Club (the nickname for the E Club) and the next night at the O-Club.

Some of their best numbers were Country Western, but the very best were Johnny Cash hits. These bands wisely avoided acid rock and trying to imitate Creedence Clearwater or the Beatles.

Every performance ended with the same two numbers: Johnny Cash's 'Ring of Fire', which had special albeit grim significance for the combat troops and helicopter crews here:

I fell into a burning ring of fire
I went down,down,down
and the flames went higher.
And it burns,burns,burns
the ring of fire,
the ring of fire.

But Bobby Bane's "I Want to Go Home"—this was the absolute favorite. The crowd often sang along with each of these songs, and always with the latter. To this day I remember the lines:

…I dream about my mother,
dear old papa, sister and brother,
And I dream about that girl,
who's been waitin' for so long,
I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh Lord, I want to go home.

• • • • •

Some nights the band had a stripper. It was always a beautiful but heavily made-up Filipino girl dressed like a SE Asian version of a harem concubine. She did an exotic dance, pulling off one garment after the other until she was down to a halter-top and G-string. Then the stripper went into the crowd and pulled some poor half-drunk onto the makeshift stage—and tortured him by rubbing herself suggestively against his body while removing pieces of his clothing. All this to howls of approval from the frenzied audience.

This worked well unless the victim made a pass at her—usually this happened early on—then she pushed him from the stage and continued her dance, ending her performance wearing just her thong and twirling pasties. This was possible in the officer's club, because even half-in-the-bag officers would leave the stage after being chastised. In the enlisted men's club, it was a disaster. Often the rube resisted being dismissed and moved in for a coup de grâce—sometimes aided and abetted by his pals. Then the Shore Patrol waded in and the night's entertainment was terminated, despite catcalls and screams from the audience whose show was now truncated.

Finally, the show schedulers wised up and only had strippers at the O Club, much to the dismay of the enlisted men. And in addition, the schedulers pointed out "safe" targets for the stripper ahead of time—officers who would not be attacking her. Usually, they pointed to the chaplain and me.

The first time they nailed the chaplain he was so embarrassed he couldn't move. He just stood there looking like a deer in the headlights and turned deeper shades of red each time she removed portions of his clothing; finally, he bolted from the stage to the derisive cries of his sometimes-parishioners. It was a pathetic showing and I resolved to acquit myself better if ever she got her hands on me. And I didn't have to wait long. It happened the next time a band came to the base.

The stripper made a beeline for me as soon as she had reached the G-string halter-top phase of her act. My erstwhile friends bellowed encouragement to her as she dragged me onto the stage.

I began to understand what happened to the Chaplain—it was unnerving to be the center of attention for this jackal pack. But I was determined to make a better showing than the feckless Chaplain Thorne. My plan was to appear

totally disinterested, and that wasn't as easy as you would think—but I was resolute.

Once she had me in the middle of the stage, I simply stood there expressionless with arms folded across my chest—the audience started heckling me, but I held my ground.

She rubbed against me suggestively, but I stood firm—looking down at her with feigned distain as she unbuttoned my shirt.

Once she had my shirt open and off, I looked away—bored.

The audience booed.

She pulled my T-shirt over my head amid cries of encouragement from the crowd—and was even more provocative with her "rubbing."

I gave no reaction.

She rubbed her bare breasts against my naked chest—this was provocative, but I stood fast (barely) with an expressionless face.

Clearly frustrated, she went further!

She unbuckled my belt; I turned and with hooded eyes blew smoke from my cigarette in her face.

Mistake!

She turned livid, stared at me for just a second and then in one swift and deft motion the little vixen jerked down my pants and boxer shorts—all the way to my knees. I was essentially naked and in the middle of the stage.

A dozen flashbulbs lit up the room as my frenzied comrades-in-arms turned their cameras loose on this unexpected photo op.

I was momentary stunned and frozen, but only for a second or two. However, it was as second or two too long, because they nailed me with their Japanese

cameras (with built-in flash) as I was pulling up my boxer shorts. And in the photos, it's hard to tell if I'm pulling my shorts up or taking them down.

[Thirty-five years later I got a phone call from Larry Monahan, an internist in Virginia who was in that crowd, saying he was coming through Minneapolis and would like to visit with me and my family—and he had some photos to share with us. I knew in an instant (by his chuckle) which photo(s) he was talking about. Some bad moments have a life of their own.]

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After that evening I made sure that I was next to the door if a stripper was with the band—and I made a quick exit as soon as she started her performance.

And that was a good thing; because one night in May, just as a cute little Filipino girl was getting ready to take the stage I started edging toward the door when Corpsman Burris tapped me on the shoulder. Despite a wall-to-wall crowd he had little trouble finding me.

"Lieutenant! Come quick! Johnson's bringing in one of his bar girls, Co Che. She's cut bad. They're going to need you."

"How did you know where I was?"

"I figured you'd be at the O Club grappling with the stripper again." Apparently, there were no secrets in Nha Be, nor discretion amongst the officer corps.

"Not funny, Burris."

When I got to the dispensary Johnson was there with a girl who couldn't have been over 17 years old. She was one of the bar girls in town who, like the others served drinks in one of the tiny one-room "clubs", and if someone were to pony up 1000 piasters (about $3) she took him upstairs by a ladder leading to a hole in the ceiling, to a single Spartan room with a bare bulb on the ceiling and several mats on the floor. There she "showed him a good time". An all-night "good time" was only a little over $5, but only a few customers took the economy rate.

[Author's note: Of the men on base—officers and men, married and single—the only ones I knew for sure had never availed themselves of this activity were Chaplain Thorne and me: The Chaplain because he was a "wuss", and me because of an antiquated sense of responsibility. I was in charge of VD control in this town and could shut down a bar and bankrupt the owner. It would have been an egregious conflict of interest and morally bankrupt for me to "do business" with, or accept favors from, any of them.]

Co Che was one of Johnson's girls; over the months he had developed a paternalistic relationship with most of the prostitutes. He adjudicated their disputes, scolded them for bad behavior, took their Johnson Cards away when

they got VD and generally ran their lives as an Asian version of The Godfather. And like a Godfather, he looked after them, too. I may have been the titular head of the VD program, but Johnson was its heart and soul.

So, when a fight with broken beer bottles ended with a combatant bleeding profusely, Johnson, who was patrolling the strip of bars and clubs, was the first person called.

Johnson stopped the bleeding and sent a semi-sober sailor as a runner to the dispensary while Johnson contained the blood loss using a towel from the bar. Everyone "on the strip" was once again impressed with Johnson's power because within minutes an ambulance came screaming through the front gate to pick up Johnson and his charge.

They came back with siren blaring and blew past the security guards at the gate, who wisely stepped out of the way, right to the dispensary. I could hear them coming as soon as I stepped outside the O Club. Inside the club you wouldn't have heard the Tet Offensive. Had there been strippers at both the White Hat Club and the O Club that night, the Viet Cong could have taken the entire base without a shot being fired.

Burris and I got to the dispensary just after the ambulance unloaded Co Che and rushed her inside. Johnson had her placed in the larger treatment cubicle, that someone with a good sense of humor had dubbed the Operating Room.

She was a tiny thing, clad in black pajama bottoms and a colorful aqua-colored patterned shirt that was splattered with blood. Co Che was wide-eyed with fear and shaking visibly—like a rabbit in the grasp of a fox. She was scared—and justifiably so. A dirty white towel soaked in blood was wrapped around her left wrist.

Johnson looked up as Burris and I entered the tiny room, "Glad they found you, sir. Co Che here got in a fight with Co Than at the Light of Heaven Bar—she's cut on the wrist. I'm afraid it's the artery."

"Why do you think it's the artery?"

"Well, it was pumping blood in spurts—and the veins usually go as a constant flow."

"And you're right—as usual—Johnson."

"What can we do, sir? She's one of our girls you know."

This sounded like big trouble to me. But maybe we would be lucky. Maybe it is just an arteriole and not the radial artery—and we can stop it with prolonged compression. And I wasn't so sure about calling them "our girls".

"Keep holding it for another five minutes, Johnson, then we'll take a look. We could win big here if it's just a small arteriole."

It wasn't. As soon as Johnson removed the towel compression her radial artery sent a jet of blood almost two feet into the air and continued to spurt pulses of bright red blood until he re-applied the towel—and held it very tight.

"Damn!" exclaimed Johnson.

"She needs a vascular surgeon. She should go to Saigon," I said.

"They'll never take her at Third Field. They won't take VN military—they'll never treat a prostitute."

"Then she'll have to go to the Vietnamese Hospital."

"You can't send her there! They'll cut her arm off! That's what they did to that old man that Dr. Levine sent them last month. They don't do repairs—they do amputations!"

I took a long breath and finally said, "Get Jacobson."

"Aye Aye, Sir," said a visibly relieved HMC first class Johnson.

Jacobson was the new guy—well, relatively new, he'd been here three months. He had come from a stateside billet where he was a surgical assistant. He was very interested in any sort of surgery (especially eye surgery) and he was extremely good. This wasn't going to be eye surgery, but it wasn't going to be something we'd ever done before either. Jacobson could think on his feet—and

who knows, maybe he'd actually seen an artery being repaired and could coach me through it.

They found Jacobson at the White Hat Club. Fortunately, he had been hustling new arrivals at the pool table rather than quaffing quarts of beer—for which he was legendary.

Once on the scene Jacobson was his usual efficient self.

"Sir, I saw them repair an artery at Balboa (the giant Navy Hospital in San Diego), we can do this."

I felt great relief.

"Great news, Jacobson. What did they do and what do we need…"

"Well, once the abdomen was open…"

"Wait a minute, Jacobson, just which artery did you see them repair?"

"The aorta, sir."

"The aorta! That's a giant vessel and needs a graft and a heart pump and…Cripes Jacobson, this is a tiny peripheral artery."

"Yes sir, but the principles are the same—we won't have to worry about pumps and grafts and any of that stuff, so that's good. But we will have to suture the artery just like they did—only this could be a bitch because it's so small. But you can do it, sir. I know you can."

I felt a swell of pride that he seemed so sure I could do this, because I wasn't sure at all. The only artery I'd ever sewn together was as a medical student on a dog at Mt. Sinai Hospital—and it was a big artery, and it was a "bitch" as Jacobson said. This was tiny, tiny, tiny. It was one of those where the surgeons put their special magnifying glasses—jeweler's loupes. We sure didn't have any of those. But Johnson was right. They would cut her arm off at the Vietnamese Hospital. We'd seen it more than once—a seemingly minor problem and an extremity was removed. It was almost a certainty that they

wouldn't attempt a difficult arterial repair when they could do an easy amputation. It was better that she took her chances with us.

"O.K., Jacobson, get the stuff we'll need and let's get started."

"Aye Aye, sir. We don't have arterial suture as such, but we have some very fine nylon—it'll do, I'm sure it will hold."

"How are you going to do this?" asked Johnson, "How are you going to sew the artery together when every time I take off the towel it pumps geysers of blood? That'll be impossible."

"How about it, sir?" said a suddenly worried Corpsman Jacobson. "At Balboa they by-passed the aorta when they operated. You need to have a good look at the artery or there's no chance at all."

I had been thinking about this ever since the idea of us doing this arose. For sure we weren't bypassing anything, but they did operations at home where they couldn't tolerate blood in the operative field without doing bypasses. And they did them on extremities—knee surgery for example. I had seen the orthopedic surgeon remove pieces of loose cartilage from a knee. That guy told me how important it was that the joint not fill with blood when he was doing this. They had accomplished this with a special tourniquet on the thigh. We could do something like that.

"We'll put the blood pressure cuff on her upper arm and pump it up to 220 mm. That'll keep any blood from going into or leaving the forearm and wrist."

They seemed impressed. They must have thought I just conceived of the idea. Well, I wasn't about to dispel that impression. Best they thought I was really in control of things.

And so the operation commenced—and it was a "bitch". We figured we had about 20 minutes (30 max.) that we could completely disrupt blood flow to her hand without risk of ischemic injury. So there should be enough time. It sounded simple—but often things do until you try them. In this case there was trouble with an unexpected portion of the procedure.

Everyone held their breath as the BP cuff inflated to 220mm, and Johnson carefully removed the towel.

No bleeding from the wound! No bleeding at all.

Whew!

Then Jacobson and I cleaned the wound with an iodine antiseptic followed by sterile saline to flush it out. This was a pretty clean wound—I guess sharp glass does that. Things seemed to be going pretty well. And then disaster struck.

We couldn't find the artery!

There were some sinews of connective tissue and a torn palmaris longus tendon (at least I thought it was the palmaris longus) and some other stringy stuff. But it all looked pretty much alike. These things don't come labeled—or color-coded.

I was feeling anxious—but Jacobson wasn't. He was one cool guy—or at least he looked like it. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure he thought I was imperturbable, too. I think we were trying to fool each other.

Finally, Jacobson said, "You know these arteries are elastic—sometimes they pop back pretty far. Maybe we should look upstream, you know, a bit proximal to the wound opening."

"Good idea."

And I cut an inch or so towards the elbow—enlarging the wound.

And there it was. But we weren't done yet. Using our ersatz jury-rigged "atraumatic" clamps (to keep from injuring the tiny artery while we were working on it) Jacobson pulled both ends together and made it look easy. It wasn't.

Then I began suturing. I was filled with newfound respect for vascular surgeons. This seemed impossible. This artery was smaller than a soda straw and in the bottom of a small hole. Somehow, I was supposed to make a watertight connection without occluding the lumen.

Jacobson was wonderful—the consummate surgical assistant: Anticipating problems and always having equipment ready when we needed it—but for me most helpful was that he was an enthusiastic and effective cheerleader.

"Great work, Dr. Olson."

Then he would follow with, "Look out, I think you may have caught part of the tendon."

And then, "…we're getting this! We're going to actually do this. Great work."

And we did it.

Bob and Jacobson operating on Co Che

At the conclusion of this Rube Goldberg procedure, Johnson let the blood pressure cuff down very slowly. By this time word had spread and a half dozen corpsmen, Vietnamese and Americans, were crowded into our little space with overflow in the doorway. One tiny VN, "Alvin", was standing on a stool to peer over the others. A great cheer went up when no blood came from under the newly bandaged wrist and Co Che's hand turned pink.

For the remainder of that night, Jacobson and I were rock stars. We went with the American and Vietnamese corpsman to the White Hat Club where we drank beer and celebrated until the place closed.

Epilogue: A few years after returning to the U.S. I recounted this grand tale of bravado to my friend Leigh Iverson, a heart surgeon. He rained on my parade, telling me that she was young and strong and, in all probability, would have done fine if I had simply tied off the radial artery—there would be ample collateral flow from the ulnar artery. And sure enough in the late 1990's, coronary bypass surgeons began removing patient's radial arteries and re-implanting them in the chest as grafts in heart surgery. To be sure, they tested before-hand to ensure there is adequate blood flow provided by the ulnar artery. However, their patients are old and have diseased blood vessels, and still the majority of the time the radial artery can safely be removed.

But we didn't know that in March of 1971, and neither did the Vietnamese Hospital. I think Johnson was right; they would have amputated her arm. And the purpose of the story is not to lionize achievements. It is to convey what it felt like to "fly blind" so much of the time—and even though success seemed unlikely, you had to do the best you could. There was no other option. Sometimes the results were spectacularly gratifying—and often they were not.

And forty years later when visiting Leigh who is now retired and living in Carmel, he told me again, "You did the right thing!" And it still makes me feel good every time he tells me!

The Blue Boy

Every morning at sunrise the navy base at Nha Be held reveille. It is performed each morning on every military base round the world—no matter how desolate and remote. Men line up in formation with their companies and, while a bugle is playing an energetic melody, they salute the American flag as it is run up a flagpole. The tune is always the same, and it is called Reveille. The staccato refrain sounds a bit like, "I can't get 'em up, I can't get 'em up, I can't get 'em up in the morning…". The ritual is actually a rather nice ceremony; it reaffirms that all is still in order—a good way to the start the day.

At Nha Be our formation was held in the very center of the base where at the intersection of the two blacktopped roads an open space existed. Machine shops, enlisted men's barracks and the waterfront were to the east of this quadrangle and the officers' quarters and helicopter-landing pad to the west. To the north was a Quonset hut that served as a (seldom used) chapel while to the south was another Quonset-type building—the quite popular officers club bar. During reveille just after the flag was raised, with the men still with their unit and at attention, one-by-one in clockwise order each unit leader stepped forward and announced, "[Dispensary] all present and accounted for!" Paul Levine was usually our representative and it was a task quite to his liking.

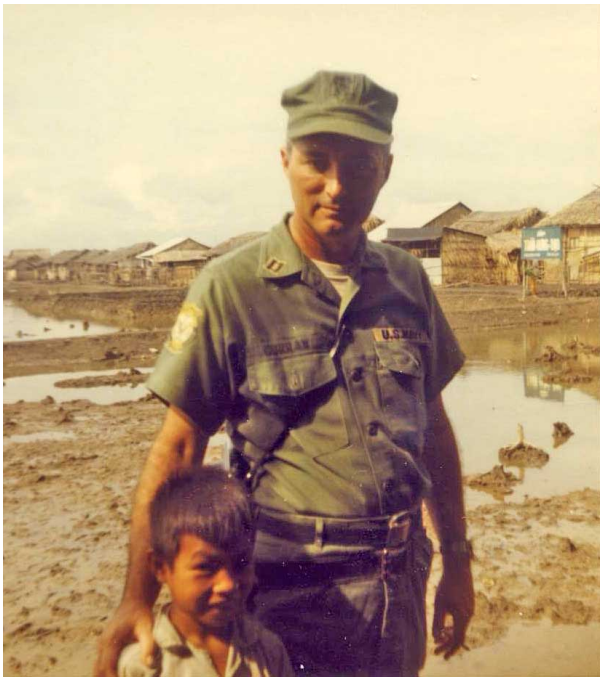
The Medical Dispensary at Nha Be

Once the formation/roll call/flag ritual was concluded, the assembly was formally dismissed and the men moved smartly, if chaotically, to their various duty stations. That is, all of them who weren't feeling ill. Those perceiving illness reported to "Sick Call" at the medical dispensary where they were triaged by corpsmen. Minor problems were dealt with and the men sent on their way. The sick were excused from work and returned to their barracks. Rarely was someone ill enough to require a physician's attention. This was particularly true in a combat zone. Young men don't get sick. To be sure, there were a few sore throats, hangovers and sunburns (and of course some cases of

VD filtered in each day), but little else. Sick call usually was over in an hour or less and because the PRU's (provincial reconnaissance unit—the primary assault force at Nha Be) fought only once or twice a week, there wasn't much to do for the rest of the day. So, we started seeing the Vietnamese nationals at Nha Be. It was a second Sick Call.

Villagers from miles around came to see the American doctors and get free medical care. The guards at the base gate let them pass unchallenged and the commanding officer looked the other way at this blatant breech of security. Ours was not the only Navy dispensary doing this and VN sick call became a huge success—so much so that the Marines started an official program to sponsor these activities. They called it Med Caps (Medical Civil Action Program). Med Caps took the concept to its logical conclusion: they flew medical teams by helicopter to isolated villages where the team spent the day rendering no-questions-asked care to anyone who came. Sometimes the Viet Cong came.

Itinerant physicians always wanted to tag along because these were often memorable outings. If nothing else, this was the unadorned Vietnamese culture, all but untouched by the meretricious effects of the occupying American Armed Forces. Even Captain Lineberry came (from Saigon)—once with a pair of visiting dignitaries. The visiting docs wanted to have their photographs taken "giving aid to the children". But after these carefully posed photo ops they occupied themselves elsewhere for the remainder of the day, taking pictures of fishermen in their sampans, children lining up for school and photogenic elders with betel nut stained teeth and skin that looked like tanned leather. Everyone seemed to enjoy coming into the villages as "good guys."



But these Med Cap sojourns were relatively infrequent events and we needed activity to keep our staff sharp. So, like several other dispensaries, we continued a sub rosa Vietnamese Sick Call—even after a moratorium was placed on military-base-medical-care-for-civilians. In December 1970, Military Assistance Command Viet Nam (MAC-V), the four-star general in charge of all military activities in Indochina, declared "all civilian medical care is to be turned over to the Vietnamese Government". The policy came straight from the Secretary of Defense. It was a good theory; turn over fighting the war and

running the country to the Vietnamese. But there were problems with the grand plan. In our case: there was no Vietnamese Medical community—especially for the armed forces. As far as we could determine it existed in name only. And I never met a Vietnamese Army or Navy doctor.

Now even passive-defiant personality types (quite common among physicians) didn't want to be caught disobeying a direct order, at least we didn't want to be easily caught disobeying a direct order. So, each villager appearing at sick call was assigned an "American name" —and then we simply logged them in as if they were civilian U.S. workers in need of emergency medical treatment. Paul Levine, the goody two-shoes, was very uncomfortable with this concept. At times I think he had too much "respect for authority". Paul clearly had bought into the military system, at least for now; the rest of us were more or less tolerating (at times chaffing under) the guidance of our commanders in

Saigon. I looked at this benign ruse as "helping MAC-V refine the directive". They weren't going to send us to Ft. Leavenworth for immunizing children against polio.

Nonetheless, all was made better when Bob Subers arrived fresh from Solid Anchor, the most storied (and remote) navy base in Viet Nam, and started his VN Navy Corpsman Training Program. Bob was a phenom at working the Navy system—he filed documents in Saigon with the witless Captain William T. Lineberry, putative commander of US Naval medical activity in Viet Nam, describing a comprehensive educational program of sizeable proportions. While in point of fact we had six VN Corpsmen (seven if you count Huá who worked with the Chinese mercenaries—the PRU).

But Captain Lineberry, who never visited the outlying dispensaries (thank goodness), was very pleased. When lunching with his pals at the posh Circle Sportif athletic club in Saigon the captain often boasted about "his" program to turn over medical care to the Vietnamese Navy. Suddenly we were supposed to take care of Vietnamese nationals—Bob Subers was a genius. The Nha Be Dispensary was at the cutting edge of Nixon's "Vietnamization" plan—the Exit Strategy for Viet Nam. Paul Levine was much happier after that.

Our Vietnamese Sick Call never seemed to get another name, although Bob Subers had concocted a catchy moniker when he filed his papers with Captain Lineberry—something like "Partners in Caring", a title that would play well with the bureaucrats when they in turn filed their reports. To us it was always VN Sick Call. And it grew by leaps and bounds once we had our Vietnamese Navy trainees on the job.

Under the aegis of the United States, the Vietnamese Navy became the third or fourth largest in the world, if you go by number of vessels under command. The US Navy was in the process of turning over hundreds of small craft for patrolling the inland waterways—the Swift Boats and the PBR's (a smaller but more maneuverable Swift Boat). However, the Vietnamese Navy had no medical corps—they didn't even have full time doctors. Most of the physicians (and especially the specialists and surgeons) left Indochina for Paris shortly after the war began, and they weren't about to return. The few remaining doctors were assigned billets in Saigon, like the new Vietnamese Navy Hospital in Saigon where they stopped by for an hour or so in the late morning—and then returned to their lucrative private practices. No one had

heard of a Vietnamese doctor venturing outside the confines of Saigon. So, for practical purposes the VN corpsmen were fated to become independent practitioners. It was an alarming thought.

Our VN corpsmen were a happy-go-lucky lot. They wore dark blue bell-bottom dungarees with pale blue short-sleeved shirts. An emblem designating their rank and duty (in this case a caduceus—for medicine) was the only adornment. All but Chieu, the lead corpsman, were very young and looked even younger. They were probably the same age as our beginner corpsmen, 18

or 19 years old, but in America they could have passed for Junior High students. Thieu and Doan were a particularly memorable pair. They were inseparable, always smiling and energetically playful. We called them "Theodore and Alvin".

All told, there were six corpsmen. Five of them attended the Vietnamese sailors and civilians (in the same "sick call"), each with an American corpsman partner-overseer. For the most part this was a good system, but the American doctors were consulted far more than with the American sick call. Although

the enlisted men had the same problems as our enlisted, the older civilians posed a difficulty. Some of them had chronic and serious diseases. This is how Paul Levine started the Thursday Afternoon Leprosy Clinic. No corpsman, American or Vietnamese, wanted to touch (literally) the lepers, so Paul had this all to himself. Paul didn't touch them a lot either.

One day during our Vietnamese sick call, Johnson, my trusty VD corpsman, came to my tiny office to announce, "One of 'our girls' is here with her little brother."

Somehow Co Che had bypassed the queue of Vietnamese civilians and come directly to Johnson, who was now a respected authority figure in town. Apparently Co Che's brother had been ill his whole life, but was now getting worse. Her father instructed her to bring him to the American Dispensary. She insisted on seeing Johnson—the personal physician to the ladies of the night.

After making this announcement Johnson just stood there.

"So, help them," I said, "it's OK with me if you see the boy."

"I did see him, but I don't know what's wrong; he looks funny."

"Funny?"

"Ya, he's real small and kind of dusky—and he doesn't move around a lot."

Johnson was no one's fool. If he said the child was "funny looking"—he probably was. Whatever that meant.

"Bring the kid in here."

Nguyen Van Dang

The boy's name was Nguyen Van Dang and he was 10 years old. Dang was very small (about the size of a six-year-old) and he was funny looking. His lips and blunt-spoon-shaped fingertips were blue—and he seemed to prefer squatting to standing. It was obvious he had something very bad—like a congenitally deformed heart. And after listening to his chest, it was certain, he was what they used to call a "blue baby".

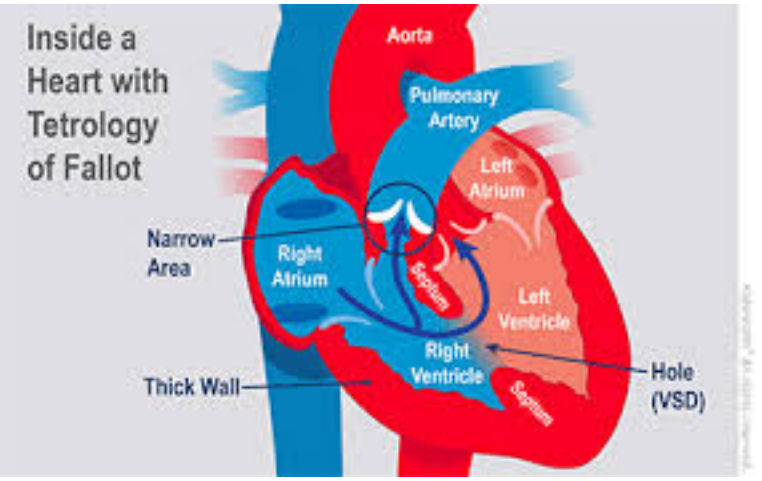
Pediatric cardiology wasn't exactly my strong suit and figuring out just what kind of heart problem he had wasn't going to be easy. During my rotation on cardiology at the University, Dr. Wang terrorized me (and a lot of other residents) in his congenital heart disease clinic. Dr. Wang wouldn't let us look at the patient records; he told us to examine the patients and figure out what the diagnosis was. The clinic was a bear. Eventually we came up with the diagnosis (well, most of the time anyway); but almost always we needed a number of hints to do it.

Our diagnostic equipment at Nha Be was not what you would call state-of-the-art, and there wasn't much of it. We weren't going to have as much information as Dr. Wang would give his residents—and we didn't have Dr. Wang either. Our EKG machine worked, and we had an old X-ray machine we used for finding broken bones and bullet fragments—when it was working. We could get a chest X-ray. Our barebones lab wasn't going to help us much. We could check his hemoglobin and analyze urine specimens. We also could do swabs for VD and strep throat but that wasn't going to help us here. Compared to a heart center with a cath lab (even a 1970's cath lab), sophisticated X-rays, chemistry laboratories that could measure blood oxygen, and pediatric cardiologists who knew what they were doing—we didn't have much to work with.

Nonetheless after Paul Levine, who aspired to be an adult cardiologist one day, and I went over our paltry data we were pretty sure he had Tetralogy of Fallot—or something very like it. Dang had been born with two heart defects: (1) the valve sending blood to the lungs was too tight and (2) there was a hole in the wall between the right and left sides of his heart. Most of the blood reaching his heart bypassed the tight valve—and consequently the lungs. It took a short cut through the hole between the two sides of his heart. From there it went directly out to be re-circulated without being replenished with oxygen. When it got to the peripheral tissues the little oxygen remaining was removed and the blood turned blue. Blood without oxygen turns blue—sometimes this

blue tint can be observed though the skin. And places very far from the heart will look bluest, the fingers and the lips for example. Dang's lips and fingers were very blue.

He had other characteristic findings of Tetralogy, too: poor exercise tolerance, he squatted when he rested (a position assumed by children with serious heart defects), and he had two distinct heart murmurs. One of pulmonary stenosis (the tight valve) and the other of a ventricular septal defect (the hole in the heart). His EKG and chest X-ray looked like Tetralogy, too



This was a surgically correctable abnormality. Left untreated it guaranteed progressive disability and an early death. This was something the thoracic surgeons at the Army Hospital should be able to fix. Several university centers in the U.S. were doing this corrective surgery in 1970, and the young surgeons over here were fresh out of training. They may welcome a case like his. It was worth pursuing.

I told Co Che to have the boy available on Wednesday when Huá could go with me to the Third Field Hospital in Saigon. Huá, the corpsman/interpreter for the Chinese mercenaries was the man you wanted if translating accurately was important.

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On Wednesday morning Huá and I requisitioned a car from the motor pool (the petty officer in charge was a pal of Corpsman Johnson) and set off for the outskirts of Saigon where Co Che and her brother lived. It was always an interesting journey down the narrow two-lane black top road across the rice paddies. It was like driving along a dike, a slender roadway with no shoulders and flooded fields each side. Periodically we passed a family graveyard marked by a whitewashed cement fence surrounding a one-foot-high dirt plateau. On these plateaus rose individual graves mounded higher still to keep them above the water table. A few gravesites were covered with cut flowers, but most were plain caked-mud mounds.

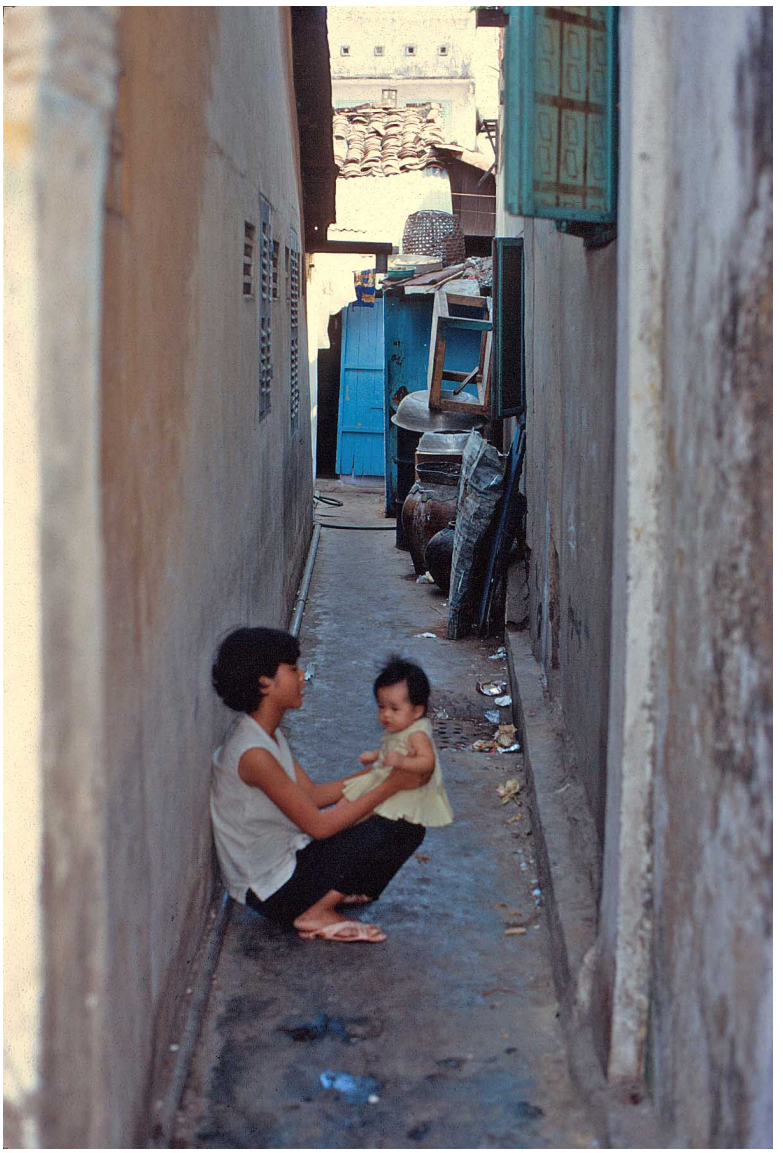
Alleyway en route to Dang's house

It was many miles to Saigon and there were checkpoints along the way. "Pill boxes" with machine guns protruding from narrow slots in sandbagged walls stood in the center of the pavement, but the guards never seemed to stop people. Traffic snarls were commonplace. Frequently long lines of cars just stopped, and no one moved for 20 minutes. This was not surprising, seeing there were no shoulders on the road where a distressed motorist could change a flat tire. They made repairs in the middle of the roadway while cars waited patiently (or impatiently) behind.

Eventually we left the Rung Sat and encountered intersecting roads—but few if any were paved. Traffic remained just as congested despite other possible alternate routes. Shortly before reaching the River marking the entry to Saigon, Huá told me to turn off the highway and proceed down an unmarked side street.

I have no idea how the Vietnamese found where people lived—there didn't seem to be any street signs once you got out of Saigon proper. But they did. To get to Nguyen Van Dang's house we parked our vehicle by an ersatz sidewalk cafe and walked single file down a narrow alleyway, which intersected with two other alleyways.

We chose a still narrower one (about three feet wide) and near the end of this cul-de-sac was their home. The homes in this pocket were made of cinderblock painted white and they shared common walls. It was rather like an Asian Pueblo—but on one level.



An alleyway in a Vietnamese residential area

At Dang's, eight people lived in four rooms: a tiny kitchen with a charcoal stove, one 8 x 10 family/sitting room, and two bedrooms. A very large futon-type bed and a mesh hammock were in the larger room, and a similar but smaller futon in the other. Nguyen Van Dang shared these bedrooms with Co Che, his seventeen-year-old sister (our bar girl) who was the largest breadwinner in the family, a younger sister, an older brother, his mother and father and two grandparents.

The kitchen

They were a Catholic family and had a picture of the Virgin Mary prominently displayed on the wall. The entire family was there to greet us, and Dang's mother offered tea. We weren't in a hurry, and Huá said it would be good to have tea with them, so we did. Huá and I were joined by Dang's father Ut and Dang's grandfather, whose name I never heard. The women and children stood quietly and watched.

We were offered small cakes, which were actually quite good despite being dreadfully sweet, and engaged in a bit of small talk. Ut drove a cement truck for a living and the older children—Co Che and her brother Thieu—had jobs and helped support the family. I knew what Co Che did, but despite wondering what sort of job her brother had, I thought it best not to inquire. After thirty minutes or so, Huá said we could leave and still be polite.

Brothers, Sister and Mom... with babies.

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The Third Field Hospital was on the other side of Saigon and getting there could be exciting. This was major league driving. Traffic was heavy and fierce—literally fierce. Aggressive drivers were just as common here as in Paris, but in Saigon often they were heavily armed. There were no stop signs. Traffic at major intersections was controlled by traffic circles—the influence of a hundred years of French rule. Cars and motorcycles jockeyed for position in one giant game of "chicken" as they made their way around the circle, hoping to get a clear shot at their intended exit on the first lap. At smaller intersections occasionally there was the other form of Saigon traffic control—the white mice. These were the civilian policemen who wore blue pants with a black stripe down the side, short-sleeved white shirts adorned with black shoulder boards indicating their rank, and black-visored white "policeman" hats. Their tiny physiques and omni-present white gloves gave them a Mickey Mouse look, and in all probability was the source of their almost pejorative sobriquet.

On this day we came to just such an intersection where a "white mouse" stood in an elevated white wooden booth placed in the center of the intersection. He was visible only from the waist up. From his perch several feet above street level he could be seen from all directions; he directed the flow of traffic by a series of universally understood hand signals. But we learned a new one this day. He raised a palm to our lane indicating we were to stop—which we did. Then he looked to his right and gave them the crooked-arm-proceed sign. As he did this a tiny Honda motorcycle at the curb next to our lane began a right-hand turn. The policeman's head pivoted in a flash, he blew his whistle, and pointed a white-gloved hand—index finger extended—in accusatory gesture at the errant cyclist. The cyclist froze, then slowly backed his motorcycle to place where he began his ill-advised turn. The policeman returned to shepherding traffic from other directions; and when he became occupied with snarled vehicles, the cyclist quietly started his turn anew. In an instant, an ear-splitting whistle cut through the air and all traffic stopped. Whistle between his teeth, the white mouse was staring our way again, only this time a pistol was in his hand and he was drawing a bead on the Honda driver. The chastised (and fearful) motorcyclist meekly retraced his steps to his original position beside us and stared self-consciously at the ground in front of him—thankful to have escaped frontier justice.

We proceeded slowly (and cautiously) to the Third Field Hospital.
Third Field was the quintessential American Evac[uation] Hospital. A single-story sprawling complex of white clapboard buildings—classic American Army design. Covered walkways provided protection from both rain and sun for those going from one building to adjacent ones. Much of it was air-conditioned, a luxury afforded most hospital complexes, even small remote dispensaries like Nha Be.

I had seen their triage area in the past, and it was impressive. Next to a large helo pad that could handle multiple helicopters simultaneously, the triage area was an open-air affair with a fifteen-foot-high "ceiling". There were no walls, so it resembled a sideless tent made of rather permanent material—wood and steel. Under this canopy were two dozen pairs of metal "sawhorses", each pair ready to support a stretcher when corpsmen raced the wounded from the dust-off helicopters to the triage teams. Dangling from the ceiling over each designated stretcher site was a cable with a contraption on the end that looked like a blunt-tined grappling hook. I was to learn its function was to hang blood and bottles of I.V. fluids—the standard hospital I.V. pole was an impediment to

rapidly moving medical personnel when this place was in action. But even standing idle, just waiting for in-coming emergencies, this was an impressive place.

Third Field Hospital Triage Area — adjacent to helicopter landing pad.

Today we only glanced at the Triage Center and headed for the administration office. Administration was in one of the single-story white buildings woven together by the covered breezeways. Not surprisingly, all of administration was air-conditioned—it was the same back home. This turned out to be a strange encounter. All the people stationed at headquarters for the Third Field

Hospital (in the heart of Saigon) were wearing camouflage outfits (fatigue-style) and combat boots. I was wearing a freshly pressed tailored-khaki uniform and spit-shined shoes (Corpsman Johnson had shined my shoes for me—saying it was going to be important to "look military").

The administration office was a bustle of activity, at least for Viet Nam it was a bustle of activity. Fatigue-clad clerks typed away behind their desks, others walked briskly about in canvas-and-leather boots (with steel shanks in the soles to protect them from Punji sticks) importantly carrying sheaves of papers in hand. All were neatly groomed and had close-cropped hair. It seemed comical to have all these ready-for-combat grim faced soldiers filing paperwork in the heart of a "safe" city.

Huá and I with Dang in tow approached the man at the nearest desk and asked where we could find the chest surgeons. But before I could tell him why, he replied with impassive aloofness, "The Surgery Outpatient Clinic—third unit on the left," never varying the cadence in his monotonous typing. But he looked up and called out after us, "They don't see civilians."

The Surgery Outpatient Clinic was quiet that afternoon, only a half dozen people were in its spacious waiting area—most of them smoking. I told the nurse (the first white woman I had seen in some time) that I was a Navy doctor and wanted to talk to one of the chest surgeons about a patient. I was trying to be charming, but she was having none of it. She wasn't exactly a knockout—and olive drab (for some reason they had olive drab rather than camouflage in this clinic) baggy fatigues aren't very flattering—but she was a "round eye woman" and probably had been hit on by half the young men coming through here.

"Back through there—offices at the end of the hall."

Huá, Dang and I trudged down the narrow corridor to the very end where a sign next to an office said, "Major J.A. Anderson—Thoracic Surgery". Inside, wearing a white coat over a light green scrub suit, was the chest surgeon. He was short and swarthy (for some reason I expected J.A. Anderson to be a tall Norwegian type) and he looked bored. He was reading a Pace catalog, checking the price of stereos—a very popular pastime in Viet Nam. Evidently there weren't any outpatients with chest problems today.

I rapped on the doorjamb lightly to get his attention. He didn't look up as he said, "Come in."

We plopped into chairs in front of his gray steel desk stacked with paperback novels, magazines and catalogs—apparently, he did a lot of reading for fun in here.

"Hi, my name's Bob Olson. Are you a chest surgeon?"

"Jim Anderson. And I am a thoracic surgeon—only here cause I'm a jack-of-all-trades trauma surgeon. What can I do for you?"

"Well, one of our bar girls out in Nha Be, that's in the Rung Sat, brought her little brother to see us."

"What's a Rung Sat?"

"It's a mangrove swamp between Saigon and the ocean. The Saigon River goes through it. Our Navy patrols it with Swift Boats. The Vietnamese tell me Rung Sat means 'Forest of Assassins'—pretty romantic, huh?"

"So why are you here?"

"Well, this is the boy," pushing a suddenly shy Dang out in front of Anderson's desk. "We think he has Tetralogy of Fallot."

Major Anderson came around the desk and held Dang's hands in his, examining his blue fingers. Then he quickly took out his stethoscope and began to listen to his chest; but paused to feel the "thrill"—a palpable shuddering sensation that occurs when blood under high pressure is forced through a small hole in the heart.

"He sure could have Tetralogy," he said.

My heart jumped; he was interested; it looked like we could do this.

It was not to be however.

Major Anderson quickly added, "But we can't help you."

"Why not?"

"MAC-V's new directive says 'no more Vietnamese civilians—period.'"

"But that's just about sick calls and treating the ARVN military personnel."

"No, it's for everything, now. Last week we tried to do a T-E fistula in a baby—just like that guy Hawkeye in that movie M*A*S*H, the one about army docs that came out last summer. You see it?"

"Yeah, everyone's seen it—they even have it over here."

"Anyway, the bird colonel in charge of Third Field—a "lifer"[career military]—came and shut us down. We didn't have any congressman to call like those guys in the movie did. This isn't like the movies—we just can't do that stuff. Why don't you send him stateside?"

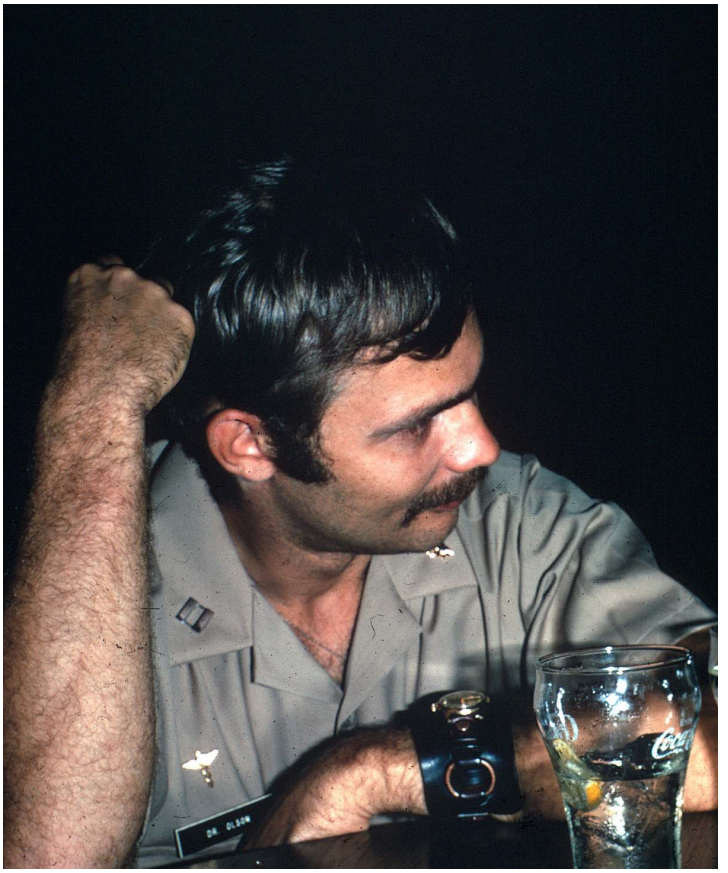
"How can I do that?"

"I don't know," he said, "I only know we can't do it here."

We left discouraged to say the least. Major Anderson was a pleasant man, but he left no doubt that they weren't going to buck the system here. And in all honesty, he probably couldn't. It's one thing to gull them into C-sections on women with "undeliverable" babies—quick life-saving operations late at night—and quite another to gear up for a complex "elective" surgery requiring a protracted post op hospital stay. But doctors are supposed to be a breed apart—even career military doctors. They might be a bit nerdy, but they are supposed to be clever and resourceful and able to plot and scheme their way around the bureaucrats. "Do the right thing now and apologize later." This was a bitter pill to swallow.

We dropped Dang off at his home and retraced our path to Nha Be. Huá took off for the PRU compound and I went to the officers club. It was only four-thirty, so only the bar flies were there. Distracted, I forgot to take off my hat after walking in and the drunks were all over this breech of decorum—they rang the bell behind the bar. That meant a round for the house—paid for by the miscreant rude enough to enter the club "covered." During Happy Hour in San

Diego it would have been a pricey proposition. Here, drinks were twenty cents so it was more of an annoyance than a financial blow. But now I was really bummed—outmaneuvered by a bunch of semi-alcoholics. Placing a dollar on the bar, I paid for the drinks and got two cans of PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon—a play on the name of the assault boats) and moved to a table by myself far from the others.



I sulked alone, musing about a number of scenarios. Most centered on things-I-should-have-said-to-the-bird-colonel at Third Field—if only I had met him. Soon I needed two more beers and my mind wandered further afield with Walter Mitty pipe dreams about being like Hawkeye Pierce and able to do the surgery myself. Somehow out of all this came an idea of how to get around this capricious MAC-V directive. I could emulate M*A*S*H. I could write my Congressman and ask him to intercede.

Writing your congressman was a strict *no-no* among the regulars over here. They went bats when they heard someone wrote a congressman who was now interested in a particular individual or problem. And the lifers had ways of making life miserable for enlisted men who did this. The response to an *officer* who engaged in such taboo could only be imagined. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed appropriate to make those turkeys who were responsible for this uncomfortable with their decisions—even if nothing else could be done. After all, what could they do to me—they couldn't send me to Viet Nam, I was already there! And so, in a pot-valiant moment of bravado I stomped over to my room and wrote a letter to my Congressman, Don Fraser…and crossed the Rubicon.

Don Fraser

Less than a week later a letter arrived from the Office of Congressman Donald Fraser. I opened it with great anticipation. My hopes went up a notch when I saw it was written and signed by Don Fraser himself. Unfortunately, it went downhill after that.

Congressman Fraser wrote saying: "[he] had a hard time believing that America's policy was to refuse medical care to a dying child, but [he] had personally checked with the Department of Defense and it was true. The

Administration's Vietnamization Policy was just that." But, he went on, "do not give up quite yet". He would check with (Senator) Hubert Humphrey to see if there were other options.

This was a bummer. I had hoped that he could place a few calls and get the policy waived in this special case. But I suppose Democrats didn't have much clout with a Republican administration. Maybe I should have written to President Nixon? This was looking like a dead end.

In a fit of pique and depression I wrote my girlfriend Patsy and recounted the initial elation at making a diagnosis of Tetralogy of Fallot and the plan to send the boy to the Army Hospital in Saigon to get it corrected; followed by despair when I learned it couldn't be done. I felt better after the catharsis of writing, and glumly went back to my daily routine. And with each passing day that I didn't hear from Congressman Fraser's Office my hopes for Dang sank lower.

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Letter writing was quite popular in Vietnam. Congress had given the serviceman franking privileges—meaning we didn't have to put stamps on our letters, we just wrote "FREE" in the upper right-hand corner of the envelope. Everyone liked getting mail and there was quite a bit of social stature to be gained by receiving a lot of mail—especially prized were letters addressed in feminine handwriting. But to get letters you had to send letters. Not everyone to whom you wrote would reply—and fewer still would reply promptly.

Women are much better at correspondence than men and often they send little presents, too. Consequently, I wrote regularly to my mother, both of my sisters-in-law, to Patsy and to my nieces, but only occasionally to Livia Ross—a Pathologist at Highland Hospital who considered herself my Godmother. Livia became so agitated in her letters—railing against the war and the government—that it seemed best not to stir her up very often. Livia was born in Czechoslovakia in 1931. When she was thirteen the Nazis sent her entire family to Auschwitz. Only Livia survived. Two days before I left for Vietnam she gave me a sterling silver Star of David on a small chain. Livia made me promise to wear it around my neck while I was in Asia—she implied that somehow it would keep me safe. It did. It is priceless. I now keep it in my

safety deposit box. With this group and a couple of other more casual letter-writing friends I had a very steady stream of mail arriving.

Delivery of the mail was ritualistic. A representative from each work unit went to the post office each afternoon. At 2 PM they neatly queued outside; but when the clerks opened the mailroom doors, discipline deteriorated and they pressed forward as a frenzied mob. The postal clerks were immune to this. They calmly handed out the mail sacks in the order they had sorted them no matter who was in the front of the line. Nevertheless, each day when the line formed, hope sprung anew that if you were first in line you would get your sack first.

Our corpsman Robbie loved getting the mail. He acted like Santa Claus when he returned to the dispensary. Robbie stood on a table with the mail sack at his feet and shouted, "Mail call!"

The other corpsmen were like moths drawn to the flame, surrounding the table instantly—anxious to learn if they had a letter from home. Robbie drew out the letters one at a time, calling out the names in his finest stentorian voice as he read the envelopes. Sometimes he was excruciatingly deliberate and often he would make a leering comment or two ("smells like expensive perfume—must be for Lt. Levine" or, "This one has beer spilled on it, must be for the chief") to the catcalls of his fans. Robbie loved this and had a knack for it; he was a born showman.

Ten days after my forlorn letter to Patsy I got her response to my message. It was a bombshell.

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In April of 1970 Patsy was a nurses' aide on station 45 at the University Hospital. Actually, she was a college junior who was working her way through school at the University and nurses' aide was a good job for her. It was what she liked to do and it would look good on her resumé.

Patsy wore a platinum blond wig over her perfectly fine ash blond hair—but wigs like this were all the rage and she was part of the scene. She was young, 22; and with perfect skin, a great figure plus blue sparkling eyes and a smile that lit up the room. She was stunning.

I first noticed her when I looked in on the nursing report at 11PM and saw a bunch of attractive young things mixed in with the regular mature nurses. Clearly Patsy was a ringleader of the Young Turks—undoubtedly because she was so vivacious. Within 24 hours I had contrived to have a conversation with her—that wasn't hard, she was affable to a fault. Within a week we were dating and two weeks later she asked me to visit her at her Sorority House. She was "Acting House Mother" for the weekend. Apparently, you only needed to be over 21 to fulfill the requirements for the job--and I think the other girls chose her because they thought she would be permissive.

They were right.

After that I went out with Patsy every chance I got. I had never had a girlfriend like this. She was absolutely spontaneous and fearless. We did crazy things. We went to nightclubs with my brother Tom and his wife Mary. We had showgirls at the Three Little Foxes Room dance on our tabletop. Tom, who was as irrepressible as Patsy, told the waitress it was my birthday (it wasn't) and

after the dancing girls sang Happy Birthday to me people at other tables started sending over drinks. Sometimes Patsy and Mary made dinner for us (although I think this was mainly Mary). Patsy made art projects for me--clever little photo booklets of our shared activities. Every day there was something new and exciting.

But I was going to Vietnam in a few weeks, and I couldn't make commitments—that wouldn't be fair to anyone. My friend Penny married Steve Thuet just before he went; ten weeks later Steve was killed by a land mine. I don't think Penny ever recovered. Fortunately, Patsy didn't ask me for any promises (she may secretly have wanted some mutual understanding but we never talked about it)—she just asked me to be there for today. And our todays were wonderful—it was a fairy tale world.

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Robbie didn't make much of my letter from Patsy—he only noted, "the Doc has another letter from a woman—how many is he carrying on with anyway? Still waters run deep!"

A chorus of guffaws erupted from his adoring groupies as I lamely tried to explain the letters were from my mother and my nieces.

Once I saw it was from Patsy, I hightailed it back to my room in the BOQ and shut the door so I could truly appreciate a little bit of sunshine from home. Patsy was as ebullient in her letters as she was in person. You couldn't help but smile as you read them. Even inane day-to-day events were described with enthusiastic gusto.

But this wasn't any casual-but-cheerful letter. Patsy had spoken to Arnie Leonard, Chief of Pediatric Surgery! She knew his daughter and was a frequent guest at their home. She told him about Nguyen Van Dang and how she and I needed Dr. Leonard's help with this—Patsy can be quite persuasive. Arnie Leonard for his part is no shrinking violet, and not one to let grass grow under his feet. He in turn spoke to Aldo Castaneda, the pediatric heart surgeon, who agreed to operate free of charge—and the Variety Club said they would underwrite the hospital expenses!

This was a miracle. A few minutes ago there was no letter from Don Fraser and I resigned myself to accept that nothing was going to happen—now everything was turned on its head. I re-read Patsy's letter and my mind began to race. I needed to write back immediately—I needed to learn what arrangements they would make and which I would do. For instance, transportation to America—and a passport and a visa and…

Aldo Castaneda

We needed to fly the boy and his mother to Minnesota, so we would need a plane ticket and visas. The passports and visas shouldn't be much of a problem—just a little paperwork (Oh my goodness, was I wrong!); but plane tickets could be a problem. Perhaps Don Fraser could get them a flight on a military transport. I would write him.

The letters were flying back and forth now and I became so anxious that one day I told Robbie I wanted to get the dispensary mailbag. Although making arrangements was supposed to be sub rosa negotiation everyone seemed to know that I was in contact with the University of Minnesota—and a congressman. Paul Levine told Subers who told… . Robbie smiled and said, "Great, Doc. I'm kind of tied up right now anyway. But if you need someone to hand it out when you get back, I'll be available."

The Post Office was closed much of the time—open only for an hour or so in the morning for mailing packages and buying money orders, and at "mail call" in the afternoon for another hour.

There was a neat queue of sailors awaiting the opening of the doors in keeping with military fashion as usual. And once the doors opened it was a mad rush to be the first in line at the desk, but all in vain. The Postal Clerks handed out the mail sacks in the order they had aligned them.

I grabbed the mail sack for the Dispensary and hustled back to the Clinic—and turned it over to Robbie to distribute. Sure enough, there was a letter from Don Fraser! I retreated to the doctor's office and closed the door before carefully opening it.

Good news! Don Fraser had written it himself and said Senator Hubert Humphrey reached out to Northwest Airlines (which at the time was headquartered in Minneapolis) and they had agreed to fly Dang and his mother free from Hong Kong to Minneapolis. They had no regular service to Vietnam. So I had to get them to Hong Kong.

It turned out that wasn't as big a problem as I thought it would be.

A grizzled Chief Petty Officer came to me and said the Chiefs would run a raffle on the base to get funds to send the boy and his mom to Hong Kong. I had thought I was rather secretive in making arrangements (and about my problems along the way) but it seemed that everyone seemed to know what was going on and were eager to help!

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So it was time for Huá and me to visit the family and begin arrangements for visas and passports for Dang and his mother. I checked out a car at the motor pool and Huá and I set off for Saigon.

On the outskirts of town Huá had me take a turn down a different narrow street and then again at an even narrower one. I have no idea how he knew where to go; there were no street signs! Huá did a lot of amazing things—so I didn't even ask.

Soon he said to park the car at the end of a cul de sac, and we proceeded down a labyrinthine series of narrow walkways between whitewashed walls until we came upon the doorway of Dang's home.

Again, I saw the cramped series of rooms—two for sleeping (Dang, his brothers and sisters and parents — plus grandpa).

The bedroom

They were expecting us. We sat down with Dang's family and were served tea. I told them (via Huá) the good news, that we had obtained transportation for Dang and his mother to go to America. But then came a shocker—the family was adamant that Dang must go with his father (Nguyen Van Ut)!

Huá also was stunned. He shook his head in bewilderment as he relayed the information to me. This was going to be a real problem—to get a man of military service age out of the country.

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The next day Huá met me again and we went off to get exit visas and passports with Ut and Dang. It was as we feared. Huá and I were told that it would take weeks to process the documents and even then, there was no guarantee. Huá told me that they indicated that if we were to pay a sum (that was fairly substantial) it could be expedited. But he added it was going to be like this everywhere we went.

I was furious. This wasn't right! I refused to pay, and we went home again. There had to be another way—and the best chance would be asking Don Fraser for help. And once more I sent off a letter and then waited over a week for a reply. But when it came it was worth waiting for. Congressman Fraser had enclosed a letter of introduction from Senator Humphrey to his old fiend Ellsworth Bunker—the American Ambassador to Vietnam, asking for his assistance.

The very next day Huá and I were off to the American Embassy. I didn't get to see the Ambassador, but I gave my letter to his Chief of Staff who was very sympathetic to our cause; he took it to the Ambassador. He returned shortly, handing me a card with the imprimatur of the American Embassy. He said, "call me at this number if you encounter any further roadblocks."

Ellsworth Bunker and President Thieu

It was a game changer. I only had to use it twice—and the word must have gotten around that Huá and I were not to be trifled with. When I called the Embassy, within 15 minutes the phone would ring in the office where we were being rebuffed, and someone who must have been quite important was on the line. Immediately the atmosphere changed. The previously imperious civil servants became positively unctuous and processed our paperwork on the spot! We were able to get passports and exit visas in just a few days.

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Things were coming together, but there was still another speed bump or two before they finally got on a plane. The most unique one was when Ut asked Huá to ask me to see him at a governmental monetary office. He wanted me to sign a document allowing him to get "greenbacks" for Vietnamese piasters at the Foreigner rate for use on his trip. The "Foreigner Rate" was considerably better than the rate of exchange given to Vietnamese citizens and to American Armed Forces personnel. The U.S. and Vietnamese governments had decided that these groups would help support the Vietnamese Banking system.

A one dollar Military Payment Certificate.

The American soldiers (and sailors) had to turn in all their greenbacks for MPC (military payment certificates) at about 40 cents on the dollar, and were paid in MPC. It was a court martial offense to be caught with greenbacks—except when you left the country.

I asked Huá to tell Ut that he didn't need to do that, we had some funds left over from our Raffle and it was earmarked for his use while in America.

Huá told him this, then turned to me and said Ut still wanted to do it—and was adamant about it.

Ut was such an even-tempered man it was hard to imagine he was adamant about almost anything. Then we asked him how much he wanted to exchange, and it became clear. He wanted to change $1000—a HUGE sum for an average Vietnamese citizen. It was the entire neighborhood pooling their funds for what would be a windfall profit.

It was clear they were attempting to "game" the system, but after thinking it over for only a moment, I signed my name saying Ut needed money for his trip to America. It was about time the "little guy" got a break in this corrupt system!

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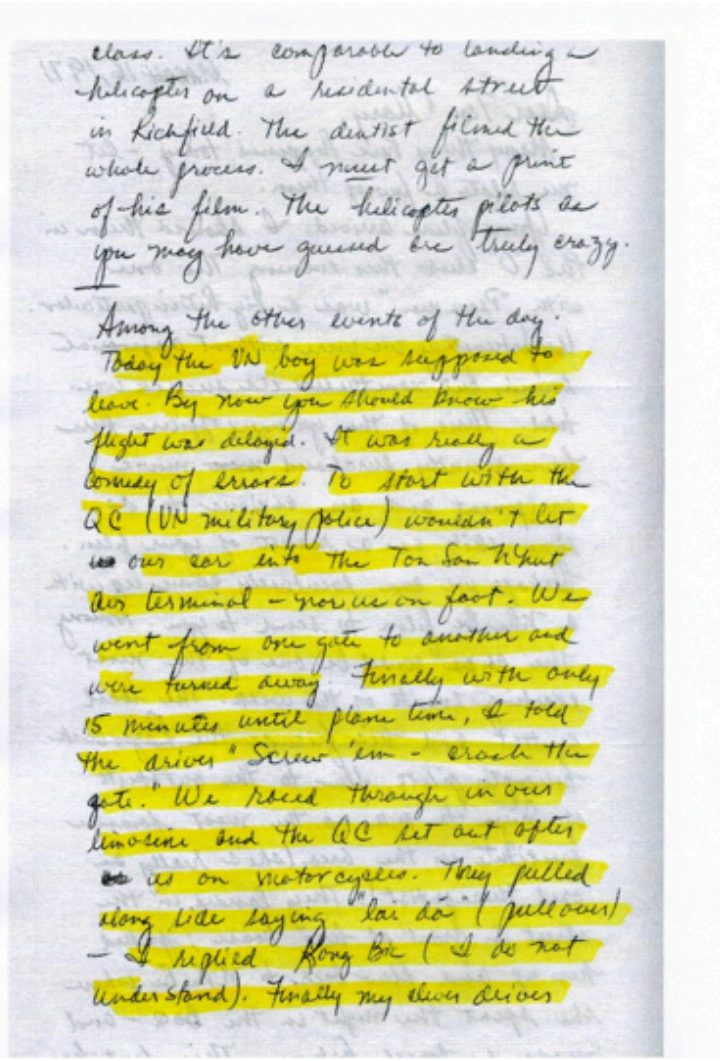
There were a number of "speed bumps" along the way, but in retrospect they were not insurmountable and actually a few were humorous—like the Keystone Cops adventure in our first attempt to get Ut and Dang on a plane out of Viet Nam. Fortunately my sister-in-law, Mary, saved all the letters I wrote to her and my brother Tom. See the description of the initial episode.

When we went to Tan Son Nhat Airport to put Ut and Dang on the plane, the Military Police wouldn't let us enter. Huá was baffled—he said they didn't even want money! But we couldn't enter. The plane was leaving in 20 minutes!

As Johnson was slowly backing away from the check point, I said (in a fit of pique), "Johnson, just barrel right past them! We have to catch the plane!" "Yes sir!", he replied and laid rubber in front the thunderstruck QC and onto the main thoroughfare. The QC were a bit slow in getting their pursuit under way and the canny Johnson headed for a large traffic circle to make a sudden turn, and the traffic cut us off from the QC pursuit.

Arriving at the airport with 10 minutes to go, the NW people were hustling us through the terminal to the final check point where a White Mouse (National Police) inspected the passports and exit visas. He turned back the passports and visas and said they must be used within 15 days of when they were issued—and it was now 16 days. There was no way he was changing his mind. There we were with newspaper photographers flashing photos, but the little bureaucrat wouldn't yield.



class. It's comparable to landing a helicopter on a residential street in Richfield. The dentist filmed the whole process. I must get a print of his film. The helicopter pilots as you may have guessed are truly crazy.

Among the other events of the day. Today the VN boy was supposed to leave. By now you should know his flight was delayed. It was really a comedy of errors. To start with the QC (VN military police) wouldn't let our car into the Tan Son Nhut Air terminal - now we on foot. We went from one gate to another and were turned away. Finally with only 15 minutes until plane time, I told the driver "Screw 'em - crash the gate." We raced through in our limosine and the QC set out after us on motorcycles. They pulled along side saying "lai đó" (pull over) - I replied Kong Bic (I do not understand). Finally my driver drives

The letter describing the effort to catch the plane at Tan Son Nhat

And once again we went through the process, but this time it was a lot quicker. Apparently, the bureaucrats in each office we needed to visit either remembered getting a nasty phone call once we produced "the card" or had heard of it from others. Whatever the reason, less than a week later we were back at Tan Son Nhat Airport and Ut and Dang boarded the plane without incident.

"The die is cast." (Julius Caesar)

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In 1971 there was no easy communication between service men in Asia and family and friends at home. The Internet and cell phones didn't exist. To make a phone call you had to drive to the USO center in Saigon and stand in line with a handful of quarters to get your turn at a 10-minute phone call to America. To get news from home you waited for a letter. However, the turnaround time for a response to a letter was over a week—a minimum of four days each way.

So once Ut and Dang were on the plane we didn't know what was happening for over a week. But after that we got updates daily—a week old, but like up-to-date news for us. The daily reports were thanks to my sister-in-law, Mary. She sent single spaced type-written messages —at least one page each day.

And she saved carbon copies of her letters which she sent me 40 years later when she learned I was going to write some stories about "The Year in Vietnam". She had also saved most of my letters to her and Tom. I wrote a lot of letters—and to Mary I sent one each day—to encourage her to keep up the dizzying pace of reporting Dang and Ut's adventures in America. To be sure Patsy wrote regularly —-but not every day! And of course, Tom didn't write at all. I learned quickly that men simply "don't write letters". Women write letters.

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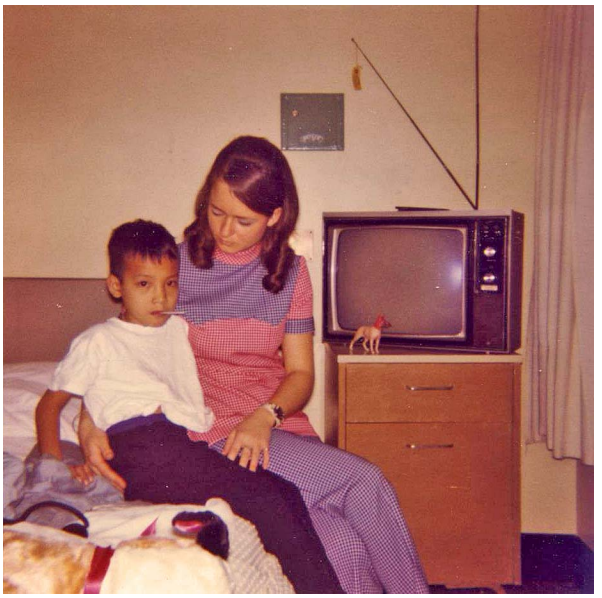
Ut and Dang were met at the Minneapolis Airport by women from the Variety Club and a representative from the Star and Tribune newspaper (with a cameraman). A translator from the University accompanied the party to the University Hospital where Dang was admitted to the Pediatrics Ward and Ut was taken to Powell Hall—the former Nurses-in-Training residence just a few yards away from the Hospital. It now served as an "on call' facility for the interns and residents at the U Hospital. I had spent many a night there the year before.

Patsy had been working the afternoon shift and when she finished, rushed over to the Peds Ward to see Dang. She was stunned to see this tiny boy on the bed with his face to the wall, sobbing uncontrollably. After an ineffective effort at consoling him she went straight to the Nursing Supervisor who also was appalled at the sight of a miserable little fellow with his blue fingers and tiny

limbs. They got Ut and brought him to the Hospital and Dang rushed into his arms. And it was decided, Ut would stay in the room with Dang. This was against "policy"; families were not allowed to spend the night with the children, however this was clearly an exceptional situation. Dang had come from a war-torn country, halfway around the world to Minnesota where he couldn't speak the language and everything was alien.



Patsy and Dang

Things went much better after that. The nurses were able to bond with Dang and Ut, and Patsy stopped by once or twice each day. She put a poster size photo of me on the wall in his room, thinking it would "comfort" him to see the *bac si.* That seemed unlikely to me, but Patsy decides things — and simply does them.

Dang was given a flurry of tests. Blood tests to check his hemoglobin and ability to clot blood normally—and a lot of other things; X-rays to look at his heart and lungs from a number of views (the CT scan had yet to be invented); specialized EKG's to examine the way electrical impulses were passed from the heart's pacemaker to the contraction muscle of the heart — and more. He was seen and examined by teams of doctors: the pediatricians; the cardiac specialists and finally Aldo Castaneda, arguably the premier pediatric heart surgeon in the world, and his retinue. At this time the University of Minnesota was the epicenter of cardiac surgery excellence. Owen Wangensteen had mentored an entire generation of young and accomplished heart surgeons who had spread across the globe and made cardiac surgery a reality.

The results of the tests and examinations were accomplished in just a few days. And the conclusion was that indeed Dang had Tetralogy of Fallot. When this news arrived at Nha Be I let out a sign of relief. My diagnosis (supported by Paul Levine) was "Tet", but we only had an old and primitive Xray machine

Aldo Castaneda

and an out-of-date EKG machine—and the physical exam. Not only was the diagnosis confirmed, but it was one of the more common congenital abnormalities and not a bizarre set of problems. Castaneda would almost surely have handled that as well, but it would have been more complicated all around—including the post-operative care.

The tests and visits were done in a few days, and then the surgery was scheduled for the following week. That left Ut and Dang with nothing to do for five days. They didn't speak any English and were in a strange city.

Fortunately, my brother Tom (a dental student) was on his spring break. Tom was nothing if not impulsive and creative about ways to have fun. He took Ut and Dang under his wing and without interpreters spirited them about. Among his first stops was Target to get some better duds for them, more fitted to Minnesota in the spring. Ut and Dang marveled at the huge discount store and eagerly picked out hats and jackets—and then they came to the Levi's.

Levi's at this time were the rage around the world. In Russia they were selling for $100/pair, and almost as much in Europe. Here they were a little over $10. Almost immediately Ut had Mary send a letter to Vietnam asking me to go with Huá and measure all his family (the male members) for Levi's. It was a good thing I'd sent money to Tom to cover such expenses.

Measuring inseams

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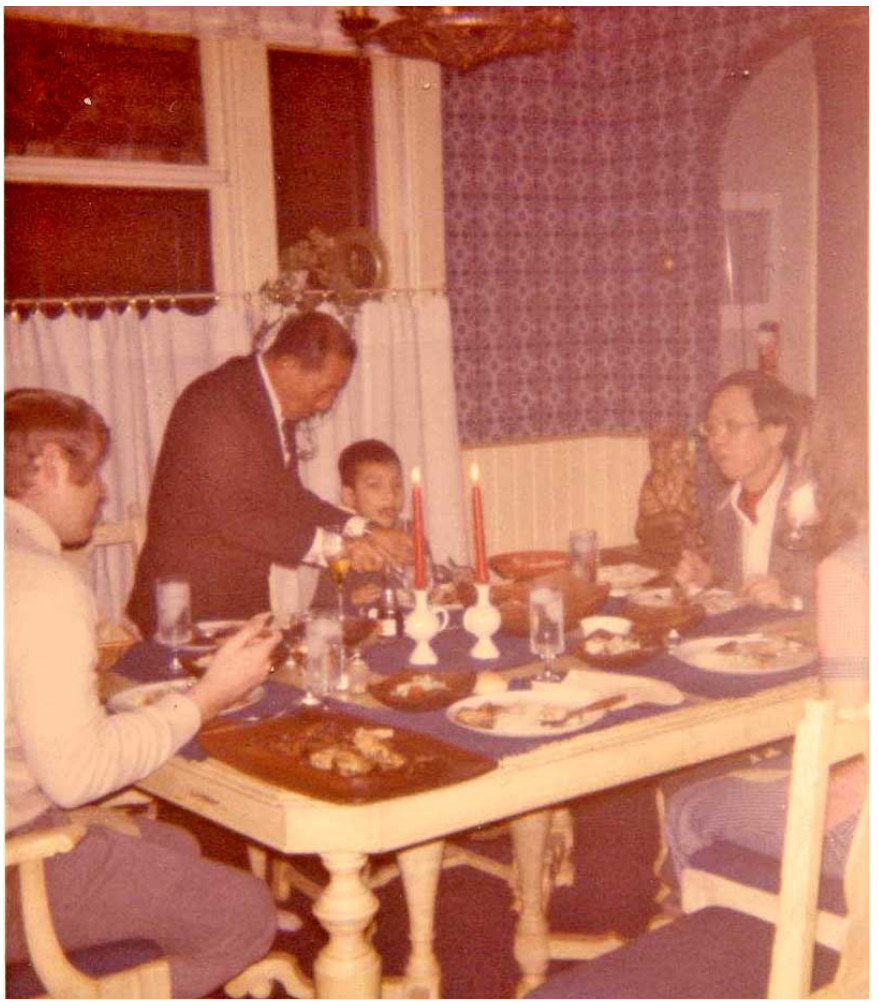
They (Tom, Mary and Patsy) had Ut and Dang for dinner each night. Mary was a gourmet cook and that, together with the promise of good French wine was enough for Tom to get students from the University to come as interpreters.

Dang, with father Ut, Patsy, Tom, and Mary



At the dinner table, Tom at left, student interpreter right

On Sunday they all went to my mom and dad's home for dinner. My mom was accustomed to entertaining foreigners—each year she would host all of Dad's myriad graduate students. Several each year were from third world countries. And I think Ut and Dang liked seeing the house where I grew up. Dang wanted to see my bedroom.

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Finally the day came for surgery. Tom was back in school and Mary had to work—but Patsy was there to follow the process from afar. It was a garden variety Tetralogy of Fallot and the operation went without a hitch—as Dr. Castaneda's almost invariably did. I got a letter from him, as is usual, seeing as I was the "referring physician". But his letter was different from others I'd seen. It wasn't a dry litany of surgical information and boiler plate. It was a real letter. He told how during the operation he thought about this poor little fellow whom he had learned lived in near poverty in a country shredded by what seemed an endless war, and how he must return to his homeland. The surgery went very well and he was able to do it in such a way that Dang would not have to take medicine after the surgical wounds had healed. Dr. Castaneda went even higher in my estimation. He was a true gentleman and a thoughtful person.

Dang was in the hospital for almost a week after surgery as was the standard in 1971; then he was to "stay close" for another four days because he was going to leave the country for a place that did not have good medical facilities for post-op heart surgery patients. They could spend the nights at Powell Hall, and during the days they were on their own. They spent one full day with Vietnamese students from the University. They didn't mingle all that well because the students were from the upper crust of VN society so their families had been able to emigrate to America to escape the war. Fortunately, the last days were over the weekend and Patsy, Tom and Mary could squire them about to see the sights, like Minnehaha Falls, and eat at McDonald's—and experience other American customs. Monday they had their last check up at the Surgery out-patient clinic and were discharged by Dr. Castaneda.

A day later Dang and Ut were put back on the plane to Hong Kong.

And once again the ladies from the Variety Club were there to have their photos taken with him and to be interviewed by the reporter.

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The plane arrived in mid-afternoon when the sun was high and hot. We were waiting at the gate when it landed, taxiing to a spot thirty yards from where we were waiting behind a waist-high chain-link fence. The plane's engines were turned off and the wheels chocked before a man pushed a set of exit stairs to the plane. Then it seemed we waited an interminable time before the aircraft door opened and passengers began to de-plane.

Dang and Ut were among the first. They were slowly heading across the tarmac towards the gate. But as soon as Dang saw us he perked up and broke into a run towards me. What a sight—the boy who left would have had to stop once or twice before reaching us, and he was *running*, just like a normal child. But he kept running right past me! …and into his mother's arms. How laughable for me to have thought he was coming to me at such a clip! *Of course* he was running to his mother!

The reporters and camera men were here, too. The Hai Quan military paper (akin to Stars and Stripes in a combat zone), and the local Vietnamese paper. There also were Ut's neighbors and relatives. It was bedlam. They were chattering non-stop. Ut only paused long enough to thrust two large paper bags into my arms before continuing. Everyone, including the Immigration Agents wanted to see Dang's scar. Ut opened Dang's shirt, and they all gasped at the fresh large healing wound sutured securely shut.

Slowly this phalanx migrated to the immigration check area where Ut continued chattering nonstop with bystanders as they checked his papers and luggage. The group then followed us to our waiting car before letting him alone. Once inside and moving away, Ut reached over and took the large paper bags from beside me. He smiled broadly when I looked into the bags as I passed them to him, and nearly crashed the car in shock—they were full of Black-Market items! I had served as Ut's "mule", carrying them past the customs agents.

Ut and his neighbors had pulled off another financial coup!

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We soon arrived at the spot where one parked to enter the maze-like alley ways to Ut's home. With Huá and me trailing behind carrying contraband and other luggage, Ut and Dang sped towards their home. We heard shouts of glee ahead when they came within eyeshot of their small "apartment". Neighbors and what must have been curiosity-seekers gathered, making it hard to work our way into the apartment to drop our loads.

Ut was a dynamo shaking hands and receiving pats on the back as he held forth speaking in rapid fire and waving his hands with accompanying gestures, as he related some of his myriad experiences from their trip to America. Ut arranged an impromptu dinner party at a small sidewalk cafe. Curiously he had the food delivered from what seemed to be a rival cafe across the street. He also noted that there was an empty space at one of the two tables—so he got another man from down the street (rather than have a woman, it would seem).

The food was plentiful and excellent—Ut was sparing no expense for this celebration. As I was going to offer to pay for all or some of this extravaganza, Huá quickly hushed me; it would be an insult to Ut to do so!

This was quite a party! They were drinking cognac in tumblers chocked with ice pieces. It was hot in the late afternoon sun and the alcohol was getting to the partiers—including Huá and me!

When eventually the food was gone and most of the cognac quaffed, Ut left his table briefly, only to return with Dang in tow—wearing University of Minnesota powder blue sweatshirts the nurses at the hospital had given them.

Over the next week Dang was on "display" for the press; first for the American Military News, where he posed with Nha Be Commanding Officer (who had been pretty much "missing in action" during this entire enterprise). And later for the Vietnamese paper—when he posed with the Minister of Health for Vietnam—whom we had never even heard of prior to this. But such is the way of the world—the "big boss" comes when there are favorable headlines to be had.

I will remember Dang as the little "Blue Boy" who lived at the end of a Byzantine alley way.

January 13, 1971 HẢI QUÂN

SAVING THE CHILDREN

Navy Doctor Gets Stateside Care For VN Heart Case

Story and Photos by LTJG E. S. Lang

"Put your hand on the boy's chest by his heart,' the doctor instructed. "You feel a buzzing sensation, a thrill, which is the blood being forced either through a hole in the wall or a defective valve.'

The heart the visitor felt is laboring to keep alive Nguyen Van Dang, a nine-year-old Vietnamese boy who has been evaluated during the past two months by the three doctors at Logistics Support Base Nha Be dispensary. The doctors agree that unless the boy is treated in the United States, and most likely with open heart surgery, he will die in a few years of congenital heart disease.

Dr. Robert Olson, a Navy lieutenant from Minneapolis, Minn., has followed Dang's case closely. He has arranged for Dang's stateside care and is now engaged in the protracted effort to obtain for Dang a passport and clearance to leave Vietnam.

"It looks like it will be the end of January before we get an OK from the Vietnamese government allowing Dang to leave country," he said. "Then I can begin tackling the transportation problem."

Dang weighs 39 pounds and is 48 inches tall. Proportionally, he looks like an American four and one half-year-old.

Accompanied by his sister, Dang first visited the Nha Be dispensary last October. His complaint was fatigue, for which a corpsman prescribed vitamins.

Dr. Olson noticed the boy's hands as Dang and his sister were leaving.

"I saw that he had club fingers (stubby, spoon-shaped finger tips), which is usually a sign of major disease in the lungs or heart," Dr. Olson said. "Dang's toes are also clubbed."

An electrocardiogram and chest x-ray revealed that Dang had an enlarged heart. Dr. Olson's subsequent investigation disclosed that Dang had been a blue baby: his fingers, toes and lips were blue at birth because a large percentage of his blood was bypassing his lungs and being denied oxygenation.

"As a result of his condition, Dang's heart-lung complex wears heavily and it has begun to deteriorate," Dr. Olson explained. "So at this point, he can only run 10 meters or climb half a staircase before he's out of wind and must rest. This is the limit of strain Dang's heart can stand."

Dr. Olson's quest for adequate evaluation and treatment for Dang began in Saigon where he was told that no in-country medical facility was equipped to handle the case.

The horizon brightened when he began corresponding with one of his former professors, Dr. Arnold S. Leonard, head of pediatric surgery at the medical center affiliated with the University of Minnesota.

Dr. Leonard replied that the board of the Variety Club Heart Hospital in Minneapolis had offered to pay for Dang's complete hospitalization and living expenses for an accompanying parent. The Variety Club is a group of Minneapolis businessmen and civic leaders.

Dr. Olson expressed confidence that the passport and transportation details would be taken care of without difficulty.

"This has to work out and I really think it will,' he said.

right—

Nine-year-old Nguyen Van Dang lives in a small Saigon home with nine other family members. He has no physician other than those at LSB Nha Be dispensary where his heart condition was discovered last October.

below—

(l or r) Dang's father stands with a Vietnamese health inspector, Dr. Olson and an interpreter as they discuss the procedure to obtain Dang's passport.

The Chicken Man

Most days at Nha Be were very quiet. Once our systems and routines were established things pretty much ran on autopilot—at least they usually ran on autopilot.

Morning sick call was held immediately after Reveille and the corpsmen did most of that. Senior corpsmen supervised and trained the strikers* and most junior enlisted men. Occasionally they needed the medical officer, but most of the cases were routine. After all, how many medical problems do 18–24-year-old men get—particularly ones who've been cleared for military service. It was mainly sore throats, hangovers and VD.

[*a striker is an untrained seaman who would like a specialized training designation (in this case corpsman) and is in an evaluation period]

The whole process was often completed in an hour-and-a-half. After that there would have been nothing to do if we hadn't had Sick Call for the Vietnamese civilian population.

The VN sick call started at 9:30 AM and went until noon. These were tougher problems for the corpsmen. There were older people with chronic illnesses, children with their special complaints and of course women with babies.

Care for these people was not in the military guidebook so even the senior corpsmen sought guidance from the medical officers. Thank goodness the Vietnamese women, children and old folks had the same diseases that tended to afflict Americans—skin infections, earaches, high blood pressure and heart disease, etc. So, an internist was able to handle their problems.

An early humbling lesson was discovering how dependent we had become on our state-of-the-art laboratories and X-rays back home. There was none of that here, and to make things worse we couldn't speak the language of our patients. Even today, forty years later, "history is king"—meaning if you listen to a patient he will "tell you what is wrong with him", but you have to listen. Then you get a test or two and confirm the diagnosis. Here the patients couldn't tell us what was wrong—trying to do it through an interpreter just isn't the same.

But on the other hand, we didn't have many hypochondriacs—and no one had read, "I am Joe's Gallbladder" in the *Reader's Digest*. That was a relief.

New mother and baby

We ran into a large number of cases of "I wonder what that was", where people came to see us and it was pretty clear they had "something" but we just couldn't figure out what it was. We ended up treating many empirically with antibiotics—and sometimes they got well. Other times they just stopped coming.

But there were situations where we did some clear-cut good for these people who flocked to us. We immunized children—actually we gave "baby shots" to many adults, too, treated high blood pressure, found someone with unsuspected TB on an average of once a week—and Paul Levine started a leprosy clinic (which by default became mine when he left to go home).

Patient with Lepromatous Leprosy

A 14 year old girl had a strange hematological disease that we never did figure out—despite sending slides of her blood to Massachusetts General Hospital (they were stumped and requested a bone marrow biopsy). She liked the dispensary more than home and after prolonged pleading she lived with us for many months, making the beds, sweeping the floors and running errands to earn her keep.

So the mornings and some afternoons were busy, or at least busier than most dispensaries because we trained VN Corpsmen and were allowed to see civilians even when the "Exit Strategy" forbade treating civilians at military facilities.

It was in the midst of one of these busy afternoons where Paul's lepers came along with my TB patients and we had the onus of the weekly VD checks of the prostitutes (by this time Susie, our VN Nurse, was doing all the pelvic exams and Gonorrhea smears) that unexpected casualties arrived. And they were Americans.

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Helicopters flying close (treetop) support were hit by ground fire from a Viet Cong detachment trying desperately to escape the pursuing PRU's (Chinese mercenaries). It was just a burst or two before the VC were annihilated by Mr. Hanh and his praetorians, but two men were hit—a door gunner and the pilot, who we knew as "Chicken Man." We called him by this ill-fitting sobriquet for so long I can't remember his real name—he was just "Chicken Man". The Chicken Man was an Army Razorback Helicopter pilot from Arkansas who foolishly told a group of Marines in a bar how his cousin once had sexual congress with a Buff Orpington, hoping for a laugh but ending up forever known only as Chicken Man.

Chicken Man was 21 years old and experienced well beyond his years, but I don't think he'd grasped the concept of "mortality" yet—he was always pushing the envelope. This is what made him so exceptional. Even the dust-off pilots called him "bold"! Consequently, it was not surprising he was so exposed as to be hit by small arms fire from the ground. It was also not surprising all the VC were dead five minutes later. The helicopter crew said despite being wounded he went back for a second pass and broke off a third pass only when they insisted the door gunner was hit and needed medical attention.

The Chicken Man makes a signature pass—
fast as hell and scraping the treetops.

The door gunner was hit in the left arm and although it bled profusely, it turned out to be a rather minor injury. Paul Levine got an X-ray once the bleeding was quelled and determined the RPG (rocket propelled grenade) fragment passed right though the forearm missing the nerves and arteries. Good enough for a Purple Heart but not a ticket back home.

Chicken Man on the other hand was hit by more than one RPG fragment and they were lodged in his thigh. This was going to be trouble.

Removing shrapnel from The Chicken Man

I had seen all those old Westerns where the "doc" wearing a tweed vest and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, proudly holds the bullet in his forceps after one deft move into the wound. Well, it isn't like that—not at all like that. I was blessed with a powerful operating room light and Corpsman Jacobson, a crack OR technician, and an X-ray telling me where the fragments were. Despite all these advantages even the ones within a few centimeters of the skin were hard to locate and grasp—unless you were willing to freely excise huge portions of intact muscle in the process. The deep ones were near impossible.

Thank goodness the Chicken Man was a made of stern stuff, because I was rooting around in there for a long time with nothing but some Novocain to control his pain. That dude just lay back, hands clasped behind his head trading insults with a kibitzing Corpsman Johnson (the VD specialist whom for some reason he seemed to know quite well) and said to me, "Take your time and do what you gotta do, doc. They gotta come out 'cause I ain't going home—not yet."

Astounding! *Everyone* wanted to go home. That is everyone except the drug dealers making a ton of money preying on the poor schlemiels who became addicted to heroin—and a rare bird like The Chicken Man" who had found his niche in life. He did this one thing better than anyone else in the Rung Sat—and despite being naïve and seemingly guileless, the Chicken Man realized the adulation and stature it brought him would never again occur once he DEROS'ed. *[DEROS = Date of Estimated Return from Overseas]*

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Trying to live rather than just survive in a war zone can be a challenging emotional experience. Some people's entire existence was consumed by fear of death or injury—they did not fare well. A few were transferred to psychiatric hospitals in Japan, and others should have been. The rest of us learned to adapt in one way or another. It is not unlike driving on a L.A. freeway. The first time you do it, adrenaline is flowing and your heart pumps like a trip hammer as drivers tailgate you at 80 mph. But within a week, either you get used to it and relax or you don't drive on the freeway. That's what you do in Los Angeles. In Asia, unfortunately, you can't simply "stay off the freeway".

Observing the human psyche at work in Vietnam could have been a fascination exercise, but I was too busy experiencing it to pay attention. The first week was filled with moments of absolute terror. I was certain Viet Cong guerrillas were lying in wait everywhere. But soon I began to adapt to my new world and stopped imagining such things. Finally, like most others, I came to relax. In fact, the pendulum swung too far: I began to feel "invulnerable". Nothing would happen to me. Well, at least a lot of the time I felt invulnerable. This comfortable delusion went on for many months, but as the DEROS time neared, fear returned—and with a vengeance.

And when the day to actually depart was imminent, paranoia set in. Intellectually I "knew" I was going to make it—I was going to live through this; I could start thinking about going home now. But as soon as I did, like all those others who became short timers before me, I started seeing potential danger in the most unlikely places--and felt a compulsion to avoid all perceived risks.

Earlier I had noted such foolish comportment in others as their time grew short and greeted it with guffaws and derision. They didn't go so far as wearing a flack jacket everywhere—but they certainly didn't take unnecessary trips into the field either. We all smiled condescendingly at them. Now when I found myself contriving ingenious reasons for staying put, it seemed merely prudent conduct rather than extreme behavior.

People played it safe close to DEROS time. However, even this didn't always work. When I went to Washington to see *The Wall*, I must have repressed the names of those I knew would be written there, because only three have ever come to me. Unfortunately, those names never leave: Thomas Mackey, James Wall and Jim Thames.

Thames died in close quarters combat at Solid Anchor and James Wall from an exchange of ground fire with the Viet Cong. But Mackey's death was totally unexpected. He had done everything "right."

Tom Mackey was one of the Seabees who had come to my aid so many times when I needed a favor. Seabees had big time Cumshaw, and not just with me. Seabees were able to help just about anyone who stayed in Nha Be for long. So, when they approached me at the dispensary asking if Mackey could get a "medical light duty" chit for the week before his DEROS it was a no brainer. The SeaBees weren't exactly a combat unit, but on occasion they had to leave the compound to work on some public works project. Best to stay at home.

Therefore, Mackey was assigned to sprucing up the base landscape—a totally made-up job, there wasn't any landscaping on the base. Tom Mackey was an honest and industrious fellow, however, so he found some things to do that would generally meet the description of his job assignment. He had less than 72 hours to go when one of the Seabees burst into the dispensary shouting, "There's been an accident—come quick!" Our corpsmen raced to the ambulance and soon returned with Tom Mackey on a stretcher…and I knew he was dead as soon as I saw him. His unblinking eyes were wide open and there

was sand on his corneas. He was dead. We went through the exercise of attempted CPR but there was no hope.

Mackey decided to pull down a small scrub tree—a very small tree. He tied a rope from the treetop to his jeep. When he backed away the tree came down hitting him in the chest and ruptured his aorta. A freak, but fatal, accident. It caused some to say that it doesn't make any difference: "when your number is up, your number is up." But few of us were willing to follow that philosophy. We could recall other incidents that spoke loudly: "Don't tempt fate!"

Suffice it to say that seeing accidents like Tom Mackey's reinforced the need for caution as I approached DEROS and became "short". And that was exactly what I did.

However, there were some things you couldn't avoid, like giving a urine test to prove you weren't on heroin. And you had to do it in Saigon. Responding to (accurate) reports of widespread drug abuse by U.S. servicemen in Viet Nam the Department of Defense devised a program to combat it. The program was based in Saigon, of course. It was code named "Cookie Crumb". They were charged with rooting out drug users and offering them amnesty if they would undergo treatment. Everyone leaving Vietnam had to be OK'ed by them.

There were a couple of other pre-departure tasks that could only be accomplished at MAC-V Headquarters, too. You could not avoid a trek to Saigon. But you didn't want to go more than once—and not at all in the last week.

I arranged to take care of all my off-base business six days before DEROS (you could give your urine specimen no more than one week from leaving country). I gave my urine specimen to the army corporal assigned to watch departing servicemen urinate into bottles (he must have rued his assignment), and then turned in my government issued gear at the Army Quartermaster's Office.

The NCO at the Quartermaster was a piece of work. He clearly took his job (and himself) quite seriously. He was very insistent that I turn in my combat boots. That was a shame; they had leather tops with canvas (breathable) sides and were surprisingly comfortable. They were a bit heavy because of a steel plate in the sole to prevent penetration by Punji sticks when wading through swamps. It might have been better to have two pair—one for everyday wear

and the other for those days when you were to walk through swamps sown with Punji sticks, but they only came in one model. In any event he demanded my boots. Bummer!

He also wanted my camouflage underwear. I was only able to save it by saying, "that wasn't possible." I was from Nha Be where our C.O. was a psychotic Marine Colonel who proclaimed underwear was not part of the uniform-of-the day. The Colonel confiscated everyone's briefs and destroyed them. We all went Commando-style. I don't think he bought the story entirely, but he liked the "psychotic Marine Colonel" part. And he declined my offer to sneak a peek at what I had under my slacks. I still keep my sole surviving pair of (olive drab) government-issue shorts in my drawer—waiting for just the right time to wear them. Some day…

[Years later, thinking of it again, a thought crossed my mind, "Do you supposed they were re-cycling the underwear? Had I been wearing used underwear the whole year?"]

But aside from this outing I stayed home and even kept my distance from the perimeter fence. I was finally going home. And the word was out that you could wear civilian clothes on the airplane if you were so inclined. I was so inclined. I was very tired of my uniform.

All military stationed in the south half of the country took planes to CONUS that left from Ton Son Nhut Airport. That was the airport where I entered Viet Nam and where I had caught civilian planes for R and R. It was just outside Saigon. My plane was to be a Northwest Airlines jet and scheduled to leave in the evening, and because of crossing the International Date Line I would "get there before I left." The plane was to arrive at Travis AFB close to noon the same date I left Asia.

I shipped my large items via the Military post office and was down to just things I needed to carry personally—jewelry, watches, and cameras. I had quite a few cameras. A lot of the letters I received that year started off with, "I heard you were in Viet Nam and thought I would write and tell you how we miss you and pray for your safe return…and while you're over there could you bring me back a Nikon camera?" Well, the customs people were onto this ploy and the rules were that you could only bring one camera of a given make. Fortunately, there was quite a number of makes of fine Japanese cameras. I must have looked like a photographer from *Life Magazine* as I strapped cameras all over my body getting ready to leave for Tan Son Nhat.

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The night I left, the marines played a dirty trick on me; at least I think they were playing a trick on me. Two hours before I was to leave for Saigon, (Marine) Gunny Sergeant Wilson came rushing into the dispensary and told me, "Don't go! The VC has cut the road. They still hold two small stretches between here and Tan Son Nhat. It won't be safe until the Vietnamese Army clears the area—and they're waiting for air support."

Panic! If there is one thing you didn't want to do was to miss your plane home, it could be weeks before they could book you on another one. But I didn't want

to get killed or become a POW on my last day either. I went to the Officers Club to talk to my friend Ted Fletcher, aide to the Commanding Officer. He hadn't heard anything about the road being cut.

"I think the jarheads are pulling your chain."

"I think you're right, but this is not something to take a chance on either."

"Look," said Ted, "Why don't you ask the helo pilots. The ARVN wouldn't do anything without demanding air support."

"Good idea!"

Chicken Man and the other Razorback helicopter pilots were, as usual, lounging in the bar, drinking Jack Daniels. They hadn't heard anything about the road being cut, and no one had asked them for air support. They were pretty sure the Marines were putting me on (talk about a cruel joke). Still, they were only "pretty sure" it was a joke.

I was on tenterhooks until Chicken Man in one bold move solved the whole problem.

"Look," he said, "why don't I just fly you to Tan Son Nhat? Then it won't matter if the road is closed."

"You can't land a gun ship at Tan Son Nhat!"

"Bet I can!"

Now you don't usually want to get your pilot out of a bar room, but this seemed like a solution sent from Heaven—or at least the U.S. Army Helicopter Group.

So, I said a last good-bye to my friends and comrades, pledged eternal fealty, promised to help organize reunions and all those things one does when leaving groups of now-bonded men--things that never seem to come to fruition later.

I took one long last look at my bright red room with the custom-built bulletproof window and, in a last-second expression of bravado—one that

would surely bring a wry smile from The Chicken Man, took off my dog tags and left them on a hook on the wall. Then in casual civilian clothes with cameras strapped all over my body and carrying my Samsonite suitcase, I headed for the helicopter.

The Chicken Man's helicopter armed with rockets and mini-gun

It must have been quite a sight landing next to the Northwest Airlines jet in a heavily armed attack helicopter, then running across the tarmac in Hawaiian print shirt, white bellbottoms and penny loafers with no socks, six cameras, but only one small suitcase.

Entering the plane, I saw I was among the last to board, and just about the only one wearing civilian clothes. A young sailor in the next seat, stared at me as I positioned myself for the long flight. After a few minutes he said, "I saw you running to the plane?

"Yeah."

"From the attack helicopter that landed on the civilian runway?"

"Yeah, I was afraid I'd miss the plane."

"Oh, I'm sure they'd hold it for you spooks."

"Spooks?"

"I'm sorry, CIA Operatives—I guess you don't like being called Spooks."

I looked at him for some time before deciding he was serious. Naïve and badly mistaken, but serious.

"Yes, that's a much better term," I told him,

"My name's Charlie Maddox," he said extending his hand, "What's yours?"

"Just call me Felix, Felix Rodriguez," I said smiling. Then reclining my seat and closing my eyes, promptly fell asleep. When I woke up, we were over the Pacific and halfway home.

Afterword

After meeting with Bob at the end of the summer of 2022, and watching the rapid decline of his health, I hastened to assemble his stories into a first proof of this memoir. I was pleased that I could get a printed copy within two weeks, and the day it arrived, I excitedly called to see when I could review it with him. Sadly, after his long battle with multiple myeloma, he had passed away the night before.

It is now my honor and obligation to carry on his last instructions about this project, when he conveyed his trust in my editorial and esthetic judgement. I offered my limited experience in self-publishing and willingness to edit his book, and I distinctly recall his response: "But don't change my voice!"

As if it would be possible to do that! For anyone who has listened to his stories, they are distinctively his. I reassured him that I would only be correcting typos and making page layout decisions. He gave me the thumbs-up.

I am proud of contributing to this effort, and quite moved by the stories that are now familiar. They capture both a significant period in our national history, and the character and courage of an exceptional man.

Thor Olson
October 2022