

My Life in the Army:
2 years, 6 months, and 7 days of my life
[09 August 1969 - 16 February 1972]

January 2018

This is a project I've thought about doing for years, so the time has come to get it done. I have no idea just how long this will turn out to be. I may make additions later if I think of them. Also, be aware there may be errors in the details, so if you think I've made an error, please feel free to let me know. These are my recollections, so I already know there's room for mistakes.

Having been raised in the western Chicago suburbs, I was brought up to be a good Christian, a good Republican, and a patriotic American. I dumped the Christian part by the time I was 16. Its doctrines and beliefs just made no sense to me. I gave up the Republican part by the time I was in undergraduate school.

By the time I was finishing high school (1963), the USA was in the early stages of our involvement in Vietnam, and it was evident that I could be drafted to serve there. In my undergraduate days at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I had a student deferment, which I could count on for 4 years. Nevertheless, I became curious about Vietnam and read some history books – just as I had become curious about the Russians/Communists in my high school days. Ignorance, especially ignorance of history, can give rise to irrational fears.

From those Vietnam history books I read, it became clear that Vietnam already had a long history of repelling foreign invaders, including the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and now, the Americans. It's a dominant theme in their history. They're a tough, militaristic people who, like the Afghans, inevitably rise up to throw off invaders. I wonder if the Americans leading our government at the time had ever read any of those books? Perhaps they might have not felt so confident in our participation in yet another war on foreign soil if they knew the history of Vietnam. I guess they held the French in such low esteem, their defeat at the hands of the Viet Minh in 1953 could be written off as poor military strategy and tactics by the French. We were a superpower, right? No dinky country could beat the likes of us!

In 1968, student deferments ended for those in graduate school. As the time when I would be drafted approached, I hastily wrapped up my Master's degree from the University of Oklahoma at the end of 1968, and had time to finish my first semester toward my doctorate in Spring 1969 before the hammer fell. During the weekend of 20 July 1969, which was when Neil Armstrong became the first to walk on the moon, I watched it on TV in a hotel on the corner of Broadway and Main in downtown Norman. I was there to confer with my advisor and plan for the fall's return to my doctoral studies. My summer was being spent at the National Weather Service's National Severe Storms Forecast Center – my third consecutive summer as a

student trainee for what was then the U.S. Weather Bureau. My living quarters there, in Kansas City, MO, were in an apartment I rented on the third floor of the home owned by a retired couple named Knauss. They had traveled extensively around the US because the husband worked for a railroad (I don't recall which one, though.). I enjoyed talking with them on their porch during the evenings after work, and I think they also enjoyed the fact that I was interested in their stories.

When I returned to Kansas City, the Knauss's were not happy to deliver the news that my draft notice had arrived in the mail. They seemed genuinely sorry that I was being called upon to go serve. I left in early August and reported to the Chicago Armed Forces Enlistment and Induction Station (AFEIS) – now called a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). My parents drove me there. I wonder what they were thinking as they drove back to my home.

It begins: Induction and boot camp

Before going on, I want to discuss my state of mind. By this time in history, protests against the Vietnam war were already well underway. I could have gone to Canada to escape – but that would put an end to my career hopes. I could have chosen to refuse induction and then gone to jail, which also would put an end to my career hopes. Hence, it was with a powerful feeling of resignation and helplessness that I became a soldier. As a self-defense mechanism, I found my psyche removed itself from this unhappy situation and was “floating above” me, looking down on what was happening to me in a detached and curious way. That defense mechanism persisted for months, but I'll return to that later.

An illustration of the situation during my induction is represented by my physical exam to determine if I was fit to be a soldier. As test of my vision, I wore my glasses to read the eye chart, and then was asked to take off my glasses. Examiner – “Cover your right eye, and tell me what you see.” Me – “Nothing.” Examiner – “OK, cover your left eye and tell me what you see.” Me – “Nothing.” Examiner – “Fine. You pass! Next man!” Wow! Just wow!

At one point they lined all of us inductees up and had us count down the line by fours. Every fourth man would be sent to a 2-year active duty hitch in the Marines (Voluntary Marine enlistments were for 4 years of active duty.) The voluntary enlistments were not enough to make up for their combat losses!! The Marines needed cannon fodder and 25% of us were going to be it. It was the first and only day I was actually glad to be in the Army!

Once we went through all the rigmarole of induction, including the swearing-in, we were assembled to wait for our bus trip to boot camp. We were being sent to Fort Leonard Wood (aka Fort Lost in the Woods) in southern Missouri. I was on the way to become part of the 1st Platoon, Company B (Bravo), 5th Battalion, 2nd Basic Combat Training Brigade (B-5-2).

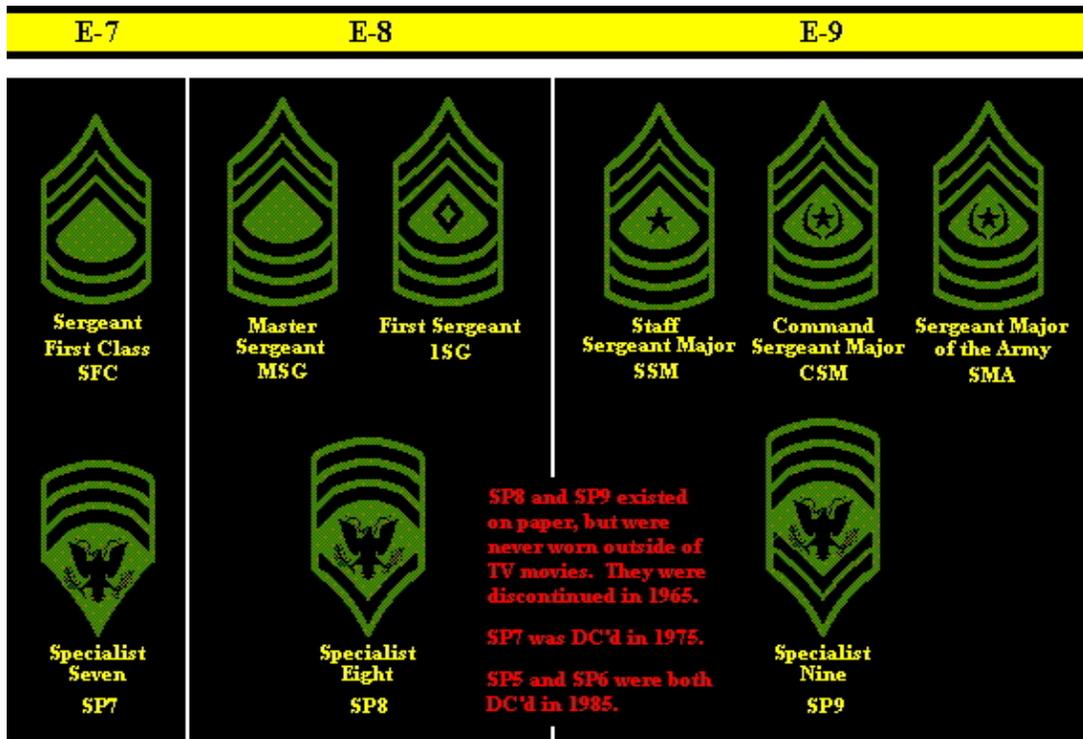
My Army clock began on 09 August 1969, the day of swearing-in. We arrived some time a few hours after midnight. I'm pretty confident the late hour of our arrival was intentional. We were greeted in our sleepy stupor by the loving screams of the drill sergeants in their "Smokey Bear" hats, who continually yelled at us, making us run everywhere all the time, their unquestionable authority dominating our lives for most of our stay at Fort Lost-In-The-Woods (or, as we came to call it, Little Korea). It was still summer and the weather was hot.

To my surprise, our first week in boot camp involved no military training. We had to get our stylish boot camp haircuts, be issued our natty uniforms and gear, take various tests, get our shots, medical exams, etc. This was called "Reception Station" but it sure didn't include any cookies and punch. We were housed in old-fashioned 1-room open barracks, and an "acting" corporal was our lord and master when we were not otherwise occupied. Most of these corporals were short-timers (see below), returning from their year in Vietnam with just a few months left on their 2-year enlistments. They were mostly SP4s (E4) given temporary, acting status as "hard stripe" corporals (CPL also E4) so they could be used to command new inductees – we were just plain old, lowly scum Privates (PVT E1).

Time out for some familiarization with Army enlisted rankings if you don't already know them. See the figures for some information about the ranking systems in place during the Vietnam era, and in the present era. The specialist ranks were for ... well, specialists, whereas the so-called "hard stripe" ranks (starting with corporal) were for those non-commissioned officers (non-coms or NCOs) who were put in charge of lower ranks – that is, troop pushers. My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS – more on this below) implied I would be in the specialist line unless I was assigned duty as a troop pusher.

E-1	E-2	E-3	E-4	E-5	E-6
(No Insignia) Private PVT	(No Insignia) Private E-2 PV2 <small>(Before MAY 1968)</small>	 Private First Class PFC	 Corporal CPL	 Sergeant SGT	 Staff Sergeant SSG
(No Insignia) Private PVT	 Private E-2 PV2 <small>(After MAY 1968)</small>	 Private First Class PFC	 Specialist Four SP4	 Specialist Five SP5	 Specialist Six SP6

Enlisted ranks in the Vietnam era, part 1



Enlisted ranks in the Vietnam era, part 2



Enlisted ranks at present (2018).

We called our particular “acting jack” by the nickname of “Susie-Q” because he played that CCR tune (the long version) constantly on the stereo he had in his private room in the barracks, but I have no recollection of his real name. To this day, curiously, I still like that tune!! He actually did his best to help us endure the boot camp we were soon to experience first-hand. We got the best advice I ever received in the Army: to survive boot camp, don’t do anything really well, or really badly. That calls the attention of the drill Sergeants to you, and that’s inevitably going to turn out badly for you, regardless of whether the attention is good or bad. I’m pleased to say that I followed his advice and by the time I graduated from boot camp, my platoon sergeant still had to look at the name patch on my uniform every time to call me out because he didn’t know my name! As a result of the acting corporal’s good advice, I was never singled out for individual punishment. Of course, we all were to suffer collectively under the baleful tyranny of the sadistic drill sergeants. But that story comes below.

When I arrived at Reception Station, I was a 2-year draftee. That is, like everyone else in the military, my enlistment actually was for 6 years, but as a draftee, the active duty part would only be in the first 2 years. The rest would be served in the Reserves (either active or inactive Reserves – active reserves had to attend monthly weekend duty and a 2-week active duty period once each year. Inactive reserves had none of that.) Part of the process in Reception Station included an “opportunity” to sign up for an Army school, but that would include an extra year added to the active duty part of your enlistment. The one true thing I was told during the interview was that most college graduates would be sent to infantry school after boot camp and would then wind up “humping the boonies” of Vietnam. That very thing happened to people I heard about. The guy who interviewed me looked at my records and announced that a good fit for me (with my 9 semester hours toward a doctorate in Meteorology) was to sign up for a school that would give me the MOS 72B20: communications center specialist. Hence, I signed up for that Advanced Individual Training (AIT) school to avoid the infantry and Vietnam. I later learned he was just filling a quota and had no clue how the Army might use my background to best advantage. More on that later. Suddenly, I was in for 3 years active duty instead of 2!! Oh, man! As part of the procedure, I was actually given an honorable discharge from my original enlistment, and my clock got reset to 13 August 1969.

If you’ve seen the movie “Full Metal Jacket”, the boot camp part of the movie is about the best match in filmdom to the way life in our boot camp went, short of the part where Vincent D’Onofrio shoots and kills R. Lee Ermy. One big difference between Army and Marine boot camp is that we were ordered not to call the drill instructors “Sir” and instead had to use their title “Drill Sergeant”. The Marines call them “Drill Instructors” (DIs) instead. There really were “blanket parties” in our boot camp (as shown in the movie, administered by the trainees to Vincent D’Onofrio for being a fuck-up and causing them all to be punished) incited and encouraged, but not formally sanctioned by the drill sergeants. In the movie, though, I didn’t see anyone

low-crawling (crawling with your belly to the ground) or duck-walking (a sort of walk done while squatting in a deep crouch – of course, we had to quack loudly as we did it) as punishment in the movie. Once, as punishment for something we did wrong, we had to duck-walk a half-mile to attend a lecture on the so-called Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Sound like fun? Just try it sometime! The irony of that certainly was striking. Push-ups and “4-count burpees” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W763P0hq5nM> were also used as punishment for trainee transgressions. “Drop and give me 20 (pushups)! Ready ... exercise!” was a frequent command. I’m sure this was all part of the plan to get us in shape, of course, but it was done more as humiliation than as training.



My boot camp platoon group photo. The guy in the middle of the front row with the Smoky Bear hat and sunglasses was our platoon drill sergeant, SSG Henderson. Can you locate me in the photo? I couldn't give you the name of a single person in the platoon other than SSG Henderson. Note the bloused pants. We were allowed to not wear our cover (hats) for the photo, which would have put our faces into shadow. We were not allowed to wear sunglasses, though. That was a privilege we weren't granted.

Keep in mind that I was 23, going on 24, when I was in boot camp, whereas most of the other trainees were around 18 and still very wet behind the ears, as well as gullible in response to the sadistic trickery of the drill sergeants. They lied to and tricked us constantly, and then punished us for doing what they asked too slowly or whatever. I'll give examples later. Since I had been living on my own since high school, I really resented these sadistic morons telling me what to do in the most condescending way. They referred to us as maggots, or called us “tray-knee” in the most mocking tone of voice possible. We clearly were lower than scum, and not worth the powder to blow us up. They were going to break us down and then build us back up as soldiers. I kept waiting for the build-up part, but it never came. I guess they forgot.

Most everything we did in boot camp was at high speed. We constantly were being rushed at whatever we were doing and then would have to wait for whatever we were engaged in next. Hence, the common use of the aphorism: “hurry up and wait!” Another common phrase was associated with cigarettes (for sale dirt cheap as there was no tax levied on Army-sold cigarettes). While taking a break (i.e., waiting), the drill sergeants would announce: “Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em!” And we would have to “field strip” the butts, which meant we removed whatever contents were left in the butt and then keep the filter in our pocket for later disposal. At the time, I was a smoker.

Boot camp meals in the mess hall were served on brown melamine trays with 5 compartments: 3 small, 1 medium, and 1 large, like a big TV dinner tray. The food was okay, but we were always required to eat fast. Second helpings were supposed to be possible, but to get them, you had to consume everything in a short time and I never managed it before the drill sergeants ran us out of the mess hall. We stood in long lines to be served but the meals were over pretty quickly! I had my first ever meal with grits there. I liked them. And there was SOS (shit on a shingle) – creamed chipped beef (or ground beef) on toast. I liked it, too. Still do.



Melamine mess trays.

In boot camp, we were introduced to the ubiquitous duty roster. Army duty rosters always are run by the company's First Sergeant (1SG – an E8) and woe unto you if you failed to report or even wanted the roster changed for some personal reason.

We virtually never saw either the 1SG (sometimes referred to as the “first shirt”) or the company Commanding Officer (CO), however. We trainees all served our turns on “fire watch” You would be on fire watch for 2 hours during the night, ostensibly to guard against fires in the barrack, but actually it was just a wonderful way to deprive you of about 3 hours sleep around once a week. Fire watch made perfect sense in the old style open barracks heated with a coal stove, but not so much in the “modern” barracks, that had 12-man rooms for the junior enlisted, with central heating and cooling.

And then there was the dreaded “kitchen police” (KP). When your turn came up (a handful of times during the cycle), you would be awakened to report to the mess hall at 3 am, to serve at the whim of the mess hall cadre until the end of the last meal of the day, slogging through all the back-breaking work of preparing and serving meals, and cleaning up. It was always a pretty awful day – virtually continuous hard labor from 3 am to 7-8 pm. There would be other duty rosters to come, of course.

We also were taught how to make up our bunks, with our spare combat boots placed in just the right spot under the foot of the bunk. The itchy olive drab wool blanket had to be stretched over the bunk so tautly that a coin dropped on it would bounce. This model applied to anyone living in any unit's barracks, wherever you went. Our training was murder on our boots, so a good portion of the time not on training or sound asleep was spent cleaning and spit polishing those boots. They had to have a mirror finish on the toes and heels. We were taught how to spit polish with water (not spit) and a cotton ball, and it consumed a lot of time every day. As I recall, we put our dirty fatigues (our Army olive green uniform pants and shirts, with white underwear) in a laundry but I don't remember much about that. We didn't use starch, though, as the drill sergeants did. We had to “blouse” our fatigue pants – tuck the bottoms into our boot tops to create a “ballooned” look above the boots. When outdoors, you were always required to wear your “cover” (hat – in boot camp, that mostly was a baseball-type olive drab [OD – cap]), and take it off when indoors. Our belt buckle had to line up with the top of the zipper flap on our pants, and the line of buttons on our shirts. No facial hair allowed.

Once boot camp began under the “wisdom” and tutelage of the drill Sergeants, it became primarily a matter of mental survival in the face of the constant physical and psychological abuse. I was not in the best physical condition when I entered, and the first few times we double-timed the 9 miles to the rifle ranges in full combat gear including an M-14 rifle, it seemed that I surely would die. But I didn't, obviously, and in a relatively short time I was able to keep up. A trick we learned was called “the airborne shuffle” in which we barely lifted each foot while running, with knees hardly bent at all. This took much less effort and it soon became nothing

of consequence to double-time the full 9 miles both ways, and remain in orderly ranks. As I recall, I lost about 20-25 pounds over the full cycle.

The training we received might include “lectures” with us sitting outdoors in bleachers (in the rain, if it was raining), and then some sort of hands-on experience. But most of it was a silly sham. For instance, after we learned about using grenades, and had a single live grenade practice throw, we had a test to determine our proficiency – but we weren’t evaluated by the instructors. Instead, we graded each other. By this means, most of us (including yours truly) were graded as “expert”! Evidently, no one cared if we actually could toss a grenade well enough to meet some minimum level of expertise. Maybe that would be covered again if we wound up in infantry AIT, but for boot camp trainees, it obviously didn’t matter much.

When we were given training on chemical weapons and the gas masks used as protection, after the lecture, we were marched in small groups of about squad size into a “gas chamber” wearing our masks. It was eerie inside, featuring a glowing object in the center (the presumed source of the tear gas) and a sort of translucent, smoky atmosphere. An instructor (wearing a mask) outlined what was to happen. On command, we were to remove our masks, and proceed to the exit door, where we had to recite our name and service number before we would be let out. If you’ve never experienced military grade tear gas, you simply can’t be prepared for its effects. I instantly began to water from nose, eyes, and mouth, and my brain was wiped clean of all rational thought immediately. The only thing I remember thinking was I had to get out of that awful place as soon as possible! After gaining my exit via the required recitation, I joined the slobbering gang of survivors, puking, coughing, and leaking fluid from all moist orifices in our head (nose, eyes, and mouth). One drill sergeant actually leaned on the exit door for several minutes, refusing to let anyone out, while he and the others laughed uproariously! Screams from inside went on until the guy finally relented. Sadistic bastards!! What did that torture have to do with our training?

Another topic we spent a lot of time on was close order drill – the marching and facing movements when soldiers are in their ranks. I found this to be relatively simple and even enjoyed it when most of us became proficient enough to do it reasonably well. The feeling is comparable to being in a musical ensemble with all members performing well in their assigned role – the sense of collective cooperation in achievement of a group goal is something of an incentive to learn close order drill.

Army lore proposes that in every platoon, there’s almost always at least one person who consistently is out of step and is too uncoordinated to be competent at close order drill. A “lovable loser” in the spirit of the fictional characters Gomer Pyle or Forrest Gump, I suppose. In our platoon, our version of that guy was a yokel from somewhere in the South, and he was picked on mercilessly. The platoon sergeants were mostly Staff Sergeants (SSG E6), but there was a Sergeant First Class (SFC E7) Senior Drill Instructor (SDI) for the whole of Company B. The SDI was cut from the same sadistic cloth as the rest of the platoon sergeants. One day, our incompetent

loser was out of step on a march, so the SDI wound up and kicked him hard in the ass! The blow lifted the poor guy off the ground before he fell down in pain. Later, we found out that this unfortunate person was given a medical discharge because he collapsed with blood coming out of his ears, apparently as a result of that powerful kick to his tailbone done with a combat boot. Evidently, no investigation or punishment for the incident was ever done.

When one trainee in a unit does something wrong in boot camp, the benevolent drill sergeants would usually administer punishment to the entire unit, not just the transgressor. That punishment for us often involved low crawling, or duck walking (Never too much humiliation in boot camp!), or pushups, or whatever. This strategy of collective blame for individual fuck-ups was supposed somehow to create unit cohesion, since the unit would be united in hating the idiot who caused us all to suffer. Unfortunately, the idiot whose transgressions earned us all the punishment of the day wasn't *always* the same person, so many different trainees would experience the hatred of his "brothers" in the unit over the course of weeks of training. I never understood how this would foster unit cohesion – it struck me as a way to *discourage* unit solidarity. You wound up hating everyone else in the platoon. My policy of not doing anything really well or really badly served me in good stead, as I was never singled out as the cause for an episode of collective punishment. The drill sergeants actually encouraged us in sly ways to wreak vengeance on the fool of the hour in retaliation for our punishment. On one occasion, the platoon was indirectly encouraged to beat up an unfortunate loser, but we weren't really into that, so we just *pretended* to beat him up. That was discovered, unfortunately, which caused the drill sergeant to explode in righteous indignation and we all were subjected to even more collective punishment.

When we ran in formation, the drill sergeants made us sing various cadence songs. Many of them were actually sort of fun in a bizarre way. "I wanna be an airborne ranger! I wanna live a life of danger!" or "I wanna go to Vietnam! I wanna kill a Vietcong!" Many were rather ribald, often invoking the evil guy back home named Jody, who was banging our girlfriends. These cadence tunes were designed to keep us all in step in our "airborne shuffle". Obviously, I had absolutely no wish to be an airborne ranger and if Jody wanted to pork my ex-girlfriend, he was welcome to try! But I digress.

Earlier, I mentioned the fake nature of most of our training. The only two training evolutions we experienced that were dead serious were the "physical training" (PT) and rifle marksmanship tests. We did quite a bit of PT every day, naturally, including the 9-mile runs to and from the rifle ranges, pushups and low-crawling for punishment, etc. I can still hear in my mind's ear those dreaded commands: "Port arms! Double time, march!" as we went from a normal marching pace ("quick time") to a running pace in formation. For the duration of the double time, our rifle was held at Port Arms – something of a test of strength and endurance.

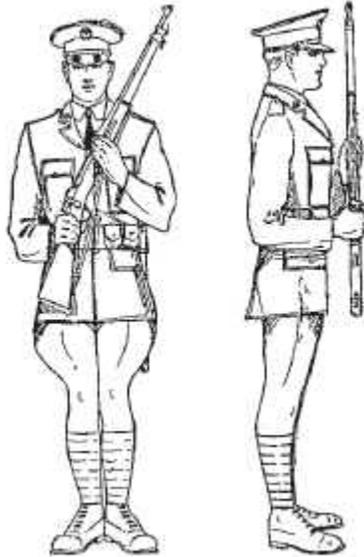


Illustration of "port arms" position

The PT test was administered toward the end of boot camp, and consisted of 5 events: a timed run (1 mile), a timed 40-yard low crawl, the horizontal ladder, the dodge-run-jump, and the 150-yard man carry.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJHvTl8Rc4U>

It was executed in fatigues, without gear or rifle. It seems at present, the PT test has been reduced to 3 events (timed 2-mile run, pushups, and sit-ups). The drill sergeants "encouraged" us to excel in the events, because they competed among themselves to have the best scores on the test. My policy, of course, was to do the minimum necessary to pass the test, but the gullible teenage trainees really tried to do their best! There might have been some sort of reward for the sergeant of the platoon (and for the commanding officer [CO] of the company) with the best score on the PT test, but there was nothing in it for us trainees! I passed with generally near-minimum scores. If you failed the PT test, you would likely be tested again soon, with a second failure rewarded with the dreaded "re-cycle": you would be held back and would join another group just starting boot camp. You'd get to do it all over again!! This was quite an incentive to pass!!

The marksmanship test was another basis for competition among the platoon, company, and battalion cadre, and so was taken seriously, but our scores provided no positive reward for us. I was issued an M-14 rifle for boot camp training, not the M-16 (more on that later), and it was a fine, but heavy weapon that used a peep rear sight. At the time, I wanted to do as well as I could for my own personal satisfaction. For the test, we fired at pop-up targets that would go down if we hit them, from various ranges and different shooting positions (standing, kneeling, prone). For each position, the targets were at various ranges and we had a maximum time to engage all the targets before they went down automatically. On the day of my test, late in the boot camp cycle, we were greeted with a cold rain. The test was not

cancelled for that, of course. You may not know it, but firing a rifle with a peep site in the rain creates a spray of rainwater from the recoil, some of which often winds up in the rear peep sight, so you have to blow into the peep sight to clear it. Otherwise, you just can't see through it. That definitely slowed me down, so I qualified at the lowest passing level: marksman. I honestly don't know how others did so well under those conditions. There must have been some trick of which I was unaware. The main thing was that I passed, and I managed once again to not excel for the benefit of the cadre. (Later, in another sham exercise during AIT, I qualified at the sharpshooter level with the M-14). Failure to qualify at marksmanship meant – you guessed it – the prospect of a re-cycle!! Failure was just not a viable option for any of us. In reality, the bar is set to a level that by far the majority of young men can make it, naturally. The Army needs cannon fodder.



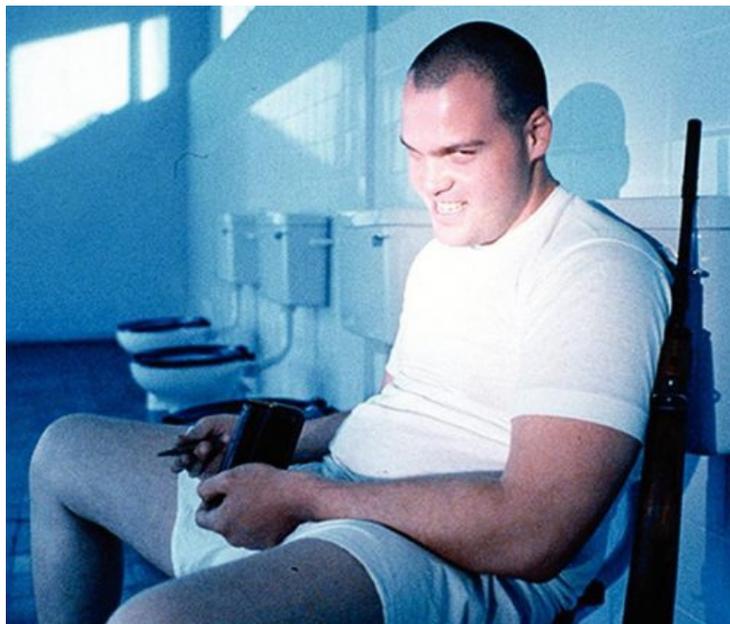
M-14 semiautomatic rifle of the sort we were issued in boot camp.

I offer something of a footnote regarding our training in marksmanship. Naturally, we had to be issued our rifles and ammunition during training. That carried with it a certain risk of a “Full Metal Jacket” scenario – some crazed trainee turning a loaded weapon on the cadre. Hence, there were always NCOs behind the firing line with loaded weapons, just in case someone decided to emulate Vincent D’Onofrio (Not literally, of course. That movie wasn’t released until 1987.). We were made aware of that precautionary response to a potential threat.

Toward the end of the cycle, we went out on a bivouac – a camping hike, where we did daily “forced marches” and then camped for the night. By this time in the cycle, the weather had turned cold at night. There was a lot of gear we had to carry, including an entrenching tool, a down sleeping bag, and a canvas “shelter half” that, when combined with another, would create a 2-person tent (albeit with no floor). Our compassionate drill sergeant, SSG Henderson went through all the details of how he wanted us to pack our gear the night before the bivouac. But the next morning, as we fell out for the morning formation, he was nowhere to be seen. There was an assistant instructor who was a buck sergeant (SGT E-5) – I’ll refer to him as SGT Dipshit since I don’t recall his name. He wore a painted helmet liner instead of a Smoky Bear hat, and was generally among the worst in the company cadre for giving trainees grief. [For instance, he had been the jerk blocking the exit to the gas chamber!] He came to our platoon and claimed our gear wasn’t packed properly! He ordered us to repack everything according to his whims, and gave us about 2 min to do it! As a result, our gear was a mess when the order came to

commence marching. As always happens with badly packed gear, our shit began coming apart and falling out as we marched along, with the only recourse being to pick up and carry all that somehow. At some point after the march began, guess who shows up? SSG Henderson, of course. When he sees the pathetic condition of our gear, he wants to know why, since he had spent the preceding night teaching us how to pack it properly. Of course, we bleated out that SGT Dipshit made us do it. As you might expect, this made him even madder. SGT Dipshit wasn't our platoon sergeant – he was, and so evidently we shouldn't have obeyed any order from SGT Dipshit!! He went on to punish us for our sins, naturally, with an extended round of low crawling. To this day, I've never grasped with the point was, if there was any, in this game SSG Henderson and SGT Dipshit played. It had clearly been a setup. I suspect they were just indulging in their penchant for sadism.

During the bivouac march, I remember one afternoon vividly, marching along in an outer rank with the SDI just to my right and a little ahead of me. Recalling how he had kicked the man who struggled with executing close order drill and his fate, I suddenly experienced a tsunami of deep hatred for him and, as I marched along, I fantasized about unfolding my entrenching tool and burying its pick end between his shoulder blades. I had never felt such intense hatred for anyone in my life before that. It was a genuine struggle not to act out that fantasy, given how I was physically tired. This intense hatred was something I'd never experienced before, and I was unaware that I could experience it. Of course, I didn't do it. But when Vincent D'Onofrio shot R. Lee Ermy in "Full Metal Jacket," I found that to be a very believable scene in the movie. I understood how someone might crack under that provocation.



Vincent D'Onofrio (in the role of Private Leonard Lawrence), about to shoot R. Lee Ermy (as Gunnery Sergeant Hartman).

We finally made it to graduation, so we had to march in a parade, get our pictures taken, receive the accolades showered us by any family members who attended the ceremony (none, in my case), and get ready to be shipped out for Advanced Individual Training (AIT).



My boot camp graduation photograph, wearing a short-sleeved khaki uniform and the dress “saucer” cap.

The next step: AIT

After graduation, I was sent to the “school” I selected while in reception station: The course was for Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 72B20, Communications Center Specialist, at the US Army South Eastern Signal School (USASESS) at Fort Gordon, GA (We called it Fort Garbage). This was my “reward” for signing up for another year of active duty. Otherwise, I was going to be at the Infantry AIT “school” and then on to Vietnam. I arrived around 10 October 1969 for this new adventure. There was no leave between boot camp and AIT.

Things were massively less hectic than life in boot camp. We still were on a duty roster, but I don’t recall ever having pulled KP during AIT – perhaps my memory has dimmed. This was to be an intermediate step between the constant pressure of boot camp and the laid-back reality that was to be “permanent party” at a non-combat duty station. Obviously, I’ll have more to say on that later.

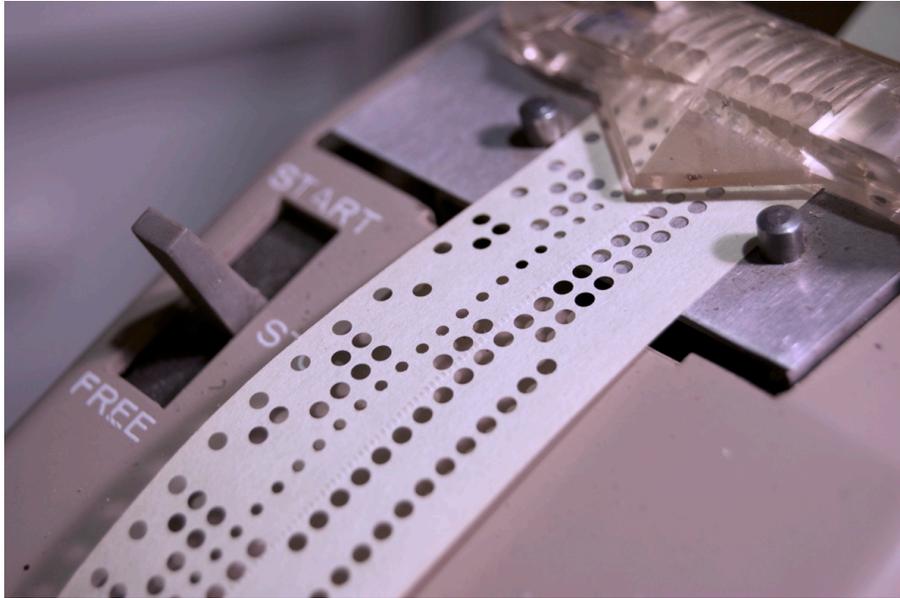
It was late in my stay at Fort Gordon that I learned some very discouraging news: one morning we had fallen out for morning formation and the sergeants informed us that the lottery for the draft had been held on 01 Dec 1969, and my lottery number had come up as #310! If the lottery legislation had been passed prior to 06 August of 1969, I would never have been called up! Standing there in formation with but 4 months of Army active duty time out of 3 years behind me, this was really disheartening news.

The barracks we stayed in were “modern” with 12-man rooms for us trainees – the same sort that we had occupied once out of reception station at Fort Leonard Wood. There were a lot of the older style open barracks on Fort Gordon still in use, though, heated by coal-fired stoves. In the morning, before the surface inversion burned off, the smoke from the fires would fill the air with smog. Wonderful air quality to start off the day.

My “school” was about using teletypes for communicating information in the field. The teletypes were rather similar to the ones I’d used in the Weather Bureau offices where I’d been a student trainee. Messages were cut into paper tape with coded holes as you typed, and then the tape would be transmitted to the destination(s) designated in the header of every message. It was something of a surprise to me to learn they used equipment quite similar to that used by the Weather Bureau.



A teletype machine similar to that upon which we trained in AIT.



Punched paper tape coming out of the transmitter-distributor (TD) on the side of the teletype machine that turned typed characters into hole patterns on the tape.

When I was in high school, I took a typing course, and it turned out that course has to be the single most useful course I ever had. Trainees entering the 72B course were given a typing test for speed and accuracy. I don't recall the minimum standard, but I do know I passed that the first time I took the test. That meant I could skip the week-long touch typing training they included at the beginning of the course, and move on to the next stage. This reduced my time in AIT, which I suppose was good. As it turned out, that was crucial in the timing of my departure from AIT in a special way. Stay tuned.

The pace of learning at the school was markedly slower than what I had experienced in graduate school. The procedures were pretty simple and the biggest challenge was to remember it all. We were given tests at various stages in the process and I pretty much aced them all without a lot of effort. At the end of the course, I was designated as an "honor graduate" – which had virtually no particular value. It might have accelerated my promotion to PFC, though. I don't recall, now.

U S Army Southeastern Signal School
Fort Gordon, Ga.



Be it known that

PVT CHARLES A. DOSWELL III

having successfully completed the
COMMUNICATIONS CENTER SPECIALIST COURSE (72B20)
U. S. Army Southeastern Signal School
is hereby awarded this
Honor Graduate Diploma

In testimony whereof and by virtue of authority vested in us by the Department of the Army
we hereby affix our signatures and the seal of this institution,
Fort Gordon, Ga. this 17th day of Dec 19 69

FG (SESS) FORM 291R
1 DEC 66

James C. Burroum
COLONEL, INFANTRY
SECRETARY
Amor
COLONEL, SIGNAL CORPS
COMMANDANT

ARMY FT GORDON GA 8-1969 120M

My certificate as an honor graduate from AIT.

During the latter part of the course, we got into the *cryptography* part of comm center communication systems – operational messages typically were encrypted. This was done by passing the paper tape through a “crypto” machine that took the plain text and coded it for encryption. Presumably, cracking the code would be a challenge unless you had access to a crypto machine. To work with the crypto machines, everyone had to pass a background check and be given at least a SECRET (crypto) clearance. As I recall, we were trained on both the KL-7 and KW-7 devices for encryption/decryption. My memories of this are dim, so this may be wrong. Much of what I learned might still be classified, anyway. I don’t recall getting a lot of crypto information – the encryption/decryption machines did almost all the work for us.



KL-7



KW-7

One of the things the instructors made abundantly clear to us 72B20 communications trainees was that a high percentage of those in Army stockades (jails) were either supply people (who had robbed the system) or communications people (who had compromised security in some way). This gave me some extra incentive to listen and learn procedures to the letter. Whatever I might think about my job, I had to pay attention and take it seriously. This turned out to have important consequences, to be mentioned later

We routinely were allowed to go off-post on weekends, and I visited nearby Augusta, GA, on several occasions (We called it Disgusta!). I was intrigued with the Confederate Civil War Memorials scattered about in Augusta. This was my first time in the deep South, and it was evident they wanted to keep the memories of their treasonous rebellion alive. One weekend, I went to town and saw the movie "Alice's Restaurant" starring Arlo Guthrie. It didn't take much imagination to see it as, among other things, an anti-Vietnam War movie. That resonated with me, of course. Seeing it while in AIT had a touch of irony I didn't overlook.

Although I basically don't remember befriending anyone from my company in boot camp, I made several friends in AIT. An important aspect of my Army time was that it was basically my first contact with people of diverse sorts from all around the country, including African-Americans. Among the friends I liked the most in AIT was a black man, from Philly. He introduced me to the first Led Zeppelin album, which remains a favorite to this day. Sadly, time has stolen his name from my memory – AIT was only about 8 weeks, after all. You had to make friends quickly in the Army as your time in any one place and/or any one person could be short. We moved about as individuals, not units. There's risk in trusting new acquaintances, but you had to overcome that concern if you wanted any friends at all.

After completing the school, I was surprised to discover that I was being sent to Vietnam for my first duty assignment, despite having added an extra year to go to this school! The orders I had were unclear as to my final destination – the only hint was that I was being sent to a unit in Long Binh, near Saigon. I later learned that offered virtually *no information* regarding my terminal destination. Anyway, those of us with orders to Vietnam were required to take a week-long course in RVN training after completing AIT. As I recall, the course had to be shortened a bit to allow us to be given leave time over the December holidays (I left for home on 22 December 1969). The course was mostly typical Army training – a pathetic sham. But there were several bits of useful truth we all learned about our upcoming time in Vietnam. All our instructors had been to Vietnam, at least, so they knew something.

1. The instructors told us that our orders might not mean anything when we arrived there. If, say, the 101st Airborne Division had suffered a large number of casualties, we might be sent as combat replacements to the 101st

Airborne. The “needs of the Army” superceded all else. The fact that we had no airborne training or even infantry AIT didn’t mean a thing. We could always parachute from an airplane on a mission and our training would then be considered complete!

2. In order to shorten the RVN training, they had eliminated a re-visitation of the dreaded gas chamber from that training! If I completed the training just before going on leave, I’d be spared that misery. At the time, I had a pretty bad respiratory infection, but I was damned if I was going to go on sick leave!! If I did that, when I got back from leave, my last acts in AIT would include being gassed again! No sir, that was powerful incentive literally to stay the course.

3. We were informed that the dreaded KP was not the worst duty you could pull in the Army. The worst duty was - drum roll - burning shit! They would cut a 55 gallon drum in half, make two holes near the open tops for purposes of carrying them, and then would place them under the toilet seats in the “crapper/shitter”. Once they were full enough (not to the brim, of course), they would be taken somewhere, fuel oil would be added to the “honey pot” and they’d be set afire. The stench was sickening and you had to *stir* the horrible flaming mixture of fuel oil, shit, piss, and TP to ensure it was thoroughly burned. After burning, what ashes remained were buried. Yuch ... more on this later.

Once the RVN Training was complete, my time in AIT was done. I left AIT and Fort Gordon on 22 December. I’d have some leave time back home over Christmas and New Year’s and then I’d be on my merry way to Vietnam. My leave time at home was very strange. I felt very distant from my family. I don’t remember much about that Christmas. My psyche was still somehow detached from what was happening to me, in defense of my sanity. I’d already experienced a lot. Nothing I’d done before could possibly have prepared me for Army life, and I certainly was not happy with it. I wonder what my parents thought about me during that time.



At home for holiday leave in December 1969. I was then a Private First Class (PFC E-3) as can be seen by the “bat wings” rank insignia on my sleeve. I had grown the mustache that I would wear for the rest of my life while I was in AIT. The hat is officially a “Garrison Cap” but we called it a “Cunt Cap” for unclear reasons. It was a pretty functionless item of head gear. Photo by my Dad in our living room.

My tour in Vietnam

After holiday leave, I had to report to Oakland Army Base in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. My sister and her second husband lived in San Mateo at the time, so I arranged to visit with them for a short time before reporting, which was nice. Then came the fateful day of 14 January 1970 when I reported for duty and soon boarded the chartered commercial jet flight from Travis Air Force Base to Bien Hoa Air Force Base near Saigon. With the length of the flight and crossing the International Date Line, we arrived in Vietnam on 16 January 1970.

My orders only included being assigned to the US Army/Republic of Vietnam (USARV) Transit Detachment in Long Binh (famous for its military prison – Long Binh Jail [LBJ]). I was issued bedding on arrival and assigned a bunk in what I learned were transit barracks. I was to stay there for about a week. We occasionally would be grabbed for some meaningless work detail by the permanent party cadre, and there was some administrative paperwork to do. Essentially, we were waiting to be put on a manifest to fly to our next stop. For me, that turned out to be yet another transit outfit, this time in Danang. I could see from a posted map that Danang was quite a ways north of the Saigon area, closer to North Vietnam.

I should say that after that little bit of information from the instructors during RVN training in AIT about the possibility we might be assigned to a combat outfit upon arrival in country, I was pretty anxious. I still had no idea of where I was headed and all of South Vietnam, after all, was a combat zone in a war against Vietnamese guerilla fighters and the North Vietnamese army. Thus, my anxieties grew with time.

After about a week in Long Binh, I landed on a manifest for the flight to my next destination, Danang. So I turned in my bedding and gathered my gear. This flight was on a C-141 Starlifter cargo aircraft. Conditions aboard were pretty spartan – nothing like the commercial jet that took me to Vietnam. The C-141 is not designed for passenger comfort.



C-141 Starlifter jet cargo plane.

Upon arrival ... you guessed it ... I was issued bedding and assigned a bunk in another transit barracks, this time complete with mosquitoes for our nighttime entertainment. Again, I stayed there for about a week, occasionally getting grabbed by the cadre for some work details but mostly just waiting to be put on a manifest again. This time it turned out a bit differently, though – rather than going to yet another transit detachment, I had been issued orders assigning me to the Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 26th General Support Group, in Phu Bai. Consulting a map revealed this location was even farther north, closer to North Vietnam and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam. My anxieties continued, but this was to be my work location for the duration of my time in Vietnam. Once again, I turned in my bedding and got prepared for the flight to Phu Bai. The aircraft was a C-130 Hercules, and it was

even noisier and more spartan than the C-141 had been. Fortunately, it's just a short hop from Danang to Phu Bai.



C-130 Hercules turboprop cargo plane.

Upon arrival ... you guessed it ... I was issued bedding and assigned a bunk in one of the HHC hooches. Our hooches were long wooden buildings with screen doors and screened windows in the upper part of the walls, with corrugated metal roofs. In between the rows of hooches were narrow sandbag blast walls, presumably to withstand shrapnel and/or small arms fire. Our bunks were low and included mosquito netting. We were issued fans to blow air over us as we slept. The dry season in Phu Bai was pretty hot and humid, so the moving air was a great help to our sleep. In the rainy season, it was cool and humid. Phu Bai is on the coastal plains – our dry season was the wet season in the mountains to our west, and our wet season was the dry season in the mountains. Typical daytime temperatures were 95+ deg F, and the humidity was always high. Wet season temperatures were around 70 deg F or perhaps a bit less, which felt pretty chilly after the dry season. We had a tropical cyclone make landfall near us once during the rainy season, and it rained about 18 inches that day, with considerable wind. The interesting part of

that was there was no apparent flooding – the sandy soil absorbed the water quickly. We had large cockroaches in the hooches and large rats roamed about, too.



I think this is my hooch ... note the “blast wall” to the left.



My bunk, in my hooch – the mosquito net over my bed is at the bottom. My stereo components were in locked boxes with hinged fronts. The Acoustic Research speakers were left out, though. I had a Marantz receiver and an 8-track tape player.

We occasionally had movies (yes, real movies on reels of film). I watched the movie version of “M*A*S*H” projected on a sheet hung in one of the hooches after it got dark. Needless to say, that movie’s irreverence regarding the Army resonated quite well with the audience in that hooch! Goddamn Army! The film was ostensibly set in the Korean War, but given when it was released (1970!), the clear intent was to express anti-Vietnam war sentiments.

Thus, I was on call 24/7. My typical day involved about an hour's work, start to finish. Thus, the biggest challenge for me was boredom. The official Message Center was in the locked communications bunker with limited access, but the mimeograph was in the Signal Platoon office, as I recall. Classified messages were to be disposed of in the burn barrel behind the Commo Bunker. This latter requirement created an incident I'll describe later.



The office of the Signal Platoon, with a couple of the platoon's buck sergeant NCOs hanging around. I don't recall their names and never had much dealings with either of them.

In order to drive the pickup I used, I had to get an Army Driver's License, which was pretty much a simple formality. I was licensed to drive vehicles up to the 2 ½ ton truck used in most of our unit's supply convoys, but I never actually drove a "deuce and a half". Having that license, however, created another incident I'll relate later.

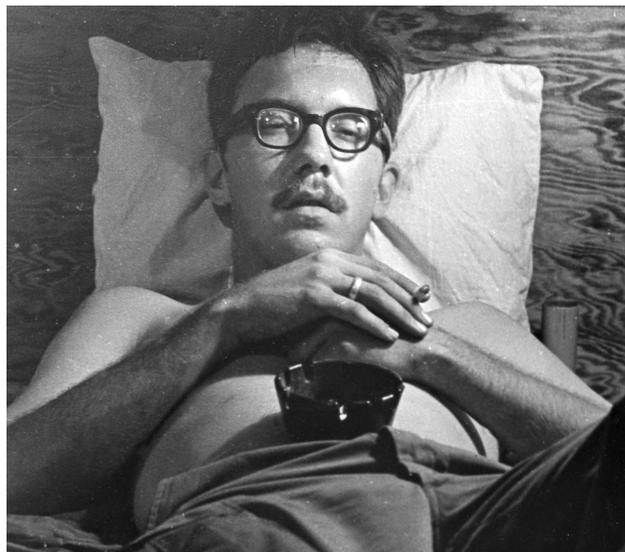


M37 ¾ ton pickup truck



M35 Deuce and a half cargo truck.

As related on my web page narrative, I was soon to meet my friend, Max Hoefler, who worked in the S-1 staff (responsibility for personnel issues). I found out later that Max had known I was going to be assigned to the HHC as a replacement for another Message Center clerk well before I arrived. He was interested in seeking me out in part because he noted that I had a fairly high score (144) on the Army General Test (GT) I took in Reception Station. As described in my Web narrative, we became very close during the few months of overlap in our service in Vietnam. It was Max who introduced me to marijuana, something I'd never tried before. That had many consequences that I'll relate as we go along. Max and I remain friends to this day and I'm forever in debt to him for making many positive differences in my life at a time when things seemed pretty dismal. It was Max who brought me and my psyche back together, when he began to encourage me not to be a passive spectator in the process I was experiencing, but to take active charge of my Army time and not be just so much dust in the wind.



Max in his bunk ... in another hooch.

In my job as a Message Center clerk, I was associated with the S-6 staff element (communications). A few months in, a lady who was associated with Special Services was setting up a Crafts Shop in our compound, to be available to all troops in the area. She needed someone to make up a sign for the Crafts Shop, so when that word was spread, I volunteered and was given the job. It took me about a week, although I probably could have done it in two or three days. She liked it so much, she leaned on the Company cadre to have me re-assigned as the Crafts Shop "Art Director". All I had to do was post an announcement that I would be teaching an art class once a week, but I never really had to teach a class, because no one ever signed up! During my time in the Crafts Shop, I was joined there by another expatriate from the Signal Platoon, Brian Weatherholt, who was the Crafts Shop photography guru. He was an experienced photographer and I learned from him how to develop and print my own B&W photographs from my first-ever good camera, a Canon FTb 35 mm, bought from the 101st Airborne Division's Post Exchange (PX). I bought my own film (mostly B&W, some color slide film) but I used the Crafts Shop's enlargers, developing fluids, dark rooms, and print paper. The photos in this section are mostly mine.



The sign that got me out of the message center, for a while.



Brian Weatherholt

Not long after my arrival, I was informed that since I had trained on the M-14, I had to participate in a “familiarization fire” exercise with the M-16 that had been issued for me to use. I already had gone through a familiarization exercise with the M-16 in AIT (qualifying as “Expert”!), but apparently the Army insisted I had to do *another* one upon arrival! Our weapons normally were stored in the locked armory of the supply shack, under the watchful eye of the supply sergeant. I dutifully signed out for my M-16 and a bunch of us piled into a deuce and a half, off to some pretty empty hillside that served as a safe backstop for our rifle bullets. The truck carried many boxes of full M-16 magazines for our rifles, and an M-60 machine gun with a bipod and several belts of 7.62 mm ammo for some of the guys to play with (not I!).

The exercise wasn’t about accuracy – it was supposed to allow us to become “familiar” with the M-16, whatever that might mean. There was pretty modest instruction and even less supervision. We had been told that the M-16 on full automatic was best fired in 3-round bursts rather than emptying the magazine in a few seconds, so I decided to follow the suggestion and practice shooting 3-round bursts on full auto. I did so, running through a few magazines in the process. After this went on for a while, I was interrupted by the fact that my rifle had jammed, with a live round snagged at a cockeyed angle between the bolt and the bore (see the photo below). I pulled the charging handle back to eject that round, and then pulled out the magazine to see how many rounds it still held. I could see it was just a few, so I decided to quit firing then and there. I tossed that mostly empty magazine back in the ammo box. I had done what I was told to do and I was bored with the whole

business. Everyone eventually had had enough, so we piled the troops and gear back into the truck and went back to the company area.



Not my rifle, but a photo of an M-16 jam very similar to what I saw. I managed to eject the jammed round, but that didn't completely solve my problem.

There, the supply sergeant made it clear that any time we fired our rifles, we were required to clean them satisfactorily before turning them back in, so we set about doing so with the cleaning kits provided. I put my thumb in the chamber and raised the front bore of the rifle to my eye so the light reflected from my thumbnail would illuminate the bore. To my surprise, I could see no light at all! It seemed the last round I had fired had not passed completely out of the bore, but instead was lodged part way down. Since it didn't uncover the gas port completely, there wasn't enough gas pressure to work the bolt properly, which only partially did its job by inertia, resulting in the next round being jammed in the chamber. If I had fired that weapon again, it would have exploded in my hands!! The supply sergeant knocked the bullet from the bore with a cleaning rod and I finished cleaning it, but my confidence in that weapon was shattered – I would've preferred carrying a *rattlesnake* into combat rather than that M-16. As luck would have it, I never had to fire that weapon in anger. The checkered history of the M-16 as the Army's main combat rifle is well-known, of course.

I had another sort of encounter that I call "The Battle of Phu Bai" with the M-16. We had received intelligence traffic that indicated the Viet Cong (VC) and/or the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were going to attack and try to overrun the base. In preparation for that predicted assault, we were issued our rifles that evening – without ammunition for them – presumably because they didn't trust us with loaded weapons unless we were actually being confronted by enemy troops. We were set out in pairs all around the inner compound that made up our 26th GSG territory. Each 2-man makeshift "fighting position" looked out from our compound perimeter and was made up of a few sandbags and a half a corrugated metal drain pipe section

set on one end, behind which “cover” we were supposed to repel any assault. We sat at our posts for hours without anything happening, contemplating our possible futures. We weren’t given any information nor any means by which we could communicate with anyone else. Some time earlier, I had learned that since there was an ASA “spook shop” in the area, if we ever were overrun, the B-52s would carpet bomb the whole place, including us if we were still there and somehow still alive. I was pretty much convinced that if the guys in cone hats and black pajamas got close to the wire, I was going to use my weapon to shoot any “lifers” (career soldiers) around me and split for the coast. I had no obvious motivation to stand and die for the good old 26th GSG. About 3 am, a pickup was going around to each fighting position, so I guessed they were bringing us ammunition and frags. Nope. They were handing out oranges for us to eat!! Shortly after that, the alert was called off, and we could turn in our rifles and go to bed. The good guys had prevailed in the Battle of Phu Bai. Goddamn Army!

In our mess hall, it had become routine for lunch and supper *every day* for months at a time to serve “roast beef” – which I swear was really water buffalo bought from Vietnamese peasants as compensation for the loss of their animals to combat fire. It was nasty, with a gamy flavor and a brownish gray color, including many veins and lots of connective tissue and gristle. Hence, we took up eating lunch and supper mostly from boxes of C-rations Brian had found somewhere, and there was a sort of sandwich kitchen nearby associated with the Army Security Agency “spook shop” near our compound – it was there I had my first bacon, egg, and cheese grilled sandwich. That and our care packages from home sustained us. I’m still not all that fond of roast beef.

Having come out of AIT as a PFC, the accelerated pace of promotions resulted in my promotion to SP4 in March of 1970. This ascent through the enlisted ranks was pretty speedy. I assume this was related to our being in a combat zone.

Although we had many Vietnamese civilians working for us, doing laundry, shining boots, performing construction and maintenance around the compound, burning the shit (see below), and doing KP, there were many Vietnamese holidays, so from time to time we could be called to pull KP or other jobs during holidays. There was a duty roster for all these chores that needed doing from time to time. Having a driver’s license meant that I was also subject to being called to work in the vehicle maintenance area – referred to as “motor stables” duty.

I was only put on KP in Vietnam once that I recall. When we got to the mess hall that morning, the mess hall NCOIC (a Staff Sergeant) called all of us KPs together and explained how it was going to roll. He gave us a clear understanding that we had an important job – to make sure everyone was fed and the mess hall kept clean so that no disease would spread via the meals. He then said that if we cooperated and did our jobs quickly and properly, he would release us after breakfast and lunch for a few hours before reporting for the next meal. It was perhaps the one and only time during my Army “career” that an NCO had ever treated us like adults, and asked for

(not ordered!) our help with the running of the mess hall. We worked like troopers for him and he kept his side of the bargain! I don't recall his name, but he was the best Army NCO I ever encountered. The experience was very different from KP in boot camp.

As with KP, I was only put on the motor stables duty roster once. I reported to a Staff Sergeant in the motor pool. One of the Army regulations was that if you were called to duty in some part of the unit other than your regular duty location, you could request detailed instructions from whomever was in charge of your temporary duty. Therefore, I pretended I was just a dumb-ass message center clerk, and asked for detailed instructions about the task I was assigned to do: changing the oil in a deuce and a half. Of course, I really knew how to do this, but requested instructions anyway just because I could. What he told me went something like this: unscrew the drain plug in the bottom of the crankcase oil pan, let the oil drain into a pan for disposal, then put new oil back in (As I recall, this would be into the breather cap hole in the rocker cover.). Notice anything missing from these instructions? He forgot to mention I had to screw the drain plug back into the oil pan before I poured in the new oil! So I then proceeded to pour however many quarts of new oil into the engine, from whence it drained immediately onto the floor, making a large puddle of oil under the truck! The sergeant was royally pissed when he saw what I had done and of course asked me why. I told him I had followed his instructions to the letter and didn't screw in the drain plug because he didn't mention it. He was so apoplectic, he yelled at me to get the hell out of his motor pool and didn't even make me clean up the mess. For some reason, I never again appeared on the duty roster for motor stables during the rest of my stay in Vietnam.

The ordinary duty roster, always run inflexibly by the company 1SG, of course, included pulling internal compound guard duty and Charge Quarters (CQ) duty. CQs were responsible for answering the phone in the Company office (the so-called Orderly Room) during times when the staff was off-duty. A "runner" was assigned to the CQ to go track down anyone needed on the phone. In addition, our company had to provide guards for the outer perimeter of the base. This involved spending a week on the perimeter, assigned to a heavily-armed combat bunker, with an M-60 machine gun and several belts of ammo, our M-16s with lots of ammo, boxes of fragmentation grenades ("frags"), an M79 grenade launcher with diverse rounds, detonators for several Claymore mines, and detonators for barrels of FOO gas (a mixture of explosives and napalm in a 55-gallon drum). Multiple rows of razor wire were strung along the perimeter, and illumination flares could be fired if it appeared that sappers were attempting to penetrate the wire. For a Rear Echelon Mother Fucker (REMF) like me, unused to real combat duties, this was all pretty serious stuff to think about while staring into the darkness during the night, trying to watch for sappers in the wire with the moving light and shadows created by illumination flares.

The outer perimeter bunkers were mostly occupied by drug enthusiasts of various sorts: marijuana, methamphetamine ("speed" – usually in the form of "diet" liquid

in bottles), heroin, alcohol ... whatever. Not the most comforting sort of folks to see performing as guards. I pulled a week on the perimeter just one time. It was on the perimeter where I was introduced to shit-burning duty for the first and only time. Oh, the joys of military duty! Goddamn Army!



Yours truly, in the morning on the perimeter, standing by the entrance to my bunker



Some unlucky soldier is on shit-burning detail, presumably in one of the recent Middle East wars, so this is still being done. You can see the hinged doors for access to the "honey buckets" from the back of the shitters. Not a task done by senior noncoms and officers, naturally.

A somewhat funny incident happened one evening, while I was off-duty. I had recently smoked a joint and was enjoying tunes in my bunk when the CQ runner came in and told me I had a flash message to pick up. I was fairly ripped, and so when I went out to my pickup to drive over to the comm center in order to retrieve this message, I was aware that the clock was definitely ticking to get this taken care of expeditiously. Unfortunately, I couldn't seem to get the damned pickup started. After many failed attempts, I finally noticed I'd not turned on the damned ignition key, being stoned as I was!! Thus, I finally went and retrieved the damned message and, although it was indeed a flash precedence message, it turned out to be an identical repeat of a message from the day before! I went ahead and processed it and managed to pass it on to its designated addressees before my clock ran out. Goddamn Army!

Another incident regarding my job came up, when it became clear that a senior NCO in S-2 (intelligence and security), found an unburned part of a classified message in the burn barrel (see the photo below). Anyone who handled classified material was required to dispose of it by burning in the burn barrel, stirring any classified trash as it was burning, thereby leaving only ashes when done. Anything not burned to fine ashes would be considered a serious security compromise, for which I'd probably be spending time in LBJ. This SFC (E-7) definitely was not one of my admirers and I think he suspected (correctly) I was a pothead and so was out to get me. However, upon further investigation, this damning piece of evidence included a signature block showing unambiguously that I had delivered that particular copy of the message to one of his S-2 flunkies who had signed for it, so if anyone was going to be on the hook for this "crisis", it wasn't going to be me! Always aware of the potential seriousness of security compromises, I had done my job properly and the proof was there for all to see! I don't think the flunky ever suffered any consequences, but I'm pretty sure if I hadn't been able to prove conclusively it wasn't I who had erred, I probably would have been in deep shit.



My message center colleague, Milt Wallace, taking care of business at the burn barrel.

One of the many things I learned from Max was to become friends with the company clerk. This person did most of the real work in the administration of the company command and knew damned near everything that was going on, or would be going on in the future. That was how we learned about impending shakedown inspections by the cadre, aimed at finding drugs, weapons, and other contraband in the hooches. If you had anything under your personal lock and key that was contraband, you faced an Article 15 (non-judicial punishment under Article 15 of the UCMJ) or worse, and it could mean off to LBJ with ye!! Given advance notice from the company clerk, these turned out to be pretty much totally ineffective. I moved my weed stash from my crib until after the inspections. No jail sentence for me!

As mentioned above, the message center was in the commo bunker, where I hung out for most of my time on duty. The bunker had a double security door entrance and only authorized personnel were permitted inside. This worked to our advantage because we frequently smoked joints inside – we had a fan to expel the damning dope smoke out of a ventilation shaft to the outside. This double door slowed down the intrusion of any riffraff like the Officer In Charge (OIC) of the Signal Platoon, giving us time to dispose of any evidence. Our two Signal OICs while I was there were classic Army chickenshit lifers. The first guy was a 1st Lieutenant (1LT O2) – I don't recall his name – and was a real prick. He wrote up one of the radio operators for an Article 15 for reading the Stars and Stripes newspaper in the bunker! He rotated out and was replaced by a newly-minted ROTC 2nd Lieutenant (2LT O1, contemptuously referred to as a "butter bar") who had swallowed the Army bullshit hook, line, and sinker. I don't remember his name, either. Officers

were discouraged from fraternizing with the enlisted swine, of course. More on him later.



The entrance to our Commo bunker.

Junior enlisted personnel routinely were subject to duty as the walking interior compound guard at night. Each night, the OG (officer of the guard – a duty for the junior officers in the 26th GSG command) would assemble a “guard mount” at the end of the working day, and the guards for the night would be inspected – the main items of interest were that we were supposed to have shiny boots, spiffy uniforms, and our M-16s would have to be shiny clean. The point of the inspection was to choose the order in which guards were allowed to choose their “relief” – the night was broken up into 3 relief periods, each of 4 hours duration: 8 pm to midnight, midnight to 4 am, 4 am to 8 am. Presumably, most people would want the 1st relief, so they could go to bed at something resembling a reasonable time (around midnight). The 3rd relief was 4-8 am, and was generally considered the least desirable. I would show up with dirty boots, messy uniform, and a rifle I hadn’t cleaned since my familiarization fire exercise. Hence, I would wind up on 3rd relief every time. [Oh, please don’t toss me into that briar patch!] This meant I could sleep until awakened by the 2nd relief, and then supposedly have to go out to my guard duty post. The fun part of this was that none of the NCOs or “zeroes” (officers) would be awake at 4 am, ever. After being awakened, I’d simply walk over to the commo bunker and join the all-night party going on in there every night. About 6:45 am, I’d wander over to my guard post as the cadre were awakening for another day in beautiful Phu Bai, pretending I had walked my post all that time. Yes, if discovered not to be walking my post, that certainly would have gotten me court-martialed for leaving my post. For that to happen, some of the cadre had to be awake at 4 am to notice I wasn’t there. But they weren’t. Ever. The third relief

would almost always be released from duty by the OG about 7:30 am. We would have the next day off if we had pulled compound guard duty the night before. Nice!

One night, my name had come up on the duty roster for HHC company CQ duty, so of course I smoked a joint before reporting to the orderly room for this detail. By coincidence, the butterbar Signal OIC was OG that night, and he meandered into the orderly room after sending out the 1st relief. I'd sent the runner back to his hooch, so he could sleep and I knew where he was in the unlikely event I needed him, so it was just the 2LT and I in the orderly room. The thought occurred to me to have some fun with this bozo, so I started out by saying, "Y'know, sir, you've sure been shaking things up around here." He puffed up like a balloon and started to lecture me about how things needed to be better in the company. So after he bragged about being a dick, I said, "Now you should understand, sir, I don't condone such things, but I'm hearing rumors that you might be fragged". Fragging was a form of murder, usually with a grenade, of a senior noncom or officer. My claim was pure bullshit, of course. I just made it up. It obviously scared him, though, and he started spluttering and muttering as he left the orderly room, clearly disturbed by this news. Fragging was a fact of life at that time in Vietnam as morale declined, so the fear of it had some basis in reality. But not my claim.

This little joke was not a nice thing for me to do, but from where I sat, he'd asked for it. I found out the next day that he'd gone to our company commander (a Captain CPT - 03) and asked for a walking guard in the Batchelor Officers Quarters (BOQ) to protect him. The CO told him to think about his request - it could put the potential fraggers right where they wanted to be to carry out their criminal mission! The CO figured, correctly, that I was just fucking with this asshole, and never considered the issue to be serious. He called me in and asked me (not ordered me) to lay off our OIC. I mostly did so. We had 3 HHC COs, all CPTs) while I was in Phu Bai, and all three were fine officers, not chickenshits.

Note: The meaning of chickenshit in the Army is: officer and/or noncom behavior that makes military life worse than it need be: petty harassment of lower ranks; open scrimmage for power, authority, and prestige; sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline; a constant "paying off of old scores"; and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of the ordinances. Chickenshit is so called - instead of horse, or bull, or elephant shit - because it's small-minded and ignoble, and takes the trivial seriously. This definition is modified slightly from the original by Paul Fussell in his book, *Wartime*.

While I was in the Crafts Shop, we had some lapidary equipment. I used it on interesting rocks I found, mostly making cabochons from them (see photo below). One day, I got the idea that I could fuck with our 1SG - in my time in Phu Bai, we had 3 different 1SGs (often called "Top" as in "Top Kick"). I'd heard scuttlebutt that all 3 were stealing supplies and gear meant for the company and selling them on the local black market, mailing their ill-gotten gains home.



The cabochons I made from various rocks I found on the ground.

Anyway, this particular one had pissed me off about something, so I figured I'd mess with his head. I found 3 small roundish rocks, polished them to look like large marbles, and carried them around in my pocket. Anyone who saw the movie "Caine Mutiny" knows where my idea originated. Whenever I saw Top, I would pull out those rocks and roll them around in one hand while I stared fixedly at him. I never said a word in the process, though. Just glared at him with the rocks rattling and clicking in my hand. I know it bothered him because he complained to the CO about it. Again, the CO was wise to me and didn't overreact. Just told me to lay off ... which I did.

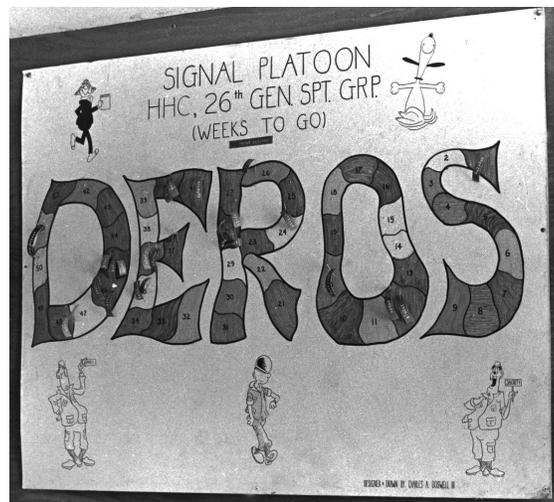


I still have the three stones I once rattled in my hand.



Humphrey Bogart, in the role of Lieutenant Commander Queeg, rolls three steel balls in his hand as a nervous gesture, in the movie "Caine Mutiny".

Everyone in Vietnam had a DEROS date: Date of Estimated Return from Overseas. As your time of departure got closer, you were considered to be a "short-timer". This countdown was inevitable, as few of us wanted to be there. While I was in the Crafts Shop, I located a sheet of poster board and made up a DEROS "clock" for everyone in the Signal Platoon. Everyone had a pin with their last name on it, and they would move it along the poster toward their DEROS date. This was an item that boosted morale, actually, and had the cadre's approval.



My DEROS poster marking off the weeks of a year in Vietnam posted in the Signal Platoon office.



A color version of the poster photo.

I mentioned above that Brian Weatherholt and I both were dragged back to our old jobs after our time in the Crafts Shop. I think Brian was the unit secretary for the Signal Office. At some point, I don't recall exactly when, Brian got the idea of putting five of us (including himself, of course!) up for an Army Commendation (ARCOM) Medal. I don't know exactly how he pulled it off because he would need authorizing signatures on the recommendations. Somehow he did it and the recommendations were sent on to Danang, which was where our next command up the chain (the 1st Logistical Command) had their administrative offices. We kinda forgot all about it, until the cadre learned the recommendation had been approved. Now my Signal OIC was the butter bar 2LT, who was not exactly my greatest fan. It turned out that the ceremony where we were to be given our ARCOMs was the morning after I had pulled some company duty, so I was fast asleep in my hooch during the ceremony. 2LT Butterbar, as my OIC, had to read my citation (below) to the entire assembled company (sans me, of course), full of praise for my performance, and this gave him pretty much zero pleasure – I was told later that he spit out the citation with a clenched jaw, while I slept in my hooch. My work in the message center might actually have deserved an ARCOM (not my call, though), but the butterbar would never have acknowledged my job efforts, I'm sure.



Insignia of the 1st Logistical Command – we called it “the leaning shithouse”!



The Army Commendation Medal

Citation

**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY
THE ARMY COMMENDATION MEDAL**

IS PRESENTED TO

SPECIALIST FOUR CHARLES A. DOSWELL III
UNITED STATES ARMY

For the performance of exceptionally meritorious achievement in support of the United States objectives in the counterinsurgency effort in the Republic of Vietnam during the period

JANUARY 1970 TO OCTOBER 1970

Through his outstanding professional competence and devotion to duty he consistently obtained superior results. Working long and arduous hours, he set an example that inspired his associates to strive for maximum achievement. The loyalty, initiative and will to succeed that he demonstrated at all times materially contributed to the successful accomplishment of the mission of this command. His performance was in the best traditions of the United States Army and reflects great credit upon himself and the military service.

My ARCOM award citation

There was another guy working in the message center who had arrived about the time I did, whose name was Milton Wallace – a young black kid from Detroit. He was quite smart and we got along fine. It was pretty clear he was an angry young black man (like many others in our outfit) regarding the discrimination he had observed and experienced in his life. His anger was justified, sadly. Anyway, Milt knew the job and was quite proficient, in spite of all that. After I was dragged out of the Crafts Shop and back into the message center, I convinced the cadre that the message center needed to be a 24-hour/seven days a week operation. There were to be two of us and, as the senior person, I was given the choice: day shift or night shift. I chose night shift, for the simple reason it would turn me into a “ghost” that the cadre never saw, so Milt got the day shift by default. I would report for work at 8 pm and get off at 8 am. This was an excellent state of affairs for me, as I had little or no contact with the company cadre for weeks at a time. Nobody hassling me about my hair or whatever. Nobody over the rank of E5 to give me grief. My time in the message center involved only a small amount of serious work during a 12-hour workday, so I was basically goofing off, doing stuff that interested me and staying stoned on weed. I became quite proficient at solitaire, smoked a lot of weed, and enjoyed the games we made up in the commo bunker. One night, we set up our radios to broadcast music on our stereo to everyone in all the bunkers around the compound and even to other commo points around the entire world! I did some wild drawings and paintings, too.

There was an interesting young black man in our little company. I don't recall his last name, but he went by Willie. He was about 18 but very “straight” – he didn't smoke or drink, and he prayed over his meals in the mess hall. He didn't get along with most of the other black guys but followed his own path. I now admire him for his independence and wonder whatever happened with him. Max and I teased him a lot about his lack of interest in much of what we considered fun and/or important. I think he was raised somewhere in the south in a very proper and devoutly religious family.

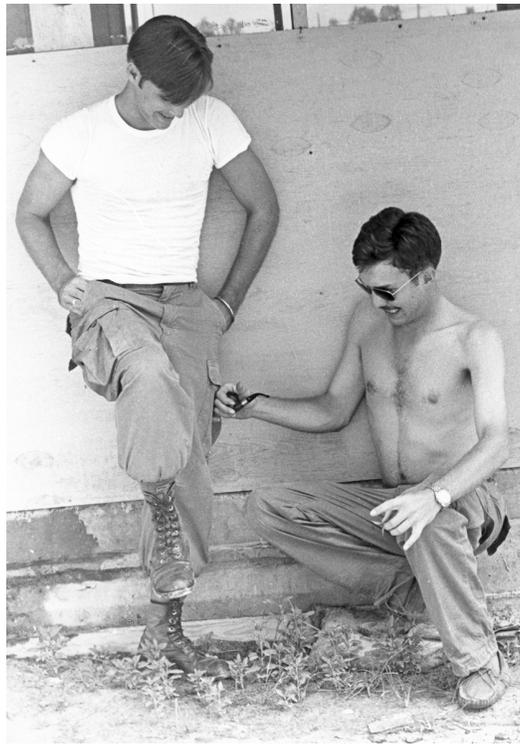


My acquaintance, Willie.

You may have noticed I had a lot of black friends in Vietnam. Many of the white guys in our company were OK, but were predominantly conservative rednecks, too. I could get along with them just fine, but with the exception of Max and a small number of others, including Rick Fultz, from PA, I tended to associate a lot with the black dudes. I think they got a kick of white boys sharing weed with them and playing at messing with each other's minds.



Max, hanging with the some of the black men in our little company, including Milt (standing), on the front steps of a hooch.



Max and Rick are hamming it up for my camera – Rick is pretending to be stomping on the weeds growing between the hooches, and Max is pretending to be aghast at the destruction of “marijuana” seedlings.

Max knew some guys who were permanent party (i.e., stationed) in Bangkok, Thailand, which happened to be one of the “rest and relaxation” (R&R) destinations available for the troops in Vietnam. So he and I went together on a Bangkok R&R for a week. We stayed with his friends and smoked a massive amount of very potent Thai weed that was reloaded into filter cigarettes. We had many adventures, including daily visits to the local massage parlors and a “date” with a local lady of the night.

There were massage parlors everywhere. They operated like this: the women would be in a glass enclosure and we would pick one among them for a massage. What went on during the “massage” depending on negotiations with the woman, but it always started with a soapy bath. I became one of the cleanest GIs in southeast Asia! When we arrived in Bangkok, we were informed that if we were going to hire the “services” of a woman, we were to pay no more than \$5 a night. Not following this rule would inflate the cost for everyone. One day, Max and some of the guys we were staying with arranged for “dates” for that evening. I had not been included for some reason. Anyway, I was sitting in a bar drinking a beer with Max, his pals, and their “dates”. I don’t recall the numbers but let’s say there were seven people at the table. I was pretty stoned on weed and the beer was making me woozy. Max leaned over to me and said, “And suddenly, there were eight!” in a very conspiratorial tone.

I looked up and sitting across from me was an attractive Thai woman! She spent the night playing the role of someone I seduced, but it was really the other way around. And she acted as if she was really enjoying herself with me. All in all, quite a night for \$5!

We didn't do the usual touristy things while we were in Bangkok, but rather some more fun adventures. We tried Kobe beef in a Thai restaurant, which was simply amazing. We attended a showing of the Beatles movie "Let It Be" in a Thai theater (in English with English subtitles – I never quite understood the point.) We arranged a Klong boat ride in a narrow little boat similar to the one in the photo below. With 5 big Americans in the boat, it was too much and the boat began to sink! The boatman kicked us off the boat, dropping us at some random location. After a visit to the nearest massage parlor to help overcome the trauma of nearly sinking the boat, we made our way back to the apartment.



A klong boat similar to the one we rode in. It has an outboard motor with its prop entirely open at the very end of a long driveshaft for both propulsion and steering. Dip into the water to go, pull it out of the water to slow down. In this photo, the occupants are small women – imagine 5 big Americans in such a boat!

We slept and smoked dope in the apartment of Max's friends, usually while listening to reel-to-reel tapes of recorded music: I particularly enjoyed "American Woman" by the Guess Who and the Moody Blues album "On the Threshold of a Dream". We would get so stoned, we lost track of time and never knew whether it would be dark or light until we stepped out. Must have been tough to be permanent party in Bangkok!

Shopping in Bangkok involved a lot of haggling – only food prices were fixed. We even negotiated taxi fare. Once we rode on a 3-wheeled scooter with a back seat, like a rickshaw powered like a motorcycle instead of being peddled. The way the driver drove that thing, traffic laws were apparently viewed by him as only diffidently-offered suggestions. At one point, we were being driven down a sidewalk! Fun when you're stoned. Anyway, we learned something important:

many shops would offer you a beer when you walked in. However, the beer was about 18% alcohol (stronger than many wines), so if you weren't careful, you might walk out with a lot of purchases and an empty wallet!

I returned from R&R with some great memories and – a dose of the clap (gonorrhea), quickly set right with some tetracycline. This was before the development of antibiotic-resistant venereal diseases. Max left for his home and the end of his time in the Army in mid-September. I tried to get another week of leave in Bangkok later, but bad weather had seriously hampered flight operations in Danang and I couldn't get out, so I had to return to my unit, sadly. Spending a night in the Danang airport, with F-4 Phantoms on afterburner takeoffs throughout the night, was not very conducive for sleep.

With my DEROS date fast approaching, my replacement in the message center arrived some weeks before I left, evidently to get some on-the-job training to supplement what he'd learned at AIT. He was a nice kid, but a bit naïve, as all newbies are. Incidentally, the cadre had begun advising newbies to stay away from me, which had precisely the opposite effect – they would seek me out to get the straight skinny. I don't recall my replacement's name, unfortunately. It was my job to bring him up to speed about our operation. He was a quick learner and it quickly became evident to him (and me) that my need to hover over his shoulder as he worked had become unnecessary. So I started leaving him in charge of the message center on his own, and skated out into the company area to goof off in various ways. The Signal NCOIC (a Staff Sergeant) was aware of this but never spoke of it to me. Unfortunately, this resulted in a problem. One day the newbie was given a bunch of outgoing messages to process and deliver to the Comm Center. He had completely mastered incoming message traffic procedures, but outgoing messages were so infrequent, they had not come up before. Someone came and found me asleep in my bunk to help the newbie get the outgoing messages processed. It took mere minutes for me to do so, and the newbie caught on instantly – this wasn't exactly a complicated task. After this brouhaha had been fixed, I was informed that for some time to come, I was to hover over him like a hawk and never leave him alone. I argued with the Signal NCOIC that the newbie now was quite proficient and this unfortunate incident was exactly what he needed to complete his training. But nothing would change his mind. So this went on for longer than it should have.

Toward the end of my time in Phu Bai, it became evident that the message center needed a document that described in detail its Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Such a document didn't exist and the Signal NCOIC agreed it was needed. I volunteered for that task, knowing how that would have been nice to have an SOP when I first arrived. Life in the message center was not what I was trained for in AIT which had been about comm centers, not message centers. I worked diligently on the draft SOP and ran it by the signal NCOIC first, who then told me it looked pretty good but had to get the approval of the Signal OIC, 2LT Butterbar, my nemesis. Sure enough, the 2LT read through it and made a number of suggested changes. Keep in mind, this guy had zero training in Signal and communications procedures, so of

course, many of his suggestions were simply incorrect. We argued about them and he chose to follow the chickenshit route and pull rank on me. [Something to keep in mind, is that by this time in my Army "career," I had arrived at the conclusion that most of the people in the Army above the rank of E5 were pigs, and all pigs are pretty much the same. I wasn't impressed with anyone above the rank of E5 except for rare instances where someone (like the mess sergeant) had earned my personal respect.]

The CO of the 26th GSG was a full bird Colonel (COL O6) whom we virtually never saw, and an executive officer (XO) who was a Lieutenant Colonel (LTC O5) and was frequently seen prowling around group area. The XO, LTC Dickhead (I don't recall his name) was a real bully and a truly chickenshit asshole, who was infamous for such things as giving an Article 15 to soldiers for having their hands in their pockets, or for forcing the troops to paint rocks white in order to outline the sidewalks around the orderly room for the Group. Bloody painted rocks in bloody Vietnam!! He lived in an air-conditioned trailer, naturally – no hooches for senior officers. There was some scuttlebutt that someone had attempted to frag him by balancing a grenade with the pin mostly pulled out on the edge of his trailer steps. As the story went, when he went to his trailer and walked up the steps, the frag fell off the steps as planned, but it fell in such a way that the pin was actually pushed back in!! I have no idea if that story has even a grain of truth, but it at least illustrates how much troops disliked this arrogant bastard.

The point of my mentioning the XO is this: as 2LT Butterbar and I argued about my draft SOP, I threw out the following suggestion to him: "Let's set an appointment to meet with the XO and present our cases for our different versions of the SOP, and let *him* make the decision of what should be in the SOP." I was, in fact, fully prepared to do so – I wasn't particularly afraid of the XO. I was confident I knew my job thoroughly. But 2LT Butterbar turned white as a sheet with my suggestion, and started harrumphing about how there was no need to involve the XO, and he supposed he could accept my version of the SOP. He knew damned well that his suggestions were crap anyway, and he had no clue about message center operations. I could make him look like the ignorant clown he was in front of the supposed bass-ass LTC Dickhead. So he backed off his high horse, and the SOP was left virtually as I wrote it, with his signature of approval on it. What a pathetic excuse for an officer!

I should mention that neither Max nor I referred to the Vietnamese as "gooks" or "slopes" or "dinks" – we respected them as people and disliked the disparaging references to the Vietnamese people. I knew enough about them to be impressed with their ingenuity and hard work. They did our dirty work so that Americans wouldn't have to do it. The ones working on our compound no doubt were earning more money than they ever dreamed possible (No, I don't know how much they were paid). Still, they made it very clear that they wanted us to get out of their country and leave them in peace. Occasionally, objects left in the hooches during the day would turn up missing, but that never happened to either Max or me.



Max with a bunch of the Vietnamese boys we called “sandbaggers” who did various jobs in our company compound.



One of the Vietnamese Mama-Sans on our compound – she worked for the troops in my hooch and spoke passably good English. A very nice person.

Eventually, my turn to go home came up. I had been given a return date a month earlier than originally scheduled – December 1970 instead of January 1971 – as the troop levels in Vietnam were being drawn down during the “Vietnamization of the

war” phase. After out-processing from my unit, I flew on a C-130 to Cam Rahn Bay. By this time, I knew how to dodge the cadre at the outprocessing base there, so I didn’t get swept up into any pointless work details for which they would round up any departing troops they could find. Again ... you know the drill ... I was issued bedding and assigned a bunk in the transit barracks while I waited to get on a manifest for the flight back to “the world”. Eventually, it happened, so I turned in my bedding and finally boarded a chartered commercial jet headed for Fort Lewis, WA, near Seattle. When the wheels lifted off the ground, a great cheer went up, naturally.

When we arrived at Fort Lewis around 3 am, we were given the promised steak and eggs breakfast and did the usual outprocessing rigmarole. I was issued a ticket to Chicago O’Hare airport from the Seattle-Tacoma civilian airport – I don’t recall how I got from Fort Lewis to SeaTac Airport – probably a bus. I boarded that flight, and wound up at home later that day after my Dad picked me up at the airport.

Christmas leave at home after 11 months in Vietnam was even more uncomfortable than that after AIT. I was angry and sullen, hard to talk to, and I’m sure my parents were confused and sad about the situation. They endured too much grief from me, I’m sorry to say. I had what might well be called a terrible attitude, that might have landed me in the stockade, were it not for something that changed my situation. My favorite phrase became, “What are they going to do? Send me to Vietnam?” What I didn’t know when I passed through Fort Lewis was that my orders for my next duty assignment (the comm center at Fort Hood, TX) had been changed. Someone was supposed to meet me with my new orders, but I guess being up at 3 am wasn’t high among his priorities.

Anyway, after I got home, I received word that I should definitely not report to Fort Hood, and they would mail my new orders to my home. The original reporting date came and went with no orders. I couldn’t travel without orders so I had to wait. I finally got my new orders – sending me to White Sands Missile Range (WSMR), NM, with a new MOS: 01F20, physical sciences assistant.

My time in New Mexico

While in Vietnam, with Max’s encouragement, I had sent letters around to whomever I could think of, seeking an Army duty assignment that would make use of my education. Turns out that with the end of deferments for grad students, there were a lot of people in the Army with graduate degrees and even some work experience in their fields (like my student trainee time), called the S&E Program (Science and Engineering). There’s a good chance that if I hadn’t signed up for that extra year and the communications school, I would have been assigned as an S&E out of boot camp!! I found out that happened to many of my S&E colleagues. Anyway, what S&Es did was work mostly for civilian scientists at various Army research installations. Apparently, one of my letters finally landed in the right place for me to get this re-assignment. My new assignment was to the HHC of the

Atmospheric Science Laboratory (ASL). I arrived in late January of 1971 after being officially absent without leave (AWOL) for a few days, but when I explained what happened regarding my orders, and that story was confirmed, all was forgiven.

I won't give the name of my civilian boss – he and I had a very uneasy relationship because he was afraid I knew a lot more about meteorology than he did. Perhaps I did, but he was wrong to think I cared enough about him to work at discrediting him. He'd become a meteorologist in the Air Force and had a diploma from some university – I don't recall which one. He'd also taken a lot of meteorology courses by correspondence. His Air Force assignment led to a lucrative job at WSMR, and he had been there long enough to be counting the months to his retirement. One day he confided in me that he had always wanted to run a gas station. His dreams about this were very detailed and he imagined he would have a lot of regular customers because of the high quality of the service he would provide. As he was going on about this, my thoughts turned to pity for this person, who had a relatively high salary for a job he really didn't like. I hope that he actually lived his dream after his retirement. How did I know he didn't like his job? He spent a lot of time typing stuff, so one day I checked his wastebasket – it was full of sheets of paper on which he had typed the numbers from his computer printouts! He was simply pretending to work! His “work” was a sham. Very sad.

My work assignment from him was to write a program to simulate numerically the development of fog. How I did it was left entirely to me. Since I had never done such a thing, I spent some time reading scientific publications about modeling and so made my choices and began the task. We had as our local computing facility a Univac 1108. I don't know which version. We programmed in FORTRAN and I got one “turn-around” per work day. In the morning, I would pick up the output from the previous afternoon's revisions to the code, figure out what I needed to do next, wrote new code and turned it in back in by sometime after lunch. Then, I just kinda hung around until it was quitting time. This was not a fast way to get working code. More on that later.

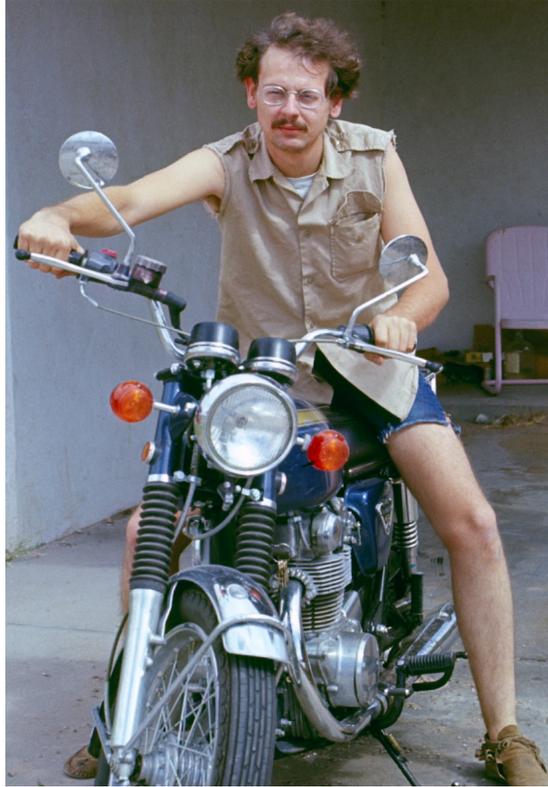
The people in our company were all pretty much like me in terms of education: everyone had a graduate degree in science or engineering, plus work experience in their field. Looking back, it seems to me the Army had no idea what they were creating with S&E companies: a lot of educated people who weren't happy about being in the Army. The workday was episodically interrupted by the platoon sergeants coming into our offices, taking us from our work, and putting us on various pointless Army work details. Here I was, programming reasonably modern computers to do what someone in the Army considered important scientific work and in the midst of that, I would have to go out and spend 30 minutes away from the office doing such things as picking up cigarette butts and trash on “police calls”. My platoon sergeant was a SSG named Boghosian. He was a first class moron who was not an S&E – just a regular Army NCO troop pusher. At the office, we were under the authority of the civilian scientists, but 24/7 we were subject to the same old Army bullshit, and our obligations to the company always came first – for example, the

inevitable duty roster. Among those chickenshit things we had to do was participate in a monthly post parade. Parades might seem like fun to those watching them, but not so much fun for the troops participating in the Army parades. At WSMR, we had to doll up in our dress green Class A uniforms with a cunt cap, then march in formation and stand at attention (or, "parade rest") in the hot sun, and listen to a bunch of useless bullshit from some officer, like WSMR's CO. After the first such experience, I decided I needed to think of a way to get out of that post parade nonsense.

Since my ability to complete my assigned task was limited by the number of turn-arounds I could get in one day, I proposed a way to speed things up: from time to time, I would go to the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, CO, with its high-speed, state of the art computers and run my code on their machines. This meant I could get several turn-arounds in one day and get at least a week's worth of work done in 2 days. I had written to NCAR to see if they would grant me the computer time, and they agreed to my proposal. In turn, the cadre at WSMR agreed to let me do this, and so I began to fly to Boulder one weekend a month, spending the weekend there sleeping in a motel, with a rental car to drive, in civilian clothes with my travel expenses paid for by the Army. Because I had become friends with the HHC company clerk (see above), I always was able to learn in advance on which weekend the post parade would be scheduled – this information was not made public – and somehow, my trips to Boulder always happened to fall on the weekend of the post parade! I never again had to march in that worthless exercise for the duration of my time there.

As an SP4, I was assigned a bunk in a 12-man barracks room when I first arrived. I got along fine with my roommates and made friends with several. One was a guy named Jim Jones who had gone to the University of Wyoming and loved hiking. Another was named Rich Moore, who was a really good computer systems guy. It's important to recognize that WSMR was in New Mexico, where people would come to for holidays. A lot of the guys in the barracks would lay about the barracks in their off-duty time and never get out to explore what they considered to be a "stinking desert". My friends and I sometimes would hike directly from WSMR back into a mountain valley to the west of the post called Texas Canyon. It was peaceful and beautiful. I would go alone sometimes and listen to the deer clamoring over the rocky hillsides.

Jim and Rich and I decided we wanted out of the barracks, so we went into the city of Las Cruces, home of New Mexico State University (NMSU), and found a rental home we could afford not far from the NMSU campus. With the encouragement of Jim Jones, I bought a Honda CB450 motorcycle for transportation. We had free bus service from Las Cruces to WSMR and back every workday, but I needed my own transportation. We moved out of the barracks and simply maintained our bunks there in the proper order.



Me with my Honda in the carport of our rental home in Las Cruces.

After some time, I found myself up for promotion to SP5. My interview for the promotion included questions about mathematical and meteorological topics such as Gauss's Divergence Theorem. Not many promotion interviews like that in the Army, I reckon! I passed with flying colors and was promoted soon thereafter.



Being congratulated by the ASL CO, Col Chabot, on the occasion of my promotion. You can just barely see my new rank insignia on the right.

My promotion created an interesting situation. As an E5, I was expected to move into a 2-person room in the barracks, but all such rooms were already occupied. This created a dilemma for the Army, but the regulations provided me with another option: by regulation, if no 2-person room was available, they had to pay me for "Quarters Allowance" to live off-post! Thus, for a few months, I received extra pay to live in Las Cruces (where we already were living.). I'm pretty sure that this almost never happened, so it was just a stroke of good luck for me. Of course, eventually, someone moved out of a 2-person room and they cut off my quarters allowance as quickly as possible. But I never moved back into the barracks – I just had to maintain the bunk and my combat boots in proper order as they collected dust. I only used it when I had to be on CQ duty and for storing my uniforms and Army gear.

My promotion also resulted in my being assigned duties as a platoon leader. I paid essentially no attention to carrying out such duties. One time, SSG Boghosian told me to chew out my platoon and make them re-do their job (which I had recently shared with them) of cleaning the latrine in our barracks. I told him that if he wanted that done, he should feel free to do it – I declined that privilege. I don't know how I didn't get an Article 15 for that, but I was never asked to do anything like it again.

My life off post was a lot of fun. Jim, Rich, and I each had our own bedroom in the house we rented. I smoked a lot of weed. We ate at various restaurants in Las Cruces, and I occasionally cooked pizzas for everyone. While I was still in the barracks, I made friends with a guy from Los Angeles, CA (unfortunately, I don't remember his name). He introduced me to Firesign Theater, an LA-based comedy group that I still enjoy a lot. We also discovered there was an "underground" radio show on weekends in Las Cruces that played Firesign and really interesting rock music. I don't recall exactly how we did it, but I think we called the station during the show to talk with the DJ, named Pat Lang. Soon thereafter, he invited us to the station to sit in the studio while he ran the show. Pat became a friend, needless to say. He lived in Las Cruces with a friend of his who owned a record store, right next to a "head shop" catering to those indulging in weed. This whole arrangement was great, and a lot of good weed was smoked, including some hashish. I wound up buying a lot of LPs that I still own, and many items from the head shop, including a stack of underground comics (destined to be stolen later, but that's another story).

My typical day began with a joint in the morning. After the bus ride into WSMR, I would do my work, and have a "magic cookie" (a butter cookie made with weed-infused butter) with my morning coffee. The cookie was consumed openly and my civilian boss had no clue what was going on right in front of his eyes. Eating marijuana has a time delay, so by the time the morning joint was wearing off, the cookie would kick in to carry me to lunch. Then, after lunch, another magic cookie

for dessert. This would get me through the workday. After a bus ride back to Las Cruces, fire up another joint and party on until bedtime. I had a stereo and played a lot of Pink Floyd and similar rock music. It should be obvious that during my time in the Army, I was stoned on weed a substantial fraction of that time. It was very much a social experience, shared with friends both in Vietnam and at WSMR. I even tried LSD in New Mexico, but didn't like it at all – too intense to be enjoyable and lasted too long. Being stoned on duty most of the time was something of an adventure, enhanced by getting away with something illegal. In today's world, with random drug testing, it's become nearly impossible.

Since NMSU was nearby, I enrolled in a course in numerical linear algebra that the Army paid for, while I was still living in the barracks. It was a decent course, and did actually help me a bit in my work. That gave me the idea that I could teach a course on basic meteorology there, so since I offered to do it for no pay, I was given the chance by NMSU and it was properly authorized by the Army. I probably didn't do the greatest teaching job – it was my first time and I was quite uncertain about how to be most effective. While I was attending that math class, one day I rode my motorcycle to class while it was warm and sunny, with temps in the low 70s – I was wearing shorts and t-shirt. When class was over, I emerged to discover, to my dismay, that a strong cold front had passed. The north wind was howling and the temperature had fallen precipitously into the low 40s or even upper 30s. That ride on my motorcycle back to WSMR was brutal! Not a good idea to be so poorly prepared.

As already mentioned, our company included a lot of educated folks, often with time on our hands. We resolved to harass the company cadre and the Army to the full extent of our abilities. For instance, several of us who had signed up for an extra year sent a letter up the chain of command requesting that our enlistment be voided immediately, as we had not been informed about the S&E option. Of course, in due time, a letter came back down the chain denying our request. We had expected nothing else. It was signed by a Brigadier General, although that letter and signature were probably done by some SP4 clerk. It babbled on about “the needs of the Army” superceding such things, of course.

Another time, we decided to request that all the S&Es should be given Warrant Officer status. Warrant officers are the specialists in the military officer corps. (Commissioned officers are supposed to be generalists, rather than specialists!) This would substantially increase our pay and more accurately reflect our status as scientists or engineers. Moreover, we wouldn't be wasting time picking up cigarette butts or cleaning latrines. Again, we had no expectations they would actually fulfill our request. They had cheap slave labor for their research, so why would they want to pay us more? So of course, again in due time, the refusal trickled down the chain of command to us. We were satisfied with having wasted someone's time, up and down the chain.

One amusing footnote about the “needs of the Army” – that line had been used in the Army’s decision not to void our enlistments. This was many months before I was scheduled for my ETS (Estimate Time of Separation – from active duty). A few months later, word came down the chain that I was to be given an early ETS by 6 months. Like my “early out” of Vietnam, this was driven by the *real* needs of the Army. They were flushing all the non-voluntary enlisted folks out of the Army, working toward the all-volunteer force they have become. I was once again the beneficiary of the ever-changing needs of the Army!

I don’t remember all the paperwork projects we initiated, but we tried to do something of the sort more or less every month. It was fun to consider all the consternation and hassle these exercises created. Way back in Vietnam, shortly after arrival at the 26th GSG, I had decided that no job I was ever going to have in the Army was going to be very stimulating, so I made up my mind to be a creative fuck-up and a thorn in the side of any command’s cadre I happening to be serving in at any time. I believe I succeeded in my goal. In the process, there were times I had skated right up to the edge of an Article 15 (or even a court-martial), but never went over that line. Dancing on that line was fun, actually. It gave me a sense of purpose while I endured my Army time.

However, I managed to find one aspect of my job at WSMR stimulating and fun. With a couple of systems engineers as friends, I began to write programs to do things of interest to me in my spare time at the office, like developing a generalized Poisson equation solver program. I actually learned how to read code in hexadecimal format because it was of some use to know how to read a “core dump” if my program bombed. Using that capability, I discovered a bug in the FORTRAN compiler, but the high priests of the IT group in charge of the computer found it very hard to believe a lowly “user” could do something of the sort. Eventually, even they had to concede I had discovered a bug. Their solution to the problem that bug created? “Just quit writing code that does that!” Pitiful.

If one considers all the stuff I pulled prior to my separation from active duty, it might be something of a surprise that I was awarded a good conduct medal on separation from active duty! However, this is completely attributable to the mere fact that I had avoided any Article 15s or a court-martial. Not a high bar, but I just squeaked by, I suppose.



Army good conduct medal

I did manage to finish my fog model before I left. From what I could tell, it was not a particularly meaningful exercise, but I did finish what I was asked to do. I even wrote up a Tech. Memorandum about the model. I have no idea what, if anything, they ever did with it. I don't particularly care, as you might expect. It was what it was, and when I was done with it, I just walked away. Looking back, I learned a fair amount about numerical modeling from the exercise and made some good decisions about how to go about it.

Soon, my ETS began to loom just over the near horizon and I began the out-processing that would finally get me out for good. I don't recall just how it happened, but during my out-processing I found myself in the office of a Master Sergeant (Msg E8) who had already become rather rotund in his desk job. He told me, "Doswell, I just don't understand you. (That was true enough!) How can you leave a situation where you can get paid to sit around and do nothing?" I told him, "Sarge, I don't know about you, but I actually want to accomplish something with my life!" That pretty much ended our conversation, as you might expect. What a role model to inspire excitement about a career in the military!!

As it turned out, my orders for my ETS put me in the inactive reserves for the duration of the time remaining on my enlistment. Once I left WSMR, I would never again be part of the Army, short of the nation's involvement in a world war, necessitating the call-up of even the inactive reserves.

A return to civilian life

My official separation date was 16 February 1972. I shortly returned to the campus of the University of Oklahoma to complete the requirements for my doctorate. After some struggles with re-assimilation into civilian society, I was married in 1975, my first child was born in early 1976, and I graduated with my Ph.D. in meteorology that summer. One thing I figured out for myself in the process of becoming a civilian again was that being stoned on weed most of the time was definitely not a good strategy to finish my doctoral studies. I pretty much quit just before I was married. In late 1975, my honorable discharge papers arrived and I was completely out of the Army!! I was overjoyed, of course, and arranged to have a uniform-burning party at my home in east Norman. I hung my class-A uniform on a homemade wooden cross, doused it with kerosene, and torched it after an afternoon of celebration. Just before lighting the fire, I said something like the following: "This happy occasion is dedicated to Lyndon Baines Johnson, without whom this would not have been necessary!"

In the early 1980s, I had some sort of brain fart, and enlisted in the Navy Reserves in Kansas City, MO, as an aerographer's mate, 2nd class (AG2 E5). I have no coherent explanation for why I did that, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. In any case, that's another story altogether. When I finally came to my senses and remembered why I'd left the military in the first place, I was allowed to stop attending monthly drill meetings and eventually was discharged honorably, again.



Me in my Navy "crackerjacks" (and our cat), at home in North Kansas City in 1982.

It should be evident from all the preceding that I was not a very good soldier. Some of the stunts I pulled are pretty stupid and even childish. I discovered things about myself that were quite worrisome, and time has not changed my concerns over a few of them. My only excuse is that I never wanted to be there and I was angry at being forced to serve. The passage of time has allowed me to see my service as including many positive things I didn't appreciate in the moment. I'm now of a mind to feel good about having served my country when it called. At the same time, I still find myself bothered by my decision not to escape to Canada or go to jail, rather than serving in an unwinnable, pointless war I didn't support. I have conflicting emotions regarding my service, in other words. When people thank me for my service (mostly on Memorial Day or Veteran's Day), it always makes me uncomfortable. My role in that war was pretty small, and had I refused my draft notice, my absence wouldn't have made anything resembling a significant difference in the war, but my personal life obviously would have been very different. I hope that my post-Army life has included some positive contributions to the world's well-being, and that they might make up, at least to some extent, for my failings and flaws.