BEFORE THE ECHOES FADE

A NARRATIVE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
93RD EVACUATION HOSPITAL
VIETNAM
SEPTEMBER 1966 – SEPTEMBER 1967
by
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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to close friends and relatives who served in the U. S. Army during the Vietnam War.

Captain Tom McCarthy, Infantry, West Point class of 1955, killed in action, Vietnam, 1964.

Captain Walt McCarthy, Infantry, killed in action, Vietnam, 1964 or 1965.

Major Gary Wratten, Medical Corps, killed in action, Vietnam, 1966.

Colonel E. Morgan Mayson, Corps of Engineers, West Point class of 1956 and my brother, who survived two combat tours of duty in Vietnam only to die of cancer at the age of 47 years.

Lieutenant General Leonard D. Heaton, Medical Corps, the Army Surgeon General and my father-in-law who could have prevented me from going to Vietnam but understood my peculiar need to confront the war myself and issued the orders that sent me there.

Introduction

A day does not pass that I do not remember, at least for a few moments, an event or a person from my Vietnam War days. This is a true story in the sense that everything I describe happened to me or was told to me. Of course, I was not able to verify stories as described to me by others, but I have no reason to believe those accounts were not accurate. This narrative covers only a few of the incidents which occurred during the most unforgettable and most consequential year of my long life. It tells the story of my service at the 93rd United States Army Evacuation Hospital in South Vietnam from late September 1966 until late September 1967. Because I was an Army radiologist, many events centered around the practice of Army medicine. But it is about other things also -- ordeals, experiences and circumstances that affected me, other doctors, nurses, and soldiers.

Wounded soldiers occasionally spilled their stories along with their blood in our Emergency Room and Radiology Department as they were being rushed along on their way to surgery. Frequently, after a battle, in moments of euphoria or depression, commanders and soldiers told coherent -- and at times incoherent -- tales of what had happened. At more relaxed times, visiting officers from combat units talked openly over drinks in the hospital's Officers Club. Much of what I have written is their story as well.

I did not keep a diary while I was in Vietnam. My letters home are long gone -- lost or discarded -- but the events in this story are recorded with as much accuracy as my memory allows. I hope that what follows helps you understand more completely what it was like to be in an Army hospital in Vietnam and to better understand what happened to cause us to lose the Vietnam War.

I do not tell this story in exact chronological order, and on occasion, I combine several separate episodes into one event or two people into one. But there are no contrived characters in this narrative. Each one was there and deeply involved. As I am sure it is with most people who serve together under difficult circumstances, I have great affection and admiration for the men and women with whom I spent every day of that year. I use their real names in most cases. Some of the names used are not their real names and where these fictitious names are used, the names are italicized. I use fictitious names either because I have forgotten their names, or to protect the privacy of those whom I believe may wish to remain unknown because of their personal gallantry and modesty -- or because of their personal failures. Any similarity between these fictional names and actual living or dead people is purely coincidental and unintended.

I believe in Duty, Honor, Country, the credo of The United States Military Academy, where I spent four years learning to be an Army officer. In 1966, I believed that my country was justified -- no, I believed the United States was obligated -- to go to the aid of South Vietnam because it was being threatened by a totalitarian Communist aggressor. I took those beliefs with me to Southeast Asia. I still retain the belief that we, the most powerful nation in the world, must continue to prudently help threatened nations;

as I remain in awe of the might, efficiency and majestic capabilities of the United States military services. But, I had a partial conversion in Vietnam and in the years since then. I no longer believe that we can invariably provide ground troops when aiding peoples all over the world because I now believe that in doing so in some situations, we may do more harm than good. I think that my experiences, like so many other young Americans who served in Vietnam, brought about a deeper understanding of the consequences of inserting our Western thinking and personality into a distant part of the world and presumptuously concluding that we know what is best for others. What I now know is that the best of intentions alone do not guarantee success nor justify intervention into another culture. I know that if, even after careful and thoughtful consideration, the United States decides to meddle in a foreign conflict, it will likely fail without applying something more than just proficient military power. Regardless of our military aptitude to turn a jungle into empty waste-land, if our troops misbehave, we will lose the support of that portion of the population which was initially friendly. To win, the United States must send in troops who are knowledgeable, considerate and dedicated to judicious use of American might when dealing with the traditions, culture and people of that country. Only then will we win "the hearts and minds" of the people. Without those hearts and minds, short of becoming the totalitarians ourselves, we will fail. I believe that we squandered our chances to win the devotion of the Vietnamese people. I believe that failure was a primary reason we lost the Vietnam War.

My conclusion, that we stumbled miserably while trying to win over the people of South Vietnam, comes from my experiences. Most American soldiers in Vietnam were, at

best, ignorant and inconsiderate of the Vietnamese. At our worst we were conceited, contemptuous, know-it-all oafs who insulted and trampled on the Vietnamese culture and beliefs. I was one of those misguided Americans. Inevitably, the Vietnamese, except those who became corrupt and became part of our affluence and our system, eventually came to despise us. This is a story of bloodshed and tears, but it is also the story of my gradual transformation as I discovered that our behavior was a major reason for our failure in Vietnam.

Preston B. Mayson, Jr.
Roanoke, Virginia
November 3, 2000

CHAPTER 1

THE GOING TO WAR EXPRESS

> We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves. President Johnson, 1964.

"What's a skinny, little Southern boy doing all the way out here in California?" the woman seated next to me on the cable car had said. It was a lonely evening in 1946. Now, years later in September 1966 as I sat on the plane circling in the landing pattern over San Francisco on my way to the Vietnam War, the memories of my early days in this mystical city floated easily back. It had been the second time that day back in 1946 that I'd been singled out because of the way I talked.

"My father is an Army officer stationed at the Presidio," I said, trying to speed up my words, which was to no avail, I'm afraid. Earlier that day while shooting baskets, coach Neff invited me to try out for the junior varsity basketball team and several kids had laughed out loud listening to me talk. But, no matter, I was elated, the coach had asked me to be at practice, so I intentionally missed the Army bus that took military kids from Lowell High back to the Presidio.

"Well, this car is going to the Cliff House, Sutro Baths and Seal Rock, miles from

the Presidio," she said. So, I was on the wrong cable car and had absolutely no idea where it was taking me.

I was desolate. I was fourteen and my family had just moved from Washington, D.C. It was my first day at San Francisco's prestigious college preparatory high school and it was well past supper time. In desperation, I jumped off the beach-bound, clanging cable car and started walking north. The ching-clang disappeared behind me.

The streets appeared deserted as the fog closed in and cut visibility down to less than a block. Dark hulks of parked cars, frozen like giant, hunched-over rabbits, silently came into view and quickly receded into the chilling, slowly drifting clouds that quietly slid in from the Pacific obscuring everything in their path. I almost galloped up a long hill along the northern side of Golden Gate Park. I was alone except for an occasional set of bright lights illuminating only a few feet of pavement and reflecting off the silver clouds of fog -- accompanied by the sound of an automobile engine, hinting of an invisible car, not just headlights, passing by. People on foot may have passed me going in the other direction or crossing from a side street -- even some hardy souls sitting on their stoop in woolens may have silently watched me pass - but if so, I did not see or hear them. San Francisco fog is thick, moist and dense; it muffles sound as well as visibility. Only those who know and have come to love that fog as I love it, realize its density and effect.

After I'd been walking briskly for what seemed an hour, a dark, high bank, a looming obstruction stretched in front of me in both directions for the short distances that I could see. All along my way, I'd been able to make out the forms of the apartment

buildings that had kept me company. Now their comforting presence had deserted me. What was that black wall and peculiar smell that became clearer and more real as I walked, slowly now, closer? I thought I'd smelled this strange but not unpleasant odor before, but I couldn't remember when or where. I wasn't frightened, but this unexplainable wall and odor gave me a floating feeling as if I'd passed, somehow, into another dimension. And I had; I was experiencing a wonderful world that was previously unknown to me - San Francisco. The tall, impenetrable, dark wall with its distinctive smell turned out to be a large grove of eucalyptus trees which were growing along and inside the Presidio.

Following the edge of the grove, I eventually found myself on Arguello Boulevard and stumbled through the Arguello Gate into the Presidio. In the darkening grayness, kept company by the deep throated fog horns in the distance and the acrid old leather smell of wet eucalyptus, I followed the steeply curved road down the other side of that hill to the margins of San Francisco Bay and home. During low and lonely times in Vietnam, I would remember that fog and dream of those horns.

After leaving San Francisco as a high school student, the months and years passed rapidly. I graduated from West Point, served in the airborne infantry, and then went to George Washington Medical School and became a doctor. It was now September 1966 as my plane approached its landing by circling over the large fog bank streaming through the Golden Gate and over the city. I then recalled other awkward occasions that embarrassed me during those early years in San Francisco. But now, here I was returning to San

Francisco, thirty-four years old, and on my way to war.

The screech of the tires jerked me back to the present as we touched down at San Francisco International Airport. I was back to reality. My reveries into things past were put away. I got off the plane and walked into the terminal. "Pres, Pres, over here, you deaf bastard," a voice called. *Lew Johnson*, a friend from my radiology residency days at Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco, who was still stationed there, greeted me.

"What the hell, *Lew*, great to see you! What are you doing here, going to Nam too?"

"Shit no! I'm not that stupid; I'm here to give you a lift to Hamilton. Nothing but VIP service for our future heroes, especially if you belong to Letterman."

"Well, I'm no longer part of Letterman," I said "but I'm sure as hell a future hero."

"Tell me about it, just don't ask me to join up."

"Damn it, *Lew*, it's great to see you, whatever the reason."

Lew rocketed his old Ford up U. S. 101, past the low marshes along South Bay, at seventy-five miles an hour. I had forgotten the pace of California speedways -- many cars passed us as *Lew* tried to maintained our position in the "slow" right lane. Fortunately, when we reached Hunter's Point, traffic got heavy and everyone slowed down. As he drove up onto the bridge approach and passed the Presidio and over the Golden Gate, I slipped back into memories of this large and picturesque Army base and the unique, exotic city where I had suffered those inauspicious introductions as that awkward teenager. I'd learned to love "Baghdad by the Bay," as Herb Cain called San Francisco.

As *Lew* and I rolled along on the giant arcs of highway 101 through the parched

Marin hills north of the city, we passed the exits to Mill Valley, Kentfield and then Corta Madera where my family and I had lived during my radiology residency. I remembered driving my wife while she was in labor from Corta Madera to the hospital late one night, reaching ninety miles per hour on the Golden Gate Bridge.

By the time we reached San Rafael, *Lew* was driving slower as if that might delay or prevent my departure. He finally mumbled that he thought I was a fool for not avoiding my assignment to Vietnam. This utterance came from nowhere and completely stunned me. It was said with little conviction, but with an air of suspicion that there might be something inevitable and fearful waiting out there in unknown Southeast Asia for all who ventured that way. It obviously made him nervous to challenge my decision to go to Vietnam.

I was embarrassed for him and wanted this awkward part of our conversation to end. Highway 101 in Marin County was very familiar to me because I had traveled it many times on hunting trips into that part of California, so I was relieved to see the sign that gave milage to Novato and Petaluma, which I knew meant that we were almost to the Hamilton Air Force Base gate. While northern California scenery is spectacularly beautiful, all I could think of at that moment was that Petaluma billed itself as either the egg or chicken capital of the world. I forced my thoughts back to our conversation. Was he a coward? He had been trained by the Army -- didn't he know that part of being an Army doctor might mean serving in a war zone hospital if the United States ever went to war? Or, could it be me. Was I the one who was wrong, gullible and a fool to be on my way to Southeast Asia freely, without trying to escape what I believed to be an obligation?

Was the rumor true that the Army Medical Corps must issue orders to twice the number of doctors actually needed each year in Vietnam because one-half of them found ways to weasel out of the assignment before going? All these uncertainties began to creep into my consciousness.

"Why?" I asked.

"You can get killed over there. A guy I know from medical school was in an ambush on his way to Tan-Son-Nhut. He was lucky, but several others in the convoy were killed."

"I want to be a hero," answered sarcastically, a little ashamed of my patriotism but also wanting to tell him that I did not think much of his attitude.

"I know, but be damn careful," he said with warmth now as if he was relieved to have finally told me what he must have vowed to say.

"Don't you know you'll have to go sometime, maybe next year?" I advised him.

"I don't intend to. I'll keep taking fellowship training and maneuvering so that doesn't happen," he stated emphatically, without any self consciousness. We had reached my destination and he turned off the engine. "Look," he said, a big smile on his face as he turned to face me, "why should I leave the warmth of my wife's bed and go off to Asia, for a whole fucking year without fucking?" The smile disappeared and he looked away. "I just don't want to go. Call me spoiled or whatever you want to but I really don't care. I'll tell you this, I am not alone; no one that I know wants to go. This thing in Vietnam is politics, it's not World War two, it ain't even Korea and I am not going to take the chance

of being dead or worse if I can get out of it. Besides, it will be over soon anyway, only a few Army docs will have to go, so let someone else do it."

Lew waved pleasantly after dropping me off. It was Friday afternoon, and I passed through the door marked, Personnel With Orders to the Far East Report Here. I had anticipated that I would be given a room in the Bachelor Officer's Quarters and told to report back Monday or Tuesday for processing and my flight. Because it had been only two months earlier that I had completed my radiology residency at Letterman, I wanted the Army to allow me a few days off in order to visit many friends in the Bay Areas, eat again at Fisherman's Wharf and ease, rather than jump, into the small war going on in Asia.

Such a civilized and compassionate policy was no longer allowed. I later discovered the reasoning behind the strict policy of shipping men out the same day that they reported to the Port of Embarkation. If a Vietnam bound soldier were allowed several days to think about his situation, he might vanish into San Francisco, Mexico or Canada.

"Report to Building T-10 at 1700 hours for transportation to the airfield, sir. Leave your B-4 bag here. It will be loaded on the air transport for you; all the bags are going to the same place, sir. The transient personnel OC is two blocks that way," he said motioning.

It was a cold walk to the Officer's Club. Hamilton Field is close enough to San Pablo Bay to cool off in the late afternoon and a short sleeve khaki uniform was more suited to where I was going than it was to where I found myself. The Transient Officer's

Club was similar to thousands of other military clubs throughout the world: a one-story, fading, wooden building with an Air Force blue awning over the door. The windows were painted over to subdue the atmosphere inside by shutting out the brilliant California sunlight. Only officers on temporary duty or those of us on our way to or from Southeast Asia were inside.

The main Hamilton Officer's Club, a large and beautiful building, constructed of yellow and pink California rock, was miles away. Pilots have their own aristocracy, and at the apogee is the fighter pilot. In the States or "back in the world," as the United States would be called in Nam, it was difficult for any Army officer to successfully intrude into the fighter pilots clannish universe. By providing a separate, even if unequal, officer's club for transient officers, their world was sheltered from outsiders. How different it was later in Vietnam -- all survivors were compatriots.

Inside the door of the Transient "O" Club, frail lattice work separated the entrance from the single large room that served as a bar, dance floor and dining room. "Hey there Georgie Girl" vibrated from the juke box. Phony, unnaturally green potted plants and dwarf trees decorated the corners of the room. A few pastoral scenes, fit for a by-the-hour motel, hung on the soiled plaster-board walls. Lava lights contorted and burped behind the bar. Before going to medical school, I had been an Army paratrooper and this club was like my old battalion officer's club back at Fort Bragg in the 1950s. Similar clubs were duplicated at many American military bases the world over. Unification of the Armed Forces seemed already upon us.

The whiskey was world class at four bits a shot. I joined a mixed bag of lost souls,

and eased into a wooden collapsible chair next to an obese young captain, who also wore a caduceus on his collar, indicating that he was a doctor. He told me that he finished medical school in 1965 and was drafted into the Army when he finished his civilian internship. We were assigned to the next flight out and most of my new friends were already drunk.

The fat doctor asked, "Major, are you going to Vietnam, too?"

"Yes."

"I sure hope I'm assigned to a hospital." His voice quivered as he looked at the floor. "I don't want to go out in the field as a battalion surgeon."

I understood. How could he "hump" through the rice paddies carrying that blubber and survive the heat and physical demands dealt out by an aggressive, hard-driving combat battalion commander -- even disregarding the more serious danger from the Viet Cong? I thought that there must be a sadist who hated fat people somewhere in the assignment branch of the Army Surgeon General's Office.

"Call the fuckers slopes, slopeheads, or dinks. Same as slant eyes in WW two or gooks in Korea -- they're all the same," came from across the table. "Fuckin dinks can keep their goddamn country. Shit, now listen to me and I kid you not," louder, from the same obnoxious mouth, "there are good dinks and there are bad dinks, an you shit better learn the difference, I kid you not." Such wisdom came from an infantry captain with an acne scarred complexion and a chest full of combat ribbons.

He continued, "Korea was tough, but in Nam its goddamn hard to tell who is a friendly an who'll terminate your ass, I kid you not. If you can't tell he's a friendly, you'd

better waste the bastard."

From the ribbons on his chest, it was clear that scar face was a survivor of Korea, and we accorded him limited respect, begrudgingly, because his ribbons indicated that he had also fought in Vietnam. His collection of swizzle sticks was olympic in size and growing. Later he told us that he was on his way back to his unit in Nam. One week before, he had accompanied a body back to the dead officer's home for burial and had been the Army's representative at the funeral. As escort officer, he was required to meet and assist the family with the details of burial. Him assist? That was a macabre joke, I thought. Additionally, he was supposed to help the family apply for the death benefits due from the Army. Why, I asked myself, could not the government call its death insurance and burial allotment something other than a benefit?

He told us that he had been required to tell the family that the casket was to stay closed because the body was so mutilated that the government would not permit anyone to see the remains. There was a long silence, except for the repetitive "Georgie Girl."

"Have you talked to many people who have been there, Major?" This voice was directed at me, ignoring the combat captain. It struck me as strange that the soldier speaking was somehow trying to dissociate himself from being a soldier on his way to war by using the word people. It must have made him feel safer.

"Only a few, they were mostly wounded, back at Letterman."

"What's it really like? I mean, all we get is bull shit war stories. What did the wounded men tell you?"

How the hell did I know what the war was truly like? I was as unsure and

apprehensive as they were. All of us were ill-prepared for this trip. I remembered a short, spur-of-the-moment briefing by a doctor who had come home. His two year obligation to serve had expired, and he refused to voluntarily remain in the Army and stay in Vietnam. This returnee had told us that when his ship docked at Vung Tau, no one knew where his small surgical team was to be assigned. His greatest problem was that much of his team's medical equipment and supplies had been sent to another port farther north. For three days he and his men ate canned food they scavenged from other soldiers and fruit purchased from a Vietnamese open air market. When he was ordered to post his surgical team on guard duty to defend the immediate area, he learned that many of his medical technicians and corpsmen had never fired their rifles. No one knew where the VC were, or from which direction they might attack. After a week, he discovered there was an Army hospital up a certain highway, so they, independent of any orders, drove up this road and joined that hospital.

I also told them about the deaths of two of my friends who had gone to Vietnam as advisors very early in the war. Tom McCarthy and I were classmates at West Point. He attended my wedding sixteen days after we graduated, and then together we struggled our way through the usual training courses needed by infantry officers - Basic Infantry Officers Course, the Airborne Course and Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. While I was in my radiology residency training at Letterman, I heard that Tom had been killed in action in Vietnam. He was an advisor to an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) ranger battalion when he died. The battalion was clobbered by an ambush and suffered heavy

casualties. The ranger battalion was in danger of annihilation when Tom rallied the rangers, leading them in an attack on the VC position and was killed by AK-47 fire. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry. The way he lived and died on that unnamed field, prove his courage and his loyalty to the men he fought with. Yes, there were American heroes in the Vietnam War.

The other friend, Walt McCarthy, not related to Tom, was killed instantly on another day. Walt and I first met in Ranger School, and in 1957 we were stationed with the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. When I left the Division to attend medical school, he replaced me as aide-de-camp to the Assistant Division Commander. I had not known of Walt's death until a few months before I departed for Southeast Asia. The action was simple and was another ambush. The signal to start the ambush was a rifle grenade explosion. That rifle grenade hit Walt's jeep as he led a small convoy along a rural road. I received a first-hand account of the ambush site from a colonel who was convalescing at Letterman Hospital. The colonel had been in the relief party sent to the ambush site and he literally lifted Walt's lifeless body off the road.

The real war was beginning to close in on each of us. It wasn't happening in the expected Hollywood tradition where American guys usually don't die. There was a protracted silence after my stories.

Finally, "I'm going to get me lots of Vietnamese tail," said a young lieutenant, breaking the mood. "They say there is nothing like it. Slant eyed women will do anything for a few American dollars or something from the PX."

"Yea, an they'll give you clap that can't be cured," snorted the captain with the

scarred complexion. "The fuckin French had more casualties from disease than bullets, an a lot of it was clap." He was well informed.

"No kidding, I thought penicillin cured it?"

"Not all of it, an you might also get Hong Kong rot."

"Hong Kong rot, what the shit is that?" The conversation was degenerating. Shortly, it would become depraved.

"Fuckin A, the only cure is amputation, an if they don't amputate, it'll fall off in two weeks anyway - I kid you not." None of us were true believers. Just the same, this was going to be a strange and perilous experience.

The music stopped and a soft, almost seductive female voice came over the PA system and instructed us to board a bus which had silently arrived. At that time we never considered that we were being controlled by a carefully orchestrated plan to process us easily through each stage of going to war. But today, in a more sober time, I am suspicious that every move was planned. A psychologist in the Pentagon probably advised the planners not to give us time to sit around and worry about where we were going; to make alcohol available to dull our fears, blunt our awareness, make us more compliant and to lure us on board the buses with sweet, sexy voices.

Soldiers and sailors in the time of Napoleon and Nelson were given rum before battle to assuage their fears. Were we not similarly manipulated? To my surprise, there were metal bars over the bus windows. Had George Orwell's 1984 already arrived?

The drive to the waiting Braniff airliner was short and quick. There was complete silence; we'd left the bravado back with the empties. In starched, whisky-stained khaki

uniforms, more than one hundred of us snaked aboard the chameleon-like air liner as its skin changed slowly from silver to a dark amber in the fading California sunlight. This plane was on time; we were not kept waiting.

We flew west with the departing sun, but the sun outraced us and we were soon in darkness. Although this was a modern jet aircraft, the seats were small and close together, and my new friend, the portly doctor, spilled over his arm rest almost pushing me into the aisle. Perspiration and panic exuded from him, and concern about his fear partially alleviated my own anxiety. The interior of the cabin was threadbare; the result of many similar flights during the past year. There was the strong, pungent odor of too many bodies, too close together, after too much booze. The ventilation system was overtaxed by a small part of the American Army. The stewardesses were not sociable.

The plane flew the polar route, and Anchorage was our first stop. We unloaded for a short break. The starkness and glare of the terminal lights matched the sharp chill blowing through our summer uniforms. We scurried to enter the terminal's warmth and protection. The aseptic passenger building, with too much chrome, clashed starkly with any image we might have expected of the Alaskan frontier. The terminal seemed abandoned except for occasional faceless and silent mannequins, frozen by fear or pity, in their places behind the arcade counters, as if to say, "if I don't move, or catch your eye, you won't talk to me." We had suddenly joined the ranks of expendable men as we silently ranged the halls and corridors staring at the expensive fur boots and parkas. We were numbed by our hasty displacement from our safe havens and exposure to our unknown futures. Time was irrelevant. We only knew that it was dark and we were lost souls.

Was it the same night that we left California or the night after?

Then for hours and hours we flew through endless darkness to Yokosuka, Japan. In Japan, there was another short escape from the plane, and I telephoned Lowell Froaker, an Army doctor friend stationed at Camp Zama. He told me, benevolently, that it was two o'clock a.m., Japanese time. Back on our plane, on and on to the west we swept at a furious pace, through the blackness, until there was only a faintest stir, almost a nothing, a frivolous, muted whips of light behind. There it was, and gone again. We raced to escape it. As fast as we could, we flew away from the pursuing sun and reality, approaching from the east bringing the daylight of our Vietnam debut. Wishing to ever remain hidden in darkness, we vainly attempted to escape the dawn. Then, in semi-obscurity, we silently passed high over the coast of Vietnam. As we peered through small portholes, we could see bright orange, tracer bullets leap forward at great speed and then decelerate and burn out in a battle that was of no consequence to those of us flying so high above. But we, too, soon would be on the ground.

CHAPTER 2

CONTRADICTIONS OF A STRANGE WAR

I fully expect (only) six more months of hard fighting. General Navarre,
French Commander-in-Chief, 1954.

It was zero six-hundred hours Saigon time as we rolled to a stop close to the main terminal of Tan-So-Nhut Air Base, which had the honor of being the busiest airport in the world in 1966. As the airplane doors opened, our first smell of Vietnam overwhelmed us. The hot, humid air that entered carried with it the acrid odor of decaying tropical vegetation, garbage from nearby dumping grounds and refugee hovels, the overcrowded city, and all the filth deposited by a modern Army in a sweltering war zone.

As we filed off the airplane, we passed rows of camouflaged fighter aircraft and helicopters - the reason Tan-Son-Nhut had more flights each day than O'Hare or LaGuardia. These silent and efficient killing machines contrasted with the "new arrivals," a bedraggled array of soldiers wordlessly shuffling by - dirty, unshaven and clothed in filthy uniforms. We were the antithesis of what the American Army should look like. I hoped that none of the omnipresent Vietnamese workmen were VC because

they surely would report that there was nothing to fear from this planeload of men. My hope, I'm afraid, was in vain.

I said goodby to my young doctor friend and wondered how he would handle all his new and unexpected problems. I puzzled, at the time, about how much weight he would lose, and, today, I speculate that it was a great deal because I lost fifteen pounds during my relatively sedentary tour of duty. But, as so often happens after brief encounters, I never found out where he was assigned or his fate.

The building which was used to process incoming troops was close to the main terminal and already several other plane loads of troops were waiting when we filed into the enormous room. Although this building shaded us from the sun and the hour was early, the atmosphere was oppressive. The warehouse-like structure was devoid of tables or chairs, so we stood inert and silent on the concrete floor as if we were refugees that had finally reached a supposed haven only to discover delay, interrogation, uncertainty and no rest. A grating, mechanical-like voice greeted us over a public address system. Between screeches and acoustical feedback, the voice welcomed us to the Republic of Vietnam. The origin of the voice was a military policeman seated at a small desk at the far end of the room. He was reading the welcome, followed by more instructions, and then: "al-******-ary -****-sonnel -***- who have brought person-*****-***-irearms into the Repu-***- of Vietnam, step forwa-***-***- the de-****-***-*****-e room." No one moved. Silence. Outside and far off we could hear the whomp, whomp, whomp of helicopters. Sweat dripped off our noses, ran down our arms onto our hand luggage and

soaked through our filthy uniforms. I couldn't smell the garbage anymore.

"All military per-****- who have brought -*****-nal firearms into the Republic - *****- step fo-****-d to -******- -****- front of the room."

Back in the world, I'd been told by seasoned returning Vietnam veterans to take a personal semi-automatic pistol with me. The pistol should be small enough to fit into my fatigue uniform pocket and of a small caliber so that I could carry several clips of extra ammunition, they said. At first this advice seemed strange, but I soon learned the reason. Many American soldiers stationed in Vietnam were not issued personal weapons for protection. The American and Vietnamese high commands were more fearful of thousands of "non-combatants" carrying weapons around Saigon, other cities and base camps than they were of having these soldiers unarmed in the event of an attack. Because there was no evidence that the VC would hesitate to shoot an unarmed American doctor or that they would fight by any rules of warfare, if there are such rules, the word was out among Army doctors - take your personal "artillery" along.

My La Fury, 6.35 mm, semi-automatic pistol was hidden in my travel case. I wasn't going to let them impound my weapon. There was shifting of feet; the whomp, whomp, whomp had grown louder and fainter and in different directions; no one moved toward the desk. There was a long silence. The military police bureaucracy was not in a hurry to complete the processing. They knew some of us had pistols and were proceeding as interrogators were taught all over the world, wear them down. They let us sweat.

They slowly repeated the announcement. My crotch felt as if it had been greased.

My mouth was parched. I was nauseated from the heat and fatigue and no longer gave a damn. Orwell's 1984 again?

"-***- All military person-**-el who have brought personal firearms into the Republic of Viet-***-m, step forward to the desk in the front of the building." The P.A. system was working better.

What the hell, I thought. My conscience began to bother me and my back hurt. I wanted to sit down and would have given a hundred bucks for a glass of water. A pistol, even if it might save my life, wasn't worth putting off that water. They were practicing psychological warfare on American troops - Orwell again - and this time I was certain of it. What would they do to me anyway, punish me by sending me to Vietnam? Several of us reported to the desk. Our pistols were confiscated, and we were told that we had violated Vietnamese law. "Bigum dealum." We were there to help our South Vietnamese allies, not shoot them. We were also told that our weapons would be returned to us after they were properly registered with the South Vietnamese government. Fat chance, I thought, but that is a story for a later chapter.

Major *Sterling McCaden*, Medical Service Corps, was waiting for me. I knew him briefly during my internship at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D. C. He saw my name on the flight manifest and met me to help cut through the paperwork and get me delivered "up country" to my hospital. His availability for such a mundane task, his starched fatigues and spit-shined boots were all moot evidence that there were vast differences in responsibilities and risks in Vietnam depending on the assignment dealt to a

soldier.

We walked through the main terminal on our way to his Jeep. The large, bright concourse was filled with soldiers and airmen. But, to my surprise, there were also many attractive young girls, dressed in colorful summer dresses, looking as if they were on a shopping trip or about to meet someone for lunch or afternoon tea. Anticipating my curiosity, *Sterling* told me, "some of them are French; many stayed here or moved down from the north after Dien Bien Phu. Others are U. S. Department of Defense employees who work in offices here in Saigon. They love it here because the get to travel throughout Asia, take advantage of tax breaks, and they think it's exciting being in a war zone, living in an exotic foreign country, watching tanks roll down the streets and Phantoms and choppers streaking overhead. But, most of all they like screwing Saigon warriors. They really have no idea what's going on out in the countryside and are fed a lot of bull shit war stories. Too bad you're going up country." *Sterling* had a desk job in a medical administrative office in Saigon. I didn't ask about his experiences as a Saigon warrior.

He unlocked a large chain holding the steering wheel to the frame of his Jeep. I looked at him. "To keep the locals from stealing it, huh?" I volunteered, proud that I was catching on to Asia.

"Hell no, although they would if the could get away with it. It's to keep our own troops from stealing it. A Jeep or truck is like gold over here and if it's left unlocked, it's gone. The bastards will paint a new unit designation over the old one and you'll never get it back. It happens every day. Our soldiers are a bunch of thieves." He then carefully

looked under the frame and hood. "You have to check for booby traps before driving off, unless you leave a trustworthy guard to watch it."

He drove down a dirt road, corrugated over time by the harmonic bouncing of truck and Jeep tires, and we arrived at a warehouse at the end of one runway. I had completely forgotten about my footlocker which I'd sent several months before by ship.

"If we don't get your trunk now, you'll never see it again, it'll never reach you." I doubted this because my name, rank and serial number, as well as the 93rd Evacuation Hospital, were boldly stenciled on two of its sides. The hospital was only 18 miles north of Saigon, so surely it would be sent to me if I did not pick it up now. Just the same, it would be helpful to have it with me when I reached the hospital. I remembered that it contained extra uniforms, personal items to help the time pass by more comfortably, pictures of my wife and sons, and a tennis racket.

Sterling banged away at the steel door of the warehouse. "Goddamn hot door," he growled. The front of the building was exposed directly to the sun. An elderly Vietnamese was in charge, and he looked at us with what was unquestioned contempt. His dull, disinterested eyes silently said, *I've seen the French, the Japanese and the French again, come and go, and you bastards are no different. I have the patience of the Orient and I will wait and then you will go away.* He had not expected any business and reluctantly listened to our request for my trunk. It was quickly apparent that he didn't understand much English. We certainly did not understand his sounds or sign language, and for the first time I understood how difficult it was for a modern society to infest an

ancient, alien culture and expect that culture to understand our language and demands. After we yelled unpleasantly, bartered and demanded for what seemed to be an eternity, while standing in the direct rays of the sun, he apparently realized that we weren't going to go away soon and begrudgingly took a copy of my orders and vanished. Fifteen minutes later he returned with the wrong trunk. After we convinced him that we were not going to accept just any trunk, he miraculously produced my battered footlocker.

Now I understood, most of these trunks would not reach their owners. I have often pondered, during the years since we deserted Vietnam, into whose hands did all these footlockers fall - like thousands of time capsules containing many personal treasures of our soldiers?

On our way into town, we passed a scrubby golf course with a few ARVN bunkers directing their fields of fire down the fairways. These bunkers must have been there for the defense of the airfield and Saigon. The course was empty but still it presented a bizarre picture next to its surrounding of refugee camps which were constantly over flown by tan and green fighters and choppers and choked by the dust of passing military traffic along this road. Why was a golf course still there with its mowed fairways and limp, faded flags standing forlornly on the greens? I silently wondered, could some of the European citizens of Saigon or the Vietnamese elite, clinging to a few disappearing vestiges of normalcy, still be pretending and playing golf?

"*Sterling*, does anyone still play golf here?"

"Not that I've ever noticed. I have seen a few grazing water buffalo out there, but

no grazing golfers. Seriously, maybe some people still play. The Vietnamese are a funny people, they seem to accept the war as just another irritation that is going on in their lives, just another pimple on their asses, only an inconvenience, not a total commitment. We Americans think about, well, like it's a world struggle against communism and when we win, Asia will be safe and free for years to come. Hell, most of these people don't understand freedom or what a real election is all about. We ask, when will it end and when can all of our troops pull out and go home? They don't act like there is any hurry to end it. There have always been wars around here. These people have been fighting among each other for centuries - warring sects, religious wars, regional wars, wars to unite or keep from uniting the country -- all fighting each other and for any other reasons you can imagine. Every century or so they fight against the Chinese trying to invade from the north and the Cambodians and Laotian tribes from west. In our modern times, before and after World War II, these people have continued to scrap, among the different tribes and regions, with the French, the Japs and now they scrap against us or the Vietcong depending on their particular side at that particular moment -- just different factions to most Vietnamese. I've heard that success to an ARVN Division is to avoid battle so it can live to avoid another battle another day. Why fight and get killed? They really seem to believe that this war, or another one, will always be going on, so what's wrong with running away? They think its stupid to get killed. Really, I can't blame them. When you realize that they believe that war is part of their everyday life, that's not a bad philosophy."

"I didn't know you were such a scholar and philosopher."

"I'm not," said *Sterling*, "it's just a sad reality about this war. They simply do not have the same vision; hell it ain't even close to vision to them, its just something to try to live through to them. You'll understand better when you see Americans who are wounded or dead because an ARVN unit didn't attack or `de-de' ed and left our soldiers to do all the fighting. There is already bad blood, and it can only get worse."

"What does `de-de' mean?" I asked.

"To bug out, cut and run, run away - they do it all the time."

Closer to the center of the city we passed the Cercle Sportif. Before I left for Vietnam, diplomats and American Army officers returning to the "land of the big PX," (U.S.), fondly told me about this private French club. Maintained and protected by the French military during their Indochina war, it was one of the last bastions of their colonial empire in Vietnam. Cocktails on the veranda, elegant dining, tennis on well-maintained courts, were supposedly still part of French life in Saigon. But Americans, not Frenchmen, were now embroiled in the fighting. The wealthy French merchants and rubber plantation owners, although no longer directly supporting the war against the communists, counted on an American victory in order to preserve their land, their wealth and their way of life in South Vietnam. These wealthy Frenchmen were hospitable to American officers and that's why I had innocently packed my tennis racket.

"When you have some time and can get away from the hospital," I'd been told, "go to the Cercle Sportif and play tennis. The French will extend every courtesy to you, and they are very friendly."

I had envisioned Saigon as a tranquil haven from the war and a periodic escape. I have no doubt that this had been the situation several years earlier when there were only a few American advisors in the field and only a handful of Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) experts in Saigon. From my observations this morning, it was apparent to me that tennis was no longer a pastime of American officers in Vietnam. The tennis racket remained buried in the bottom of my trunk.

But Saigon was not a war ravaged city in 1966. Central Saigon was serene as we drove along the spacious boulevards canopied by ancient trees. Bougainvillea, and other exotic plants unknown to me, bloomed everywhere. There were lovely homes, and the modern office and apartment buildings were attractive and well cared for. Except for some uniformed Americans and Vietnamese, a few olive drab trucks and occasional bunkers with protruding machine gun muzzles, there was little to suggest that Saigon was a city at war.

"This place doesn't look like such tough duty," I interjected after several minutes of silence. My nose had already adapted, and I no longer noticed the smell.

"Well, it's not really hard to take for only a year since it could be longer, but you'll see, after a while you will really miss home. In our offices, duty hours are seven to five, seven days a week, but in your hospital, you'll work when there is work to do and fuck off when there isn't work to do. Our schedule still leaves the evenings free to hit the officer's clubs, play bridge or poker, watch a movie, or whatever." After a pause, "honestly, you can get plenty starved for sex over here and many troops get laid by getting a girl friend -

Department of Defense civilian, Army nurse or Vietnamese honey. Not everyone screws around, easier to avoid where you are going, the boondocks. Most officers are straight arrows when they arrived, but after being here in Saigon, many are broken arrows when they leave."

"Well I meant the landscape, the beauty of Saigon, but I guess the landscape includes the inhabitants too," I added meekly, aware of male vulnerability.

"Listen, this place is beautiful. What a wonderful place it must have been to visit before the war. You could easily spend days touring the temples just in this city, and then return to a modern hotel and wonderful French cooking. The highlands are supposed to be spectacularly picturesque. Unfortunately, the Cong controls most of that part of the country today."

"But can't you still get good French food?"

"Possibly, if you know where to go, but all civilian restaurants, except those in the Caravelle or Continental Hotels, are dangerous because of possible ambush or bombing. It's much safer to eat in the officer's messes and clubs."

"Just the same, the city is still beautiful," I said.

"That's true, and would you believe that today, with a war going on, Saigon is still called `the Paris of the Orient' in tourist publications printed by the South Vietnam Tourist Bureau? The dumb shits, this is the same denial of reality that I was talking about before. They think life goes on and they still try to attract European tourists to South Vietnam."

Throngs of adults on bicycles and columns of children passed along the avenues on

their way to work and school. In addition to the bicycles, numerous Lambretta motor scooters, pedicabs and a few European autos moved steadily through the streets. The women, universally thin, were attractive in their traditional, colorful, long-sleeved "Ao Dais" tunics extending to the ankles but slit up both sides to the waist and worn over tight slacks. The diminutive children, like ceramic dolls with pug noses and sharply formed lips, all with similar features as if cast from the same mold, wore the appropriate uniform for each of their schools. These uniforms were usually dark shorts or pleated skirts and white or pastel shirts or blouses. Some even wore tiny blue blazers. The light colored clothing of the adults and children was immaculately clean. Later I noticed that this same cleanliness of apparel persisted in the rural provinces, and it always amazed me that the people were able to keep their clothes so clean without modern laundries. I am afraid that this amazement on my part reflected a prevalent and unjustified attitude of most Americans that the Vietnamese people needed our technology for all sorts of reasons, whether to stay clean or win the war. The black pajama-like work clothing was worn by many of the farmers and was more often seen on laborers in the countryside than in the cities.

Sterling turned the Jeep sharp left and drove through an open iron gate located in a long concrete wall. Three strands of barbed wire stretched above the top of the wall and was even strung along below the gate. The entrance was guarded by an American military policeman. We were in the U. S. Army Medical Command Headquarters Compound which was only one of many such enclaves of Americans scattered throughout Saigon.

Despite its wall and wire, it was not a strong defensive position. If the VC ever occupied the surrounding buildings, they could fire directly down into this compound. The entrance could be blown wide open by explosives hidden in a car driven up to the gate or concealed in a book bag on a bicycle left close by. But perhaps the weakest defense against attack was the isolation of unarmed, non-combatant Americans in these small, scattered locations. I longed for my confiscated pistol. Later, when the 1968 Communist Tet offensive hit, many American servicemen died because they were scattered around Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, Nah Trang, Pleiku and other cities and were unable to defend themselves because they were unarmed. The VC viciously attacked these small, dispersed compounds and quickly killed many of these non-combatants. Eventually, most Americans were moved out of Saigon and other cities to large bases, such as Long Binh, where they could be more effectively protected.

An elderly Vietnamese gentleman slowly swept the dirt road and patio of this small compound with an ancient broom. Each time a Jeep pulled in or out, he would carefully obliterate its tire tracks as if to say, my job is to hide the comings and goings of Americans. *Sterling's* office was located on the ground floor and as he gave me the required briefing, we enjoyed locally baked french rolls, jam and coffee. Early into the briefing he was handed a dispatch by a youthful Spec-3.

"G-2, Sir."

After reading it, *Sterling* handed it to me.

SECRET
Second Field Forces

Covering 24 hr. period 0001 hrs. 25 Sept. / 0001 hrs. 26 Sept. 1966. Tay Ninh Prov: Light, scattered hostile activity. Two American IRHA, hostile casualties u/k. Binh Dong Prov: Fortified hamlet 36 K. NW Saigon, presently under attack by hostile force, estimated strength hostile force, 100. First Infantry Div: LRP contact with irregular hostile force, strength u/k, one American KIA, six American IRHA, two American MIA, six hostiles confirmed dead, one hostile POW. Tunnel complex containing cache of small arms, rice and medical supplies secured and destroyed. Bien Hoa Prov: ARVN motor pool, S.W. Bien Hoa City attacked 1900 hrs, two trucks destroyed, casualties u/k. ARVN intelligence reports unusually strong activity north of Long Binh. Reliable informants report that ammunition complex, 93rd. Evac. Hosp. and 90th Replacement Bn. to be subjected to mortar fire, 2330 hrs. 26 Sept.

So, analysis of intelligence information concluded that my hospital would be hit by mortar fire tonight. I would be at the 93rd in a few hours. The fancy china cups and saucers, heavy silver spoons and knives, delicious jam and recently baked bread that we were enjoying only a few miles from the fighting was just the first of many contradictions I encountered during this strange war.

CHAPTER 3

WELCOME TO THE 93RD EVACUATION HOSPITAL

> The war in Vietnam is on the right track. Ambassador Lodge, June 30, 1964.

The driver slammed on his brakes, and as I was thrown forward my trunk slammed into the rear of the seat. The traffic light was red. I had not remembered any lights during our drive from Tan-Son-Nhut, but later after I'd gotten to know Saigon better, I realized there were many such modernizations all over the city. I had prejudged Saigon to be a backward and primitive city, thanks to my Western bias.

There were numerous vehicles on this well-engineered highway out of Saigon. The main road leading north was built with U. S. foreign aid dollars during the French reoccupation of Vietnam after WWII. Even then, United States advisors to Vietnam understood that the countries of Southeast Asia needed economic help in order to improve their lives and resist Communism. These American advisors, admirably depicted in Lederer's and Burdick's best-selling novel, The Ugly American, pleaded with the colonial French and Vietnamese in power to use the money to establish small factories which would provide jobs and goods for the Vietnamese people and products for export.

Why was I surprised that such recommendations were ignored and the dollars ended up being used to build this military road? The French wanted a highway so that their tanks and troops could rapidly be deployed out of Saigon to meet any threat from the north. This link between Saigon and the sleepy province capitol of Bien Hoa came to be known as "the road to nowhere," as discussed in Burdick's book. Now I was traveling this road and it no longer went nowhere. Although Bien Hoa itself had changed very little since the 1950s, large military bases had materialized as if by sorcery, almost over night, along this heavilly traveled thoroughfare as jungle and rubber plantations were uprooted by bulldozers and dynamite. Tents, bunkers, communication trenches, temporary prefabricated shelters and permanent buildings were surrounded by miles of concertina barbed wire.

I heard the blast from the "deuce and a half" truck before I saw the truck itself. My driver had slowly inched our Jeep forward into the intersection, like a blitzing linebacker, trying to anticipate the green light. The deuce and a half swerved and cleared our bumper by inches. The light changed and we jerked northward toward our destination. This driver was a lunatic. He careened up Highway 1, in and out, between and around cars, Jeeps, trucks, bikes, and pedestrians along the roadside. He drove as if he'd earned his credentials in not so far away hell, and he may have for all I knew about him. At one point I wondered if he was a Vietcong agent bent on eliminating his passenger.

Finally I understood. It was late afternoon and the sun was rapidly falling over Cambodia not many miles to our west. Although the streaks of orange and red sky were

spectacularly beautiful, there was no time to appreciate that display. After making his delivery, my ARVN soldier driver had to return to Saigon before dark. I was a "cherry," a new and inexperienced soldier in this war, and I belatedly remembered that it was dangerous to be on any road in Vietnam after dark. Because we controlled the air and had more powerful weapons on the ground, the countryside and roads belonged to the American and South Vietnamese armies during daylight. After dark, similar to our old west frontier, the land and the roads outside the "stockades" belonged to the enemy - the Apache, Pawnee and Sioux in the old West, and the Cong in Vietnam. The ability of a small, native guerrilla force to control most of the land after dark is repeatedly validated in military history. A foreign army, regardless of noble or ignoble motives, rarely gains the full support and cooperation of the local inhabitants. Irregular native soldiers who fight in familiar surroundings, speak the language and practice local customs are supported by similar citizens. Such support and loyalty arise most frequently because of nationalism, but on occasion because of fear of brutal retribution from the guerrilla army. Because of this unjustifiable, or justifiable support depending on the viewpoint, the VC had a colossal tactical advantage over our larger army trying to fight a war in this alien country against even an unpopular segment of the population. T. E. Lawrence, the immortalized Lawrence of Arabia and an expert on this type of warfare, calculated that a single local guerrilla soldier was equivalent to eight foreign soldiers fighting against him.

We sped across a modern concrete bridge spanning the Saigon River. Fighting at this crossing would be heavy during the yet to come Tet offensive of 1968 and the bridge was featured in many Life magazine photographs six months after I returned home. On

this day, in a peaceful setting, a goateed patriarch, carrying an umbrella, slowly strolled across the bridge wearing a gray business suit, white shirt and sandals. As we drove further away from Saigon there were fewer vehicles to slow our progress. As the Jeep crested a small rise and began its descent to the junction between our highway and the road to Vung Tau, or Cape St. Jacques as the French called it, I could see our destination ahead on the right. The pavement stopped at the edge of the highway.

The 93rd United States Army Evacuation Hospital participated in World Wars I and II. A bastion of medical care in both wars, it experienced its most infamous hour on August 10, 1943 when General George S. Patton slapped a soldier while he was visiting wounded soldiers in one of its wards. After WW II the hospital was "mothballed." The 93rd was reactivated for this war and arrived in Vietnam on March 29, 1965. It was the first of many "E-vacs" in Vietnam and opened for business on the north slope of a small hill overlooking Bien Hoa city and the Bien Hoa Air Base which were several miles away. The runways of the air base could be seen faintly through the heat waves and haze. Fighter, bomber and transport aircraft were blurred as they rocketed along on takeoff or glided in after their sorties.

The hospital buildings were twelve clusters of Quonset huts. Each cluster was constructed of four huts joined together to create a cross. These structures were well equipped with all the needs of a modern surgical hospital. I marveled at the enormity of the task required to transport the equipment more than five-thousand miles, set it up and get it working properly. It was a minor miracle. When the complexity of constructing one large hospital was multiplied by the thousands of other different and equally sophisticated

operations functioning all over Vietnam, it demonstrated the astounding ability, know-how and accomplishment of the U.S. military support and supply services.

The Quonsets were painted "OD," olive drab, almost matching the dust that hung in the air. For identification, each building had a Red Cross painted on its roof. These crosses were almost obscured by the dust, but fortunately to my knowledge during the entire war, not one hostile aircraft ever flew over this part of South Vietnam. However, these crosses did help identify the hospital to new "dust-off" pilots from the gaggle of other OD buildings all over the area.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Irvin, Jr., Medical Corps, United States Army, a board certified obstetrician, rose from his desk as I entered his office. As a deliverer of military babies all over the world for many years, Irvin was a beloved and respected physician. Here, he seemed just as competent in command of a combat hospital as he was in a delivery room.

"Welcome to the 93rd Evac," he said in a pleasant Southern voice, as we shook hands. "I'm Bob Irvin, and I want you to feel right at home here; we're really glad to have you."

Colonel Irvin's office was a diminutive, partitioned corner of the headquarters Quonset. It contained a desk, two chairs, and the hospital flags with battle streamers. The solitary window was propped open with a stick and the window, screen and most everything in the room was caked with dust.

After a few more pleasantries, Irvin said, "This 250-bed hospital has about 35 doctors, 12 Medical Service Corps officers, 60 nurses and around 200 enlisted men