

Introduction

In 1966 the Mobile Riverine Forces were born out of a need to counter the buildup of main force Vietcong battalions that flowed down from North Vietnam.

Except from Don Blankenship's website "Rivervet" <http://www.rivervet.com/>

"South Vietnam, especially the southern 1/3 of the country, is covered with waterways, both natural and man-made. This created a logistical nightmare for the ground forces. The Navy responded to this problem by the creation of the Mobile Riverine Force, consisting of Armored Troop Carriers, Monitors (similar to the Civil War variety), Command and Communication Boats, Assault Support Patrol Boats, Flamethrower-equipped boats, and Refueling boats, all of which were served and supported by a fleet of Troop Ships, LST's, Repair Ships, Barracks barges, and other supporting vessels. The Mobile Riverine Force became the partnership between the Army and Navy in fighting the war in the rice paddies, canals and treacherous waterways of the south. While they were principally congregated in the IV Corps area, they were also called into service in the rivers of I Corps, the area nearest the DMZ, and at some times in the III corps area."

The Mobile Riverine Forces did not exist before 1966. Neither the Army nor the Navy had the proper equipment, trained personnel, or doctrine to operate in the riverine environment. One of the most immediate needs was to establish a specialized training command to both train the Navy personnel assigned to the Mobile Riverine Forces and to develop the doctrine needed to effectively operate in the riverine environment. In 1967 the Navy established the Naval Inshore Operations Training Center at the Mare Island Naval Base, Vallejo, California. The site was selected because of its proximity to the sloughs of the Sacramento River which bore a close resemblance to the Mekong River environment. Because the initial staffing of the River Assault Forces was just starting and no one had reached full term on their one year assignment in country, the Navy decided to use the returning PCF (Swift Boat) and PBR (Patrol Boat River) officers to staff the instructor billets.

Boat tactics, communications and team building training were conducted in the sloughs of the Sacramento River, and the classroom training was conducted in the main NIOTC building at Mare Island. What was missing was a location to do the very necessary live-fire training. This training was essential because the newly constructed river assault craft mounted .30cal, .50cal, 20mm and 40mm guns and these kinds of weapons did not exist on the modern Navy ships and almost none of the MRF volunteers had experience with these weapons. The initial site for live fire training was the Naval Gunfire Range on San Clemente Island. Trainees were flown to the island and embarked on LCMs (Landing Craft Medium) that were stationed out of San Diego Harbor. This provided to be a very difficult training environment and one that was not of

sufficient length (two days) to give the sailors the confidence that they could effectively operate the weapons. A decision was made to acquire access to a large artillery range at Camp Roberts, California, an extremely large base (44,000 acres) that was used for only 8 weeks during the summer for Army reserve training. This site selection decision required the Navy to establish a permanent staff of 16 Navy gunners' mates and an officer in charge to run the training at Camp Roberts.

In general, the mingling of Army and Navy personnel at Camp Roberts proceeded without incident. There were, however, some rather interesting occurrences during the Navy's stay at the Army camp as related by Navy Lt Larry Irwin, the designated Camp Roberts Officer-in-Change...

Naval Inshore Operations Training Center, Vallejo, CA

November 1968

"Before Camp Roberts...the joy of flying on a vintage airplane"

When I first arrived at the NIOTC training center in Vallejo, CA, the Navy had not yet set up the training facility at Camp Roberts. The live fire training for the Mobile Riverine Force training classes was conducted on board two LCMs (Landing Craft Medium) which had been outfitted with Mobile Riverine Force style .50cal and .20mm gun turrets. The firing practice was conducted on the western side of San Clemente Island which is a naval gunfire range. The LCMs came out of San Diego and the Mobile Riverine Force classes were flown from Travis Air Force Base down to San Clemente aboard two chartered airplanes, a C47 and a C130. A side note: You can imagine how effective the training was as the MRB students tried to fire into the side of an island while rocking back and forth in 4-5 foot seas.

I swear that someone must have found the above mentioned planes in an old salvage lot and spent a few bucks trying to make them fly. After I had made three trips down to San Clemente and back I swore that I would never fly again. The engines on both planes backfired frequently and trailed a light plume of smoke from each engine. Additionally, there were spots where you could look out through holes in the skin of the plane to the ground below. To make matters worse, the San Clemente airstrip was only about 6000' long which has to be the minimum length for landing a C130. To make matters much worse, the airstrip had a hump in the middle which meant that you landed going uphill, went airborne again and landed again going downhill. When you first landed going uphill you couldn't see the downhill side of the strip so you were certain that you were going to crash into the sea. For the return flight on my third and last trip down, we were flying in the C130 and I noticed that we were circling the field at Travis Air Force Base for about 30 minutes even though the runway appeared to be clear. We finally landed and I noted that fire trucks were following us as we taxied down the runway. We

stopped at the end of the runway and just sat there. I had expected that we would be piling out of the plane any way we could, but the doors didn't open and we just sat in the middle of the runway and waited for about 30 minutes. A ladder mounted on a truck finally arrived and we deplaned. Apparently very unhappy with the Navy, the Air Force made us walk the two miles to the terminal in the bitterly cold wind. I didn't find out until the next day that the Air Force had actually denied permission to land the plane because when the C130 had taken off earlier that day it had been smoking and had dropped so many parts on the runway that the runway had to be completely vacuumed. When we landed, the pilot was ordered to stop where he was and wasn't even allowed to taxi to the terminal. The plane was towed off the runway and dragged down a side road. We were told that an Air Force Safety Inspection team went aboard and failed the plane on the first 7 items on their check list so they just closed their books and left. I don't know the final disposition of the planes. In its great wisdom, the Navy decided that a bus trip to Camp Roberts would be the better alternative.

Camp Roberts, CA

December 1968

“Where in the hell are my buildings?”

We started training at Camp Roberts in late fall after I arrived at the Naval Inshore Operations Training Center, Vallejo, CA. Because we had no facility set up there, we had to truck most of the weapons and weapons maintenance gear with us, but it certainly was better than flying. For the week of training, the enlisted men were set up in a barracks that was only used for about six weeks in the summer when the Army reserves came in, so they had about ¼" of dust covering everything. I was berthed in the BOQ, a large, very old, two story, wooden building that was probably designed to house about 100 officers. There was only myself, an Army major and an Army 1st Lieutenant in residence. All of the other dozen or so permanent staff of Army officers lived off base. That anyone was staying there was good because it meant that the hot water was turned on and working (It wasn't in the enlisted barracks) and there wasn't a covering of dust. Also, there was a staff of 5 civilians taking care of the BOQ. I have no idea what they did all day. I made my own bed and cleaned out the sink in my bathroom.

I never saw the Army major in the BOQ because he seemed to spend most of the day in the officer's club. I did run into the Army 1st Lt on a daily basis and couldn't help but notice that he was angry almost all of the time. I finally got a chance to talk to him at the Officer's Club on Thursday night of the first week we were there. It turned out that he had a good reason for being angry. He was a reserve officer and had completed his two years of active duty about four months prior to our meeting, but he was being held on active duty. It turned out that he was the base "Material Officer". Apparently, in the Army, when you are the Material Officer,

you are required to sign for all of the facilities and equipment on the base. This means you actually even have to sign for all of the buildings on the base. And that was his problem. When his relief came aboard, the two of them toured the base and found that four buildings listed in the inventory were missing. To put it in perspective, Camp Roberts had about 8,000 buildings on the premises, and all but about 100 of them had been out of use since the end of World War II. The poor 1st Lt's incoming relief would not take over the Material responsibility until the buildings were found and the 1st Lt couldn't leave the service until he was properly relieved. I couldn't help but commiserate with the guy and even went over to the East Garrison and drove through the area with him. It was row upon row of decrepit buildings with windows broken, paint all but gone, and leaning to one side or another. We stopped at the end of one of the rows and looked at the spot where the buildings were shown on the map and there was not a single clue that there had ever been buildings there. I really didn't know what to tell the guy.

When I came back to Camp Roberts for the next round of training about three weeks later the 1st Lt was gone. I asked around and finally found out from the bartender at the club that about a week earlier an old semi-retired civilian maintenance worker had returned from about a six months leave of absence. The 1st Lt had taken him over to the East Garrison and quizzed him about the building and found that this civilian had a standard operating procedure that when he made a round of the buildings and he came across a building that appeared to be leaning too much, he hung a plumb line from the side and if it was over 10 degrees of lean he just hopped in his bulldozer, leveled the building, burned the resultant pile of wood, and hauled off the cement flooring and piping to the base land fill. Six months of rain and sun erased any sign of the buildings.

Camp Roberts, CA

February, 1969

“Culture Shock”

Because the Army staff was so small and occupied in locations other than the firing ranges during the day, there was very little contact between the sailors and the Army folks. Also, there was no one other than the Navy personnel out on the firing ranges. The exception was the mess hall, but it wasn't the interaction with the Army personnel that caused a problem, rather it was the amount of food. You have to understand that the Navy feeds very well, especially if you are based ashore. A typical Navy breakfast is your choice of: 3 different kinds of meat, 2-3 eggs any style, hot or cold cereal, hot cakes or waffles, 3-4 different fruit juices, 2-3 kinds of fruit, toast or breakfast pastry, coffee or tea. If you ate everything on your tray you could go back for seconds. I didn't happen by the mess hall myself but I heard many stories about the confrontation with the serving line personnel when the sailors were handed 1 egg over easy, 2

pieces of toast, a small bowl of hot cereal, a small glass of juice and a cup of coffee. And no seconds.

The grumbling got so bad that I had to include a short lesson on cultural differences in my welcome to Camp Roberts speech. By the second day of training each week I noticed on the way out to the range in the morning there were many sailors with bags of potato chips, pepperoni sticks, candy and whatever else they could get from the base store. That I was feeding them C-rations for lunch didn't help the matter.

Camp Roberts, CA

March, 1969

“The incident reports”

I was very much an independent command down at Camp Roberts. While I talked regularly with the Marine Major Lattig who was the NIOTC weapons training officer, my only contact with the NIOTC (Naval Inshore Operations Training Center) senior staff came on two occasions when I had to fill out incident reports about activities at Camp Roberts.

The first incident report stemmed from a terse memo from the Army base Colonel to NIOTC's Captain Wells complaining that we had painted the cement step outside the NIOTC Camp Roberts admin office in a very nice looking Navy blue. We were very proud of the appearance of the place until the base adjutant came by and told us that the Army does not paint cement. Our decorative attempts got back to the Army base colonel and on to Captain Wells...and back and forth. The only comment I heard that came from Captain Wells was that he thought it looked nice. We did rectify the situation by picking up the cement block and turning it over. I didn't mention the way we had rectified the problem in my incident report.

My second incident report came when I got a report from my chief gunner that one of our jeeps (loaned to us by the Army) had crashed. This, I thought, was a pretty serious thing. My chief gunners mate, Chief Eash, took me out to the site of the crash and was shown an overturned and wrecked jeep at the bottom of a steep hill out at the far western side of the firing ranges. There was blood on the back seat so I asked the chief if anyone was hurt. He said that he didn't know because the jeep had been stolen. I looked more closely and noticed that along with the blood there was a lot of short brown hair that didn't appear to be human hair. Odd. We went back to the large barn-like building that my gunners used as a place to park the loaner trucks and jeeps and as a place to clean the weapons after training. I called the Army motor pool from

there and told them about the wreck and where to find it. I was advised later that they had picked up the vehicle and scrapped it. As I was finishing my call to the motor pool I noticed a number of flattened cardboard boxes that we normally put on the cement floor of the building while cleaning the weapons. When I inspected the cardboard I noticed what appeared to be blood and this same short brown hair. Odd. I called my boss back at NIOTC, Marine Major Latting, and he told me to write an incident report. I did write the report but kept my findings to the details of the crash. After he received my initial report draft, Major Latting asked me what I suspected and I told him that I was sure that my gunner's mates had been out poaching deer and then slaughtering them in the maintenance building. The major passed this on to his boss, Captain Wells, so that the Captain wouldn't be surprised by anything the Army found and reported. The word that I got back was that Captain Wells thought it was pretty funny but also that I was lucky no one was hurt. A copy of my final report went to the officer in charge of the motor pool and, of course, on to the base colonel. I was called in to the base colonel's office and read the riot act for losing a valuable Army asset and told that this would be reported up the chain of command and down to the NIOTC staff. I talked to the motor pool officer before their final report went in to find out how much it was going to cost the Navy and whether or not they had detected any cause for the accident. He hemmed and hawed and said that jeeps were pretty expensive to replace, but the final report said that the value of the jeep was zero dollars because it had already been written off the books and apparently just put in running condition for the Navy's use. I never heard anything more, but I don't think there was any more deer hunting.

Camp Roberts, CA

April, 1969

"The mountain is moving"

The very large artillery range that had been rented by the Navy to train the Mobile Riverine Force personnel was sparsely populated with fairly large oak trees and overgrown with grass. By this time of year the grass was starting to brown slightly which, when looking down range from the Navy's hilltop firing position, gave the hills a mottled look. The grass was very tall and with the addition of a slight wind from left to right made the far ridge line appear to be swaying slightly. This was especially apparent to me from my position in the range safety officer's tower.

The most important thing for a range safety officer is to be constantly on the alert, carefully observing both the nearby activities on the firing line and at the same time keeping an eye down range, especially on the road that ran across the center of the range. One day in April, as 1100 hours approached and the temperature began to climb over 100, the view down range became very confused. Smoke and dust from the exploding ordinance added to the difficulty of maintaining a crisp view of what was actually happening on the range.

Using my binoculars and scanning down range, I had the distinct impression that the mountain was moving toward me. Clearly that couldn't be true, but just to clear my vision I dumped the remaining water in my canteen on my head, rubbed my eyes and looked again. It was still moving. And it was changing color. Some of the patches of brown were being replaced by patches of white.

As I was shaking my head again, I got a very excited call from the guard at the southern end of the cross-range road. He was screaming about a covered wagon coming down the mountain. My first thoughts were "been to too many western movies" and "out in the sun too long", but I reacted correctly in swinging my binoculars toward the south side of the firing range...and by golly there was a covered wagon coming down the right side of the range. Two horses pulled a canvas topped wagon and there was a man sitting on the boot with reins in his hands.

I immediately called a "cease fire" and "unload all guns". It wasn't quite quick enough to stop a couple of .81mm rounds that were already in the air and which, fortunately, landed about 500 yards from the covered wagon.

As the smoke from the firing cleared somewhat it was very clear that the mountain was moving. Behind the covered wagon was a huge flock of sheep. The covered wagon soon disappeared over a small rise and was headed in the direction of the south end of the cross-range road. Shortly, a second call from the guard came in.....I heard "he's got a knife" and the phone went dead. Moments later the guard appeared running up the side road with his sound powered phones still on his head. He was moving really fast...uphill and in the heat. When he got close enough you could hear him shouting "he's got a f....g knife".

The covered wagon was now clearly visible and I could clearly see the sheep and about 3 sheep dogs racing along behind the herd. In about 5 minutes they had approached the bottom of the hill below our firing position. An older man dressed in "sheep herder clothes" (I guess) got down from the wagon and jogged up the hill carrying his knife. To say he was angry is an understatement. Clearly we had scared the hell out of him and his sheep and I could understand him being a little peeved. When he got to the perimeter of our weapons training area my chief gunners mate went over to try and talk to him, but almost immediately turned and shouted that couldn't understand a word the sheep herder was saying. Fortunately there

was an MRF trainee named LtCdr Alzedo who spoke Spanish and who came over to try and aid the communication. After a few minutes I got word that the fellow didn't speak Spanish but almost surely was Basque.

No one was getting stabbed so I gave the word to break for lunch.

All attempts at communicating with the sheep herder essentially failed but we kept gesturing to him to head south with his herd. I think that the 100 odd students all armed with machine guns convinced him that he wasn't going to win this one with only a knife. He finally turned, whistled twice, swung his arm in the direction of south, and jogged down the hill. The 3 sheep dogs immediately and with no other instruction began barking and running at the sheep to get them started south. I was very impressed. I promised myself I would get a sheep dog when I left the service.

By the time lunch was over the sheep herder and the flock had cleared the perimeter road and was well clear of becoming targets for our training. At the end of the day I drove over to the base Colonel's office and told them my story. They were well aware that the ranges had been rented out to a company for the winter and that sheep had been brought down from Montana, but the grazing area was supposed to be on the East Garrison on the other side of highway 101. They had had problems in the past because, quite understandably, no one on the base spoke Basque. They also said that they had no idea how he had gotten on this side of the highway.

I never saw the sheep herder again, which was probably good, and I ended up buying a Labrador Retriever whose only skill was chewing up tennis balls.

Camp Roberts, CA

June, 1969

"Military Police Training"

Camp Roberts was used as an Army Reserve training center during the summer. During the winter there were only about 70 Army personnel at the 44,000 acre facility. The year I was there, the first group of reserves to come for training early in June was a battalion of MPs. For some reason the first week they were there, they came alone, without any other Army units.

One Monday morning in June, and the first week that MPs were there, as I was leading a convoy of the 2-1/2 ton trucks full of Navy MRB trainees out to the firing range, I came across a brand new stop sign (temporary) and was halted at a cross roads by 3-4 MPs in a jeep (I was driving my new, nifty Fiat 124) and I was asked for identification. They were apparently assigned to guard that crossroad. I showed them my Navy id and they compared it to a list on their clip board and told that I was not on the authorized range access list. I explained the situation, in very diplomatic terms, of course, that we had been doing this same thing for the last five months. They radioed back to someone and, after about 10 minutes, they received permission to let us pass. Fine. We proceeded up and over a small hill and sighted yet another stop sign and MP jeep with 3-4 MPs. We were stopped and asked for identification and this group of MPs also found that we were not on the authorized range access list. A radio call and a 10 minute wait ended with permission to pass. We proceeded around the side of the next hill and came across....yes, another MP jeep with 3-4 MPS...same story. We were stopped 4 more times and it took about 1-1/4 hours to get to the range.

We commenced the firing training and around noon I caught sight of an MP jeep starting down the road which crossed the range. Apparently they did not hear or see the .50cal and .20mm tracers crossing their line of sight. I ceased fire and held my breath as they were traveling on a road that potentially had unexploded 40mm grenades strewn about and I had no way of communicating with them. Fortunately they stopped for reasons I couldn't tell and turned around and went back south. About that time I received a frantic sound powdered phone call from our sentry that we had posted on the road at the entry point for the range. He said that he had been "arrested" by the MPs and told that he was unauthorized to have a control point at that location. His frantic protestations about a live firing being underway and his pointing to a pole with a red flag on it didn't register. Apparently it wasn't on their training list. Shortly our guard called back and said they had come back through his station and had left. I guess that the MPs in the jeep that started to cross our line of fire and then turned around had told their companions that the control point was probably a necessary thing, as my road guard was released and they went on their way.

It didn't end there. I had to continue training longer than usual because we had started late, and we just re-commenced firing. We finished around 1800, loaded everyone up, and started back to the main camp. Yep, there were the MPs again with their portable stop sign at the cross road closest to the range. I was just a little fed up with the whole thing so I just waived at the guys in the jeep and drove through the intersection. The Navy guys in the trucks didn't help much as they started yelling "Get'em, Get'em" "he ran the stop sign" to the MPs, who

immediately jumped into their jeep and came after me. Now the speed limit on the range was 25mph and I was actually exceeding the speed limit, but it wasn't much of a chase as the MP's jeep had a speed governor and couldn't go over 25 mph. I slowed slightly for the second group of MPs, but continued on. They also piled in their jeep and started after me. By the time I reached slope leading back to the main base I looked back and noted that I had 5-6 jeeps with flashing lights following me. I turned into the road leading to the officer's club, stopped in the parking lot, got out and went into the club. When I went up to the bar I was greeted by a major who was the base Adjutant, who was watching the show through the big picture window that looks out onto the ranges. For the next 30 minutes each set of MPs came up to me, handed me a ticket for ignoring a stop sign and speeding. When they left, I stacked them up in a pile and handed them to the major and said "I guess I owe you a beer". He went through the stack and then said..."You owe me 6 beers". I never heard anything more about it and figured that I had made a strong contribution to their reserve training efforts. For the remainder of the one week session, we were just waived through the intersections, which was a great disappointment to our Navy guys in the trucks.

Camp Roberts, CA

June, 1969

"Military Police Training Continues"

The MP's diligence was not limited to just the access to the ranges. Because I was playing on the Vallejo Naval Base basketball team during the weeks when I returned back to NIOTC, I was trying to stay in as good as shape as possible. For basketball, this meant running. Because the Navy's Camp Roberts weapons training preparation started around 0600 and ended at 2100 most days, it meant that I had to roust myself out of bed at around 0500 every morning, put on my sweats and start stretching, jogging, and then running. The only practical place I could run was around the main parade ground at the center of the base as it was the only place that was even partially lighted.

This form of exercise started in January and went on for about 5 months without incident, until the reserve MP training battalion arrived. On Tuesday morning on the second day of training for the week, I started into my usual 5 o'clock (sorry...0500) round of about 5 trips around the parade ground. After about 10 minutes I noticed a pair of headlights following a good ways behind me. As I jogged under a street light I glanced back and I could see that it was a jeep full of MPs and it appeared that they were following me. They were about 50 yards behind and travelling at my speed (jogging speed). Shortly their lights went out but they continued to follow me. I actually paid very little attention to this, but by this time I had made a complete

circuit around the parade ground and was starting a second trip around I took another glance back and discovered that now two jeeps were following me with their lights out. This seemed a bit odd. It got stranger still when, as I continued on, I passed at least two more MP jeeps parked back in the shadows of the buildings with their lights out. This went on for another full circle of the parade ground when suddenly all of the jeeps, including the ones hiding in the shadows, turned on their lights and proceeded in my direction. The lead jeep that was behind me came roaring up (if it is possible to roar at 25 mph). The other three vehicles came up also, but stayed a ways back (out of danger, I presume). An MP jumped out of the lead vehicle and demanded to know who I was and what I was doing there. I calmly explained that I was jogging and that I was a Navy Lieutenant and in charge of the Navy's training detachment there at Camp Roberts. They made no comment on this but next I was ordered to show my ID. Well, I didn't have my ID on me as my sweats don't have a pocket and I hadn't been carrying one since I started this practice 5 months before. This apparently is a bad thing and I was ordered into the back of the nearest jeep and carted off to the MP headquarters.

The Sergeant at the MP headquarters first told the four groups of MPs "Well done" and then turned to me and said "who the hell are you and what are you doing on this base". I explained that I was a Navy Lieutenant and was assigned to and had been living on the base for the last five months. The Sergeant said "What the hell is the Navy doing here?...", but had the presence of mind to call the duty officer who confirmed that yes there was a Navy detachment stationed on the base and that I was the officer in charge. The Sergeant gave me permission to proceed.

The following day I received a message from the base executive officer asking that I use the base gymnasium for my morning workouts, at least until the MPs were gone. I knew there was a gym on the base but I had never seen the lights on or any activity around the building so I was a bit concerned, but this was fine with me as it would allow me the opportunity to practice a few shots as well as exercise.

I stopped by the gym after dinner that evening and found the door open and the building office occupied by an Army corporal who was apparently in charge of the place. He informed me that the building was always open and showed me the light switch which I would need for my 0500 forays. He also got out a couple of basketballs for me and showed me where I could checkout some basketball shoes. So I was all set for the next morning...I thought.

The next morning 0500 came around and I made it to the gym and found the door open. I was alone in the building so I checked myself out a pair of basketball shoes and a basketball and headed for the basketball floor. I passed the power panel and flipped on the lights and entered the main room to the rather startling discovery that the gym floor was a dirt floor. This was a bit odd. When I walked out onto the floor and bounced the basketball it didn't sound or act like a dirt floor. I went back and found a push broom, tried it out, and discovered what appeared to

be a very new hardwood basketball court underneath about 1/4" of dirt. Twenty minutes of sweeping and I had myself a nice large clean floor to on which to exercise and shoot a few baskets. As I was leaving around 0600 the corporal arrived and when asked about the state of the floor he said that he didn't know and that in the 6 months he had been assigned the duty he had never been in the gym. All in all I was fine with the arrangement and I was never stalked by the MPs on the way to the gym.

Camp Roberts, CA

June, 1969

"The Wonderful Juke Box"

In one of the previous stories, I mentioned that there was an Army major staying in the BOQ there at Camp Roberts. I can't tell you much about him because I never talked to him and I only saw him at the Officer's Club. I do remember that he was very short and very over weight. This was not surprising to me because when I saw him at the O' Club he always had a pitcher of beer in front of him, and he was always eating a cheese burger. This also was not surprising because the only food that the O' Club served was the basic hamburger or the "deluxe" cheese burger. The cheese burger was called the "deluxe" cheeseburger because it had a piece of cheese on it. I know this to be a fact because the bartender who made up the menu told me. The major always sat by himself against the back wall, away from the bar, and right next to the jukebox. Now this wasn't any ordinary jukebox because it played a short video along with each song. Even though it was a high tech version of the jukebox it still only cost a nickel to play a song and its accompanying video. Actually, not even a nickel was needed because when you put in a nickel it dropped through into an open box in the front of the jukebox, hence...free replay. Now, I like juke boxes because they usually have a lot of "oldies but goodies" to play, but the problem was that whenever anyone got up to put in their nickel, the major would stand up and say "I got it" or some words to that effect and he would put in a nickel and play his favorite song. Over and over again. I wish I could remember the name of the song but I do remember it was a song about a horse race. I could probably still hum a few bars. I should remember the song because it was burned in my brain as it was the only song that the major would ever allow to be played. I got tired of the song but not actually the video as there were no actual race horses in the video, rather it featured about 5 or 6 scantily clad ladies wiggling and slapping their rears as they "ran down the back stretch". It was unwise to interrupt the major during the play as it consumed his whole attention, and I confess to being somewhat enthralled by the movements in the video.

At some time early the following spring, the jukebox and that particular song had reach the end of their collective lives. I was in the club in the early evening and I had finished my “deluxe” cheeseburger, when, after about the 5th rendition of the race horse song, the juke box started to make strange noises. Shortly the jukebox gave up the ghost and stopped completely. The major jumped to his feet, stepped over to the jukebox and gave it a good whack. This didn’t start the music, but the jukebox did start to smoke and growl. The major pulled the jukebox away from the wall, I guess to discover the problem. This movement may have contributed to the fact that a fire started in the back of the machine. Thinking quickly, the major stepped back to his table, grabbed an almost full pitcher of beer, and poured it on the flames. Now I went to firefighting school when I first enlisted in the Navy out of high school and I remember distinctly hearing the Chief Engineman/Instructor telling us to never pour water on an electrical fire. I guess the Army doesn’t cover that in their officer training. As it turned out, the Chief Engineman was right. The jukebox exploded into flames and its wiring leading up to the ceiling also burst into flames. This got everyone’s attention as the O’Club was a very old, very dry, light framed wooden building. Fortunately, the power surge tripped a fuse so that the room lights went out as well as power to the jukebox. The bartender had sufficient composure to come out from behind the bar, open the sliding glass door at the back of the room, and shove the burning jukebox out of the door. The jukebox tumbled down a grassy hillside and started a grass fire. Fortunately there was very little grass and the fire didn’t spread and was easily put out when the base (civilian) fire detachment arrived. The burning wiring on the wall self-extinguished so that the club didn’t catch fire.

I don’t remember seeing the major in the club after that. I am not sure whether it was a budget thing or not, but the fire charred wall at the back of the officer’s club had not been repainted before I left a month or so later. I guess it was retained as a reminder of the (only) exciting time at the club. And the best thing that came out of it, of course, was that in the confusion I didn’t have to pay for my “deluxe” cheese burger.