Chapter 3

"Welcome to Vietnam: You All Take Care Now"

In our grass-stain green fatigues and jungle boots with whitewall hair cuts—the Army demanded a fresh haircut for all significant events, even going off to war—we boarded a DC-8 Seaboard World Airline charter flight in the late afternoon of November 2. After a twenty-hour flight, including refueling stops in Hawaii and Guam, we approached Cam Ranh Bay a little before dawn on November 4. As I contemplated what lay ahead for me in the upcoming year, I noted that the flight and the loss of a day crossing the international date line meant that I already had two days in on my tour when I arrived. Looking down on the lights of the base below us, I wondered if incoming planes were shot at? Did we have to run for cover when we landed? Or was the airfield safe? It struck me how little I really knew about the nature of the conflict I was entering.

As we deplaned, by order of rank of course, the stewardesses smiled, waved, and issued cheerful good-byes such as "Welcome to Vietnam. You all take care now. See you next year at this time." In a small way, it was comforting.

In the famous opening scene of the movie Platoon, the young arrivals in their fresh uniforms pass by the hallow-eyed, zombie-like veterans heading home from their time in hell. The veterans grant comforting words such as "fresh meat" as they trudge along in their death-like trance. As we arrived at the Replacement Center, the 82nd Airborne was rotating home in the early stages of the Vietnamization drawdown. Unlike Oliver Stone's caricatures, the bright-eyed "All Americans" in their many-times-laundered bluish green fatigues shouted, cheered, and jeered as they enthusiastically displayed their joy to be going home. They peppered us with insults such as "fucking cherries," "Charlie's going get you," "Welcome to the Nam; you're goin' die here," and the whole host of "short" cliches that became part of every Vietnam vet's argot. It was my introduction to the gallows humor that permeated and sustained the combat soldier. The veterans weren't vindictive; their demeanor was upbeat, comradely, and in its own way encouraging. Seeing them heading home in such high spirits was affirmation that this too would happen to me someday; indeed the force reductions could result in a truncated tour. It did seem strange though that to reduce the number of forces in Vietnam, units were being sent home at the same time that new personnel were flooding into the country.

The encounter with the departing troops was my first experience with the silent voice of uniform hue, a language which would come to speak louder than words. Newly-issued jungle fatigues blazoned a grass-stain green color with a yellowish tint. As they were washed and washed, they increasingly became a faded bluish-green, and very old
fatigues started to have a whitish tint with frizzled cuffs and seams. You could guess how long someone had been in country by the shade of their fatigues. Since being "short" (having relatively few days left on your tour) was the greatest status symbol of the war, the more faded your fatigues, the more worthy one was of deference. If he had to be issued a new set of fatigues for any reason, a soldier wanted to keep at least one set of old fatigues to occasionally show off his tenure.

For combat soldiers, time in the field was more important than rank. Indeed everywhere, time in country was an unofficial parallel rank structure on the respect meter. An infantry private with months in the field felt quite justified in looking down on any newly arrived officer of any rank clad in the tell-tale greenish fatigues. The private’s CIB, worn fatigues, bush hat, decorated steel pot, and other symbols of life in the field far surpassed the patches on an officer’s collar. Only those designations earned in country had real meaning. It wouldn't be long before all of us could read the silent argot that told of time in country and marked grunts from REMFs.

I arrived in country with a gullible notion that the war was everywhere with everyone in Vietnam subject to danger and combat. It took only one day to see that the war wasn't at Cam Ranh Bay. The base was huge, barren, and sandy and smelled awful. The mixture of ammonia-scented latrines, the oily pungency of shit-burning, rotting garbage, and dead fish formed an aromatic combination that was standard Vietnam olfactory fare. The stifling heat and humidity were overpowering. On the other hand, the wide blue bay was my first introduction to the never-ending beauty of this picturesque country. Despite its primitiveness, the base at Cam Ranh Bay smacked of a Stateside post. Where the combat zone began, I did not yet know. We heard some small arms fire in the distance the first evening, and the word spread among the newly arrived that a sniper had killed a perimeter guard. Whether this was fact or rumor fanned by the innocent, I never learned. Many of us, at least those in combat arms and ones as credulous as I, believed that within the next few days we would be in the midst of a whole year of daily fighting for our lives.

At formation the first night at the 22nd Replacement Battalion, I received shipping orders assigning me as an FDC operator with an artillery unit of the 101st Airborne at Dong Ha, located on the DMZ, the northernmost American base in country. Pursuing my instructions at Ft. Huachuca, I approached the First Sergeant at the end of formation and pointed out that I had been incorrectly assigned in FDC. He proclaimed that the plane was leaving in a few minutes and I should take care of any problem at Dong Ha. Since he was so unconcerned and dismissive, I suspected that I would face the same difficulties getting anyone to listen to me at Dong Ha.
I did not want to be in FDC, and even in my neophyte state, I knew that the DMZ was the worst area of the war, hardly the choicest assignment that I could draw. Even if I could free myself from FDC, most likely I would still be with the 101st in a most unpleasant part of the country. I insisted vigorously that we had been told emphatically “not to accept” incorrect orders, so I was following lawful instructions. He yelled at me to get on the plane and threatened me, but I persisted. Scared out of my wits by the confrontation, I was literally trembling. With my high, thin voice, which quivered when I got emotional, I could never project the macho image that the military honored; but from Basic Training days on, I had learned that audacity and stubbornness often prevailed. If they couldn’t yell you down, the military often took the path of least resistance. Finally, the First Sergeant relented and said to come into the headquarters where a stay was placed on the orders, and I was put in for reassignment.

I tried all the next day to get the use of a phone to call my high school and college friend Larry Schloss at Long Binh Post. “Replacements” weren’t allowed to use the phones. Undeterred, I found a young Sp/4 in an office who let me use his, although to no avail as I couldn’t get through. Larry had been in country for better than four months as a personnel specialist at II Field Force. He had written to me before I left the States that if he could get his hands on a copy of my orders, he would try to get me assigned as a personnel specialist in his office. Seemingly never able to satiate their demand for trained clerical personnel to deal with the paperwork bureaucracy in Vietnam, the Army routinely lifted college graduates with typing skills from combat arms and transformed them into on-the-job training clerks. Working through a friend of his at USARV, who screened in-country assignments, Larry earlier had arranged an assignment for a high school associate of ours as a truck driver at Long Binh.

Since I did not receive my shipping orders until I was at Ft. Lewis immediately before I left for Vietnam, I wasn’t able to provide Larry with the paperwork he needed to pull off an assignment. The best that I could do was to give him a general week-long time frame when I should arrive in country. As I learned later, his friend screened all the incoming sensor operators during the designated week in search of my name, but since my orders assigned me as FDC, he missed me. When my name was resubmitted with the L9 sensor designation, the friend spotted my orders. However, a new directive just issued, probably because of people such as I who were challenging the incorrect assignments, stated that L9 designees were a priority not to be assigned otherwise. The best that Larry’s friend could do was to assign me as a sensor operator to the 199th Infantry Brigade, whose rear headquarters was at Long Binh. Even that was a bit out of the norm since I was already at the 22nd Replacement Battalion in Cam Ranh Bay, the center for processing personnel designated for units in I or II Corps Tactical Zones. Personnel for III Corps, where Long Binh was located, came to the replacement battalion at Bien Hoa.
On November 6, I flew from Cam Ranh Bay to Bien Hoa Air Base, a little more than ten miles northeast of Saigon, and took a bus to Long Binh, about five miles further east. Long Binh was a gigantic military complex, the largest U.S. military area in the world and the rear area headquarters of the war in Vietnam. The Long Binh complex consisted of the huge Long Binh Post and numerous other attached compounds comprising a sprawling city of tens of thousands of people. Buildings of all descriptions, including large World War II style barracks like those still used on U.S. military bases, were interspersed with paved roads, heli-pads, storage depots, and vehicle parks spread out over square miles of red dirt. Very little vegetation could be found. Swirling red dust was everywhere in the dry season, and the place was a sea of mud during the rainy season.

Long Binh was a vivid testimony to the excess of support manpower and material in General William Westmoreland’s approach to the war. It was a virtual REMF citadel. Other than more primitive conditions and separation from families, life at Long Binh wasn’t that different from any large Stateside base. The complex overflowed with the amenities associated with military bases worldwide—huge PXs filled to the brim with the latest in technology and other toys, stereo shops, dozens of movie theaters showing first-run movies, recreation centers, swimming pools, libraries, and Officer, NCO, and Enlisted Men (EM) Clubs. Loon Fong’s Chinese restaurant on Long Binh Post was a culinary delight at incredibly low prices. In a fleet of air-conditioned trailers, the University of Maryland, where many years later I began my teaching career on military bases in Europe, ran a full mini-college campus for off-duty personnel. Several graduate programs were also available as were junior college, technical school, and remedial programs. Long Binh Post even had its own government-franchised bordello.

Long Binh and MACV in Saigon were the quintessential symbols of Vietnam as a paper-pusher’s heaven. The volume of record keeping, statistics, reports, and miscellaneous other stacks of paper was mind boggling. In the pre-computer era, all this work was done by a huge contingent of clerk-typists working primarily on manual typewriters. The minimum typing qualification from the Army’s clerk school was 15 words a minute with ample errors, and many of the clerks didn’t significantly exceed the basic proficiency. A good typist was a valuable commodity. For whatever reasons, possibly sensitivity to criticism about the huge number of non-combat manpower poured into the country, the Army was not sending many clerk-typists to Vietnam in 1969. This didn’t mean, however, that the giant rear-echelon bureaucracy was any less ravenous for personnel. As indicated above, incoming personnel with other MOS’s, particularly college grads, were siphoned off to keep the paper-pushing empire intact.

Larry had briefed me well about the value of typing skill. As I processed in at the Personnel office of the 199th Brigade Main Base (officially named Camp Frenzell-Jones
after the first two soldiers from the unit to die in Vietnam, but always referred to as BMB), on the various required forms I was not modest about my excellent typing skills. I was assigned as a sensor operator with the S-2 (Intelligence) detachment in Headquarters Company at the Forward Base at Xuan Loc, 25-30 miles east of Long Binh. Another piece of advice dispensed at Ft. Huachuca was that immediately upon assignment we should report to the S-2 office to have our classified Sensor School notes sent to us through military channels. These would assist us in our new jobs. No sooner than I received my assignment, I dutifully sought out the Rear S-2 officer to complete this task.

The 199th Rear S-2 office consisted of a clerk in his last days in country and his just-arrived replacement, who was an egregious example of the manpower diversion noted above. I would soon be another instance. Drafted out of law school, William Smith was selected for NCO School for a cram course as an infantry sergeant—so called “Shake and Bake” NCOs—to fill the need for infantry squad leaders in Vietnam. Vietnam was a young man’s war; the older, experienced NCO’s tended not to be in the field. Despite the time and expense of training him for this combat role, when he arrived in country, the highly educated and articulate new sergeant was picked off immediately for a desk job. He spent his entire tour in Long Binh as the Rear S-2 clerk and as an off-duty swimming pool lifeguard.

The departing clerk happened to be from St. Louis, and we began our conversation with some pleasantries about being from Missouri and about the St. Louis Cardinals. He asked to see my Army Personnel Records and after glancing at them, picked up the phone, called S-2 Forward, and began telling someone on the other end about my educational background and my purported typing prowess. When he finished, he informed me that the S-2 clerk at Xuan Loc was leaving for home that week and the office was looking for a good typist. I would be assigned to the sensor program but would serve as the S-2 clerk-typist. He added that the sensor program had more operators than they knew what to do with anyway. All of this happened so fast that I didn’t fully understand what was taking place, but an office job sounded just fine to me.

First, I had to complete a week of RVN orientation, known as Redcatcher Training from the nickname of the Brigade, a refresher course on basic combat training and the particular dangers of Vietnam. The Forward S-2 office was eager to get me to Xuan Loc and tried unsuccessfully to get the week waived for me. I too was eager to get to Xuan Loc and see what my situation held in store. I definitely hoped that I wouldn’t have need of the Redcatcher training. Although the war seemed rather remote at Long Binh, early one morning during the week of training, we received a reminder that we were at least tangentially in a war zone as a Viet Cong rocket landed on the huge complex. It was the first rocket in almost a year and it didn’t hit anything, but the explosion rousted us out of
our hootches into the bunkers. The RVN instructors continually reminded us about the 1968 Tet Offensive when Long Binh Post had been attacked and fighting had occurred on base. And they warned that another big offensive might occur in the upcoming Tet season. Although I assumed that most of the rhetoric was to motivate us to take the training seriously, the rocket did add authenticity to their words.

My friend Larry came over to see me one afternoon before I left Long Binh. Larry and I had been friends for a long time. We went to junior high, high school, and college together. We were both drafted in graduate school, and Larry was just three weeks ahead of me in Basic Training at Fort Leonard Wood. We ended up in Vietnam within a mile of each other, or at least my Rear Headquarters was just across the road from his base. However, our tours were very different. Larry spent his year as the stereotype REMF, a personnel specialist with II Field Force, the ultimate rear-echelon bureaucracy. He worked an eight-hour day in an air conditioned office on Long Binh Post and had virtually no contact with the war. His daily work routine wasn't much different from that he would have experienced at any base in the States or around the world. I served my year at the forward base of a combat unit. Although my work also was primarily administrative, I flew helicopter combat missions and saw limited action on the ground. I identified as a combat soldier even if I may have only marginally qualified.

Almost every time that I was in the Rear, I dropped into Larry's office in Long Binh. Usually, I had driven in by jeep and was covered from head to toe with red dust. In full combat gear with steel pot, flak jacket, M-16 and a couple of bandoleers of ammo hanging off my shoulder, I looked like a typical grunt. I could see the shock in Larry's eyes as he had trouble conceptualizing his old friend in this image. Others in the office glared disapprovingly at the dirty soldier in their neat, orderly, and polished space. I had the feeling that the last thing the REMFs wanted to come in contact with was a real live soldier to remind them of the reality of a war beyond their protected haven. Several times I tried to get Larry to take a chopper flight to come see me at Xuan Loc, but he never would. Married nine days before leaving the country, Larry suffered a bitter year of separation in Vietnam. Given his safe situation, he easily could have extended his tour and gotten out of the Army immediately upon return. He hated the service, but he passed up the opportunity and finished out his time Stateside at Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

Few people could have gone to Vietnam with more similar backgrounds than Larry and me. But Vietnam was a totally different experience for each of us, then and ever since. For him, it was a lost year of his life that he treats as if it never happened. I have not talked with him about it, but I doubt that he even considers himself a Vietnam veteran. I wouldn't have predicted it, but my Vietnam year was the beginning of a career direction. Larry and I serve as good examples of the diversity of the Vietnam experience.
for every participant. Our mutual year in Vietnam is not something that we hold in common. It is actually a point of separation between us.

On Sunday, November 16, I took a chopper to Xuan Loc. My first helicopter ride was exhilarating. The whop-whop-whop sound of the rotors had a captivating, calming sound that I loved. The countryside below, including the jungle, the highway, the Michelin Rubber plantation, and various small hamlets, was beautiful. Throughout my tour I was struck by the beauty of the country, and I always found it hard to believe that a war was going on amidst such magnificent landscape. I spent much time in helicopters during my year, and I never got over the thrill of them. To this day, the sound of a helicopter rotor, whether real or in a movie, stirs a visceral excitement deep inside me.

The Forward Headquarters at Xuan Loc was a rather small compound, not more than the area of two or three city blocks with approximately 20 buildings laid out more or less in three rows. One main street ran through the compound with a turnoff to the heli-pad that jutted out in a triangle shape to the south. The base was located on the eastern edge of the city of Xuan Loc (population approximately 14,000), the provincial capital of Long Khanh Province. The Headquarters of the 18th ARVN Regiment was across the street to the east, and several tiny American compounds, including artillery, MACV, engineers, and Navy Seabee contingents, as well as various ARVN, Regional Forces, and Popular Forces units were scattered around the city.

Unlike BMB, Xuan Loc had trees and grass. The buildings were almost all the traditional hootch, a cabin-like structure with exterior walls of wooden slats slanting out and screen wire inside covered by a tin roof. The space between the slats allowed for air flow. The hootches used as offices had wood floors built up from the ground. Some of the barracks hootches did as well. Others had a concrete slab at or slightly below ground level. In the latter, during the monsoon rains, water flowed in and stood a couple of inches deep. We put everything up on beer or coke cans to keep it above the water, and we waded through the dirty red tide until the girls who cleaned the hootches could get it swept out.

Arriving at Xuan Loc, I reported to Master Sergeant Nelson Taber, the S-2 NCOIC. A 27-year veteran in his late forties, Msg. Taber hadn’t been in country long, and, surprisingly for a career NCO, this was his first Vietnam tour. Msg. Taber, or “Top” as he was sometimes called, indicating his status as the top NCO, was a traditional senior administrative NCO. He had an aura about him that commanded deference, and it didn’t take long to discern that the S-2 office was his. The younger enlisted men knew that he was boss, and junior officers recognized that he was a man to treat with propriety. Msg. Taber had spent much of his recent career in ROTC programs preparing junior officers, and he dealt with young officers with a fair amount of paternalism. It was clear that they
shouldn’t cross him and they didn’t. The senior officers also demonstrated proper respect for his status, and his military decorum toward them was scrupulously correct.

In almost a year that I worked for him, I was never clear just what he actually did except preside over the office. He expected things to run smoothly and he did not like surprises or embarrassments in his area of responsibility. As long as one demonstrated proper deference and caused him no problems, he was easy to get along with, and most of the young enlisted men who worked under him were quite loyal to him. He had a temper and one definitely wanted to avoid his ire. Because I did my job and was unfailingly respectful and careful in dealing with him, we got along well. Only a couple of times did I incur his anger and those passed quickly. He treated me with the same paternalism that he did everyone else.

As soon as I reported in, Msg. Taber called in Sp/4 Jerry Ketterer and told him to find me a bunk. Ketterer, from Hannibal, Missouri, a former high school student of a colleague in the graduate history program at the University of Missouri, officially was the S-2 driver. An infantryman in the field for a brief time until a wound or illness (I don’t remember which) brought him back to base, Ketterer was a classic stereotype straight out of Catch 22, an outgoing redneck hustler who had carved out a role for himself at Xuan Loc as driver, handyman, and general “gofer.” Everyone at Xuan Loc from the Commanding General on down knew Ketterer and his reputation as a “scrounger” who could get his hands on whatever one wanted. He did things for people from the General to the newest PFC and he piled up favors. Meanwhile he lived the good life, partying most of the night, sleeping late, and being omnipresent and yet out of sight at the same time. If someone wanted him to drive a jeep during the morning, they would usually find him in bed; but he would pop up and be ready to go in a couple of minutes. He managed to touch base with every office on the compound everyday, and he was a fountain of news, rumor, and gossip. He was the man to see for what was going on at Xuan Loc. Even the General would ask Ketterer what was going on on the compound, and the young specialist was never adverse to speaking his mind.

Whatever else he did or did not do, Ketterer was always available for and solicitous to Msg. Taber. He would come wandering into the S-2 office at mid-morning, yawning and looking a bit disarrayed, inquire if Msg. Taber needed anything done, and then would share and collect gossip with the rest of the office. Whenever Msg. Taber wanted something, he would issue a command to “find Ketterer.” Since the young specialist’s quite unmilitary lifestyle was a source of embarrassment periodically to the senior NCO, Ketterer regularly was the recipient of Msg. Taber’s blistering tongue lashings. However, these chastisements simply rolled off Ketterer’s back, and he would be back in a few hours as if nothing had happened. For all the threats and blustering,
Msg. Taber liked Ketterer and protected him. And Ketterer knew that his peculiar status as something of a base institution was secure as long as he had Msg. Taber’s tolerance.

Ketterer found me a temporary bunk in one of the hootches for a couple of nights until the regular inhabitant returned from R&R. Since all the beds were full, I was a vagabond for the first week, grabbing a bunk every night wherever I could from someone on guard duty or the night shift. Finally, a permanent bunk opened up in the hootch next to the S-2 building. Getting my own space was very important since I could unpack my duffel bag and start to bring some order into my life. The hootch was a small building with two parallel rows of approximately eight or nine double-decker bunks crammed a few feet apart. The more than 30 people who lived in the hootch existed in very close proximity to each other. Two Air Force enlisted men who served as liaison personnel had a private room walled off at the back of the hootch. Latrine and shower facilities were located at the far end of the row of buildings. Local Vietnamese women, some very young and some quite old, called hootch maids, cleaned the buildings daily, and for $10 a month deducted from our pay, they made our beds, washed clothes, and shined boots each day. The service was quite extraordinary. You dropped your clothes on the floor when you took them off and the next afternoon a clean uniform would be folded on your bunk with shined boots underneath.

With the different work shifts, one could find people in the hootch asleep or awake at any hour day or night. Fortunately, I was a sound sleeper since radio and stereos blared almost constantly. Ketterer scrounged me a small lamp which I tied above my bunk so I could lie in bed and read at any time. With my mosquito net and military camouflage poncho liner as bedspread, as was the common practice, I carved out my own personal space free of rules, regulations, and inspections for the first time since I had been in the Army. Of course, just as I had during my first days, if you were gone for a few days, a squatter could inhabit your bunk in the interim. I wasn’t gone very often, and my bunk was a personal haven during my tour.

The close communal living had its interesting dimensions. Some individuals walked around quite unselfconsciously in the nude stopping to talk with the hootch maids. Sex was a primary topic of conversation in the place, and Playboy centerfolds hung all over the barracks. Solicitation of the younger hootch maids was common. Most of them refused, but occasionally a monetary arrangement was concluded. I walked into the hootch during the day more than once where various unabashed sexual activity was in progress. All the food and drink that anyone could want were always available, and late at night, the smell of marijuana floated through the barracks. Given the close quarters and varying lifestyles, tempers sometimes flared; but in general we coexisted amazingly well.
My work situation was quite demanding at first. I came to Xuan Loc in the final days of preparation for a major Inspector General (IG) review. Indeed this is why the S-2 office had been on the look-out for a good typist. They needed someone to get the reams of last minute paperwork completed. The entire base also was preparing for a new Brigade Commander, which necessitated briefings from every segment on the compound. When I arrived on Sunday afternoon, I was introduced and shown around, and Msg. Taber told me to report to the office at 7:30 a.m. the next morning. When I came in, I was handed a large stack of typing that had been building since the last clerk left and instructed to start working on it. A “shake and bake” sergeant in from the field for jungle rot on his feet, a former graduate student in history at Wayne State University, had been pulled over from night duty in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to do the essential daily tasks. However, his typing skills were limited, and he was happy to return to the TOC. I typed reports, correspondence, briefings, etc. all day on an old black metal Olivetti manual with sticky keys. (Later I would acquire a huge, clunky old Royal of equally dubious quality.) At 5:00 p.m. Msg. Taber told me to go eat dinner and come back. He was in for a little while after dinner and left. I was there until after 10:00 p.m. that night when the Major finally told me that I could leave; but later someone got me out of bed to type a briefing for the next day. It was after 1:00 a.m. when I got to bed to stay.

The next several days followed a similar pattern. The Military Intelligence (MI) Order of Battle office in the rear of the S-2 building was open twenty-four hours a day so S-2 was always open even if we didn’t always have someone in the front of the building. The Major in charge of S-2 (called the S-2) had a volatile, manic personality and worked virtually around the clock, particularly late at night. I wondered when and if he slept. From Greek background, he was often referred to behind his back as “the Crazy Greek.” I had no idea what kind of hours I was supposed to put in, and I didn’t think that it was appropriate to ask. Msg. Taber’s enlightening overture was that my job description was to do what I was told to do. My thought was that since this was a war zone with soldiers in the field being shot at twenty-four hours a day, working long hours was minimal to what those in combat faced. The young sergeant who filled in until I arrived was so happy to be out of the field that he would have worked daytime in the office and at night in the TOC not to have to go back to combat. However, my generous views on the subject of working hours would soon change.

I understood that the General’s office had a day and a night clerk and the only electric typewriter on base; the two clerks maintained twelve hour shifts each. I was putting in a lot more hours than that. I hadn’t been behind a typewriter for awhile and my shoulders ached from constantly sitting at the machine. By the end of the day, my mind was a blur, and I couldn’t concentrate on what I was trying to do. With no training as a clerk, I didn’t know the proper forms for the various pieces of correspondence or reports, so I was undergoing a crash course in military office practices while everyone demanded
that their work be done immediately. The word spread quickly that S-2 had a good and
hardworking typist and paperwork started flowing in from other offices as well. Msg.
Taber was angry when he heard that other offices were dumping their work on me, but he
wasn’t around late at night when an officer would come in and inform me that his
particular piece of work had priority. I didn’t understand the relationship of the various
components of the base yet or feel confident enough with my new situation to say no.
Besides, Msg. Taber’s ire was primarily because other offices didn’t follow proper
protocol to go through him to use his personnel. When they asked him politely, he
volunteered my services without hesitation.

I don’t know how long I could or would have kept up the pace; however, the
coming and going of the IG brought well-needed moderation, and things improved again
after all the briefings for the new Brigade Commander passed. I continued to return to
the office in the evening after dinner and work was often waiting for me. No one ever
gave any indication of when would be an appropriate time to depart. I determined that I
was on call twenty-four hours a day. Msg. Taber usually checked in for awhile after
dinner and then disappeared for his nightly poker games. Various officers passed through
during the evening, primarily the night-duty Military Intelligence detachment and TOC
officers. I didn’t mind being in the office in the evening, especially when no one else was
around. It was certainly more peaceful than next door in the barracks. If there wasn’t
much to do, I wrote letters or read.

With a little experience, I learned that I should leave the office before the S-2
came charging in at about 10:00 p.m. because he always had something to type. If it was
a rush and I wasn’t readily available, he might send it to the night clerk in the Command
Headquarters rather than dispatch someone to find me. If it wasn’t urgent, it would be
waiting for me in the morning. However, if I was there, he always said, “Do this now.”
More than once I typed well into the night only to have the report sit on his desk for days.
I came to understand that if I were available, work would appear, including that from
other offices. When someone was looking to have something typed quickly, they grabbed
the first person they found. I decided that it didn’t always have to be me. Sometimes the
S-2 or another officer would send someone to get me in the hootch at night. If I wasn’t
there, they took the work to Command Headquarters.

When a lot of paper producing was going on, it was wise to stay away from the
hootch in the evening. Going to the nightly movies was a wise choice, although I was
pulled out of several of them. During the time that I occupied the clerk position, I
alternated between periods of reasonable or moderate work load punctuated with periods
of working virtually around the clock. If we had visiting dignitaries coming, I could
expect to be at the typewriter well into the night producing endless drafts of last minute
briefings. When I was up most of the night, Msg. Taber generously allowed me to come
in an hour or two late—that is if no one asked for me. A few times I had been in bed only an hour or two when someone came to get me in the morning. However, I was so dazed and surly that I wasn’t of great value, and I was not adverse to stating emphatically that I was a person who needed sleep.

The worst aspect of the typing job was stencils which were employed in order to generate hundreds of mimeographed copies of all reports. Using the correction fluid to fix typing errors was a frustrating process. One could get high on the smell of the stuff. For months I had blue ink on my hands, arms, face, and the rest of my body most of the time. The Situation Report (SITREP), the account of the events of the day, was the daily bane of my existence. It was always a rush job to get it out, the formula to be followed was awkward, and the product had to be perfect. Everything came to me handwritten. Interpreting the scrawling was the first task, particularly deciphering the scribbles which passed for numbers. Getting the coordinates correct for places where actions had occurred was very important, but it was never an easy task. I had to chase people down to ask questions such as, “Is this a five or a three, a two or a seven, etc.?” I was constantly irritated over why people couldn’t write numbers carefully and precisely to avoid ambiguity. When the stencil for the SITREP left the office every morning, I considered the bulk of my daily task complete. Anything that I didn’t have to do on stencil was pleasant in comparison.

Daily I transformed illegible and illiterate writing into typed prose. The Major wrote like he lived, in energetic bursts of incoherence. Since I had to interpret his horrible handwriting anyway, I corrected his spelling, made minor grammar changes, and did the best that I could to figure out what the sentence was supposed to mean. I found the military’s penchant for passive voice tedious. To save myself from repeated drafts, with more scribbling up and down the margins to interpret until the Major finally reached a point of elemental communication, I started to edit as I typed. I knew that I was treading on thin ice since I had witnessed his violent temper several times; and it didn’t take long for him to scream at me, “Who did I think that I was correcting a superior officer?” I was properly deferential as I explained that I was a good writer who could save him time by cutting down the number of necessary drafts. He angrily retorted to type just what he had written; but after a few days in which I was scrupulous to record every error in the script, including all the wrong spelling that I corrected routinely, he changed his mind and told me to make the changes necessary.

As he gained more and more confidence in my writing, he started dumping projects on my desk for me to write for him. By the time that he left the Brigade in mid December, I was doing most of his writing. Immediately before he rotated from his assignment, the S-2 had to complete Officer Efficiency Reports (OER) on all the officers serving under him. In several cases, he gave me lists of phrases about each officer and
told me to use those and the typical Army cliches to write the OERs. I worked until 3:00 a.m. for a couple of nights getting that task completed, but it was more interesting than other functionary duties.

As I settled into the routine, I was comfortable with the situation in the office. I had established my reputation as a hard worker who possessed valuable skills. The days passed quickly. Mornings were busy, nights were always problematic, but afternoons were generally quiet and lazy. Siesta time prevailed. Msg. Taber and Captain Bruce Adams, the Assistant S-2 (for Air operations) took naps after lunch, and the Major seldom made an appearance during the afternoon. Someone stayed to answer the phones while I had lunch, and I relieved them. I usually had an hour or two of solace before people drifted back in. Without anyone around, it was a good time to write the letters that are the basis of this memoir. It was a warm and sleepy time and sometimes I faded off at the desk. Sometimes I could get someone to watch the office and answer the phone, and I would go next door for a more serious nap. Soon after people wandered back into the office by mid-afternoon, the mail arrived and everyone stopped to read it. Besides letters, there were always several copies of the daily world-wide military newspaper _Stars & Stripes_. I looked forward daily to _Stars & Stripes_, but I read virtually everything else that came into the office too, including the two weekly newspapers USARV’s _The Army Reporter_ and MACV’s _The Observer_, the 199th’s own biweekly _Redcatcher_, and monthlies or bi-monthlies such as _Army_ and _Infantry_. The afternoon passed pleasantly. The pattern didn’t vary much seven days a week.

I considered myself very fortunate to have my nice, safe job, but having trained as a sensor operator, I could not help but be interested in the sensor program. Several operators resided at the Brigade’s primary monitoring site on Signal Mountain, the large mountain that dominated the whole area. Two others were at another site on an ARVN base, and a few were assigned to the individual battalions. Two were permanently stationed at Xuan Loc and others rotated in for a few days at a time. At Xuan Loc, the operators did almost nothing. In truth, the sensor program didn’t have much of a purpose and wasn’t taken very seriously. No one really cared about it. As the Rear S-2 clerk told me when I arrived, the program had more operators than it knew what to do with or could find places to put them, especially since the unit had little mission.

2Lt. Mike Williams was the sensor officer. He and PFC Jerry Ross, a member of the first sensor class, initiated the program when the Brigade operated in the Pineapple region west of Saigon. Williams had been a long-haired, free-spirited graduate student in counseling psychology when he was drafted. Even though he graduated from OCS and had served with distinction for a time in the field as an artillery forward observer, he never adapted to the military style. In the early days, Williams and Ross, two kindred spirits, largely went their own unsupervised way, and they had a lore of stories from the
“frontier” times. Larry Savoy eventually joined the two and the three constituted the old hands. When I arrived, Sp/4s Ross and Savoy were permanently stationed at Xuan Loc and their only mission seemed to be to cultivate their suntans as they counted down the final months of their tours. They slept until noon and made only token appearances in the office. I envied their freedom. The thought of liberation from the typewriter and being able to read most of the day appealed to me. Since I intended to keep myself sharp for return to graduate school, reading time was a major objective during my entire tour, and indeed I kept a list of the more than 50 books, including some heavy tomes, that I read during the year.

My first holiday, Thanksgiving, came and went less than two weeks after arriving at Xuan Loc. I was quite busy that morning and didn’t even remember what day it was until noon. Although holidays were regular working days, the Army took them seriously. The meal was wonderful, and the Mess Hall was open all day so people could wander in whenever they wished. Thanksgiving meals with all the trimmings were flown out to all troops in the field with the exception of one platoon that couldn’t participate because it was on patrol. Vietnamese, Thais, Australians, and Americans of every kind sharing the meal together was for me a quite meaningful experience which represented the true spirit of thanksgiving. The Australian liaison on base remarked that only Americans could come up with such a holiday and shut down a war to celebrate it. Incongruous as this feast seemed to be in the middle of a war zone, I was certainly thankful to be relatively safe and living a good life as compared to the troops in the field. I ate too much and could barely keep awake during the afternoon. Captain Adams, who was so thin that he looked emaciated, ate so much that he got sick and had to go to bed.

The next day we observed a change of command ceremony as Brigadier General William R. Bond assumed command of the 199th. From what I heard, few regretted the departure of his predecessor. Although I hadn’t been around long enough to have any personal insight on the matter, I had heard many snide remarks about the man and his penchant for show over substance. I have no idea if he was responsible, but I had witnessed plenty of what the Army calls “eyewash” or purely for show such as painting the rocks in the Headquarters Building rock garden prior to the IG. I had hoped that kind of Stateside Army practice wouldn’t dominate the war zone. General Bond was a soldier’s general, a combat veteran of three wars, who liked to be in the field. He was outgoing, gung-ho, and generally popular during his tragically-brief command. He always seemed to be going at almost a dead run. As he flew by, he returned salutes with a quick, crisp motion and usually spoke something such as “Good morning soldier.” He almost ran me over one day as he came flying around a building on his way to the helo-pad. He didn’t seem to stand on great formality and his adoption of the bush hat, which identified him with soldiers in the field, not only legitimized its wear on base but made it the fashion statement of the moment. I was amused that when he donned the floppy hat
all the senior officers quickly followed suit. Previously, the bush hat had been frowned upon and sometimes forbidden on base.

The Brigade S-2 left soon afterward on December 10. His replacement had been on board for weeks for briefings prior to assuming the position. I had spent quite a bit of time talking with the new Major, and he informed me that I would be getting a larger role in the office when he took over. I liked the man, but from my conversations with him, I had reservations about his abilities. It was clear that he was very homesick for his wife and children, and I picked up a number of references in the office that questioned his capacity for the job. A few days before he was to assume the office, I rode with him back to Long Binh where he had an interview with someone at II Field Force. We talked quite a bit during the trip and I could tell that something was very wrong. He was extremely nervous, and on the way back, he sort of babbled. Although PFCs didn’t ask majors personal questions, I dared to inquire one time, “Are you feeling okay, Sir.” His positive response wasn’t very convincing. No sooner than we got back to Xuan Loc, the Major collapsed from nervous exhaustion and was medivaced to Bien Hoa Air Base Hospital. A temporary S-2 and then a new permanent one were named and a whole new series of briefings were conducted. After recovery, the Major eventually emerged as the Brigade Inspector General, a much better role for him.

Other than an earlier short excursion into the city of Xuan Loc, the trip back to Long Binh was my first venture off the base. I enjoyed the new sights and the experience the first time; however, in the next several months, I would make this trip many times and come to hate it. The trip along Highway 1 to Long Binh during the day time was relatively safe, although sniper fire did occur on rare occasions. When I returned from my uneventful excursion, I learned that three of our sensor operators had had a more traumatic trip. On the way back from an implant mission at a river bridge, the 2½ ton truck (known in the Army as a “deuce-and-a-half”) ran over a land mine. The driver and passenger in the front were killed. Those in the back, including the sensor operators, were thrown out onto the roadside. Although no one in the back was seriously injured, they were bruised and shaken by the experience. One of the operators never got over that day. He had just come down from the monitoring site on Signal Mountain on the normal rotation into Xuan Loc. He went back immediately and, with the exception of R&R, he refused to leave the mountain again for rotation or for any other reason. Since he was the most dependable of the operators, he was left there in peace until the end of his tour.

Vietnam, a tropical country, has two seasons—the wet season and the dry season. The monsoons occur at different times in different parts of the country, but essentially there is a spring one and a fall one. I arrived just at the end of the fall wet season and the beginning of the winter dry season. The temperature was hot in both winter and summer, although decidedly more so in the summer. During winter, the days were quite warm, but
the evenings were pleasant. The length of daylight didn’t vary much between the seasons. The shedding of tree leaves was one of the few indications of winter. All year round, the temperature at Xuan Loc was more moderate than at barren Long Binh. The weather at Christmas was hardly traditional for a midwesterner.

Christmas is a special time, and my Christmas in Vietnam was one of the most memorable in my life. The Christmas Eve communion service at the Xuan Loc base chapel was lovely. I sang in the choir for the service, as I did most of the time on Sunday mornings. Sp/5 Doug Dash, one of the clerks at Command Headquarters and a choir director in civilian life, had organized the choir and served as conductor. It was his passion during his tour. Msg. Lee, a small and quiet-spoken Mississippian, served as organist. The choir was an interesting collection across all ranks in which the most senior officers subordinated themselves to the young specialist director’s leadership and expertise. Msg. Lee tried to keep the choir alive after the end of Doug’s tour, but it dwindled to a small shadow of its former self. At the Christmas service, I was touched, as I had been earlier at Thanksgiving, by the gathering of nationalities, which included liaison personnel from adjacent Australian, New Zealand, Korean, and Thai forces, as well as the several Vietnamese present. Singing Silent Night in the quiet darkness, the evocation of Peace on Earth seemed appropriate for a war zone. A raucous band at the Base Club that same evening provided a different ambiance for those more inclined to that form of celebration. However, the band was silent during the service as was virtually all other activity on base, a very rare occurrence and a very powerful experience.

As I walked back to my hootch that night, I thought that the stars never looked brighter or the world more serene. The irony of war was profound. I contemplated why mankind couldn’t merely luxuriate in the beauty of the earth, and I sympathized very much for the men who spent that evening in the field, on both sides. Naturally, I felt a touch of sadness about being so far away from family at Christmas, but in truth I was more overpowered by pure, unadulterated joy. That night remains powerfully etched in my memory.

Christmas Day, a normal office day even if no one pretended to work, started out uneventfully. After stuffing ourselves at lunch, all of us in the office were reading, writing letters, and periodically falling asleep, when suddenly in mid-afternoon “all Hell broke loose.” Across the base, people started getting violently ill and collapsing. Dustoff choppers lifted more than 50 people to the Bien Hoa hospital in the first hour, and the numbers continued to grow through the afternoon and early evening. Those of us who were still healthy helped load stretchers on to the choppers and wondered if we were next to succumb. It was a scary time since we didn’t know what was happening. Paranoia was high. Eventually the word filtered back that the cause was food poisoning from the shrimp cocktail. So many people were so desperately sick and in such horrible condition
when we put them on the choppers that I thought that many would die. No one did, but it was several days before some returned to work. Our office had no casualties. Most reported that they were not shrimp eaters. I love shrimp, but I had taken one bite of the shrimp cocktail, thought that it tasted wrong, and actually spat it out. I was very glad about that.

Three days after all this excitement, on Sunday afternoon, the Bob Hope Christmas Tour, with Miss World 1970, actress Connie Stevens, Les Brown and the Band of Renown, a troop of mini-skirted singers and dancers, and astronaut Neil Armstrong, came to Long Binh Post. Included in the audience of 25,000 were 900 “Redcatchers” from the 199th Infantry. The Brigade sent seventeen busloads of troops from the line units. At first Msg. Taber said that I could go with the Xuan Loc contingent, but he changed his mind and decreed that he needed me in the office to cover for all the others who were going. I was miffed, but not overly disappointed. I considered the Bob Hope Shows corny, and the hot, dusty ride to Long Binh in the back of a deuce-in-a-half was less than appealing. I was more interested in being able to say years later that I had attended the Bob Hope Christmas Show in Vietnam than I was in actually being in attendance. Had I insisted and invoked all the late night hours that I had put in, Msg. Taber would have relented, but I chose to save my favors for another day. With military operations still largely shut down from the twenty-four hour Christmas truce and so many from Xuan Loc back in Long Binh, the rest of the office unofficially took the day off. I was the only person manning the place, and it was a long, very hot, boring day.

The Bob Hope Christmas Tour wasn’t the only celebrity event on the docket. Earlier in the month, major league baseball players, Tug McGraw and Ron Taylor of the New York Mets and Peter Ward and announcer Bob Elson of the Chicago White Sox dropped in at Xuan Loc and the battalion firebases on their handshaking tour. I knew that they were on base but didn’t bother to see them either. Later in January, some Dallas Cowboy football players made the rounds of the Brigade firebases but didn’t stop at Xuan Loc. Many popular entertainers made Vietnam tours with shows occurring periodically in the clubs at Long Binh. Several years later, the movie Apocalypse Now captured the incongruities of this type of activity in a war zone. Naturally, the benefactors of these activities to entertain and honor the troops were usually the REMFs.

New Years Eve was uneventful. I dropped in at the Club for a little while but found the band loud and obnoxious so I went to bed early. The noise at midnight woke me up, but I dropped off to sleep again. New Years Day was slow and boring in the office. We talked about bowl games and made some bets. I got up in the middle of the night that evening to listen to Armed Forces Radio’s live broadcast of Missouri’s 10-3 loss to Penn State in the Orange Bowl, and I endured some ribbing the next morning.
Ironically, the last two months of 1969 were the best months of an otherwise dreary year. It had been a hard year for me, but I was much happier in Xuan Loc than I had been during my tenure in the Stateside Army. Life was quite tolerable, I felt secure, the months were passing, and I could see the “light at the end of the tunnel.” By this time next year, my Army days would be behind me and I would be preparing to start the spring semester in graduate school. The very thought was a source of sustenance and joy.
Chapter 4

Redcatcher Review

The 199th Infantry Brigade, nicknamed the “Redcatchers,” that I joined in Vietnam was a unique unit. It’s motto, “Light, Swift, Accurate” reflected its composition as a light brigade designated to deploy quickly to new areas to undertake varied missions in counterinsurgency warfare. It did not have the indigenous “heavy” armor and artillery of normal infantry brigades, and as a separate brigade, it operated independently rather than as a component of a division. The 199th was born during the war specifically for its particular role in the Republic of Vietnam. Since it was recalled home and deactivated in October 1970, the unit’s entire history was during the Vietnam War. From its very first months in country, the 199th engaged in pacification and close association with the ARVN. In the post Tet 1968 period, no other unit was more intimately involved in the new emphasis on pacification, Vietmization, and the American troop reduction. To place my tour in context, this chapter digresses to overview the 199th’s varied history in country up through the end of 1969. During my tour, I witnessed and participated in the three elements noted above. I was with the unit until the very end as I was one of the last individuals to leave the brigade before it returned its colors to the United States for official deactivation.

As caveat, I explain that my source materials in resurrecting this history are the quarterly Operational Report-Lessons Learned documents published at the time by the 199th Headquarters and two Redcatcher Yearbooks published in May 1969 and May 1970, both of which drew heavily upon the quarterly reports. Obviously, the yearbooks were public relations promotional sources, but in truth the Operational Reports were as well. Although the Operations Reports are the authentic sources for statistical information, the presentation of the material in these official documents and the interpretations in the yearbooks followed the official perspective that dominated the Vietnam War from our earliest involvement—“everything is good and getting better.” Certainly this upbeat, positive-improvement attitude dominated the official paperwork and publications during my tour even in the face of often contrary evidence. I had some involvement with the Operational Reports since during my early tour I typed the daily Situation Reports, one of the major sources for the quarterly compilations, and I was drafted into typing one of the quarterly Operational Reports.

I have tried to moderate the “Redcatcher” esprit de corps tone that permeated the yearbooks and to ignore the self-serving, trivial, and often silly “lessons learned” recommendations in the Operational Reports. Nevertheless, the following unit history,
drawn from these sources, reflects a very positive perspective, at times virtually saccharine. Even if the statistical data presented below would tend to affirm the optimistic conclusions, the naivety and arrogance of the U.S. military that defeat was beyond the realm of possibility was a prime factor in our ultimate failure in South Vietnam. This perspective is evident in the unit history records and later in my empirical experience as a member of the 199th.

The 199th Infantry Brigade was formed in April 1966 at Fort Benning, Georgia, and officially activated on June 1. After staffing the brigade with large numbers of career soldiers pulled from shortened tours in Europe plus new enlistees and draftees, the brigade began small-unit training at Fort Benning, including helicopter assault techniques at the Air Mobility School. Following eight weeks of advanced jungle and swamp training at the National Guard facility at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, the unit returned to Ft. Benning for M-16 familiarization. No question existed where the brigade was headed. The American military build-up in Vietnam was progressing at a rapid pace in 1966 with a more than 100% troop level increase from 184,310 on January 1 to 385,000 by the end of the year.

The initial units of the 199th, under the command of Brigadier General Charles W. Ryder, consisted of three infantry battalions—the 2nd Bn, 3rd Inf; 3rd Bn, 7th Inf; 4th Bn, 12th Inf (the 5th Bn, 12th Inf. did not join the 199th until April 1968)—the Headquarters component; 2nd Bn, 40th Artillery, which initially had only 105 mm howitzers capable of quick airlift; Delta Troop, 17th Armored Cavalry, which at the first had only jeeps with mounted machine guns; 7th Support Battalion; 87th Engineer Company; and 313th Signal Company. Later additions as the 199th grew included Fireball Aviation, 152nd Military Police Platoon, 179th Military Intelligence Detachment, 40th Public Information Detachment, 44th Military History Detachment, and 503rd Chemical Detachment.

As was the practice of the early years of the war, the 199th was deployed as a cohesive unit. A 280-person advance party arrived in country on November 28 and established an encampment just north of Long Binh Post in an area already cleared, leveled, and prepared for occupation. This site approximately 15 miles northeast of Saigon would be the 199th main base camp for the duration of the unit’s tour. Troops from the 1st Division and armored vehicles from the 11th Armored Calvary provided security for the advance party until the 199th’s own combat personnel arrived. Conditions were primitive. A late monsoon rainstorm the first night unearthed many of the peg stakes and collapsed the advance party’s tents as the newly-prepared ground disappeared into a series of big lakes. Despite the inauspicious beginning, the advance party managed to have a few tents erected and a concertina perimeter in place by the time the rest of the brigade arrived.
After a two-week trip across the Pacific, the bulk of the original 199th Brigade disembarked from the *USS Sultan* and *USS Pope* at Vung Tau on December 10 and 12 respectively and were trucked to their new home. Greeted by several incoming mortar rounds on arrival, Commanding General Ryder ordered three feet of sandbags around every tent. All officers, NCOs, and enlisted men filled "mudbags" until midnight to accomplish the task. On December 16, just days in country, the brigade conducted its first operation, designated *Uniontown*, to secure the perimeter of the base. By the end of the month, artillery was in place to support larger operations.

The 199th's primary mission was the defense of Saigon. By mid January, 1967, a forward command headquarters was established at Cat Lai, seven miles east of the capital city. Saigon was surrounded with scattered 199th troops from the Brigade Main Base to the north, the command Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to the east, and line units working the areas of the Rung Sat Special Zone, a huge mucky, dismal wet-zone swamp to the east and southeast; the Pineapple, a large area of pineapple plantations and rice paddies in the west; and the village of Hoc Mon to the northwest. Unlike most other American combat units that conducted combat operations independently from ARVN units, the 199th from the beginning of its tour until the end worked jointly with ARVN units. This cooperation during the early stages of pacification foreshadowed the brigade's later role in the Vietnamization effort.

Operation *Fairfax/Rang Dong*, an eleven-month venture with the 5th ARVN Ranger Group, began on January 12. Under the auspices of the "Revolutionary Development Program," the forerunner of CORDS, this was a classic early pacification effort, i.e. military operations mixed with civic action. By the end of June, the joint operation resulted in 700 VC killed, 340 tons of rice confiscated, 3300 enemy fortifications destroyed, and 370 sampans sunk. On the civic affairs side, over 80 tons of food and clothing were distributed at eleven permanent and several mobile Medcap sites in Gia Dinh Province, which surrounded Saigon, and the 87th Engineers repaired eight major and 92 smaller bridges. By the end of the year, over 32,000 people per month received various levels of medical treatment at the Medcap sites.

Meanwhile, the Brigade Main Base (BMB) increased to 1200 acres, and five million board feet of lumber were used to construct permanent wooden buildings, including three 500-man and one 165-man mess halls, two BOQs and 47 BEQs, and numerous latrines and outdoor showers. Three miles of roads, drainage systems, and other improvements were built. "Instant bunker kits," wooden shells which could be lifted to base camps and protected by sandbags, were also constructed. The development of BMB continued until the 199th left the country. Additions in later years included a library, swimming pool, photo lab, mini-golf course, snack bar, MARS radio station, EM,
NCO and Officer clubs. Although not as lavish as Long Binh Post across the road, BMB in later years became a REMF citadel.

The 199th lost its first personnel on January 21, 1967, when PFC Herbert Frenzell and Sp/4 Billy Jones were killed during a combat air assault in the Thuc Duc region between Long Binh and Saigon. On September 18, 1967, Brigade Main Base was officially named Camp Frenzell-Jones in honor of the first 199th casualties. However, the base continued to be known as BMB. On February 6, a unit of the 2nd Bn, 3 Inf discovered a VC bunker complex in the Rung Sat that functioned as a hand grenade factory and also included a water purification plant. Over 150 completed grenades and 1000 grenade bodies, molds, and explosives were extracted from the complex. The next day, in its first large contact with the enemy, the 199th killed 13 Viet Cong in a firefight east of Saigon.

Besides land action, the 199th undertook water operations in the swamps of the Rung Sat where they worked with the U.S. Navy, ARVN units, and the U.S. 9th Division, whose AO bordered the 199th's. At Can Giuoc in June, the 199th and the 9th Division used floating gun-platforms in an operation that resulted in 249 VC killed and many more wounded. The after-action report called this venture the first full-scale American riverine assault since the Civil War. On August 2, 34 Americans died and six ships were damaged by a Viet Cong mortar attack on the U.S. Navy Base at Nha Be. During the attack, the Navy fuel tank farm was hit destroying 50,000 gallons of fuel. 199th soldiers helped roll the burning barrels of fuel into the Nha Be River to avert greater tragedy. Also in early August, the Brigade Commander Brigadier General John F. Freund, who had replaced General Ryder on March 1, sustained a broken leg when he attempted to rescue troops with his own helicopter during ground fighting. Brigadier General Robert C. Forbes replaced General Freund as Brigade Commander on September 1.

Just a few days before marking a year in country, the brigade suffered its worst incident. On December 6, two platoons from the 4/12 Infantry on patrol searching for mortar sites that had been firing on the battalion base camp walked into an enemy base camp and suffered 21 deaths and 74 wounded during the first day of the two-day battle. Chaplain (CPT) Angelo J. Liteky, who was accompanying the unit, moved upright amidst the fire administering last rights, directing medivac helicopter landings, and personally carrying 20 wounded men from the battlefield to the landing zone despite suffering wounds in his neck and foot. For his actions, Liteky became the first chaplain in Vietnam, and only the fifth chaplain in U.S. history, to receive the Medal of Honor.

In the middle of the night on January 30-31, 1968, a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol operating a few miles from Long Binh Post spotted about 80 armed VC soldiers literally running towards the base. This corroborated information from the 179th Military
Intelligence Detachment that an attack on the base was imminent that night. The actual assault began at 3:00 a.m. with incoming 122mm rockets and small arms fire from neighboring Ho Nai village. The Tet Offensive had begun. Since the perimeters and bunkers of BMB were manned largely by 7th Support Battalion and headquarters company personnel, many clerks, typists, cooks, and mechanics suddenly became combat soldiers. Artillery, helicopter gunships from Fireball Aviation, jet bombing strikes from Bien Hoa Airbase, and ACAVs (Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles) beat back the attack. 199th infantry units with support from the 11th Armored Cavalry and the 9th Division blocked attempted retreat, and the attacking 274th VC Regiment suffered heavy casualties.

While fighting continued in the Long Binh-Bien Hoa areas, the 3/7 Infantry engaged the enemy in Saigon. A large NVA/VC force had established a headquarters at the Phu Tho Racetrack in the Cholon section of the city. In two days of intense house-to-house fighting as they made their way to the racetrack, 199th units killed more than 150 enemy. Within the first 14 hours of the Tet Offensive throughout the AO, the 199th killed more than 500 enemy and added more than 400 in the next few days. The 199th suffered 14 killed in action and 92 wounded (45 not requiring hospitalization). The unsuccessful attack on Long Binh was very costly to the enemy and had a long-term impact upon their ability to conduct military operations in the area. Nevertheless, sporadic fighting and occasional rocket attacks continued in the Long Binh-Bien Hoa area and in Cholon through mid-February.

In the wake of Tet, the 199th was designated a mobile “fire brigade” for the III Corps Tactical Zone to be sent wherever enemy pressure exerted itself. In the next several months, the Brigade was dispatched into the Saigon area on two different occasions; twice deployed into Southern War Zone D, north of Saigon; and once, to the Cambodian border west of Tay Ninh City. These operations in March and April resulted in more than 130 enemy deaths registered during heavy fighting and the discovery of numerous bunker complexes and supply caches. To deal with the heightened combat demands, a fourth infantry battalion, the 5/12 Infantry, joined the 199th Brigade during April.

With another assault on Saigon expected in early May, elements of the 199th again took up positions to defend the capital, this time to the south and west of the city. The anticipated offensive began at daybreak on May 6 when elements of the 272nd NVA Regiment attacked a 4/12 Infantry base camp west of Saigon. The assault was repulsed by early afternoon with 44 enemy killed and very light American casualties suffered. A little after midnight that evening, other elements of the 4/12 Infantry intercepted an NVA battalion marching on Saigon about 2.5 miles from the city. Heavy fighting during the
night with support from helicopter gunships, artillery, and Air Force air strikes produced 92 enemy dead as the offensive was stopped.

That afternoon, May 7, elements of the 3/7 Infantry and Delta Troop, 17th Cav attacked Binh Tri Dong village two miles west of Saigon, where elements of the 273rd NVA Regiment had overrun the village and dug-in. The fighting, artillery barrages, and a total of 18 air strikes continued for several days before the 199th retook the village. Over 118 enemy were killed as an enemy battalion that had been a threat to Saigon was virtually wiped out. In another operation on May 9, two companies of 4th Bn 12 Inf ambushed a combined NVA/VC force estimated at 180 men three miles west of Saigon and killed 35 enemy. The next day, two companies of the 3/7 Infantry in separate incidents killed 17 VC west of Saigon. Contacts with the 271st, 272nd, and 273rd NVA Regiments and the 6th Local Force VC Battalion continued for the next week. In the ten day period of the enemy's May Offensive, the 199th recorded nearly 550 enemy soldiers killed and 71 prisoners taken. The 199th and supporting units lost 19 lives.

In late May and early June, the 199th, now under Brigadier General Franklin M. Davis, Jr., who assumed command on May 10, shifted their focus north of Saigon where they conducted search and destroy missions against base camps that were the enemy's center of operations in the area. However, in mid-June the Brigade returned to its primary mission of defending the west and southern approaches to Saigon. The brigade forward headquarters was set up at FSB Horseshoe Bend in the area know as the Pineapple. This very flat region consisted of rice paddies, elephant grass, nipa palm, fruit trees, bomb craters, and a large number of enemy bunkers. The Pineapple plantation to the west, from which the area derived its name, was a long-time enemy sanctuary, and the area was extensively booby trapped. In the wet season, the area was an endless morass of knee-deep mud which turned to baked, broken dirt clumps during the boiling hot dry season. In either period, the Pineapple was a miserable place, and guarding the streams, river bridges, and roads to stop enemy infiltration was not a glamorous assignment.

As opposed to the major fighting of the preceding months, the 199th now slogged through the muck daily with occasional small-action contacts with the 5th and 7th VC Divisions and other main force units. Firefights were rare and enemy body count small, but booby-traps claimed many U.S. victims. The daily sweeps did result in the discovery of literally thousands of bunkers and numerous weapons caches. A total of 1732 bunkers were destroyed in the Pineapple between mid-August and mid-October. On one operation in mid-September, the 199th uncovered a large enemy storage depot complex which contained 200 bunkers, three sophisticated hospitals, more than 2600 lbs. of rice, 115 lbs. of medical equipment, thousands of rounds of ammunition, and many weapons. The complex was protected by more than 100 booby-traps.
Working with Vietnamese forces, 199th personnel operated on the rivers in small River Patrol Boats and larger 30-man South Vietnamese vessels known as “Ragboats,” which were part of the River Assault Group (RAG). Many of the riverine and land operations were joint ventures with the 9th infantry and with Vietnamese. On one riverine operation, General Davis became the Brigade’s second Commanding General to be wounded in action. When General Davis had to be evacuated to the United States, Brigadier General Frederic E. Davison took command of the 199th on September 1.

Shortly afterward on September 26, 1968, General Abrams pinned the Valorous Unit Citation to the Brigade Colors. A year later, in September 1969, the Brigade received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry for actions during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The individual battalions also received various citations over the next year as part of the proliferation of awards that characterized the war at all levels.

Since 1954, the Viet Cong had roamed at will through the Pineapple, but by early fall 1968 captured documents and prisoner interrogations reported that the enemy could no longer move safely through the Pineapple or Gia Dinh Province at company or platoon strength. Two years of Rang Dong joint operations resulted in 7683 enemy fortifications destroyed and well over 1000 enemy killed. One of the largest contacts occurred in late January 1969, when 199th and 9th Division troops trapped an estimated 100 NVA/VC near the Vam Co Dong River north of Tan An, and 42 enemy were killed in the three-day action.

Fearing that the four NVA divisions which had withdrawn to their Cambodian sanctuaries might launch another large assault on Saigon during Tet 1969, MACV Commanding General Creighton Abrams in October 1968 fortified the area around the capital. The 1st and 25th Divisions redeployed from the Cambodian border closer to the heavily populated capital district, and the 1st Cavalry Division relocated from I Corps to a huge AO in War Zones C and D north of Saigon. The 199th, which for its two years in country had been the primary American unit protecting the capital, now had significant Allied assistance. The enemy did launch an offensive on February 23, but as a result of good U.S. intelligence gathering and strong military action, the 1st NVA Division and the 5th VC Divisions suffered heavy casualties in their unsuccessful venture. On February 23, 199th and ARVN forces encountered VC forces at Ho Nai village outside Long Binh, the scene of fighting during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and killed 33 enemy in three days of fighting. Several high ranking enemy officers surrendered under the “Chieu Hoi” program which encouraged enemy defections. In March Lieutenant Colonel Nam Xuam, chief of staff of the local Viet Cong subregion, who had lived and operated in the Pineapple for ten years, was killed during a sweep seven miles south of Saigon.

In line with General Abrams’ new emphasis on U.S. units’ concentration on pacification, the 199th engaged in five large cordons--codenamed Stranger I, II, and II
Caesar I and II—from February to May. Working with the ARVN, National Police, various South Vietnamese Government agencies, and the U.S. 25th Division, the cordons sealed off a contested village and sought to ferret out the so-called Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), the hidden Viet Cong in the villages. During the five cordons, each of which lasted from a few days to a week, 24,000 individuals were processed at large tent cities called Combined Holding and Interrogation Centers. Those who passed muster often received new ID cards and were sent back to their homes. A total of 9000 ID cards were issued during the five cordons. VC and VCI suspects were detained for further interrogation or turned over to the Vietnamese authorities. Strangler I, conducted in Hung Long village and four of its hamlets in February, and Strangler II, held a week later in the Tan Nhut Triangle, checked out 5500 people. The two most successful cordons were Strangler III, at Tan Buu village in early May, which located 6 VC guerillas and 55 VCI, and Caesar II, at Ben Luc village, which concluded on May 22 with 57 VCI identified. The totals for the five cordons included 45 Viet Cong soldiers killed in action, 9 ralliers (enemy who defected to the South Vietnamese side) under the Chieu Hoi program, 19 VC guerillas arrested, and 176 VCI identified.

To mitigate the villagers’ displeasure over the disruption of their lives for several days and to try to win “hearts and minds” for the South Vietnamese government, the cordons’ incorporated a large civil affairs component, including feeding and entertaining the people during their semi-incarceration. South Vietnamese Cultural Drama Teams gave performances and Political Warfare Teams provided pro-government political speeches. Medical and dental treatment was dispensed to thousands of people at the holding centers. For example, between June and November 1968, the 199th provided medical aid to 74,000 people in the Saigon area alone. Other 199th pacification activities included building and repairing bridges, restoring homes damaged in fighting, such as the large scale destruction in Ho Nai and Binh Tri Dong villages, and food distribution to refugees and the families of “Hoi Chanhs” (ralliers). Beyond this, Redcatcher soldiers gave more than $4000 in private contributions for refugee relief and to children’s orphanages.

In June 1969, the 199th entered another chapter in their experience with a new AO and primary mission. Under Major General Warren K. Bennett, who assumed command on May 28, the Brigade’s forward headquarters relocated from Horseshoe Bend to share the headquarters of the 11th Armored Calvary at Long Giao, eight miles south of Xuan Loc. The base was known as “Blackhorse” after the mascot of the 11th Armored Calvary, the “Blackhorse Regiment.” In August, the 199th headquarters moved to the new permanent base at Xuan Loc across the street from the headquarters of the 18th ARVN Division. After years of guarding Saigon in the heavily populated Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa Provinces, the Brigade’s new AO in the distant, sparsely-populated Long Khanh Province was quite different.
Long Khanh was a large province dominated by rubber plantations and virgin jungle. The population centered along the province’s three major highways, Routes 1, 2, and 20, and more than half of the populace lived around the provincial capital of Xuan Loc, 40 miles east of Saigon, the home base of the 18th ARVN Division. The smaller towns of Gia Kiem, Gia Tam, and Dinh Quan lay along Route 20 which ran north through the province. Farther north above the Dong Nai Rivers, the upper third of the province was mountainous and largely uninhabited. Rubber was the center of the economy of Long Khanh, with several large plantations, including the Michelin Plantation, dotting the landscape. To a lesser extent, lumber was also important since most of the wood products for the Saigon area came from Long Khanh. Some small farming also existed in areas where the jungle had been cleared. The thousands of acres of uninhabited jungle made Long Khanh a hiding place for NVA and VC units and served as a resupply and infiltration area for units working closer to Saigon. Enemy units had operated unchallenged in the province for years. In many areas it was not uncommon for NVA units to walk along the highways or cross fields in the open with little apparent concern.

Despite its strategic location in War Zone D, the 18th ARVN Division, which was responsible for Long Khanh Province, was regarded as one of South Vietnam’s worst military units. It was known for slack discipline, failure to patrol very far from its home base, excessive caution in battle, and a desertion rate of over 25%, the highest in the South Vietnamese military. The 199th’s new task was a classic example of Richard Nixon’s recently announced Vietnamization plan: to upgrade the 18th ARVN into an effective force capable of fighting the war on its own. The problem was not equipment for the 18th Division was well supplied, and American advisers had worked with the division for years. General Abrams’ commission to General Bennett of the 199th and the new 18th ARVN Division Commander, Brigadier General Lam Quang Tho, was to show the 18th Division by example. As an American general explained, “We are going to move the 199th in there, have them crawl into bed with the 18th, and make sure they get up at reveille every damn day.”

Reforming the 18th ARVN was a daunting task. The 199th’s contempt for its counterpart was clear. Any hope of success would depend upon totally remaking and retraining the division. To get the 18th Division out into the field, the AO was carved into four zones of responsibility, with one of the 199th’s four battalions co-located with one from the 18th at each site to conduct joint operations. The 2/3 Infantry stayed at Blackhorse, sharing the base with the 11th Armored Cav until the Cav moved out at the end of September. The 4/12 Infantry moved into FSB Joy, northeast of Xuan Loc, vacated by the 1st Cavalry. Later, the battalion established its home at FSB Nancy in Dinh Quan, well know throughout Vietnam for the distinctive granite boulders that characterized the city. The 5/12 Infantry constructed a new FSB Libby along Route 20.
northwest of Xuan Loc. The 3/7 Infantry remained in the old AO under the operational control of the 9th Division for a few more months and did not arrive in Long Khanh until early September. When it arrived, it built FSB Mace at the eastern slope of Signal Mountain, which was east of Xuan Loc.

Until the 18th’s desertion problem could be overcome, everything else was futile. Most of the deserters were young Saigon draft dodgers who had been arrested and shipped off to serve in the 18th Division where they tended to flee at the first opportunity. Thus a recruitment drive was undertaken to fill the division with local youth who might have a greater stake in defending their own villages. The 199th’s 10-man ARVN Mobile Training Team worked with a different company each week reviewing previous training in firing and maintenance of weapons, communication procedures, security and intelligence, land navigation, demolition, small unit tactics, ambush techniques, quick kill, patrolling, airmobile operations, convoy counter-ambush, night fire, and night vision techniques. Training also focused on Vietnamese junior officers and sergeants to provide better leadership in the field.

Within a few months, a measure of success was evident as the desertion rate dropped dramatically and the kill ratio improved from five enemy soldiers killed per ARVN death to a twelve to one ratio. However, few 199th personnel who worked directly with the 18th Division or media personnel who followed the war had great faith that the 18th Division would fare very well without American units and support should the local 5th VC Division test them. Since the heavy losses in the two Tet Offensives in 1968 and 1969, Viet Cong cadres had tried to keep a rather low profile and rebuild. Intelligence intercepts reported that local VC planned to maintain a low profile until the Americans left. Then the 18th ARVN could be easily overrun. Although the 199th experienced many frustrations with the 18th ARVN over the next year, a turn around did begin in the division. In Spring 1975, when other ARVN units across the country collapsed, the 18th ARVN Division fought bravely and well during the Battle of Xuan Loc, the last battle of the Vietnam War. In the end, the 18th Division distinguished itself as it improved from the worst to the very best of the ARVN divisions.

As the 199th conducted ground reconnaissance or search and destroy patrols simultaneously to prosecute the war and to serve as training exercises, they found the forests and jungles of Long Khanh Province quite different from the flat, open area of the Pineapple. The thousands of acres of dense jungle provided the NVA and VC safe havens for movement and base camps. Since clearing the entire jungle was not feasible or practical, Rome plows from the 60th Land Clearing Company at Long Binh were brought into southwestern Long Khanh Province in September to create “land cuts.” These were wide ribbons of cleared land in areas of known enemy hiding places and across suspected supply routes. Delta Troup, 17th Cavalry employed newly-arrived
Sheridan tanks to provide security during the land cuts and while building a series of small firebases--Gladys, Crystol, and Willa--in the target areas. The 2/3 Infantry and the ARVN units working with it employed these bases to patrol the cuts to stop enemy movement. By mid-October, intelligence reports indicated that the 274th VC Regiment was finding food and ammunition resupply difficult and at times impossible. By the end of January 1970, 4150 acres of jungle had been stripped and the impact on the war was significant.

Land clearance went hand in hand with ground reconnaissance. The level of enemy contact, however, was relatively light compared to earlier periods. The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the military command center for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, issued instructions to increase guerilla warfare and terrorist activity in order to inflict casualties on U.S. and South Vietnamese forces but to conserve scarce manpower and ammunition in the process. During this period, the 199th and the 18th Division worked in close cooperation with the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force and the 1st Australian Task Force, which operated in adjacent and sometimes overlapping AOs. The Allied goal was to isolate main force units from local force units and to target the local forces units to destroy their effectiveness.

During the last two months of 1969 and the first month of 1970, the 199th killed 479 enemy, took 13 prisoners, eliminated 10 VCI, and welcomed five Hoi Chanh ralliers. 199th casualties during the period were 36 killed in action and three more who died later from wounds. The biggest coup was an ambush on November 21, 1969, which resulted in the deaths of the Commanding Officer of the 195th Sapper/Reconnaissance Company and the Deputy Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of the Political Staff of the Headquarters of Military Region 7, the organization that controlled enemy local forces in the area.

Like the Pineapple, the Long Khanh theater was also very much a bunker and cache war. In a four-day sweep northwest of FSB Joy, a company of the 4/12 Infantry located several enemy base camps constituting one of the largest finds that the 199th achieved in country. Over 30 tons of enemy supplies, including 34,000 lbs. of beans, 15,000 lbs. of peanuts, 250 lbs. of rice, 330 gallons of gasoline, and six bicycles, were extracted from the bunker complexes. On July 5, the 4/12 Infantry located and destroyed 81 bunkers and 20 enemy fighting positions north of Xuan Loc. Near the end of the month, a total of 90 bunkers were destroyed and 160 mortars, 70 B-40 rockets, and over 150 lbs. of explosives recovered at a large base camp complex discovered east of the provincial capital. In early August, ARVN and 199th units destroyed a 33rd NVA Regiment base camp of 133 bunkers and captured a large amount of weapons, munitions, and food. A few days later, 123 bunkers were destroyed. Both discoveries were west of Xuan Loc.
While these discoveries captured the headlines in the 199th's unit newspaper *Redcatcher* and even in *Stars and Stripes*, most reconnaissance operations were more prosaic with small finds and minimal body count. However, by October intelligence reports indicated that the consistent pressure had forced the 33rd NVA Regiment to retreat to the jungles north of the Dong Nai River to avoid further U.S. and ARVN contacts. The 274th VC Regiment remained in the area, although for the most part it too wished to avoid engagements. The one major contact with the latter unit was its unsuccessful ambush of an 18th ARVN convoy in which it suffered 60 VC losses. For the three-month reporting period, November 1969 through January 1970, the 199th discovered and/or destroyed about 17,000 rounds of small arms ammunition; almost 3000 mortars, rocket rounds, and grenades; 6000 lbs. of rice; and 21,760 lbs. of other foodstuffs.

Alongside the Vietnamization training and joint operations mission, pacification was the purported highest priority for the 199th in the new Long Khanh theater. Thousands of Medcaps (Medical Civil Action Projects) and Dentcaps (Dental Civil Action Projects) were held in the villages of Long Khanh Province and around BMB in Bien Hoa Province. 199th medical personnel trained Vietnamese medical personnel at both Xuan Loc Provincial Hospital and Ho Nai Hospital near BMB. Through the Integrated Civic Action Projects (ICAPS) and other related activities in the summer and fall of 1969, schools, orphanages, roads, bridges, and wells were built, rebuilt, or repaired. The food, medical supplies, clothing, and other items captured in the caches were distributed in local hamlets.

Another element of pacification under the Vietnamization rubric was the improvement of local security in the hamlets and villages. The 199th supplied materials for the construction of perimeters around Regional Forces (RF) units in hamlets throughout the province. The Brigade also provided weapons training, night ambush techniques, and other assistance, including joint operations with Regional and Popular Forces (PF). Each of the 199th infantry battalions initiated joint ventures. In September the 2/3 Infantry and Xuan Loc District advisors organized the Hamlet Upgrading Team (HUT) in which U.S. infantry personnel taught ambush techniques for Popular Forces and followed-up the "classroom" instruction with a combined night operation. The battalion also formed a special RF/PF training program at Cam Tam dubbed SAM, for "Stamina, Accuracy, and Marksmanship," which required Vietnamese soldiers to assemble and fire the M-16 rapidly, crawl through a barbed wire barrier, and throw grenades. In both programs, American soldiers from the field provided the training.

In October, the 4/12 Infantry organized its own HUT program for the Dinh Quan District Popular Forces. In November, the 5/12 Infantry formed a Local Improvement Forces Team (LIFT) for both Regional and Popular Forces of Kiem Tam District that
provided training by rotating infantry platoons. Under the system all infantrymen in the U.S. battalion served as a teacher at one time or another. In later months, the various battalions offered more specialized training. For instance, the 3/7 Infantry provided mortar training to the 184th RF Company which was located near the battalion’s FSB Mace. Although the American soldiers still remained dismissive of the RF/PFs, or Ruff/Puffs as they were universally called, the performance of these units improved with the increased training and attention. Statistically at least, Vietnamization seemed to be working.

As 1969 ended and a new year began, the 199th’s three-pronged mission of pacification, Vietnamization, and military operations was well in place. The coming year would bring about major changes as the calculus of these three missions continued to evolve in new combinations. Although I hardly suspected it at the time, my life too would become more complicated as I took on different and greater responsibilities within the context of this changing war.
Vietnamization was the priority of 1970, and the 199th was deeply engaged. As the American troop reduction continued, speculation was rife about what unit would be going home next and where units would move. From the day I joined the 199th, rumors about the Brigade moving to a new AO or going home early were persistent. Also from the day I arrived in country, the advent of the Vietnamese Tet holiday season was a topic of concern. However, Tet 1970 passed quietly. BMB took a few incoming rockets; nothing happened at Xuan Loc. The enemy forces had paid a high price during the Tet Offensives of 1968 and 1969, particularly in the Saigon area, and it took a couple of years to recover. This lower level of activity gave the U.S. the opportunity to push forward on the Vietnamization effort.

In January, Lt. Williams talked to me about joining the sensor program. With Jerry Ross leaving, Williams wanted me to be the new coordinator of the program. Largely unsupervised and ignored, Williams and Ross had operated more or less as they pleased during their tours. They were quite indifferent to Army procedures and the paperwork bureaucracy. However, with Msg. Taber and the new S-2, proper paperwork, records, and bureaucratic procedures were high priorities. Not long after I became the S-2 clerk, I had been given the sensor program paperwork, so it actually got done. I was very interested in the possibility of the new job. I could envision myself sleeping to noon like Ross and Savoy and not working at night. However, I doubted that Msg. Taber or the S-2 were going to free me from my typewriter. Good typists remained a rare commodity. Neither Lt. Williams nor I was yet willing to venture the idea, much less push for it.

The previous S-2, "the Crazy Greek," a military intelligence branch officer, was indifferent to military bearing, and it was reflected in the office. The major who commanded the MI detachment located in the back of the building was even more loose. The MI people were quite unconventional. They never wore shirts, several rolled their fatigues pants up into shorts, and the night shift even wore civilian clothes. When I arrived in Xuan Loc, I was struck by the fact that the sergeant filling in as the S-2 clerk didn’t wear a shirt in the office. When Ross and Savoy wandered in, they usually weren’t wearing shirts and often had on shower shoes rather than boots. They also hadn’t visited the barber in some time either. Lt. Williams wasn’t much better. Msg. Taber tried not to intervene but he really couldn’t control himself. He preferred that Ross and Savoy stay away so that he didn’t have to deal with their unmilitary bearing. Once he lost his
temper and ordered Ross and Savoy to get haircuts and added with only a bit less sarcasm to the lieutenant, “You could use one yourself, Sir.” He treated Williams with the same kind of paternalism that he did the ROTC cadets that he had trained over the years. However, he did respect the fact that Williams had served well in the field, so the senior NCO tolerated the lieutenant’s casual military manner more than he would have otherwise.

Gradually, I tested Msg. Taber’s indulgence by taking my shirt off for a while during the hottest part of the day, and before long I had progressed to not wearing a shirt in the office. I never wore rank, and since I could not seem to keep up with my “headcover,” I lost an excessive number of hats during my tour. I continually ran around outside without a hat, one of the most basic violations of military etiquette. I was careful not to press Msg. Taber more than he would tolerate since I knew that the quality of my life was subject to his whims. The winter dry season was still quite hot, and as the temperature in the office got warmer and warmer, sometimes even Msg. Taber and Captain Adams stripped to their Army green T-shirts. I liked the informality, and it was consistent with my ongoing resistance to the military rank structure.

The demeanor of the office changed with the advent of the new S-2. Major Edward Pratt (pseudonym) was very different from his predecessor. A West Point infantry officer, he was aloof, serious, and all-business all the time. Military bearing, practice, and protocol were very important to him, which I attributed to his being an Academy grad. When he arrived, we put on our shirts and followed more formal practices for awhile, but gradually we slipped back to the old patterns, always testing to see how much he would allow. At first, the Major tolerated the extant office culture. However, eventually, and for him inevitably, he decreed that we would comport to proper military office discipline and our free-wheeling style was truncated. Nevertheless, subtle challenges to the proper order continued unabated.

Other than these military practices issues, Major Pratt largely ignored us. He swept through the office with a brusk “Good morning” or whatever part of the day it happened to be. He didn’t walk; he strutted, and his stride was just a bit too long. With his ramrod bearing and exaggerated gait, he was easy to parody. I don’t know if he was actually that pompous or, as I suspected, shy and deficient in knowing how to relate to people. In any case, he appeared to have no personality. I was never at ease around him; nor was I impressed with his intelligence. But he was tolerable, he basically left me alone, and he did loosen up some by the end of his tour.

I started early to attempt to gain the same editing freedom that I had enjoyed with his predecessor, but Major Pratt was less inclined to allow a low-ranking enlisted man to exercise authority. Since he was a more competent, albeit stilted, writer, my editing skills
weren’t as crucial. Gradually though he learned that he could save himself quite a bit of
time by giving things to me rather doing them himself. While I was establishing the value
of my talents in the office, I committed a *faux pas* that set me back temporarily. I rewrote
and typed one of his memos complete with signature block and all the requisite
distribution information on the hated stencils. Since he was beginning to trust my writing
and typing, he would just glance at the memo, sign it, and give it to me for distribution.
In this case, I was so pleased with how I had improved the memo that I overlooked the
small detail of giving it to him to sign before I duplicated it and sent it out for base-wide
distribution. The memo was of monumental insignificance and the indiscretion ultimately
was minor, but the Major was embarrassed by the implication that he had failed properly
to supervise my work. He chewed me out royally and Msg. Taber joined the flaying, but
after we left the office Msg. Taber told me to forget it. I was very careful not to make
such errors in the future, and the Major came more and more to trust whatever I did.

Cognizant that knowledge was power, I sought to learn everything that I could
about the various functions of the S-4
and
I was genuinely
interested, I asked myriad questions about Order of Battle, photo interpretation, POW
interrogation, and all the other aspects of the military intelligence operation. I was
curious about everything that the S-2 and S-3 operations officers did. Although security
and need-to-know access prevented me from learning all that I wanted to, it wasn’t long
before I understood most of the activity in the office and how to do it. I assumed any
responsibility that I could get my hands on, and I didn’t hesitate to answer questions
myself rather than refer the queries to “my superiors.” Assertive and confident, I
answered the phone with authority snapping out “PFC Dunn speaking, Sir!” as if I were
announcing that I was the base commander. Msg. Taber and the S-2 thought that I was a
bit too aggressive and brazen at times, but most of the time they preferred my attitude
over diffidence and indifference.

I also liked to know what was going on in the field and on base. The SITREPs
gave the basics about military actions, but they were so bland that I could fall asleep
typing them. Msg. Tabor was a fountain of on-base information and gossip, much of it
garnered at the senior NCOs nightly poker games. The master sergeants, first sergeants,
and sergeant majors knew everything that transpired on base and apparently compared
notes in the evening. Msg. Taber used information as part of a reward system for good
behavior. As long as I played the loyal subordinate who never challenged his view on
any topic, he liked to drop choice tidbits of information on me. He controlled the amount
and pace of dissemination, though. I had to be careful not to probe because if it seemed
that I was trying to find out too much, he would get angry and clam up entirely. I learned
to ask careful, safe questions as if I were just making conversation without appearing too
interested. Otherwise my information source would dry up for weeks. He kept me
rather well informed on the comings and goings of guests and VIPs on base; identified
some of the strange cast of characters who occasionally passed through the office, including various agents, informants, and intelligence liaisons; and explained some of the operations going on in the field.

From the day I entered the Army, I had a bad attitude about rank, especially concerning officers. As a child, I had imbibed my father’s disdain for officers from his experience as an NCO during World War II. I hadn’t been impressed by many officers during my training status time in the States either. According to my value system, demonstrated intelligence and educational attainment were the important factors. I was quite willing to defer to Msg. Taber because of his age and experience and I made the same concession to field grade officers if they evidenced competence. If they were obvious fools, I saw no reason other than coercion to show them any respect. However, I deeply resented any concession to individuals of my age or younger who had selected the officer vs. the enlisted path to fulfill their draft obligation. While I never regretted my decision to leave OCS, the experience had left its psychological scars. I could tolerate ROTC officers better than those out of OCS.

In my petty war against authority, which was both personal and reflective of the times, saluting particularly galled me. Again, part of this went back to my father’s complaint about having to salute stupid officers and his small victory in not having to salute the medical officers with whom he worked. The other part was the military’s explanation that you didn’t salute the individual but the rank. I was willing to acknowledge specific individuals, but I had no respect for rank per se. From BCT on, I tried to avoid saluting whenever I could get away with it.

One did not salute in the field or on firebases, and during my early months, this practice applied at the Forward Headquarters at Xuan Loc. When the policy changed, I continued my personal practice of not saluting below field grade. Most officers didn’t pay any attention, although I did get chewed out once by a young MI lieutenant. When he stopped me and asked the rhetorical question, “Don’t you respect officers, soldier?”, I calmly responded, “In most cases, no, I do not, sir.” He complained about my attitude to Msg. Taber, but Msg. Taber didn’t care for the whining officer any more than I did, so he told me rather satirically “to be nice to the young lieutenant.” I made a great show of stopping in my tracks to salute the officer with great flourish for a few days and then returned to ignoring him. He decided not to challenge the issue any more. Looking back, I am somewhat embarrassed by such adolescent actions, but the principle and battle seemed very important to me at the time. I was careful, however, to pick my spots for defiance and to balance them with a high degree of competence in doing my job because I still wanted promotions and all the other benefits available.
In late January, the Brigade's military history officer came to Xuan Loc and requested that I be transferred to serve in his two-man office at BMB. The Brigade Inspector General, who earlier had been slated to become S-2, had told the military history officer about me. The idea sounded good to me, but Msg. Taber emphatically said no. Two more times, in March and again in May, I was offered the position in the military history detachment. The last time, the offer came from the new captain who had just taken over the detachment. Danny Barrett had been behind me in the graduate program at Missouri and knew who I was, although I didn’t know him. We both studied with and taught for Al Millett. Danny was an ROTC graduate who had served a tour in Europe before coming to Vietnam. He was convinced that he could get me reassigned even over the objections of the S-2. However, the job appeared to be little more than another clerk position compiling data for an annual report and doing a considerable amount of typing. I was free of my typist role by this point and did not want to return to it. I liked what I was doing then in the sensor program, so I declined Danny’s offer. Whether he could have accomplished the reassignment remained problematic anyway.

At the same time that I received the first military history job inquiry, I pulled my first sensor mission. The preceding week, an air drop sensor mission came up when the two operators at Xuan Loc were off base for the day. Lt. Williams drafted me to accompany him on the mission. I was excited and ready to go, but at the last minute we had to abort the mission because a chopper wasn’t available. However, another mission suddenly surfaced a few days later on January 26, when again the two operators were at one of the battalions. Msg. Taber objected to me being used as a back-up sensor operator, but I was eager for the new experience and convinced him to let me go. We flew out to rendezvous with the gunships that were to provide protection for our drop, but we had to abort again when the gunships were diverted to support ground troops in a firefight. We flew back to base and I disappointedly returned to my typing.

About an hour later, we received a call that a gunship was available for a brief window of time. I left the paper in the machine as we sprinted to the airfield to resume the mission. My role was simple. The sensors were lined up in the proper order. I pulled the arming line and handed them one by one to Lt. Williams who dropped them out of the chopper and plotted their locations. It was a easy mission over a reasonably secure area, so we didn’t have to dive and twist on the approaches as I would on many of my later drops. As we flew over the jungle and the rubber plantations with their French colonial mansions and feudal workers' village, I wished that I had thought to bring my camera. As we returned to base, I was able to understand for the first time where our compound fit into the complex of various military installations around Xuan Loc. It had been an exhilarating experience, and I could not wait to go out again.
I was back at my typewriter before lunch to finish the memo I had left in the machine. It had been a strange morning. I had taken two helicopter flights, including my first combat mission, produced several memos, and started a letter to my parents all before noon. In the letter, I casually mentioned the mission and proceeded to discuss other subjects, including a tape from the chapel choir's Sunday performance, a letter to the history department chair at Missouri University about restoring my teaching assistantship when I returned next year, the best seller non-fiction book that I was reading, and the receipt of a letter from Earl Tharp. My practice of shielding my parents from topics which would worry them was in place.

After the sensor mission, I was no longer content with the clerk job. I'm sure that most draftees would have thought me crazy to want to give up a safe job for the risks of going into the field. I realized that good fortune had smiled on me since I arrived in Vietnam, and I had trepidations about voluntarily putting myself in harm's way. However, I was ready for something a bit more exciting than the office regime, and my forbearance with the all-night work was rapidly decreasing. After two all-nighters in a row in early February, I had had it. I determined that I was going to the sensor program no matter what objections were raised.

It had been a bad week. Captain Adams was on R&R and I was doing some of his administrative paperwork. One of his major responsibilities as the S-2 air officer was to handle the details of B-52 strikes (codename Arclight). I always typed the required paperwork according to a boilerplate formula that included responding negatively to a series of questions, such as were there any civilians in the target area, any religious shrines, any historical artifacts, and several other no-no's. Obviously, the first question was a priority, but the others would have been difficult to verify. Usually the request for an Arclight came up suddenly when a significant troop concentration was pinpointed in an area and the potential for high-level casualties was great. I asked once if anyone ever really investigated the absence of religious shrines or historical artifacts or if anyone even cared. I was told that it was none of my business. Arclight requests often came in the middle of the night, and I would be called out of bed to do them. If everything ran smoothly, they didn't take that long to type and I could return to bed. However, often that was not the case and I ended up sitting around most of the night waiting.

I drew two all-nighters in a row while Captain Adams was on R&R. Another officer handled the request. Although I was not privy to the intelligence information behind the strike, I knew far more about the procedure than he did and I took him through the paperwork step by step. Nevertheless, he kept running off to have everything that I told him verified by someone else, and he would be gone for hours. My anger seethed as I cooled my heels in the office all night both nights. Msg. Taber wanted me in the office
both days for various reasons, so I was tired, cranky, and had minimal patience with incompetence. As was my nature, I spoke my mind on the issue.

I was already agitated that I was working around the clock much of the time, often doing work reserved for officers, yet I couldn’t get promoted. Since I had made PFC at the end of AIT, I had enough time in grade for promotion to Specialist 4, which would mean a large pay increase; however, no promotion allocations for Sp/4 had been available in the Headquarters Company for a couple of months. With only the barest amount of sleep in the last two days, I was very irritable the second night. When a young captain wanted me to run a personal errand for him in the middle of the night, I told him that I was in the office on off-duty time for essential business, not his pleasure. He angrily retorted, “Young man, this is an order.” I was thoroughly hacked at this point. I instructed the young officer that he was barely one year older than I was, and he would kindly address me as PFC Dunn. Since he was not in my chain of command, if he wanted to issue a lawful order he should see the S-2 whom he could find in the office behind me. Since the offices were divided by wooden slats with open space between the slats, the major could hear every word of this exchange. Obviously, not realizing that the S-2 was in the office in the middle of the night and had heard him make a fool of himself, the captain sheepishly fled the office.

That night was the final straw. The next day, I announced that I wanted out of the clerk job as soon as possible. Msg. Taber was only moderately supportive, but Major Pratt seemed to appreciate my frustration and apparently was impressed with my willingness to stand up to the captain. He called me in and told me that he wanted to make me the new S-2 TOC NCO. He said that I had done outstanding work in the various areas of responsibility that I had assumed and that he needed someone in TOC who would stand his ground. He added that he doubted that I would be afraid to speak up in the presence of all the top brass in TOC. I understood the message beneath the words. It was generally known that the S-2 TOC officer was a dud and that people looked to the sergeant, who was now rotating, for sound judgments.

The opening in the TOC set in motion a number of prospective moves. The Night TOC NCO wanted to move to the day, which meant that I would inherit the night slot. In some ways, the Night TOC position was another glorified clerk position since the major responsibility was to write and type the INTSUM, the Intelligence Summary of the past 24 hours, which was begun after midnight and finished in time for the morning briefing. I had been told that it was a three-hour job if I worked fast and didn’t have interruptions. Once the INTSUM was finished, most nights would be quiet and you could read or write letters. Not many high ranking brass would be around in the early morning hours unless there was a major enemy contact.
My replacement for the clerk job arrived on February 15. I was to spend about a week training him and then move to the TOC. Lt. Williams again asked for me to join the sensor program, but the Major reaffirmed that I would go to TO. The history detachment officer also dropped in to inquire another time if I might be available for his detachment. I seemed to be a desired property. Unfortunately, the clerk replacement was not. He was a poor typist and didn’t appear very bright. After only a couple of days, it was clear that he couldn’t handle the job, so we sent him back to the Rear for reassignment.

The same day, an infantryman who had been pulled out of the field to let the jungle rot on his feet heal called our office from the Rear. Looking for a way to avoid going back to the bush, he had heard that we might have an office job. He had a couple of years of college and claimed to type 50 words a minute. Afraid that I would be stuck in the clerk job for sometime yet, I implored Msg. Taber to take a look at him. We told him to come out for an interview. Although his typing wasn’t what he claimed, he was competent, available, and certainly willing to do anything it took not to be sent back to the field. These seemed the perfect credentials. The first day I turned about three hours of typing over to him and enjoyed my initial step toward greater freedom.

The salesmanship of our new clerk reflected a trend. Many soldiers who sustained minor wounds or illness, or enjoyed a few days of stand-down, used the opportunity to “scrounge for jobs” that could keep them from going back to the field. Sometimes they got lucky and their company commander would release them. The Rear was a cornucopia of possible jobs—drivers, mechanics, permanent guard duty, office positions, and general “gofors.” Combat troops who had served well in the field hoped to be rewarded by rotating back to the Rear for their final months. However, the opportunity was merely chance and circumstance and often the grace of a company commander. Clearly, college grads and those with useful skills were more in demand. Whites landed more of the office jobs than blacks, and as racial tension grew in the Rear, some commanders did not welcome large concentrations of black field troops on base.

Msg. Taber had never been enthusiastic about me leaving my position in the office and the disaster of the first replacement clerk toughened his stance. The new clerk was on loan until his feet healed, so we weren’t certain that he wouldn’t be sent back to his unit. Without Msg. Taber’s acquiescence, I would not be released from that typewriter. He wanted to feel confident that the new clerk could handle the job, and he pointed out that with Lt. Williams leaving in mid March, I was the only other one who knew the sensor program paperwork. Furthermore, he announced that he did not want any of the other vagabond sensor operators in the office.
One day when no one else was around, I ventured the idea off-handily that one scenario would be for me to become the acting NCOIC of the sensor program and continued to work in the office daily doing the sensor paperwork and some of my other work. I remarked that it was merely a thought and that I didn’t care one way or the other. I had learned not to advocate a position since it would be rejected out of hand. It was better to drop suggestions and allow Msg. Taber to take credit for an idea. PFC’s were not supposed to make organizational decisions. A few days later, Major Pratt announced that Msg. Taber had come up with an outstanding idea. I was pleased. The new clerk inherited the SITREP, the memos, answering the telephone, and the general “shitwork” typing, as well as the late-night duties. I remained in the office in my unofficial assistant office manager role, and we found another “Shake and Bake” sergeant to come into the Night TOC. Everyone was happy. I trusted that since we had only one typewriter in the office, I would be relatively free from the machine.

About the same time that I was extricating myself from the dreaded night work, I gained a new night-time experience. Until just a few weeks before, perimeter guard duty at the Xuan Loc compound was handled by infantry units who rotated in for the task. Now Xuan Loc personnel became responsible for pulling guard duty. My first opportunity came March 1 and approximately every two weeks thereafter. Two hours on and two hours off from dark until approximately 6:00 a.m., wasn’t a bad experience. Usually I drew one of the two guard towers on our side of base, although once I was assigned to the front gate. Virtually surrounded by other bases, we were quite secure. The chance of a ground attack was extremely remote, and sappers were not very likely either. Nevertheless, I took my watch very seriously. My first night of guard duty was memorable. Nine mortars hit the Vietnamese Regional Forces camp perimeter which was near another American compound in the area. It wasn’t very close to us, but we had a brief alert with everyone manning their positions.

Usually the nights were less eventful. As I stared out into the darkness beyond the fence, I enjoyed the solitude and the beauty of the night and the opportunity to think and dream. We usually kept the radio on to help keep us awake, and if my partner at the post didn’t sleep during his off time, as many did not, we talked. I had some very good conversations on guard duty nights. I slept during my two hours off. I had the enviable ability to pull a poncho liner over my head and drop off to sleep almost instantly. Things weren’t so pleasant, however, during the rainy season. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t keep dry in the cold, driving monsoon rain so you spent your off time drying out. The cold, wet nights could be very long indeed. The best part of guard duty, whether in the wet or dry season, was sleeping in the next morning and appearing for work after lunch.
The new sensor officer, 2Lt James Bartlett, Jr. (pseudonym), son of one of America's most distinguished diplomats and a Nobel Prize winner, arrived on March 2, just a few days before Lt. Williams left the country. Bartlett was not sensor trained. The rumor was that he had not distinguished himself in the field, so an on-base position was secured for him. Bartlett had special status. For instance, few lieutenants spent their first night as the special guest at the General's Mess. His father was one of America's most distinguished public servants, but Bartlett, Jr. was, in my experience with him, distinctly short of his father's stature.

Bartlett and I quickly developed a strange, competitive relationship. I alternated between liking him and hating him. The conflict was mutual. This dynamic continued even after we left Vietnam. We both got married about the same time, and during our honeymoon, my wife and I visited James and his wife in New York City. My wife commented that the sizzle of competitiveness was in the air the entire night. I haven't had any contact with James since that night, and there is no reason to believe that I will ever see him again. He might not even remember me today. However, during our time together in Vietnam, James Bartlett, Jr. touched a raw nerve in me and continually pressed on it. In many ways, our relationship epitomized my private power struggle with the U.S. Army. I am sure that James would see the picture quite differently, but this story is from my perspective.

The differences between Bartlett and me were many. James' life was one of privilege and society—famous father, wealth, prep schools, elite colleges, New York City lifestyle, and a job in Zurich as an international banker. My background was rural, small town, midwestern, and unsophisticated. But the similarities we shared were even greater. We were both highly educated, academically oriented, smart, aggressive, arrogant, the same age, and basketball fanatics. We were both accustomed to being in control. In another circumstance, we could have been college roommates and good friends. We were each drafted at roughly the same time and opted for OCS. I left. He almost quit several times, but stayed. Our situations easily could have been reversed. Neither of us had much patience for the military way, and both of us had a chip on our shoulder because of it. We were both civilians at heart serving our sentence through different paths. That was most of the problem. James may not have been much of an officer in mind or deed, but the United States government said that he was superior to me. Bartlett was the epitome of why I didn't like junior officers. I did not accept why he should have any authority over me. I knew the sensor program; he did not. I was aware of his record in the field; although to my credit, I never mentioned it. There wasn't much else negative, though, that I didn't say about him at one time or another.

James could be very likeable. We debated politics, history, philosophy, and education, and we enjoyed sparring with each other. We enjoyed talking about sports.
With our egos on the line, our one-on-one basketball games against each other were little short of mortal combat. It seemed very important to James to establish his authority over me, not only militarily, but intellectually and athletically as well. I wasn’t willing to concede an iota on any quarter. James’ identification as a black man amused me. When he got on his soap box about race, I chided him that he was only partially African-American. His skin color was lighter than mine, and in social class and culture, he was far removed from the American black experience. I acknowledged James’ intelligence and his worldly sophistication. He wore it like a robe, along with his glaring insecurities. James’ body language spoke volumes. He slouched into the office and arrogantly lounged at his desk with his feet up in the air. His manner and attitude infuriated Msg. Taber who tolerated him because he had no other choice. Had James not enjoyed the special status as his father’s son, Msg. Taber would have squared him away quickly.

James was at heart a spoiled playboy who intended to do as little as possible during the remaining part of his tour. Since I did the work of the sensor program, he didn’t have much to do, although he made a pretense of being in charge. For the most part, he employed his freedom to traipse around the countryside, spend time in the Rear, and generally “sham” (the Army parlance for goofing off). The less that he was around the office, the happier I was since he loved to create work for me. But most importantly, James had no intention of putting himself in harm’s way. That was fine with me as long as it didn’t increase my level of danger. However, when he volunteered me for missions that he refused to go on, I was furious. Claiming that he had done his time, he would not go out into the field at all, and he pulled very few air missions. When he did go on air drops, he usually flew in the gunship high above the action, rather than in the chopper with me doing the actual drop, where he would be subject to ground fire. As Msg. Taber once said, James Bartlett was my cross to bear.

March 16, with just a bit more than one third of my year behind me, marked the beginning of a new stage of my tour. First, I finally got my promotion to Sp/4. Some time before, Msg. Taber got a phone call that I had been promoted to Sp/4 effective February 21, but when the orders came through, I recognized that another Joe Dunn, a PFC clerk back at Long Binh, had been promoted instead. I called the First Sergeant who confirmed that a mistake had been made and the other Joe Dunn was not even yet eligible, but it was too late to do anything about it this month. I would have to wait and be considered next month. That I was furious would be a mild understatement. Eventually the great Army bureaucracy finally got me promoted on the correct effective date.

The same day that I learned that I was indeed an NCO, my replacement officially became the office clerk and I was designated the acting sensor program NCOIC. Ironically, the brand new typewriter that I had been trying to get for months arrived on
that day as well. I had spent four months typing on a minimally operational piece of junk, and I was happy to give the new machine to my replacement. I wanted to dispose of the relic to minimize my chances of being called on for typing duties, but Msg. Taber would have nothing of that. The old typewriter followed me across the room to my new desk. I was finally free of my role as clerk, but the dreaded machine accompanied me to my next life.