Chapter 1

Coming of Age in Mid-America

Vietnam engaged me long before I understood that it had. In the eighth grade I read William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American*, and for all I knew Sarkhan, the surrogate Vietnam, was a real country somewhere in an area of the world that I didn't know where to find on a map. At about the same time, I read Dr. Thomas Dooley's *Deliver Us From Evil* and his other chronicles of life as a medical missionary in Indochina. I looked up Vietnam on a globe, but it didn’t make much of an impression on me. Courtesy of Herbert Philbrick's “I Led Three Lives” television show and book and J. Edgar Hoover's *The Masters of Deceit*, I discovered early in high school the specter of communism. I read a number of the tracts on the subject, and during my senior year I wrote a very long, impassioned essay for the high school newspaper on the global threat. In those days the school newspaper did not have political commentary of any kind or, in truth, deal with anything controversial, so the letter attracted some attention.

Inquisitive, but superficially intellectual and quite unsophisticated, I was a typical, provincial product of Jackson, Missouri (population approximately 3500). Jackson was a quintessential, quiet Midwestern town, its citizens patriotic, hardworking, and honest. Family roots were deep. Everyone knew where you went to church. Little League was important, sons followed their fathers playing football and basketball at Jackson High School, high school friendships and sweethearts were lifelong, kids were expected to be successful, and Main Street was full of second-generation family businesses. Drugs were unheard of and most of my friends hadn’t even drunk a beer. It was the right kind of place to come to maturity during the early 1960s. It still is today.

For me and most of my peers, high school was a central formative, nostalgic period in our lives. I was on the periphery of the "in" crowd. I didn't date a lot, but I was possibly the best “twister” in school (won some sock hop dance contests) and I took the head majorette, a tall stately blonde known as the Golden Girl, the prettiest girl in the class, to the junior prom. I played centerfield in baseball, ran for an undefeated cross country team, sat on the bench in basketball (first as a player and then as statistician), compiled the highest number of debate points in the school's history, held my share of offices, and was a very good student. I was opinionated, outspoken—the Senior Class Prophecy projected me as a “Noted Lecturer (still a Loudmouth)”—and, in truth, quite shy.
I occasionally heard the name Vietnam on the news. By the time I graduated in 1963, I knew that we were involved in a military conflict there, but that was nearly the extent of my knowledge on the subject. I dutifully registered for the draft when I turned eighteen during the fall of my freshman year in college, but I perceived the action as nothing more than a formality. In the spring of my high school senior year, several of the guys in my class joined the National Guard under an early enlistment option that offered them a reduced number of years of service. They headed off for six months of training immediately after graduation and those who opted to go to college entered in the second semester. The Guard and Reserves offered lucrative deals to fill their quotas in those days, but that would soon change. As the war escalated in 1965, Lyndon Johnson chose to employ the draft rather than mobilize the reserve forces. The virtual safe havens of the Guard and Reserves soon had long waiting lists of eager enlistees. While my high school friends and I who had moved on to college played basketball in the city park on Sunday afternoons, we laughed at our former classmates training at the National Guard Armory across the street. However, the last laugh was theirs. They had completed their shortened military obligations by the time those of us on the basketball court got our draft calls much later in the decade and two of us went off to Vietnam.

I gave no thought to the National Guard, the draft, or Vietnam in 1963. Along with about a third of my high school graduating class, I enrolled at the local state regional college in the fall. Southeast Missouri State College, in Cape Girardeau, the hometown of Rush Limbaugh, was as apolitical a place as could be found anywhere. The southeast Missouri region was a slow-moving, traditional, conservative area of agriculture and small towns. Neither the region nor the college really experienced the 1960s, and both were happy about it.

College for me was little more than an extension of high school. I lived at home, continued with the same group of friends from high school, and experienced almost nothing at college beyond the classroom and sports events. Most of my social life revolved around sports. I attended all of my younger brother's high school football, basketball, and baseball games, went to most of the college's football and basketball games, and avidly followed my beloved University of Missouri Tigers and the St. Louis Cardinals baseball and football teams. Among my fondest college-years' memories were the Cardinals in the World Series in 1964 and 1967. With extended family activities, church, a week-end job in a service station, and occasional dates, mainly with Jackson girls, my time was full and life secure. I absorbed a great deal of information in college, made mainly A's, graduated just a hair below summa cum laude, totally escaped intellectual challenge, and indeed was never forced to think very deeply about much of anything. I knew that this wasn't all that college should be, but only when I went away to graduate school did I begin to understand just what I had missed.
I gave minimal attention to the ever-increasing American involvement in the war during the mid-1960s. Southeast Missouri, region and college, were insular, sheltered communities, and I didn’t know anyone who had been in the war. I cannot remember Vietnam being mentioned in any of my college classes, and no anti-war movement or indeed any form of protest existed on campus. Following a disastrous first semester in college, my best friend’s younger brother received greetings from the local draft board in the spring of 1966. The board lurked in the wings for those who lost their academic good standing and deferment status. The corruption of the system was already well in place. With the assistance of an uncle, a high-ranking officer in the local National Guard unit, Jerry received one of the coveted openings in the unit. He went off for six months of training, returned to a more successful college career, and avoided the fate of others who didn’t enjoy such insider connections.

I had no personal worries about my deferment status. I pursued a high school teaching degree, but by the end of my sophomore year, I was seriously considering graduate school. The draft played no part in the decision. Both teacher and graduate study deferments existed, and I had no question that the war would be successfully concluded before I had cause to concern myself about it directly. Several times I made ignorant, bravado statements about winning the war and how I was ready to go if necessary. One in particular sticks in my mind. During the spring of 1964, I picked up a newspaper laying on a table in one of the local college “hangouts” which announced another of the many South Vietnamese coups that year, and I proclaimed with great sagacity that “If those damn gooks could keep a government in place for two consecutive weeks, the U.S. could win the war for them in a couple of months.”

That remark still embarrasses me today. However, it probably reflected the thoughts of a large percentage of the relatively few Americans who even knew that a war was going on. A year and a half later, on a date with a pretty, young, blond political naif who was worried about her older brother possibly going to Vietnam (which he later did), I pontificated about the war and my readiness to fight if called. She was duly unimpressed, I made a fool of myself, and I still feel sheepish today about my arrogance and naivete. I had lived a very sheltered existence and had no conception about the impact of Vietnam on someone’s life.

My memories from thirty years ago are not crystal clear, but the first direct contact with anyone who had been in Vietnam that I recall was in the late fall of 1966. In my last semester as an undergraduate, I was dispatched to student teach at Potosi High School, almost a hundred miles from the college. Potosi, Missouri, was a small town in the "Lead Belt," an area named for its history of lead and other minerals mining. Potosi was a tough, working class, hill town not much different from similar locales in eastern Kentucky or West Virginia. By the 1960s the mines were largely defunct and little other
employment existed to replace them. Potosi was the kind of place where kids went to Vietnam, and a fair number from there did. By the time I got there, one already had been killed.

In the first days after I arrived in November, a young man who had graduated from the high school a year before and was just back from the war, dropped in to see his old teacher. She invited him to talk to the class about Vietnam. I can't remember much that he said except that his theme was that we were fighting for America, girlfriends, Fourth of July picnics in Potosi, and to keep the gooks from taking over the Lead Belt. He showed some slides, including the picture of a Viet Cong he claimed that he had killed in close combat. He was quite proud of the feat, and the students were definitely into his description of shooting the individual and whipping out his Instamatic to record the event for posterity. I didn't care much for the guy, but his perspective reflected Potosi, Missouri, and much more of the mid-America that I knew.

When I finished my student teaching and undergraduate degree in January 1967, Potosi High School offered me a teaching position beginning immediately at mid-year. I briefly considered accepting the offer for the rest of the year and postponing graduate school until the fall, but I opted to proceed with my original plan to enter the University of Missouri in January. I wondered a few times how things might have been different had I stayed another semester or longer, but I have never questioned that I made the right decision. I dated a girl from Potosi for a couple of years on and off after I left, so I made several trips through the town. Her younger sister's fiancee spent a year in Vietnam--as a mail clerk. My outspoken friend often made slurring references to my safe haven in graduate school while her sister's fiancee and others she knew were in Vietnam. Although the relationship was becoming somewhat serious before I entered the Army, it cooled after that and ended before I went to Vietnam. She got married during my tour and I never saw her again. Surprisingly, I received a letter from her out of the blue some months after I returned from Vietnam in which she apologized for her earlier aspersions.

Because I did not go away to college, graduate school was for me what others experience as an undergraduate. I was accepted at the University of Illinois and Indiana University, but with no financial aid available at mid year, I decided to stay in state for the moment. My plan was to transfer to the University of Illinois after the spring semester or at least after my masters. However, it didn't take more than a few weeks at the University of Missouri to convince me that I was where I was meant to be. Stepping in at mid-year with no orientation or transition was more than a bit of a shock. I had planned to specialize in Russian history, but since I hadn't pre-enrolled, I had to take whatever courses had available space. The options that first semester re-shaped my graduate school plans and the rest of my academic career. I ended up in large undergraduate/graduate lecture courses in American diplomatic history, military history,
Weimar-Nazi Germany, and Southeast Asian comparative politics. American diplomatic and military history ultimately become two of my specialties, along with Russian and Soviet studies and recent U.S. political history. The course on Southeast Asia was most ironic since I would not know until many years later that the Vietnam War would become my primary teaching and writing specialty.

I threw myself into graduate school with energy and enthusiasm, and I loved it. The first semester, however, was trying. Living in the graduate dorm without a roommate, I was a little lonely. Entering at mid year and not being a teaching assistant, I had to establish myself, and I was somewhat intimidated by the cockiness and self-assuredness of the senior graduate students. Since my undergraduate college had a free textbook rental system, all my previous courses had been built around textbooks with minimal supplementary reading. I came to graduate school with very little personal library and less understanding of what the study of history was really about. I was unprepared for the reality of 32 assigned books in my four graduate courses, not to mention book reviews, other reading, and research papers; and I wasn’t certain that I comprehended the higher level of performance that I was expected to fulfill. I wondered at times if I had what it took for a doctorate. However, I worked very hard reading voraciously in a literal attempt to make up for undergraduate inadequacies all in one term. With three A’s and a B, I got off to a good start and began to establish myself. My confidence level soared.

During that first semester, my hometown minister nominated me for a Rockefeller Fellowship, which paid for a trial year in seminary for those who might be persuaded to contemplate the profession. The ministry itself did not engage me particularly (although then and several times since I have considered it); however, I was attracted by the idea of studying religion, especially comparative religion. A year at a place such as Princeton Theological Seminary appealed to me. Admittedly, I approached the opportunity more pragmatically than philosophically. I completed the application and advanced to the interview stage in Kansas City during the spring. Unfortunately, in the interview it was glaringly apparent that I had not thought very deeply about the purpose of the fellowship or about significant social and ethical questions of the day. Questioned about my moral or theological perspective relating to the war in Vietnam, I spoke in cliches and babbled some inanities. Not only was it clear that I hadn’t devoted any serious contemplation to the subject, but, in truth, I knew little about the war itself. Busy trying to survive in graduate school, I seldom watched the news and only scanned the newspaper.

In the report of my interview and rejection letter, the panel was relatively kind. They made some mild remarks confirming what I already knew—that I had rather inchoate perspectives on theological and social issues and that my potential for a possible commitment to the ministry was not as high as they preferred to see. They wished me
good fortune in pursuing my present plans in graduate school, but I imagine that they were not particularly impressed with my potential in that vein either. I am sure that they considered me intellectually shallow, and honestly I would not have disputed that characterization. Embarrassing as the experience was, the interview illuminated that I needed to be far more reflective about what I did believe. The one thing that crystallized from the affair was that teaching history was my real interest and career orientation. Anything else was a diversion. A letter soon followed in which a second-echelon interdenominational seminary offered me, and I am sure all the others interviewed, a trial-year fellowship. I passed on the offer.

The 1967-68 academic year was better. With a regular semester and a summer term behind me, I was now confident about my graduate school abilities and I expected to excel the same as I had during my undergraduate years. I was getting to know people in the program and I had a roommate who was becoming a close friend. The University of Missouri may not have been Cal-Berkeley or the University of Wisconsin, but from the perspective of the political vacuum of my undergraduate years, the University seemed to me a citadel of student activism. A fellow history graduate student who lived in the graduate dorm was head of the local Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the nation's leading anti-war group, and the history department was a center of activism on the whole range of issues of the day. With the full contingent of anti-war rallies, protests, vigils, and "happenings" played out weekly, I found it impossible to ignore Vietnam as successfully as I had in the past. As the war escalated in 1968 and various deferments came under question, the idea that Vietnam could be waiting for me in the future became a larger possibility. However, I remained more absorbed with research papers and the bibliography on a myriad of subjects than with international or campus politics.

Like virtually every university in the country, the spring of 1968 was a cauldron of protest at Mizzou. Even my undergraduate college, Southeast Missouri State, joined the decade with student uprisings in the spring over the dismissal of eight faculty members, and the protest spread to a challenge to in loco parentis and other issues. Vietnam, however, was not one of them. Unable to suppress protest and maintain the level of order that he had accomplished for decades, the college president was forced to resign. If protest was possible at Southeast Missouri State, it could happen anywhere.

I received my masters degree in the spring of 1968 and plunged on for the Ph.D. More importantly, I began as a teaching assistant (TA) in American history survey in the fall. Since the third grade, I had evaluated teachers and contemplated how I would do it better. From the seventh grade through high school, I was asked annually to teach a history class on "student teacher day," and I built a reputation doing it. I knew my subject, and I had much more flair than most regular teachers. Even in junior high, I set out to demonstrate that I was far better than the faculty and on a one-day basis I could
pull it off. During my student teaching as an undergraduate, the professor who evaluated all the student teachers remarked that he had never witnessed such a transformation as I manifested from a reserved and shy person into a flamboyant showman in front of the classroom. In my three years as a graduate school teaching assistant, most of which came after my military interlude, I was proud of my reputation as among the very best and usually the highest rated of the history department's more than twenty-five TAs.

I loved teaching and gave every ounce of my energy to it. I also liked being part of the departmental elite which the TAs represented. I spent much of my time hanging out in the TA office talking about teaching with my peers. It was an idyllic time. My politics were New Deal/Great Society Democrat with civil rights as the defining issue by which I called myself a liberal. In truth, I had no systematic political philosophy; and as with many of my age and the time, my politics were more knee-jerk than thought out. Although the term "conservative" evoked for me negative images of racists, McCarthyites, demagogues, and Neanderthals against social progress, and it wasn't a characterization that any self-respecting graduate student would claim, I knew in my innermost soul that I was more conservative--socially, culturally, and fiscally--than I cared to acknowledge. In foreign policy I was a disciple of the Realist School of George Kennan, Hans Morganthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr. I interpreted Vietnam not as immoral or imperialist, but as a mistake--an overcommitment not vital to our national interests.

Many of the TAs ascribed to the au courant New Left ideology of the time. My middle-of-the-road liberalism was dismissed as naive, outmoded, even reactionary. To the leftist radicals, liberals and conservatives were two halves of the same coin with liberals actually more heinous. To the radicals, conservatives were merely ridiculous, but the liberal's siren of political reform was a constant impediment to the development of a true radical revolutionary consciousness. Before I left for the Army at the end of 1968, the political debate among the TAs hadn't yet become vitriolic, and most of our freshmen students were generally unaware and quite apolitical.

*The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, by William A. Williams, one of the founding gurus of the New Left radical analysis, was the "in" book at the time employed in most of the American history sections. The volume depicted America, driven by the imperatives of the capitalist market economy, striving to dominate the world economically and to establish our sense of order on every nook and cranny of the globe. Williams explained the Vietnam War as the latest manifestation of this mechanistic economic and cultural imperialism. Although the Marxist analysis had little personal appeal to me, I was caught up in teaching, or maybe indoctrinating, my students with the "latest and hottest" interpretation, and like many other eager and naive budding academics, I enthusiastically tried to get my students to understand and articulate the Williams thesis. Obviously I wasn't very successful because a large number of students on the final exams explained
that Williams believed that because the United States owned the world, we should take it over and run it the way that we wanted in the best interest of everyone. The students expressed that this was a very good thing. Convoluted as was their interpretative and assessment prowess, young Missourians from the farms, small towns, and suburbs seemed to be inherently inured against Marxian analysis.

As the demand for manpower in Vietnam grew, the draft reached deeper and deeper. Deferments for undergraduate college students in good academic standing lasted throughout the war, but other deferment classifications began to wither. First, the marriage deferment, which had resulted in many hasty marriages and some for no other purpose than draft status, was shelved. Next fatherhood lost its protected status. Finally, graduate deferments in most non-technical disciplines and teaching deferments ended. However, as long as they met Washington's monthly quotas, local draft boards retained considerable discretion about which deferment classifications they would continue to honor or deny. My local board began issuing draft calls to graduate students and teachers in the fall of 1968, and my three close friends and I who had gone to junior high, high school, and college together, all received our greetings soon afterward. The two of us in graduate school were inducted in February. The two teaching high school were allowed to finish the school years before their inductions.

The draft physical was indeed the humiliating meat market described by several authors on the subject. Arriving by bus in St. Louis early in the morning, we spent the whole day in long lines in a quite chilly building clad only in our underwear. I was in very good shape physically, so I expected that the physical would deem me more than worthy. I did have a nasty scar from two childhood surgeries on the pyloric valve of my stomach, the first at five weeks of age. The doctors asked many questions about the operation; but despite the ugliness of the scar, I had had no problems since the last surgery at age five. My hay fever allergy was the only possibility for exemption, but it wasn't hay fever season so I didn't exhibit red, burning eyes and continual sneezing. I knew that some draftees arrived with letters from sympathetic doctors who deemed the potential inductee unfit because of allergies. However, that was the kind of thing that I just couldn't do. When the military doctors asked about my hay fever, I stated simply that it was pretty bad for about six weeks each year; otherwise it wasn't a problem. Knowing how I could become incapacitated by endless sneezing during the season, I harbored a faint hope that should I end up in Vietnam, something in all that vegetation would cause me to sneeze myself right out of the jungle and country. Ironically, I suffered no hay fever problems at all when I did get to Vietnam. The climate and plant life agreed with my nose and eyes perfectly.

Unquestionably, I didn't want to be drafted. I wished to keep progressing toward my Ph.D. and enjoy my teaching. However, by the time the draft notice came, I had
come to accept it as inevitable. Try as I did, I couldn’t completely repress the patriotic strain within me. My grandfather had served in World War I and my father had volunteered for the Army in World War II. I was proud of my father’s service, and part of me wanted to be able to say that I had done my duty as well. I did invoke my right to appear before the local board for an automatic appeal. Since I had accepted the reality and knew that the appeal was a mere formality, my primary goal was to be allowed to finish the fall semester. When I was ushered into the room for a few minutes with the board, blandly and dispassionately, I stated simply that I was a graduate student and was teaching university courses. I believed that I was making a larger contribution than I would in the military and I asked for reconsideration of my draft status, at minimum an extension to finish the semester. If by some miracle the board had revoked my draft call, I would have had mixed emotions and a degree of guilt. I wasn’t happy about my plight, but all my long-time friends from high school faced the same situation. Our time had come.

The board deliberated only a few minutes before their automatic response to my request. However, I will never forget the comment by the board secretary, a tough-looking, no-nonsense woman with a gravelly voice. She related that the board was very sorry to have to draft young men such as myself who were making something of themselves and contributing to society, but I had to understand that the draft quotas just kept rising and, "We’re running out of niggers." That language and philosophy were not out of character for the southeast Missouri of those days. As long as the quotas could be met by drawing on minorities, the poor, and local troublemakers, white middle-class kids who were doing the proper things should be left alone. The board and most people in the region didn’t see anything wrong with that approach. Besides, they reasoned, taking blacks out of the cotton fields into the military did them a favor, and everyone benefitted by removing potential problem makers from the community. However, by 1968 the manpower demands were forcing places like southeast Missouri to expand the net. As the draft nationwide reached up into the more privileged classes, support for the war among the middle and upper classes began seriously to wane.

Of the more than twenty male TAs in the history department at the University of Missouri, only two of us were drafted. Some local boards continued to defer teaching assistants and other TAs were not tabbed for various reasons, including that several were too old. The other draftee, who left school at the same time that I did, contacted spinal meningitis during Basic Training. When I returned to the history department after my two-year absence, he was already back--paralyzed from the neck down in a wheel chair. Even though I had barely known him before I left, I was very uncomfortable around him and could hardly speak to him. Obviously, I suffered from a touch of survivor guilt. I was relieved when he left the department to pursue a degree in library science.
Although on one level I felt that going into the military was a responsibility that if it befell me should not be shirked, I resented the fact that most of my peers were allowed to stay in school. On the surface I was quite upbeat about going into the Army, and I joked with my graduate school friends about becoming a warrior of American imperialism; but a deep bitterness seethed inside me. This was compounded by the cynical nature of the times, the national disillusionment with the Johnson and forthcoming Nixon administrations, and the general distrust of government, indeed all authority. As immature graduate students, we tended to pontificate in overly emphatic, apocalyptic, and exaggerated terms. In our uncertainty, we proclaimed in absolutes. I wasn’t fully cognizant of the anguish I was inflicting on my mother and father who were often recipients of my building anger, bitterness, and insecurity. They knew how much I didn’t want to leave graduate school, and they agonized about the possibility of me going to Vietnam. Yet they kept up their spirits for my sake. I wish that I had been more acute and sensitive. I continue to regret my behavior during this period, and as a parent now, I can fully appreciate their pain.

Even though already drafted, I still had the option to enlist and exercise more control over my situation. Since my fate was cast, I did want to use the military time to the best positive advantage, and trying to determine what I should do compounded my stress level. I actually contemplated joining the Marines. My military history professor, Alan Millett, under whom I had worked as a TA, was a major in the Marine reserves, and he encouraged me to consider the Corps. He told me that with my brains and achievement orientation I would advance much faster in the Marines than in the Army. Millett, a young assistant professor, dynamic teacher, and budding scholar, was a role model for me. (While I was in the Army, Millett left Missouri for Ohio State University, where his career led him to become one of the nation’s premier military historians and a brigadier general in the reserves.) The idea of the elite Marine status had some appeal. I was in very good physical shape and the challenge of Marine basic training had a strange allure. However, in the end I opted against the Marines, another decision I have never regretted.

I also rejected joining the Air Force or Navy for four years, which I determined was far too long to be away from graduate school. I finally decided to enlist in the Army on the Officer Candidate School (OCS) track. It was a low-risk option. I would not incur any further service obligation beyond my required two years unless I completed OCS and accepted an officer commission. If and when I accepted a commission, my obligation would be two years from that date. I could drop out at any point and all time served would count toward my original two-year obligation. The choice before me was two years as an enlisted man or a total of approximately three years service time if I completed OCS and became a second lieutenant. Even after enlisting with this option, I was still ambivalent on the matter, but I perceived that I had nothing to lose. I would
proceed and see how things transpired. Of the three available branches of OCS—infantry, artillery, or combat engineers—I opted for artillery.

The year 1968 was a very traumatic one for the nation, one of the most searing and divisive in the twentieth century. For the most part it was a very good one for me. I was exactly where I wanted to be, graduate school life was wonderful, the Cardinals won the World Series, the University of Missouri Tigers defeated Alabama 35-10 in the Sugar Bowl, and I was dating a pretty girl. As the year closed, however, I prepared to leave the sheltered, comfortable life that I knew for an uncertain and potentially dangerous interruption.
Chapter 2

Introduction to Uncle Sam’s Army

Nineteen sixty eight had been a good year; 1969 was not. In fact, it is almost a lost year. As an historian I have trained myself to link key historical events with incidents in my life. I can close my eyes and envision any given year as a circle with major historical events and significant happenings in my life appearing by month around the circumference. However, Woodstock, the moon landing, the arrest of William Calley, Ho Chi Minh’s death, the Chicago Seven Trial, and other events of 1969 are not etched into my mind in the same way as the happenings of other years. For a large part of 1969, I was out of touch with the news and did not establish the linkages that are imprinted in my brain for almost all other years of my life from my high school days on. The year remains more illusive to me than any other one of my adult life, and I do not remember it fondly. I spent most of 1969 in the Army in a training mode largely removed from the rest of society. Only after I arrived in Vietnam near the end of the year did I return to keeping abreast of events and marking historical connections. In sum, it was a long year; it was a hard year.

On February 18, 1969, in St. Louis, I raised my hand for the formal induction oath into the U.S. Army. I felt a deep uneasiness that I was entering a hostile, foreign world. I crossed my fingers behind my back as a symbolic protest that this was not really a voluntary action. Having formally enlisted for the OCS option, I was not technically a draftee; however, I considered myself a captive prisoner and I wondered how long and how terrible my sentence would be. In Basic Training we constantly had to yell out our rank and service number employing the prefix RA (for Regular Army enlistees) or US (for draftees). Often I chose to scream out the US designation as a small token act of resentment at being identified as a voluntary enlistment. At age 23, I was older than the normal eighteen and nineteen-year-olds entering the service, and as a Ph.D. student, I was considerably beyond the educational norm.

After formal induction, we boarded a Trailways bus for the 125 mile trip to Fort Leonard Wood in central Missouri, one of the largest Basic Combat Training (BCT) facilities in the country. Dubbed Fort “Lost in the Woods,” a most appropriate appellation, Leonard Wood was known for its miserably cold winters, wet springs, and unbearably hot and humid summers. I didn’t stay for the summer, but I can attest to the accuracy of the other two season’s characterizations. I was cold and wet most of my time there, and the place had little else to commend it either. In the Army someone always has to be in charge. Since the bus had only new inductees aboard, one soldier was designated
bus commander and I was named assistant bus commander. We sat together in the first seat entrusted with a packet containing everyone’s military files and orders. Both of us had enlisted for OCS after being drafted. He was an accountant and a very intelligent guy. We both had the same attitude: serve our time, decide as we went along about OCS, and hope that we got lucky on the matter of being sent to Vietnam. I saw the guy a few times during Basic Training and we mutually inquired “how’s it going.” One of the last times that our paths crossed, he remarked that he didn’t plan to continue with the OCS option. He was the first contact that I had in the Army and I sometimes wonder what happened to him, what story he has to tell.

We spent the first days at Ft. Leonard Wood in transient barracks waiting to move to the BCT area to begin our training cycle. The first order of business was to get our heads shaved and uniforms and equipment issued. I don’t remember much else about those days except that we had a lot of formations (the military’s term for bringing everyone together in ranks to see that all are present and to issue orders) and everyone screamed a lot. The cadre, the permanently-assigned personnel in charge of the transient inductees, were primarily young soldiers back from Vietnam putting in their final months until their discharge. It didn’t take much perceptivity to tell that they had a very bad attitude and were no happier to be there than we were.

When Saturday morning came, the young NCO in charge told us that he didn’t want to babysit us all week-end. His words were something to the effect that this was our last week-end before beginning Basic Training, so we should enjoy ourselves, but stay out of trouble. Someone asked if we could leave the immediate barracks area. He responded that the next formation would be Sunday evening at 5:00 p.m. He didn’t care what we did as long as we didn’t get into any trouble. In my total naivety, I took him literally at his word. I decided that I could make a quick week-end trip to visit my friends at the University of Missouri that I hadn’t seen since I left graduate school before Christmas. I had been in the military only a few days and already I was craving sanity. In the excitement of this unexpected window of freedom, I didn’t think the situation out very clearly. I simply went to the bus station on base and bought a ticket to Columbia, which was about 100 miles north. The university town was a popular destination for soldiers on weekend pass, so direct-connection trips left almost hourly.

Only after I got on the bus did it strike me how much I stood out. Everyone else was wearing the Class A dress uniform or civilian clothes. In brand-new pea green fatigues with shaved head, my basic trainee status was patently obvious. It now dawned on me that the offer to let us wander around did not extend to leaving the base. A military pass was necessary for that, and basic trainees probably didn’t receive these. All kinds of questions that I hadn’t contemplated raced through my mind. What would happen if the Military Police at the base gate checked for passes? I could only plead total
ignorance which would be perfectly true. But would anyone believe that someone could be so naive? Suddenly I was frozen with terror. I did not want to attract any attention to myself and getting back off the bus now required more courage than I could muster. The bus engine started up and still I couldn’t make myself move. It was too late now. I curled down low into the rear corner seat in the packed bus and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. When the bus rolled through the base gate without pausing, I breathed a temporary sigh of relief; but now I realized that I was potentially AWOL, a very serious military offense. I spent the trip worrying about going to jail even before I started Basic Training. I was certainly off to an auspicious start in Uncle Sam’s employ.

At the Columbia bus station I started walking to the University, but I stood out even more than I had on the bus. A car load of college kids heckled me, yelling out that the police picked up runaways. A second car stopped and asked if I was AWOL and looking for a safe house to escape to Canada. Suddenly afraid that a police car would appear at any moment to arrest me, I blurted out to the driver of the car that I needed to get to some friends at the University who would take care of me. He said to hop in. I wasn’t sure whom I was dealing with, but at this point I wanted very much to be off the public streets. All the way to the Graduate Dorm where he dropped me off, the driver talked about an underground network to assist deserting soldiers. I got the feeling that it wasn’t by chance that he had been near the bus stop, and that this might be a regular occurrence. When I got out, he asked if I needed any money. I thanked him for the ride, said that my friends would take care of everything that I needed, and quickly disappeared inside the dorm. I was beginning to feel like an escaped convict with all-points bulletins issued for my arrest. I wondered if that might even be the case. Could my AWOL status have been discovered and arrest orders be circulating on me? I told myself that I was being paranoid. In any case, inside the Graduate Dorm was a safe haven.

Although I had been gone only for a little more than a month, my visit was like homecoming. Wearing borrowed clothes that made me less conspicuous (and even during an era of long hair, a shaved head was not unusual on a college campus), I enjoyed a great afternoon and evening talking about what was going on in the department and at the University. Already, I gravely missed my former life. I wondered how long it would be, and what stood between, before I returned to this existence. Dressed in the donated clothes with a sock cap down over my head and my fatigues wrapped in a sack, I didn’t stand out on the bus ride back to the base the next afternoon. When I arrived at the bus station, I quickly changed back into my fatigues before proceeding to the barracks. I slipped in quietly during the late afternoon and stashed the civilian clothes in my footlocker. The person in the next bunk asked where I had been. I mumbled something about staying with a friend and asked if there had been a bed check. He said no. I heard someone else say that some trainees had been caught off base. I decided to discard the civilian clothes in the nearest dumpster.
Formation at 5:00 p.m. was tense. We learned that some trainees had been caught off base and that others were picked up for drunk and disorderly conduct on base. Obviously, we hadn’t followed the young sergeant’s injunction to stay out of trouble, and he was being punished for permitting us to run loose for the week-end. Finally, we were threatened that the cadre knew that other trainees had left base and those individuals were warned to turn ourselves in immediately. I was pretty sure that I knew an empty bluff when I heard one. I had been naive and lucky, but I had experienced an early lesson that I would see repeated many times during my Army tenure--where incompetence reigns, audacity usually prevails. My philosophy and practice throughout my service was that following the rules led to mediocrity. Accomplishing anything meant taking risks.

Later that evening we boarded buses for the short ride to the BCT barracks. The Basic Training arrival scene has been hyperbolized in many movies, but the reality that night wasn’t far removed from the movie versions. Almost thirty years later I can still visualize bits and pieces of that surreal experience. As we got off the bus carrying our large Army duffelbags and other equipment, a bevy of drill sergeants descended upon us yelling and screaming every insult imaginable. Marched off at a jog to large multi-story new barracks, I remember lugging the heavy bags to the very top of one building only to find that it was not the right building. Under a constant barrage of screaming insults, down I went and up to the top floor of the next building. Wrong again. Periodically, we were required to drop and do push ups. I was in mass confusion and totally exhausted. Looking back on the experience years later, I understand that this was the closest thing that I experienced in the Army to the actual disorientation and horror of a firefight, which entailed the total loss of any logical order or control over one’s situation. I assume that was the purpose of the exercise. In any case, even OCS never topped this exhibition.

Seemingly hours later, a number of us were marched off to another area quite removed from the rest of the buildings and placed in an old, wooden two-story, classic World War II barracks, which heretofore had been unoccupied. We had to clean the barracks and latrine, make our beds, and set up guard duty assignments before we were allowed to collapse in bed well after midnight. I never learned why some of us were dispatched to the old barracks more than a quarter mile away from the rest of the trainee company in its first-class facility. Most likely it was simply luck of the draw. This was the high point of military inductions and all training facilities were overflowing.

Our separation had advantages and disadvantages. Jogging to the company area for all meals and formations was tedious, and we got quite familiar with the steep dip down and up to the area where the rest of the company resided. The company area had hard-surfaced space for formations; we “fell-out” each morning right into the mud. Splashing mud on each other as we jogged in ranks to the breakfast formation, we always started the day looking like the poor cousins of the rest of the company. On the other
hand, being removed from the swarm of training officers and drill sergeants in the company area had distinct benefits. The only cadre personnel in our barracks were a drill sergeant who exercised only marginal responsibility over the barracks and a young sergeant back from Vietnam who was awaiting entry into Drill Sergeant’s School. After the first weeks, he was the person responsible for us after hours, but he went out drinking most evenings and usually staggered in quite late at night in very bad condition. He left most supervision to the designated trainee officers and trainee NCOs who were hardly a responsible lot. The young sergeant’s primary task seemed to be to get us up in the morning and over to the company area to be turned over to the regular drill sergeants. I never fully understood the dynamics of our situation, but it was clear that we had more freedom than our peers in the company area. I was happy about that.

I pulled fire-watch duty the first night and every third night for the duration of Basic Training. Each hour from lights out until wake-up call, one person per floor served as the fire guard. During your designated hour, you walked around inside the barracks with a flashlight, in effect an internal guard. At fifteen-minute intervals, you signaled out the rear door window to the person circling the building outside on guard duty. When your hour expired, you woke the next person on duty and fell back into bed. Rousted from sound sleep in your warm bed at 3:00 a.m. and fighting to stay awake in the cold barracks for an hour, which seemed to stretch on interminably, was never pleasant. Neither was it necessarily an easy task to get the next fire guard awake and on his feet so that you could blissfully crawl back under the covers. I hated fire watch.

Guard duty to me wasn’t as bad. It was a full-night assignment, two hours on and two hours off patrolling a building, parking lot, fenced area, or endless other possibilities. Although it was bitterly cold the two nights that I drew guard duty, I enjoyed a rare sense of freedom as I paced along in the middle of the night swinging a billy club, singing, and talking to myself. The time passed quickly for me, and I enjoyed taking advantage of the Army’s policy to receive the next morning off to sleep in. I pulled a lot of guard duty during my Army years and I found it quite tolerable most of the time.

Kitchen Police (KP) was another matter. I did my share of KP too at various duty stations during my year in the States, but KP during Basic Training was its own special hell. From 4:00 a.m. until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. was a very long day of mopping floors, cleaning garbage cans, washing pots and pans, peeling potatoes, and other mind-dulling tasks. Yelling, screaming, threats, and other harassment were constant. A large percentage of those assigned to the culinary arts were from the lower ranks of intelligence and ability. Cooks weren’t very high on the totem pole of respect in the Army, and this was the opportunity for low ranking kitchen personnel to lord it over the defenseless trainees. Bribery was common. Those who paid the cooks got to leave early, even in mid afternoon; those who did not were the ones still there late at night. The three times that I
pulled KP in Basic Training, days that I thought would never end, rank among the most miserable times that I spent in the U.S. Army.

Basic Training wasn't hard, demanding, or challenging. It was just stultifyingly boring. My life had revolved around the daily newspaper, the news, and ongoing political discussions. Now it seemed as if I had disappeared into a time warp, and I felt disoriented without access to what was going on in the world. As a compulsive workaholic who measured time as a precious commodity, I found the Army's central practice, "hurry up and wait," and the wasted hours doing nothing of any significance almost unbearable. Most of the training was incredibly dull. Always short on sleep, I was continually fighting just to stay awake. The weather was cold, rainy, and generally miserable all the time. I caught a bad cold and I spent one particularly unpleasant week struggling with the flu. I missed graduate school and teaching immensely. As I stood in formation, marched around a parade ground, policed up an area, sat through some boring instruction, or engaged in similar mindless tasks, I thought about teaching one of my classes or sitting in a graduate seminar, and despondency nearly overwhelmed me. I wondered how I would live through two years of such mindless inanity. For someone usually so upbeat, my state of mind, my growing depression, concerned me. I simply could not generate any degree of the artificial enthusiasm—the chants, unit pride, camaraderie, etc.—that was supposed to accompany all activity.

The one thing I enjoyed was mealtime. With a tremendous appetite and high metabolism, I could eat and eat without consequence. I was always hungry, and the food was plentiful and good. I lived from mealtime to mealtime. I hated the military harassment while we ate; but when that subsided after the first weeks and we could eat in relative peace, I looked upon the mess hall as an oasis in the midst of a desert. It was throughout my time in the Army.

Physical Training (PT) was easy. In excellent shape when I entered the Army, I enjoyed the physical aspects and always had one of the highest scores in the platoon and company on the PT tests. Only the overhead bars prevented me from maxing the PT tests. I have very small hands which are quite dry. Thus they had a tendency to slip off the freezing cold bars in wintertime and lower my score. I tried wearing gloves, but my grip was even worse.

If physical conditioning was my strong point, mechanical tasks such as disassembling and assembling my weapon and close order drill were just the opposite. As several interest-tests in school confirmed, I evidenced very little mechanical ability and less interest. In the timed assembling of my rifle, I always seemed to drop a piece, fumble some aspect, or do something stupid to foul up entirely. I never did learn
adequately to field strip my weapon, even in Vietnam. In close-order drill, my concentration wavered and I tended to freeze when yelled at.

The biggest problem with Basic Training was that I felt totally out of place and very lonesome. Used to a gregarious circle of graduate school associates, I felt like I had been transported to an alien planet. Most of the platoon were eighteen and nineteen year-olds from inner-city Chicago and Detroit. They talked endlessly about gang wars and trouble with the police, and they were a violent lot. A couple of them claimed that they had been given the choice of the Army or jail. Several were high school drop-outs who spent half of their training time in basic skills classes. Although I have no direct evidence, in retrospect I believe that much of the platoon were Project 100,000 products, Robert McNamara's grand social experiment to accept draftees below minimal intelligence standards as a means of providing them opportunity for vertical mobility. I wondered how I happened into this particular group. I could not identify with the Army's buddy system and ersatz camaraderie. It wasn't that I was elitist, but I had no desire to be one of the boys, and the feeling was mutual. I stayed to myself.

Tensions existed though. Every night we had to clean the latrines, buff the floors, and complete a number of other tasks before going to bed. I always wanted to get started as early as possible so that we wouldn't have to stay up after lights-out. Getting up at 5:00 a.m. daily and regularly losing an hour of sleep to fire watch, I was tired most of the time and I tried to grab every hour of sleep that I could. However, the trainee officers and NCO's seldom got the platoon working much before lights out, so the tasks had to be completed in the dark when we could have been sleeping. Even after we got to bed, several individuals played radios and talked for a couple more hours. The bunk across from mine was a favorite hangout which made it hard for me to get to sleep. Apparently these individuals could get by on three hours sleep per night, but I couldn't. The young sergeant in charge seldom struggled in before 1:00 a.m., usually not sober, and sometimes he even came out to carouse with the night owls. I had little respect for the trainee leaders, who were selected at random or at the sergeant's whim. In my opinion, most lacked basic intelligence and any semblance of leadership talents.

My failure to be one of the boys and my crankiness about my right to sleep resulted in a couple of confrontations, including an attempted "blanket party." This consisted of a number of people throwing a blanket over you in the middle of the night and beating you up while trapped under the blanket. Having received several threats from a particularly violent threesome, I anticipated an attack at some point. I started sleeping with a club or my mess kit knife under my pillow. Fortunately, when the assault came, the assailants were inept. I woke up just ahead of the attack and got in a couple of strategic kicks and several blows which prevented getting "blanketed." The aggressors
fled before the noise woke up the entire barracks. After one more smaller physical confrontation, I gained an armed truce and was left alone.

Other than these physical challenges, Basic Training limped along uneventfully, and I was almost completely removed from the daily happenings of the world. Former President Dwight Eisenhower’s death, on March 29, 1969, was marked with a base-wide memorial formation. We practiced for it in the pouring rain, and the ceremony was conducted in the rain as well. Other than my first encounter with the gas chamber to impress upon us the importance of a gas mask—a painful experience that I will never forget, I don’t recall many other highlights from training. After a few weeks, we had free time on week-ends. I wandered around the base a lot. Throughout my time in the Army and my later years with the military in Europe, I found military bases fascinating places, a virtual sociological study. I was intrigued by the similarities and differences on each base, and I still am today. However, I spent most of my free week-end time attending movies at the base theaters or at the base library. Always supportive, my parents and brother visited one week-end. Although I was only a few hours away from home, I felt as if I was stranded on a different planet.

Early on during Basic Training, I was informed that I had scored exceptionally high on a test that indicated ability to learn languages, and I was offered the opportunity to volunteer for Vietnamese language training. Having a lazy ear for the nuance of sounds, I had always struggled with learning languages; thus my purported talent came as interesting news to me. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by the possibility of nine months of Vietnamese language training followed by a year tour in Vietnam. Indoctrinated with the daily harangue that we needed to learn all the combat skills that we were being taught to keep ourselves alive in Vietnam, I assumed that my chances of a Vietnam tour were high. I also knew that if I did go to OCS, a Vietnam assignment was the common fate of most new second lieutenants. Given the alternatives, the idea of gaining a valuable language skill and still being out of the Army in two years was most inviting.

I decided rather conclusively in the first couple of weeks of Basic Training that I did not want to spend one more day in the Army than was absolutely necessary so I wanted to dump OCS anyway. However, when I applied for Vietnamese language training, I was informed that the OCS option took precedent over any other opportunities so I could not volunteer. When I tried to drop the OCS option, which I had been assured when I enlisted that I could do at any time, I was told that I could not do that during Basic Training. Caught in this circular reasoning and duplicity, and not familiar enough yet with the inane bureaucracy to assert myself as emphatically as I needed to do, I had to forego the Vietnamese language opportunity. I was quite disappointed. I have wondered where that road, if taken, would have led.
In the last few days before BCT graduation in late April, the orders for Advanced Individual Training (AIT) came through. Mine was no surprise. I was dispatched to an OCS Prep unit at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to train in artillery Fire Direction Control (FDC). A large number in my platoon received orders to infantry training. One young trainee was distraught because he was assigned as a truck driver when most of his buddies were going infantry. Graduating in the top 20% of the company on the various evaluations, I was promoted to Private E-2 and awarded my one stripe "mosquito wing" chevron. I mused about how successfully the military instilled the desire for these small designations and distinctions. Why would a Ph.D. candidate care so much that his PT skills elevated him above a number of eighteen and nineteen year-olds that he would never see again? The promotion resulted in only a few dollars more a month in pay, and everyone else would get their promotion in a couple of months anyway. But on graduation day, the patriotic strain in me took great pride in wearing that strip and being in military uniform.

The artillery OCS Prep unit was a very different experience from my unhappy days in Basic Training. Most in the unit were college grads with several graduate students as well. Our drill sergeant was quite unlike the macho, screaming, profane egomaniacs from Basic. A pencil thin, almost effete Black man, with a high voice, he was intelligent and articulate. Everything about him bespoke gentleman. We were to refer to him as Drill Sergeant Sir, and it seemed appropriate. Many years later, Lou Gossett in An Officer and a Gentleman reminded me of the man. The first lieutenant who served as company executive and training officer was another story. A pompous dullard who could never seem to get anything right, he was a laughingstock among the cadets and the cadre as well. Although a bit overweight, soft, and pudgy, he preened around attempting to demonstrate, at least in his own mind, the model to which we should aspire. One of his early pronouncements was that for the rest of our lives we would be recognized as having been military officers by the bearing and demeanor that would set us apart. If he was an example, I wished to forego this distinction.

The prep unit was structured as a preview of OCS. We progressed through three stages--lower, mid, and upper classes--during the eight-week period which simulated experiences as trainees, NCOs, and officers. Lower class entailed heavy harassment conducted by the mid class under the supervision of the upper class. The harassment wasn’t vicious. In fact, it was sort of a game, and the time frame was short, so I didn’t mind the lower class time period at all. Life as mid and upperclassmen was pleasant. As an order freak, I liked the preciseness, the attention to the smallest detail, and the challenge to get everything just right in the prep unit. Hard work and merit paid off, and the battery (known as a company in most other areas of the Army) worked together as a unit. This was quite unlike the chaotic incompetence of Basic. Since we needed to be alert for the classroom work, proper sleep was a priority. The military believes in getting up early--in this case 4:30 a.m.--so we were dispatched to bed at 8:30 p.m. with bright
sunlight still streaming through the windows. It didn’t get dark until between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m. during May and June. It was difficult to go to sleep under these conditions, but most of the time we had to sneak out of bed anyway to shine our boots and belt buckles and clean the barracks. We slept on top of our tightly made beds or even on the floor since there wasn’t time to make the bed to inspection-quality in the allotted two minutes when we leaped out of bed in the pre-dawn morning.

I rather enjoyed playing the game in AIT and was reasonably good at it. My favorite memory is what some others considered the worst nightmare—the traditional Jark every Sunday morning. Named after a Colonel Jark, the first commander of OCS, it was a 4.2 mile roundtrip run up a mountain in combat boots carrying your weapon. Theoretically we were to stay in formation, but inevitably the formation broke down and runners were allowed to proceed on their own in a competitive race to the top. It was a tough run. The mountain was steep and the rifle got heavier and heavier. I was usually among the first finishers with my legs, arms, and lungs burning. When everyone finally made it to the top, we started back in formation. On the way down, winning the race wasn’t important. The goal was to get everyone back by encouraging and assisting weaker runners, shouldering their rifles as needed. If that wasn’t enough, the tradition dictated carrying a rock down the mountain. The larger the rock, the more macho the achievement. OCS candidates placed their rock in front of them at breakfast as symbol of their accomplishment. As a former cross country runner, I had good legs; but my upper body strength wasn’t as fully developed. Getting my rifle, and usually someone else’s as well, down the mountain was enough stress on aching arms and shoulders, so I confined myself to modest rocks that I could carry clenched in my fist. I remember one super athlete cradling a small boulder in his hands with two rifles slung over his back.

Many runners couldn’t make it up the mountain in the first place. Most ended up walking and taking breaks to sit down and rest. On the trip down, the sides were littered with breakdowns. Several times I thought that I would join the number, and I did throw up at least once, but I always kept running to the end. In a perverted sort of way, I enjoyed the challenge of the Jark. The best part though was that when we returned, we could let our aching, sweat-drenched bodies stand under a hot shower for as long as we wished. Many then collapsed in bed, but I strolled over to the mess hall for morning brunch where we were free from any harassment. Although so tired that I could hardly lift the fork to my mouth, those brunches are among my fondest memories of my Stateside Army days. I was around for only a few OCS Jarks, but they were a bright light in an otherwise dismal time. Even if, like my pebbles, the rocks grow into boulders over the years and the physical feats of carrying three classmates down the mountain on your back become more apocryphally heroic, the Jark is a unique rite of passage and bonding experience among artillery officers. I never wore crossed cannons on my lapel, but I have swapped a few Jark yarns with artillerymen at various times in later life.
Most of AIT was devoted to the serious classroom work of learning to direct artillery fire. I decidedly did not like FOC. I found the elementary geometric formulas and the slide ruler as baffling and frustrating as I had in high school, and my calculation skills were substandard. Although I had brought this on myself through the OCS option, I reflected that it was typical of the Army to test an individual extensively to determine strengths and weaknesses and then assign him to an area of demonstrated ineptitude. To say that I was not competent to direct live artillery fire was a modest understatement. In my first field exercise, I had the tubes pointed 180 degrees in the opposite direction from where I thought that I was firing. The range officer noted that I was more danger to my own side than to the enemy.

Several in the OCS Prep unit had made the decision to drop the OCS option, including a few who had increased their enlistment term to get the opportunity; they were stuck with their three-year obligation even if they didn’t go to OCS. However, everyone was told that we couldn’t drop OCS during AIT. I suspected, as I had when I raised the issue during Basic Training, that these pronouncements were a lie and all the duplicity was about maintaining good statistics. The Army believed that too many candidates were dropping out of OCS before they entered the program, so units were ordered to lower the drop-out rate. I was still too green to challenge the system, but I was convinced that the Army and the truth had nothing in common. The institution would say whatever was convenient to suit their purposes of the moment. As I witnessed later in Vietnam, truth and reality meant less than good statistics from which to spin the official story of the day. Already I was experiencing one of the root causes of our failure in the war.

Some candidates were persistent enough to drop OCS during AIT. Since I enjoyed the OCS Prep unit and the thought of having to serve in FOC was not appealing, I wavered back and forth. Since my obligation remained two years until I actually accepted a commission and every day counted no matter where I was, I drifted along putting off a final decision. I was increasingly convinced that Vietnam was inevitable no matter what route I took. We were threatened constantly that OCS dropouts were automatically sent to Vietnam. However, almost 90% of non-OCS-slated FOC graduates were going anyway. If one completed OCS, a Vietnam tour awaited either immediately or certainly during the second year. The high casualty rate made second lieutenant forward observers in great demand.

The cadre continually evoked examples of lieutenants who received European or Stateside tours instead of Vietnam. I found it interesting that a program designed to produce combat officers and fill the insatiable demand for artillery forward observers in Vietnam would devote so much attention to the hope of escaping the purpose for which we were being trained. Only a few candidates, primarily those who projected themselves as career military, were enthusiastic about going to Vietnam; others talked a good game.
Most everyone seemed to be calculating their best options to avoid the prospect. Among all this self-absorption, myself included, two or three individuals stood out for their bearing, integrity, courage, team play, and selflessness. I knew that I didn’t measure up to their standard. These were impressive young men with exceptional leadership potential. I wonder what happened to them. They could be generals today or casualties of the war. For the most part, the OCS Prep unit was a collection of talented individuals. It would be interesting to know what became of them in the military and beyond. How many of them, whether ultimately commissioned or not, became Vietnam statistics?

Everywhere we turned at Ft. Sill, we saw Vietnam vets serving out their remaining months before discharge. They served as cadre, assistant instructors, firing range personnel, or general flunkies. We also ran into them in the beer gardens, PX, and other facilities. Since they had been there and come back alive, they became ipso facto fountains of wisdom. Several remarked that their tour wasn't so bad; others liked to curl our hair with the horrors of Vietnam. All of them were merely logging days until their discharge back into their normal lives. Some were bitter, others resigned, a few, philosophical; but to us they were all oracles. The ones whom we had most direct contact with were FDC and several had earlier been where we were in the OCS process. Probably justifying the decision that they had made earlier, and from the perspective that they had survived and were close to discharge, the consensus of most of the FDC vets was to bail out of OCS and get the Vietnam tour over with. The logic made sense to me.

From the vets I learned that if you returned from Vietnam with less than four months on your obligation, you would be discharged immediately instead of serving the remaining time Stateside. And you could extend in Vietnam beyond your year tour to get within the four-month frame. The policy made good sense since the military had little use for the hordes of returning vets with less than six months left on their two-year obligation. Few were potential career types, and it was expensive and inefficient to reassign them, often in make-work positions, only to discharge them soon after arrival at their new station. As we witnessed, many of the vets had strong short-timer attitudes. After Vietnam, they did not adapt well to the Stateside “spit and polish.” Many of these combat veterans had exercised heavy responsibility in life and death situations at very tender years and rank. They did not react well to being ordered around by NCOs and officers who had not been where they had. Combat vets’ contempt for Stateside REMFs was manifest. The common retort was, "What are they going to do; send me to Vietnam." It was a popular cliche in Vietnam as well. For the most part, the goal for both the vets and their superiors was to let the vets serve out their time with as little conflict as possible.

Unless one spent more than the average time in the U.S. prior to Vietnam, the soldier had to extend for a considerable time in Vietnam to get within the four-month
window. This explained why there were so many short-timer vets at Ft. Sill. Even for those who required only a brief extension, the question of staying beyond the tour engendered a great deal of anguish and superstition. Stories circulated about individuals killed during a two-week extension. Even if these were apocryphal, they became gospel. REMFs often were the most superstitious about extending since soldiers in the field lived with danger and chance daily. It appeared obvious to me that the best strategy was to stay in the States long enough so that at the end of my Vietnam tour, the question of extending would be irrelevant. Getting out four months early so that I could start the spring 1971 semester at the University of Missouri had become central to my planning. That meant that I needed to stay in OCS as long as I could stand it. I continued to drift along not knowing what I really wanted to do.

I graduated from AIT on June 19 and flew home military stand-by for a two-week leave prior to starting OCS. I went to Potosi and Columbia, but most of the time I just enjoyed being at home away from the Army. Since we were allowed to have cars at OCS, I planned to drive mine back to Ft. Sill. Mid-morning the day before I was to leave, I was casually getting things together for the next day when I glanced at my orders and discovered to my shock that I had misinterpreted the reporting date. I was to sign in at my AIT unit by midnight (counting the two-hour grace period) and would report to OCS the next day. My mother was hanging some of my laundry on the line. I nearly scared her to death when I ran outside announcing that I had to leave immediately. We quickly threw things together, including wet laundry on the back seat, and I called my father to say good-bye. I faced a 650-mile trip, more than half of it on windy two-lane roads through the Ozarks, but it could be done if everything went my way. I pushed my 1962 white Corvair, undoubtedly the worst excuse for an automobile ever perpetrated upon the American public, to its limits stopping only for gas and a hamburger eaten on the run. Flying down the Oklahoma interstate in the evening, I could see that if I didn’t have any trouble I would make it. When I signed in from leave inside the final hour of the grace period, the NCO on duty remarked laconically, "Well the last one is now in." I called my parents, who had lived a very tense day, and dropped into bed.

I started OCS with inadequate motivation, and it was as miserable an experience as advertised. In the prep unit, if you worked very hard and did things right, you received praise rather than abuse. It didn’t work that way at OCS. The abuse, the hostility, the adversity, and the chaos were constant no matter what you did. It wasn’t possible to do it right no matter how hard you tried. For an obsessive person such as me, that was very difficult to accept. We were up almost all the first night devoting hours to arranging the scores of field manuals and technical books on our shelves according to the specifications. I was exhausted, but I knew that the display was perfect. My cubicle mate, a walking disaster of disorganization, gave up and went to bed hours before I did. The next morning the inspecting midclassmen descended on the barracks screaming and
shouting and tearing everything apart. One excoriated my cubicle mate about his disarray and then started yelling at me about why I hadn’t helped him. He turned to my shelf, pulled one manual out about half an inch, pointed at the book with a sneer, and asked why my shelf was shamefully out of line. The only response that we were allowed to give to any charge was “No excuse, Sir.” When I bellowed out the mantra, he screamed in my face at the top of his lungs that my books were a disgrace and I had no explanation. With a couple of swipes, he slung the manuals across the room bouncing them off the wall and tearing them apart. He then proceeded to rip up my bed and toss the mattress and everything else I had all over the room. Everyone else experienced the same fate. The barracks was in shambles. No one could tell what belonged to whom.

An almost uncontrollable rage welled up inside me. My face was red. The midclassman put his nose right against mine breathing heavily in my face and screamed repeatedly, did I want to hit him? I yelled back, “No Sir,” each time, but my mind was pulsating internally that at that moment, nothing in the world would give me greater pleasure. As he continued to scream insults at me, I fought the urge that was growing by the second. Only a tremendous amount of fear of the situation, of him, and of the consequences prevented me from ending my OCS venture that very first day in what would have been a very satisfying effort to break his nose.

To some extent today, I can understand, although I do not accept, the scenario. It was the beginning of a process of molding us to deal with fear, arbitrariness, chaos, intimidation, anger, and the necessity of maintaining discipline and poise no matter what. As I learned later, this was good preparation for combat. At the time, however, I only discerned fear, anger, and hatred. The fear was far more than of a particular individual and situation. It was the terror of the arbitrary and totalitarian power which the system held over me and of having my whole life ruined, even going to jail, if I couldn’t control myself. My complete powerlessness in a totally artificial world was very difficult for me to accept. I knew that I was about to explode and I had no recourse.

Several candidates didn’t make it through the first day. Certainly I would have loved to walk myself. If this was what it took to be a military officer, I knew that I didn’t have it. The building anger of all my months in the Army was boiling within me. Everything about me craved logic, order, and success. Arbitrary and indiscriminate failure was something I did not cope with well. Although I didn’t like to fully admit it to myself, I knew also that I was not the best team player. I was too competitive and individually-oriented. I found it hard to waste time on those whom I judged didn’t have the ability or motivation to succeed and I tried to outdo those who could perform. I had seen that aspect of myself on the OCS Prep Jarks. Just as in Basic Training, I didn’t have any sense of camaraderie with a group just because the Army told me that they were my “buddies.” I was probably redeemable, but I didn’t care to reform in this context.
Any previous ambiguity was gone; I knew conclusively that I didn’t want to be a military officer. However, no matter how much I told myself this, the idea of being a quitter was unacceptable to me. If I had followed my desire to withdraw before I arrived at OCS, that would have been a logical, well-thought-out, and honorable decision. However, the calculus was different once in the program. I had been indoctrinated in the prep unit that those who left were losers, I believed that my education and future goals obligated me to attain the highest status possible, and I didn't want to appear, at least in my own mind, to cave in to the harassment. I always prided myself that through dogged determination I could do anything. I had dropped only one course in my educational career; and even though that was for very good reason, to this day it is a bit of an embarrassment. I was that way about almost everything. I intended to complete what I started.

With all of this agonizing, I still hadn't factored into my calculus, Earl "Mad Dog" Tharp, the midclassman I had already encountered. One of the few in OCS who was only a recent high school graduate, Tharp, from neighboring Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the son of a fundamentalist minister with whom he had a strained relationship, was a study in insecurities that manifested themselves in the huge chip on his shoulder. Unlike most of the others in the mid class that controlled our lives, Tharp wasn't just playing a role. His anger and hatred were too clear, too deep, too obsessive and he exhibited a particular viciousness in his harassment. He earned his nickname for his out-of-control actions, and his classmates enjoyed threatening to unleash the "Mad Dog" on us. In truth, they spent more time attempting to control him because he was an obvious embarrassment to them. Each lowerclassman was assigned to the harassment tutelege of a midclassmen. "Mad Dog" selected me personally since we were almost from the same hometown and everything about me touched the raw nerves of his psyche. I was several years older than he, and my educational level triggered his anti-intellectual and social class biases. He had nothing but contempt for privileged college boys. It didn’t just show; it consumed him.

I lived in terror of Earl Tharp whom I considered a deeply unstable individual. Under any other circumstance, we would not have had any point of relationship. Although we were from two different worlds, our common geography was a connection, and in the military that can be very powerful. Even in the short time in OCS, I began to understand Earl some. I would later learn much more about him. He was an insecure nineteen-year old with a lot of problems. Younger than all his peers, less educated, abysmally unsophisticated and naive, he was totally out of place. Estranged from his very rigid father, Earl was trying to gain his father’s acceptance and respect the only way that he knew how. Earl wanted very much to gain the distinction of being an officer and he could not wait to fight in Vietnam. He had enlisted for infantry but had ended up in artillery, and he was having serious problems with the academic portion of the program.
Earl’s strongest credentials were his iron will and his superior physical conditioning where he excelled above his peers. He actually began to gain some grudging respect for me after my showing in the first OCS Jark. Physical prowess was important to Earl and his personal charge finishing as one of the top two or three lowerclassmen was a feather in his cap. I discerned a detectable drop in his harassment and venom after that.

Finally, one day in the fifth or sixth week, I quit wavering. The incident itself was trivial. I had endured much greater trials; but on this day, I decided that I had had enough. Instinctively, I had been waiting for this moment that I knew would inevitably come. I stood at attention in formation in the 98 degree temperature for nearly a half hour with the sweat running down my body inside my uniform. The tickling sensation as water dripped down my sternum was driving me mad, and black waves were passing in front of my eyes as I fought not to pass out from the heat. I said to myself simply, this is it. At the first break, I walked into the battery headquarters and announced that I wished to resign. Every day in OCS someone was screaming at us that they would “wash us out of the program,” that we couldn’t take it, and that we didn’t deserve to be there. I now agreed. Resigning wasn’t an easy proposition though, as I had to talk to the training officer and the company commander who both used a combination of insult, encouragement, and even flattery to get me to stay. I knew that they charted the drop-out rate per week and I was sure that their only interest in me was what contribution or detriment I made to the battery statistics.

As I walked out of headquarters after resigning, I was in somewhat of a daze and the strange artificiality of the life I had been living soon became evident. Lowerclass cadets were not allowed to walk on the sidewalk but were relegated to the edge of the street. Instinctively I went into the street, but then with some trepidation I returned to the sidewalk. One of the training lieutenants who had been treating us like scum just a little while before charged up and started to scream at me. I saluted and blubbered defensively that I was no longer a cadet; I had resigned. Instantly his demeanor changed and he responded pleasantly, "Good luck, private." As we both started to leave, he turned back and inquired, "Since you will be turning in your gear, may I swap some of mine with you?" Still in a disoriented state from the new condition of my life, I responded blankly, "Fine," and he walked with me over to the barracks where he traded his worn rain gear for my new issue. In less than a few minutes I had been transformed into a mere private, but I had regained human status.

After leaving OCS, I was dispatched to a holding company for a couple of weeks while awaiting orders. My life suddenly flipped from a racing treadmill where I didn’t know what day of the week it was, to a slow, lazy existence in which time was of little importance. As I got over the shock, a great cloud lifted from me and a wonderful euphoria of freedom took over. For the first time since I entered the Army, I was not a
trainee of one type or another, but an actual soldier. I was still a lowly PFC undoubtedly on my way to Vietnam and I had a year and a half more time to go, but I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. Most of the holding company were OCS dropouts awaiting their next fate, and new individuals joined daily. As we awaited orders, we did made-up work such as painting rocks, moving furniture, pulling guard duty, and merely hanging around. Analogies to the proverbial WPA stories came to mind as five or six of us and a 2 1/2 ton truck were sent to move a single desk. We filled up full days with tasks that could be completed in an hour. I lay in my bunk and read much of the time. Located only a couple of blocks from the OCS area, we often saw the cadets marching or training. I didn’t miss them.

My favorite assignment was guard duty where I spent several nights patrolling a very large parking lot. It was good duty. The temperature cooled down pleasantly in the middle of the night, the full moon shone brightly, and it was wonderfully peaceful. I listened to the radio, talked to myself, sang, made up games with license plate numbers, and thought a lot about the past and the future as I completed my slow trips around the lot. After months of forced community, I enjoyed being by myself. Occasionally I lay down for a few minutes on the hood of a car and felt the cool metal against my back as I stared up at the moon. I couldn't do that for long though because my eyes would start to fall shut in the early morning hours. The two-hour stints passed quickly. Eight months before I had been teaching at a major university; now I patrolled a parking lot that decidedly did not need guarding. I reflected that the Army had perfected the ability to waste time and talent to an art form.

For the first time since I entered the Army, I was free to do as I pleased after duty hours. Unlike most of the others in the barracks, I wasn't the barhopping type. During our first free weekend in AIT, I had made the mandatory trek to the area of sleazy stripper bars in downtown Lawton known as "The Impact Area." Blaring out of every bar at maximum volume was the hit of the moment, "Proud Mary," and the line "big wheel keep on turning" will forever be locked in my head in connection with Lawton, Oklahoma. I had no desire ever to return, so I spent most nights going to a movie on base, browsing in the library, or reading a book in my bunk. The others thought I was very dull, but it was a good life to me.

Not long after I left OCS, Earl Tharp showed up at the holding company. Having difficulty with the academic component, he had in effect flunked out and was asked to resign before entering upperclass. His peer reviews may well have played a role in his cashiering as well. I got to know Earl during the brief time that he spent in the holding company. We still had almost nothing in common except hometown and rather conservative lifestyles; although boring as I was, I was a libertine in comparison to him. Only a few weeks before, he was lord and master over me and I feared him. Now I just
felt sorrow for Earl as I began to understand the demons that drove him and the “Mad Dog” persona which he had adopted in OCS.

Earl badly needed an authority figure to turn to during this personal crises period for him—someone whom he could trust. Earl didn’t trust many people. Interestingly, I assumed the role as his counselor, amateur psychologist, mentor, and friend as he unburdened himself to me. This role reversal seemed natural to me since he was about the same age as those that I had taught at the university, and he exhibited many of the adolescent insecurities that I had encountered in my students. I came to like him very much. He was actually a rather quiet, sensitive, thoroughly decent kid with an almost pathological compulsion to prove himself. From an extremely rigid and limited background in which everything in the world was supposedly clear, he was a typical nineteen year-old struggling with all his belief systems, personal self-doubt, and a basket of other insecurities. Even though he had been far more out of place in OCS than I had been, he had invested a great deal of his self image there and he was having trouble dealing with his failure.

Earl looked to his combat performance in Vietnam to redeem himself, and he couldn’t wait to get there. He volunteered as a helicopter gunner and was killed while I was in Vietnam. Although our paths crossed accidently, briefly, and strangely, in actuality, I was closer to Earl Tharp than anyone else that I knew personally who died there. Years later I looked up his name at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, and as a Keynote Speaker when the Traveling Vietnam Wall came to Cape Girardeau, I made special reference to him. Earl was reflective of so many young soldiers who never returned from Vietnam. I wonder what life would have held in store for this simple and complicated young man had he survived.

We hadn’t been in the holding company very long before the OCS dropouts were offered the option to train as Unattended Ground Sensor Operators, a relatively new program at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. The school sought candidates who had either infantry or FDC backgrounds and a Secret security clearance. Since infantry and artillery OCS dropouts already possessed the necessary security clearance, met the requisite intelligence requirements, and had clean service records, we constituted a prime pool to recruit for the program. The school, which prepared its graduates to implant and monitor electronic intelligence equipment that tracked enemy movement in the field, was three weeks long but it took awhile to get a place in a class. This was just what I needed to keep me in the States long enough not to face the extension decision at the end of my Vietnam tour. I had contemplated airborne jump school to add a few more Stateside weeks but I wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea. The only drawback to Ground Sensor School was that it was a 100% Vietnam guarantee. As soon as we opted for the school, we were placed on orders to Vietnam with the school as a pre-departure temporary duty (TDY) assignment.
Since I figured my Vietnam chances were better than 90% anyway, I had little to risk. I had not the slightest idea what ground sensors entailed, but as far as I was concerned it had to be better than FDC. I was ready and willing to head for the Arizona desert.

I didn’t know any of the following at the time, nor while I was in Vietnam, but years later I investigated the origins of the sensor program. All the armed services launched development programs on electronic combat intelligence gathering devices in the early 1950s. Prototype acoustic and seismic sensors designed and built by the Operations Research Office at Johns Hopkins University were shipped to Korea in 1954 and tested in the Chorwon Valley. Although these sensors did not arrive until more than a year after the armistice, they promised to be valuable in a future conflict. The idea of a barrier across Vietnam, which would employ electronic devices, was proposed as early as 1958 and continued to surface periodically in the early 1960s. In January 1966, Professor Roger Fisher of Harvard Law School presented the idea of a barrier again in a memo to his friend John McNaughton, the Assistant Secretary of Defense. McNaughton eventually passed the memo along to Robert McNamara, who was searching for a better means to stop infiltration. Although Fisher proposed only barbed wire, mines, and chemical weapons, McNamara added the dimension of electronic detection devices, and he commissioned an existent group of the nation’s leading scientists, who called themselves the Jasons, to brainstorm the idea. This was the genesis of the so-called McNamara Line whose implementation began in April 1967 when the marines cleared eight miles of land along the DMZ and implanted mines, barbed wire, and sensors. Drawing upon the work of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientists, government laboratories, and commercial manufacturers, the Defense Communications Planning Group spent $670 million in the late 1960s to produce large stocks of seismic and acoustic sensors for implantation.

The McNamara Line proved to be inordinately expensive, impractical, and unworkable and was never completed. However, in operations known as Commando Hunt and Igloo White, large numbers of seismic sensors were airdropped along infiltration routes in Laos between 1968 and 1973. These sensors assisted in the frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful effort to curtail truck traffic down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Also, the hundreds of sensors implanted both by ground teams and by air drop around the marine outposts at Khe Sanh in early 1968 were credited with detecting enemy movement that gave the marines early warning of at least one attack.

In the wake of Khe Sanh, sensors were installed around the perimeters of many military bases, along convoy routes, and across enemy infiltration routes in South Vietnam. These implants were monitored on the immediate bases and from mountain top communications and relay sites, such as that on Nui Ba Den, one of the best known mountains in Vietnam. In some remote areas, planes monitored from the air.
Increasingly, unattended ground sensors took on a tactical role as line units employed them in the field as part of intelligence and combat operations. Infantry patrols employed small, portable sensors to support their night-time security perimeter. As sensors became more and more prevalent, trained personnel were needed to administer this new intelligence tool and the school at Ft. Huachuca was established in 1969. I was in only the tenth class to undergo the training.

Since I mistakenly thought that we might be shipped out from Ft. Huachuca immediately upon completion of the school and I wanted to get rid of my car before I left for Arizona, my parents and brother decided to visit me before I left Ft. Sill. My brother planned to drive the car back to Missouri where he could use it or sell it. I didn’t care since my days with that troublesome Corvair were over. We had a good family week-end visiting Mt. Scott, near Ft. Sill, and driving down to Wichita Falls, Texas. As we sat in the Ft. Sill Steak House the first evening, my mother pulled out a letter that my Potosi girlfriend had sent via my home address. It was the proverbial Dear John letter, not a great shock since our relationship had been heading downhill since I entered the Army and contact had virtually ceased while I was in OCS. My absence and dyspeptic attitude had not helped, but ironically for all of her many slights about me avoiding Vietnam while in graduate school, my former girlfriend didn’t relish replication herself. If she were looking for a husband, I wasn’t a very good prospect in either the short or long run. We both knew that it was best to end something that was not going anywhere. Although the actual finality hurt some, I knew that it was primarily the romantic nostalgia of losing the girl to look forward to coming home to. In truth, it was better to be leaving for Vietnam with no encumbrances.

I rode to Arizona with one of the guys from the holding company. The barren plains of West Texas were awful, but New Mexico was interesting. At the end of the first day, we came over the mountains and looked down on Las Cruces, New Mexico at dusk. It was a stunning sight. Ft. Huachuca, an old Indian territory post on the Mexican border, home of Black soldiers in World War II and more recently the headquarters of the U.S. Signal School, was a sad and forlorn place. Huachuca City and Sierra Vista, two tiny outposts near the base were stereotypic military villages consisting primarily of bars, strip joints, pawn shops, trailer courts, and a few cheap apartments. (I could hardly believe it when my brother was assigned to Ft. Huachuca five years later, after the Military Intelligence School moved there, that the fort was a bustling military base and Sierra Vista, a Sunbelt suburban phenomenon with more than 25,000 population.)

The month of September at Ft. Huachuca was pleasant. Although this was a military school, I was not a trainee, and it was good to be regarded as a human being. The class included junior officers, some mid and senior NCOs, and low-ranking enlisted
men such as myself. Class was informal and when the day ended at 4:00 p.m., we were free. The enlisted group generally went out at night. Nogales, Mexico was the trip of choice two or three nights a week. Although Ft. Huachuca sat on the Mexican border, the gate was at the north end of the post and the road looped around the base, so it was more than an hour to the border town. I went to Nogales twice, but it wasn’t my kind of place, and I couldn’t roll back in at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. and stay awake in class the next day. I quickly opted out of that social life and settled into my more mundane routine of reading and an occasional movie. Ft. Huachuca had very few, in fact almost no, social virtues and the movie at the single makeshift theater didn’t change very often.

If Ft. Huachuca was dead during the week, it was virtually non-existent on weekends. It was necessary to get away. Along with the rest of the young enlisted members of the sensor class, I make the obligatory week-end road trips to Tucson, where we lounged around the motel pool, watched football on television, and drank beer. My peers may have preferred the bars, but I enjoyed wandering around the University of Arizona campus. At Ft. Sill I had visited the University of Oklahoma and Southern Methodist University in Dallas on week-ends. The electricity that I felt on the university campus was invigorating and yet it made me exceedingly homesick.

I enjoyed some of the individuals in the week-end group; others I did not particularly like. One of the most memorable was an easy-going, unpretentious guy named Frank Riddlehoover from Greenville, South Carolina, who had the most southern drawl that I had ever heard. Just listening to him talk and tell stories was quite a treat. I had not known anyone from South Carolina and in my stereotype, it was as backward a place as was possible to find—on par with Mississippi. I assumed that most South Carolinians were committed racists and fundamentalists. Frank didn’t fit the mode, but his accounts of an exotic place named Bob Jones University did. I had heard of it and it was my vision of the state. It was one of the first places that I visited when I moved to South Carolina. I had been in South Carolina for about a decade when I received a phone call one morning at school from Frank, who had seen me on a local news show the previous evening. After serving as a sensor operator with the 4th Infantry Division, Frank returned home where he was a high school teacher and state championship soccer coach in Greenville. Subsequently, he moved to Spartanburg where I see him periodically.

The sensor school subject material was not the most fascinating information in the world and I fought daily to stay awake, but the days passed quickly enough. The instructors told us that Vietnam was a test ground for technology that would change warfare and that we would be in the front ranks of this revolution. I was not inspired, but the Gulf War and the high-tech contemporary military validated the prediction. The instructors also stressed the secrecy of everything that we did. Even the sensor program codename, Duffelbag, was classified.
Attending this school didn't change our Military Occupation Specialty (MOS); it merely gave us an added qualification. I remained a 13E20 (FDC specialist) and the L9 suffix to the MOS indicated ground sensor training. Although we were to be assigned in Vietnam as ground sensor personnel, we were told that since the L9 suffix was new some personnel specialists might assign us incorrectly in our regular MOS. If so, we were instructed to challenge the mistake. Most infantrymen clearly preferred assignment as a sensor operator. However, some of my FDC peers, not relishing the idea of venturing into the field to implant sensors, privately expressed that they planned to seek an FDC assignment. FDC personnel at least stayed on the firebase, usually in well-sandbagged bunkers. I remained convinced that for me almost anything was preferable to FDC.

At the end of sensor school, we went through a week of RVN (Republic of Vietnam) Training to prepare us for our departure. The September temperatures—well over 100 degrees daily with at least one day at 109—were brutal. The sun's wilting rays almost drove us into the ground; but with the dry humidity, it was tolerable in the shade. The second day of training, I slipped on a rock and badly sprained the arch of my foot. Since my thin, wiry ankles were almost impervious to this kind of injury, in all my years of sports I had never had a sprain that I couldn't walk off in a few minutes. This time, however, my whole foot turned blue and it couldn't support any weight. If I couldn't complete the training, I would have to wait until the next week cycle or whenever I was able to walk. Since I already had a Vietnam report date, this lost time would be taken out of my pre-departure month leave. A medic at the infirmary did a marvelous job of taping my foot to shift much of my weight from the sore arch to my heel. By sheer will power, often with tears running down my checks, I spent several days limping up and down hills and jumping out of trucks by landing on the good foot. Whenever I made a misstep, the pain was intense. Once as I leaped from the truck, a rock rolled under my good foot and all my weight came down on the sore one. I collapsed in the road and thought that this was the end of my training. I crawled off the road, but I kept going. Somehow, I made it through the course. It took my whole leave for the foot to heal so that I didn't limp, and it was still a little tender when I landed in Vietnam. Nothing that I experienced in Vietnam was as painful as the couple of days of RVN training, and fortunately, I arrived in country with a greater injury than anything that I sustained there.

My month leave before Vietnam was idyllic. I spent a week in Columbia where my brother was a graduate student in history at the University of Missouri. However, the draft board descended upon him not long after I left the country. I calculated that I would still be on my tour when he finished Basic and AIT so I might save him from Vietnam since two brothers couldn't be forced to serve in the war zone at the same time. If he ended up in combat arms, I was prepared to extend my tour to keep him out of the war. However, through the fortune of personal connections (the wife of the university ROTC commander was a student in one of the classes he taught) he got into ROTC and stayed in
graduate school. When I returned from Vietnam, we finished our Ph.D.s together. I graduated in August 1973; he in December. With the war over, the Army was not interested in new active duty military officers and he was offered a reduced tour served in the reserves. The job market for Ph.D.s in history was at an all-time low point, so he insisted upon serving active duty time. Thus, he began a military and military-civilian career that culminated in positions such as Deputy Defense Director of the U.S. Mission to NATO and Director of Inter-American Affairs in the Defense Department.

October in Missouri is beautiful, and I enjoyed the fall season as I had never done before. I traveled to see other friends, including my former girlfriend who was teaching in a small town north of St. Louis. Most of the month, though, I simply enjoyed time with my parents. During the day, my mother and I played pinochle with neighbors and friends, and I spent time with my dad in the evenings. My mother and I took a trip to Arkansas to visit relatives. Although it was a wonderful time, the situation was hard on my mother and maybe even harder on my dad. He covered it up better, but he felt the anxiety as great or more.

I left for Ft. Lewis, Washington, on October 30, for the first leg of the Vietnam tour. My only memory of the few days at Ft. Lewis was that it was continually rainy and foggy. I was on guard duty my last night, a familiar experience for me. As the morning light was just breaking, the dense fog began to rise. When I came around the building that I had faithfully protected during the night, suddenly right in front of me was Mt. Rainer, stunning beyond description. It seemed so close that I could almost reach out and touch it, an existential moment branded in my mind for life. As I gaped at the beauty of the scene, I was nearly overcome with patriotic emotion. I paused and prayed that I would return safely to the land and life I loved. The fog descended as quickly as it had risen, and the mountain was gone. The next evening so was I.