LIFE OF A COBRA PILOT WHO SURVIVED VIETNAM

Richard Parrish

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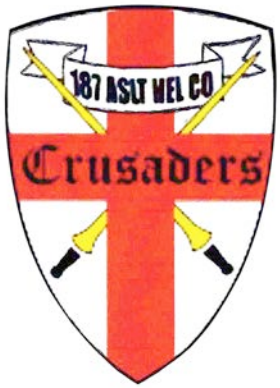

Clockwise from top:
Aviator Wings,
Cobra School,
187th Assault Helicopter Company,
Rat Pack Cobra Platoon,
Author's Call Sign "Centaur 50" on F Troop/4th Cavalry,
F Troop/4th Cavalry,
"Blood Patch" Hunter Killer Team F Troop/4th Cavalry above 1st Aviation Brigade,
At center: Author in 1972 during his time assigned to F Troop/4th Cavalry

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Richard Parrish

Edited by Bruce Novak and Hilda Banks
Typing and page arrangement by Bruce Novak

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Capt. Martindale

1st Sgt. Martin

WO1 Haines

Spec 4 Porterfield

CW2 Jesse

Spec 4 Morgan

WO1 Petrilla

DEDICATION

Some may class this “memoir” as a mere vanity project. However, I don’t intend that. This is an appreciation of the undeserved gift of my imperfect but wonderful life that many of my close or unknown comrades were robbed of by death or terrible injury in the Vietnam War. Like the title character says when he visits the captain’s grave at the end of the film “Saving Private Ryan,” I just hope that I’ve earned it. The thought of what these comrades missed, their accomplishments, family, and long enjoyment of life, saddens me. My remarkable but wonderful life and family should also have been theirs:

Capt. Paul V. Martindale, from Letohatchee, AL, died 28 Apr 72, 25 years old
WO1 William A. Haines, Jr., from Warren, OH, died 28 Apr 72, 21 years old
CW2 William C. Jesse, from Lawton, OK, died 2 May 72, 23 years old
WO1 John J. Petrilla, Jr., from Philadelphia, PA, died 2 May 72, 22 years old
Spec 4 Charles V. Morgan, from Warsaw, KY, died 2 May 72, 27 years old
Spec 4 Dale K. Porterfield, from Los Angeles, CA, died 2 May 72, 19 years old
1st Sgt. Johnny C. Martin, from Birmingham, AL, died 11 May 72, 36 years old

All were my comrades in F Troop, 4th Cavalry, 1st Aviation Brigade who were killed in Vietnam. This memoir is also dedicated to my many other comrades who were seriously wounded while serving their country in Vietnam.

On Memorial Day 2024, I’m pointing to the names of my seven F Troop, 4th Cavalry (Air) comrades listed above on the replica Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in my new hometown’s Veterans Park. Previously, I visited them annually on the original Wall in Washington, DC. Because they all died within a couple of weeks of one another, all their names are listed close together on one panel of the monument.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank Bruce Novak, my classmate in Signal Officer training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, in 1970. His efforts to reconnect our classmates after many years led to my sharing some of my experiences in the army, Vietnam, post-Vietnam, and subsequent life. He encouraged me to record these and offered to assist in doing so. He first transcribed the recollections I shared with Chase Thompson in an interview for Eastern Kentucky University's William H. Berge Oral History Center's Veterans Project on October 20, 2022, an experience which triggered my interest in actually writing this memoir. Bruce also transcribed and helped edit many subsequent phone conversations as I dictated additional sections of this memoir. He typed and edited the text, collated the manuscript, and arranged for its printing. His great efforts and necessary encouragement to continue this project are the only reason it exists.

I also wish to thank Bruce's wife Linda, who so patiently endured this process and often even assisted Bruce in spending so much time and effort on my memoir.

Then there is Hilda Banks, whom I have never met, but was recruited by Bruce. They had worked together over several years editing memoirs and accounts of combat infantry soldiers from the 26th "Yankee" Infantry Division during the campaign to defeat Germany in World War II: *My Search for the "Tall Sergeant": An Unidentified World War II Hero; The World War II Memoirs of PFC David A. Markoff;* and *My Memorable Experiences with the Yankee Division in World War II.* Like this memoir, those books are available online through the Donovan Research Library at Ft. Moore, GA. Although 98 years of age, Hilda generously assisted Bruce, adding her professional editing skill for which I am indeed fortunate and grateful.

Next, my maternal grandmother, Pearl Champion, an evangelist, counselor, and founder of the Apostolic Church in Carbondale, Illinois. Her daily prayers for my safety while I was in Vietnam are assuredly the reason I survived.

Last, but by no means least, I am grateful to my wife Anna (Nguyen Thi Thieu) who has been the greatest reason for my wonderful life and family.

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I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way

Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption
I planned each charted course
Each careful step along the byway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way

— excerpt of Frank Sinatra's version of lyrics
originally written by Paul Anka for the song "My Way"

Chapter 1: EARLY YEARS

I was born, or so I was told, in 1947 in the small town of Carbondale, home to Southern Illinois University (SIU). My parents had four children. My brother was 12 and my sister eight when I was born. They were kind of my parents' first family. Then I came along. I was the beginning of their second family, because two years later my younger sister was born.

My father was farm raised. He had a high school education. He milked cows from an early age twice a day at the family's dairy farm. Then, at 16, he started working at the family dairy plant in town. That dairy business was started by my grandfather and his oldest son and was later owned by my father and his brothers. They processed milk, bottled milk, made ice cream and cottage cheese, and sold them to regional stores and schools. The brothers were very successful with the business; they even were able to buy a small Cessna airplane and a couple of boats to enjoy on a nearby lake.

My father in 1950

My mother, my siblings, and I
clockwise by age, about 1950;
I'm second from the youngest

My mother was a homemaker. Her father was a steam locomotive mechanic. Her mother was a preacher and evangelist. My mother attended the university for one year followed by a year of "business" school (secretarial, after all, this was 1934). She soon married, and never worked outside the home. She was a very private person and an avid reader.

My siblings and I grew up in the country on a 150-acre farm with pastures and woodlands raising horses, ponies, and hay. Some of my father's friends and business associates also boarded their horses on our farm. We had a couple of great big barns. Of course, my brother and I were the cheap labor to take care of all of this under my father's direction. I had lots of places to play in the woods and creeks, and horses and ponies to ride. When I was 12 years old I got a 0.22 rifle and soon was roaming the farm, creeks, and woods learning to shoot. This was in the 1950s when most of the television shows were about cowboys, so I thought I was just a cowboy, and my father thought he was a cowboy too.

My parents weren't very demonstrative in showing their love, but they showed it in other ways. They provided everything that we needed, and we had a very peaceful, safe, healthy time growing up. We had good schools and rode the school bus every school day from the country into the town.

In the pasture at about six years old

As a teenager with my father
and my young nephew

When I was about 11 years old, my father and I visited
my older brother at Air Force Flight Training in Alabama.

By the time I was six years old, my brother had moved away to attend college. He became an air force pilot. My older sister married a friend of his who was also an air force pilot when she was 19 and I was only 11. So, for a good deal of my childhood my little sister and I were the only children on the farm. We rode horses a lot and enjoyed life. I had a pretty idyllic childhood.

I learned many skills working beside my father on the farm. He and my older brother had built a large horse stable before I was born. When I was 13, my dad hired a crew to build a 60 x 80-foot machine shed for our farm equipment. When the shed was completed, he showed up one day with rolls of Romex electrical wire, crates of switches, outlets, and light fixtures, then walked me around telling me where he wanted everything installed. It was up to me to figure it out, based on occasionally helping him on small projects previously. For weeks, I strung wire and installed switches and outlets. Once I was done, he inspected it all and after approval connected it to our power source which he had extended underground from our stable barn. It all worked! Wow! What a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that gave me. Then, I was put in charge of planning, organizing, hiring help (my football teammates), and running our annual harvest of 1200 bales of prime alfalfa hay for our horses and sale to others, another hard but fulfilling responsibility.

My older brother Roger (front row center) commanded the
Air Force's Thunderbird Squadron, its flying aerobatic team.

By now, my older brother was a fighter pilot in the air force, and my older sister had married his pilot friend. This was my first exposure to the military. My father had tried to enlist during World War II, but was turned down because of a heart murmur. After the war, he became a civilian pilot and a commercial pilot, more as a hobby, like his horses. That's where my brother and I were exposed to flying.

High school and college went by pretty quickly. I wrestled and played four years of football, never as a star, but as a solid starting tackle or linebacker, and played on the conference championship team. I had the usual fascination with cars, horses, guns, and . . . girls. Fortunately for me, both in high school and in college, there were enough forward girls to overcome my natural shyness and lack of confidence socially.

Within a few weeks after high school graduation, I was both enrolled in summer school at SIU and had a job. The job was working for my maternal uncle, who ran the fleet maintenance for the dairy business trucks. It was mostly unskilled labor, sanding and bonding truck bodies for repainting, and shuttling trucks around, even semitrailer trucks, between various towns. It was hot dirty work at $1.25 per hour minimum wage.

After a short time, I was offered a job running chain on a survey crew for my neighbor who was a civil engineer. Although this was still tough, hot, and muddy, it paid $1.65 per hour. During that summer I learned a lot about surveying, but I knew that in the fall, when I'd have more classes, I couldn't work the full schedule of the survey crew. Fortunately, I'd learned what all the cryptic notations in the surveyor's record book meant, so with the mechanical drawing I'd learned in high school shop, I was able to produce legal plat maps[1] of the surveys. The boss engineer learned of this and brought me into the air-conditioned office to do these plats, and I could make my own schedule between classes for $1.85 per hour!

My first two years of college were mostly general studies requirements and, for me, the emphasis was on math and sciences in the School of Technology. I also was in the required Air Force ROTC.[2] After the required two years, I dropped ROTC in order to carry a heavier academic load to complete an Industrial Technology Bachelor of Science degree in four years instead of the recommended five.

---

1. A plat map is a guide to an area of surveyed land made by a licensed surveyor, a blueprint containing detailed property information.
2. Reserve Officers' Training Corps. Southern Illinois University is a land-grant state university. At that time all such universities were required to have ROTC programs, probably as part of the federal funding that they got. All physically capable males who were state residents had to fulfill two years of ROTC. At our school it was Air Force ROTC. I don't think students who lived out of state had this requirement.

During this time I also changed jobs to work as a respiratory therapist at the local hospital. What today requires a four-year degree and certification, I did after three days of on-the-job training. Because I either worked second or third shift, I never saw my supervisor, who was the hospital anesthesiologist, after I was hired. I worked in the Emergency Room and Intensive Care Unit, and gave breathing treatments in the wards as needed.

By taking heavy course loads 12 months of each year, I was able to graduate in four years. But, by the beginning of my last year, I'd realized that, although I was interested in the manufacturing process, I had no desire to work in a factory or live in a city where most were located. Rather than change my major and start again, I resolved to finish as soon as I could and go into the military. With a friend, I took the exams and physicals for Navy Flight Training at the Naval Air Station in Memphis, but I was overweight so wasn't accepted. After my graduation in June 1969, I didn't even seek a job in manufacturing. Instead, knowing my student draft deferment was now removed, I continued working at the hospital.

I actually wanted to go in the service. I'd gotten a taste of the military in ROTC, and we were a military family. My father was unable to serve in Word War II, although he had tried many times to bypass the system which labeled him as 4F because of a heart murmur. But my older brother and my sister's husband were both air force jet pilots. My family in southern Illinois can be traced all the way back to the Civil War. Three brothers traveled from Illinois to Tennessee to join the Confederate Army. Only one made it back alive. Their father was originally from South Carolina and had migrated to Illinois in the 1820s. His sons were the ones who joined the Confederate Army, but not because they believed in slavery. They never owned a slave in their lives, and they had no intention of doing it. For them the war was about States Rights versus Federalism, and that's why they went to fight for the South. They were fighting for state autonomy and state sovereignty.

In early October 1969 I received a call from a relative who was the secretary at the county draft office. She informed me that my name was on the November listing. So I quit my job and on October 28, 1969, enlisted in the army. I chose to not go to the air force because of sibling rivalry. My brother and brother-in-law were very successful jet pilots, but I wanted to chart my own way. I expected, with my degree, to be in the Corps of Engineers. Of course, the army in its wisdom elected to make me an infantry rifleman. Because of my size, I was specially trained as both a radio operator and/or a machine gunner. I guess they figured I could carry the extra loads easily.

My family's reaction to my enlistment was that they thought I was crazy, because I was enlisting to be a private in the army when I had a college degree and everybody else in my family was an officer. But I'm a bit of a contrarian, and, rather than compete against my very, very successful and well-known brother and brother-in-law in their air force careers, I decided to forge my own route, and I enlisted in the army. My brother used to joke with me and he said, "Why would you join the army and wear a pickle suit?" And I said, "What do you mean 'a pickle suit'?" He replied, "You know, wrinkled and green," because the air force was a little bit more refined in its image.

Chapter 2: ENLISTED TRAINING

I began Basic Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, on the 28th of October 1969 when I went on active duty. So I had eight weeks of basic training during winter in New Jersey, which was rather uncomfortable. Basic was mostly physical training, and training in first aid, basic rifle marksmanship, drill, and other skills common among all jobs in the army.

The academic portions of basic training were easier for me because I was older and more educated, including two years of ROTC, than for almost everyone in my training company. Physically, it was hard for me because I was overweight by about twenty pounds when I went into the service and not in very good condition. But they managed to take care of that rather quickly with the very rigorous training. All our training was done in the normal combat uniform: fatigues, boots, field jackets, steel pots (helmets), and web gear (canvas belts to carry equipment). All of our physical training was done in this uniform, but without web gear.

Because of being overweight, at first I struggled physically. But I had this wonderful drill sergeant who was extremely knowledgeable, dedicated, and good at his job, a very young-looking Black drill sergeant (E7). Without being soft, he was understanding. He realized that my biggest problem was the physical challenge. Other people had other challenges: homesickness, bad attitudes, whatever, because we had draftees in our training company as well who didn't even want to be there. But he understood that my challenge was not that I didn't want to be there. It was just that I was struggling physically. He worked with me to make it easier for me to overcome that problem and succeed. He didn't cut me any slack on the physical work, and he didn't punish me by making me do more. He just made me complete whatever I had begun and gave me incentive to finish even though it was painful and hard, and so forth, and basically taught me that I didn't know my own limitations, that I could go much further than I thought I could. That's an extremely valuable skill both within and outside the military at every level. Particularly later, in OCS (Officer Candidate School), I did things physically and mentally that I'd never before have thought I was capable of. He was very good, a wonderful example of fairness, firmness, and understanding. Not only for me but for anybody that had problems, he'd recognize the challenge that you were facing, whether your problems were emotional, physical, mental, or something else, and he would work with you individually as much as he could. Of course, he was responsible for a whole platoon, but he was an excellent drill sergeant—I'm sorry, I don't remember his name. As far as I was concerned, his name was "Drill Sergeant."

At Fort Dix during the winter of 1969-1970, there was a widespread outbreak of upper respiratory infection. It became so bad that a limited type of quarantine was tried. Members of each platoon wore a colored tag on the zipper pull of their field jackets. We were forbidden from associating with anyone with a different color tag.

Despite this, I became very sick and had a constant cough and congestion. The last thing I wanted was to go on sick call, be hospitalized, and risk being recycled to begin basic training all over again. My cough was so bad that I couldn't sleep well, and my throat was so irritated that I'd wake up to find blood on my pillow.

My solution was to self-medicate. I got a bottle of NyQuil Cough Syrup at the PX,[1] which had alcohol in it. As a nondrinker, it was particularly strong for me. I also asked my mother to mail me some Darvon pills she had for back pain. By taking a shot of NyQuil with a Darvon pill each evening, I would pass out in my bunk, have a restful night, and allow my body to heal itself. Within a week, I was well.

One member of my squad was very strange and caused problems. His story was that he'd quit school after eighth grade and joined a carnival as a laborer. After nearly five years, he'd risen to be allowed to sell tickets and make change. When he lost his job at 17, he returned home to his mother, who wanted no part of him. She eventually took him to a recruiter and signed permission for him to enlist. She told him the army would teach him to be an accountant and work in payroll—not!

While in basic training, he got little mail from his girlfriend in Maine, whom he nicknamed "Rocky Raccoon." Mostly the news was that she had a new boyfriend. Not only that, the boyfriend was riding the Harley Davidson motorcycle that my squadmate had stored in the girlfriend's bedroom.

Of course, he reacted with rage, depression, and drunkenness, becoming a problem for both us and our drill sergeant. Our solution was for squad members to take up a collection ($24) to enable him to attempt to go AWOL[2] and return to Maine. He was arrested at the Fort Dix gate trying to leave dressed in a mixture of Class A green upper uniform with coverall pants and boots. For us, at least, the problem was solved.

Because I was older, more mature, and better educated than most fellow trainees, I quickly was recognized and given student leadership or trainee leadership positions, temporary ranks so to speak, so I had responsibilities even as a trainee.

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1. Post Exchange, a department store on an Army post, as opposed to a grocery store which is called a commissary
2. Absent Without Official Leave

Later, when I went to AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) for eight weeks at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I again was made an acting sergeant and then squad leader in the training company and had extra responsibilities because of that.

In AIT we learned more skills related to our specialty. Mine was infantry rifleman. We learned land navigation and map reading; radio usage; squad and platoon tactics; patrolling; and how to use weapons such as grenades, machine guns, and antitank rockets. I was especially designated as a machine gunner and as a radio-telephone operator with a PRC-25 backpack radio.[3]

When I came out of AIT, I actually made sergeant very quickly because of my education, experience, maturity, and age. Promotions came very fast during the Vietnam War. But when they opened up my 201 File to make me a sergeant—the first time they'd really looked at it since I'd come into basic training—they realized that I had a college degree, so they decided that I should go to OCS. At first I thought that was wonderful. I'll make more money, they'll send me to OCS, and I'll probably be in the Corps of Engineers. But again, the army, in its wisdom, sent me to infantry OCS.

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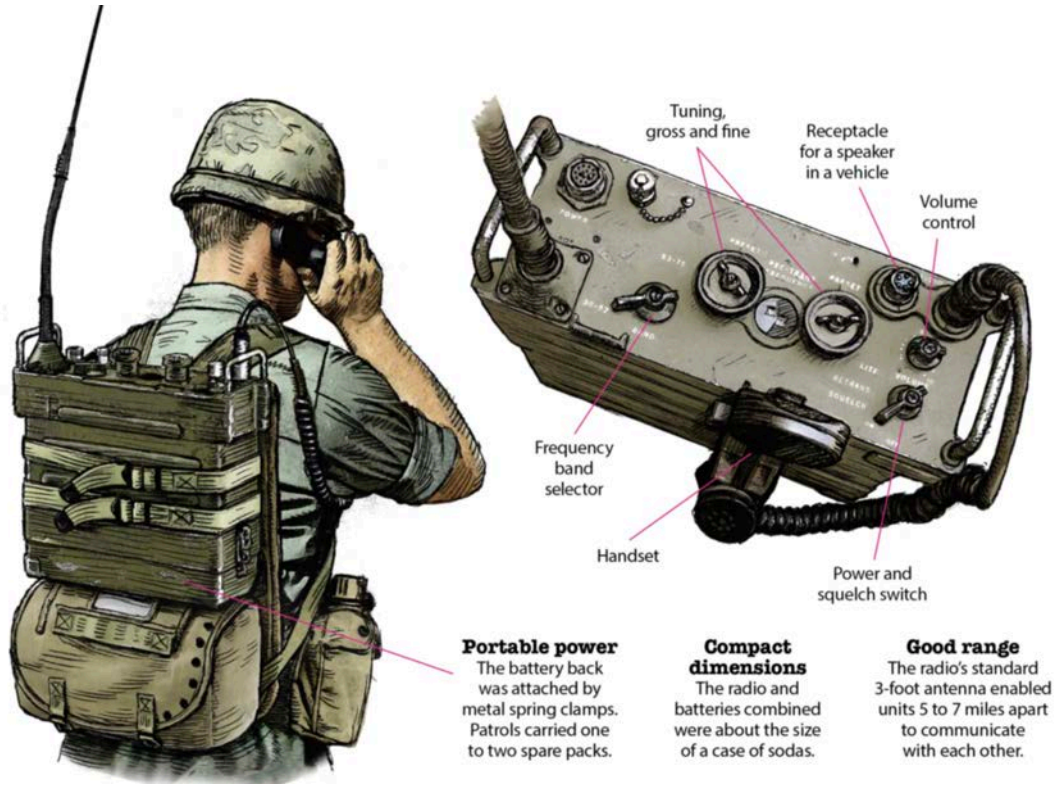
3. Portable Radio Communication, model number 25, was the first army radio that used primarily solid-state rather than vacuum-tube electronics, which made it weigh less than 20 pounds. Depending on the terrain and type of antenna used, its range was about 5 to 10 miles. Source: https://www.historynet.com/vietnam-an-prc-25-radio/



Chapter 3: OFFICER TRAINING

Me in OCS field training

During the Vietnam War, Infantry OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia, lasted 26 weeks. For me, in the summer heat and humidity, it was very challenging. One of the many challenges was that we averaged running ten miles per day. We didn't wear gym shorts and sneakers. We wore freshly starched fatigues, paratrooper jump boots with very thick soles, and helmet liners or steel pots[1] depending on what kind of training we were doing. We ran three miles every single morning before daylight, plus several more during the day when we had PT (Physical Training), and we ran to every class as a unit. I had heard about that, so I'd gone down to the local surplus store in Columbus, Georgia, and bought a pair of used Vietnam jungle boots with canvas uppers and leather toes and heels. I dyed the canvas black and spit-shined the heels and toes. Then running in predawn darkness by the light of street lamps, parking-lot lights, or vehicle headlights, my boots' toes and heels would gleam, so nobody could tell I wasn't wearing paratrooper boots which weighed about three times more than the jungle boots. That strategy gave me a slight edge and kept me from getting worn out as fast.

Only the men that I shared my cubicle with noticed me dragging these boots out and putting them on early in the morning. Though they were probably jealous, they never said anything about it. Of course, in training companies, if someone gets punished, then everyone gets punished. That's something they teach you in training to establish a bond, or a sense of camaraderie.

During the six months at OCS, we couldn't leave the post. We weren't allowed to leave the company area or even go to the PX. We were isolated. We weren't even allowed to watch television, read a newspaper, or listen to the radio.

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1. Helmet liners, which were made of plastic, were much lighter than helmets (steel pots), which were made of steel. A helmet liner could be worn without a helmet but provided no protection in combat. The steel pot protected against shrapnel but not bullets hitting straight on. Together the pot and liner weighed about three pounds.

Helmet liner <— side view

underside view —>

<— Helmet (steel pot) with camouflage cover

This I also overcame. I had a small transistor radio that I'd hidden in a hard electric-razor case with a fake power cord wrapped around it. During footlocker inspections, they would throw open my footlocker, pick up the electric-razor case, open it, look inside, and see an "electric razor" with the cord wrapped around it. But, at night after lights out, I could pull that out, put the earplug in my ear, put the radio under my pillow, and listen not only to music but to news about the war in Vietnam which they didn't want us to know—why they didn't want us to know about the Vietnam War, I don't know. Maybe they just wanted to "control the message."

But we did have some fun. In OCS, "pogey" was the name for unauthorized snack food of any kind. We weren't allowed to leave our company area to go anywhere to buy food or snacks, nor was anybody even permitted to bring them to us. We were only authorized to eat what they served at the mess hall, which was very substantial because we were extremely physical in OCS, with a lot of running, PT, obstacle courses, and so forth. We probably ate 4000 calories each day. The ones who were skinny bulked up and muscled up, and the ones who were fat slimmed down and muscled up as well. Maybe the authorities had a good idea. I don't know. Of course, not having any snack food made getting it very tempting for us.

Each barracks building housed one OCS company composed of four platoons. My platoon occupied half the third floor of our building. There was a stairwell in the center of the building. On the second and third floors were two long rooms separated by that stairwell. Each room housed one platoon. Each big room was divided into little cubicles by portable wall partitions like those in an office. Four men lived in each cubicle, and it was semi-private with no doors. We had two bunk beds providing two upper and two lower. Each of us also had a wall locker and a footlocker, and we shared one desk, a very crowded living space for four guys. The first floor was taken up by administration, supply, the mess hall, and that kind of stuff.

The building wasn't air-conditioned, and Fort Benning, Georgia, was very hot. At night we had a four-foot diameter fan to the outside at the end of the room. We left the doors open to the stairwell, and that was our only air circulation. This made it cool enough at night to, hopefully, get some sleep.

Like many other things, pogey was unauthorized, off-limits for us. Not being allowed to listen to radios or television, or even read newspapers, we were basically incommunicado. We had to just concentrate on our work and our studies. Lots of stuff was forbidden to us, and we had lots of rules. So, of course, it was tempting to try to bypass those rules.

Each platoon had a TAC (TACtical) Officer, a regular commissioned second lieutenant, who was in charge of the platoon and its training. These TAC Officers were very young, and this was probably their first assignment after graduating from OCS. He was more or less our platoon commander, like a drill sergeant in basic training. We also had a full command structure within the cadets with a cadet platoon leader, assistant platoon leader, squad leaders, and so forth. However, those were rotating positions. This was part of our training, and part of our evaluation was how we did in those leadership positions.

In OCS we were actually scored on three different areas: academic score, peer rating, and our TAC Officer's evaluation. The combination of those scores gave us our position in the class ranking.

There were demerits for breaking any rules. We had to walk punishment tours like guard duty drill if we had too many demerits. The TAC Officers had competitions about which platoon was doing better than another platoon. It was like an internal competition among the TAC Officers who bragged about whatever they could. Platoon members would try to break the rules, but they generally got caught. And when they got caught, there was group punishment like extra running, etc. The worst punishment was having to do PT and low crawl through a scout-dog training area behind our barracks which had a pretty large amount of dog poop in the grass.

We didn't like to be caught and punished for doing anything that was not allowed by the rules. Our platoon really hadn't made any attempt to get around the rules in any substantial way. We saw the other platoons getting caught for different things, different violations, and receiving group punishment. They always seemed to get caught at whatever they were doing. We were observing all of that, and most of us came to the conclusion, which I think is correct, that generally the way the platoons got caught was that each platoon contained one or more informers, "rats" who thought that they would gain some kind of advantage by ratting out individuals, a squad, or the platoon as a whole, whoever was going to be violating any of our prescribed rules. The rat would warn the TAC Officer who would then catch the violators and take great pleasure in punishing them.

Our platoon hadn't done anything to get caught at, and our TAC Officer actually seemed somewhat disappointed that he'd never caught us doing anything for which he could punish us. He didn't have anything to brag to his fellow officers about catching us doing.

We suspected there were rats in most platoons, so a few ringleaders in our platoon came up with a plan. I was not one of the initiators of this plan, but I was included in implementing it along with Gene Brady, who was an ex-special forces NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer), and another E5, whose name I can't recall, who had just finished special-forces training before he was accepted to OCS. We were the three, with possibly one other, who participated in an action to violate our rules in a spectacular manner without getting caught. We didn't share information of this plan with anyone else in our platoon since we didn't know if there was a rat among us.

As I remember it, this was the plan. Gene had served in the army for some years and was married with children. His wife was living nearby off the base for our six months of OCS. Of course, he had to live in the barracks and only got to see his wife, like all of the few married cadets did, on Sundays during chapel services. That was the only time we could meet anybody. We couldn't go to the PX. We couldn't go anywhere else except to the chapel. So Gene got to see his wife once a week. Those who didn't see their wives in chapel could phone their wives once a week. So, with being deprived of any comfort food or any snack food, the master plan was to try to smuggle in some McDonald's burgers.

Our plan was carried out on a prearranged night after all the TAC Officers had gone home. Often they didn't leave until lights out at 10:00 pm because they were still in charge of their platoon during the entire training cycle. They would go back to their BOQs (Bachelor Officers Quarters) or home late at night, and return at 5:00 in the morning.

So, on the designated night, Gene, I, and one or two others, got out of our bunks and went around to each cubicle where each cadet had a shelter half neatly wrapped around tent poles with one tent rope wrapped around that for display purposes. We gathered up the tent ropes from multiple cubicles until we had a good pile of about four-foot ropes. One of the guys, probably Gene, made a hook out of a wire coat hanger. Then we went out of our platoon bay into the stairwell. There was an iron fire-escape ladder on the wall leading up from our floor to a trap door to the roof. We climbed up onto the roof with these ropes and the hook, closed the trap door behind us, and then we low crawled through the gravel—the roof was flat with tar and gravel on it. So that we couldn't be seen from any angle from ground level, we low crawled down the roof's centerline to the end of the building. From there we could see a parking area that had large pine trees. One of us had a flashlight for signaling. Then we laid on that roof and tied tent ropes together until we had a long enough rope to reach down to the ground and tied the hook on one end.

At a predetermined time a little Volkswagen car drove into that lot and parked in an area half covered by pine trees. It was Gene's Volkswagen with his wife driving. We flashed a light to signal the car. Gene dropped the rope with the hook down the side of our brick building that had no windows on that side. Next Gene's wife jumped out of the Volkswagen, ran about 100 feet to the end of the building with a big, bulky, green laundry bag, hooked it onto the rope, ran back to her car, and left. We then pulled the rope up with the laundry bag attached, and laid there untying all the tent ropes from each other and from the hook. Then, dragging the ropes and the laundry bag, we low crawled back to the trap door at the top of the stairwell, opened that door, and checked that the stairwell was clear.

In the building there was a CQ (Charge of Quarters)—I don't know if he was a cadet, an officer candidate, or a junior NCO—sitting in the orderly room who was basically a fire guard and responsible for any emergencies in the building. That was his duty all night. He was the only person on duty in the building at this time of night, around 2 am. So we crawled down into the stairwell at the top of the stairs, went into our platoon bay, and went around waking up each guy in our platoon. They'd had no knowledge of what we'd been doing, so there'd be no risk of a rat being involved. We gave each back his tent rope and a McDonald's hamburger. Each man stuffed the burger in his mouth, ate it as quickly as he could, and hid the wrapper. Then one of our guys took the last McDonald's hamburger in its paper wrapper and with it very slowly and quietly low crawled down the stairs to the first floor, by the open door of the orderly room where the CQ was on duty, and into our TAC Officer's office.

Our TAC Officer was very proud of his office. One entire wall was covered by a beautiful mural of the Vietnam jungle painted by a previous class. It was very well done, and he was really fond of that mural since he hadn't been able to go to Vietnam yet. Another thing he was very attached to was in the center of his uncluttered desk, an army-issued ink blotter, about two-feet square with leatherette corners framing green ink-blotter paper. I don't know why that was still being used; we weren't using fountain pens in those days. Anyway, he was very proud of how pristine and clean his desk and his ink blotter were.

So, the individual who'd crawled down the stairs crawled into his office—nothing was locked in those days—and laid a big McDonald's hamburger in the middle of the ink blotter where it proceeded to leak grease through its wrapper all night long and soaked through several layers of the ink blotter paper, thus badly greasing them up. Then he crawled back upstairs, and we all went to bed.

The next morning when our TAC Officer got there, he found this greasy hamburger in its greasy paper sitting in the middle of his cherished ink blotter. At first he became very furious. He came roaring upstairs to our platoon on the third floor and came rushing in at the time we were going to be getting up anyway, 5:00 in the morning, screaming, “Alright, who did it! I want to know right now who did it! If you don’t tell me, you’re all going to be punished . . . .” He just went on and on and on. Nobody said a word. Everyone was silent. Nobody would admit to doing it. Nobody would say who had done it. In private, they might have ratted, but this was in public, so they couldn’t.

He ordered everybody to get ready for PT and stormed back out. Even though it was still dark outside, we had to be dressed and outside for a run. But he didn’t have anybody to put the finger on as the perpetrators, and, we later found out, he was very proud of the fact that his platoon was the only platoon that had successfully carried out this kind of subterfuge and gotten away with it, and sort of rubbed it in his nose with a hamburger on his ink blotter. We heard through the grapevine that he was bragging to the other TAC Officers that his platoon was the only one smart enough to come up with a plan and carry it out without getting caught. So that was our pogey run, our successful pogey run. It was fun, it was a terrific memory, and it developed great camaraderie in our platoon.

We lost a lot of our platoon shortly after that, however, since the army was cutting down on infantry OCS because President Nixon had announced that there’d be no more American infantry involvement in Vietnam. Since the army didn’t need many infantry second lieutenants to send to Vietnam, OCS cadets were allowed to quit OCS after just 18 weeks, five weeks short of graduation. If you graduated OCS you had a three-year army commitment, but if you quit, your commitment dropped back to just two years. So some of my good friends quit. They did the rest of their time as Spec 5s (Specialist 5, equivalent to a three-stripe sergeant). We lost about 75 percent of our OCS company as a result.

After basic training at Fort Dix, AIT at Fort Jackson, and OCS at Fort Benning, I still was far from done with training. I trained for two years in the Army. All I did was train. After we’d been trained in OCS to be combat infantry second lieutenants, the army in its wisdom commissioned all of us in the Signal Corps, because the government was ending American ground troop involvement in the war. Therefore, the overwhelming need for infantry second lieutenants was dwindling, and the support branches that had been short-shrifted for several years were being backfilled.

Most of us were not very happy about being commissioned into the Signal Corps. We'd been trained for the infantry and brainwashed, more or less, that we really wanted to be infantry lieutenants. But we went next to Fort Gordon, Georgia, for nine weeks of Signal Officer Basic Course, which is primarily the course offered to ROTC officers to get them branch-qualified. Of course, coming in as a homogeneous group from OCS, having lived together and struggled together for six months and really developed camaraderie, when we went to Fort Gordon and were interspersed with these new ROTC lieutenants who had gotten their commissions far easier than we had, we took over. We ran the company. We took over all the leadership positions in the training company of lieutenants, and we literally ran the ROTC second lieutenants ragged. We didn't outrank them, but in the leadership positions, we ran everything. They didn't like that, but for us it was easy.

In my dress blue uniform
when stationed at Fort Gordon

Because we were enlisted men before being commissioned as officers, what is called "prior-enlisted" or "mustangs" (meaning an officer who came up from the enlisted ranks), we had certain advantages over the ROTC graduates. Of course, there is nothing wrong with people who go straight into being an officer, but if you are an enlisted person and you know that your officer, your CO (Commanding Officer), was just like you at one point, it gives you a greater sense of trust. We had that experience of being enlisted which gave us, I think, more understanding and more experience in our leadership roles over enlisted people. We were asking people to do things that we had probably already done as an enlisted man. Of course, that kind of background separated us from the ROTC trainees in the basic course. We felt we were superior to them, both physically and because of our experience.

During the time that I was training at Fort Gordon in the Signal Corps, I applied for special forces and flight school. I really didn't want to be a signal officer, so this was my attempt to sidetrack it, sidestep it so to speak. Because I hadn't gone to jump school at Fort Benning, I needed to go back there to jump school in order to be qualified to go to special forces training, and that was going to require a wait. But luckily a slot came open for me to get into flight school.

When you're dealt lemons, make lemonade. My ten years in the service were very interesting and very entertaining for me. First I was an infantry enlisted man. Then I became a helicopter pilot. But I was also a communications officer and later, in Vietnam, an air cavalry officer.

My family had air force experience. My brother and brother-in-law were air force officers. My father was a private pilot and owned an airplane. I had grown up flying right next to him. Although I was an unlicensed pilot, I knew a lot about flying. When I took the aptitude test for flight school, I pretty much aced it. So I got into flight school and went directly from Fort Gordon, Georgia, to Fort Wolters, Texas, for primary helicopter flight training which lasted about four-and-a-half months, followed by another four-and-a-half months of advanced helicopter training at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and then another month of Cobra school at Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia.

Chapter 4: HELICOPTER TRAINING

Fort Wolters, Texas, located about 70 miles west of Dallas, was a huge, very active facility that had expanded greatly because they'd been training pilots for Vietnam for several years. They had about 1200 small two-seat trainer helicopters there that were shaped like little grasshoppers.

The TH-55A Osage training helicopter
had a maximum cruising speed of 75 mph and a range of 200 miles.

Once, on a night training flight cross-country with an instructor next to me, I had to plan the flight, fly it, and then return at night. We were about 60 to 80 miles from our base when a chip-detector light came on which means there's metal in the oil in one of your gear boxes, so your gears are starting to chew themselves up. When that warning light came on, I kept the controls. My instructor got on the radio and called back to our home base to tell them where we were, what was going on, and that we were going to put the helicopter down. Then he told me to find a place to put it down. Well, it's dark out in central Texas. Everything is black except cars driving down the highway. Then I saw a place that was lit up with a lot of lights. From way high up it looked like a Walmart parking lot, but it turned out to be a small-town drive-in movie theater. I pointed and I said, "That's where we're going to go." He said, "OK, put us there." So I made an approach and landed in the back row of the drive-in movie theater between two of the speaker posts. We looked up and there was a John Wayne movie showing on the screen. My instructor said, "I've got the aircraft," and he picked it back up and slid it sideways so that we were close enough to the speaker post to put a speaker in the door of our helicopter. Then he shut the aircraft off, and we watched the rest of the movie.

They left the gates open because we were there by ourselves. In the middle of the night, we saw a car coming down the gravel road to the movie theater. This car came in, and it was the county sheriff. When he heard that we were there, his wife baked us chocolate-chip cookies, and he brought them out to us at the drive-in movie theater at 2:00 in the morning.

At about 6:00 that morning a mechanic from our airfield driving a pickup truck with a flat-bed trailer showed up. We were in Granbury, Texas, southeast of Fort Wolters. The three of us loaded the helicopter onto this flat-bed trailer. We just pushed down on the tail to raise up the front of the skids, and the driver backed the trailer under the front of the skids. Then we went back, and all three of us lifted up the tail. This helicopter weighed only about 1200 pounds. So we lifted up the tail, rocked the helicopter forward on its skids, then slid it onto the trailer, chained it down, and drove home. It was about a two-hour drive back to our base.

Front side Back side

The “TH-55A Cockpit Procedure” card was printed on laminated stock. A copy was given to each student pilot and, since it was often lost, additional copies could be bought at the bookstore.

My helicopter training was in three phases. Primary was in Fort Wolters, Texas. Then I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for advanced flight training which involved flying Hueys, instrument training, tactics training, preparing us to fly Hueys in Vietnam and go into landing zones and combat situations, and teaching us various other necessary skills.

UH-1H Iroquois “Huey” helicopter

The Huey helicopter was actually created in the mid-fifties. It was not really new technology in the 1960s and 70s. Designated the UH-1 Iroquois, but usually just called a “Huey,” it was produced in several versions. Before development of the Cobra attack helicopter, for example, a shorter version of the Huey, the UH-1C, was configured as a gunship. Like most helicopter engines, the Huey’s turboshaft engine needed no coolant or lubricating oil. It was air cooled, and its fuel also served as lubricant. Later versions had more powerful engines. The general-purpose versions had a crew of four: a pilot, a copilot, a crew chief, and a gunner. They could carry six to eight American infantrymen or eight to ten Vietnamese.

Army tradition, and army air corps tradition long before there was an air force, was that the top three graduates in their class would get their choice of transition training into a special kind of an aircraft. A friend of mine and I, who were both signal officers, were in that top three. So he and I called Signal Branch in Washington, DC, and asked, "Have you got our class rankings yet?" because we knew what they were. They said, "Yes. Congratulations. You've done well. That's great. You can have any transition you want. What do you want?" Both of us were on the same phone call together, and we said, "We want Cobra school, Cobra helicopter gunships." They said, "What? Signal Corps is a combat support branch. You don't have to fly combat aircraft. You can fly fixed-wing, VIP aircraft, Chinooks, Sky Cranes, anything like that you want." We said, "Yup, we want Cobras, and you've got to give it to us." He said, "Well, OK." So, for the third phase of our flight training, we went to Cobra school for a month at Hunter Army Airfield, which was part of Hunter-Stewart Joint Base in Savannah, Georgia.

By then Cobras had been used in Vietnam for maybe two years. They were essentially new state-of-the-art aircraft. We didn't fly with a crew chief or a gunner. The cockpit was configured more like a jet fighter plane with two pilots in it, fore and aft. Little winglets stuck out, not for flight, but to carry our weapons. We carried rocket pods on the winglets; a turret gun under the nose had two guns in it. It could be configured differently, but we normally would have an M134 minigun, which is a 30-caliber,[1] 6-barreled minigun, capable of firing 2000 or 4000 rounds per minute. We also carried a chain grenade launcher which was like a machine-gun but shot 40mm grenades. We had those two guns in our turret.

In Vietnam we actually carried so much weaponry and ammunition that we never took off with more than a two-thirds load of fuel, because the helicopter couldn't lift it. We tried to limit our missions to no more than an hour and a half, and when we'd get back, we'd be low on fuel. But South Vietnam was a small country. We were never very far from the bad guys.

There were really three primary uses of the helicopter in Vietnam. One was as troop-carriers. They transported troops into and out of combat getting troops right into the thick of things quickly and surprisingly for the enemy. They were very effective in moving across distances and crossing rough terrain.

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1. "Caliber" means the internal diameter of a weapon's barrel or diameter of the ammunition it fires, which are about the same. Caliber can be expressed in millimeters or in hundredths of an inch, though, if in inches, "hundredths of" is usually understood. For example, an M16 rifle's ammunition is 5.56 mm ≈ 0.223 inches, often referred to as "22 caliber." The Cobra's miniguns fired rounds of the same diameter as the M14 rifle, 7.62 mm ≈ 0.308 inches, "30 caliber."

The second big use of helicopters was logistics. They carried supplies out to the troops in the field, primarily food and water and ammunition. Helicopters could resupply troops in the field, so that they didn't have to carry 70-pound rucksacks all the time. Troops could be resupplied every couple of days with more water, rations, and ammunition, if they were in contact.

The third use, which is what I was more involved in, was as a weapons platform. Our AH-1 Cobras were mobile tanks, basically. We didn't have a main gun like a tank, but we had better: We had rockets. We normally carried 72 rockets on our helicopter plus our turret guns. We carried 2000 rounds of minigun 30-caliber ammunition and 300 rounds of 40mm grenades. I actually had a specialized helicopter at the end of my tour which, instead of one of my 19-shot rocket pods, had a 6-barreled, 20mm cannon hanging under my winglet. I carried 925 rounds of 20mm ammunition which had an explosive warhead on them. That was a pretty effective thing. They'd started out with similar cannon on later aircraft, but then they upscaled them to 30mm, like on the A-10 Warthog. A lot of our jets were also carrying 30mm cannons. But it was basically the same gun, just up-calibered.

At that time, there was no separate aviation branch. Aviation pilots all belonged to a home branch, but they were seconded, that is, temporarily assigned to aviation. Air cavalry was controlled then under armor branch. It was just another kind of armored cavalry.

Cobra helicopters at Tan My Airbase in South Vietnam
where I would soon be flying them in combat.

Chapter 5: ASSIGNMENT TO VIETNAM

Following Primary Flight School at Fort Wolters, Texas, and Advanced Flight School at Fort Rucker, Alabama, I did my Cobra Gunship Transition (AH-1G) training at Hunter Airfield in Savannah, Georgia. My orders after that were for Vietnam.

I went home on leave to Carbondale, Illinois, before deployment. While staying with my mother, I gave away many of my possessions such as my stereo, TV, tapes, records, etc., to my niece and nephews. I signed the title to my 1961 Corvette, gave the document to my mother, and asked my cousin to sell the car for me, for which my mother got $1000. I had some guns, both antiques and an AR-15, which I stored behind the water heater in my mom's utility room. What she didn't know was that, anticipating my exposure to combat as a gunship pilot, I'd tagged each gun with the name of who should get that gun if I didn't return.

Me home on leave before deployment to South Vietnam

While on leave, a black-powder gun club that I belonged to as a founding member ("The Jackson County Anti-Horse-and-Mule-Thief Association") had a Christmas party. Having been away in the service for two years, I had no date, so my sister set me up with a blind date with her friend from Angel Flight (Air Force ROTC female auxiliary). Unfortunately, my orders had me departing on December 22, 1971, so my Christmas had to be early.

On that date, my family drove me the two hours to the St. Louis Airport for my flight. I had my duffle bag with flight suits, boots, etc. I wore my short-sleeve "tropical tan" uniform with overseas cap and flight jacket because it was very cold. While in the terminal, I was accosted by two MPs who were on duty there. They told me I was out of uniform because I had a summer uniform on during winter. They asked me if I had a winter "greens" uniform, or civilian clothes with me to change into. I replied "No" to both questions. They looked confused, then asked where I was traveling to. When I told them "Vietnam," they looked at each other, saluted me, and said, "Have a nice trip, sir."

"CTZ" stands for "Corps Tactical Zone." I CTZ was also called "I Corps" or "MR 1" (Military Region I).

Flying Tiger Line DC-8

My flight to Vietnam was on a military chartered Flying Tiger Line DC-8 jet routed through Seattle, Alaska, and Japan with only a short fuel stop or crew change at each landing. Upon arriving at Tan Son Nhut Airbase near Saigon we off-loaded. When the aircraft door opened and we stepped out, it was like being hit in the face with a wet towel. The heat and humidity took my breath away. We were bussed to Camp Alpha, the army replacement center, for processing. That mostly consisted of turning over our orders and records, a meal at the mess hall, being assigned a transient bunk in a large barracks room, and being issued TA-50 field gear (pistol belt system, canteen, steel pot helmet, etc.).

Before sacking out for a much needed sleep, I remember looking out though a cyclone fence, with concertina wire topping it, at the nearby public highway traffic. The antique black Citroen cars and tiny Renault taxis looked very exotic to me. Then I saw a beautiful 1956 Ford Thunderbird convertible (my favorite car) driven by a European, probably a rich rubber-plantation owner.

The next day, our assignments were posted. We loaded onto various trucks to be dropped off at our new units. Those of us who were pilots either left our field gear at Camp Alpha or threw it away enroute to our airfields. We were pilots, after all, and wouldn't need that heavy junk to haul around!

I was assigned to the 187th Assault Helicopter Company in the 12th Aviation Group of 1st Aviation Brigade. It was stationed at an airfield in Di An (pronounced "Zee On") about 12 miles northeast of Saigon. This had been a 1st Infantry Division base, but by the time I got there in December 1971 the division had gone home and the ARVN[1] had taken over the base. Only our airfield was still American.

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1. Army of the Republic of Viet**n**am, South Vietnam

I found the Orderly Room and was told to report to the gun platoon (Cobras) leader. I found Captain Ledfors in his hootch[2] with a warrant officer pilot, and I introduced myself to them. It turned out the warrant officer was also from Illinois, from a very small town called Robinson. I shared that I'd just had a blind date with a girl from Robinson a few days earlier. She was his next-door neighbor! Thank God she wasn't his girlfriend!

There were no quarters immediately available for me, so I was told to check the duty roster for "Officer of the Guard" and use his empty bunk for a while. After nearly a week, the supply sergeant solved the shortage of hootches. A flatbed truck arrived from Long Binh Base with two prefabricated six-hole latrines packed in stacked wall sections. The four of us without housing were told to push the floors together, stand up the walls and nail them together, put on the tin roof, and leave out both of the six-hole bench seats. The result was a single room, with four screen doors, large enough for four beds.

187th Assault Helicopter Company's pocket patch

After only a few days in the 187th (call sign "Crusaders"), I settled into my Cobra platoon (call sign "Rat Pack"). I don't know why we were given that name, but it was on our platoon patch. Here I enjoyed my first army mess hall Christmas dinner. During my previous two years in the army, I had been home on leave for Christmas. This year I even got to watch the Bob Hope Christmas Show, albeit on a very small TV with very bad reception, on the Armed Forces TV network.

Our Cobra platoon's pocket patch

When I went to the 187th, it had lift platoons which were Hueys for carrying troops into and out of landing zones (LZs) for combat assaults. But there was one platoon of Cobra gunships whose job was to prep the LZs and suppress enemy fire while the other helicopters were landing and off-loading or on-loading troops. That was our platoon. Then we would come back around, line up, and fly flank on the Hueys. When they were flying in to land, we'd be flying on their flanks shooting into the tree lines on either side of the LZ to suppress any enemy fire.

An interesting thing was that two of our Huey platoon leaders had very different attitudes about our support fire for them. One of these platoon leaders was always screaming on the radio to lift fire or shift fire, because he thought we were suppressing fire and shooting rockets into the tree line way too close to his platoon that he was leading into the landing zone. He was afraid that we were going to hit him.

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2. A hootch, sometimes spelled "hooch," is a small hut or improvised living space. The word, with either of these spellings, can also refer to illicit whiskey.

The other platoon leader was just the opposite. If you were not leading him into the LZ with rockets exploding in front of him and literally splashing mud onto the canopy of his helicopter from the explosions, he claimed you weren't supporting him properly. He wanted everything outside of his circle blown up. So, we had to accommodate each of their different demands.

Although we were the only Americans on that base, a brigade of Koreans was also there. A lot of people don't know that South Korea sent allied troops to fight alongside us in Vietnam. They were tremendous fighters and much feared by the communists because they didn't take any prisoners, or at least they had that reputation. They were ruthless and scared the heck out of the enemy. There was no joint command between American and Korean troops below corps level. They would go on operations, and we would go on different ones, so we really never fought together.

Oddly, after I got out of the army and came back to Illinois to attend graduate school, I happened to be in a little Korean shoe shop in my town. The man and woman who owned it had emigrated from Korea. He was a Vietnam veteran of the White Tiger Brigade in the Korean army in Vietnam. As noted, they had earned a tremendous reputation over there. He and I had a lot in common. It's a small world.

Which brings to mind another example of experiences that influenced my perspective on race, this time concerning Black personnel. We had both military and civilian flight instructors in flight school, and it was the luck of the draw whether you got a civilian or a military one. The military ones were, of course, all Vietnam veterans that had come back and become flight instructors. My final flight instructor there was, or seemed to me to be, a rather elderly Black man, and he wore two hearing aids. He gave me my check ride in a Huey, which I needed for graduation. We had a normal instructor- student relationship. It was all business, nothing personal.

Anyway, many years later, quite by chance, at the Commemorative Air Force Museum's bookstore in Midland, Texas, I was thumbing through a book about World War II air corps training fields. This book had pictures of these old fields all around the country where pilots were trained for World War II in the army air corps. At the time I owned a World War II army trainer biplane called a "PT-17 Stearman." As I scanned through this book, I saw a picture of a Stearman airplane like mine. I looked carefully at that picture, and there, kneeling on the ramp next to the airplane, were a flight student and his instructor, both of whom were Black. This picture had been taken at Tuskegee Flight School where the Tuskegee Airmen trained. I looked at the caption; the instructor was my flight instructor from Fort Rucker, Alabama.

It was the same guy. He had been an instructor, a civilian contractor, for the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. He'd been able to adapt to helicopters as the technology and the needs changed, and he was still teaching in 1971.

I was with the 187th only about two months. I didn't get a great deal of flying time then because we eventually stopped doing combat assaults with American troops. We were carrying Vietnamese troops into the LZs, but we weren't doing that nearly as often as previously when we had American troops to carry. Our company got orders to stand down, pack up, and prepare to ship everything back home or transfer it to South Vietnamese units. Anybody that had more than six months in-country was going to get a drop and go home early. Those that had less than six months in-country, which included me, were going to be reassigned in-country to finish their tour.

The 187th's stand-down was primarily an inventory and transfer of equipment, including our UH-1 (Huey) helicopters and all our vehicles, to ARVN. However, our Cobras were still sensitive, classified technology, so they would not be given to ARVN. Instead, these aircraft were to be flown to Vung Tau port to be put on ships and sent to be rebuilt in Corpus Christi, Texas.

As the junior commissioned officer in the Cobra platoon, I was tasked with organizing the crew chiefs to prepare the Cobras for "Agricultural Inspection" before their transfer. This meant completely cleaning any dirt, debris, leaves, grass, etc., out of each aircraft, inside and out, to prevent any contamination from reaching the United States. This cleaning was expected to take up to two weeks to accomplish with vacuums (which we didn't have), brushes, and rags. I wasn't happy with the prospect. Instead, I ordered the crew chiefs to de-panel the Cobras, which meant removing every exterior panel possible from each aircraft's skin with manual screwdrivers. (Each panel was held on by hundreds of small screws.) I also told the platoon sergeant to find me a water truck with a high-pressure pump and hose. For a whole day we completely hosed down the aircrafts' insides, removing everything we could see of dirt, leaves, grease, bugs, etc. This waterlogging, of course, was not an approved cleaning method, but it was a speedy one. We left the panels off for two days, hoping drainage and drying in the sun would erase evidence of our shortcut. Of course, in such a humid environment complete drying was unlikely.

I consulted our maintenance officer, Captain Voorhees, about this. He concluded that when he flew them over to Vung Tau, if he parked them a long walk from the inspectors, he could complete the one-minute shutdown and have the master switch off. Therefore, any warning lights triggered by short circuits in the electronics would be off before the inspectors could see them and refuse delivery. He did successfully turn the aircraft in, although the inspectors were mad about their long walks in the hot sun.

Chapter 6: UNAUTHORIZED TRANSFER

I was worried about being reassigned to a nonflying job because I was a signal officer. I'd just been trained at flight schools, and I was there to fly. That's what I wanted to do, and I was in gunships, so I wanted combat. Both my roommate and my platoon leader, who were armor captain Cobra pilots, and a few others of our pilots got orders transferring them out of the unit, but I didn't have any orders yet. A deuce-and-a-half truck arrived to pick these guys up. I read the bumper numbers on the truck, and it said, "F Troop, 4th Cavalry (Air)." I went, "Oh!" Lightbulb. So I said, "Hold the truck." I went and grabbed my footlocker and helmet bag, which were all my possessions at the time, threw them in the back of the truck, and climbed on.

F Troop, 4th Air Cavalry Brigade pocket patch

We rode in that truck for about an hour-and-a-half to two hours and ended up in Long Binh, about twenty miles northwest of Saigon, at F Troop, 4th Air Cavalry, which had recently moved there from Lai Khe. I went to the orderly room to fill out a sign-in sheet that required you to provide the date, your name, rank, serial number, the headquarters that originated the orders to you, and the date and time that you signed into the unit. Then you dropped your orders and your records into an "in" box, and you were officially there. I didn't have any orders, and I didn't have any records. But, being prior-enlisted, I had pulled Charge of Quarters many times over the weekends and observed times when people would come and sign in, and, therefore, I knew a little bit about the procedure. So, when I filled out that sheet without orders, in the blank where you put in the source of the orders, I just put, in capital letters, "VOCO" which meant "vocal order of the commanding officer." Normally that would mean "orders to follow."

The next morning I found myself in the front seat of a Cobra flying a mission into Cambodia, which is where we weren't supposed to be, of course. I flew for a whole week with these guys. Not only did I like what they were doing, but I was flying assault helicopters in the air cavalry. We were going out with scout helicopters looking for the enemy and starting a fight with them, so that we could gauge their size and their locations for intelligence purposes. We would literally go out with our scouts and trick the enemy into shooting at us so they would give away their position, then duel it out with them and see how strong they were.

After a week of that I realized I was really AWOL, technically, from my unit. But, my platoon leader was with me, so who was going to report me? However, I had to do something to remedy this situation. So, the first day that we didn't fly, because we had so many aircraft damaged, I hitchhiked on a helicopter, not to my old airfield, but to my battalion airfield where nobody knew me. I found the battalion headquarters. Then I loitered under shade trees all morning outside of that headquarters until I thought most of the people who outranked me had gone to the battalion mess hall for lunch. That's when I went into the headquarters and into the S-1 (battalion personnel) office.

A young WO1 warrant officer pilot, who was medically grounded temporarily, was working there with a typing clerk. I went in there and went into my act, pounding on the counter and cursing at them. Back in those days you could curse in the army—it was very acceptable for emphasis. I got their attention right away, of course. This little 19- or 20-year-old warrant officer pilot came running over to me, and he said, "Lieutenant, what's the matter? What's the matter?" I stopped cursing and said, "If you people don't get my orders straight, not only will I never DEROS[1] from this place and get sent home, but I won't even get paid while I'm here." He again asked, "Well, what's the matter? What's the matter?" So I said, "I was transferred a week ago to F Troop, 4th Cavalry, but I don't have any orders or any records. What the heck is the problem?" He said, "Oh, oh, OK, we can fix that." He asked me my name and my serial number, and then he went over to a wall with a big bank of four-drawer file cabinets in it. He started pulling open drawers. He pulled out my 201 Personnel File, pulled out my supply records, my medical records, and my flight records. Then he stacked them all up on the counter and said, "OK, now what day were you reassigned to F Troop?" I gave him the date that I'd gone AWOL to reassign myself. Next he asked, "OK, and what's the full name of that outfit again?" I told him. He said, "OK. And what unit were you in before?" I told him, "The 187th Assault Helicopter." So he went over to the typing clerk who put seven carbons in the typewriter because they didn't have copy machines there.

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1. Date Eligible for Return from Overseas, the date a soldier was expected to return from an overseas assignment.

He typed up seven carbons of a transfer order, pulled all of it out in one piece, stuck it in front of me and asked, “Is this correct, Lieutenant?” I read it through. It was all correct. But then my heart sank when I saw the signature block at the bottom that said “Lieutenant Colonel, Commanding,” the battalion commander. I thought, “Oh my God. How am I going to fool this guy? It’ll never happen.” Well, this young warrant officer turned the orders back over, pulled an ink pen off his ear, and signed “for the commander”—he had signature authority—and gave me two sets of orders plus all my records, and I left. I hitchhiked on another Huey back to my airfield. I had transferred myself.

My flight-suit pocket patch in F troop

The army was a lot looser then, not only because of the times, but because we were at war. Today, with all the computers, all the controls, and all the communications, everything is centrally managed. We were not centrally controlled back then. There was a lot of latitude.

While we were stationed at Long Binh flying out of III Corps, we got a highly unusual mission for us. We called it a “Felix Mission” because it was organized and run by and for Felix Rodriquez, a CIA[2] operative from long before and even after the Vietnam War. He’s a Cuban exile who was working for the CIA in Cuba even before the Bay of Pigs invasion.

This mission involved all of our eight or nine flyable Cobras. It was a night mission which was very rare for us. Normally we didn’t fly at night because our helicopters didn’t have good navigation equipment. At night we needed visible electric lights on the ground to navigate. This mission involved our entire platoon of Cobras taking off at a certain time, flying at a certain altitude in a certain direction from our airfield at Long Binh. We would fly west-northwest toward Cambodia.

We were ordered to link up with Felix—we didn’t know his last name at that time. We contacted him on a prearranged radio frequency. He was in a Huey helicopter controlling the mission. We didn’t know where we were going or what we were going to do until he briefed us en route over the radio. We linked up with him. He told us to turn off all of our lights. Felix was leading us with just a small white tail light on his Huey. We maintained our distance from the other aircraft by using the glow through their canopies from the instrument panels, which is rather dangerous. In loose trail formation we followed him west into Cambodia.

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2. Central Intelligence Agency, the federal government’s civilian foreign intelligence service

We flew for maybe an hour, then Felix told us to come up abreast with all of our Cobras at a certain time. In other words, we were now flying spaced out along a line with Cobras to our right and left. Felix was still ahead of us. He told us that he would give us a countdown until we got to the target area. Each Cobra was carrying 52 or 76 2.75-inch rockets, a full load.[3] When his countdown ended, we were all supposed to do what we called a "school solution" for firing our rockets, which is nose down 30 degrees, so we were losing altitude slightly. At the proper time we were to salvo all of our rockets out of all our Cobras at the same time. We were spread out several hundred yards wide flying at about 90 knots (104 miles/hour) and covering a lot of ground as our rockets were all being fired. We didn't know exactly where we were or what our target was, only that we'd flown far enough that we were in Cambodia.

Cobra helicopter showing two XM159 19-tube 2.75-inch rocket pods attached to its right wing

Because our mission was highly classified, none of us had known beforehand what it was. But afterwards we were able to find out that, apparently, there was a very high-level meeting of NVA[4] officials somewhere in a village on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia that was part of planning meetings for their "Easter Offensive" of 1972 into South Vietnam from Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam which would include Russian tanks. Our mission under Felix Rodriquez, who had all this intelligence about the meeting, was to break up the meeting and kill as many of the leadership as we could by carpet-rocketing the area where they were meeting that night.

Once we'd salvoed all of our rockets, we turned our lights back on, broke up our line-abreast formation, turned around while trying not to hit each other, and were given an azimuth for heading back to Long Binh. Then we formed back up and headed home.

Felix Rodriquez later wrote a book about his experiences working for the CIA off and on for nearly 40 years in South America, Central America, and Cuba of course. He's a famous CIA guy, and we from F Troop, 4th Cavalry had an opportunity to work one of his clandestine missions in Cambodia.

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3. Some of these Cobras carried two 7-tube rocket pods along with two 19-tube pods, and the rest carried four 19-tube pods.
4. North Vietnamese Army, regular army soldiers, as opposed to the Viet Cong guerrillas

Then, about a month or so after I'd moved to F Troop, North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive began. Russian tanks and huge numbers of troops came flooding across the DMZ[5] from the north and also from Laos to the west and from Cambodia to the south. South Vietnam was divided into four corps areas: I Corps or One Corps was the farthest north; II Corps was the central part of the country; III Corps was the region around Saigon, but not Saigon itself which was in the Capital Zone; IV Corps was the Mekong River delta down in the south. We were stationed in III Corps, near but not in Saigon, and flying a lot into Cambodia.

When the Easter Offensive came across the DMZ, there was only a part of one helicopter unit left in I Corps because by then we were pulling American troops out. Of the approximately 100,000 that were in South Vietnam when I arrived, by the time I went home a year later, only about 15,000 Americans were still in-country.[6] It was getting kind of lonely.

Then on March 31, 1972, our unit got orders to pack up all our helicopters and fly up to I Corps. At that time we were actually having a big party celebrating the grand opening of our officers' club that we had just built and christened. Our commander came in at 10:00 at night, shut the party down, and said, "At 5 am tomorrow morning we're pulling pitch,[7] and we're flying all the way up to I Corps," which is like flying the length of Florida. It was an all-day trip with multiple fuel stops en route.

We had to pack up our footlockers. The Huey pilots packed everything they could in their Hueys, including the kitchen sink, probably, in some instances. The scout pilots with one pilot and a crew chief, and a gunner in the back of their little scout helicopter, packed as much as they could into that aircraft. But, in the Cobra, there was no room to pack anything. I had a helmet bag. I had my helmet on my head, and I had a couple of spare flight suits, some underwear, and a shaving kit in my helmet bag. That was it. For everything else they said, "Well, pack it into your footlocker, lay it on top of your bunk, and we'll ship it up to you." The next time I saw my footlocker was four months after I got back home from Vietnam. So, all I had was, basically, three flight suits, one of which I was wearing, some underwear, a pair of boots, my helmet, and a shaving kit. That's how I lived for the next eight months.

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5. The DeMilitarized Zone, area established by the 1954 Geneva Conference along the border separating North and South Vietnam

6. *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* by Dale Andradé, University Press of Kansas, 2001, pp. 495-496 says that there were 104,500 U.S. Army ground troops in South Vietnam in January 1972, but by the end of 1972 fewer than 15,000 remained.

7. "Pulling pitch" derives from the need to pull the pitch control stick on a helicopter to make it lift off (see footnote on p. 49).

Chapter 7: EARLY DAYS IN I CORPS

At the end of March 1972 the North Vietnamese had come across the DMZ and across the border from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, about four full divisions of regular troops with Russian tanks. The ARVNs were ineffective, initially, at stopping them, and my unit was sent up from III Corps to I Corps to replace the only other helicopter unit still there. We flew first to Marble Mountain Airbase near Da Nang, then the next day, to Phu Bai. Eventually, about two months later, we moved to an airfield called Tan My near Hue,[1] on the beach of a peninsula at the mouth of the Perfume River, where we became the only American aviation unit in I Corps.

When we arrived, only half of the "Blue Max" aerial rocket artillery Cobra unit was still up there, because the rest had stood down. Most of its pilots were gone. Our pilots flew with some of its remaining pilots for two days learning the area of operations. Then they all left and we were in a brand-new area, the only helicopter unit up there. So we had to deal with retreating South Vietnamese, four advancing divisions of North Vietnamese regulars, and hundreds of Russian tanks. In our helicopters we didn't have any weapons that could stop a tank. U.S. advisors had a few experimental TOWs,[2] ground-launched antitank missiles that the army was trying to get into the country as rapidly as possible.

A-1 Skyraider

We also discovered very quickly that not only did the North Vietnamese bring tanks with them, but for the very first time seen in Vietnam, they brought Russian shoulder-fired heat-seeking missiles,[3] which were death for us. The first day I ever saw those missiles was when two Air Force A-1 Skyraiders were hit by them and when one of our Hueys was shot down and the crew killed. That's when we stopped flying at our normal altitude of 1200-1500 feet and started flying everywhere at treetop level. That put us in small-arms range. A small-arms hit isn't likely to shoot you down, necessarily, but if you're hit by a heat-seeking missile, you're usually a goner. That changed our tactics completely.

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1. Phu Bai, Tan My, and Hue are pronounced "Foo Bye," Tahn Mee," and "Hway," respectively.
2. Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided missiles
3. These were Russian Strela-2M missiles.

Strela missile

Launch tube

The road leading west out of Hue went past fire support bases FSB Birmingham and FSB Bastogne both of which had been established by the 101st Airborne Division when they were there. By the time we got up there, the 101st was gone and those bases had been turned over to the ARVN. They were both on a westerly road that went through what we called the Tennessee Valley on its way toward the A Shau ("A Shahw") Valley and ultimately Khe Sanh ("Kay San"). After the 101st left, the ARVN were responsible for keeping that road open. But during the Easter Offensive of 1972 the North Vietnamese Army brought down enough antitank weapons that the road was littered with M48 tanks we had given to ARVN. The NVA soldiers were just up and down that road, and we lost all access to the A Shau Valley along that route.

Earlier in that same valley my wingman, Gilbert Wayne Fluhr, fired a pair of rockets at an M48 tank that had been disabled in the middle of the road and occupied by North Vietnamese who were shooting at ARVN rangers. He managed to blow the turret off the top of that tank to relieve those ARVN rangers so they could evacuate the area.


CH-47 Chinook helicopter

ARVNs had occupied both Birmingham and Bastogne bases. Each was on a little hilltop in that valley at different distances from Hue. Capt. Harry L. Thain, a West Point graduate and a friend of mine from flight school, was flying a Chinook helicopter on a logistics (resupply) mission when he received a "mayday call" (distress call) from Bastogne. We listened to this on the radio but were not in the area to assist. He diverted from his logistics mission to try to rescue the special forces Americans who were barricaded inside the command bunker on top of the mound in that firebase. The base had been overrun by the NVA who had come through the wire, and the disarmed ARVNs were being marched out of the base with their hands up.

The Americans were barricaded inside the bunker and calling for evacuation. The North Vietnamese were swarming all over the bunker trying to break in. The bunker was a heavily sandbagged Conex container covered by earth and sandbags. On top was a very small helipad (helicopter landing pad), just big enough for a Huey. My friend Harry was on the radio with the guys in the bunker. They told him where they were and that enemy troops were occupying the base all around and above them.

Capt. Harry L. Thain

Harry, who technically was not a combat pilot, went ripping in there with his Chinook helicopter and was on the radio telling these guys when to open their bunker door and run out to the helipad on the top of the bunker. He came in at high speed and pulled pitch, creating a tremendous rotor wash which literally blew the NVA off the top of the bunker and tumbling down into the wire around it. He came in with his ramp down and landed with only his back wheels on the bunker and his front wheels still up in the air because the helipad was too small for the Chinook. The Americans came running out and up onto the helipad and into the back of the Chinook. As it took off, the Chinook was partly obscured by all the dust its rotor wash stirred up. Though it was damaged by small arms and automatic weapons fire, my friend was able to pilot his helicopter back to a safe airfield. Harry earned a Silver Star Medal for this action.

I wasn't directly involved in this action but listened to it on the radio as it happened and later talked to his wingman who'd observed it. Birmingham and Bastogne were completely overrun by the NVA in April 1972 as they were working their way toward Hue, though ARVN troops reoccupied those bases in mid-May. Sadly, my friend was killed in late May during a resupply mission for a radar base when an enemy mortar round hit his Chinook's cockpit and the resulting crash killed him and his four crewmates.[4]

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4. The author's memories of this incident, fifty-two years after the fact, initially seemed to conflate these two incidents. He recalled that Captain Thain's Chinook had been hit by that mortar shell during his takeoff from FSB Bastogne rather than during the later incident. However, that was corrected by each of the following narratives:

   The West Point Association of Graduates website, https://alumni.westpointaog.org/memorial-article?id=7270a8bf-39e5-470e-bdb8-ac2f80f7daef ,

   The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's The Virtual Wall website https://www.virtualwall.org/dt/ThainHL01a.htm ,

   page 3 of The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund's Wall of Faces website https://www.virtualwall.org/dt/ThainHL01a.htm ,

   and the first sentence of the 24 May entry in the "Official 11th Combat Aviation Group History," provided by Tim Crilley in the website https://www.angelfire.com/ga2/vnhistory/FRAC.html .

   Diverging descriptions of the same event by different witnesses is a common problem for juries in court trials. Similarly, varied descriptions of an event experienced by two soldiers during wartime is quite common, particularly when it is recalled many years or decades after the fact. Even the same individual may remember an event differently soon after it occurred compared with decades later. This is a frustration for historians of our Civil War, World War II, and probably every war.

Chapter 8: COMBAT IN AND NEAR QUANG TRI

At the end of April 1972 the North Vietnamese were encircling Quang Tri (pronounced "Kwang Tree"), a city of about 100,000 people. There was a brigade, I think, or maybe just a battalion of ARVN marines in the city with a company of tanks, but they were totally outgunned and outnumbered. We had 100 Americans in the Citadel, the old fortress in the center of the city, much like in the movie "Fort Apache." They were boarded up inside this medieval, big stone fortress, and the city was surrounded. We participated in the evacuation of those people.

Actually, before that evacuation, we didn't have that mission. But our assistant operations officer was inside that fortress, and we also heard that a female GS-12[1] CIA officer was in that fort, the only American female up there. So, we took it upon ourselves to create a mission, not given to us by corps. We took off before dawn with a command and control Huey for radio relay, two scout helicopters, and two Cobra gunships. Our intent was to fly up to the center of Quang Tri, land in the fort, evacuate our guy and that lady, and get them out of there.

In the process of that mission, just maybe a kilometer-and-a-half before we got to Quang Tri, our Cobra helicopters were flying at altitude, since this was before we'd seen NVA heat-seeking missiles. We were just loitering a couple of miles south of Quang Tri where we could observe what was going on. Our Huey was with us. It was actually above us. The two scout helicopters were flying in trying to sneak into the fort at tree-top level just at dawn. We got a Mayday call that they were shot down. That's not a good thing. They didn't make it to Quang Tri. They got shot down passing over a village, a hamlet, on the outskirts of Quang Tri, because the North Vietnamese had completely encircled the city.

OH-6 "Loach" scout helicopter

So we turned to go find them and pull them out if we could, if they were still alive. Normally, a downed helicopter was marked by the smoke, because it will burn. Neither one of these caught on fire. They were the little Hughes OH-6 scout helicopters. They're shaped like an egg, very crash-worthy and survivable.

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1. General Schedule-12, a grade in the federal government's civilian white-collar pay scale

Both scout helicopters got shot down and went down in the same sugar-beet field, which was like a soybean field here. The crop was maybe three-to-four-feet tall in the field where they'd crashed. In the middle of the field was a big cemetery mound covered with brush. These two scout helicopters were on either side of that cemetery mound and neither crew knew that the other one was down. They couldn't see each other. But both crews, three men each, crawled out of those helicopters, then crawled to the center of the field to hide in the brush of the cemetery mound.

Each pilot had a survival radio, but those radios didn't always work. One pilot was calling us on his radio, and we could hear him. But when we answered him, he couldn't hear us. The other pilot was on the other side of the cemetery mound. His radio wouldn't transmit, but he could receive. As these crews were crawling through the brush, they nearly shot at each other because they met in the brush on the cemetery mound. In the meantime, before they ran into each other, the guy that could transmit was calling us, but he didn't think we were hearing him because we weren't talking to him. So we were just flying and looking around. He started calling in the blind[2] telling us, "Two Cobras. Two Cobras. Turn right 30 degrees." We heard him and we turned right 30 degrees, so he'd know that we'd heard him. Then he gave us directions to come in. We flew in and saw the aircraft in the sugar-beet field.

As we were coming toward the sugar-beet field, we flew over the village. I was in the front seat shooting the 40mm grenade launcher into the hootches in this village. These guys got shot down because when they flew over the village there was a morning formation in the village square with North Vietnamese soldiers standing in line. Their immediate action drill if a helicopter flew over them was to stick their rifles' muzzles in the air and empty their magazines. These helicopters flew right through their fire and got shot down. So I fired 40mm grenade rounds into the hootches of this village as we flew over it, and I was blowing the thatched roofs off. That was scary, because every time I blew the roof off a hootch, there was a tank under it.[3] That scared me to death. So I stopped shooting the roofs off them.

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2. "In the blind" means he didn't know if anybody was hearing him.

3. These hootches were built with supporting poles stuck in the ground and walls that were easy to detach. To drive a tank into one, a wall just had to be temporarily removed.

We made it to the sugar-beet field. Then we started a race-track pattern with our two Cobras 180 degrees apart along the loop. We saw hundreds of troops running at top speed toward the sugar-beet field trying to get to these downed aircraft to capture the pilots and crews before we got there. So, we were shooting up the tree lines in a race-track pattern, on all four sides of this great big sugar-beet field, trying to keep those troops back and away from our guys. In the meantime, our Huey had gone down to tree-top level and flown in beneath us, and landed right next to the cemetery mound. Then all six of the crew members jumped into the back of that Huey, and its pilot came up and came back out while we were still suppressing. By then, however, we were completely out of ammunition. We were still just flying circles and aiming at the tree lines to try to intimidate them so they wouldn't get up and go running or shoot at us. We didn't have anything left to shoot by then, though. We were completely emptied out. But, anyway, we got those crews out. That was the beginning of the day.

Next, we went back to our base, rearmed, and refueled. Then our orders came in. The fortress was going to be evacuated. The air force was planning to fly in CH-53 Jolly Green Giants,[4] large transport helicopters, each of which would be accompanied by two A-1 Skyraider propeller-driven fighter-bombers as their air support. Our job with nine Cobra helicopters was to be in the air, available. If any of the Jolly Green Giants got shot down, we were to assist the Skyraiders in protecting its crew on the ground until another air force helicopter could rescue them.

Jolly Green Giant helicopter

4. "Jolly Green Giant" was a nickname given to big helicopters made by Sikorsky. They were similar to the old presidential aircraft, basically that type of helicopter, but very big, even bigger really than the presidential helicopter, because each had a ramp in the back. During this war their main mission was to pick up downed aircraft pilots even inside North Vietnam.

The Jolly Green Giants were going to have to land in the courtyard of this fortress which was very tight. The hundred or so Americans inside were furiously chopping down trees in the courtyard and tearing awnings off the side of the building to make room for these bigger helicopters to get in there. These huge helicopters would go in one at a time. An Arc Light, a concentrated bombing raid by B-52s, came in first; B-52s dropped bombs around the city where all the masses of enemy troops were. Then the A-1 Skyraiders came in, and, because they were much slower and more accurate, they dropped bombs right up to the walls of the fort to clear it all out and to keep the enemy from climbing over the walls.

USAF B-52 Stratofortress bomber

Next, the Jolly Green Giants came in one at a time, landing with their ramps down in the back, and people were running up these ramps into the backs of the helicopters. As each would pick up and leave, the next helicopter would come in. The first three got out. The fourth came in and was sitting there with its ramp down but nobody was getting on. So its pilot was screaming over his radio, “I don’t have anybody. Give me a body count! Give me a body count!” He was calling to the other pilots to find out how many were on their helicopters to see whether they had gotten everybody.

He was sitting there, and sitting there, and sitting there. By then, the bad guys had made it back to the fortress walls and they were climbing over them. So when he finally got the word that everybody had gotten out by squeezing onto the first three helicopters, he lifted off. His two waist-gunners and his tail-gunner all had miniguns on swivel mounts, and as they were lifting out, they were shooting bad guys off of the wall of the fort like it was a shooting gallery. After taking that unnecessary risk, the string of profanities transmitted by that pilot was impressive.

Two Skyraiders that were there got hit with shoulder-fired heat-seeking missiles. One of them made it out, I believe, to bail out over the ocean. The other one refused to bail out. He said, “There are sharks out there, and I don’t swim very good.”

His wingman came in, flew around him, and said, “Well, you’re not on fire, but you’re missing part of your engine.” I saw the missile hit that guy. It came up from the ground, went through his left wing, came out of the top of the wing, and hit the left side of his engine which is where the exhaust was. When it went through his wing, it went through the fuel cell (a self-sealing fuel tank that could close a bullet hole but not one made by a missile), and that huge airplane, with 90-foot wingspan, was totally engulfed in a fireball. I thought, “That guy’s dead.” But as quickly as that fireball exploded, it then collapsed, and he was still flying in a slow climb to the right.

That missile had just blown up all the fuel in his left wing and blown out cylinders on the side of his radial engine, but he was still flying. I couldn't believe it. He told his wingman that he wasn't going to bail out and become food for the sharks. He said, "I'm going to Da Nang," which was about 80 miles south of us. So he flew down to Da Nang and landed that damaged aircraft there. We didn't get called into that situation because none of those aircraft got shot down.

While the encirclement of Quang Tri was still happening, I was on a mission to try to break a gap in it so the ARVN marines could escape. These marines, in their breakout, had to cross a river, but they couldn't cross it with their tanks. They just drove their tanks in and sank them in the river, M48 U.S. tanks, so the North Vietnamese wouldn't get them. In the process of trying to break that encirclement, we found that the enemy had all the roads blocked. On the road that we were trying to clear, there were North Vietnamese troops out in the open, and they were actually using civilians as human shields. There was a school nearby too. But we had to clear that road. We had to do it. We knew there were civilians involved when we cleared that roadblock, but we had no choice in the matter. We never did body counts from our missions. That's not anything we did. When the ARVN marines made their breakout down that road—and this was just a five-minute action, that's all it was—they reported to us that they counted 88 enemy KIAs on the road. That's not counting the wounded who were carried off. So in five minutes we created 88 North Vietnamese KIAs and no telling how many civilians. The ARVNs didn't count those. That was all just one day.

Until my interview that was the basis for this book, the only person I ever talked to about this action was a PTSD[5] counselor at the VA.[6] It's sometimes helpful to get things out. But those are the fortunes of war. We didn't start that war. If they were going to use human shields . . . . How many cities did we bomb in Europe in World War II? Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atomic bombs. That's what happens when there's a war. Lots of people are going to get killed, innocent people. There's no helping it.

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5. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying or traumatic event. The condition may last months or years, with triggers that can bring back memories of the trauma accompanied by intense emotional and physical reactions. Symptoms may include nightmares or unwanted memories of the trauma, avoidance of situations that bring back memories of the trauma, heightened reactions, anxiety, or depressed mood.
6. Veterans Administration, now called the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, is the Cabinet-level executive branch department of the federal government responsible for providing lifelong healthcare services to eligible military veterans at VA medical centers and outpatient clinics located throughout the country.

Quang Tri City fell to the NVA on May 1, 1972. On May 2, we were up there with nine Cobra helicopters and our command and control Huey. We got diverted to a stretch of highway south of Quang Tri which was crowded with a refugee column including about 3000 vehicles. I was told that it had broken out of Quang Tri, broken the encirclement and was trying to get out of the area. It was mixed civilian and military, on a little two-lane narrow road. We diverted down there, and that's where we got a radio call that two air-force spotter pilots who'd been shot down had managed to crash-land, and make their way to the road where this refugee column was. They had grabbed a PRC-25 back-pack radio from a South Vietnamese soldier and were calling for help on the guard frequency, an emergency transmission broadcast.

One of our Hueys, piloted by WO1 John Petrilla with crew chief CW2 William Jesse and gunners Spec 4 Charles Morgan and Spec 4 Dale Porterfield went down and landed on the road to pick up those two air-force pilots.[7] Our Cobra and Capt. Dan Tyner's were circling above them to provide cover.

Just after they took off I saw a large smoke burst in the brush about 100 yards away and followed its contrail. Their Huey was about 600 feet up and climbing when the missile went right up its tail pipe and blew it out of the air. That's when my platoon leader, Captain Haynie, did a wing-over and went straight down to treetop level. Then he said, "That's enough of this crap. Follow me." So we all did wing-overs and went down to treetop level. From then on, our tactics changed and we never flew higher than treetop level.

My Cobra platoon leader

Another Huey was also crippled by ground fire during this operation, but it managed to land safely and its crew was rescued.

No one on John Petrilla's Huey could have survived, but because the area was controlled by the NVA, its crew was officially listed as MIA until the ARVNs recaptured the area in July and we could return to search the site. As a result of remains recovered during that search, all members of the crew were finally reclassified as KIA.

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7. Russ Miller recalled Petrilla's Huey picked up just one man, an advisor to the ARVN. Any passengers who were actually in that Huey were all killed along with the crew.

After fierce fighting the ARVN retook the city in mid-September. Quang Tri had been a city of 100,000 people. The ensuing battle to push the enemy out took months, and because American ground troops were no longer there, the South Vietnamese army engaged in that struggle, and we were their support. The city was decimated. Nothing was standing when that battle was over.

I saw these refugee columns coming out of Quang Tri. Then later, after I came home, when our part of the war was over, I saw the fall of Vietnam, with the refugee columns on the news. That just brought me back to seeing what happened that day at Quang Tri. Same thing. One day, a hardworking, loving Vietnamese family had a home, a job, a living, and relatives. The next day, that family was on the road as refugees, who may or may not survive, with only what they can carry in their arms, running from death. It's that fast.

Whether these people were in danger of execution by the North Vietnamese is debatable. However, there was a precedent during Tet[8] of 1968, when the communist cadre basically took over the city of Hue, the old imperial capitol, for a month or so. Those involved in politics, leadership, media, education, or the military were rounded up, executed, and put in mass graves. South Vietnamese. Thousands and thousands of them killed and put in mass graves just because of who they were.

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8. Tet, short for Tết Nguyên Đán meaning "Festival of the First Day of the Year," celebrates the arrival of spring based on the Vietnamese calendar and is one of the most important celebrations in Vietnamese culture. The 1968 Tet Offensive was a coordinated series of North Vietnamese attacks on more than 100 cities and outposts in South Vietnam.

Chapter 9: THE DAY I WAS SHOT DOWN

A couple of months after we got to I Corps we were sent out on a mission. As an air-cavalry unit with scout helicopters and Cobras, our primary mission at this time was to try to keep track of the movement south of the forward edge of the battle area. The North Vietnamese were bringing tanks down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and then from the west through the mountains, and were marching south on the plains between the mountains and the coast, taking land, taking villages, taking provinces. We were trying to keep track of their progress.

Several times we were tracking the building of roads they used to bring vehicles down from North Vietnam. They were using a bulldozer to build a road through the mountains in South Vietnam from the west down to the plains. We spent days looking for that bulldozer. We found that they were using it to scrape out a road through the jungle, so much per night. Then they would back that bulldozer up hundreds and hundreds of yards, drive up a side ravine, and hide and camouflage it during the day. The road they were building was wide enough for vehicles, but they would pull trees, bamboo, and other brush over the top of it to hide the road from above. You'd have to get down really low to see the road. Satellite photographs and observation aircraft couldn't find it, and it was being extended from hundreds of yards up to a quarter mile each day.

One day my partner and I were sent to look for these kinds of vehicles and the trails and roads they were building to bring in larger amounts of supplies and troops. We were in what was called a "heavy pink team," which was normally a scout helicopter and two Cobras. But on this day we went out with just two Cobras and a Huey for radio relay. Normally, it flew above us at altitude, and we flew nap-of-the-earth, at treetop level, because of the heat-seeking missiles. When we would go forward, the Huey would stay behind at altitude to be able to relay our radio transmissions back to base, if necessary, or to artillery or whatever.

We didn't have a scout that day because we'd been given a specific target. There had been an instance of antiaircraft fire coming out of the end of what turned out to be a box canyon. We went into this canyon to literally draw fire, locate, and engage this antiaircraft position that we suspected was covering roads and maybe even the storage of supplies that had been moved down south. In fact, because it was a box canyon, a dead end, it was not a road place. Apparently, they were using the canyon either as an assembly area or a storage area for supplies because there was only one way into or out of it.

We went in with two Cobra gunships at treetop level. When we took fire at the end of this box canyon from what was a 12.7mm (≈ 0.51 inches wide = 51 caliber) antiaircraft position, roughly the equivalent of our 50-caliber machine gun, we entered into our standard engagement maneuver, a 180-degree deployment. Normally this meant we'd fly in a circle 180 degrees apart so one aircraft was engaging the enemy while the other aircraft was coming back out and repositioning to attack again. However, this box canyon was very narrow and deep. So at treetop level we were down below the sides of the canyon. Whenever the outbound helicopter would pass by the inbound helicopter, one had to fly above the other because we didn't have safe maneuver space side by side in that canyon. We'd been engaging this position with rockets and minigun fire several times.

My partner, Russ Miller, and I were inbound. He'd been a prior infantry enlisted man, possibly a staff sergeant, who then went to OCS and flight school just as I had done. He was the aircraft commander that day flying the aircraft from the back seat, and I was flying front seat running the turret guns. We were getting ready to pass over the outbound helicopter which had just finished its gun run. So we were covering its exit while also engaging on our entrance into this box canyon. Just as we passed one above the other, on the side of the cliff, actually on our left side as we headed inbound, we were taken under fire by an unknown second antiaircraft position that was above us. Apparently, the antiaircraft gunner was trying to get both of us at the same time in his "kill box," because we were one helicopter just above the other. The outbound helicopter actually didn't get hit.

1st Lt. Walter ("Russ") Miller

We were struck with eight hits, eight hits from a 51-caliber machine gun. It felt like we'd been T-boned (broadsided) by a locomotive. They hit the side of our aircraft and literally flung us sidewards momentarily. I was on the turret gun, using both hands to fire the minigun straight ahead at the target in front of us. Russ in the back seat was controlling the helicopter. As soon as we got hit, he started screaming in his microphone, "Mayday! Mayday! We're hit! We're going down!" He thought he was transmitting over the radio, but as it turned out he was merely transmitting on the intercom. He hadn't switched to the radio.

I realized that our skids were starting to drag through the tree tops, which is pretty bad because if they catch on something, you're done for. We were losing altitude. So I threw down my gunsight and grabbed the controls in the front seat of the Cobra, which in the front seat are smaller controls.[1] The stick is actually on the right side instead of between your legs and it's very short, and the collective is on the left side and it's very short. But they have full control of the aircraft. So I grabbed the controls and pulled the collective, which increased the pitch angle of the rotor blades providing more lift, and got us up out of the trees. We were literally dragging leaves.

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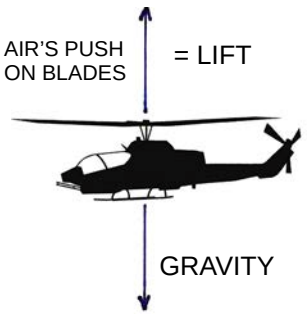
1. Like most helicopters, a Cobra is controlled in flight by using four types of controls: Collective pitch, throttle, antitorque, and cyclic pitch.

   The **collective** control is a stick, a lever, usually on the pilot's left side which controls the pitch angle (slant) of the helicopter's main rotor blades. This is used to increase or decrease the blades lift.

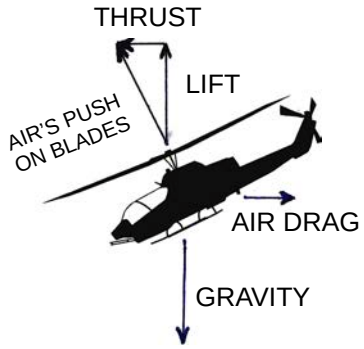
   The **throttle** controls the spin rate of the motor and, thus, of the rotor blades. The throttle control is a rotating grip on the end of the collective stick (much like the hand throttle on a motorcycle). The collective is linked to the throttle to automatically keep the motor's spin constant even though changing the rotor blades' pitch changes friction pushing back against the blades which otherwise would change the rotor's spin rate affecting lift.

   The **antitorque** controls are a pair of foot pedals that control the pitch angle of the tail rotor blades. The reaction force to that force which keeps the main rotor spinning at a constant rate despite air drag tends to spin the helicopter in the direction opposite to that of the rotor blades. The tail rotor counters that force more or less, depending on the pitch of its blades.

   The **cyclic pitch** control is a stick between the pilot's legs in the back seat that can be tilted in any direction. (In the front seat it's a smaller stick on the gunner/copilot's right side.) This stick controls the pitch angle of the main rotor blades. But, unlike the collective which changes each blade's pitch the same amount collectively, the cyclic changes them in sequence so as to give more or less air push on each blade depending on its slant. Since that causes more lift from one blade than the other, it tilts the rotor (and the helicopter) which causes a push toward the lower side of the rotor, the direction you want the helicopter to go.



As the rotor blades spin, they push air downward. As a result, that air pushes those blades upward. If this lift force on the helicopter is enough to balance its weight (earth's downward pull on the helicopter), it can hover motionless.



When the helicopter tilts forward, the air's push on its spinning rotor blades provides both lift and a thrust forward to balance the air's drag. Therefore, the aircraft can fly horizontally at a constant velocity.

When I'd gotten us up out of the trees, I looked in the rearview mirror to see the pilot in the back seat. That was the only use of the rearview mirror from the front seat. Russ, in the back, was still screaming on the radio—well, he thought it was the radio, but it was the intercom. I noticed that his black air-cavalry hat, which he'd hung on the air-conditioning hose on the back of his armored seat, had been blown into the back of the cockpit and was being held against the back firewall by the wind coming in from the missing canopy. The whole canopy had blown out on one side of his seat, and the brim of his cowboy hat was partially burnt off and smoking—this all happened instantaneously—and I noticed it when I'd just pressed the intercom switch to talk to him. Then I started laughing because of seeing his hat smoking in the back seat. My laughter shocked him and stopped him from yelling "Mayday!" into the intercom.

I realized that he'd been blinded, at least temporarily, which was why we were losing altitude and going into the treetops even though he was still on the controls. I was fighting him on the controls, but he couldn't see because one round had come into the cockpit, gone between him and the inside of the armored seat which was made up of ceramic armor, and ricocheted upward in the back of his seat between the seat and the air-conditioning pad. It had powdered a bunch of this ceramic seat, cut the air-conditioning hose, and sent a bunch of powder from the ceramic, or possibly from the canopy plexiglass that had been blown out, into the air-conditioning system. Now Russ didn't have the visor down on his helmet, but I did. So when all of this powder blew out through the vents on our instrument panels, it blew directly into his eyes but not mine because of my visor. So he was temporarily blinded. But he didn't know if it was temporary or not. He just couldn't see.

When I started laughing on the intercom, it shocked him back into reality, and he said, "What are you laughing at?" I told him, "Well, partner, your cowboy hat is about to blow out the window, so you'd better grab it." So he turned around, grabbed his air-cav hat, and shoved it down between his legs to keep it from blowing out. By this time his eyes were watering enough that it was starting to wash the stuff out. He was beginning to see, very blurry, but he was able to see a little bit.

Now we were still inbound toward our target, and I initiated a turn to head away from the target and toward the opening of the canyon. Normally, when we would turn away from a target, the front-seat gunner's job was to fire a volley of 40mm grenades at the target, since just as you're turning, your helicopter's belly tilts up toward the target making you very vulnerable. Those grenades are arching over and exploding for some time as suppressive fire while you're making your escape. But we weren't able to do that this time because I was on the controls doing a steep turn to try to get us headed back out of the box canyon away from the problem.

We got turned around and were headed out of the canyon, but our wingman didn't realize that we'd been hit because all Russ's transmissions had been on the intercom, not on the radio. So my wingman had turned inbound to be able to pass over us as we made the transition from us to him for the target. As he was preparing to pass us, he saw another great big piece of canopy plexiglass fall off our helicopter. He got on the radio and said, "Centaur 51, there's pieces of your helicopter falling off." I answered him back saying, "We've been hit, and we're getting out of here." He replied, "Roger that, I've got you covered," and volleyed rockets into the end of the canyon to cover our exit. Then he made his turn right behind us and followed us out.

Let me back up and talk about the eight hits that we took. We were stitched (a line of bullet holes) starting from the ammo bay which is under the front seat, where I was sitting that day. The ammo bay held about 2000 rounds of 7.62mm minigun ammunition and about 300 rounds of 40mm grenades on a machine-gun-like chain. We had taken armor-piercing and incendiary rounds into the ammo bay, which caused some of the grenades to go off under my feet, and they blew out skin on the right side of the aircraft. Later we found there were grenade explosion holes, outward bound, from that 40mm grenade storage. Other 51-caliber armor-piercing incendiary rounds had come into the left side behind our ammo bay and underneath, and then went up into the cockpit of the aircraft commander in the back seat. They started blowing out the canopy, got into his seat, and so forth.

That line or "stitching" of machine-gun bullets then proceeded upward and rearward into the small hydraulic compartment between our cockpit and the engine compartment. It contained two hydraulic systems, one as a backup because with its larger blades the Cobra helicopter is very difficult to control without hydraulics, making it really hard to move the controls. We didn't know at the time, but the hit took out both our hydraulic systems. Then it continued stitching behind the hydraulic compartment into the engine compartment.

Several rounds came through the side doors of the engine compartment. Our engine itself was protected because there was an armor plate bolted on the inside of the engine-compartment door that kept any rounds from actually hitting our turbine engine. But, unknown to us, one round had hit our transmission gearbox which is in the rear of the engine. This gearbox converts the rotation of the driveshaft from horizontal up to vertical to run the rotor system.

We were outbound from this box canyon with our wingman behind us, and we were losing altitude. We got out into the plains. The mouth of this box canyon opened up into the plains with little or no vegetation or trees, and we were only flying at about 30 knots (about 35 miles per hour)[2] instead of normally doing about 80 to 100 knots (92 to 115 miles per hour). The helicopter was shaking itself to pieces. By this time Russ's vision had cleared enough so that he was on the controls with me, and we were both trying to manhandle these controls without any hydraulic system assist.

A couple of miles or so outside the mouth of this canyon and perpendicular to our eastward travel was QL. 1,[3] which was the main north-south highway of South Vietnam, a very narrow stretch of mixed concrete or asphalt about 8-to-10-feet wide built by the French in the 1950s. But it was the main highway. We got out to that highway, and we turned right which was south and flew above it. We were going only about 30 knots, very slow, and were only about six or eight feet above the pavement, the thought being that if the engine quit on us, we'd just do a running landing on our skids right down onto that highway. Of course, that was a heavily traveled highway, not fast traffic, but heavy, probably averaging 30 to 35 miles per hour with all of the potholes in it. There were trucks, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, and carts of all kinds on this highway. We were barreling down it only several feet above the pavement. All of these people were diving into the ditches with their vehicles to clear out in front of us so that we didn't run into them. Well, that was very scary.

Now, from the time we got hit, we kept the helicopter in the air for about six or seven minutes. We were headed for Camp Evans which was right near the highway. The day before we had flown over Camp Evans which had had a South Vietnamese artillery battery of 175mm Long Tom cannons given to them by the U.S. They were Korean-War vintage artillery pieces originally designed to shoot tactical nuclear warheads. But they had a good range, and because we didn't use them anymore, we gave them our good guns and our good ammunition. That was the day before.

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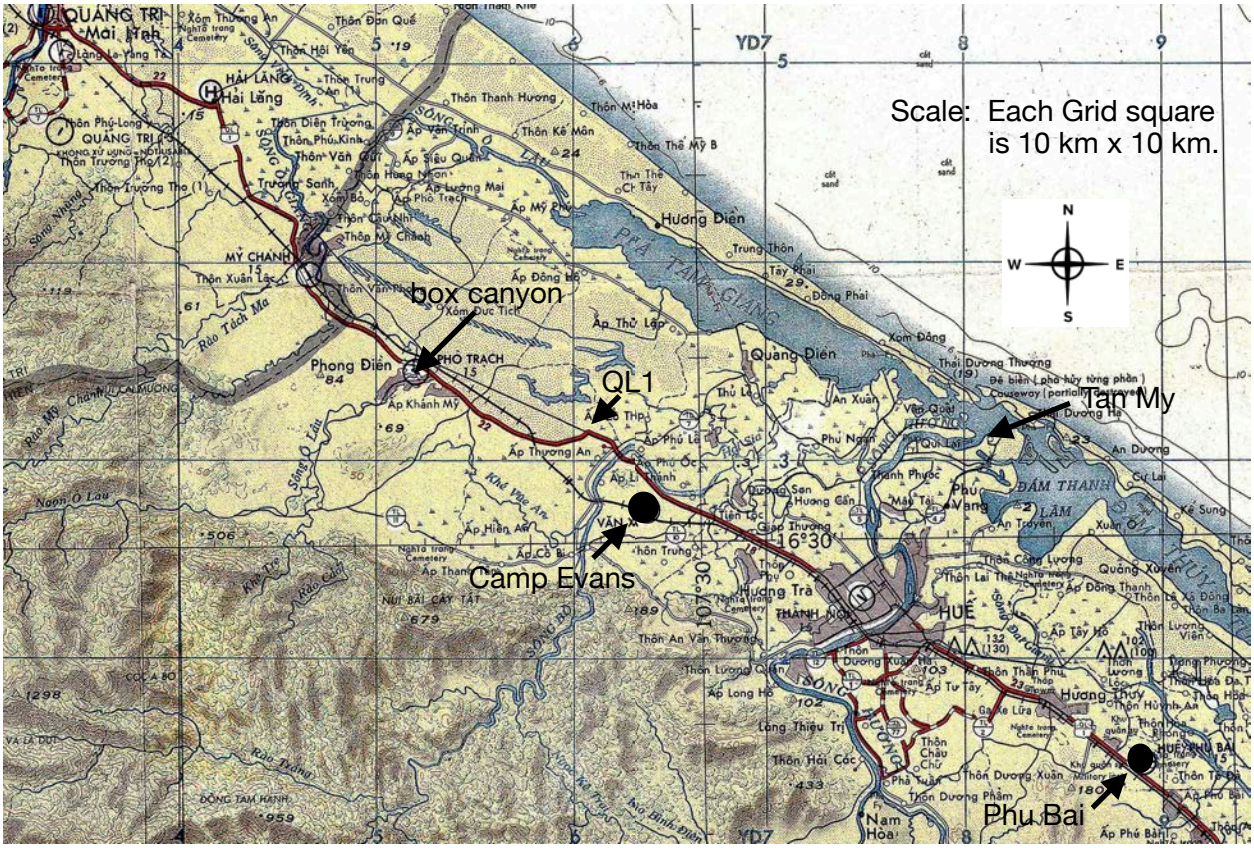
2. Speed in "knots," nautical miles per hour, multiplied by 1.15 equals roughly speed in miles per hour, or multiplied by 1.85 equals speed in kilometers per hour.

3. National Route 1, in Vietnamese: Quốc lộ 1, abbreviated "QL.1," is the trans-Vietnam highway. It runs about 2300 kilometers (1430 miles), roughly north-south, usually near the coast, from the China-Vietnamese border to the southern tip of Vietnam. This is a bit less than the length of I-95 from Providence, RI, to Miami, FL, or I-5 from the Canadian border to the Mexican border.



Quang Tri to Phu Bai

We went in to make an emergency landing at Camp Evans on its pierced-steel-planking runway. There were no Americans there. The 101st Airborne Division had turned it over to the ARVN when the division went home the year before. As we made our approach to this runway, we were so busy trying to control the aircraft that we didn't look around at the base, the airfield, or anything else. We were making this approach to the ground with an aircraft that was trying to shake itself to pieces. Just as we got our skids touching the steel runway and had about half of our weight down on the skids, our transmission seized. We had been told in Cobra gunship school that those transmissions would run for 20 minutes with no oil in them. Well, that was a lie. We'd been in the air only about six or seven minutes since being hit, and apparently had lost all our transmission fluid and all our hydraulic fluid. Then just as we got our skids touching the runway, the transmission seized, and the precession or gyroscopic effect of that 880-pound rotor blade stopping instantaneously caused us to do a snap roll to the right. However, when we snap rolled, the rotor blade hit the runway and knocked us back upright onto our skids on the ground. We quickly shut the engine down. It was barely running anyway.

If we had been 10 or 20 feet higher in the air when that transmission locked up, the aircraft would have snap rolled, and we would have gone in upside down and nose first, which was exactly what had happened to my 21-year-old roommate, Bill Haines. A few weeks earlier on April 28, shortly after we'd moved up to Phu Bai, his Cobra took a round in its transmission. He was in autorotation, which is a way to land a helicopter safely after engine failure when the main rotor system is being turned just by the air hitting it as the helicopter loses altitude. The spinning rotor blades slow its descent. He was in autorotation about 100 feet in the air and on fire. But his transmission seized and snap rolled him. So he went into the ground nose first and upside down, and he was in the front seat.

WO1 William A. Haines, Jr.

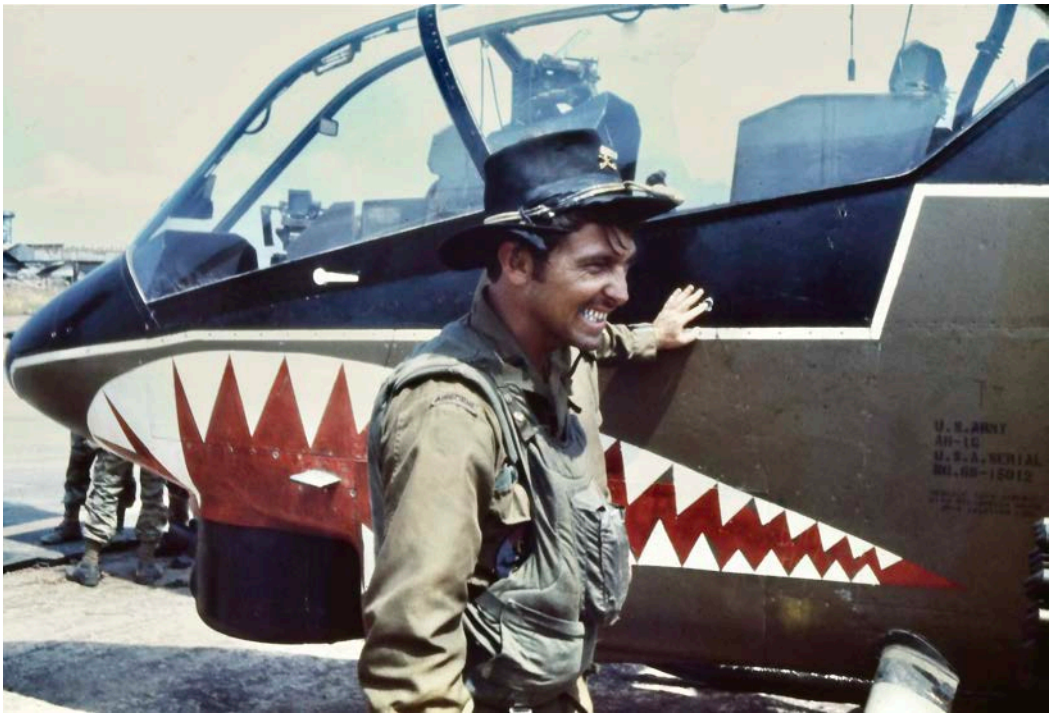
As he went down, while they were in autorotation, his aircraft commander, Paul Martindale, had unfastened his seat belt and shoulder harness to be prepared to get out of the aircraft very quickly because they were on fire. As soon as he got the aircraft on the ground, he was going to get out. But when that Cobra snap rolled, it threw him out of the cockpit. He'd probably already unlatched the cockpit canopy door also. So when that aircraft snap rolled, it threw him out about 100 feet in the air. He wasn't hit by gunfire and he wasn't burned, but he was killed by the impact with the ground.

Capt. Paul V. Martindale

Our scout helicopter recovered Captain Martindale's body immediately. But the other pilot, my roommate, Bill Haines, was killed and was burning in the front seat of that helicopter. We weren't in control of the ground where they crashed, and North Vietnamese Russian tanks were there, so we couldn't verify that Bill had been killed. A month or so later, we regained enough control of the area that we sent a mission up to the crash site, which was then basically just a pile of ashes. They were able to recover one of his boots with several foot bones in it and a dog tag (an identification tag). Each of us wore leather boots because of their fire resistance instead of canvas jungle boots, and nearly all of us laced one of our dog tags into our boot laces for that very reason. So after recovering his boot and his dog tag, they were able to verify that he was a KIA to his young widow. That was sobering.

After we landed, our wingman was circling his Cobra above us. Our command and control Huey came in and landed right next to us. What they knew, because of the banks of radios which they had but we didn't, was that during the night the ARVN artillery battery had evacuated this firebase where we'd just landed because it was virtually surrounded by 10,000 North Vietnamese regulars. This was early morning, and the North Vietnamese hadn't occupied the base yet. They may not have even known that the ARVNs were completely gone. We didn't know it when we landed our Cobra there, but there were no South Vietnamese soldiers left on the base, and we were completely surrounded by North Vietnamese troops.

We climbed out of our helicopter and were looking over the damage. The fuel cap had blown off. Our Cobra had holes in the ammo bay from the explosions of the 40mm grenades. It had holes underneath the rear cockpit and up into the rear cockpit, and a good bit of the plexiglass had blown out of the rear cockpit. We opened up the hydraulic compartment and saw why the hydraulics had gone out, and we realized because of the rotor blades stopping instantaneously, that the transmission had locked up from a lack of transmission fluid. So we were walking around the helicopter and surveying all this damage in anticipation that we'd come, take the aircraft back, and try to rebuild or repair it. Also, with a miniature 35mm camera I was carrying in the sleeve of my flight suit, we took a souvenir picture of each of us, Russ with his burnt up air-cav hat, in front of the damaged aircraft.



Russ, wearing his partially destroyed hat, with a finger
in one of the bullet holes near where he'd been sitting

Me, on the other side of our downed Cobra, showing the jagged hole to my left.

What we didn't realize was that we were still in enemy territory. The guys in the Huey next to us were screaming and waving at us and waiting for us to come jump in the back of their Huey. Then as we were taking pictures, I heard a thump in the distance. Being a former enlisted infantryman, I recognized immediately what that sound was: It was the firing of a mortar tube. All of a sudden, this mortar round passed over both helicopters and hit about 30 yards beyond us blowing a hole in the steel runway. We were looking around the nose of our helicopter at this smoking hole in the runway and heard another thump, a second round from the mortar. It landed on the other side of the Huey from us. In other words, the first round was long and the second was short. Well, having called in mortar fire before, I knew where the third round was going to be: in the middle. That's the bracket. That's where we were. So Russ and I, both former infantrymen, took off running as fast as we could and dove head first onto the deck in the back of that Huey, and its pilot pulled pitch and got us out of there before that third round hit. As he was getting us clear, our wingman rolled in with his Cobra and salvoed all his remaining rockets on our helicopter so that our radios and guns couldn't be captured and used against us.

We were flown back to our airfield at Phu Bai, dropped off, and went into the flight operations office to make our report. A "Shot Report" had to be filled out if you were hit on a mission. We had to fill out information about the aircraft number, who was flying it, the time, the location, what we were doing, what we were hit by, what damage it caused, and so forth, a standard form.

Russ's eyesight had returned to normal by this time. He had minor scratches and some bleeding on his neck caused by the ceramic shrapnel from his seat, just enough for a Purple Heart. We had no medic at this base, so he just wiped the blood off.

Normally, after filling out a shot report, we'd just go back to our hootch and have the rest of the day off to kind of gather ourselves up. But while we were filling out the shot report our operations officer, a captain, had a field phone in one hand and a radio in the other talking to corps headquarters. There was a heck of a fight going on somewhere out there. So he wrote a five-digit number on a piece of paper and threw it at us, on the table where we were filling out our reports. We both recognized it was the tail number of another Cobra. We didn't get the rest of the day off. We had to go out, get in another Cobra, and head out to another fight that was going on.

The second time during the whole year I was in Vietnam that my helicopter took a hit was during that not very significant mission. We didn't know it until we got back, checked out the aircraft, and found that AK-47 rounds had gone through our tail boom. They hadn't hit anything important or affected our mission.

So, that was the day I got shot down.

Chapter 10: ANTITANK MISSILE TESTING

During the Easter Offensive of 1972 the North Vietnamese brought a lot of Russian tanks across the DMZ into South Vietnam. Nothing on our Cobra helicopters could take out a Russian tank. The best we could hope to do, and we did quite often if we caught them out in the open, was to shoot white phosphorus rockets or flechette rockets filled with hundreds of nail-like projectiles at them to make them button up their hatches and go semi-blind using only their optics to see. Then we would call in the air force if it were available. They sometimes had a first-generation smart bomb that was radio controlled. A TV camera in the bomb's nose could be used to guide it into the tank by watching a video monitor screen from the back seat of a fighter plane and moving a small stick on a controller. But those weren't always available.

Bombed NVA tank, probably a Russian T-54

We were the only combat helicopter unit in I Corps at that time, most Americans having pulled out or started to before the Easter Offensive. Because, for the first time, we were exposed to the Russian shoulder-fired heat-seeking missiles, we got a rush delivery of something that had been tested at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland to try to help us avoid being targets of those missiles. Basically, it was a fiberglass attachment replacing the normal shroud over the exhaust of our turbine engine. It diverted the hot exhaust gas, which normally just went to the rear, upward into the rotor wash of the helicopter in hopes that it would disperse the heat and make us less of a target for a heat-seeking missile. We called these things "toilet bowls" because that's what they looked like, fiberglass toilet bowls. They helped some, but they weren't very good by today's standards.

Aberdeen Proving Ground also sent us two test Huey helicopters with pilots and technicians to test some weaponry on those helicopters. They were shipped directly to I Corps from Aberdeen, apparently. These helicopters each had attachments for launching wire-guided antitank missiles.

We were told at the time that these were highly classified French Roland missiles. That was probably misleading since, as I found out much later, Rolands weren't wire guided. Supposedly, these things had a range of up to 3000 meters of wire, which is about two miles, a lot of wire. But, again, we weren't given a lot of specifications on this. Our unit was assigned to find targets for them, North Vietnamese/Russian tanks, to take under fire and test the effectiveness of these missiles fired from the helicopters and guided by wire to the target. The plan was for the two Hueys to go out on separate missions each led by one of our scout helicopters.

By this time, we were all flying at treetop level because of the heat-seeking missiles. So the scout helicopters were to go out at treetop level searching for the enemy tanks. The Hueys were kept in the rear several miles back. We had Cobras protecting the Hueys, supposedly. If our scouts located a tank, their job was to come back, pick up one of the Hueys and lead it at treetop level to a potential firing position no closer than 1000 meters from the target. There it would lift up to a high hover and engage the tank with a wire-guided missile to test its effectiveness. We were briefed that we would not leave the Hueys for any reason. Of course, we were still at treetop level as well and moving around. We were not to engage the tanks if that placed the Hueys in any immediate danger because this was a very classified operation.

Antitank wire-guided missile just after launch from Huey
(guide wire is just barely visible, see arrow)

When we were briefed for these missions, we were told which team would go to which areas to search for tank targets. But, to my memory, after a briefing was completed, the Cobra pilots were held back for an additional briefing while the scout pilots and the test pilots of the Hueys went to prepare for departure. In this separate classified briefing we were told that, due to the sensitive nature of these French missiles being tested on these helicopters for antitank service, if any of the Hueys were shot down by any means, we were ordered to salvo our rockets, which meant to fire all our rockets in a volley, to totally destroy the wrecked helicopter whether the crew had gotten out or not. Of course, this was very disturbing. But we were told that this was absolutely imperative because of the classified nature of what was on those helicopters. I suspect that the test pilots knew nothing about this order. We were distressed by this order, but it was an official order. Thank God, we never had to carry it out.

So that was the testing of those wire-guided missiles being launched from Huey helicopters from Aberdeen Proving Ground and our orders as to what to do if they were possibly going to be compromised by being shot down. Again, thank God we never had to carry out those orders.

I don't know whether the rockets were effective on the tanks or not, because we were far behind the Hueys when they fired.[1] We could see the Hueys at all times, but we couldn't see the targets. The test stopped after several attempts. Then for our unit, it was over.

While our scout and Cobra pilots were out looking for tanks, our Huey pilots didn't get much action. Quite often our Hueys would merely be a radio relay with us, or if someone got shot down they'd come pick them up if they could. But the Huey pilots got some action in September when a typhoon hit us.[2] As the typhoon was coming ashore, we all got warnings. So we flew our aircraft into the mainland, away from the beach where the airfield was, down to Da Nang Airbase. But once the typhoon had passed us, the Huey pilots were called into service because there were many half-sunk fishing boats out in the ocean. The Hueys were saving people from sunken boats and carrying relief supplies to villages up and down the coast. They really got a chance to do some good service there.

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1. In "U.S. Army Air-to-Ground (ATG) Missiles in Vietnam" by Dr. Kaylene Hughes, AMCOM History, February 6, 2017, Dr. Hughes includes the following:

   > The airborne TOW missile system proved to be very adaptable to combat operations, and the XM26 performed very well while in Vietnam. Hughes Aircraft Company technicians were able to handle the minor problems that occurred. Because the airborne TOW system was actually a test bed that had not been designed to be maintained in the field, it required the support of highly trained engineers and technicians as well as extensive laboratory test equipment to keep it operational. Despite the challenges, the airborne TOW achieved a 90 percent reliability rating for the entire period it was deployed in Vietnam. The lack of a limited visibility/night vision capability was the single largest impediment to XM26 system effectiveness during that time.
   >
   > Between Apr. 30, 1972 and Jan. 11, 1973, the two HUEY gunships fired a total of 199 TOW missiles: 37 in training and 162 in combat. Of the missiles fired in combat, 151 (93 percent) were reliable and 124 (82 percent) scored hits on a variety of targets. These included: 27 tanks, 21 trucks, 5 armored personnel carriers, 3 artillery pieces, 1 antiaircraft gun, 1 122-mm rocket launcher, 5 machine guns, 2 57-mm guns, 5 caves, 8 bunkers, 2 bridges, 2 mortars, 2 ammunition storage dumps, 2 TOW jeeps (1 with launcher and 1 with missiles), and 1 house. There were 11 malfunctions and 4 misses. The latter occurred when the gunner fired the missile at a range in excess of 3,000 meters and lost it when the guidance wire ran out. Although the HUEYs encountered considerable machine gun fire, neither gunship was hit by enemy fire because they stayed high.

   Source: https://www.army.mil/article/181893/u_s_army_air_to_ground_atg_missiles_in_vietnam

2. This was Typhoon Elsie which had peak wind speed of 85 miles/hour and made landfall in northern South Vietnam on September 4. Then, while rapidly weakening as it moved over land, the storm crossed the Indochina Peninsula. On September 7 it moved over the Bay of Bengal, restrengthened over the warm water (where it was now called Tropical Cyclone 24-72), then finally made landfall again and dissipated over India.

   Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1972_Pacific_typhoon_season and https://www.google.com/search?channel=fenc&client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Typoons+in+Vietnam+in+1972

Tan My Airbase viewed from the air looking northeastward

Tan My Airbase viewed looking in roughly the same direction as the picture above but from over the runway closer in and lower down. The two long two-story buildings are barracks. Photo by Rich Neeley in March 1973 just after F Troop, 4th Cav had stood down

Chapter 11: BASED AT TAN MY

Tan My Airbase was originally built as a U.S. Navy Seabee station and petroleum storage facility. It housed American sailors and marines during the late 1960s. But by the time my unit, F Troop of the 4th Cavalry Regiment, got there in July 1972, it was unoccupied. Since we didn't particularly like the rocket attacks at Phu Bai, our commander moved us to this abandoned base.

Tan My Airbase viewed from the air looking westward

The airfield's runway consisted of rolled sand with tar on it. We had revetments made of sandbags and steel planking on one side of the runway to protect the aircraft from mortar or rocket fire. Our infantry platoon had laid down concertina wire along the base's perimeter. They'd also sandbagged conex containers, reusable square metal shipping containers, for bunkers at various points along the wire. The infantry pulled guard duty at these posts day and night, mostly at night. During the day we could see for miles around us, except during monsoon-season thunderstorms, so we didn't need a lot of guard duty. The climate was usually warm and humid though the air could get cool at night except in summer.

The base had two large, long, two-stories-high wooden barracks. In the center of each first floor was a latrine and shower, basically a single shower. These barracks contained many individual rooms without doors, each big enough for four people.

Two barracks, enlisted men's on the left, officers' on the right

My room ("hootch") in the barracks

Cobras of F Troop, 4th Cavalry Regiment on Tan My Airbase
Photo by Dan Keirsey

There were also three rather loosely connected quonset huts: One was the quarters for the commander and the first sergeant; the second was the officers' club, where all the pilots hung out, got briefings, and so forth; the third was the orderly room/ flight operations area.

A series of small sheds was used for the motor pool, although we had only about three vehicles at the airfield because we didn't drive anywhere except out to the end of the runway. We had two 3/4-ton trucks and a jeep or two. One of our aviation hangars was open on one side and big enough to hold three helicopters. It was used by our maintenance platoon to work on aircraft. Another hangar was used for other purposes.

Sergeant First Class Price was our mess sergeant. He'd volunteered to come to Vietnam on his final tour before retirement. He'd been a general's mess steward, but now he was cooking out of the back of our base's generator shack on field ranges using gasoline. He'd walled off the back of that shack using empty four-foot long, tarpaper cardboard rocket tubes stacked lengthwise to deaden the sound of the two great big Caterpillar-engine generators. Though he had a couple of residential-sized refrigerator freezers, he had no hot-water heater, so we ate in the mess hall off paper plates with plastic forks. We could walk from the meal serving line in the kitchen outside to a large dining room in a nearby mess hall building.

Sergeant Price was great at getting and cooking food. Several hundred yards southward down the beach was a fishing village that only he ever visited. He'd go down there to buy buckets full of tiger prawns, nine-inch-long shrimp, from the fishermen. He also bought homemade charcoal from their village. He'd come back with big jute bags full of charcoal and buckets full of tiger prawns. He'd combine that with some cases of frozen steaks that he'd traded for with the air force at the depot in Da Nang, because the army didn't issue us any steaks. Then he'd cook "surf and turf" for us on Saturday nights, charcoal-broiled steak and barbecued tiger prawn. They were delicious!

One of my extra duties at this base was to be the mess officer which involved overseeing the quality of the food and the finances to pay for it. Sergeant Price was so famous for the food he turned out, that as a mess officer I encountered a problem. We drew rations for only 136 people per day which were flown up to us from Da Nang twice a week. But anybody who had access to a helicopter in I Corps would fly into our base to eat lunch there because of the fame of Sergeant Price's cooking. Finally, corps headquarters had to put out a directive: If you didn't have official business at Tan My, you couldn't go there for lunch because outsiders were eating up all of our rations.

Me on my bed in my hootch

A buck sergeant (E-5) and a driver from our troop were permanently stationed with the maintenance detachment down at Da Nang. Their sole duty was that two days a week they'd get up at 3:00 in the morning, go to the depot in Da Nang, draw rations for F Troop, and put them in the back of a deuce-and-a-half truck. Then they'd drive them through downtown Da Nang to get to a pad where a Chinook helicopter would come in, pick up the rations, and fly them up to Tan My.

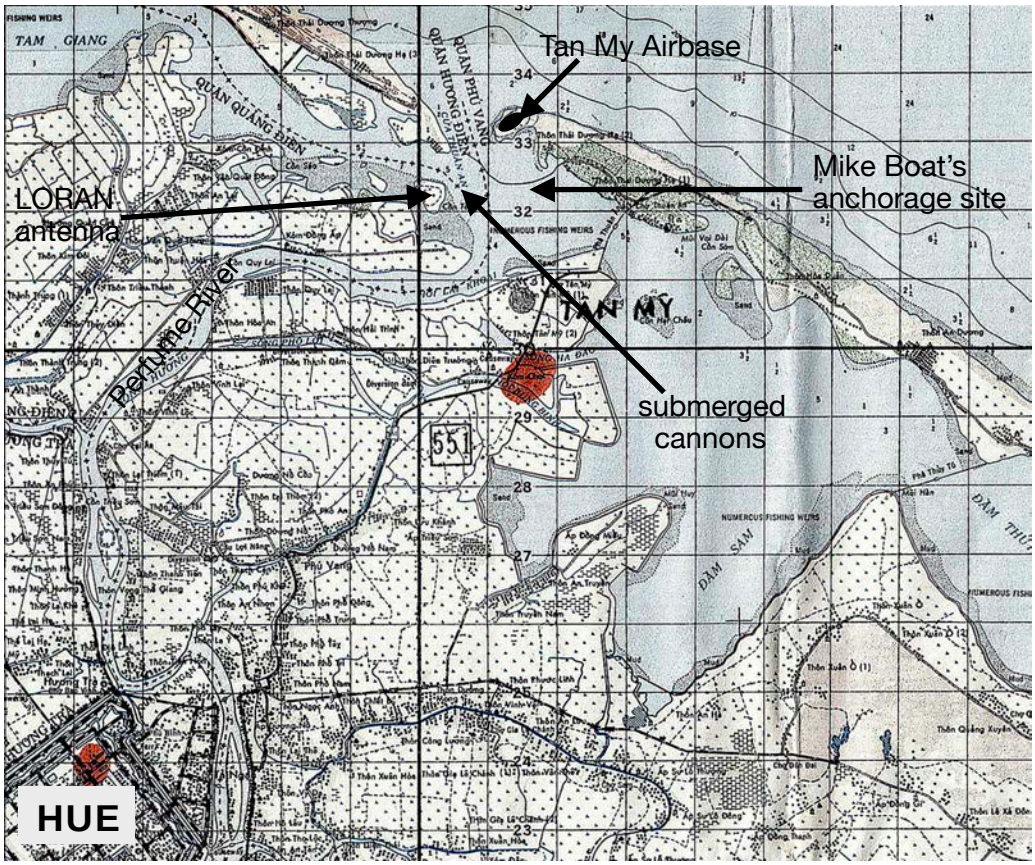
While the sergeant drove the truck, the usual driver rode in the back as a guard with an M16 and all the curtains down, blacked out. One day they had an incident. They were stopped in Da Nang traffic on purpose by “cowboys” who blocked their way with a cyclo.[1] Guys selling dope, running a scam, stealing, and such were called “cowboys” over there because they were outside the law. They were going to raid that truck and steal whatever was in it. As they started climbing up on the truck’s tailgate, the guard in the back who was resting on top of the frozen rations with his M16 on his chest cut loose with a burst that shot them off the back of that truck. When the sergeant heard that gun go off, he put the truck into low, drove right over that cyclo, and “got the heck out of Dodge.”

1. A cyclo is a bicycle with the front wheel replaced by two wheels and a seat for a passenger mounted between them. The cyclo was a replacement for the rickshaw. Today in Vietnam, cyclos are only used for the tourists.

Rickshaw and cyclo

Chapter 12: OPERATIONS WHILE BASED AT TAN MY

Our airfield at Tan My was near the mouth of the Perfume River, on the southernmost of the two peninsulas enclosing a tidal basin. There was a narrow channel between these several-mile-long peninsulas through which the river emptied into the South China Sea.



Tan My region

Our runway, which was only sand treated with tar and rolled, ran from the South China Sea beach all the way across the narrow peninsula to the water of the tidal basin on the inside. Whenever we took off to the west, which was toward the mainland, or landed coming from that direction, we flew across the tidal basin. When the tide was out, we'd noticed some anomalies under the water of the tidal basin near the mainland.

Over on the mainland was a Coast Guard LORAN navigation detachment with a big antenna. Because they had strong fencing and security around their compound, we kept our rubber fuel bladders which we used for refueling in there. Ten or so 1000-gallon bladders were stored on the ground hooked up to pumping systems. We would land next to them and refuel our helicopters before we returned across the water to our own airfield and revetments and parked.

Several of our guys got very curious about what those anomalies were in the tidal basin over near the mainland. So one day they decided to investigate. On this day, our commander was away at a meeting somewhere, but his helicopter was still on the airfield. His helicopter was a Huey, but it had a 50-caliber machine gun mounted on one side instead of an M60, and a regular M60 on the other side. This Huey was his pride and joy. It was very well maintained.

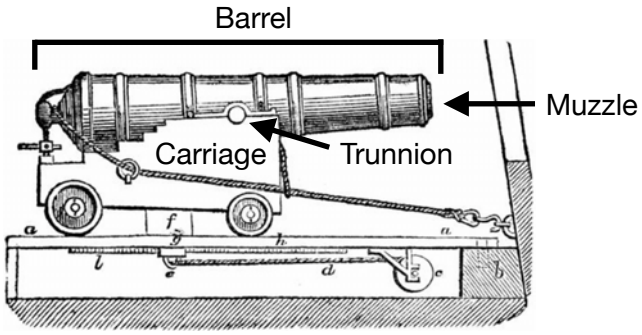
These pilots, who planned to investigate these things in the low tidal basin, flew his helicopter over there and hovered right over the anomalies. As it turned out, they were about the size and shape of large cannons underwater. The guys were very excited about that, so they landed the commander's Huey on the mainland right next to the water, got out, and waded into the water. With the tide being low, the water there was only about five-to-six-feet deep, right up to the neck of most guys. It would have been too deep for me if I'd been there. I was not, but we were watching all this activity from our side of the tidal basin. Some of these guys waded out, ducked their heads underwater, felt around, and checked the anomalies out. They were cannon barrels, small ones, medium ones, and large ones, five in all. Their wooden carriages had long since rotted away in the sea.

So the guys decided that they were going to recover some of these cannons. They came back and got some sling webbing, then flew back over there, went underwater and, holding their breath, rigged these nylon slings under two of these cannons. Then they hovered the helicopter over the slings to pull each of these cannon barrels up out of the water. They were covered with silt and barnacles, and they didn't come out of the mud very easily. The Huey really had to struggle to get them to break free. The smaller one they got out fairly easily, picked it up, flew it over to our airbase, and dropped it in the sand in front of our orderly room at the airfield. Then they went back for the next cannon which was a little bit larger, a heavier load, with a lot of suction on it when they were trying to pull it out of the mud and muck. The helicopter had an "overtorque" warning light come on; there was too much torque resisting the turning of the engine. The engine was straining too much and was losing RPMs (Revolutions Per Minute, rate of spin). But the cannon barrel finally broke loose from the muck; they then quickly lowered it onto the mainland. Once the helicopter recovered its RPMs, they picked up the cannon, flew it over, and dropped it in the sand near our orderly room.

Anytime you had an overtorque on a helicopter engine like that, you were supposed to report it so that the engine would be inspected to make sure it wasn't damaged. But since these guys didn't have permission to use the commander's Huey, they didn't report it. They thought, "Well it's some minor thing. Sometimes you get an overtorque on an engine if you're doing something really extravagant." So they just parked the Huey back where it had been and didn't tell anybody about it.

Everybody was more interested in the cannons. Our commander came back, saw these cannons, and was excited. He didn't really inquire into how they got them. He then gifted the larger cannon to the South Vietnamese I Corps commander. They somehow delivered it to his headquarters as a trophy. But within a few days our commander went out on a mission, and the engine failed on his Huey. He had to make an emergency landing, and they had to go recover his Huey because of the engine failure.

These were muzzle-loading cannon probably from the early 19th century, I would say. They hired a papasan, a local guy, to chip barnacles off the cannon that we had propped up in front of our orderly room. He worked on that thing for several weeks chipping barnacles to get down to the metal on it as best he could. On the barrel of the cannon, there was a crown across the top of the cannon where the trunnions, the projections from the barrel which hold the barrel on its carriage, were. We cleaned off the muzzle of the cannon and could read "Liverpool."



19th-Century British Naval Cannon

Recovered cannon barrels before cleaning

So, our best estimate of how these cannons got into our tidal basin was that during the 19th century there was a tremendous amount of trade and British naval presence in the South China Sea during what was called the "Opium Wars." Lots of trade went between Burma and Singapore back and forth to China and Hong Kong along the Vietnamese coast. These British ships, primarily the merchant ships, were heavily attacked by fast pirate sailing ships much smaller than British warships or merchant ships. Merchant ships, of course, all carried cannons for self-protection, but, unless they were traveling with a warship, they were easy prey for these very fast-moving swarms of smaller pirate craft. They would literally swarm these British merchant ships and quite often capture them. The pirates would then take the ships into places like this tidal basin, strip everything out of them, all the cargo, everything of use that they could get out, then scuttle or burn the ships to get rid of the evidence of their piracy. That was our best estimate of what had happened: The cannons were probably remains of a British merchant ship that had been captured by the pirates of the South China Seas. This was just another interesting adventure during war.

We had our own skirmish with pirates of a sort in that tidal basin. South Vietnamese navy sailors maintained what was called a “Mike Boat,” an open-welled landing craft similar in shape to a World War II Higgins boat but larger. It was based in the tidal basin between us and the mainland. Their duty was to inspect the fleets of fishing boats that regularly left the tidal basin to go out to sea. The sailors checked that these fishing boats weren’t bringing in North Vietnamese soldiers or supplies for the Communists.

An LCM-3 Mike Boat model
LCMs were bigger than Higgins boats
and made mostly of steel instead of wood.

But what they did mostly was steal from people who were taking small boats between our airfield and the mainland. For example, when we paid our hootch maids[1] their salaries every Saturday, they would get on a boat to the mainland and then catch a ride over to Hue where most of them lived. These navy guys would stop the boat, harass the girls, steal some of their wages, and also take food or anything else the girls had gotten from us to bring to their families.

To stop this minor piracy of our employees, not just the maids, but cooks and other employees, after paydays we would fly them across the water to the mainland on a Huey so they wouldn’t have to ride in a boat that would be stopped by navy pirates. The navy guys got mad at us for cutting off their income. So one night, a bunch of them were probably drunk. They were living on this landing craft at anchor, and one of them got on a 50-caliber machine gun and started shooting in the direction of our barracks. Fifty-caliber rounds were ricocheting off their metal roofs. We weren’t very happy about that. At night a standby crew was available to fly a scout helicopter and a Cobra. Quite often the platoon leader and I were on duty as the standby night Cobra pilots because he and I were the teetotalers in the platoon. We were known to always be sober, whereas a great many of the pilots after 6 pm at night were known not to be eligible to fly an aircraft. We had a rule called “Twelve hours from bottle to throttle.” You weren’t supposed to have any drinks within 12 hours of when you had a mission. That’s why a lot of guys would start drinking very early in the afternoon since they had to stop drinking 12 hours before their mission the next morning.

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1. Even though we lived in a barracks, we referred to the Vietnamese girls we paid to clean our rooms and do laundry as “hootch maids.”

So we launched the scout helicopter and the Cobra in response to being fired at by this South Vietnamese navy landing craft, probably by drunk sailors. Our standard procedure was that the Cobra would fly at altitude with all the lights out, and the Loach would fly at lower altitude with his lights out to go find the source of the problem. Usually, like back at Phu Bai, it was rockets being launched at us by the Communists. But here it was the South Vietnamese navy shooting at us. So the scout helicopter went over and circled around this landing craft, but nobody would come out of their quarters down in the well deck of the landing craft. Finally he dropped some artillery simulator grenades, flash-bang-type things, into the well deck of the ship which, enclosed in the metal of the well deck, probably burst the sailors' eardrums but didn't kill anybody. Meanwhile, we were circling above in our Cobra in case the sailors started firing at the scout. If they had, we would have blown them out of the water, but we didn't have to do that. The next day they moved their boat away, and we never saw them again.

I want to mention a couple of brief incidents due to enemy action that occurred during the summer while we were stationed at Tan My Airbase. After seeing those Russian heat-seeking missiles used against us, we flew at very low altitude, maybe 30 feet, so that when we flew over the enemy we'd be out of sight very quickly. It took three seconds for those missiles to lock onto a heat signal before each was launched. One day, when we were returning to Tan My from a mission farther north, one of our scout helicopters flying ahead of us got hit by small arms fire from the sand dune areas along the beach—the NVA were dug into the sand dunes. The scout helicopter had been barely off the ground when it was hit, so it crashed and rolled along the beach about 100 yards. There was a pilot, a crew chief, and a gunner in that OH-6 helicopter. But the OH-6's egg-shaped structure gave it tremendous strength. When it hit the ground and started tumbling, the canopy was torn off, and the rotor system, the transmission, the engine in the rear, the tail boom, and the skids were also ripped off. We thought those guys were dead. When that thing stopped tumbling, nothing was left except the egg-shaped frame of the main fuselage. But all three of those guys crawled out of it with nothing more than some bruises and contusions from being thrown around inside it—of course, they'd all been strapped down. That was amazing to us.

Another time I was returning from up north flying at very low level over the sand dunes. It was a very hot day as it usually was. All of a sudden I saw this fireball go past me on the right side of the aircraft. I didn't even notice it until it was past me at about a one- or two-o'clock position moving away from me. This fireball was the tail end of a shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile.

I knew what it was because as soon as it went past me, the missile itself realized that it had lost its heat target which was me, and it started its search which was built into the rocket. It started going up, down, left and right trying to find the heat source that it was supposed to be zeroing in on. But because it had already passed me it couldn't find it. Then it went into the default mode that we had been briefed on: It turned slightly right, went down into the ground, and blew up. My life was saved, fortunately, because I was flying down close to the sand dunes which were producing tremendous heat waves that time of day and also because a heat deflector unit had been installed on the exhaust of our helicopter. They were fiberglass shrouds that deflected the exhaust up into the rotor wash to dissipate it somewhat. That was the only time that I was shot at by a heat-seeking missile.

An AH-1G Cobra flying close to the ground, a survival tactic in Vietnam

When we were up in I Corps flying out of Tan My, the initial forward push of the NVA with their tanks had finally been stopped mostly by our air force and by the ARVN rushing huge numbers of forces up to I Corps which they were also doing near An Loc in III Corps. The NVA had actually pushed far enough, well past Quang Tri, to overrun their ability to supply themselves, particularly along the coast. Farther inland they could use the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply their forces. But along the seacoast for a mile or two inland it was too open, so they weren't able to bring trucks and big loads of supplies down to their occupation troops.

Our air cav reconnaissance flights discovered that at night small fishing boats came down the coast from the north and threw supplies into the ocean for the surf to wash ashore on the beaches and be recovered by their troops. We would fly morning reconnaissance up and down the beaches of that occupied area and find what turned out to be huge bags of rice, weighing maybe 50 pounds or more, sealed in plastic bags so they would float, then put in a jute bag with markings showing that they were a gift from the People's Republic of China. If we had a Huey or a scout helicopter with us, which wasn't often, we could pick the bags up. Otherwise, we'd just shoot them up and let the seawater spoil the rice. So that was one thing we were doing to prevent the NVA's attempt to supply their troops who were out of reach of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Rice bags from China recovered on the beach

On July 11, 1972, a marine CH-53 helicopter from an American aircraft carrier was shot down near Quang Tri. It landed in an area occupied by the enemy. The crew sheltered in a bomb crater, and the air force was given the task of trying to rescue them. They came with CH-53 Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters and propeller-driven A-1 Skyraider fighter-bombers that acted as escorts for the helicopters. This happened about 10 to 20 miles north of our base at Tan My. We were listening to this action on the radio all afternoon. They had located the downed men in the bomb crater but were unable to go in and get them because of very heavy ground fire. The Skyraiders were dropping bombs and presumably strafing or shooting rockets to suppress the ground fire.

Around dusk the rescue helicopters finally gave up, saying the fire was too heavy for them to fly in. They didn't want to lose any more aircraft. We didn't have radio contact with the downed pilot and his surviving crewmate, and I don't even know if the Jollys did. When we heard over the radio that the Jollys were going to pull out, even though we didn't have this mission from corps headquarters, we just took off running for our helicopters. We ended up with two OH-6 Loach scout helicopters and two Cobras. We got on the radio guard frequency, an emergency channel that everybody who has a radio turned on can hear no matter what frequency they're tuned to, and broadcast that we were coming to rescue them. We were not giving up. Although both Skyraider pilots were very low on fuel and needed to get back to their base in Da Nang before their fuel ran out, one of them responded to our radio call and told us that he'd stay on station to lead us to where they were, since we didn't know their exact location. We took off and started flying north and the Skyraider headed south to meet us while it was getting dark.

When we met up with him, because his speed was much faster than ours, he dropped his flaps and his landing gear to slow down and flew very low, just above us. We were flying at treetop level. We turned off all the lights on our helicopters, and he turned off all his lights except a small white tail light that we followed. Our scouts were following him, and we were following our scouts. His plan was to lead us to the bomb crater that these guys were hiding in. He was going to give us a heads-up when we were getting close. He told us, “When I tell you that I’m on the location, there’s a bomb crater there, and if you can land on both sides of it, that’s where they’ll be.” Both crew members were wounded. The Skyraider was about one-quarter mile ahead of us, and its pilot called out, “I’m almost there. Watch me! Watch me! I’m on it . . . NOW!” When he said that, he turned all of his lights on: strobe lights, position lights, landing lights, wingtip lights, everything. He had been in nearly a stall for us to keep up with him. Now he went full throttle, retracted his landing gear and flaps, and went into a climbing right turn up toward the ocean. Then every rifle and machine gun within range opened up on him. Tracers were going everywhere, following him where his plane was lit up like a Christmas tree. They were all shooting at him as he was gaining altitude way above us and flying away.

Our two scouts then made a high-speed, low-level approach landing on either side of that bomb crater. Their crew chiefs jumped out and ran into the crater to pull the marine airmen out and get them into their two helicopters. In our Cobras, we were circling, as we often did, over this hot area, basically at treetop level, although there weren’t any trees, just brush and sand dunes. We circled 180 degrees apart in a counterclockwise direction, so if either of us saw any fire coming our way we could take the enemy under fire very quickly with our turret gun. But we were talking to each other on the radio saying, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! They don’t know we’re here.” The ground fire aimed at that prop fighter plane flying away was so loud that they didn’t hear us. They were concentrating on trying to shoot that plane down and apparently didn’t see us. We covered a couple of circles while the scout crew chiefs got those guys out of their hole and into the helicopters. Then they called us on the radio and said, “We’re coming out,” picked up, and reversed direction. We broke off our circle and followed them out. We never fired a shot, and we were never hit. We just snuck in under the ground fire and caught them off guard.

I’m not sure, but I think our helicopters flew the wounded marines out to the aircraft carrier, because we didn’t have any medics at our base and Da Nang was an hour south of us. We had taken wounded out to navy ships before, once to a destroyer when our first sergeant was shot through the lung. They probably dropped those airmen off on the carrier, refueled, and then flew back to our base that night or maybe early the next morning.

The next day we were all called into formation. A marine general named Miller, probably a brigadier, from the air wing on that aircraft carrier, started pinning medals on people, so-called “impact awards,” awards given right after an action with the paperwork to follow. My aircraft commander that day was Russ Miller; I was in the front seat. Russ had a Silver Star pinned on his chest, I received a Distinguished Flying Cross, and the other three helicopter crews were also decorated. The scout pilots probably got Silver Stars as well. But, by the time we got the paperwork from the army, all of our marine impact awards had been downgraded one level. I chalk that up to interservice jealousy.

Marine general awards us medals for rescuing the marine aircrew the day before. I am about to receive my medal; one of the scout pilots is to my left at the end of the line.[1]

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1. The Silver Star Medal is awarded for gallantry in combat against an enemy of the United States.

   The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded for heroism or extraordinary achievement in combat while in aerial flight.

   The Air Medal is awarded for heroism, outstanding achievement, or meritorious service while participating in aerial flight but not of a degree that would justify awarding the DFC.

The marines don't give out medals easily. Nevertheless, the army bureaucracy decided Russ's Silver Star should be downgraded to a Distinguished Flying Cross and my DFC to an Air Medal for Valor, one of the 16 Air Medals that I was awarded while in Vietnam. I don't know whether the Skyraider pilot also received a medal for his part in the rescue, but he should have.

Summer was monsoon season in our region of South Vietnam. Although it usually didn't rain continuously, a short hard shower or two typically fell each day. Nothing ever seemed to dry out. However, we were able to schedule our recon flights between these storms.

In August I was able to take two weeks of regular leave to go home for my younger sister's wedding. Like our older sister, she married an air force officer.

My mother, my sister, her husband, and I at my younger sister's wedding

After the initial blockage of the NVA's assault to the south, we didn't really have any American ground combat units in I Corps. We were pulling troops out and Vietnamizing the war at that time, providing the South Vietnamese with logistical, air, and some artillery support. We were the only helicopter unit left in I Corps, and we were pretty much just relegated to armed reconnaissance.

Our job each day was to fly out to determine where the enemy was and to locate the forward edge of the battle area. It was no longer a guerrilla war. They had actually occupied a good many miles of the northern edge of South Vietnam. We went out daily to find out whether they were moving forward, been pushed back, or where they were.

We provided that information through the American liaison office at I Corps Headquarters to the South Vietnamese Army and the American advisors for planning counterattacks to try to push the NVA out of South Vietnam. The ARVN were never able to completely do that. At the time of the cease-fire, which happened in March 1973 a few months after I left for home, the NVA still occupied portions of South Vietnam. So a good part of what we were doing during the latter part of 1972 was going out, locating NVA positions, and gathering information. If we could get them to shoot at us, then we'd get in a fight. But they were becoming more and more disciplined and realized that if they shot at us, they suffered for it. So we didn't see a whole lot of actual combat in the second half of 1972.

When fellow pilot Capt. Danny Tyner went home, I inherited his Cobra that had a 20mm Vulcan cannon mounted on its left wing stub instead of a 19-shot rocket pod. But that gun never worked properly; it didn't work at all most of the time. Normally we carried 925 rounds of 20mm bullets that had an explosive warhead in each one. That gun wasn't something you'd normally see on an army aircraft. I only saw it once, on mine, although a few others may have existed. But our ordinance men didn't have the parts, knowledge, or practical skills to really maintain that gun properly. So, when I inherited that aircraft, I needed to get that gun fixed. There was supposed to be a separate logbook just for that gun containing records of its routine preventive maintenance, repairs, and condition. But that logbook did not exist.

20mm Vulcan cannon mounted on Cobra winglet

Fortunately, Spectre gunship air force technicians were sharing the hangar with our rear detachment second-level maintenance platoon down in Da Nang, and I had access to them. The Spectre technicians had AC-130 gunships with six of these same six-barrel Vulcan cannons sticking out the sides of each AC-130.[2] These were an improvement over the AC-47 (DC-3) twin-engine air force gunships called "Puff the Magic Dragon" that had 30-caliber six-barreled machine guns sticking out the sides.

Alone I flew my newly acquired Cobra with its nonfunctioning Vulcan cannon over the Hai Van Pass down to Da Nang. I landed in front of the hangar that our people shared with the AC-130 air force maintenance people. It was near the end of the day, and I went into the hangar, found the tech sergeant in charge of the air force ordinance shop, and told him my problem with the cannon. Being the air force, they generally work only an 8:00 to 5:00 day even in wartime. The tech sergeant told me, "Lieutenant, it's pretty much quitting time, and the guys are going to the mess hall for supper, so maybe we can look at it tomorrow." I replied, "Sarge, I really need to return tomorrow to get this helicopter up there and start pulling missions with it." He thought about that for a minute and he said, "Lieutenant, do you have any ration cards for beer?" Because I was a nondrinker I had unused ration cards for beer, whiskey, cigarettes, and things like that that were good trade items. So I replied, "Yeh, I do. I have beer ration cards." He said, "Well, I tell you what. I'll talk to my guys, and after supper if you can go get a couple of cases of beer and bring them back to the hangar, I'll have a couple of guys or more that can come work on this thing tonight, look it over and see if they can fix it for you."

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2. An AC-130 Spectre gunship was a C-130 cargo airplane modified into a flying weapons platform. An AC-47 was a modified C-47, the military version of a DC-3 commercial airliner.

I went and got a couple of cases of beer with my ration cards and brought them back, hitchhiking on various vehicles that were passing up and down the ramp that evening since I had no transportation, and turned the beer over to the tech sergeant after dinner. Then I went to the Air Force Officers club and got myself a good steak dinner, and I found a place to crash for the night.

The next morning I went out to the hangar around 7:00 am and found that the air force tech crew had rehung the gun and were zeroing it on the ramp after dismounting it, taking it into their shop, and working on it all night long. The tech sergeant told me they had replaced all six barrels because they were completely shot out: There was no rifling (helical grooves that make the bullet spin) left in them. They were worn out. He said they also had to fabricate in their shop a Teflon bearing that the six barrels rotated on in the rear. In addition, they'd created a new logbook that should stay with the gun at all times to record all preventive maintenance and repairs. I said, "Wonderful! Wonderful!" He said, "So it's ready for you to take up and test fire it to make sure it's OK." Since I didn't have another pilot in the front seat, I said, "Sarge, would you like to go up and test fire it with me?" He said, "Oh, yeh, yes sir. I'd love it." So I put him in the front seat of that Cobra, and we took off over Da Nang harbor, which is a large, almost enclosed harbor, a good protected harbor. Of course, it had both fishing and commercial traffic, even oil tankers and a hospital ship in that harbor. I was just going to test fire the cannon into the water to see how it functioned. But just as I was getting ready to test fire it, I looked down to be sure the harbor area where I was going to shoot it was clear, and saw near the surface a great white shark maybe six-to-ten-feet long. So I just rolled over, entered into an attack routine, fired that gun at the shark, and managed to turn that shark into bloody pulp. That proved that the gun worked, was zeroed properly, and that everything was fine. Then I went back to the ramp at Da Nang, let the sergeant off, took off with my now-functional Vulcan cannon, and flew back to Tan My Airbase.

Chapter 13: COURTSHIP AND BUREAUCRACY

Anna at 15 years of age

I first met my wife, Anna, when she was working as cashier in our airfield's officers' club in Di An. She'd been working for the U.S. Army since she was 12 years old. Her first job was as a lumberjack clearing brush with a machete, chopping up wood, and clearing land to build the army base at Di An. Next, she progressed to become basically a construction laborer, hauling goods, filling sandbags, building bunkers with sandbags, and such. There's an art to that. You've got to tamp them down and pack them, and they're hard as a rock.

Di An was then the home of the "Big Red One" 1st Infantry Division, so it was a big base. Anna's older sister Thuan, who had one year of college, worked in the civilian personnel office there and made sure that Anna always had a good job.

By the time she was 14, she was a KP.[1] She cleaned vegetables, cleaned pots and pans, cleaned floors, learned how to become a baker, and made 700 yeast rolls three times a day by hand for the battalion mess hall. By the time she was 15, she became the janitor in a CID[2] office, the military police. When 16, she became a copy typist in the CID office. Because that office had no copy machines, rows of little girls sat at typewriters with carbon papers and copied letter for letter whatever they were told to copy. They couldn't even read English. Anna just learned to type one letter at a time and copy it. By the time she was 17, she was the cashier behind the cash register at our little quonset-hut airfield officers' club, which was where I met her.

Anna's family was originally from North Vietnam and quite well off. But they had to leave everything they owned and flee to South Vietnam as refugees when Anna was less than a year old because they were being persecuted as Christians by North Vietnam's Communist regime.

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1. Kitchen Police or kitchen patrol, either military or civilian personnel assigned or hired for duties in a military dining facility, a "mess hall," including washing dishes, preparing food, and clearing tables.
2. The army's Criminal Investigation Division

Her father got a job with the South Vietnamese national railroad. By the time I'd met Anna he had worked his way up and was a white-collar superintendent coordinating and overseeing the reconstruction of railroad bridges, which in a war zone had a lot of job security since bridges were always being blown up somewhere and needed to be rebuilt or repaired.

Anna's parents had eleven children, nine of whom survived infancy. Anna was about in the middle of that. She had older sisters, younger sisters, and one younger brother. As if that weren't enough, her parents also adopted an infant child whose parents had abandoned him at the hospital because he wasn't expected to live. They brought him home and raised him as another brother to Anna.

Anna grew up in a small village an hour or so outside of Saigon. Her life centered around her family and their church. They had a garden and a small orchard behind their home. The whole family was very involved in Catholic Church activities. That was her childhood until she was 12 years.

Anna had trouble at school because she had dyslexia, and education was not free in South Vietnam at that time. With so many children, by the time they got around to Anna, her family didn't have enough money to keep her in school. So she dropped out after the fifth grade and went to work for the U.S. Army.

When our chaplain rotated home, I took over helping at an orphanage that he had been supporting. Since the nuns there spoke only Vietnamese or French, I needed an interpreter to go with me. Anna's older sister Thuan, who then worked in our orderly room, said, "My sister will go with you, and you don't have to pay her because, if you'll stop by our parents' home between here and the orphanage, she can take some food, detergent, and things from the PX and drop them off with our parents." The civilian workers lived in a compound within our compound, because it wasn't safe for them to go home at night on the roads, which were patrolled at night by the Viet Cong. If they worked for the American Army, they were targets. They would get kidnapped, tortured, raped, or killed.

I didn't know the way to the orphanage, but Anna did, because she'd helped out there as part of her church girl scout troop's activities. So every time I didn't have to fly, which was rare, I'd steal a vehicle and scrounge supplies from the mess sergeant, the medics, and the supply sergeant. Then I'd load up that vehicle, go pick her up, and drive to the orphanage. That's how I got to know Anna. She was very beautiful. She was very religious, grew up going to Mass seven days a week, and she was very hard working and conscientious.

Anna didn't speak French, and she didn't really speak a great deal of English at the time. So most of her interpreting was Anna and I speaking pidgin English to each other with a lot of sign language to find out what the orphanage needed and what the nuns wanted me to do.

I was drawn to Anna for several reasons. She was a beautiful young lady, very tall for a Vietnamese. I attribute her height to the fact that when she was going through puberty in the growth phase, she was working in an army mess hall and had unlimited access to American food with a lot of protein in it, unlike the normal Vietnamese diet. She had meat, ice cream, milk, and eggs, so she grew up to be a head taller than most of the men in her village. She was also very, very hard working and very religious. I wasn't very religious. My grandmother had been an evangelist. I'd never been around that myself, but I wanted my children to be exposed to Christianity. I knew that wasn't something I could provide. I'd stopped going to church when I was around 12 or 13 when I got bigger than my mother and she couldn't make me go anymore. But Anna could provide that faith and belief in Christianity to my children. For these reasons, I decided that I wanted to marry Anna. She would be a good wife.

Although I was engaged to a girl from Savannah, Georgia, when I went to Vietnam, I had decided that she was not going to be too happy with me, when she was working as a nurse with all these rich, famous, young open-heart surgeons. So I broke my engagement in a rather unorthodox manner. I stopped opening her letters, and I would write "deceased" across the address and send them back to her. So, basically, I released her from the engagement so she could marry a young, rich doctor, which, I found out many years later, she in fact did. I set her free.

Then one day as I was returning from the orphanage with Anna, my terrible interpreter who hardly knew English, as she was climbing down out of the deuce-and-a-half (two-and-a-half ton) truck I had stolen to use for our transportation to the orphanage that day, I grabbed her by the hand which shocked her—I hadn't held her hand before or even touched her. She was standing on the step of the truck with the door open looking at me like "What?" I said, "Will you marry me?" Her eyes got really big and she said, "I have to ask my sister."

Her parents had twice previously tried to arrange a marriage for her to Vietnamese boys, friends' sons, the first time when Anna was only 15. Both times she'd run away from home to avoid these marriages. Anna told me the main reason she'd avoided those marriages was that some of her friends had married very young, and they became widows very quickly because their husbands had been in the army during the war. So she didn't want to marry any Vietnamese guy at least during the war.

When Anna asked Thuan if she should marry me, her sister didn't know a great deal about me, but she did have access to my 201 file (an individual's army personal history records) because she worked in the orderly room. She said "Yes, he's a good one because he's got a college education and he's an officer." And Anna knew that when I came into the officers' club, I didn't drink alcohol, smoke, or mess around with any of the waitresses. So Anna decided that she could marry me, although, she told me later, she just assumed we would get married and I would get out of the army and live in Vietnam with her and all of her family. She hadn't planned on leaving all of her family behind, which is a big thing.

But then, in the process of my unit standing down, I lost contact with Anna for about a month. When I went to F Troop, 4th Cav, she lost her job at my other airfield. When the 187th stood down, she went back home. I had no address or way of getting in touch with her at all. Then one day, as I'd just gotten back from a mission in Cambodia and was walking across to the arms room, I heard, "Parishee, Parishee, Parishee!" It was her older sister, Thuan, who was applying for a job in our orderly room. When she saw me, she started screaming at me. She asked, "Why you don't write to my sister?" I said I didn't know how. She said, "You stay right here," and she went in for a job interview. When she came out, she said, "You sit down and write a letter to my sister right now." Then she took it home with her. She had to read it, because my fiancée-to-be couldn't read or write English. She read her the letter, then took dictation, wrote a reply, and was able to bring it back to me because she'd gotten the job in our orderly room. That, miraculously enough, put us back in touch with each other.

Anna came to visit me at Long Binh only once. She had to ride six different buses. I call them buses but they were actually Lambrettas, three-wheeled little vehicles that carried about six or eight people in the back. From her village she had to take all these routes on different little buses for three or four hours. Actually, I don't know how long it took her. I brought her in the gate at Long Binh and took her for lunch at a Chinese restaurant that was on the base. We had a nice talk.

Shortly after that, as a result of the North Vietnamese Army's Easter Offensive, my unit got orders to go up to the DMZ, and I left Long Binh. But, because we still had a rear detachment with the orderly room, I was able, for the time being, to keep in touch with Anna through her sister. Then her sister lost the job in the orderly room because it shut down and moved to I Corps. But she knew my address through the military system, and she got a job at the VIP Airplane Company at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, which proved to be very convenient later on. So we kept in touch. I would write a letter and send it to her sister who'd take it home and read it to my fiancée.

The army set up barriers to GI marriages, purposefully and for good reason. (I was told that 80% of them failed.) They made it so very difficult to get married to a local that it was virtually impossible. You had to go through multiple steps: chain of command approvals, counseling, chaplain counseling, interviews, etc., etc. They just dragged it all out to try to make it impossible. But I knew that, so I didn't go down that path. I found an alternative means, which I was quite good at, as you remember.

I found out that if I didn't marry her in Vietnam, the army would have no say in the matter. I would periodically go down to Saigon because, as my extra duty up by the DMZ at our airfield, I was also the mess officer. I would carry the cash collection sheets down and turn them in at the finance office. I could have mailed them, but I didn't. I would get scheduled on a VIP twin-engine Beechcraft out of Da Nang and fly down to Tan Son Nhut, because my soon-to-be sister-in-law would manifest me on that aircraft as a priority passenger, which meant that colonels couldn't bump me from the flight because I was just a first lieutenant. Anybody who outranked me who wanted to fly on that plane could have bumped me, and I'd just have to wait around for days until I could get on a plane standby. I didn't have the time to do that. But, because Anna's sister Thuan was manifesting these flights out of the office down at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, she just put a high priority on me like I was carrying secret documents or something.

Whenever I would go to Saigon I was supposed to wear a class B uniform (khakis). Unless you were on duty, you couldn't wear a field uniform. But all I had was a flight suit, and I didn't want to travel unarmed either. However, personal sidearms were not allowed in Saigon. I carried a little leather briefcase with those documents in it. So every time I'd go down there, I would go in the orderly room, type out a set of travel orders for myself, and forge a signature on the bottom. I would also put in the special instructions "Duty uniform and sidearm authorized." When I walked out of the gate of Tan Son Nhut into Saigon, the air police would stop me because I was not in a class B uniform and I was carrying a pistol. I was wearing a cav hat too, which they also didn't like. They'd say, "Lieutenant, you can't go into Saigon like that," and I'd say, "Here's my orders." They'd read it to the bottom of the orders and then say, "OK. Fair enough, fair enough." As you can see, I was kind of my own boss.

I'd take a two-day trip down to Saigon. It'd take me 15 minutes to turn in my cash collection sheets to the finance office. Then my fiancée, Anna, would come to her sister's apartment in Saigon to meet me, and we would go to the American Embassy to apply for a fiancée visa, a K-1 visa it's called, for her to come to the United States for the purpose of getting married. That visa is good for only 90 days. I knew about this because her older sister had come to the U.S. to get married. However, her fiancé's family was racist and treated her badly, so she didn't get married and returned to Vietnam. But she knew about the visa, and that's how I found out about it.

When I took Anna to the American Embassy to start the application process for this visa, she had to bring her birth certificate, in Vietnamese which I couldn't read, and her army ID card as an employee of the U.S. Army that said she was 21 years old. Her sister had altered it for her. I was 25, almost 26. But when the embassy clerk read her birth certificate, he looked at me and said, "You can't marry this girl." I asked, "Why not?" He replied, "She's only 17." She was underage. So I had to wait for her to turn 18 before we could complete the application process.

Anna spent months going to Vietnamese offices, bureaucratic offices, to get stamps and approvals from the government of Vietnam. She had to get her police record (of course, she had no record) and go to the tax office to get a stamp saying she didn't owe them any taxes. She had to get a physical exam to check that she wasn't carrying any communicable diseases to the United States. But she'd never been to a doctor in her life, ever, and she was 17 or 18 years old by then. So she was very leary of that. She had never disrobed in front of a male in her life. The embassy had given me a list of approved doctors in Saigon that she could go to for the physical. There was a female U.S. MD at the Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital in Saigon. So I told her, "Here's a woman doctor you can go to." OK, she'd go to see a woman doctor. She wouldn't go see a male doctor, but she'd go see a female doctor. She got her physical. The entire process took her months and months. A lot of GIs maybe tried that. They would even hire Vietnamese lawyers and pay them thousands of dollars to try and navigate the bureaucracy of Vietnam to get all of these approvals done. But Anna never wanted to do that, and I didn't trust that lawyer system anyway. So she just went and sat outside bureaucrats' offices for days at a time until they would finally see her. She wouldn't pay them any bribes. That's why they wouldn't see her. Finally, they'd get tired of seeing her there, and they'd give her a stamp, and then she'd be off to the next bureaucrat. Once, after several months of her efforts, Anna very reluctantly asked me for some money for the first time. I asked her, "What for and how much?" She needed the money for bus fares and food for all those trips, about $26.

Which leads me to the second time I went AWOL. When I was DEROSing, I came down to Tan Son Nhut, to Camp Alpha, to be processed for a flight home. I had bought Anna a round-trip ticket from Pan American Airlines to follow me home. The Vietnamese government required her to have a round-trip ticket, or they wouldn't allow her to leave. She had everything except the exit visa from the Vietnamese government.

So, when I came out of Camp Alpha into Saigon to check on everything, Anna said, "Well, I don't have my exit visa. The guy wants a bribe." I said, "OK." So she took me to the Ministry of Finance, which was right across the street from this beautiful old French cathedral in Saigon, which she was familiar with. We went to the Ministry of Finance to see this bureaucrat who was holding her passport.

Anna in front of the Ministry of Finance Building

We walked into his office which was a great big room with one desk in it at the opposite end of the room where he sat. That was all about appearances, power. We walked in and Anna said, “Sit down right here,” just inside the door. Well, he was about 30 feet away at his desk by himself. He didn’t even acknowledge that we were in the room, but just kept on reading papers, ignoring us. It was a power trick. I asked, “OK, what do we have to do here?” She said, “I have to pay him a bribe.” I asked, “Oh, how much?” I don’t remember in piasters how much it was, but it was about $30. I said, “Sure, OK, no problem,” and I gave her the money in piasters. Then she got up and walked silently up to his desk. He never looked up at her once. This was the bribery system that they had learned very well from the French. Corruption. She started counting out the money one bill at a time and laying it on the corner of his desk so he could see how much it was as she was laying it down. He never looked at her, never said a word to her. After she laid the money on his desk and he knew it was the correct amount, he reached forward, took it, put it in a drawer, pulled her passport out of the same drawer, and pushed it across the desk. She picked it up and brought it back to me. I asked her, “OK, is the exit visa stamp in it?” She said, “Yeh.” I said, “OK,” and I stood up and said, “Now I’m going to go kick his ass.” I was just going to go whip his ass, because he was corrupt, and I didn’t care what it took. But she said, “You can’t do that.” I said, “The heck I can’t!” She said, “No, no, no! My sister’s passport is in his drawer also.” So we just left.

We walked down the steps of this building, I got in a taxi, and went back to Camp Alpha where I'd been missing for two days. I walked into the flight operations desk, and I said, "Hey, when are you guys going to get me the heck out of here?" They said, "Well, who are you?" I said, "I'm Lieutenant Parrish." "We've been looking for you. Where have you been?" I said, "Here I am. I'm tired of this place. I want to go home." And two hours later I was on a freedom bird flying home.

But first I was involved in one more little confrontation. I had already shipped a footlocker and an aluminum box full of items home. But when I went down to Camp Alpha at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon to catch my flight home, I was still wearing my flight suit and flight jacket. I didn't have any civilian clothes with me except for a pair of blue jeans rolled up in my helmet bag with my flight helmet.

While stationed at Long Binh, those of us who were pilots in F Troop had given our flight helmets to one guy who took them to Vung Tau and got them painted and lacquered over a two- or three-day period while he was "socializing with the natives." Then he brought all our helmets back.

Me with my Cobra flight helmet
Photo taken decades later for F Troop's website

When you went through Tan Son Nhut, at departure the air police searched your bag to make sure you weren't taking home weapons or anything like that. This air policeman stopped me and said that I was not authorized to leave with flight gear, meaning my flight jacket and my helmet. He was going to confiscate them. So I told him, "Airman, I'll tell you what, you just sign a hand receipt for those." He asked, "A hand receipt, what's that?" I replied, "That's just a receipt that says you took them from me and now they're in your possession, because when I get back to Fort Hood, Texas, and they intend to charge me for the loss of my flight jacket and my flight helmet, I'm going to have your name that they can send a bill to instead of me." He looked at me really hard, and then he handed me back my helmet and my flight jacket, and I got on the plane with them. That's how I got my helmet home. Of course, once I got to Fort Hood, I was unable to use that helmet because it was painted and that was unauthorized to wear stateside. So they issued me another flight helmet.

Two days after I left Vietnam, Anna was on Pan American Airlines flying to St. Louis where she arrived on December 22, 1972.

Chapter 14: REFLECTIONS

As I've indicated, the only uniforms that I had, because my foot locker had disappeared, were my flight suits. I'd also picked up a pair of bluejeans at the PX in Vietnam. When we got off the plane at Oakland, San Francisco, those of us who had the capability of changing clothes went into the first restroom out at the gate, and stripped our uniforms off. When I left that restroom, I was still wearing a teeshirt, the only shirt I had, my bluejeans with an army belt in them, and my paratrooper boots. That made me a little bit lower profile to some of the protestors who hung out at the airport there, welcoming Vietnam veterans with cries of "baby-killer," spitting at them, cursing at them, screaming at them, and doing anything that they could. So, I wasn't screamed at or cursed at because I maintained a lower profile. I got out of there as quickly as I could. Then I was able to avoid that kind of miserable welcome by coming home on leave, getting married right away, and going to Fort Hood for my next assignment. By staying in the military for about another six years, I was in a safe environment where I was insulated from all of that antiwar stuff. Of course, after 1975, when South Vietnam fell, and we were no longer fighting there or supporting its army anymore because its government had collapsed, the antiwar protests collapsed too.

Then a gradual change occurred in civilians' attitude toward our troops. I believe Vietnam veterans played a great part in that change. When we saw troops deploy to Desert Storm and so forth, we made sure that somebody was appreciating and welcoming them home. I think we influenced a lot of other people around us to help make that happen, because we didn't want the same hateful, degrading things happening to them that had happened to us.

We went over to Vietnam, did the best we could, and tried to do a good job. We were trying to keep Communism from spreading all over the world, because we sure didn't want it to come here, and if it covered the rest of the world, it would end up here. We thought we were doing a job, and we came back and got derided for it. Some hadn't even wanted to go. They were drafted and sent. But they still did their job whether they liked it or not. The protestors didn't know whether you were a jeep driver, a medic, a supply person, or a guy like me flying Cobra gunships, front-line combat. For the left-wing liberals, if you were in the army you were the enemy. I had seen some of those protests in college before I went in the service. Part of my wanting to go into the service was a reaction to those protests that disgusted me because I was fulfilling my patriotic duty as I saw it and took pride in that.

In Vietnam I developed the view that we were sold out by the politicians. Our troops won every battle we fought in there. Every single battle was an absolute victory including Tết of 1968, which was portrayed in the media as a loss though, in fact, it was a failure on the part of the North. We were slow in reacting to their offensive, but once we did, we absolutely kicked their butts. It was four years after the battle of Tết before they were able to raise enough troops, supplies, logistics, and weapons to launch another big engagement, which was the Easter Offensive of 1972 that I helped oppose. As a result, I've hated the government ever since. I don't trust government at any level from dog-catcher to the president.

In this country, the military is subject to civilian rule, control, and command. However, people should understand that once we get into a war which the civilians have committed us to, for whatever reason, the politicians need to stop interfering and to let the military leaders run the war. Vietnam was one of the earliest times that happened. Of course, the first time was when President Truman didn't allow General MacArthur to invade China and use a nuclear weapon. Truman fired MacArthur over that. But in Vietnam it was choosing and limiting targets, rules of engagement, and such. Now it's even worse, much worse than it was in Vietnam. Instantaneous, worldwide communications give the bureaucrats in Washington, DC, immediate control over every ground movement in the war zone. That's a mistake. You've got bean-counters in Washington making decisions over the heads of combat veterans on the ground in the face of the enemy. That's wrong. That's why we have problems. Coupled with that, politics is involved and you've got the media involved with their politics. So, they're not telling the true stories, and giving the facts. They're slanting everything for political purposes. So, frankly, our military is emasculated. It's weakened. Right now, the only thing that is saving us is technology. Without our advantages in technology, we couldn't fight our way out of a paper bag. Now the problem is China which is very quickly surpassing us in technology. Over the last five years China has advanced enough in technology to catch up and even pass us. So, I worry about our military. I worry about our country and our future. And I worry about my grandchildren.

In the Vietnam War, replacements were brought in on an individual basis, not by units. We didn't train, and deploy, and return as a unit. You went over there by yourself and were assigned to a unit with people you'd never worked with. Particularly because of the high attrition rate with helicopter pilots, I never got very close to any of my colleagues; others may have socialized with their colleagues more than I did. But half of the people there were "short" (had little time left before going home); they were experienced but couldn't wait to get home. The other half were new guys, who made lots of mistakes, didn't know anything, and were trying to learn from the veterans. People were constantly rotating in and out. Units were constantly changing.

I personally was a bit of a loner. I was not a big letter-writer. I actually only wrote about two letters home the whole time I was there, although, once I got to Tan My I was able to phone home instead. Also, I didn't get very close to anybody because of a personal experience: After we'd moved to I Corps, I'd roomed with a 21-year-old warrant-officer whom I really didn't know. I got moved into a hootch with him, and within less than a week, he was shot down, killed. At the time I barely knew his name. I had to pack up his personal belongings to give to the 1st sergeant to send home to his young widow. So, I just didn't get close to people. I was a loner. I read books. I didn't drink like a lot of guys did. As a result, my platoon leader and I, as the only teetotalers, were the permanent night standby pilots. If we started getting rocketed at night or mortared, we took off with a Cobra and a scout helicopter (called an OH-6, a "Loach") to try to find the source. But that was me. That was my coping mechanism, just not to get close to people, because sometimes they didn't come back.

There was another guy, who wasn't in my unit but had been in my Cobra class at Savannah, Georgia, for 30 days. We were a small class, and we all got to know each other fairly well in that short period of time studying. He got shot down in III Corps near the Cambodian border. Now, my unit had a reputation for never leaving people on the ground. If somebody got shot down, we'd do whatever it took to get him out or recover his body if possible. This guy, whom I knew—I wasn't flying that day, but I learned about what happened by listening to it on the radio—was shot down in a Cobra. His outfit took heavy fire, and they just assumed that he was dead, so they left. Our unit didn't operate like that. Our guys were operating not too far away, and they diverted from their mission, went over to where he was shot down, found the wreckage, and found a blood trail in the elephant grass where he had crawled a hundred yards, heavily wounded, and then was captured or killed. He was gone. But they saw the blood trail and knew that he had survived the crash and had gotten 100 yards away from his aircraft. After that, we didn't have anything to do with that unit, because we just didn't trust them. We wouldn't fly with them, and we wouldn't count on them to ever back us up. We didn't like the way that unit operated. It was frustrating to think that you couldn't count on somebody like that. Our guys could count on each other. The institutional tradition in our unit was different. We did everything to try to get somebody out. For example, my roommate's Cobra had crashed on fire, upside down, in heavily occupied enemy territory, with NVA tanks everywhere. His aircraft's commander had actually unbuckled before he crashed into the ground. When the aircraft snap-rolled, it flung him out. He probably was 100 feet in the air when he left the aircraft. When he hit the ground, it just turned him into jelly, broke about every bone in his body. He was killed instantly.

My roommate was still in the nose of the aircraft in the front seat that went in upside down and on fire, so he didn't survive the crash either. We were able to remove the body of the aircraft commander because it was separate from the burning aircraft. We hated to leave my roommate's body behind. Three months later, we retook that area, and our first priority was to find that crash site, which was basically nothing but a pile of ashes. We sifted through it, because my 21-year-old roommate was listed as MIA (Missing In Action) at that time, until we found one of his boots. We wore leather boots, not jungle boots, because of the flame retardant value of leather. We all attached a dog tag to our boot laces. The only thing they found of his remains, after the fire and after predators had been at the aircraft, was a boot with a dog tag and some bones in the boot. That's how he was identified as a KIA (Killed In Action). He's the only one we left behind.

I've seen pictures of memorial services from the Mideast wars. But I first saw a service like those when we held a memorial service for three people in my unit. For each one we displayed an M16 rifle with its bayonet stuck in the ground, a flight helmet on top of the butt, a pair of boots at the base. We didn't have a chaplain, but we conducted a memorial service for them. We just did it ourselves. I don't know if we originated that ceremony, probably not, but we held our own over there. When I saw that same kind of memorial service on TV during the Gulf War, I'd say, "Yeh, that's the way it's done."

But that's part of it. You know, you sign up not just for good times. You have to buck up and take the hard stuff too. That's part of being a soldier. You had to get past it and do your job. You didn't have time for dealing with anything else. I never used to believe in PTSD, really, until it started affecting me. Then I understood, "Oh, that's what this is." I'd never really thought about it. When you're there and you're doing your duty, you don't have time to think about that stuff. You have a job to do the next day. There's no time for mourning. If you're alive, upright, and breathing, you're still on duty, period. There were no excuses. We just had no choice but to compartmentalize. We had to delay the reactions, delay the mourning, delay the anxiety and the stress. Sometimes it was years before the reaction kicked back in. But we didn't have the option of having it at that time, period. Our loyalty to each other, an esprit de corps, kept us going. We were proud of what we were doing.

Once a correspondent came to our airfield. I don't even know what he was there for. But he observed that here we were, we're so far away from other American troops that we couldn't even get armed-forces radio. We were out on a limb by ourselves. Yet, we were walking around our little sand-patch of an airfield, and everybody was in clean, ironed uniforms. Of course, we had hootch maids who did all of this for us, for which we paid about four dollars a week. But we wore ironed, starched uniforms or our flight suits. Even the other guys who wore fatigues had spit-shined boots. Everything was clean. We had pride in ourselves, and we exhibited it even when there was nobody around to appreciate our appearance but us. We didn't slack off.

In our unit in Vietnam, because of the high risk that we were in, our attitude was a little bit fatalistic. We knew we were going to get shot down. We didn't know if we'd be killed or crippled. We hoped we wouldn't be, but everybody was in danger of getting shot down pretty soon. I think perhaps 80% of our aircraft were shot down during the year I was there. Most of them were recovered and put back into service, but not all of them. That's a high attrition rate. But we still maintained pride in our unit. Our equipment and our uniforms exhibited that esprit de corps. There's a reason behind that in the military which I think has been lost. We had ironed, starched uniforms whenever we could, spit-shined boots, and all this kind of display. But that's merely a tool to teach every soldier attention to detail, because in your mission, the devil is in the details, whether it's the time that you have to be on target, whether it's the operational ability of your weapons systems, whether it's the coordination with your other troops or units, it's detail. Detail. And to this day, if I'm not early any place I need to be, I feel late. I will never be late. My wife hates it, because anywhere we go, I'm ten minutes early. She wasn't raised like that. She grew up in a tropical climate in a small village where their idea of telling time was, "Is the sun up, or is the sun down?" But, attention to detail means the difference between life and death in the military.

There are really two cultural issues to discuss here. One is race. Race in a combat unit was nonexistent, because each of our lives depended on everybody else. We were all brothers. I actually saw this in my own unit where our infantry platoon was a quick-reaction force for downed aircraft and rescue. When their mission was taken away from them because of the ending of our ground involvement in Vietnam, they were relegated to perimeter guard duty, not a combat role they could be proud of and that they were trained for, and their morale sank. There began to be racial issues among them, because they'd lost that camaraderie of exposure to danger and dependency on each other. The other cultural issue, of course, was the anti-war sentiment back in the States and among some troops, because we had draftees. There were a lot of people who didn't want to be there. But, once they were there, if they were put in a position of danger, the camaraderie had to kick in, and they became part of the team.

In support units, logistics units, and such, they had a greater problem with discipline. Drug use as well manifested more in rear-echelon units. They had to deal with it differently than we did. But as a front-line combat unit, we didn't have much problem with drugs or discipline except when the infantry platoon attached to us lost their mission and just became perimeter guards, which they weren't happy with. We were all dependent on each other. If you got shot down, you wanted to know that people were going to come get you, and they were going to do anything in their power and take any risk necessary, personal risk, to come get you. In our dangerous combat units, race did not matter. We needed each other equally. Also, the military was long, long in the forefront of integrating the races, and set the example, I think, for the rest of the nation. I see division in our country today because of the separating of the races, but I don't want to get into that.

I grew up in a small town in southern Illinois. I was exposed to African-Americans, of course. But southern Illinois was actually a segregated area when I was very small. That was the culture I grew up in at the time. I later learned in the military that, hey, we're all the same. We train the same, we work the same, we bleed the same. We had to cover each other's backs. As far as other races, it's ironic, I was in a race-relations class at Fort Hood, Texas, after I came back from Vietnam. I had a squadron commander that was from south Georgia, probably racist. This class was being conducted by the chaplain. In the discussions, he was asking questions like, "Do you think that a marriage or a family can be successful if there's a wide divergence between the spouses? A divergence of education levels, age, ethnicity, race, religion, etc." My squadron commander said, "Yeh. If you want to have a happy marriage, you need to marry someone like you. That way you'll all get along." Then the chaplain, who knew about me and my marriage to an Asian from Vietnam, asked me pointed questions in front of my squadron commander. He asked, "Captain Parrish, what education level do you have?" I answered, "Well, I've got a bachelor's degree." "And you're married?" "Yeh." "What education level does your wife have?" I said, "She has a fifth-grade education." He said, "Oh." Then he asked, "What religion is your wife?" I replied, "She's Roman Catholic," which she was at the time. He asked, "What are you?" I said, "I'm Baptist." He asked, "What age are you?" I told him my age. He asked, "Is your wife the same age?" I replied, "She's eight years younger than me." "So what race is she?" I said, "She's Asian, Vietnamese, and I'm White." Then he asked, "Do you think you have a happy marriage?" I said, "Yeh, I think so." And my squadron commander kind of just sat back, shrinking into himself. (Anna and I celebrated our 50th year of happy marriage in early 2023.)

Rich and Anna
at Christmas 2022

Chapter 15: INTRODUCTIONS OF ANNA AND HER FAMILY TO THE U.S.

Anna and I had met in Saigon to try to finally get her exit visa before I DEROSed and returned home from Vietnam. Anna had packed up her few belongings, and she actually gave her entire savings from working for the U.S. Army, all of her money, to her parents. I gave her a little bit of money to buy some clothes for traveling. She went to the tailor shop and ordered several beautiful Vietnamese ao dai (pronounced "ahl zye," a long split-at-the-side dress worn over pants) and bought a few other things. Of course, I left. Anna told me later that when she was preparing to go, she prayed that if the night before she left she had a bad dream about me, she would not come. Fortunately, she didn't have a bad dream about me.

The next day her sister Thuan took her to the airport and put her on the plane. This was the 22nd of December, nearly Christmas. The plane was full, and there were a lot of Americans on the plane, some of whom were DEROSing because we were pulling down our force strength in Vietnam. Everybody on the plane had the Christmas spirit. Some people pulled out guitars, were playing Christmas carols, and everybody was singing. Anna was very happy. Sitting next to her was an older civilian American guy who'd been a contractor in Vietnam. He was speaking with her—of course, with her broken English it wasn't a very detailed conversation. She told him she was coming to America to get married, where she was going, and so forth. He asked, "Do you have any money?" And she said, "No," she didn't think she needed any money and that she'd given all of her money to her parents. Of course, he was floored by that because she was going to need money in terminals and for telephones and other things. So he gave her a $20 bill out of his pocket. What a generous person.

She flew to San Francisco on the first leg of her trip and was met there by her older sister Thuong who had come to the United States a couple of years earlier at age 18 to go to college, having been sponsored by an army chaplain. Thuong would marry an American and remain in the United States after she graduated.

It was December and cold in San Francisco. Anna had never owned a coat in her life. Her sister was wearing a navy-style pea coat, a dark blue, heavy wool navy jacket that was very trendy at that time for college students to wear. Anna and Thuong spent three or four hours together in the airport visiting because they hadn't seen one another for a few years. Then her sister literally gave Anna the coat off her back so that she would have a coat when she got on the plane and arrived in St. Louis in the middle of winter. So Anna flew on to St. Louis.

I was on leave at home in Carbondale, Illinois. My mother and I drove 100 miles from Carbondale to St. Louis airport to pick up Anna. Of course, my mother was very apprehensive about my marrying somebody from a different country and culture. When Anna arrived in St. Louis, she had changed into her best, new, tailored Vietnamese dress which was a red ao dai, a high-collared, long-sleeved, very fitted ao dai split up to the waist, with white, bell-bottom, velveteen trousers underneath which was the Vietnamese style at the time, so that she would make a good first impression on my mother. Anna tells me now that when she got off the plane I was just grinning from ear to ear. I was so happy to see her. But she didn't even look at me. She saw this gray-haired lady with glasses standing next to me and knew instantly that that was my mother. Then Anna turned to her, crossed her arms across her chest which is the Vietnamese sign of fidelity and respect, did a slight bow of her head, and said, "Hi, Mom," which is what her sister in California had taught her to say when she first met my mother. Of course, that melted my mother's heart instantly, this beautiful little girl saying, "Hi, Mom," and showing such respect to her.

Then she turned to me, and she was so excited and just jabbering on and on, half understandable. But one of the things she told me, she said, "Richard"—but she couldn't pronounce "Richard." She said, "Rich-oy," which is the Vietnamese way of pronouncing "Richard," apparently. She said, "Rich-oy, you'll never believe I flew from Vietnam on the biggest helicopter I ever saw." Of course, I knew it was a 747 airplane. But having grown up in the war, she thought that everything that flew was a helicopter. That she was so naive just tickled me.

That evening we got in the car and drove the 100 miles back to my mother's home. As we drove through farmland in southern Illinois, we passed a pig farm right next to the highway. There were dozens and dozens of pigs in this muddy, muddy feed lot. The pigs were all covered with mud, it was cold outside, and there was a little bit of melting snow on the ground. Anna looked at those pigs and asked, "What's that?" Of course, I knew that her family raised a pig several times a year for food, so I said, "Those are pigs." She looked at them and asked, "They don't eat those, do they?" I said, "Yah." Then she said, "But they're so dirty!" because, the way her family raised a pig, the children would go out and hose the pig off and brush it clean every day. Their pig was sparkling clean all the time because it was their food. To the Vietnamese a pig was a valuable asset, and they took very good care of it. We finally got to my mother's and put Anna to bed immediately because she'd been traveling for over 24 hours, dealing with jet lag, and was very tired.

My mother lived in a condo at that time, having sold our home while I was in Vietnam. When she got up next day, Anna explored the condo seeing how an American house was decorated. She'd never seen that except perhaps in movies or her favorite TV shows on Armed Forces Television—her favorite show was the western, "Bonanza." She thought all American houses looked like that. She started shadowing my mother in the kitchen, and to this day Anna spends most of her time in the kitchen. She'd worked in an army mess hall as a teenager, so she was watching my mother prepare food and examining all the food in the refrigerator.

This was the day before Christmas, so we then went to the supermarket to buy the last-minute things for the holiday dinner. Anna was fascinated by the supermarket, of course. She couldn't believe all she saw while walking up and down the aisles and on the drives to and from town.

The next day we had our big Christmas dinner. My younger sister, who was still in college, came over with her husband. Anna was familiar with the special Christmas dinner, having worked in an army mess hall where they served wonderful Christmas dinners for the troops nearly everywhere.

Anna and I at my mother's condo, Christmas 1972

But after the first few days we began to worry about her. She was sleeping 12 or more hours a night. We figured after a couple of days she'd get over that jet lag, but she was still sleeping all of the time. So we watched her for another couple of days after Christmas, but eventually we took her to a doctor. We thought something was wrong with her because she was just tired all the time and needed so much sleep. The doctor checked her carefully and said there was absolutely nothing wrong with her. He diagnosed her as being so tired all the time because of overstimulation, so-called information overload. Everything she saw she was taking in and learning: watching television, the preparation of Christmas dinner, the supermarket, our drives on the streets with all the busy traffic, and so forth. She was absolutely overloaded with new information, and it was just exhausting her. It would take time for her to get over the culture shock.

After Christmas we took Anna to meet my mother's mother, who was maybe 90 by then and was living with my aunt and uncle. My aunt and uncle belonged to the Apostolic Church, a very fundamentalist Christian church. My grandmother had been a founder of that church in Carbondale and before that had been a traveling evangelist. Of course, Anna was a very religious Catholic. Once we got to my aunt and uncle's house, I began to realize that there might be a problem. All their kids and grandkids were there to meet "the little yellow girl that Richard had brought home." My aunt and uncle and all of their family were very unworldly, untraveled, and uneducated beyond high school, some not even high school. Not only that, but some members of their church were there, and their neighbors were looking in the doors and windows. It was quite strange to me, and I began to worry about how Anna was going to take all this, like being a fish on display in a bowl.

Anna was sitting right by my grandmother, and my aunt, who is a wonderful person, loved everybody, but had no tact whatsoever, came over to Anna and asked her, "Does it bother you at all that you can't speak good English like us?" I just winced and thought, "Oh my gosh, what's going to happen now?" But Anna, at the age of eighteen, had the presence of mind to smile, look up at my aunt, and reply, "No, because nobody here can speak any Vietnamese." So she was already a half step ahead of everybody else by speaking English even if poorly.

Meanwhile, my grandmother, sitting right next to her, was crocheting little pieces half the size of a hand out of white thread. Anna was watching her and she asked, "What are you doing?" My grandmother replied, "Well, I'm crocheting these things to make a bedspread. I started making a bedspread during World War II, but I never had a chance to finish it. So now I want to finish it before I die." Anna was looking at her crocheting these complicated little disks that were going to be pieced together into an entire bedspread, and she asked, "Can I try one?" My grandmother was quite surprised, but she handed Anna the crochet hook and the thread. Then Anna laid a piece that my grandmother had finished on her knee to look at as a pattern, and she began to crochet a nearly exact duplicate of the one my grandmother had made. My grandmother was astounded by that. Of course, she didn't know that Anna had learned to crochet and sew by hand in Vietnam. And my grandmother said, "None of my daughters or my granddaughters have ever shown any interest in learning how to do this." Years later, by the time my grandmother had died, she had finished that beautiful, hand-crocheted bedspread, and she left it to Anna because she was so impressed by Anna's appreciation of it.

Then we got into the preparations for our marriage. I had agreed to marry Anna in a Catholic service although I was not Catholic. Anna had no family here, so my mother had to become the mother of the bride as well as the mother of the groom.

My mother's best friend was a member of the Catholic church in town, and she stepped in to help my mother organize a Catholic wedding. In the meantime, my mother and my sister took Anna to the big department stores in St. Louis to shop for an American wardrobe. I gave them money for the shopping.

She bought shoes and another coat, a beautiful, longer coat with a hood on it, and a wedding dress. They came back with a lovely white wedding gown for $100—I don't know if that was a good deal or not in the after-Christmas 1972 sales, but that's all it cost me.

In order to be married in the Catholic church, we first had to be interviewed by the priest and make the arrangements. The priest's name was "Father Bill." We got to the church, went in, and were met by this heavy-set guy in purple bell-bottom pants with flaming red hair and muttonchop sideburns down the sides of his cheeks mopping the hallway. He said, "Can I help you?" So I said, "Yeh, we have an appointment with Father Bill this morning." And he said, "Oh, follow me," took us to the office, and said "Have a seat right here." We sat opposite the desk, and he walked around the desk and sat down—this guy was Father Bill! This absolutely scandalized Anna because she had grown up in the Catholic church in Vietnam which although French-inspired hadn't adapted to the new rules of Vatican I that requires church rituals no longer be presented in Latin. Her services were always done in Latin by Vietnamese priests who always wore long cassocks with a stand-up collar, which is the black robe of the Catholic priest. So this red-haired, hippy-looking priest in bell-bottom pants and a kind of tie-dyed shirt she didn't understand at all. It floored her. But anyway, we got through that interview and a planning session and arranged for our wedding.

A week or so later in January we held the ceremony. Since I didn't convert, we couldn't be married on the high altar. We had to be married one step down. It was a small ceremony with maybe 20 to 30 people there followed by a cake-and-punch reception in the church meeting room.

Anna and I at our wedding
My younger sister was the maid of honor
and my cousin served as best man.

Our honeymoon night was at the Carbondale Ramada Inn that my uncle owned. Of course, he gave us the deluxe Honeymoon Suite. The next day we loaded up my brand-new pickup truck that I'd ordered through the PX in Vietnam and took delivery of in Carbondale. Everything we owned was in the back of this pickup truck, and with my new bride, I drove to Fort Hood, Texas, for my next assignment.

That was Anna's introduction to the U.S.

A couple of years later new and urgent challenges faced us as a family. When the government of South Vietnam fell on April 30, 1975, panic and chaos broke out there. Those who had worked for the U.S. Army, such as Anna's sister Thuan, were in particular danger. She was persona non grata to the Communists—a target. Also, in an Asian family a male heir is extremely important, and Anna's only brother was 12 years old at that time. It doesn't matter whether he's the first or the last kid, he's the number one kid in the whole family and girls are secondary. So, their family decided to try to get that boy and also Thuan out.

My wife's uncle, fortunately, worked in the motor pool of the U.S. Embassy. He took an embassy Ford four-door sedan, drove it out into the country to his village, and loaded it up with his entire family. I don't know how many people that was, maybe eight or ten of them. He also loaded up his niece and nephew, who were Anna's siblings, and drove back into Saigon. By the time they got there, because of the crowds trying to get in to safety, the nearest he could get to the embassy was a couple of blocks away. So he just parked at the curb, got everybody out of this car, and had them link arms. Then he led them through the crowd until he got to the embassy's gate. The marine at the gate recognized him, opened the gate, and pulled him in. Then he screamed, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! This is my family outside!" So the marine told him, "OK, you point them out one at a time and I'll bring them in." That's how he got his whole family in. He identified his niece and nephew as his own children to get them in the embassy. Later my wife's sister, brother, and their uncle's family climbed up a ladder to the roof of a building where helicopters were landing. People called this building the U.S. Embassy, but actually, it was next door to the embassy. They got on one of the last helicopters to leave the roof of that building to fly out to safety on a destroyer, which is a very small ship, off the coast of South Vietnam. That's how they got out.

They sailed on that destroyer for several weeks to Guam, where they spent months in a refugee camp. Thuan actually worked there as an English-Vietnamese interpreter for the camp. Next they were moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, where she also worked as an interpreter. Finally, they came to live with us for a while at Fort Hood, Texas.

A year or so later, I was reading a paperback book about the fall of Saigon, written by an Italian journalist who was there and had taken pictures. My brother-in-law, who was maybe 13 or 14 by then, was looking over my shoulder and saw this picture of a deserted street in Saigon after all the mad chaos was over, with this abandoned Ford sedan sitting at the curb of the otherwise empty street. He got very excited and said, “That’s the car that uncle brought us to the embassy in. That’s the car.” Of course, it was the only time that he’d ever ridden in a car before he left Vietnam, so it made a big impression on him. That was the car that had held about 12 to 15 people driving to the embassy. It probably looked like a clown car from the circus when they were unloading it.

Anna’s father had retired from working for the National Railroad just before the government fell. He was sent to a re-education camp for a time. Since he was not military, he didn’t have to spend a lot of time there. He wasn’t high enough in the government to be really important, so he was able to return to his family. But they had two homes, one out in the village and one in Saigon. In order to keep the Communists from confiscating one of their homes, because as good communists, a family doesn’t need more than one home, they split the family up. Part of the family lived in one house, and the rest lived in the other one so they would both be occupied. They couldn’t be renting one out as landlords, of course. That’s taboo under communism.

It took us about 15 years and a lot of money to get the rest of Anna’s family out of Vietnam, but we did. Anna’s sister Thuan married a soldier at Fort Hood, Texas, whom she’d met while she was there. I think she was working at a McDonald’s at the time. Together Anna, I, Thuan, and her husband bought plane tickets for both her parents, the rest of her sisters, and one of her sister’s kids. They had gone through a Catholic relief organization, and been taken out of Vietnam to a refugee center in Thailand. They were there for about 90 days being processed, interviewed, and eventually approved because of our sponsorship to come to the United States.

Chapter 16: STATIONED AT FORT HOOD

The day after we got married, our honeymoon consisted of driving halfway to Fort Hood, Texas. We had neither the money nor the time for a real honeymoon, so the drive to Texas was our honeymoon. Having just purchased with cash a brand-new Ford pickup truck, I wasn't real flush with cash. Two days later we arrived at Fort Hood and checked into a motel.

The next day I signed into the 1st Cavalry Division, which at that time had been reconfigured from its Vietnam organization (where it was the 1st Air Cavalry Division) into a test type of "tricap" organization that involved one brigade of armor, one brigade of mechanized infantry, and one brigade of air cavalry attack helicopters. I was assigned within the 1st Cavalry Division's Air Cavalry to Alpha[1] Troop, 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry. It stayed organized that way for several months, but the end result was that they found the division couldn't fight its way out of a paper bag. It didn't have enough armor to be an armored division, it didn't have enough infantry to be an infantry division, and they weren't sure what to do with the helicopters because all the infantry was mechanized, so they didn't need us to carry them into the battles.

We had no Cobra helicopters at that time with the capability of attacking tanks. The best we could do was what we did in Vietnam: Get a tank to button up and become half-blind by shooting certain kinds of rockets at them. I was temporarily a flight leader in a platoon. But soon after that, my platoon leader became the XO (E**x**ecutive Officer) of Alpha Troop, 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry Brigade, and I became the platoon leader as a 1st lieutenant.

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1. Lettered army companies are sometimes referred to in the military using the NATO phonetic alphabet: "A" is "Alpha," "B" is "Bravo," and so forth. This alphabet is used in military communication over radios and telephones because some English-letter names sound so similar that they can be misheard and confused: For example, A and J; B and C; or I and Y. There are various versions of phonetic alphabets. For example, the New York City Police Department uses a different one. Even the military version has changed since World War II when "A" was "Able," "B" was "Baker," etc.

NATO MILITARY ALPHABET

A = Alpha	J = Juliet	S = Sierra
B = Bravo	K = Kilo	T = Tango
C = Charlie	L = Lima	U = Uniform
D = Delta	M = Mike	V = Victor
E = Echo	N = November	W = Whiskey
F = Foxtrot	O = Oscar	X = X-ray
G = Golf	P = Papa	Y = Yankee
H = Hotel	Q = Quebec	Z = Zulu
I = India	R = Romeo	

For a more in-depth discussion, see https://www.aircharter.co.uk/about-us/news-features/blog/a-look-at-the-history-of-the-nato-phonetic-alphabet


OH-58A Kiowa helicopter

It's interesting that today the new TO&E (Table of Organization & Equipment) under the aviation branch has completely changed. I commanded 12 helicopters as a 1st lieutenant, four of which were scout helicopters, OH-58s, little Bell helicopters (not the OH-6s we had in Vietnam), and eight or sometimes nine Cobra helicopters in my platoon. However, under today's TO&E that size unit is called a troop and is commanded by a major. I wasn't even a captain. At that time our troop, which had three platoons like mine and one headquarters section, was commanded by a major. In today's TO&E, that's called a squadron and it's commanded by a lieutenant colonel. Three attack helicopter troops like the one my platoon was in made up a squadron with a headquarters troop. That was commanded by a lieutenant colonel back then. You can see how the rank structure has changed. What I commanded as a 1st lieutenant fresh out of Vietnam is today a major's slot, and is called a troop with only 12 helicopters, and it's counted as "command time." As a platoon leader I didn't get "command time," which was a company-level thing. But now 12 helicopters *is* a company command, which just astounds me. Anyway, I was in this experimental air cavalry brigade in my attack helicopter troop for several months until they decided to discontinue this "tricap" test that they'd configured for the 1st Cavalry Division. I'll get into that more later.

When Anna and I got to Fort Hood, I went to Copperas Cove which is about ten miles west of Fort Hood. Not having a lot of money, I bought a used, 14-foot-wide house trailer virtually unfurnished. Then Anna and I moved in and set up housekeeping. Initially Anna was very happy with that trailer because it was the nicest house she'd ever lived in, and it was affordable for me. It had two bedrooms, a nice kitchen, and a living room with a dining table. The one thing she didn't like was that it had a laundry room with no washer and dryer. Not having ready cash, I couldn't buy them. So, I'd take her to the laundromat at the trailer park, which she never liked because it was never clean enough for her. My wife, thank God, is a clean freak, and I love her for it. Sometimes when I'd run short on flight suits, she would literally wash a flight suit or two in the bathtub. She didn't like to do that, but she knew how.

Within the year, when Anna became pregnant with our first child, she informed me in no uncertain terms that she was not going to have that baby until we had a washer and dryer for her to wash diapers in. In those days, we didn't have disposable diapers. Diapers were all cloth and had to be washed every day. Eventually I financed a washer and a dryer at Sears & Roebuck for our laundry room, so Anna could stop crossing her legs to hold the baby in—that was the threat she made to me.

About a year-and-three-quarters after we got married, our first daughter was born. That was Maria Thuan. Her middle name was that of Anna's older sister who had arranged for Anna to be my interpreter and given permission for her to marry me. So we named our first daughter after her.

Anna turned out to be a wonderful mother. She was typically Asian, her entire life centered around the home and the children. That's a very Asian characteristic, and I loved it. My mother was a stay-at-home mom and that's what I expected my wife to be. Even though in a different culture, with difficulties with the language, she was super smart and learned everything very quickly. Nevertheless, I couldn't teach her to drive, I didn't have the patience to do that. So my mother had to come to Texas to help her learn that skill.

The 1st Cavalry Division reorganized and basically ejected our air cavalry brigade, and it was formed into an autonomous, stand-alone attack-helicopter brigade. We were called the 6th Air Cavalry Combat Brigade. We went through some slight modifications in the number and kinds of helicopters in each platoon. One thing they had to add was a big maintenance and service squadron that had not only second echelon maintenance for our helicopters but also a huge POL (Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants) support organization for field purposes. At one time just within our troop we had 20 POL tanker trucks in our motor pool which is a huge number of tankers for a company-sized unit. You can imagine the amount of jet fuel that we could burn through with 40 helicopters and diesel fuel for the trucks.

But, after pulling out of Vietnam and with Jimmy Carter as president, we didn't have the budget for the fuel. We had trouble getting spare parts for the motor pool and for the aircraft. For the aircraft it wasn't quite so bad because there was a large buildup of spare parts left over from the Vietnam War that hadn't been used up yet. We had trouble meeting our flight minimums, the minimum hours of flight time that each pilot had to achieve each month—I don't remember what that was offhand. With fuel shortages because of budget constraints, we had to constantly struggle to find enough fuel for training and minimums to keep our pilots qualified. We cut down on the amount of field-training time we could do, range time with weapons on the aircraft, and so forth, but we struggled through it. When we separated from the 1st Cav Division, we didn't even have a space on the airfield. Our troop was operating out of the sagebrush at Fort Hood for at least six months. For storing tools, our platoons' maintenance and crew chiefs had tents, canvas tents with steel frames shaped like quonset huts. They worked out in the hot sun, in the rain, or in the cold. Finally, we moved back onto the airfield and got a hangar.

At this point, helicopter air cavalry units were still under the armor branch. But I was still in the signal branch. That's when I started applying for a transfer to the armor branch because armor controlled air cavalry. I was combat qualified in air cavalry. I was a platoon leader in air cavalry. So I thought armor branch was where I needed to be for a career in the army. I'd never had a signal assignment other than nine weeks at Fort Gordon for the basic course; I didn't want a signal assignment at that time. But I was always unsuccessful in my requests for branch transfer. Signal corps branch would never release me to armor branch.

Now Anna was trying to learn how to be a housewife, an army wife, an officer's wife, and an American all at the same time. Of course, she didn't drive at the time, so I had to drive her usually about once a month to the PX and the commissary where we'd just load up on food to bring home, and fill in with milk or bread or whatever during the month as we needed it.

She didn't speak much English either. There were lots of GI war brides, not just from Vietnam, but from Korea, Thailand, and Germany, so there were classes on post for remedial English for these wives. I signed Anna up for one of these classes. I'd drop her off there in the morning, then pick her up around noon and take her home before I came back for my work in the afternoon.

However, that only lasted for a week or so, because of a very traumatic incident that Anna went through. One day I got caught up in some work and was unable to pick her up at noon. Anna had money in her pocket, but she didn't know how to call a taxi. She didn't know anybody from the class that lived in Copperas Cove to give her a ride home. She only knew the short route of back roads through Fort Hood that I used to drive. She waited for hours sitting on the steps after the class had let out, everybody had left, and the place was closed and locked. Finally, she gave up on me and started walking home even though she barely knew the route. This was in mid-summer. It was hot, probably 95 degrees. She didn't know it was a 9-mile walk; it didn't take very long at all in a vehicle. She started walking home on this back road through Fort Hood out through the ranges. Several people stopped to offer her a ride, but she was afraid and wouldn't accept. But finally she got so hot, so dehydrated, and so worn out that when a guy in a pickup truck offered her a ride, she very reluctantly climbed in the truck and told him that she had to go to Copperas Cove. He started driving and he started making advances on her. She, of course, was hugging the passenger-side door of that truck. When he started to turn off the road onto one of the gravel range roads, she knew that was wrong. She was scared to death and threatened to jump out of the truck if he didn't stop. So he stopped, she jumped out, and he drove off. But this guy had scared her badly. She ended up walking the rest of the way home that afternoon.

When I finally got free to pick her up and she wasn't at the classroom, I didn't know where she was. I hoped she'd gotten a ride home. So I drove straight home. She was basically passed out on the bed, still scared to death, angry, and sick from the heat. That was the end of the English classes. She wasn't going back. That was nearly the end of her trust in me because I'd let her down, and she never lets me forget it. Thank God, she was strong enough to get through that situation as an 18-year-old, foreign bride.

I was in Alpha Troop three years. We had a few slight reorganizations in our TO&E. We also participated in some tactics tests, and my platoon was assigned to a test run by III Corps, whose headquarters was at Fort Hood. The 2nd Armored Division had a brigade of tanks mounted with laser-beam firing devices and laser-beam receptors. The Cobras and scout helicopters in my platoon also had the same devices mounted in them. We were sent out on maneuvers there at Fort Hood to find and "fight" with the tanks. We still didn't have any weapons mounted on Cobras which could take down a tank. But the TOW missile (what we'd been testing in Vietnam under a different name) was being developed to be mounted on Cobras eventually. We were flying the AH-1G model Cobras. The AH-1Q was going to be the Cobra helicopter with two TOW missiles and their controls mounted on it as part of the basic armament. This was the result of the testing that had been done in Vietnam on those Huey helicopters from Aberdeen Proving Ground. However, this never happened while I was at Fort Hood. It took several more years to develop and test those missiles on Cobras, and then for Cobras to be modified to carry them.

But my platoon did the tactics test. We were shooting laser beams at laser receptors on their tanks, and they were shooting laser beams at receptors on our helicopters. If one of their beams hit one of our helicopter's receptors, it would mark a "hit." A red light and a siren would go on, and our helicopter would be "shot down," have to land somewhere, and wait 15 minutes before it could take off and go hunting again. That was part of the test process for measuring the capabilities. We were very successful at finding armored targets and engaging them. We were "killing" about seven tanks for every helicopter that they "shot down."

That sounds fine if you have an unlimited number of helicopters, but the Russians had a whole lot more tanks than we had helicopters. Of course, all of this was aimed at the Fulda Gap, an opening between mountain ranges near the then border of East Germany and West Germany, a likely Russian ground invasion route into Western Europe. If the Russians invaded through the Fulda Gap, we'd have to try to stop them with attack helicopters as well as armor. At the end of the test, the test administrators came back to us and briefed us on the results and told us the kill ratios.

They said that once these helicopters were available to us, they would send antiarmor helicopter units to Europe to use as stopgap measures. They told us that we needed to stop a Russian tank attack or slow them down enough to buy two weeks of time to get the rest of our army to Europe. The kill ratio would be seven to one. But seven tanks isn't much in the Russian army, because they've got thousands.

When the administrators debriefed us on the results of these test maneuvers, they asked our opinions on what could be done, tactics or equipmentwise, to prepare an attack helicopter unit to better fulfill this new role as a stopgap, a time-buyer, against Russian tanks. I gave them a smart-ass answer. I said, "You need to replace the chaplain in our squadron with a psychologist." They asked, "What are you talking about? Why would you need a psychologist?" I replied, "Well, given the kill ratio, after about four or five days, we're going to have a 70% to 80% loss in pilots and aircraft. We're going to need a psychologist to convince the remaining 30% to get back in their helicopters and keep going back out there, because that's suicide." They didn't like my smart-ass answer.

Another thing that happened in our 6th Air Cav Combat Brigade was the RIF (Reduction In Force) in the army. Not only were we short on budgets and fuel, but the army and Congress in their wisdom, just like they always do after a war, took the money away and shrank the military. They forget about what they need to do to prevent war, and they just cut the military budget so congressmen would have more money to spend elsewhere to buy more votes. We had many commissioned officers flying helicopters who'd gone through warrant-officer helicopter school. Most didn't have a college degree. Some were only 18- or 19-years-old when they became helicopter pilots. But after a successful tour in Vietnam, if you became a CW2 (Chief Warrant officer, grade 2), you would receive a postcard in the mail from the Department of the Army, Military Personnel, saying if you wanted to become a commissioned officer, all you had to do was check this box, mail the card back to them, and you would become a 1st lieutenant. During the war, 1st lieutenants were making captain in three years. So we had a lot of captains who had become 1st lieutenants by postcard. My first platoon leader who later became our troop's XO was one these former warrant-officer captains. Our flight operations officer was also. But these guys didn't have college degrees, so the army didn't want them anymore as commissioned officers. They started getting these RIF letters giving them an option: They could take a $10,000 separation payment in cash and leave the army. Most of them did that. If they chose to remain in the army, they'd go back to their regular army rank. Several of those had been NCOs even before they went to warrant-officer flight school. My former commander and our flight operations officer did that. Each reverted to staff sergeant from captain and were, of course, reassigned to a ground unit in their old branch qualification, which usually was armor.

We lost an awful lot of combat-experienced pilots that way, just because the army in its wisdom decided that they probably weren't going to make colonel someday because they didn't have a college degree. So they just threw them in the ashbin. Stupidity is rampant in the military forever.

I was the platoon leader for a while. I got a new flight leader who served under me, a 1st lieutenant right out of flight school. After I fulfilled my time as a platoon leader, checking one of the boxes for a career, I turned my platoon over to this 1st lieutenant, and I became our troop's flight operations officer. I was responsible for all of the flight records, flight planning for training purposes, making sure that each pilot in every unit got his minimum number of hours. I had to shovel people around to get hours with the shortages of fuel and time that were available.

At this time I wasn't flying Cobras. There were usually three Hueys in the headquarters section of our troop. One was the commander's Huey. One was the operations officer's. My flight operations officer job was equivalent to what now is a squadron's S-3 (Air), so basically I was the S-3. The third Huey was the maintenance officer's.

What little flying I did, and it was very little, was in a Huey, and then only when we went to the field or to get minimums. Now I could schedule myself to fly in a Cobra when I was getting my minimums. I would generally schedule myself to fly at night because the Cobras would be available and it didn't interfere with my duties as flight operations officer. I would usually find some young warrant officer who hadn't gotten his flight minimums yet, usually a WO1 just out of flight school, and I'd say meet me at such and such an aircraft at 8:00 tonight. We'd go out, preflight inspect a Cobra, and fly it for an hour or two. I loved flying at night just locally. That's how I got my minimums. I didn't fly the Huey very much unless I needed it when we were out on a field exercise, as the flight operations officer. That was the first time I'd flown a Huey since flight school.

I love the Huey. It's a very wonderful aircraft to fly, easy to fly relative to a Cobra or to a scout helicopter. The Huey is very forgiving, and I enjoyed it a lot. It's not quite as aerodynamic or maneuverable as the Cobra, but it's easier to fly, so it was fun. I did that as flight operation officer until I'd been in the troop for two-and-a-half years.

At that point my squadron commander, a lieutenant colonel, decided that I'd been a captain long enough and that I needed to prepare for the advanced course for my branch which, unfortunately, was Signal Corps. So he pulled me out of Alpha Troop and moved me up to squadron headquarters as the squadron communications officer.

He said, “You’ve got to have some kind of signal assignment before you can go to the advanced course for Signal Corps back at Fort Gordon.” So for six months, I was the squadron’s communications officer. I didn’t know much about signal issues except what I learned as an enlisted backpack radio operator. But I learned. I had a good sergeant, a Black E7 career communications sergeant who knew his stuff.

During that six months my greatest accomplishment was that the sergeant and I collaborated on building a communications trailer for when our squadron went to the field and we had to set up a TOC (Tactical Operation Center) for the squadron. We had to be able to communicate up to the brigade, to each of the three attack helicopter troops within the squadron, and to the maintenance and support troop. That involved a lot of radios. We took a deuce-and-a-half-sized trailer, built a plywood shelter on its back, and built shelves on both sides of the trailer. The army already had communication shelters of various kinds, but we didn’t have one, so we built one. We placed FM, VHF, and UHF radios, a switchboard, and a series of KY-38s (crypto devices hooked to the radios) in the back of the trailer. We also had a generator welded onto a frame on the tongue of the trailer to power all these radios, and backup batteries in the shelter itself.

All of this was hardwired to a distribution panel at the back of the shelter on the outside wall to which we could hook up two 28-pair cables. One cable would run 100 feet from the trailer over to the TOC. The other cable went out to antennas set on the opposite side of our shelter from the TOC so the enemy couldn’t get a fix on our TOC’s position from our radio transmissions and then target it. All communications from the commander and staff in the TOC were done through telephones hooked up through 28-pair cables to the radios and then on to their antennas. Once we got all the bugs out of this, it worked pretty well, and I left it as the legacy of my six months as communications officer for our squadron.

We still wore the cavalry hat in our brigade just as in Vietnam. At the time that was done only, as far as I know, at Fort Hood, and it was only for aviation units. Nowadays, anybody who can even pronounce “air cavalry” in the whole 1st Cavalry Division—my son-in-law who’s an artillery officer served several tours in 1st Cav—everybody wears cavalry hats. But back when we were doing it, only AIR cavalry could wear a cav hat, and we were mighty proud of that. When we formed up as the 6th Air Cavalry Combat Brigade, as a former amateur historian and re-enactor, I was very familiar with Civil War cavalry because I’d studied it as a hobby. So I wore a Civil War replica brass “US” belt buckle that I’d ordered and worn when I was in Vietnam, and I started wearing it at Fort Hood. One day our brigade commander called me into his office and asked me, a junior captain, what the hell was I wearing for a belt buckle. He’d never seen that before.

I explained to him that it was a Civil War cavalry-type belt buckle. Of course, it was worn in the Civil War not only by cavalry but by infantry and everybody else. He liked that idea. I think he got one for himself. Nobody bothered me for wearing that buckle from then on.

During the ten years that I was on active duty, 1969 to 1979, my pride in the military decreased because in peacetime the bureaucracy takes over. Race-relations training, drown-proofing training, and fuel shortages kept us from doing actual war training. We had problems keeping equipment running because supply systems were shorted. We had to struggle to get our flight minimums: Every pilot has to fly so many hours every quarter. As a flight operations officer, it was my responsibility to make sure they all did. Fuel shortages due to budget cuts under Jimmy Carter made that difficult. That was coupled with the fact that back then we had no aviation branch, so the Signal Corps kept trying to drag me back into signal assignments. I kept resisting as much as I could, unsuccessfully, I'm afraid.

Then as a captain I went with Anna to Fort Gordon, Georgia, for the signal officers' career course. The army wanted to send me to Germany after that course, but I didn't want to go because the army didn't have enough good housing for the dependents in Europe, plus I thought Anna had enough problems learning the American culture, and she had a lot of help from the officers' wives club from my squadron in Texas. So I volunteered to go to Korea for one year, unaccompanied, so that I could ensure I'd come back to Fort Hood after my Korean assignment. I also hoped that I could get a flying assignment there, but I didn't.

While in the career course I'd had a house built in Texas. As soon as I finished the career course, my family moved to this brand-new brick home where Anna was familiar with Fort Hood, its commissary and PX, and still had friends from our old squadron's officers' wives club. Two weeks later I took off for a year in Korea. I did get to come home on leave after six months, but Anna's older sister Thuan and her younger brother, who had both been refugees rescued by helicopter on the last day of the evacuation of South Vietnam in 1975, moved in with Anna and our daughter while I was in Korea. I didn't want Anna living alone with a baby, and her sister was more proficient with English than Anna was and a little bit more educated. It was a comfort to Anna that she had her sister and her teenage brother living with her while I was gone.

The Signal Battalion commander in the First Infantry Division in Korea initially wanted me as a company commander. I ended up angering him by asking for a transfer to armor since that branch controlled air cavalry at the time. I was qualified to be an armor officer because of my air cavalry combat. But Signal Corps still wouldn't release me. When I asked him to endorse my application for branch transfer, he just screamed at me and kicked me out of his office. To punish me, he assigned me to a mechanized infantry battalion as a signal officer, which he thought was terrible punishment. But, as an ex-infantry enlisted man, I was right at home, no problem. I was not only the signal officer but also became the S-3 (Air) in the S-3 (battalion operations) shop. That's where I worked. I did my time there and enjoyed it. It was a seven-day-a-week job practically, but that was OK. I was busy. I was fine.

About two months before the end of my one-year tour in Korea, however, I got a long-distance phone call in the orderly room in the middle of the night, which was daytime in Texas, and Anna informed me that I needed to go to the Seoul airport the next day to pick her up at the airport, which was a shock to me. I was on an unaccompanied tour. She wasn't authorized to be there, and the army wasn't going to pay for her to be there.

She had become acquainted with a bunch of Baptist ladies who were teaching English and citizenship classes for international wives at Fort Hood. In the process of doing that, they helped Anna study, even drove her all the way down to San Antonio to take her citizenship test and get her American citizenship. This normally takes five years, but at that time a foreign spouse married to a military person could get an accelerated citizenship after they'd been here for just two years. That's what Anna did. She'd been here for over three years by that time, and those ladies helped her study and get her citizenship. Then they helped her apply for a passport. Once she got her passport and had saved up enough money, she bought a plane ticket and was coming to Korea to see me. I'd been gone too long.

Her sister would care for our baby, Maria Thuan, at home. It's very typical for Asian people if they have to work somewhere or travel for an extended period of time, to leave their children with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other relatives. So Anna stayed for two months, the last two months of my tour in Korea, and left the baby at home with her sister.

Another reason Anna came to Korea was that she decided it was time for her to have another baby, and she thought that I probably ought to be there when she got pregnant. So that's how our number two daughter came along. Within two weeks after she got to Korea, Anna was pregnant. I used to call her "Fertile Myrtle," because every time we decided to have a baby, she was pregnant almost immediately. She was a born mother. So we had daughter number two about eight months after we returned to the United States from Korea, and that was Sarah Anne Parrish. Sarah got her name from an old family name back in my ancestry.

When I returned to Fort Hood from Korea, hoping to get another flying assignment because they had huge amounts of aircraft there, I ended up in a signal battalion in the 2nd Armored Division. I came up for the company command. Never having served as a platoon leader in the Signal Corps, I really wasn't qualified to be a communications company commander. But I was qualified to be the headquarters company commander, because motor pools, mess halls, and supply are the same everywhere. That's what I had as headquarters company commander. I did that job, but I didn't like it, and I didn't want to make a career out of it. They told me I was assured of making major. But they said, "You will not see another flying assignment again for the rest of your career." So I said, "Goodbye," and I resigned after ten years of service.

Chapter 17: CIVILIAN JOBS

By the end of 1978 I was finishing up my command of Headquarters Company, 142nd Signal Battalion, 2nd Armored Division, but I was not happy in the signal corps branch. I discovered that I wasn't going to fly anymore because I was getting close to making major, and because the army had no aviation branch at that time, no flying jobs were possible. As a major I'd probably have had a staff job related to communications. I was also pretty dissatisfied with the way my battalion commander was running things. I didn't see a good future for me in staff jobs, because I really didn't care for that kind of work. So in January 1979 I turned in my resignation from active duty with the rank of captain and took terminal leave.

But I had very bad timing. In 1979 under Jimmy Carter there was high inflation, gasoline was very expensive, and jobs were hard to come by. My wife was still in Texas with two babies getting our house in Copperas Cove ready to sell. I applied for jobs in Dallas and Houston with construction companies as a construction superintendent. They'd hired lots of former army officers to do that. But with the high interest rates and inflation, the construction business was drying up and had no job for me.

So I went home to where I'd grown up in Carbondale, Illinois, to look for a job. My bachelor's degree was in industrial safety, but that was pre-OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) so somewhat out of date. Still, I had the degree, so I started looking around at the coal mines. I actually got an interview with a coal-mining company. A guy flew from company headquarters in West Virginia to interview me and offered me a job on the spot as superintendent of a five-man mine-safety crew being formed to cover five different coal mines in southern Illinois. My job was to begin in two weeks. But a week later he called with bad news: Because of the recession, the company had had to lay off 1000 people in management, and my job along with the five jobs I was to supervise were eliminated before we even got started.

So here I was in southern Illinois. I'd resigned from the army, which upset Anna very much because she loved the army. She loved the structure. She loved the support system provided by the other army wives, and the fact that they were all in the same boat: None of them was living in her hometown. They were military wives and traveled around to wherever their husbands were assigned. So they were basically on the same level as Anna who was away from her home in Vietnam.

I was ready to sell my house in Texas, but had no job. Then a realtor in Carbondale said he wanted me to get a real-estate license and sell real estate for him. When I told him I wouldn't be comfortable as a salesperson, he had another idea. Carbondale was a university town where probably 65% of all the housing was rental property: trailer parks, dormitories, apartment houses, and houses that were rented mostly to students. He said he'd start up a property management branch of his real estate firm. He had offices in about six different towns in southern Illinois, but Carbondale was the main one. That's where all these rental properties were, and many of their owners needed professional management to help them.

So he and I together started up this business of managing rental properties. It began with just an apartment building that he owned with eight apartments in it. Within a year I had over 300 units under management. I had two radio-dispatched maintenance men and a secretary/bookkeeper. At that time this was the only part of his business making any money because mortgage rates were so high, approaching 15%, that it was awfully hard to sell any houses. He was losing so much money that he had to close down all his branches except the main office. But my operation was making money.

Meanwhile, Anna and I sold our house in Texas and bought one in Carbondale, paying almost 15% interest on a mortgage, which was pretty brutal. But I moved my family up to our house. I had a job that wasn't bringing in a whole lot of money, but we were paying the bills.

In the process of that, I bought a farm from my Dad. My Dad had a piece of property south of my home that he had bought years earlier intending to build a home there to retire in because it was next to the Shawnee National Forest and a good place to ride horses. Anna and I convinced him to sell me that farmland.

But after managing rental properties very successfully for about two years, and getting more and more properties under management, I ran into a problem with the owner of the real estate company. He was kiting loans[1] from one bank to another to cover his expenses every month, and he was still living like he had a lot of business. He was going around to different banks all over southern Illinois and getting short-term loans to pay off other short-term loans. He'd skim a little bit off each to cover a month or two's expenses, hoping he'd make some house sales whose commissions would get him caught up on the loans, but he was getting further and further behind.

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1. "Kiting loans" is an illegal way to obtain unauthorized credits in a bank account by using dishonest methods: for example, borrowing from one bank to pay off a loan from another bank.

One day I deposited $10,000 of security deposits and first and last month's rents in an escrow account at my management branch's bank. The owner and I were the only ones who could withdraw money from that account. Unknown to me, he was in the bank president's office at that time trying to negotiate another loan to pay off another bank that he owed money to right away. But he was turned down. The banks had finally caught on to what he was doing.

However, when I walked out of the bank, he went over to the teller and asked what deposit I had just made, and he withdrew $10,000 from the escrow account to use for his personal and business expenses. I didn't find out about this until a week later when my secretary got the bank statement and said, "There's something wrong here. Didn't you deposit that $10,000 of escrow money?" I replied, "I sure did, and you have a copy of the deposit slip," which she did have in her records. She said, "The bank shows that it was withdrawn immediately." So I went straight to the bank and said, "I want to know when and who withdrew this $10,000." They told me it was the owner of the company.

What he was doing was illegal in my mind. The escrow account was not our money. We were the fiduciary for that money, but the money belonged to the owners of the properties that we were managing. It was rent money and damage-deposit money that was to be distributed to the owners at the proper time and in the proper amounts.

The next morning I went to work early and cleaned out my desk. When the owner came in, I spoke to a young man, right out of college, who was the manager of all the ladies who were the real estate agents, saying, "We need to go meet with the owner." I took him with me to this meeting as a witness. We walked into the owner's office, and I said, "We've got to talk." I told the owner what I had found out. I told him that was escrow money, not his money or my money. It was the property owners' money. I had never done anything illegal in my entire life, nor had anybody in my family. I felt what he'd done was illegal, and if he didn't return the funds immediately to that account, I'd have to quit. He called me a "hothead." He tried to calm me down and said, "Oh, I'm just borrowing the money for a short time. I've got some sales coming up. I'm going to be able to pay it back right away," which, of course was all BS, and I knew it. So I said, "If you can't put the money in today, I'm gone," and I walked out. I quit the job.

So there I was again, with no job, a wife and two kids, and a mortgage with 15% interest rate. Fortunately I had some savings from when I was in the army, and that was going to have to tide me over. The very evening of the day I'd quit, my father, who was in a hospital in St. Louis, died of a heart attack. The real estate company's owner explained why I stopped working there by saying I'd quit to be able to take care of my father's estate and properties. I was indeed doing that, but that wasn't why I'd resigned.

To make a long story short, the owners of the rental properties started not getting their rent checks because he was skimming money off. He was trying to run the property management himself. Owners called me asking what was wrong, and I said, “I don’t work there anymore.” One owner up in central Illinois who owned two apartment buildings was frantic and convinced me to temporarily take over the management of her buildings so she could start getting checks again to pay off her mortgages on those buildings. She also filed charges against my ex-boss at the state attorney’s office. The state attorney called him in, and they made a deal that if he would make monthly payments on what he had taken from her, the state would not prosecute him. I managed her buildings for the next six months or so until she could sell them. Because the woman was ill and lived many miles away with her husband, the state attorney also assigned me to report to him whether my ex-boss was making those monthly payments. I don’t know what happened with the other building owners. I think they just assumed the management themselves.

Meanwhile, I still had no permanent job. I was painting apartments and doing odd jobs like that. So I decided to go back to graduate school at Southern Illinois University. I’d never used my GI Bill education benefits because I had my bachelor’s degree when I’d enlisted in the army. But my undergraduate grades weren’t very great because I’d been a party boy, a fraternity boy, drove a sports car, and had lots of girl friends. My gentleman’s B- average wasn’t sufficient to get me directly into the graduate school. But I had a friend whose wife worked in admissions there. I went to talk to her, and because I was a veteran, she admitted me on probation for one semester to see how I did on my grades. Being a veteran and married with two children, I was much more mature than when I’d been an undergraduate, so I worked hard and made straight A grades in graduate school. I studied public administration financial management. And in the meantime, we had our third daughter, Rachael Nguyen, whose middle name is Anna’s Vietnamese family name.

While in graduate school, I was introduced to the assistant director of the purchasing department who then introduced me to its director, a World War II veteran. While I was winding up graduate school, an opening came up for a manager of their general stores operation which is a logistics supply for all of the university. When that civil service job came open I applied for it, but I was told by a Black lady at the human resources office that I wasn’t qualified to take the civil service exam for that job. Now I had been a company commander, a pilot, had a bachelor’s degree, now graduate school, but she said I wasn’t qualified to even take the civil service exam. It was actually blatant discrimination: I was not Black, I was not a minority, and I was not female. At that time the university’s human resources department wasn’t giving anyone an even break unless they were in some minority group.

So I went back to the director of purchasing who had tipped me off about that job and did the hiring. I told him they wouldn't let me take the civil service exam. He called the only White male still working at SIU's human resources department and told him what had happened. That guy told me, "You write me a one-page letter explaining all of your relevant personnel resources and logistics management experience in the army, and I will get you scheduled for the exam." He then used that letter as the basis for overruling the lady who'd decided I wasn't qualified to take that civil service exam.

The civil service exam required a score of 70 to pass. The top three scorers on any given exam were entitled to be interviewed by the person hiring for the job. Veterans who took the civil service exam got an additional five points added to their scores as a veterans' benefit. If the veteran had a purple heart medal, which I had not, it was 10 points. These benefits varied from state to state.

Only two applicants were applying for this job. The other fellow had been working for 15 years as the accountant in the office where this management position opened. He scored in the mid-70s. I, on the other hand, with my 5 bonus points got 102 on that civil service exam. So when I took that score to the interviewer, who had already interviewed the other candidate, he wanted to hire me. But when he contacted the human resources office, they told him, "Oh no, you can't do that. That job has been identified as a priority for minority hire." He said, "I don't have any minorities on the interview list. No females or Blacks even tested for this job, and I need this job filled." So he had to write a letter explaining why he wanted to hire me instead of a minority person for that position. When I got hired, the one man still working at human resources who processed me said, "I hope you understand and appreciate that you're the only White male who's been hired in a management-level position at this university for years—but congratulations." So that's how I got hired at the university in a management-level position and was able to start paying my bills.

I stayed in that job for 15 years. I managed a dozen or so employees: four storekeepers in four warehouses, two delivery trucks with drivers and laborers, an office staff, and accountants. We had about 8000 line items of supplies that I bought in bulk and had delivered all over campus as they were needed. This was a $28,000,000 per year operation.

But after 15 years the administration decided to break that department up as part of a reorganization of the university, and I was brought up to the purchasing department. My boss all that time had been the director of purchasing. So as the general stores manager, I was then promoted to assistant director of purchasing replacing a man who'd been there for many years but had passed away. I brought my assistant, who became a buyer in the purchasing department, along with me.

After several years the director of purchasing retired, and that civil service position opened up. The only people who had the education and experience to apply for that position were myself and the fellow who'd been my assistant at central stores. We both put in applications, took the civil service exam for that job, passed very easily, and were both interviewed. But neither of us was offered the job. Instead, another person, was chosen who'd formerly been comptroller of the university but had never supervised anyone other than one secretary and had no experience in purchasing or disbursement (paying of the bills). He did have a master's degree in accounting and was a CPA (Certified Public Accountant), however.

More important, he had politically connected sponsors: For many years this fellow's mother had been the maid and babysitter for the richest family in southern Illinois. They owned a construction company that built almost all of the interstates and highways in southern Illinois, and over many years had donated several million dollars to the university. When this fellow was laid off as comptroller for the university, I might say for good reason, they called the university and basically told them, "You better get this boy a job, or you won't get any more money from us." So he was given the job without ever taking the civil service exam or having any of the required experience levels in purchasing, which was a violation of all civil service rules. But rules are only for people who follow the rules, and people of power go around the rules. That's how he became the director of purchasing. That's why I never got that job.

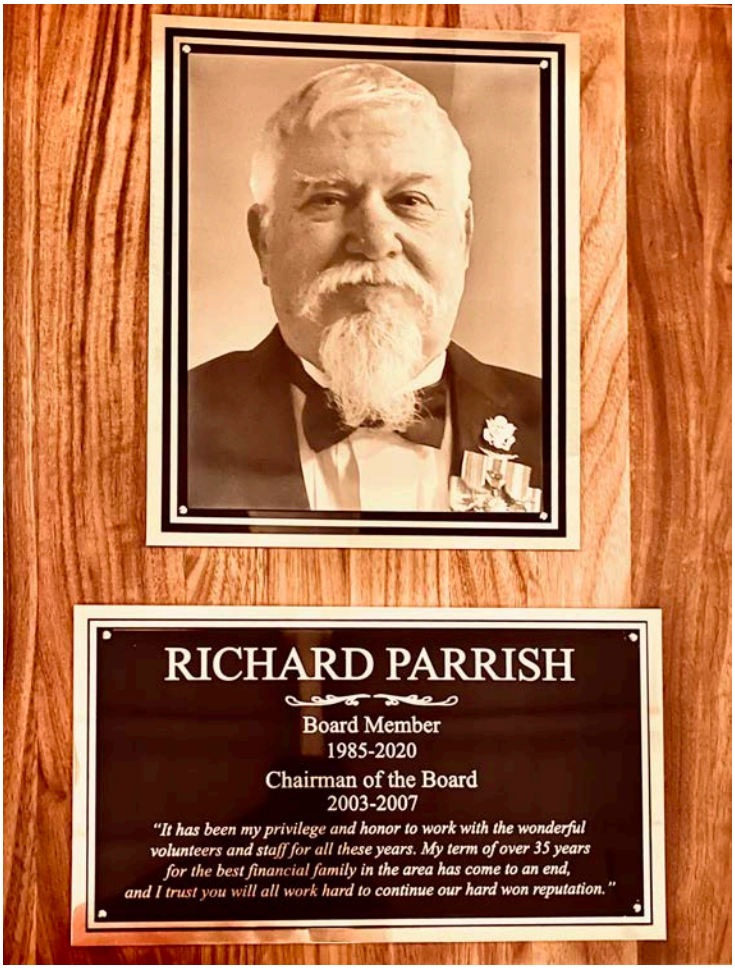
Actually, I enjoyed my job in purchasing, but this fellow knew nothing about purchasing, so I spent the rest of my seven years there covering up for his lack of knowledge, and dealing with venders and meetings, because he had a terrible speech impediment that caused people who didn't know him to think he was handicapped. He was really a bright fellow, but people couldn't understand him. Basically, I was doing the job of director of purchasing while he was getting the paycheck. Eventually, I got tired of that, so in 2005 I retired early at age 59.

Meanwhile, I had a sort of second job. Before my father died, he appointed me trustee of the family land trust which owned the old 150-acre farm I'd grown up on. Half was owned by my mother and half by my father as part of a divorce settlement. After my father died in 1982, I also became the land trust's manager and developer, and I still am. I've developed that land, subdivided it, worked with engineers, got streets, sewer lines, and water lines put in, and worked with a realtor friend to develop it as commercial property. A Kroger grocery store, a Kohl's department store, hotels, auto dealerships, banks, doctors' offices, etc. were located there. Of course, my brother and two sisters are also beneficiaries of the trust and co-owners of the inherited property. Over many years I developed that land for a good increase in value.

In effect, this had been my second job while I worked in the purchasing department at the university. I had to do a lot of fighting with city departments over zoning and code enforcement. Sometimes I had to sue them to allow me to do things my way. This job could be a lot of trouble, a lot of pressure, but I was fairly good at it, and I managed to make a lot of money for my siblings and myself.

About a year after I started working at the university, my boss, the director of purchasing, who was on the board of the credit union, asked me if I'd serve on a committee of the credit union. He initially got me appointed to a volunteer position on the membership committee. We were promoting the credit union to university employees, serving as a liaison between the credit union and new members. After doing that for a year, I was asked to run for an open position on their board of directors. I served on that board for about 35 years including five years as chairman of the board.

When I first got involved it was about a $24,000,000 credit union limited to university employees only. During all those years the credit union expanded to a full community-oriented credit union with many other employees as well as about $350,000,000 in assets. It was a huge change. We went from a very small organization to a very large one with many branches in different towns and big contracts for operational software. I was very actively involved in that credit union's growth and progress for 35 years. I sold the credit union a couple of acres of our farmland development at a very cheap price. It was one of the first commercial buildings there. That was both good for the credit union and useful for promoting commercial interest in our development. And it worked.



Plaque in my honor that hangs in the lobby of the credit union's main office

I retired from the credit union board almost a year after Anna and I moved to Kentucky. They hadn't wanted me to retire even though I'd moved, so I attended remote meetings for a time before deciding that was too cumbersome and finally retired in 2020.

In 2019 Anna and I moved to Kentucky to live closer to our daughter Sarah and her family and because of Illinois' taxes and gun laws. I was at a men's breakfast with several members of my church. A big factory in town buys Ford and Dodge truck chassis and builds a bed to go on the back of each truck that has lots of tool storage, power, and a big boom with a bucket on it in which an operator can go up to do pole and cable work. They make about 12,000 of these boom trucks each year. One of my friends at that breakfast owns a company that recruits retirees to work part-time as drivers to deliver these trucks to buyers throughout the country. I've taken trucks all over the midwest and east. For example, we'd get a call from the factory saying, "We've got two of these trucks to be delivered to upstate New York," and we could turn down or accept the trip.

I only went when we had more than one truck, because when we did, one of the trucks would tow one of the driver's car. We used two-way radios to communicate with each other while on the road. We had to follow the same rules commercial truck drivers did: We could only drive for so many hours before taking a 30-minute break, and we could only drive for a total of 11 hours each day. We might have to stay overnight in a motel. Then once we'd delivered the trucks, we'd all drive straight home together in that car, sharing the driving. We all got paid well, and we'd compensate the guy whose car we'd driven home. Not having a CDL (Commercial Driver's License), I couldn't drive the really big, heavy trucks, but I could drive the smaller ones. I did that part-time for almost two years. Then I had a few health issues, and I decided the money wasn't worth the chance of having health problems while on a trip. Some of my friends in their 70s are still delivering those trucks.

One of the smaller boom trucks we delivered

Chapter 18: RE-ENACTING MILITARY HISTORY

I'd done some historical re-enacting in college before going into the army. I was in a black-powder, muzzle-loading rifle club, "The Jackson County Anti-Horse-and-Mule-Thief Association," which was a lighthearted name for this gun club. We'd dress up in costumes for our shooting matches. We were doing just buckskinner re-enacting then, dramatizing events from the times of the fur trade and frontiersmen, not really military history. Later, while I was at Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia, for the career course, Anna and I joined the city's Revolutionary War re-enactment and display. I had the special clothing and a flintlock musket, and Anna dressed up like an American Indian woman with long black hair. I'd always been intrigued by antique guns, black-powder shooting, and history, a fascination that started early and just got more intense after I resigned from the army.

After leaving the army, I got a job managing rental real estate, bought a house in Carbondale, and moved my family from Texas to Illinois. Once I got my bills under control, I started building a new house, a log home I'd designed while serving in Vietnam, on the farmland about eight miles south of Carbondale that I'd bought from my father.

Building was slow because I didn't carry a mortgage on it and could work only when I had the money to buy materials. Eventually, once the log exterior was all in place, we sold the other house and moved into our log house, which was still very much unfinished. It didn't even have glass windows yet, just plastic sheets stapled over the window openings.

We moved in during the first week of December 1982. The second floor wasn't divided into rooms yet. I'd ordered windows, and as they arrived I installed them during the evenings which took me weeks to do. I had a heat pump at the house, but without windows or wall insulation, the best the heat pump could do was to bring the inside temperature up to about 55 degrees. My wife and I and my two daughters slept under a lot of quilts and blankets. We had all the furniture for the bedrooms, the living room, and the dining room on the first floor of the house, most of it stacked up nearly to the ceiling. Until we finished the rooms upstairs, we couldn't establish bedrooms. We did have an electric water heater for hot water, and I'd installed a downstairs bathroom with tub and shower unit so we'd have a full bath before we had the upstairs rooms finished.

At this time, I also started riding horses again.

My log house

While all of this was going on, I also reconnected with my old black-powder, muzzle-loading rifle club. By then they had evolved into re-enactors of the French and Indian War period. A partially reconstructed French fortress called Fort De Chartres was about an hour's drive from us along the east bank of the Mississippi River 50 miles south of St. Louis. It was the last of four French forts that were built there. All the earlier ones were built of logs that had rotted away and eventually been replaced by a cut-stone, limestone fortress.

Anna and I at Vincennes for the 1982 Memorial Day encampment.
This was the site of a Revolutionary War battle, an American victory.

When this fortress was being built in the 1750s, its cost overruns practically bankrupted the French government. This fort's purpose was to guard the Mississippi River, French Illinois, and the route from Detroit to the Gulf of Mexico. This re-enactment group portrayed the French militia of the 1740s through 1760s in that area of Illinois. That same group, with some slight changes to their costuming, would also perform Revolutionary War re-enacting as militia troops, not regular troops. I participated off and on for several years, and we traveled around the country as far as Fort Niagara in New York and Fort Michilimackinac in northern Michigan. We met other groups in all these places, did military drills and battle demonstrations, and set up historically correct encampments with our families. Back in those days it was normal for the wives if not also their children to travel with volunteer militia groups.

Then some of us got involved in Civil War re-enacting. Initially it was as an artillery group that had a mountain howitzer. We were hired to work on one of the made-for-TV miniseries called “North and South” [based on John Jakes’s trilogy of novels by the same name] that was being filmed in Mississippi. The filming company had created earthworks and earthen fortifications for the filming. So we went down there, established our cannon in the earthworks, and took part in the filming of “North and South,” part II, I think.

In the 1st Illinois Light Artillery. I’m second from the left.

While we were there it rained occasionally, and we got covered with all that red Mississippi mud. We were dragging this cannon around in the mud when I became acquainted with a Civil War cavalry unit, and these guys would come riding by very grandly without any mud on them. I thought, “Something’s wrong with this picture. I’ve grown up with horses all my life from when I was four years old until I went into the army. I really need to be in the cavalry.” And this cavalry unit was based in central Illinois. So I transferred myself from the artillery to the cavalry.

I joined the 7th Illinois Cavalry based around Springfield, Illinois. It was a big outfit that owned semitrailers to transport horses and carry saddles and equipment. They also had wagons, harnesses, and limbers, two-wheeled carts for pulling other people’s artillery. It was quite exciting. History always fascinated me. Through the re-enacting I’d gotten interested in portraying history very correctly, so we did a lot of research.

When I was in the French militia at Fort De Chartres, I even learned the 1750 French drill manual so that I could drill our troops in French including the loading and firing sequences of their muskets and their volley fire. We made quite an impression when we went up to Fort Niagara, New York. There were several “French” units there, but we were the only ones actually giving the commands in French and drilling according to the 1750 manual. I always took pride in doing re-enacting very accurately.

Being historically accurate wasn't easy. For example, the day we arrived and started setting up our camp in Montana for "Son of the Morning Star," a 1991 made-for-TV movie about George Armstrong Custer, we happened to see the star who portrayed Custer, Gary Cole, riding a horse. When his horse was galloping, this guy looked like a chicken trying to fly. He was a horrible horseback rider. Cole was then in the early years of a long acting career that included theatre, TV, and movies. He was a star in a TV series, but hadn't acted in any westerns previously. He obviously knew almost nothing about riding a horse, and it looked egregiously bad with his arms flapping like that. We knew the assistant director, so we told him that this guy would ruin the whole movie if he rode a horse that way. That sight would be a laughingstock to anybody who'd ever been around horses. George Custer was a consummate horseman, a fantastic equestrian. This guy was going to ruin Custer's whole reputation by his inability to ride properly. That afternoon we noticed that the head wrangler had gone off with Cole on a horse and was schooling him on how to ride a horse and sit the saddle without flapping his arms to give him a bit more credibility as a horseman. Cole ended up doing all of his own riding. He wasn't really good at it, but he was a lot better than he'd been that first day.

Me as a cavalry sergeant
at the Battle of the Little Bighorn
in "Son of the Morning Star"

Another illustration of our attempt to be historically correct when re-enacting was when we did the French and Indian War or Revolutionary War. We would set up a camp with our "camp followers," our families, with us right in the camp. Some Civil War re-enactors would do that too, but not the hardcore ones, the more correct ones. Our cavalry unit was particularly proud that we weren't carrying a whole load of huge tents and cots and chairs and furniture. A cavalry unit wouldn't have had anything like that. We prided ourselves on packing our saddles just as a cavalryman of the Civil War would and living off only what we carried on our saddles. We would ride into a camp, get off our horses, unsaddle them, throw our bedrolls and saddles on the ground, and that was our home. If it rained or snowed on us, we had ponchos and blankets, we had our wool uniforms, and sometimes in the dead of winter we had what were called "greatcoats," big, hooded overcoats, normally rolled up on the front of our saddles.

Anna and the girls sometimes wanted to go with me to Civil War re-enactments, but that posed certain problems. If it were a big national event, I would take them with the understanding that I wasn't there to cater to their needs and wants. I was responsible for a platoon, or a company or more of cavalry. That was where my duties lay. We didn't set up a camp for the families. I had a gooseneck horse trailer that had a small room in the front with a little icebox, and up over the gooseneck portion of the trailer I had some foam mattresses. Anna and the girls slept in the trailer. They had a place to change clothes, an icebox to keep food in, and some folding chairs. That was their camp while I was off doing my cavalry duties.

My family was all in costume. Anna had sewn beautiful Civil War dresses for herself with hoops, and the girls wore prairie dresses. They would be in costume when they came to visit people in the camps or to watch the battles, but they were strictly on their own, because I had other responsibilities.

Fortunately, however, Anna and my two younger daughters did have their own wonderful opportunity to take part in a re-enactment experience. When at a large national Civil War battle re-enactment with nearly 5000 others in Spring Hill, Tennessee, we heard about the Athenaeum school located in nearby Columbia, Tennessee. The Athenaeum is all that remains of two famous schools for girls that existed from 1830 until the Great Depression. In the 1860s such one-year schools for young ladies were considered to be what we call a "college" or a "finishing school" today. In 1909 my maternal grandmother attended a similar one-year school for girls in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and graduated as a fully-qualified elementary school teacher.

Each summer a one-week class for 20 to 24 girls would be held at the Athenaeum, and there was a one- or two-year waiting list to get in. A girl had to be between 14 and 19 years old. Unfortunately, we hadn't heard about the Athenaeum in time for my oldest daughter to attend, but my two younger girls were accepted. The school didn't provide any housing, so each student lived with a host family in Columbia, much like a foreign exchange student today. Although the school itself was free, it charged a $200 fee for food and other expenses.

The Athenaeum followed the curriculum taught to Southern young ladies in 1860. The school had certified teachers who were also re-enactors. For example, a very capable Black lady portrayed the role of a slave, serving as housekeeper/cook and modeling these skills to the girls.

The students learned household management, such as how the lady of the house should behave and manage a household budget, servants, and the larder. They were taught how to decorate, clean, and maintain a home with servants (slaves), how to sew, ride a horse sidesaddle, proper etiquette, and how to entertain with dinners and teas. Basically, they learned the finer graces expected of young, cultured Southern ladies of 1860.

In the evenings boys from the local public high school would join the young ladies for dancing lessons to learn the dances of the period. These young men would then be the young ladies' escorts at the graduation ball. The boys wore cadet uniforms which were white trousers and grey, military-style cutaway coats as if they were in a military school. A local church building that dated from before the Civil War was used for the graduation and awards program. One of the church's pastors had been the brother of President James K. Polk, who was also from Columbia, Tennessee. The girls wore white, hooped, formal gowns. Anna had made two day dresses of that period style and the white formal gowns used for the graduation and the ball afterwards. My wife and I attended the graduation ceremony and the ball, I in my Union army uniform and Anna in her formal gown.

The ball was held across the street from the church. The band played music of the Civil War period, and they did dances from that time. It was all very nice but very formal. For example, I had to have white gloves for the ball because a man wore gloves while dancing with a lady so his skin wouldn't touch her skin and be too familiar. They used a dance card. The girls had to have appointments for each dance with whatever boy was going to claim that dance with her. It was just an important learning experience for the girls to re-enact that culture.

Each year during the graduation ceremony, the faculty gave an award to the "best Southern belle," the girl who'd best exhibited the style, grace, and politeness of a Southern belle in the 1860s. Most of the girls in my youngest daughter's class were from the South and all wanted to be Southern belles. Ironically, however, my little Yankee from Illinois, half-Vietnamese daughter was selected. She was just generally a very friendly and sweet girl, and really smart. She's the one who now works in the State Department. Maybe through the re-enacting she was bit of an actress as well, so she just fell right into it naturally.

Starting out as a private I did cavalry re-enacting for 16 years, longer than I'd actually been in the U.S. Army. I progressed in rank in the cavalry up through sergeant, lieutenant, captain, lieutenant colonel, and finally to full colonel.

My last year I was deputy commander of the 1st Federal Division [combined arms: infantry, artillery and cavalry] which encompassed union army re-enactors from Ohio to California. My best friend, who'd joined the cavalry just six months before I did, was the commanding general. In re-enacting, commanding generals and even company commanders generally achieve their rank by a yearly vote of the troops that they command. So, for him to become general of the 1st Federal Division, a majority of the division's brigade commanders had to have voted for him. Before that, he'd commanded a cavalry brigade. Every time he stepped up a notch, I was his second in command or one step below him. For example, when he commanded a company of cavalry, I was one of his platoon leaders.

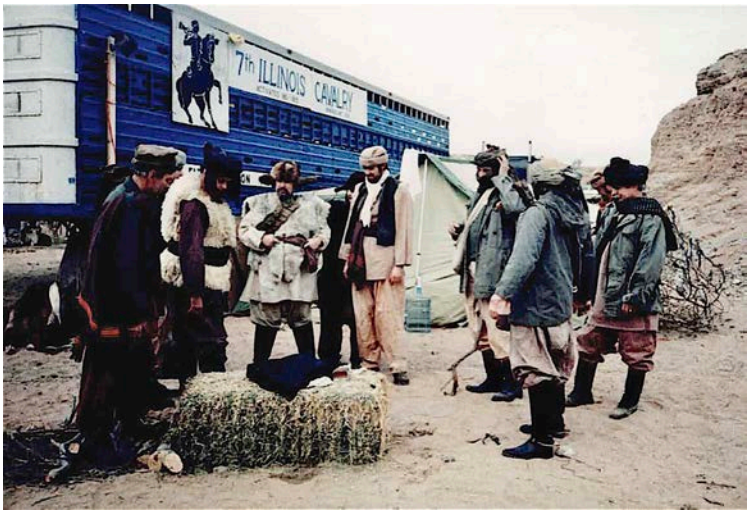
Our reputation spread far and wide, and we had members in ten different states. We traveled all over the United States doing battle re-enactments, but at least once or twice a year we did what was called a "national event." One example of that occurred in 1988 at the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg where there were about 8000 to 9000 participants, both Union and Confederate, re-enacting a battle just two or three miles down the road from Gettysburg Battlefield National Park. When our re-enactment was over, our cavalry unit was one of only three units invited by the National Park Service to move our camp onto the actual battleground. We couldn't do actual battles in the national park, but we did battle drill demonstrations and set up a camp available to the public.

In addition to those events, Civil War re-enactors, particularly people like us with horses, were hired by movie companies to do movie work. Many movies were being made about the Civil War during the 1980s and early 1990s. They would hire us to be what they called "background action specialists." We weren't extras, because we were highly skilled with our horses and our weapons. More important, we came as a package deal.

For example, if a production company was making a film that included horses and riders with guns, they generally would have to hire a wrangler, a cowboy who would take care of the saddle horses and arrange to rent as many horses as they needed. Then they'd rent the horse tack (all the equipment the horse required), whether it was cowboy saddles or military saddles, whatever was correct. Of course, many times Hollywood productions weren't historically correct. Then the production company would have to hire additional wranglers to ride the horses, rent costumes for the wranglers and guns that they would carry. This became a nightmare for the company, and the costs were outrageous.

However, with us they'd just say, "We need 25 cavalrymen equipped and correct for two weeks on set." That set might be in Texas, Georgia, Wyoming, or Arizona, wherever they were doing their location filming. Of course, we got paid a lot more than a daily extra got. Extras just walked on and they were furnished with costumes, but they didn't have any particular skills. We had the skills to handle our horses. Our horses were trained not to react to gunfire and explosions. We provided our own horse equipment and, in most cases, our own costumes whether they were Civil War uniforms, Indian War uniforms, or even cowboy clothing. Also, we were paid travel expenses to the filming location. We'd haul our horses out there and set up a camp. They'd provide the feed and water for the horses. The extras would get simple little box lunches each day from the caterers. But we ate in the catering tent with all of the actors, the stuntmen, the craft people, the technical people working on the set, and the stars. We all ate together in a big circus tent run by a catering company out of California.

We worked on many movies—I don't remember how many. Some but not all were Civil War or Indian War movies. I worked on one movie down in Yuma, Arizona, called "Rambo III," released in 1988. We provided the horses and the saddles, but we were costumed as Afghan rebels fighting against the Russian conquerers. We were on horseback fighting against tanks and helicopters from Russia.



Colleagues and I (third from the left)
from the 7th Illinois Cavalry re-enacting troop
during the filming of "Rambo III"

We worked very closely with the stunt people. We got to know them and the assistant directors because we'd worked with them in previous productions. The stunt people knew we were safe and handled our horses well, so they'd include us in some of their stunt-work planning. We wouldn't actually do the stunts. They'd surround the stunt riders first with a couple of other stuntmen to be their immediate safety. Then they'd surround them with our re-enactors on horseback. Our job was to make sure that no other people that they didn't trust, like the extras working on the set, got anywhere near where the stunts were being done during the shooting, which could have been very dangerous for the stuntmen as well as the extras. We were a secondary line of safety around the stuntmen as they performed.

Two hundred of our re-enactors portraying Afghan horsemen in “Rambo III”

An example of this occurred during a Tom Cruise movie called “Far and Away,” released in 1992, in which Tom Cruise and his then wife, Nicole Kidman, starred as English-Irish immigrants during the 1893 Oklahoma land rush [the fourth Oklahoma land rush]. A platoon of soldiers were in that movie, but our group didn’t furnish those soldiers, who were a different group from Texas that we knew very well. Instead, we were dressed up as “boomers,” civilians on horseback, ready for the land rush to start, to race to stake out pieces of land. But the stuntmen placed us strategically. That scene of the land rush itself had the largest gathering of wagons and horses in one scene since the 1931 movie “Cimmaron,” about 400 wagons and 1000 horsemen.

We had only about 20 to 30 horsemen there. But we provided safety and security around the stuntmen, because there were many very dangerous stunts in that movie where wagons crashed and horses fell down. We were there to form a safety perimeter, moving at a dead run in the midst of 1000 horses, a wall of security around the stuntmen in the wagons. Some poor farmer, who was driving his team pulling a rented wagon, or some Wyoming rancher with a team of horses and a wagon he rarely drove except in parades, when driving at breakneck speed across the prairie oftentimes could lose control of the horses. Our job was to keep those wagons or any inexperienced riders, who were really just extras, horseback enthusiasts, or those hired from local ranchers and farmers, all costumed up, from running over the stuntmen and hurting them or themselves very badly.

Ron Howard, who played Opie in “The Andy Griffith Show,” directed this movie. I think he’d rented every single panavision, wide-angle movie camera in the world, about 13 of them, for this scene. He had some of them buried in holes, some up on ten-story-high scaffolds, and a couple on helicopters. These panavision cameras were used to film the land-rush scene. We weren’t there for the whole movie, but were for the land rush. We would go out and watch them rehearse the stunt. They would tell us where they wanted us positioned, what they were going to do, and where we needed to be to shield them from the onrushing horses and wagons, many of which would by that time be out of control. Sometimes the horses would run for a mile before these poor farmers could get them to stop.

We were told after the fact that the movie’s insurer had estimated that there could be between one and three deaths during that very dangerous land-rush scene. There were two emergency medevac helicopters sitting on the ground right next to the filming prepared to take anyone badly injured to the nearest hospital which was 40 miles away. Fortunately, there were no deaths. There were a couple of broken limbs but no deaths.

That was some of the movie work I did as a re-enactor. I retired from cavalry re-enacting after 16 years when my buddy, who was the division commander, decided that he was going to retire. The brigade commanders had an impromptu meeting under a shade tree just before a battle when they found out the commander was retiring after this battle—this was at a re-enactment in Mississippi—and they came over and offered me the division command for the next year. This wasn’t just commanding troops in the field. It was an entire year of coordinating with re-enactment sponsors, groups, historical sites, logistics people, and the military units that wanted to participate. It was a year-long job just to put on one or two national events. That was what the division commander was responsible for.

I turned them down because, as I told them, I was the deputy commander helping my buddy do all of this logistics, coordination, management work, and communication—this was before we had the internet—but I didn’t have any second banana who was ready and able to assist me. I retired as a full colonel when my buddy who was a brigadier general retired. Plus my horse was getting old, and I didn’t want to have to acquire and train a new horse, because it takes a lot of work to train a horse for what we did. So, after about 25 years of various re-enacting, around 2004 I retired from re-enacting and shifted my hobbies in another direction entirely.

Chapter 19: MY HORSE BUTCH

My first cavalry unit owned some horses. In order for those horses to be fed, bedded, and maintained, any guy who didn't own a horse paid a certain fee to the cavalry unit. When we appeared in a movie, our unit collected a fee for each horse and rider we provided. Those who brought their own horses got a full share of that fee, but the share of any guy who used one of the unit's horses was split between the guy and the unit. Those fees were used to maintain the horses. The commander of my first cavalry unit was an equine veterinarian, so most of the vetting work was either free or inexpensive.

I had several horses living on my land in southern Illinois, and my wife and daughters would occasionally ride them. But I had one main horse that I used strictly for all movie and re-enacting work. Of course, I had to have a truck and a horse trailer and all the equipment necessary to travel around the country with horses. Then I was "gifted" with a new horse.

That horse, named "Butch," had been donated to our cavalry unit. He was a $10,000 foal raised and trained to be a racehorse. He was one-quarter quarter horse and three-quarters thoroughbred. The problem with that horse was that he was out of control. He'd been raised in a box stall as many horses of that type are. He'd been fed sweet feed and high-protein hay to develop his muscles and energy. He was very very fast, but out of control. When he was exercised by the groom or was being led into the starting gate at a racetrack, he would rear up and oftentimes come over backward on top of his rider. Because he hurt a lot of people that way, the tracks banned Butch. He wasn't allowed to race on any of the tracks in that circuit because of his reputation for hurting riders. The people who owned Butch had invested a lot of money in him, but they couldn't race him. He was a gelding [castrated to make him more manageable], so they couldn't breed him. They knew the commander of my cavalry unit, and they donated Butch to our unit, which was a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, to get a $10,000 tax deduction. When Butch was given to us, he put two of our best young riders in the hospital. He came over backward on one of these riders and hurt the guy's back. He also came over backward on the other young fellow, who rode bulls in rodeos; then when Butch was getting back up, he stepped on the guy's face nearly tearing half his face off. So the horse was not usable, and my cavalry commander was going to take it to a business in Kentucky that killed horses for dog food.

My commander thought that the horse I had didn't look historically correct enough to be a cavalry horse and wanted me to get rid of him. So he told me, "Richard, we've got this horse we been having a little trouble with. If you can ride him, we'll give him to you if you get rid of that white horse." I said, "OK."

But Butch was still in Springfield, Illinois, a four-hour drive from my house, and I didn't know his reputation at the time. When I first went up to Springfield to ride that horse, it was for the Christmas parade in downtown Springfield, and they had brought our cavalry horses in from the farm to ride in the parade. When I started riding the horse down the street, he was walking like he was drunk, weaving back and forth. So I asked our veterinarian commander, "What's wrong with this horse?" He replied, "Well, we don't let anyone get on him unless we heavily tranquilize him." So I said, "I can't ride a horse like this. This horse is drunk!"

The next weekend after the Christmas parade, we loaded all of our horses and headed out to Yuma, Arizona, to work on the 1988 "Rambo III" movie with Sylvester Stallone. I hadn't had another opportunity to ride Butch or do anything with him, but they loaded him on a semitrailer with 24 horses. There were several more that people hauled in their personal trailers. It was a 24-hour drive to get there. We took the horses out one time after 12 hours to water and feed them. Then, after an hour, we reloaded them on the trailers and drove another 12 hours. Horses stand up in a trailer—they'll sleep standing up if they're not moving. When we reached Yuma, the commander and I got our horses out and rode around looking at the set. They had trenches, Russian tanks and jeeps, and different machine-gun positions all set up for the filming. The horse was fine. Butch was fine because he was tired. He was sleep-deprived, plus I hadn't given him any grain, only hay, when we were traveling.

But the first day we shot a scene, Butch got out of control and was running away with me. I pulled his head back all the way to his chest, but he wouldn't slow down. I even reached down, grabbed the bridle with my right hand, and pulled his head all the way around to my right stirrup. But he was still running straight ahead, a full, flat-out run, as fast as he could run. As a result, he was about a hundred yards ahead of all the other 200 horses in this scene so that I wasn't even in the camera frame because Butch was so much faster and I couldn't slow him down.

When I came back into camp, I was cussing and complaining about this horse that I couldn't control. A lady from Georgia was there with her boyfriend and she knew a lot about racehorses. She said, "He's been on the track before, right?" I answered, "Yeh." She said, "He's been trained in reverse cues." I replied, "I don't know what that means."

She explained, “On a track a jockey runs the horse in the race and with those short stirrups he balances himself on his feet and the reins that are pulled very tight in the horse’s mouth. So when you pull back on that horse’s reins, he’s not gonna stop. He thinks it’s a race. He’s running. When you want him to stop or slow down, drop the reins and sit straight up. That’s what jockeys do when a race is over.”

So I learned something valuable then. I’d never been around racehorses. I tried that, and it worked! He slowed to a trot when I let the reins go and sat straight up. He thought the race was over.

But Butch still didn’t know how to really stop. He didn’t know how to neck rein, which means that the rider holds all the reins in one hand so he can hold a weapon in his other hand. Butch didn’t know how to make turns, and he still had a habit of fighting the bit and trying to rear up. I’d throw all my weight on his front to push him back down. Well, initially for that film I was issued an AK-47 with a blank adapter to shoot blanks, fighting against the Russians—of course, that’s not very realistic. But, because he kept trying to rear up on me, I traded the AK-47 back to the prop people and drew a big Enfield, bolt-action, World War II rifle with a big long wooden stock and a heavy barrel. The next time we went out and Butch tried to rear up on me, I simply did what my father taught me to do to a rearing horse. I brought that gun down between his ears and knocked him down to his knees. He was seeing stars. Every time he’d try to rear up, I’d hit him over the head again with that rifle and knock him to his knees. By the end of one day, Butch wasn’t rearing up any more. He had learned.

Next I took him out in the deep sand—there’s a lot of dead time between shots on a movie set—and I walked, trotted, and galloped him around in circles, and then the circles became figure eights. I was teaching him how to neck rein and how to respond to the bit for stopping. I also taught him how to change his leads, when he would change from a right circle to a left circle. Changing the leads means changing which leg is leading when going around a circle. I would simply throw my weight onto the side his lead leg needed to be on when he needed to change direction. If he didn’t get his leg out there under him with all of my weight shifted in that direction, he’d fall down. So he learned how to change leads, which is very important for horses. Deep sand is a perfect place to train horses because it wears them out and they become very tractable because they’re tired. They don’t have any energy to fight you. I also changed his diet. I took him completely off the sweet feed and put him on low-protein hay, just grass hay. After we got back to Illinois, I continued his training, and within six months I had Butch trained to where students at the university could take riding lessons on him. He was gentle, well-trained, under control, and easily handled, a totally different horse, which was a long way from being made into dog food.

I've owned many horses in my life and rode from the age of four until I retired from the cavalry in my late 50s. Butch was the best horse I ever had. I'm not one who thinks of a horse as a pet. I grew up on a farm, and to me horses were working animals. Butch was a working animal for me to do my re-enacting and the movie work. I also played polo on Butch, and he was a fantastic polo pony. He was the only horse I ever thought of as more than just a farm animal. He was my buddy.

I saved his life twice when he got what is called a "colic." Colic is a very serious condition whereby a horse's intestine gets twisted or otherwise blocked. The horse stops eating, its stomach becomes septic, and the horse can die. For amateurs the best treatment for colic is just to keep the horse on its feet walking around. On two occasions, both at re-enactments, I've had to do this with Butch. When his stomach hurts bad, a horse will lie down and sometimes even kick at its stomach with its rear feet to try to alleviate the pain. My horse would be on the picket line where he'd been tied, and normally he'd have been sleeping while standing. Horses don't normally sleep lying down. Butch was down, awake, and in pain. A horse guard called me, so I got out of my bedroll, went over to the picket line, and got my horse up. Sometimes that's hard to do. They don't want to get up because their stomach hurts. It may take several people to get them up on their feet. Sometimes you even have to whip them to get them to stand up. Once you get them up, then you walk them. You get them water and you just make them walk all night long. That walking often allows their stomach to pass through some of the stuff that's blocking their intestine and eventually get clear, saving their life. So I saved Butch's life twice.

Part of horse picket line for "Rambo III"

He reciprocated many times by saving my life. When we were doing re-enactments and movies, we would often be galloping very fast over unknown, dangerous, and broken terrain where a horse could easily go down and not only hurt himself but hurt his rider very badly. Butch could leap at a dead run over things that would appear suddenly in front of us that I never thought a horse could jump over. He was totally fearless. If I was urging him forward, he would go. So, I felt a real bond with Butch.

When I retired from the cavalry, I rode him for another year or so. But I wasn't using him much, he was getting old, and I was getting old, so I gave him to a friend of mine in the cavalry who had two young sons but only one horse who was too high-spirited for his sons to ride. Although Butch could be high-spirited if you wanted him to be, he was very calm and quiet otherwise after I trained him. So I gave Butch to my friend for his twelve- and eight-year-old sons to ride, and he lived out the rest of his life on a cattle ranch in central Illinois.

Butch and me, about 2000

Chapter 20: MY STEARMAN BIPLANE

After I left re-enacting and retired my horse, my hobbies went in a different direction. I'd been riding motorcycles since college, but when Anna and I were at Fort Hood and we had our first child, I gave that up. This was because the four-lane road between where I lived and Fort Hood had one or two casualties every week from GIs on motorcycles getting run over or hit by cars. I didn't want my children to be orphans, so I gave up riding motorcycles until my kids were all out of high school. About 1999 I began buying motorcycles: Kawasakis first, then Harleys, and finally an Indian Chief. I rode until March 2023, when I went to Daytona [Florida] Bike Week and sold my bike—after all, I was 76 years old at that time.

Another hobby that I pursued after giving up re-enacting was flying. I hadn't flown for 18 years or so, but in developing my family's commercial property, I had a particularly good sale which I distributed to my siblings and myself. I used my share to purchase the only airplane I was ever interested in buying, a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane that had been used as a military trainer during World War II. My father had airplanes starting about 1946, and I grew up flying occasionally alongside him. However, I had never gotten my private pilot's license until after army helicopter flight school when I also earned my civilian license. I'd never used it, but when I decided to buy a World War II army trainer biplane, I had to get additional certifications for fixed-wing, high-performance, and tail-dragger airplanes, in which the tail wheel is on the ground as opposed to having a wheel under the aircraft's nose, to add to my civilian pilot's license.

To get a fixed-wing certification, I found an instructor, a retired air force lieutenant colonel, who taught me the basics in a rented Cessna 172. Of course, I also had to do the ground school for the private fixed-wing license. After about a dozen hours I soloed in the airplane. I didn't have to fly the minimum of 40 hours required of a new pilot. I just had to prove my proficiency in a fixed-wing airplane to get signed off.

Meanwhile, I found a biplane in Virginia that I wanted to buy. It was being used in a flying circus show just outside Washington, DC, and belonged to an airline pilot. When he'd taken it in for its annual inspection, the engine was found to be inoperable because some of the bearings were chewing themselves up. The engine needed to be completely overhauled and rebuilt. He sold it to me in that condition for a really good price.

My Stearman

This was all done remotely. I hadn't even seen the airplane, but I'd looked at its log books and talked to the person who'd been doing the routine maintenance on the aircraft and gotten a report from him. So I bought the airplane. I had its engine removed and shipped to California to be overhauled and rebuilt, which took a few months. During that time I found an instructor in St. Charles, Missouri, an ex-navy pilot who had a Stearman and could instruct me in its high-performance aspects, aerodynamic capabilities, and tail-dragger landing characteristics which are different from modern airplanes. I took about 15 hours of instruction with him, but his insurance company didn't allow him to solo his students in the biplane. Now I was flying the biplane, getting pretty proficient with it, and had the skills but not the certification.

By this time my plane's engine had been overhauled, shipped back to Virginia, and rehung. So I asked my brother, Roger, who was a retired commander of the Air Force Thunderbirds and currently an airline pilot, if he would assist me in ferrying the aircraft from Virginia back to Illinois because it wasn't legal for me to do it myself. I couldn't insure the airplane yet either. He had flown tail-draggers but not a biplane. My brother had some friends in Arizona who familiarized him with that type of aircraft, and then he flew to Virginia to meet me and test fly the aircraft. The engine was leaking oil everywhere, which wasn't safe, so we brought it back and had mechanics work on it another half-day to fix all those leaks. Then my brother took it up with me and pronounced that it was suitable.

That afternoon we left from the airfield in rural Virginia and headed west toward Illinois. We were flying through very low cloud ceilings across mountain ridges in Virginia and West Virginia. The ceiling got so low that we weren't much higher than the ridge lines. We followed the interstate highway so, if we had an engine failure, we could land on it. I was sitting in the back seat, the pilot's seat in a biplane, flying most of the time. My brother was sitting in the front seat where during military training the instructor would sit. To try to keep track of where we were, he was struggling with a very primitive GPS that he'd borrowed from a friend of his in Arizona. Of course, I had maps on which I'd marked out a route with all the calculations for our time and where we needed to land for fuel. We made it over the mountains with just one fuel load as planned.

It had now gotten dark, and Roger was slumped down in the front seat playing with the GPS. He looked up and saw liquid dripping off the upper wing right above his head and told me over the intercom, "Oh my gosh, our gas tank [which was in the upper wing] is leaking!" I replied, "No. You haven't been paying attention. It's been raining for the past 15 or 20 minutes." We had windshields about a foot tall in front of us but nothing except the upper wing above us. But with our airspeed and the propeller blast, the rain wasn't hitting us as long as we were behind our short windshields.

When we got to the airfield in West Virginia where we'd planned to stop, Roger took over the aircraft to land us in a pouring rainstorm. Our airplane had no landing lights, but because it was a modern airport, the runways were lit up. He landed it OK, though paved runways aren't as forgiving for tail-draggers as grass runways are. Then I taxied the airplane over to where we could refuel. In this open-cockpit aircraft with no airspeed, rain was now just pouring down on us. My brother then got out of the plane and yelled, "Go ahead and refuel it." So I climbed into the front seat and he handed me up a fuel hose so I could pump 40 gallons of gas into the tank in the upper wing while he ran in out of the rain.

After I finished refueling, I pulled out a tarp and covered both of our cockpits, then went inside the fixed-base operator's office to pay for the fuel and check whether we could get the airplane hangar for the night since there was a thunderstorm and a strong wind was blowing. We were looking at the radar on the office computer to see where the storms were and what tomorrow's forecast was, and a modern turboprop airplane landed and taxied up to our airplane. Its pilots walked into the office and saw these two soaking wet guys wearing leather jackets, leather flying helmets, and goggles looking at a computer, and there was a biplane parked outside. They were looking at us and over our shoulders at the weather, so we got to talking. We asked where they were headed. One replied, "We were headed for Washington, DC, and Virginia, but the storm is just too bad. We don't want to fly any farther in this storm. Where are you coming from?" We replied, "We just flew through the storm and landed the biplane here." They were shocked at that statement.

The airplane was parked in a hangar overnight and we found a motel room. The next day the weather had cleared up, so we rolled the airplane out and took off again, mostly following highway I-64 west. The airplane's radio and compass didn't work. The GPS and a handheld radio were all we had. Because there was still a low ceiling and flying at a higher altitude would have used more fuel, we were flying at about 500 feet. There were cellular towers higher than where we were flying. We flew over the median of the interstate highway, because we knew there'd be no towers there, so that was the safest place to fly. We were averaging about 95 miles per hour. At times some cars on the interstate were going faster than we were. But we were having fun. I did most of the flying, and my brother did the navigating. When we flew near a control zone or a larger airport, he'd call in on his little radio to report our position and get clearance. That second day we flew to Frankfort, Kentucky, and landed after a long day of flying with a couple of fuel stops. The third day we flew the rest of the way to Carbondale, Illinois, arriving there a little after noon.

It was only after Roger and I got my airplane home that he was able to finally sign me off, not only for a tail-dragger aircraft but for a high-performance aircraft. We refueled the aircraft, got something for lunch, came back, and took off again to fly around locally for an hour or so. My brother, who was a certified flight instructor himself, wanted to test me on some emergency procedures, spins, and stalls, things that you're not allowed to do in modern airplanes but are very deadly if you don't know how to deal with them. Roger tried to catch me off guard by putting me into a stall that turned into a spin. If you go into a stall in a certain way In my particular airplane, it does a snap roll and then noses straight down into a spin. If you allow it to spin more than two times, the spin gets so fast that it's almost impossible to stop. He did that to me as a surprise. He just told me what to do to position the aircraft so it would naturally get into a spin. But to his great surprise, I did everything right. Before the spin even made a full turn, I had the opposite rudder pushed in to stop the spin. Then I was just diving straight down, and I very carefully, gradually, and under control pulled the stick back to bring the nose back up after I'd regained enough airspeed, because if I'd jerked the stick back, I could have ripped the wings off the airplane. He was quite surprised that I did everything right, wasn't scared, and had the aircraft fully under control. After we landed, I told him that in a helicopter that's what we called "an unusual attitude." When we did wingovers (a maneuver to quickly reverse an aircraft's heading while moving a minimum horizontal distance) in our Cobra helicopters, that was just as severe as this snap roll that the airplane did. I explained that we used to do those on purpose for what we called a return to target when we were doing attack runs with a Cobra. We'd pull the nose up to almost a stall position, then we'd just roll it over like a snap roll and come back at the target from the reverse direction. I'd been in that unusual attitude many times before in a helicopter, so I wasn't worried about it. He then signed me off. The next day I drove him to the St. Louis airport, and he flew back to Arizona.

My 1943 Stearman open-cockpit biplane was a modification of a 1930s mail plane designed by Lloyd Stearman. Both the army and the navy used a modified version of this airplane as a trainer during World War II. Their modifications were primarily to increase the height of the landing gear and narrow its width. These changes actually made the airplane less stable, harder to control, and easier to topple during landings. They did this to help weed out primary flight trainees who couldn't keep an airplane under control and probably wouldn't make it through the training. For this reason the navy's nickname for their version of the airplane whose fuselage was painted yellow was "the yellow peril." Army pilots called their version whose fuselage was painted blue "the washing machine" because it washed people out of flight school. Military Stearman biplanes were challenging to fly.

During the time I had my Stearman, two experiences flying it provided some drama. The first occurred several years after I bought it. I flew it to a week-long National Stearman Fly-In in Galesburg, Illinois, which always started on Labor Day. Over 100 antique Stearman airplanes showed up. Some were pre-war mail planes like Lindbergh flew, most were the World War II military version like I had, and a few were post-war modifications with a much larger more powerful engine to convert them into highly powered crop sprayers. I flew there with a friend who was a retired commercial pilot in his 70s in the front seat. We had a good time for several days flying around, looking at other aircraft, and going to seminars on repairs, maintenance, and such. When the time came to fly home there was a weather front with possible rain and fog along our flight path. But it seemed that front would move out of the way before we reached it, so we planned our flight with one refueling stop and took off heading south.

My airplane had a few anomalies that caused problems. Its radio worked but wasn't reliable due to magnetized sections of the airplane's metal frame. These same anomalies also affected the accuracy of the compasses mounted in both the front and back seats. These were called "whiskey compasses" because they had a needle floating on alcohol, a typical World War II aircraft compass. The frame of my airplane was tubular steel covered by fabric. At some point in its career that tubular frame had been damaged and been arc-welded, electrically welded, to repair that damage. That makes a very strong weld but magnetizes the metal. I measured this magnetism and tried to degauss [demagnetize] those areas but never was successful. Magnetized regions in the front and rear of my airplane's frame made both its compasses and its radio very unreliable. I did have an early-generation hand-held GPS which provided me with a compass heading. I also flew with a map showing me rivers, roads, railroads, towns, and other terrain features I could navigated by, which wasn't unusual for me because that was how we navigated in Vietnam.

On the first leg of our flight back home we flew into that front which had stalled. We were just passed Springfield, Illinois, heading south when we flew into a wall of fog. One minute we could see around us and the next minute it was like we were in the middle of a big cotton pillow, a "whiteout." We couldn't see anything in any direction which is very dangerous. Normally a pilot in this situation relies on his instruments to maintain position and control of the aircraft. You can fly without seeing outside of your aircraft if you have all of the proper instrumentation. The most important instrument is called an attitude indicator which tells you whether the nose of your aircraft is pointing up or down, or if it's turning to the right or the left. That's important because you need to know if your airplane is climbing or descending, or in too steep a climb or too steep a descent which is dangerous.

My plane didn't have an attitude indicator. Stearmans weren't made with them. I did have an altimeter, which told me my airplane's altitude, and a rate-of-climb/descent indicator, which told me at what speed my plane was going up or down (as for example, climbing at 500 feet per minute). So I needed to figure out, almost instantaneously, what instruments I had that could tell me what I needed to know to continue flying my airplane level and safely without crashing it. Also, I had to make a 180-degree turn to fly back out of that fog. Almost immediately I realized that there was a lag of several seconds in both the climb-descent indicator and the altimeter: They had to catch up to what was actually going on. However, I knew that if my airplane were climbing, the RPM rate on my tachometer, the rate of spin of the propeller, would decrease slightly, and it would increase slightly if it were descending. Since I knew there was no lag in that reading, I used it to stay in level flight. Also, if my airplane were climbing, its airspeed indicator would show a slight slowing, or a speed-up if the airplane were descending. So I went into a very slow turn by using my GPS as a compass and my RPM rate and airspeed indicators to be sure the plane wasn't going up or down. I also double-checked with my altimeter and my climb-descent indicator, but their information would be after the fact. I continued until I'd turned 180 degrees, then continued for about ten minutes until I flew out of that fog.

Then the question became, "Where do we go now?" We weren't far from Springfield, Illinois, but that was a controlled airport: You had to contact them on the radio to get permission and instructions from them to land there. I knew my radio wasn't reliable enough to do that. Getting into that traffic pattern would have been very dangerous. However, my map showed a small private, grass-strip airstrip on a nearby farm that belonged to another Stearman owner whom I'd just met that week at the fly-in. So I figured out where I was on my map. Then I passed my map up to my retired-pilot passenger in the front seat—not an easy thing to do from the back seat in an open-cockpit airplane flying at 100 miles per hour—and told him over the intercom that he'd be my navigator. He had to unfold the map on his lap while I explained where we and that farm were on the map. He then gave me a heading, and I used my GPS to fly in that direction looking for that airstrip. It was in a "Y" between two prominent highways, so we found it. Its grass runway was in the middle of a soybean field and led up to a barn and a house. I descended to about 100 feet and flew the length of the runway checking for obstructions or ditches. It was a short, very narrow runway, but I was used to landing on such farm strips. So I climbed back up, flew around into an approach, and landed on that strip. Then I taxied my Stearman right up in front of the barn.

The guy who owned that place was still back at the fly-in with his motor home, but he had tie-downs build into the ground. So we tied the airplane down to protect it in case a strong wind came up that night, then I called him on the phone and told him,

“I just landed on your little airfield at your farm and we’re stuck here because of weather, but I’m low on fuel,” because we never made it to our fuel stop. I asked, ‘When are you planning to come home?” He replied, “We aren’t coming home until tomorrow evening, but I’ve got neighbors who might be able to help you with the fuel.” Sure enough, a neighbor showed up—I don’t know if the guy called him or he saw us landing—and asked if we needed anything. It turned out that he had some 5-gallon fuel cans at his farm and could drive me to the Springfield airport to get aviation fuel.

So I got in his truck with him, and he drove home to get the fuel cans and a funnel, then drove me to the Springfield airport. I went to the man at the counter there and said, “I need 20 gallons of aviation fuel.” He said, “Fine. Where’s your airplane?” I said, “It’s not here. I have cans to fill. It’s on a farm strip ten miles away.” So they brought the fuel truck over and filled our 5-gallon cans. I was a bit concerned about getting pieces of rust from these old cans into my airplane’s fuel system, but the funnel had a filter in the bottom, so that helped. When we got back, I climbed up on the front seat of my airplane, my friend handed up the fuel cans, and I poured 20 gallons of fuel into the center of the airplane’s top wing where its 43-gallon-capacity fuel tank was. That 20 gallons nearly topped it off.

We kept checking the weather radar on our smart phones, but that front wasn’t moving any time soon. We had a couple of candy bars for our dinner, and we covered the cockpit. Finally, my friend called his brother who lived in Springfield. His brother came over, dropped me off at a nearby motel because he didn’t have room for me at his house, and took my friend with him to his place for the night.

The next morning they picked me up and drove back to where my airplane was, checking the weather the whole time. The front was still moving very slowly but looked like it would clear the airport where our next fuel stop would be by afternoon. So we took off and eventually flew into fog again. But I went down to about 600 feet where I could see the ground well enough and flew over the center of a highway where I knew that there would be no cell towers, which can be as tall as 900 feet.

Finally we got to the airfield, and I entered a landing pattern to go in and top off the fuel. But just as I was in my final approach, I noticed a big red “X” across the end of the runway which meant it was closed. There were cars lined up along that runway because it was being used for a model airplane flying event. But I knew that airport also had a grass runway, so I circled around, landed on it, and taxied over to top off my fuel. We waited some more for the front to move out and finally flew home safely without any more incidents. That trip was rather exciting, though a little scary at times.

The second dramatic incident involved the same friend who'd been with me on that flight. We went from Carbondale north to Urbana, in central Illinois, for a "warbird fly-in" where people who had military aircraft flew into this private airfield owned by Rudy Frasca, a man who'd made millions of dollars by building aircraft trainer simulators used by airlines, flight schools, and the military all over the world. At that field there were hangars where he was rebuilding World War II aircraft. He had a P-51 Mustang and a P-40 Warhawk, both fighter-bombers, and several other World War II aircraft, and he was in the process of rebuilding a Focke-Wulf 190 German fighter plane.

We spent the day there seeing all types of World War II fighter planes, then left to return home. Again we needed to make a refueling stop along the way. My airplane didn't have much of a fuel range because it was designed to be a trainer, and most training sessions lasted an hour to an hour-and-a-half. So it had a maximum of two hours of fuel on board with 30 minutes of safety.

When we landed to refuel, we noticed a piece of sheet metal four to six inches wide about 10-feet long that wrapped around the junction between the upper wing and the center wing section in a "U" shape. This sheet metal was held together in the rear by one six-inch long bolt that was loose. Because the bolt had broken, that piece of metal was held on only by the air flowing over the wing. If that piece of sheet metal had come off, the airplane could still have flown, but that metal could have cut our heads off. So I went into the airfield's maintenance hangar and talked to the mechanic. He didn't have anything like that bolt. He even drove to the hardware store in town to see if they had something long enough and strong enough to replace the bolt, but they had nothing suitable either. We were running out of time, so I decided to safety wire it together with multiple wires run through the bolt holes and tied together to temporarily hold the sheet metal together until I got home and could get the correct bolt to hold it on. Then we took off to fly back home.

My plane had no landing lights or instrument lights, but we had plenty of time to get home before sundown. However, I failed to take into account a big weather front to our northwest, like a big wall that went up 30,000 feet. Instead of occurring when the sun went below the horizon, "sunset" occurred about 45 minutes earlier than normal because the sun disappeared behind this 30,000-foot-tall wall of clouds. So by the time I got home it was fully dark. I didn't have any trouble flying home, but I really didn't like to land my airplane on paved runways. I used the grass strip beside the paved runway at our airfield. The paved runway had lights, but the grass strip didn't. I had no view of the ground whatsoever because it was pitch-black. I made a very shallow, steady approach to the grass runway parallel to the lit paved runway. My plan was to just very slowly descend until I felt my plane's wheels touch the ground.

However, I'd misgauged how far the grass runway was from the main runway, and on the airport property just beyond and beside the grass strip was a cornfield. In September that corn was about eight or nine feet tall. So as I came down slowly into what I thought was the grass runway I descended into a cornfield. By the time I'd realized my mistake, the corn had grabbed my landing gear and I couldn't increase my speed to pull up out of it. So we crashed into a cornfield. Because the corn had grabbed the landing gear and the lower wing, it flipped the plane up onto its nose, hesitated there for a moment, and then flipped the plane completely over. So we were hanging there in our shoulder harnesses. We hollered to each other, "Don't undo your shoulder harness," because we could have fallen three or four feet and broken our necks. So we put our hands up over our heads to catch our weight and then undid our shoulder harnesses and seatbelts and slowly lowered ourselves down and out of the cockpit. I had a little penlight in my pocket and I examined my 70-year-old buddy for injuries. Neither of us had any injuries. Then I started smelling some fuel, so I crawled back into my cockpit and turned off the master switch and the fuel disconnect to try to prevent a fire. I went back out and found my friend standing at the edge of the cornfield, and I told him, "This is a good thing." He looked at my like I was crazy and asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, the last time I crashed an aircraft, people were shooting at me when I got on the ground. This time there's nobody shooting at me and all I've got to do is to deal with the FAA and the insurance company, so this is all good."

That night I called a friend in western Missouri who did all the maintenance on my airplane and told him what had happened. He said, "Don't let anyone move that airplane until I get there." Of course, the FAA won't allow you to move a crashed aircraft until they've inspected it. But the airport manager wanted to get a crane first thing in the morning to get my plane out of that cornfield. I told him, "It's not affecting your runways. The airport's open. It's not a problem. You leave my plane right where it is until I decide to move it."

We called the FAA, and they sent an inspector from Springfield to inspect the crash site. Meanwhile, my buddy drove all night from western Missouri to southern Illinois with a utility trailer. When he arrived in the morning, we went to Walmart and I bought 160-feet of rope and some hooks and things. I also called another friend who lived near the airport and had a backhoe, and I said, "I need you at the airport."

When the FAA inspector got there he interviewed me, then went out and looked at the airplane upside down in the corn. Only about 60 feet of corn had been knocked over. He said, "That's a pretty short landing." I replied, "The corn grabbed the airplane and stopped it almost immediately. In fact, the navy ought to start planting corn on their aircraft carriers so they can stop those airplanes real fast." He didn't like that joke.

The only visible damage to the airplane at the time was a bent propeller and part of the rudder had been crushed where it hit the ground. We didn't want to damage the aircraft further, so my friend pulled his backhoe up to the engine end of the airplane, and I laid some couch cushions from the hangar on the ground where the engine was going to touch to protect it when he tilted the airplane back up. He reached his bucket across almost to the tail of the airplane. We tied its tail to the bucket of the backhoe. We had two long ropes to stabilize it, and by then members of my flying club and some students from the university had come out there and were assisting on those ropes. He lifted the tail up over the engine, so that the airplane was standing on its nose. We disconnected the bucket, he drove the backhoe around to the other side of the aircraft and we reattached the backhoe to the tail. He then extended the bucket forward to very carefully let the airplane down onto its tail wheel. Now the airplane was right side up on its landing gear but was still in the middle of a cornfield. So, he used the backhoe to clear a pathway through the corn wide enough for the airplane to pass through to get to the grass runway. Then we tied ropes from the airplane's main landing gear over to the hitch on my pickup truck, my friend got in the cockpit to use the airplane's brakes to steer it by braking the right or the left wheel, and I carefully used my truck to pull the airplane out of the cornfield, across the grass runway, across the paved runway, and completely across the airport to put it in my hangar.

My friend from Missouri and I removed the stabilizers and the rudder from the back of the airplane, and disconnected all four wings. It took us all day. Finally we wrapped them up and loaded them on his utility trailer to take back to Missouri. Because their frames are made of wood, the upper wings needed to be repaired and recovered. A few days later I borrowed a big trailer and with some help loaded my airplane onto it, tied it all down, and with my pickup truck, drove all the way to western Missouri with the fuselage of my airplane on this trailer. We put it in my friend's hangar, and over the winter he rebuilt the upper wing and recovered it and the tail section. He also pulled the engine off and sent it to Oklahoma to get it inspected, because any time you have a dramatic engine stoppage like that it can damage the inside of the engine and the crank shaft. Between the insurance money and trading an old replica car I had in my barn—I traded that car to the guy in Oklahoma for the engine inspection and a new propeller—by spring the airplane was back together. A friend flew me to Missouri. I flew my now-repaired airplane back home, and it was ready to go for another season.

Interestingly, that summer when I crashed my airplane into the cornfield, three other Stearmans also crashed in southern Illinois, with pilots who were much more experienced than I was, but theirs were all total losses and could not be repaired. The Stearman has a bad reputation. The insurance companies hate them. They're big, they're heavy, and they're designed to be difficult, but they're fun to fly.

After Roger had flown my Stearman, he was gobsmacked by this wonderful, big, heavy but responsive, fun to fly biplane. He was an airline pilot at the time, but he'd been a fighter pilot in the air force and, in my opinion and in his, flying a great big airliner is like driving a big aluminum bus in the sky. You're keeping your passengers comfortable with very slow turns and climbs, no aerobatics. It's really kind of boring being an airline pilot. But he loved flying this biplane. He could do rolls and loops in it, so he decided he had to have one. I did some checking around and found a fellow in Missouri who had two rebuilt ones for sale. My brother called this guy on the phone and got some information about them, then flew to St. Louis where I picked him up, and we drove to southwest Missouri to see these airplanes. Roger looked them over, took one of them up, flew it around, and decided to buy it. They made a deal, and three weeks later he flew that plane back to Arizona. So he had a biplane just like mine, a World War II army trainer version with a blue fuselage and yellow wings.

A couple of years after he got his biplane, he became friendly with several other fellows in Arizona who owned Stearman biplanes. Roger had the credentials to license people to fly in formation—as a commander of the Thunderbirds, he'd flown in formations at very high speeds only a few feet apart. He and his friends decided to fly to the National Stearman Fly-In in Galesburg, Illinois, and stop on the way at an antique airplane fly-in in Iowa. We arranged to meet there, an all-day flight with a fuel stop for me; a three-day flight from Phoenix for them. While we stayed there over the Labor Day weekend, we started flying in formation. I'd flown in formation during helicopter flight school with Hueys but not in Vietnam, because Cobras normally didn't fly in very close formation like Hueys would when doing combat assaults and having to land close together in hot landing zones. I didn't fly Hueys in Vietnam, but I knew the basics about how to fly formation, so I started flying formation with my brother and two others. Normally my brother flew as flight lead. But because these guys didn't know my capabilities, skills, or safety levels, another pilot assumed flight lead. My brother flew next to me in the number three slot of an echelon (diagonal) formation and I took the number four slot, so I was flying only near my brother, not near anybody else.

When we went from Iowa over to Galesburg, Illinois, we also flew in formation, and the passenger in the number two aircraft turned around and took a picture of my brother and me flying in close formation. That's one of my most treasured photographs. It's the only picture I have of me flying in formation with my brother. I'm so proud that I was able to fly with my brother, Roger, who had become an air force jet pilot when I was a child—he was 12 years older—and a famous air force pilot, the commander of the Thunderbirds twice. I was able to fly in formation with him in those biplanes, those army air corps trainers.

My brother in #832 and me in #16 flying in formation

I kept my biplane for about eight years. I particularly liked landing it on grass strips, so I'd search out all the little private airstrips and farms, and land and take off where people's houses were. These private airstrips were often used by their owners and others flying small experimental aircraft. I'd come in flying my great big biplane and land on their little grass strip.

Anna flew with me only a few times. She didn't like the noise and wind. But she did enjoy going up in the fall and flying over the national forest near our house, because she loved to see the autumn colors of the trees. That was her favorite time to fly.

Eventually I got to where I wasn't flying as much anymore, and flying an aircraft like that requires a lot of muscle memory. You're flying by the seat of your pants, and if you don't keep in practice, you're not as good or as safe. I had other things going on in my life by then and didn't have much time for flying. So I sold my airplane to one of my brother's friends in Arizona.

The friend flew it for a while but ended up wrecking it when he was taxiing out of a hangar and his propeller hit an airport tractor. He rebuilt the plane with insurance money and then sold it to the Confederate Air Force, which is now called the Commemorative Air Force.[1] Now people can view it in their museum in Phoenix, and they can also pay to take rides in it.

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1. Originally called the Confederate Air Force, in 2001 the organization voted to change its name to better reflect their mission of acquiring and restoring to flying condition military combat aircraft from the U.S. and other nations.

Chapter 21: OUR DAUGHTERS

Our three girls went to school in Cobden, a town of about 1200 people nearest our home, 12 miles south of Carbondale. Cobden is a farming and rural community with orchards, vegetable farms, and some cattle farming because it is in the rolling, fertile hills of southern Illinois, rather like the Ozarks. Our girls attended a unit district school there, kindergarten through twelfth grade where the total K-12 enrollment was only about 375 students. You'd think a little school like that wouldn't have the quality of a bigger school, but many of the teachers there were spouses of university professors. In fact, two of our daughters had the same second-grade teacher whose husband was the president of the university. So they had a very good quality education. Because the school was so small, it didn't have a football team, but it had pretty good basketball and baseball teams. One time they even won the state basketball championship, with four of the five starting players related to each other.

I think our girls had a happy childhood. They grew up on our farm where we had horses. A little dirt road behind our farm led into the Shawnee National Forest where they went hiking. Two of our girls were majorettes, leading the school's marching band. They all played instruments. Two got odd jobs and used to be let out of school early to play trumpet at veterans' funerals. The VFW would pay them to play taps at a military funeral.

My oldest daughter, Maria, went to my university, Southern Illinois University (SIU). She started studying accounting but then changed to hospitality management. When she graduated, she got a job at Disney World in Florida as a hotel manager working a shift overseeing the clerks at the front desk, which she did for about six years.

Just before the 9/11 terrorism attack, when air travel fell off for a year or so, she had been promoted to a job putting together attractive packages to encourage business during the less busy times of the year. But she was getting bored. She liked the interaction with the customers and the front-desk clerks better. She's a problem-solving type of person by nature, a little obsessive-compulsive. So when she planned to quit that job with Disney to work for another hotel somewhere, I told her, "If you do that, you're going to drop back to the lowest seniority at your new company. You'll be working every weekend and holiday and doing the same thing you've been doing." I said, "Have you considered flying?" She thought I was crazy. She replied, "What do you mean flying? I don't know how to fly." I replied, "Well, nobody knows how to fly until they learn. The army got me my license," although I'd flown with my father as a child.

I said, “Tell you what. I will pay for you to go take a ‘discovery flight’ at Kissimmee [Florida] Airport outside of Orlando.” So she booked a flight with an instructor at Kissimmee Airport, 45 minutes or so. In a “discovery flight” you’re learning a little bit about flying but you’re not learning how to fly. You’re getting an overview. But the instructor was apparently excellent, and he let her handle the controls of the aircraft. She was able to make the plane climb and descend and turn right and left, and she was able to shadow his hands on the controls when he was bringing the plane in and landing it. She was very excited. She said, “Dad, I was in control of that aircraft!” She’d had her feet on the rudder pedals and her hands on the controls while his hands were in his lap, and she loved it because she was in control. Somewhat like her father, she’s a bit of a control freak.

I said, “It takes some time to get a pilot’s license. Keep your day job and start booking some lessons.” Well, she got on line and took her ground school all on line. She passed her exam for the ground school in just a few weeks so she could become a student pilot. Maria absolutely loved flying, and she was very good at it, but after 27 hours of lessons, her instructor had never soloed her. That’s very unusual. It takes a minimum of 40 hours of instruction to get a pilot’s license, but quite often you can solo within 15 hours or so. I soloed in a helicopter in the army after 16 hours, and a helicopter’s pretty complex. So I told her, “You need to fire that instructor. He’s milking you for more time than you need. Go find a different instructor who can get you soloed.” She did, and her new instructor soloed her within three hours of meeting her because she was that good, and he wasn’t holding her back.

After she got her private pilot’s license and soloed and flew by herself a little bit, Maria and I started talking about where she should go to commercial flight school. There was a Pan Am Flight Academy in Vero Beach, Florida. So, she took a leave of absence, borrowed a whole bunch of money, and started flight school.

She progressed very quickly. First she got her private multiengine license, then her commercial license. Next she got her instrument license so she could fly in bad weather at night. Then she got her instructor’s license and went on and on until finally she got her air transport rating (ATP).[1]

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1. “The Airline Transport Pilot Certificate is the highest certification issued by the FAA. The ATP rating is for those who wish to make a lifelong career of aviation. Think of an ATP like a Ph.D. level of education in aeronautics, aviation law, physiology, aeromedical factors, meteorology, and aerodynamics. This is a required step in becoming an airline pilot, a turbine corporate pilot, turbine charter pilot and most flying jobs where you may operate ‘heavy’ aircraft.”
   — https://www.americanaviationllc.com/airline-transport-rating

The Pan Am Flight Academy hired her, as they do some of their best students, as an instructor. She made only ten dollars per hour as an instructor, but she was building her flying time and experience teaching other new students. After a little over a year, she managed to get a job with a commuter branch of Continental Airlines flying jets as a first officer. Within about two-and-a-half years, she made captain, which is very admirable. I've known airline pilots who've been first officers for ten years before making captain. She made captain very quickly because it was recognized that not only was she a good pilot but she was extremely responsible and safe. My elder brother, Roger, who was an airline pilot after he retired from the air force, and I were as proud as we could be that she'd become a pilot also.

My father had been a pilot. My elder brother was a pilot. His second son went to the Air Force Academy and became a pilot. My elder sister married an air force pilot who retired as a general. I was a pilot in the army. Now that my brother has passed away, his son, who flew both in the air force and as an airline pilot, and Roger's two grandsons have started an air academy in Texas. They have a few airplanes and give flying lessons when they're not flying for the airlines. So, flying is really in the family.

Maria met her husband in the flight school. He also became a commercial pilot. They got married, and both were flying. She had to commute on the airline from Florida to New Jersey, which was her hub, each time she had a flight. Including the commutes and her flights, she'd be gone about three days and then return to their home in Florida. She did that for several years but then developed a medical issue that required her to take some pretty strong medications that eliminated her from passing the physical. So she was unable to fly and had to take disability for a while.

By then they'd had their first son, so she was perfectly happy to be a stay-at-home mom just like her mother has been. Then they had a daughter. I was always a little bit disappointed that Maria wasn't able to continue flying because she was so good at it and made good money. But money isn't everything. Being an excellent mother and running a happy home is very important as well. So that's what she is. She's a stay-at-home mom—she kind of thinks she's Martha Stewart. She likes to dabble in decorating, cooking, and those kinds of things, and she's good at them. She volunteers a lot at their church. They still live in Florida.

Her husband transferred from his airline job and got a job with a company called "NetJets," an executive timeshare jet company. It's owned by Warren Buffett and is a big, worldwide company. He loves it and flies small commuter jets all over the country and overseas occasionally.

Their son, my first grandson, is now 14 years old and in high school. He has been flying airplanes on a computer simulator at home for years. He became so good at it that they got him flying lessons. Though he's not old enough to solo, when he goes out with an instructor he does everything from the preflight inspection, to being on the radio, filing the flight plan, taking off with the airplane and flying it around—the instructor is just sitting there watching him and telling him what to do. My grandson makes these beautiful, perfect landings—much better than I ever did. So it's very possible that he will become a professional pilot. Of course, he can't solo until he becomes 17 and can't get a license to fly until he's 18. By then he'll probably be better than any of the instructors he flies with. They also have a daughter who's in elementary school who's a very smart little girl. Those are our grandchildren from our first daughter.

Our second daughter, Sarah, didn't want to go to a college near home. She decided to go to the University of the South, in east Tennessee. It's a small private school with fewer than 2000 students, but very expensive, much more than I could afford working at the university. She got a 50% scholarship which helped out a lot, but I still had to pay a hefty tuition there. I was kind of upset because, with her high grades and ACT scores, Sarah had also qualified for a veteran's full four-year scholarship at the University of Illinois. But she didn't want to go to a great big school, and she didn't want to stay in Illinois, so she went to this private school down in Tennessee for two years. She worked there as a waitress in the dining hall to cover some of her expenses. But she had a boyfriend down there and went for too many moonlight walks instead of doing her studies. That distraction dropped her grade-point average just a few hundredths of a point below the level required for her to maintain her scholarship, so she lost it.

I told Sarah there was no way that I could maintain her at that expensive school, so she was going to have to leave. She came home and lived in her bedroom. Fortunately, as an employee of the university I got a partial tuition waiver, and she studied at SIU to get her bachelor's degree in what was basically pre-med. After graduation she worked an internship with a professor from the med school who then recommended her on her application for medical school.

My university had a medical school with a highly regarded reputation. Even the medical faculty from Harvard Medical School came to our university to study the teaching methodology used here, which was problem-based learning. Sarah attended one year of medical school at my university in Carbondale. Her other three years of medical school were at another campus of SIU in Springfield, Illinois, where they had a big teaching hospital. She did quite well, got her M.D. in family practice, then did her residency at the University of Kentucky.

There she met a young army major from Lexington, Kentucky, who'd also graduated from that university. Lexington was his home. They got married after she finished her residency, and she was practicing in Lexington, actually working for the university's clinic and hospital. Her husband was on active duty and did three tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, moved to Fort Hood, Texas, for a while, and then to Okinawa where he was an army exchange officer with the marine unit.

They had two boys. Right now the older is ten and the younger is five. Like their father, they're big into sports, soccer and games like that, and they are the main reason that we moved here to Kentucky. Sarah now works in an urgent care facility for a big hospital company with facilities all over Kentucky. My son-in-law recently retired as a lieutenant colonel after 24 years in the army. He'd been on the general staff of the Fifth Corps, which has its rear headquarters at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and its forward headquarters in Poland. So we get to spend a lot of time with our two grandsons here in Kentucky. Anna loves being with them, and she does a lot of babysitting when our daughter's 12-hour medical shifts sometimes overlap with her husband's being out of town with his new job. He works for a firm that has contracts with the military to reintegrate separating and retiring military personnel back into the civilian workforce, a very rewarding job.

We spend a lot of time with them, but we also go down to Florida to visit our oldest daughter's family once or twice each year, or they'll come up here to visit us and also to see her in-laws in Pennsylvania. So, that's two of our three daughters.

Our youngest daughter, Rachael, also decided not to go to Southern Illinois University because it was too close to Mom and Dad. Nor did she finish high school in Cobden. As a freshman in high school, unbeknownst to me, she filled out an application and had her mother sign it, when her mother didn't know what she was signing, for her to go to the Illinois Math and Science Academy (IMSA) in Aurora, a suburb west of Chicago. I didn't even know she was applying for this until she needed to be driven over to the next county to take the ACT test as a freshman in high school. I said, "Wait a minute. Why are we paying for an ACT test? You don't do that until you're a junior in high school." Then she broke it to me that she was applying for this special school.

This school is run by the state of Illinois and administered under the state university system, but it's a residential high school. Virtually every faculty member there had a Ph.D. A famous visiting scholar just wandered around the halls, meeting, greeting, and mentoring the students. He looked a bit like Albert Einstein, and he was a Nobel Prize winner.[2]

Rachael was admitted and lived in a dorm with a dorm mother and roommates for her last three years of high school. Graduates of this school are pretty much guaranteed admission to any college in the United States. Like her older sister, she didn't want to go to a big university. She wanted a small, more intimate, private school. She decided on a small, well-respected, private university in Greenville, South Carolina, called Furman University.

In high school in Cobden Rachael had studied Spanish for a year. At IMSA she studied German and one summer was able to live in Germany. When she got to Furman, she wanted to study more German, but it was a small school and the class was already filled. She was concerned about that. We discussed this on the phone, and I said, "Well, you have to take a foreign language. You want to have a good reason for it. Most people in the world who don't speak English, speak Spanish, Hindi, or Chinese. China is the rising economic power in the world, so why don't you study Chinese?" So she signed up for Chinese.

After a few weeks of classes Rachael called me and said, "Daddy, I've got a problem here. I've got to memorize these thousands of Chinese characters because they don't use Roman letters like we do. I've always gotten good grades, and I'm afraid if I don't do well in this Chinese language class, it'll hurt my overall grade-point average." She's rather a strong character, like all of my daughters, and doesn't like to be told what to do.

2. This, apparently, was Leon Lederman, a respected physicist and professor who shared the 1988 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work on neutrinos and was also the second director of Fermilab with its high-energy particle accelerator lab. He founded the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, a three-year residential public high school for gifted students, and was on its board of directors for many years.

Leon Lederman

Fermilab's accelerator rings seen from the air

So I didn't just demand that she continue her Chinese class and work harder. I used a little bit of reverse psychology on her—Rachael won't like to read this, but she knows it. I told her, "You know it's up to you to choose if you want to drop your class. You've already paid tuition for it." She had a partial scholarship for that university like my second daughter had, and I was paying part of it. It was expensive. I said, "If you think you need to drop the class, that's your decision. You're the one who has to live with it. You know the facts." So she was relieved that I wasn't going to oppose her in dropping that class. Then I dropped the bomb. I said, "But frankly, I'm kind of surprised at you." She asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "I'm kind of surprised that you don't think you're capable of learning what every Chinese two-year-old child seems to learn, and that's how to speak Chinese." That kind of shocked her. She thought about it and replied, "Well yeh, if little kids in China can learn it, why can't I learn it?" So she kept the class, and she was surprised to do very well in it. She's very smart, and she's very hard working and responsible, and all of these qualities come together to make her successful in academic endeavors. She continued her Chinese all through her undergraduate years, but she was also involved in student government activities. She's very organized, detail-oriented, and responsible. She's friendly, people like her, and she was very successful in college.

After her junior year of college, Rachael got an internship from the State Department to go to China and spend the summer at a Chinese university in a total-immersion language situation with a Chinese roommate. I think she had to sign a contract that she would only speak Chinese while she was there. That improved her Chinese skills even more. She came back, and after she graduated got an additional internship to go back to China to the same university and get a total immersion experience again, all paid for by the State Department. When she came back from that summer, after graduation, she got an internship in a research department of the U.S. Congress in DC. She was on a team that researched and wrote a book twice a year as a reference guide for congressmen and senators to use whenever they were deciding and voting on any issues related to China.

This internship paid a little, but not enough to live in Washington, DC. She was actually sleeping on the porch of a college friend's apartment and got a night job working at a Mexican restaurant. That's how she was paying her bills. But she earned really good recommendations and recognition for all of her research work in this book. It was organized into different chapters about China, such as trade, human rights, national security issues, it's military, and so forth. She acquired a great deal of valuable knowledge from working on it.

After she finished that internship, she decided to go back to China for additional intensive Chinese language training. She went for one year to Tsinghua ("Ching Wah") University in Beijing—whenever I mention that name to anybody who's Chinese, their eyes get really big because Tsinghua is basically China's version of our Harvard or Yale. There she studied Chinese language and worked for a Chinese professor helping him edit an English translation of a language training book that he was writing. She lived in a Chinese apartment with a Chinese roommate, got really proficient in Chinese, and actually qualified to become a Chinese linguist translator.

The State Department had had its eye on her ever since she'd been a junior in college. So when she came back, it offered her a scholarship to study for her master's degree at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Diplomacy near Boston with some of her classes at Harvard. Many State Department careerists went to this graduate school. She received a $90,000 scholarship to study there for two years for her master's degree in international law and diplomacy.

But Rachael diligently figures all the angles on everything. When she was working in DC at the Mexican restaurant, my middle daughter, Sarah, was getting married in Lexington, Kentucky. Rachael called us to ask if she could bring a date to the wedding. I asked, "Who is this?" I didn't even know she had a boyfriend. She answered, "He's the bartender at the Mexican restaurant where I work." And I thought, "Oh my God, she's dating a bartender!" Well, she brought him, and it turns out he's an American from Maryland. He earned his bachelor's degree in finance, then worked at some financial firm in New York City for a while, but didn't like working in the financial field. So he was working at this Mexican restaurant in DC and saving money to go to graduate school in marketing and advertising at the University of Virginia. He wasn't a career bartender at a Mexican restaurant, but aspired to be a graduate student at the University of Virginia. He came to the wedding, and we really liked him. He just fit right in with our family, a nice guy, everybody liked him. They ended up getting married.

Before she started her graduate work at the Fletcher School, the State Department was going to give her another internship at the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam, for the summer. They'd planned a big wedding on the east coast with all her college friends and her fiancé's family. But then she discovered that if she were married, the State Department would also pay for him to go with her. So they had a quicky wedding at the city hall in Annapolis, Maryland, with just his parents, Anna and me, and the two of them, so he could qualify as her spouse to be sent by the State Department to Hanoi with her, and that's where they celebrated their honeymoon all summer long.

When they returned, while she was still in graduate school at Tufts, she had her first daughter, who is now 11. Her husband was working for an advertising agency out of Boston at that time.

After Rachael finished graduate school, the State Department hired her. Her first assignment was to the Philippines for three years where she worked in Manila at the American Embassy where, in separate trips both Anna and I visited her. Then the State Department assigned her to the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong for three years and the family got out of there just as protests were beginning after the Chinese took over the city and were showing a heavy hand in running it. Anna and I visited them in Hong Kong as well. While we were there we also flew to Okinawa where Sarah and her husband were then working. Along with visiting their family, another highlight of that excursion was being able to tour Hacksaw Ridge, site of a bloody World War II battle.

Next Rachael was assigned for three years to Vienna, Austria, and, of course, we also visited her there. While she'd been in Hong Kong with her first daughter, she had a helper, what we'd call a "nanny." A middle-aged Filipino lady kept house and took care of the baby, because Rachael's husband was working in a marketing-type job there. The nanny had been doing this job in Hong Kong for different women for 15 years. She worked for Rachael's family for three years and was so good and so much a part of the family, that they loved her. So when Rachael was reassigned to Austria—by then she'd just had their second girl—she did a great mountain of paperwork to get approval to take this Filipino lady with them from Hong Kong to Vienna. The nanny lived with them in their home there and took care of the children for three years as the girls got older. State Department rules required that she be paid the going rate for wherever they were living, so they had to pay her about twice as much in Vienna as in Hong Kong, but they were glad to have her there. She was also an excellent cook and, most important, she had become a part of their family.

But when they moved to London for her next assignment—they've been there now nearly two years—they weren't able to take their beloved Filipino nanny with them because the salary they'd have to pay her in London was very, very high. Also, the girls were older now and in school and didn't need full-time care at home. So Rachael helped her to find a job in Vienna with another diplomatic family until in a few years she could retire and return home to the Philippines.

She had been employed as an overseas foreign worker for about 25 years now, sending money back to her parents to raise her three children. Of course, she went back each year to visit them, but she's put three children through college by being an overseas worker. That's worked out well for her.

Rachael's two little girls are just smart as whips—grandparents, of course, always think that. Anna visited with them when they were first setting up housekeeping in their apartment in London. She helped them move in, get unpacked and all settled in. I didn't go on that trip. But in the summer of 2023, all three of our daughters and their families organized, paid for, and accompanied us on our wonderful 50th wedding anniversary trip to Europe.

Anna and I with our daughters Sarah, Rachael, and Maria, each with her husband and children in July 2022

Chapter 22: MY RETURN TO VIETNAM

Anna took our three daughters to Vietnam in 2015. I wasn't with my family then because I had returned to Vietnam in about 2013 on a two-week trip accompanied by a buddy from Illinois.

We first flew into Manila, capital of the Philippines, where my youngest daughter, Rachael, was working in the U.S. Embassy. We stayed for a week, visiting with my daughter, her husband, and their baby girl. My daughter accompanied us on weekend trips out of the city, but when she was working we did our own touring around Manila. We took a boat over to Corregidor, the fortified island where American forces last held out after Japan's invasion of the Philippines and the site of a major battle late in the war when it was recaptured. We toured the Malinta Tunnel, one branch of which had served as General MacArthur's headquarters when the Japanese invaded the Philippines, and also the ruins of the huge "Mile-Long Barracks" there.

Next, we flew to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), a very crowded, busy, modernized city, where we stayed several days, then flew up to Da Nang for a few days. While in Da Nang we rented a car with a driver who didn't speak much English and his brother who translated for us. We drove over the Hai Van pass by the old French Highway 1, which I had flown over many times. I had brought with me an old tactical map showing our airfield at the mouth of the Perfume River coming out of Hue.

This trip was quite an adventure. No highway actually ran to our old airfield which was located at the point of a peninsula. We had to enter the peninsula far south of where the airfield had been and drive north, keeping the tidal basin on our left and the South China Sea on our right as the peninsula narrowed. We went through fishing villages and little farm hamlets. Our driver and interpreter kept asking residents for directions to our American base, but nobody knew where it was. According to my map, however, we couldn't go wrong because we were surrounded by water and heading toward the tip of the peninsula. We ran out of road but still drove north along paths between houses, through backyards, and across sand dunes. We finally got to a big forest and couldn't go much farther. There was a small government police station near the tidal basin where all the fishermen had to have their paperwork checked before being allowed to go out beyond the mouth of the river. That may have been the result of so many people trying to escape Vietnam by boat years earlier. Near this police station was a small hootch with a thatched roof that had an old man and old woman living in it. They sold snacks to the fishermen waiting for their paperwork to be checked who bought food or snacks to eat while they were out in their boats for two or three days.

I was disappointed because I couldn't identify our airfield anywhere. We'd had a rolled-sand runway, two barracks buildings, an open-sided hangar, a motor-pool building, and a quonset hut that served as an orderly room and officers' club. But I recognized nothing. We bought some cookies and warm Coca Cola, and the old lady came running over to us with tiny chairs and a table that looked like what you'd find in a nursery school and set them up on the sand in the shade for us to sit on and enjoy our snacks. Looking around I realized that the view from where we were sitting was nearly the same as the one I'd seen from the back door of my hootch—my barracks building. This lady's daughter had come over with a big plastic pan full of dirty dishes to a well with a pump that stuck up about two or three feet, and she started pumping water into this plastic pan to wash the dishes. We began a conversation with her and learned that she worked in a pharmacy in Hanoi but would come over during the weekends to check on her parents. I realized as I looked at the pump that there was no fresh water on this peninsula.

It finally hit me that that well pipe was the only thing left from our airfield. Seabees, who occupied the site before we did, must have sunk that well to get fresh water for the troops living there. All the buildings had been dismantled piece by piece, the sheet metal and the wood all taken away by the local people to use for repairs or to build their own huts in the fishing villages. That forest, which was now full of 60-foot-tall trees, had actually been our airfield. After we'd left, those trees had naturally sprung up and completely reforested the end of that peninsula where our runway, revetments, and buildings had been. I was quite excited to realize that I was sitting on our old airfield, but it bore no resemblance to what it had been and had completely gone back to nature. However, I was able to verify its position by that fresh-water well.

View of the tidal basin from Tan My Base in 1972

Roughly the same view in 2013

Next we drove to Hue, toured around for a few hours, and drove back to Da Nang by the new superhighway connecting these two cities. Shortly after that, we flew to Hanoi where we met an acquaintance, a young lady who had been a graduate student at my university, where she had earned a master's degree in teaching English, and was now a professor at a university just outside of Hanoi. Her sister worked for the finance ministry in Hanoi. Another sister and her 12-year-old son had come in with the professor for a doctor's appointment. The three sisters and my friend's nephew took us on a two-day walking tour of the old part of Hanoi. With locals as our guides, we enjoyed touring around the city, with its narrow streets, tiny shops, and a lake in the middle where there had once been antiaircraft guns stationed all around.

My friend had just broken her engagement to another professor and was unhappy with her job. I suggested that she go back to graduate school for her Ph.D. She checked into doing that and applied for and received a Common Market scholarship to study in Great Britain and Germany. Working very diligently, she finished a five-year Ph.D. program in three years. Then she returned to her university in Vietnam—she didn't have any choice; the Communist government told her where she had to work. Although she wanted to go to a different university closer to her home, she did get a promotion with her Ph.D. She's now Chairman of the Foreign Language Department there and much happier.

In October 2023, this friend and her mother, who was recently widowed, visited the U.S. and stayed with us for a month here in Kentucky. Anna is a superb cook and loves entertaining visitors. My mother and grandmother were excellent cooks, but Anna has, for example, taken their Thanksgiving recipes and made them her own with little tweaks here and there. Her turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, gravy, whatever, she can do it. She's an excellent cook of both American and Vietnamese foods. When my Vietnamese friend and her mother visited us for a month, they were thrilled with both Anna's American and Vietnamese cooking. Anna spends lots of time each day in the kitchen, but that's what she enjoys. Cooking can be hard work, but she loves doing it.

My friend's father had been a retired North Vietnamese army general and, at one time after the war, the commander of their version of West Point. Her parents had quite a story. They married when her mother was 18 years old. Two hours after their marriage, he got orders to go to the front in the Vietnam War as a junior officer, and she didn't see him again for four years. She didn't even know if he was alive or dead. In the meantime, she joined the army auxiliaries and worked in supply, first aid, and even dug tunnels occasionally on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When her husband came back, they were finally able to resume their marriage.

When my friend's mother was 18 and still living on her parents' farm, an American pilot was shot down and parachuted onto the farm, way out in the country. It took six farmers, small men, to carry this great big American guy who had a broken leg to her parents' home where she provided first aid, cleaned him up, and took care of him for a week, because it took that long for the army to get there to take custody of this downed pilot and, presumably, take him to the "Hanoi Hilton." I wish I knew that pilot's name—hopefully, he's still alive.

After visiting with our friends in Hanoi, my buddy and I booked a flight to Siem Reap, Cambodia, where we spent four or five days visiting the 1000-year-old temples of Angkor Wat that basically have been excavated and made into popular tourist attractions. Then we returned to the Philippines before flying home. That trip brought back many memories.

Chapter 23: TEACHING ENGLISH CLASSES

Before I retired from SIU, Anna was volunteering at the Baptist Student Foundation on campus. Each week a different Baptist church from southern Illinois brought in all kinds of food, like a potluck, and provided lunch primarily for international students. That was an opportunity for these students to learn about Christianity and especially the Baptist church.

When I retired, I had the time to go to this luncheon with Anna once a week. Of course, international students at SIU were already relatively proficient in English, but many of their spouses were not. Also, many were visiting professors from countries all over the world either in graduate school or doing post-graduate studies for advanced degrees, and many had come with their spouses and families.

Before each luncheon a lady volunteered to teach vocabulary and grammar to improve the English skills of these students, visiting faculty, and/or their spouses. Many had studied English in their home countries and knew how to read and write English, but they were very poor in and very insecure and self-conscious about conversational English.

With one of my English conversation classes at SIU

I have a Vietnamese wife myself whose English was basically self-taught with me. I had some experience with that situation and could easily understand people who didn't speak English very well. I decided to volunteer to teach an English conversation course after the luncheon once a week. That class became very popular. It began as a one-hour class and ended up running up to two-and-a-half-hours because the students had so much fun interacting with each other and with me. The reason they enjoyed it so much was that I wasn't teaching English so much as I was facilitating their speaking English. Many of them were self-conscious about their English conversation skills. They often asked questions about modern slang, but I tried not to teach them the misuse of English.

The lady in the morning was a trained English teacher who taught them the proper use of grammar and also expanded their vocabulary. I was merely dealing with their conversational skills and helping them to feel comfortable, not self-conscious, in English conversation. I would ask them questions about their different cultures, the schools in their countries, the kind of food that they liked, and go around the room getting them talking to each other comparing their experiences in their country to what they had just heard from someone else in the class. I facilitated these conversations, and they enjoyed talking English with each other after a good meal cooked by a bunch of local Baptist church ladies. Everybody had fun. It got to the point that I'd have to kick them all out because I was tired and wanted to go home. I taught that class for six to eight years and enjoyed it as much as my students did.

Some of my students visiting me in my log home

Chapter 24: OUR 50TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY FAMILY CRUISE

In July of 2023 our three daughters and their families took Anna and me on a trip to Europe to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary. Our anniversary actually was the previous January, but summer was when all the grandkids were out of school and their families could get vacation time. This was a big family event with all 14 of our family members, which included our three daughters, their husbands, and six grandchildren. They had planned, booked, and paid for all aspects of this fantastic golden anniversary celebration with our whole family.

The trip started with all of us meeting in Rome. Anna and I flew there from Louisville, Kentucky, through Chicago. Our daughter Sarah who lives in Kentucky and her family also flew out of Louisville but by a different route and arrived a few hours later; our daughter Maria from Florida and her family flew and also arrived within a few hours of us; and our daughter Rachael from London and her family met us in Rome. They had arranged for two big vans to transport us from the airport to the center of Rome where they'd booked a big rental-by-owner condo with four or five bedrooms in an old Roman building that had been modernized and air-conditioned, thank goodness, because it was over 100 degrees in Rome at that time. We toured Rome for about five days, all prearranged by the family. We had reservations for a privately guided tour for our family at the Vatican and spent nearly a whole day there. We dined out in the evenings at wonderful Italian restaurants. One day we took tours outside of Rome. Then they'd booked vans to take us down to the port.

Our cruise ship from Rome first went to the Greek island of Santorini [officially known as Thēra] for a day, then sailed to the Greek island of Mykonos for another day. There they'd rented a jeep for me to drive around while all the kids were at the beach with their parents and Anna. Some of them also went on a winery tour of the island, but I was driving around in an open-topped jeep down the narrow streets of Mykonos. After that, we got back on the cruise ship and went to Turkey.

We had a wonderful day touring Ephesus, Turkey, a place where the apostle Paul had preached and which was the final home of Mary, Mother of Jesus. The tour included an amazing craft school run by the government for teaching local women how to make hand-knotted Turkish carpets. Our family bought several carpets there. I'm now sitting in our living room at home looking at one we purchased that is an exact duplicate of the oldest carpet ever found in the world. The original dates to about 700 or 800 years ago and was found wrapped around a mummy in a grave in Outer Mongolia.

This carpet was the subject of a National Geographic magazine article telling its history. Its beautiful colors were still unfaded, and although parts of this carpet were missing, most of it was still there.

The Parrish clan on the cruise ship

On the last day of the cruise we went to Naples where we toured the ruins of Pompeii. Once a flourishing city, Pompeii was destroyed when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79. I had thought it was just a small archeological dig and was astounded by what we saw. We had a private guide for our group who took us for half a day through this archeological site. Nearly the whole city has been excavated.

I was amazed by the grand streets with block after block of partial buildings. The streets were paved with stones, and had sidewalks on both sides in front of the homes, shops, and buildings. At the intersections where people crossed the streets, where we would have a crosswalk painted on the pavement, in Pompeii they had huge square blocks of stone that stood up about a foot-and-a-half, even with the sidewalk's height at those places. The guide explained that these marked where people actually crossed the streets, because the streets themselves were full of mud and manure.

Pedestrians would step on these big square blocks like crossing a stream by stepping on rocks. The blocks were all spaced perfectly so carts could be driven up and down the streets. The horse or mule in the center could pass between two blocks of stone, and the wheels of the carts could pass between other stone blocks. The design was all planned out for traffic.

We were also amazed to find excavated and in situ lead pipes that had carried running water all over the entire city of Pompeii. Both public fountains and the richer homes actually had running water. That's just unbelievable to me.

After Naples and Pompeii, we reboarded the cruise ship which returned us overnight to our starting point, the port of Rome. The next day our daughters from Florida and Kentucky and their families took flights home. Anna and I went to London with the family of our youngest daughter, who was posted there at the embassy with the U.S. State Department.

We spent a wonderful two weeks exploring London, with some trips outside the city. They'd even booked us rooms overnight in the ruins of a beautiful castle that is now a hotel outside of London. A couple of hundred years ago the ruins of the castle were bought by some landed gentry who built a big summer home inside the ruins. Now that's been slightly expanded and is a lovely, small boutique hotel and restaurant.

Rachael's flat in London is only two buildings from the intersection where the famous photograph was taken for the Beatles' "Abbey Road" album cover showing the Beatles walking across the crosswalk in front of the Abbey Road Studios. That location is now quite a tourist attraction. In the morning I liked to sit on a bench at that intersection and watch hundreds of tourists from all over the world who'd come to take selfies and photos of themselves crossing Abbey Road, copying that Beatles' album cover. It was quite interesting and fun for me to watch people from everywhere as they dodged cars and buses to take selfies in the crosswalk there.

For the first week we were there, every morning I would walk my granddaughters, aged five and nine, several blocks through this residential neighborhood to the American School in London. Although it was closed for the summer, it had a swimming program in a lovely indoor basement pool where my granddaughters went daily that week for swimming lessons.

Then my daughter taught me how to take the Tube (London's subway) from her neighborhood to get downtown, and I went to the Winston Churchill Bunker Museum, where he ran the war from his underground headquarters during World War II. The facility was actually underneath the Ministry of Finance building less than a block from #10 Downing Street (where the Prime Minister lives), so I saw the outside of that famous building. Rachael told me she's been to many meetings at #10 in her role with the U.S. Embassy. Big Ben, Parliament, and Westminster Abbey were just half a block from the Churchill Museum, so I walked all around there. My daughter had booked us on a boat tour of the Thames River that went by the Tower of London. She also took us on a tour of the brand-new, beautiful U.S. Embassy building, a big modern high-rise in London, where she works.

The entire trip was a month long. It was a fantastic gift from my three daughters and their families to Anna and me in celebration of the 50th anniversary of our wedding. Anna and I enjoyed it so much, and we could never have asked for anything more wonderful than that to mark our Golden Wedding Anniversary. Great memories to treasure, and best of all, with our whole family right there with us.

* * * * * * *

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

A (in military aircraft designations) = Attack (as in A-1 Skyraider)

ACT = American College Testing, alternative to the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The SAT has an optional essay-writing section.

AH = Attack Helicopter (as in AH-1 Cobra)

AIT = Advanced Infantry Training

AK-47 = Avtomat (automatic) Kalashnikov model 1947, a Russian assault rifle roughly equivalent to the American M-16 rifle

AMCOM = U.S. Army's Aviation & Missile Command

ARVN = Army of the Republic of Viet**n**am, South Vietnam

ATG = Air To Ground, a rocket or missile fired from an aircraft at a target on the ground, the opposite of a Surface to Air Missile (SAM)

ATP = Airline Transport Pilot Certificate (see footnote 1 on p. 150)

AWOL = Absent Without Official Leave or Absent Without Leave

BOQ = Bachelor Officers Quarters

C (in military aircraft designations) = Cargo

Capt. = Captain (also abbreviated "CPT")

CDL = Commercial Driver's License, allows you to drive large vehicles such as semitrailer trucks and buses

CH = Cargo Helicopter (as in CH-53)

CIA = Central Intelligence Agency, federal government's civilian foreign intelligence service

CID = the army's Criminal Investigation Division

CPA = Certified Public Accountant

CQ = Charge of Quarters, a rotated duty of guarding the entrance to a barracks

CTZ = Corps Tactical Zone (see map on p. 24)

CW = Chief Warrant Officer (see "WO" entry below)

DC = Douglas Commercial, as in DC-8, a commercial airliner built by Douglas Aircraft Company which produced airliners designated DC-1 through DC-10 before merging with McDonnell Aircraft Corporation

DEROS = Date Eligible for Return from Overseas, the date a soldier was expected to return from an overseas assignment

DMZ = Demilitarized Zone, a roughly 5-mile-wide zone along the border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam established in 1954 when Vietnam was divided and ended when Vietnam was reunited in 1976

E = Enlisted (as in E5 = Sergeant or E6 = Staff Sergeant). Non-commissioned officer ranks ranged from Corporal = E4 up to Sergeant Major = E9.

FM = Frequency Modulated, a type of radio signal which uses changes of frequency to encode and transmit a sound signal: as opposed to AM, Amplitude Modulated; or CW, Continuous Wave (unmodulated, for example, Morse Code transmitted by radio). FM radio picks up less static from sources such as lightning than AM.

FSB = Fire Support Base, small temporary facilities containing artillery used to support infantry troops in the surrounding region. These sites were often resupplied by helicopters.

GS = General Schedule (as in GS-12, a grade in the federal government's civilian white-collar pay scale, with GS-15 being the top level)

IMSA = Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, a three-year residential public high school located near Chicago for gifted students

K-1 visa = Permits a foreign-citizen fiancé(e) to travel to the United States, marry his/her U.S. citizen sponsor within 90 days of arrival, then become a permanent resident

KIA = Killed In Action (during combat)

KP = Kitchen Police or Kitchen Patrol (see footnote on p. 79)

KY (as in KY-38) = The "KY" stands for a voice encryption device.

LASER = Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. LASERs produce a narrow beam of light of a single wavelength (color).

LCM and LCVP = Landing Craft Mechanical and Landing Craft Vehicle/Personnel. LCMs were called "Mike Boats" because of the last letter of their designation. LCVPs were called "Higgins boats" after their developer and manufacturer. LCMs, made mostly of steel, were larger than LCVPs, which were made of wood. They both had similar designs and could carry people, small vehicles, and/or supplies from a ship and land them on a beach, but LCMs were big enough and strong enough to carry and offload a tank (see picture on page 70).

LOH = Light Observation Helicopter. The OH-6 helicopter was nicknamed a "Loach" (see "OH" in this section).

LORAN = Long Range Navigation. The system, developed during World War II, used radio transmissions from multiple LORAN transmitters to locate one's position. GPS, Global Positioning System, has replaced LORAN.

Lt. = Lieutenant (also abbreviated "LT")

LZ = Landing Zone

M (in army weapons) = Model (as in M16 rifle, M134 minigun, or M4 Sherman tank)

M.D. = Medical Doctorate degree

MIA = Missing In Action, missing but not known to be killed, captured, or AWOL

NCO = Non-Commissioned Officer, a corporal or sergeant in a leadership position who doesn't have a commission or a warrant

NVA = North Vietnamese Army, regular army soldiers, as opposed to the Viet Cong, who were indigenous guerrilla soldiers from South Vietnam

OCS = Officer Candidate School

OH (in helicopter designations) = Observation Helicopter (as in OH-6 Cayuse; its nickname "Loach" comes from the acronym "LOH," Light Observation Helicopter program)

OSHA = Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the federal agency whose job is to protect workers from health and safety hazards in their workplaces

P = Pursuit. During World War II the army air corps used P as in P-38 Lightning for what the air force now uses F, meaning "Fighter," airplanes designed to shoot down enemy aircraft.

Ph.D. = Doctor of Philosophy, from the Latin words "Philosophiae Doctor"

POL = Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants

PRC-25 = Portable Radio Communication model number 25 (see footnote on p. 9)

PT = Physical Training, physical exercising to build up strength and endurance

PTSD = Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying or traumatic event (see footnote on p. 43)

PX = Post E**x**change, a department store on a military base

QL = In Vietnamese: Quốc **l**ộ 1, abbreviated QL.1, means National Road 1.

RIF = Reduction In Force, eliminating jobs in order to save money

ROTC = Reserve Officers' Training Corps

RPM = Revolutions Per Minute, spin rate, number of complete spins each minute

S-1, S-2, S-3, and S-4 = Staff officers in a battalion ("squadron" in cavalry) or brigade responsible for personnel; intelligence and security; operations; and supply and maintenance, respectively

SAT = Scholastic Aptitude Test, a nationwide test taken by most high-school students planning to go on to college. Many colleges require taking it to be considered for admission.

Sgt. = Ser**g**ean**t** (also abbreviated "SGT")

SIU = Southern Illinois University. Its main campus is located in Carbondale, Illinois.

SOBC = Signal Officer Basic Course

Spec = Specialist. During the Vietnam War era, specialists were equivalent to corporals or sergeants who had special technical training but not leadership responsibilities. For example, a Spec 5 was equivalent in rank to a 3-stripe sergeant.

TA-50 = Standard clothing and gear issued to a soldier

TAC = Tactical, as in Tactical Officer

Tet is short for Tết Nguyên Đán meaning "Festival of the First Day of the Year" (see footnote on p. 45)

TH = Training Helicopter (as in TH-55A Osage)

TOC = Tactical Operation Center, a command center for a military operation

TOE (or TO&E) = Table of Organization and Equipment specifies how a unit is to be organized, staffed, and equipped.

TOW = Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided missile

TV = Television

U (in military aircraft designations) = Utility

UH = Utility Helicopter, as in UH-1 Iroquois. Its nickname “Huey” comes from the sound of its original designation, HU-1.

UHF = Ultra High Frequency, a higher frequency of vibration range of radio waves than VHF (for example, TV channels 2 through 13 broadcast in the VHF range; those above 13 broadcast in the UHF range)

VA = Veterans Administration. It is now called the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (see footnote on p. 43).

VFW = Veterans of Foreign Wars. The oldest American veterans’ organization, it was founded just after the Spanish-American War.

VHF = Very High Frequency (see “UHF” in this section)

VOCO = Verbal Orders of the Commanding Officer, a non-written order to travel. Usually written orders follow later.

WO = Warrant Officer, as in WO1, Warrant Officer 1, the lowest of five grades of warrant officer in the U.S. Army. Those of grades above WO1 are called Chief Warrant Officers, abbreviated CW as, for example, CW2. Warrant officers are specialists in technical areas such as intelligence, aviation, and maintenance. They rank between enlisted men and commissioned officers.

X (in military designations) = e**x**perimental research

XO = E**x**ecutive Officer, assistant commander of a company (troop) or larger army unit. An XO serves as day-to-day manager of the command staff.

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- Photo of author pointing to above names on replica of Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, from author's collection

Epigraph - Frank Sinatra's version of Paul Anka's lyrics for "My Way,"
https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Frank+Sinatra%27s+version+of+%22My+Way%22+lyrics

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Page 9 - PRC-25 labeled diagram, https://www.historynet.com/vietnam-an-prc-25-radio/

Page 11 - Photo of author in OCS field training, from author's collection

- Pictures of helmet and liner,
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Helmet with camouflage cover, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ixYaeP75vI

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https://www.google.com/search?channel=fenc&client=firefox-b-1-d&q=wrapped+McDonald%27s+hamburger+picture#vhid=cGuNorX4GN5R7M&vssid=l

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- Photo of UH-1H Iroquois "Huey," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell_UH-1_Iroquois#/media/File:UH1_Huey_-_Fly_Navy_2017_(26938005897).jpg

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Page 25 - Photo of Flying Tiger Line DC-8, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Tiger_Line#/
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Page 29 - Photo of F Troop, 4th Cavalry Troop pocket patch, from author's collection

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Page 32 - Photo of Cobra with two XM159 rocket pods on its right winglet

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- Photos of Russian Strela 2M (SA-7) surface-to-air missile and launch tube,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9K32_Strela-2

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Boeing_CH-47_Chinook#/mediaFile:Ch47-chinook-vietnam.jpg/

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Page 49 - Silhouette of Cobra helicopter, https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-
d&q=Cobra+helicopter+silhouette#imgrc=3Ax-HipztYs86M

Page 53 - Map of region from Quang Tri to Phu Bai. Detail from Ban Do Day Diet Quan Khu
I Military Region Special Map scale 1:250,000 was prepared under the direction of
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Page 61 - Quote from "U.S. Army Air-to-Ground (ATG) Missiles in Vietnam" by Dr. Kaylene Hughes, *AMCOM History*, February 6, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/181893/u_s_army_air_to_ground_atg_missiles_in_vietnam

Page 62 - Photo of Tan My Airbase viewed from the air looking northeastward, https://www.centaursinvietnam.org/WarStories/WarDiscussions/D_BlackhatATC.html

- Tan My Airbase buildings viewed from the air closer up, photo by Rich Neely, https://museum.vhpa.org/4thcav/ftroop/FTroop.shtml

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Page 64 - Photos of outside and inside of barracks at Tan My, from author's collection

- Cobra flight line at Tan My Airbase, photo by Dan Keirsey, https://museum.vhpa.org/4thcav/ftroop/FTroop.shtml

Page 65 - Photo of author in his Tan My barracks room, from author's collection

Page 66 - Photo of rickshaw and cyclo, https://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/a-history-of-cyclos-in-vietnam

Page 67 - Map of Tan My region. Detail from Special Use S.E. Asia 1:100,000 Edition, 2-AMS(29ETB) Sheet 6541, prepared and printed by 29th Engr. Bn. US Army 1968. [Red spots of unknown meaning were on this map when acquired in Da Nang in 1972.]

Page 69 - Drawing of 19th-century British naval cannon, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/19th-century-naval-cannon.html?sortBy=relevant

- Recovered cannon barrels before cleaning, photo by Wayne Moose, https://www.centaursinvietnam.org/WarStories/WarEssays/E_EasterOffensiveWoods.html

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