

"MEKONG"

Professional journalist report the war

Memoirs of
Ray Funderburk, PIO, 9th Infantry Division
Vietnam, 1967-68

I was ready to enter the war in Vietnam. With a background in radio and television reporting and having edited two newspapers and one magazine, my journalistic credentials had already been established.

That was probably the reason I got the strange phone call from the Pentagon that day. I was sitting in the Public Information Office of 5th Army Headquarters in Chicago after making my usual cocktail circuit at the Illinois Athletic Club, which required a minimum of three martinis, when the phone rang.

"You haven't been to Vietnam yet, so you gotta' go," the strange voice of the assignment officer rasped. "They need a PIO bad at the 9th Infantry Division. That's where we are sending you."

"Where is the 9th stationed in country?" I asked.

"Mekong Delta, south of Saigon. They are getting involved in more battles than anyone and aren't getting the coverage in the media. We feel you can handle the chore."

"When do I go?"

"Three weeks. Get ready. Orders are on the way."

If I had thought quickly enough, I would have asked more about the Mekong Delta. But I didn't, and had to find out the hard way.

JULY 1967

The airplane ride across the Pacific was nothing short of a ghost trip. Everyone on the bird was headed to Vietnam and there wasn't much laughter. In fact, there were several stern faces on those who were making their second trip.

When we landed in Saigon, it was raining. Not just sprinkles, torrents of pounding monsoon rain, pelting your body like a giant shower.

We hustled into a bleak wooden barracks that leaked. Our guide told us to pick a cot and told us to be ready to board transportation at 6 a.m. the next morning. We had no food, no water, nothing. I asked about food and was pointed to another wooden building nearby where smoke tried to rise into the pounding rain.

"Mess hall," the guide mumbled.

Satisfied to remain, I picked out a canvas cot and plopped down. My butt was immediately soaked. I looked up and found several shrapnel holes in the roof from a mortar attack in the past.

The next morning our transportation arrived. We were herded out into the pouring monsoon to board our transport--a friggin deuce and a half truck.

Here I am, an officer--a major--sitting in the back of a bouncing, rumbling truck complete with hard wooden bench seats and a wet group of complaining GI's. What an introduction to combat.

We rode and rode, passing flooded rice paddies, water buffalo up to their bellies in mud and water, farmers slopping around in the rice paddies trying to plant.

After two hours we arrived at the gate to the compound. A small guard shack, with openings for entry and exit past heavy barbed wire, housed to burly MPs. After they checked everyone's orders and ID cards, they let us pass. The truck pushed through the flooded dirt road to the building where three flag poles supported limp flags, one of which was the stars and stripes.

"Headquarters, 9th Division," shouted the driver without getting out. "Officers off here, enlisted men stay aboard."

I jerked my duffle bag, tossed it out the rear and hopped down. My boots sank into the morass as I slopped toward the door, dragging my wet duffle bag.

As I entered, a young soldier stood up from behind a small wooden folding desk and saluted.

"Welcome to the Old Reliable headquarters," he shouted.

"Major Raymond Funderburk, replacement for the PIO. Where do I sign in?" I asked wiping my hands, trying to get the moisture off.

"Sir, the Chief-of-Staff has been expecting you. This way, sir," he responded.

We walked down a narrow hallway made of warped plywood with plywood floors that moved when each step applied pressure.

"Right in here, sir," the young soldier pushed open a plywood door.

Sitting behind a long, handmade desk, sat a rather heavy colonel with a pouch. His short, grey hair was receding and the face was a mass of wrinkles. Behind puffed eyelids shone bright green eyes. He got up and extended a hand.

"Welcome to the Old Reliables," he said. "My name is Colonel Hunt, chief-of-staff. We've been expecting you. General Ewell asked the Pentagon to send us the best PIO they had on the shelf and you were elected. Could have been your Masters Degree in Journalism, your two newspapers you edited and the magazine--Infantry Magazine, wasn't it? Sit down, let's talk about what's happening."

"What's with this 'Old Reliable' stuff?" I asked. It was the wrong question. Hunt launched into a half hour of discourse about the 9th Division's history in warfare, especially in World War II where it earned the nick-name Old Reliable. I wished I had never asked the question.

"Now, here's our problem," Hunt launched into another half hour of combat discussions, flavored with the lack of publicity the unit was getting. "We need press coverage. The PIO we brought over from the States--well, let's say he's not cutting the mustard, if you know what I mean. The Commanding General is livid. We are kicking ass out in the field and no one knows how well we are fighting. You know General Ewell's third star rests on how much publicity he gets--or rather the unit gets. Right now, we are a secret organization. No one knows we are here and what we are doing. You've got to straighten that out. While assigned here, you work directly for me. No one else will screw with you, and if they try, send them to me. Okay, you have your marching orders. Go down to the supply sections, draw your weapon and some jungle fatigues and boots and then get over to the PIO shop in the morning. I expect big things from you, Funderburk. Big things!"

Completely drenched, tired and slightly confused, I thanked the colonel for his warm welcome, saluted and dragged my duffle bag back down the bouncing plywood floor toward the front entrance. I asked where the supply section was and the young soldier took me to the doorway and pointed to a row of metal huts about two blocks away.

"Where do the officers sleep?" I asked.

He pointed to a row of large tents in the opposite direction.

I was so wet I finally gave into the monsoon and walked slowly through the rain, dragging my duffle bag. At the supply section, they issued me fatigues, jungle boots, sleeping bag, web belt, first aide kit, and then led me into the armory where a slim young sergeant asked me to sign for a .45 caliber pistol.

"I don't want a pee shooter, Sarge," I said. "I wear glasses and if those get knocked off, I can't see anything but blurs around me. Besides, a .45 is good only in an elevator. What else have you got?"

He disappeared around a corner then came back holding a short, shot-gun like weapon. He pushed a lever and it broke into two parts. "M-79 grenade launcher. Bursting radius of 20 meters in both directions. Can't miss anything you shoot at, major. Want one?"

"Hell yes, never shot one but I bet I can learn real fast if some VC is making my life miserable."

"This is how you load it," he demonstrated, slipping a large bullet-like grenade into the barrel then closing it with a loud 'snap.' He unloaded the launcher and handed it to me.

"Don't forget to take off the safety before you try to shoot somebody. You'll have to sign for it. I'll give you twenty rounds of ammo. I'll even throw in a pouch to carry the grenades," he smiled.

That young sergeant didn't know it, but he had just saved my life by giving me an M-79 grenade launcher. Later, during several combat actions, it would mean the difference in life or death. I learned to love that weapon and carried everywhere I went, even to the toilet.

An uneventful night in the officer's tent, with leaking canvas raining down on my sleeping bag, past until mercifully, the sun came up and I was able to slip out of my wet clothes and don new, clean jungle fatigues.

After a warm breakfast of S.O.S., I headed to the PIO office.

As I entered, I was shocked at the appearance of the office, the men, the scattered trash and the PIO sitting behind his Army metal desk with a bottle of Scotch whisky in front of him, with a water glass that held about three shots.

He staggered to his feet and extended a hand. He smiled broadly, showing yellow teeth surrounded by three days of beard growth.

"Welcome to Vietnam, you poor bastard," he laughed, shaking my hand with a limp grip. "You've got your work cut out for you with old Hunt. He's a whip driving old sucker trying to make general. He'll bust your butt for nothing if you don't watch it. He's on my ass constantly about getting publicity for the unit. Hell, he want's press coverage so he and the CG can get promoted, that's all."

My introduction was brief. I told the former PIO to take his whiskey bottle and depart the office and not to return. All of this was said in a calm voice, of course.

"But I don't leave for three days," he whimpered.

"Good, stay drunk for three days, but don't bother coming back here. Your time is up as PIO. I'm the new guy on the block and things will change."

I said that loud enough so the staff could overhear. There was no barrier in the open bay, so most conversations were easily heard by others. I watched as some of the staff members buttoned their fatigue jackets and began to straighten up their desks.

As soon as the drunk left, I called everyone together.

"My name is Major Raymond Funderburk. I am a professional journalist and a soldier. I was sent here to take over this failed attempt at publicity and turn it around. And, that's exactly what I intend to do. I have not met you all individually, but I intend to do that this afternoon. I want each man to be prepared to talk to me and tell me of your background, what you are currently doing and what you would like to do in this office. At the same time, I'll tell you what you will be doing. It will be an even trade. I want you doing what you are best at. If it's writing, then you'll be on the editorial staff. If you a good with a camera, you'll do that as well. We are here to get publicity for those poor souls out there slopping around in the rice paddies, facing death every day. We owe them the best we can do to make sure they are represented in the media back home. I'm a professional journalist. I write better than most of you, can use a camera better than most of you and can pick up a microphone and go on the air better than most of you. So, don't try to bullshit me. I have done broadcast journalism, print journalism and been the editor of so many publications I can't recall the number. Let's all work as a team, and I will be your best supporter."

"Oh yeah, if there is anything I hate is having someone come down on my people without going through me first. If that happens, and I mean even if it's a colonel or general giving you a hard time, you come to me ASAP. I'll take care of him, regardless of his rank. No one screws with my people or they have me to answer to. Understood?"

I could see some smiles on faces that weren't smiling when I arrived. I could sense the group was beginning to like the new boss.

"Now, who is senior?"

"I am sir, Sergeant First Class Dominic Cruz."

"Sergeant Cruz, why don't you and I take a little walk."

We both left by the back door and walked down the wooden sidewalk made of pallets laid out across the mud.

"Sgt Cruz, what's wrong with the men?"

"Do you want it straight, Major?"

"Straight is the only way I want it, now and as long as I'm in charge. Don't ever try to bullshit me. I can't stand a bullshitter. Be up front, all the time."

"These men are disgusted. The old PIO was drunk all the time, didn't care what was happening, not taking care of his men. They are bored. We have seventeen men and not enough work for everyone."

"Do you have a unit newspaper?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes sir, but it isn't published but once a month, and then it's a piece of trash."

"Well, you'll have a weekly one very shortly. How about a unit magazine?"

"You've got to be kidding? Magazine? No way."

"We'll have one of those also. How many reporters do you have in the field?"

"None, sir. All our reporters are here at the base camp."

"Well, how in the hell can you report what this unit is doing by sitting in a base camp.? We need to be in the field with the troops, in combat with them."

"Sir, if I may, you might be stepping on some toes by sending our men into the field."

"Whose toes?"

"The battalion commanders. They have enough to worry about without having a reporter looking over their shoulder every day. Especially a stranger they know nothing about."

"Tell you what, Cruz, you let me handle the politics, you handle the men. You make sure they all have a weapon, know how to use it and also a tape recorder and camera."

"Sir, weapons we have. Tape recorders and cameras, no way!"

"What? You don't have cameras and tape recorders? How do you expect to cover this war, writing on toilet paper? Don't worry, I'll take care of that very shortly."

We returned to the office and I gathered up the staff.

"Gents, we have twelve Infantry battalions in this division. I intend to send a reporter down to each battalion to be embedded with them and cover their action. I am going to buy tape recorders for radio use and cameras to capture the combat as it happens."

I could see the sudden brightness in their eyes. 'Wow, this old guy is for real'.

Now, let's begin the interviews. And based on what you tell me, you will be assigned to the field or remain here to accomplish editorial tasks. Okay, let's start with you," I pointed to a lanky young man with long hair, too long.

"Your name is Sullivan, right?"

"Yes, sir. I used to be a reporter on the Columbus Daily News in Columbus, Ohio, until I was drafted. I have a degree from Ohio State in journalism."

"Then you're ripe to go into the field and do what you have been trained to do. And, you can make a trip to the barber shop and get those curly locks taken off or I'll do it for you, do we understand each other?"

The young man blushed and nodded.

"Don't get me wrong. You're a soldier first, then a reporter. You might have to fight alongside some infantry in the field, so I want you looking as good as they do, not looking like some base camp slob. Understand?"

He nodded and smiled.

I made all my remarks to each man loud enough so the rest could hear what was happening.

NEXT MORNING

I attended the morning operations briefing and was awed by the amount of enemy contact we were making in the field. As we left the briefing, I asked Colonel Hunt to let me meet with him and the Commanding General sometime during the day.

"Hell, let's do it right now. He hasn't met you yet and I'm sure he'll have some guidance to give you as well. Let's go into his office," Hunt said.

We entered the CG's office and I was completely taken back. He was a slender man, slightly hunched over with a sharp face and narrow eyes. One hand looked like it had been run over by a tank. Later, I found out it had been run over by a German tank in the Battle of the Bulge.

"Funderburk, we aren't getting any media coverage back in the states," was his opening remark. "My wife keeps sending me clippings about the Cav, the Marines, everyone damn outfit but the 9th Division. I want news to get back to the people who are paying for this damn war."

I decided to lay it on the line. "General, would you like to know why you aren't seeing any media coverage?"

"Why hell yes, if you have an answer, go for it," he replied.

"Simple, sir. Your PIO staff is sitting on their ass in base camp. We need to get those reporters out in the field with the maneuver battalions so they can be in the thick of combat when it happens. Only then can they report the war properly," I told the old general.

"Why not. Sounds like a plan to me. Hunt, make it happen. Send those boys out in the field to each one of the twelve battalions," the general said.

"There's more," I offered. "These reporters need cameras and tape recorders. They can't properly report the war without tools. Just like a mechanic needs tools, reporters need tools as well."

"Good. Get them tools. What else?"

I decided things were going too well to push it, so I told the general and colonel that was all for now. I kept the weekly newspaper and magazine ideas in check for the time being.

ONE WEEK LATER

I had just returned from Japan after buying fifteen Nikon camera sets, complete with filters, flash attachments and telescopic lenses--along with twenty high quality, but rugged tape recorders. I met with the staff.

"Gents, these Nikon cameras are the best you can buy. If you don't know how to use a camera of this quality, please say so and we'll hold some lessons right here in the shop. By the way, who does your film developing?"

"The Signal Battalion, sir," said Sgt Cruz.

"Is that why the quality of your prints is so poor?"

"Yes sir, and it is getting worse."

"Is there nothing going well with this outfit?" I sighed, making a mental note to visit with the Signal Corps battalion commander and find out why we were getting such poor service.

As it turned out, two of the soldiers were more than expert with a camera and were able to hold training for the rest destined to travel to the field. At least I had a start on getting some good photography out of the combat zone.

ONE MONTH LATER

One of my better field reporters was involved directly with a combat assault and got some really wonderful action shots of VC being killed and captured. He was elated that he was able to get the photos. He and I could hardly wait until the black and whites came back from the Signal Battalion.

We waited and waited. After two days, I went to Colonel Hunt and complained. He called up the Signal Battalion commander and the three of us met in Hunt's office.

"Okay, Funderburk, you called the meeting, let's hear what you have to say," Hunt said.

I took out some of the photos my man took of the combat and laid them on the desk. They were yellow from not being properly washed after being developed in chemicals. The stains were obvious.

"This is crap, gentlemen. I can't hand this to a network bureau chief in Saigon and ask him to use it. He would toss it in the can. We have to have better quality control on these prints. I am working with professionals in Saigon and they expect professional products from us, not crap like this."

Hunt's face got red. "Colonel Johnson, anything you want to add about your film lab and it's quality control?"

Colonel Johnson's face got redder. "I haven't seen these prints before now. I understand why you can't use them. Maybe I'd better go check out the lab and see if we can't do better next time."

Hunt smirked. "You have one more chance. If you fail to make it better, your gone. I'll get me somebody who knows how to run a damn photo lab. Now, both of you get the hell out'a my office and get back to work."

Johnson couldn't wait to catch me outside to try to chew me out for not informing him of the problem. "Why didn't you come to me first?" he asked, pleadingly.

"I talked to your sergeant in charge of the lab and the young lieutenant in charge of the lab and both told me to back off. Said they were swamped with intelligence photos that were a lot more important than sending news stories back home."

Johnson was aghast and said he would talk to all concerned and make our work a priority. That was my first success in the staff war within the headquarters.

Later, the photo quality kept getting so bad, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I had a sergeant named Farley. He was the world's best scrounger. What is a scrounger? It is one who can steal, borrow, beg, sell, buy and do other matters of trade and come back with exactly what is needed to accomplish the mission. So I called upon Farley to help with the photo lab situation.

Seems two of my men had earlier worked in photo labs and would love to continue to do so.

"Farley, what would it take to have you go out into Vietnam and return with a photo lab?" I asked.

The old sergeant paused for a moment, then smiled. "Six pairs of jungle fatigues, size small. Six pairs of jungle boots, size small and two bottles of Jack Daniels."

"I understand the clothes, but what are you going to do with the Jack Daniels?"

"Drink it while I'm busy trading, of course."

The next day Farley departed in a jeep from the office, with his fatigues and two bottles of whiskey. I told him goodbye and wished him luck.

ONE WEEK LATER

I was sitting at my desk when the phone rang. It was an MP at the main gate.

"You got a sergeant named Farley working for you?"

"Sure do, why?"

"He's at the gate driving an Air Force truck. Says he works for the PIO."

"Let him in and thanks," I said, wondering where he got an Air Force truck.

Farley pulled in and stopped, hopped out and smiled. He went to the rear of the van and opened it up and waved for everyone to see inside. It held a complete photo lab.

Laying on the floor were boxes of developing chemicals and stainless steel trays to hold the wash.

"Where in the hell..." I started before he held his hand up and shook his head.

"No questions, sir. Just results. The lab was not being utilized sitting in a depot in Saigon. It now will be used for its intended purpose, which makes it absolutely okay with the Government, I am sure."

TWO WEEKS LATER

I was sitting in my office, which by now was portioned off with plywood so that I had a small cubicle in the rear of the metal building, when my phone rang. It was Colonel Hunt.

"My office, NOW!"

I walked in to find Colonel Johnson sitting very smugly in the corner, big smile on his face.

"Johnson tells me you stopped sending his lab film to be developed. What the hell's going on?"

"Simple, I got my own lab. Now I can control quality."

"Where did you get it?"

"Found it sitting in a depot in Saigon. Not being used, so they let me sign it out for use as intended."

"That sounds like a bunch of bullshit, Funderburk. You don't just find a complete photo lab waiting for you in Saigon."

"Sir, you said the CG wanted publicity. If I have high quality photos, the news media will use them over others. If you will let me run the PIO shop and see what I can do to increase the level of press coverage we are getting, then we can make it work. Trying to interfere and question my every move won't make it happen."

"In other words, you're telling me to mind my own business and let you function," Hunt quipped.

"Exactly, sir. You don't need to be bothered trying to run the PIO shop, that's what you hired me to do. Give me my head and let me do my thing."

Hunt smiled. "I like you, Burk. You got balls." He turned to look at colonel Johnson. "Get the hell outa' my office. Funderburk has this under control."

From that day forward, neither Hunt or Johnson attempted to tell me how to run the PIO office. Thank God!

LATER

As in all wars, the Stars and Stripes newspaper was printed and distributed to the units in combat situations. That was the case in WWII, Korea and now Vietnam. The S&S was a government printing establishment manned and operated by a mix of Federal employees and military personnel--all of whom had newspaper backgrounds.

One Sunday morning I grabbed a jeep and drove into Saigon as it was only a 20 mile drive north. With some confusion and a lot of question asking, I finally found the S&S office and went in to introduce myself.

The man in charge was a civilian dressed in his leisure suit with a colorful bandana around his neck. He looked as though he was preparing to go on the set to shoot a scene from "Jungle Boy." His name was Clark.

"Welcome to the world of combat reporting," Clark said. "How can I help the 9th Infantry Division today."

"Well, I will get right to the point. We aren't receiving a lot of ink in the Stripes of late. How can we get more coverage?"

"Simple. No reporters to send out your way. All the reporters I have are up north where the real action is. You guys in the Mekong Delta ain't doing much. No need to waste good talent," Clark grinned, trying to be funny.

"You need talent--good reporters? How about us making a deal. I'll give you my best reporter--this guy was drafted from the Pittsburgh Press. Good man. I'll give him to you on loan to work full time, here in Saigon."

Clark was astounded. "You'd do that? What's the catch?"

"Simple, I want to see a story or at least a photo in every edition of the Stripes. Doesn't have to be front page stuff, but I want the 9th Infantry Division to be in ink. You do that, and I'll give you my best man."

"Deal. When can I expect him?"

"Give me two days to set it up. Can you provide some sleeping arrangements?"

"We have a set of apartments we rent for our personnel. I will give him a room, rent free. He'll have to eat on the economy like the rest of us. We live here in Saigon like the natives."

"His name is McIlhany. Good man. Good writer, excellent with a camera."

"What kind of cameras have your guys got?"

"The best. Nikon."

"Wow, we don't even have Nikons. Great. We gotta' deal."

I returned to base camp, which was called Bearcat. Why Bearcat I haven't the faintest idea.

Sergeant Cruz was upset I'd bartered off McIlhany.

"Major, you just can't send one of our guys off to Saigon without orders or nothing! It ain't kosher."

"Cruz, how many little deals have you pulled in the Army for the almost twenty years you've been around? How many shady deals, twists of truth, borrowed goods--how many?"

Cruz smiled, shook his head. "You really don't want to know, major."

"Get McIlhany ready to move out to Saigon. Can you round up a jeep for him to have in the city?"

"MAJOR! A jeep?"

"Yeah, one of those things we drive around the base camp. We have more than we need here anyway. Get a jeep signed out to him."

"How's he gonna' get gas in Saigon without any orders?"

"Cruz, I thought you were an operator? Make it happen, okay?"

"What if the MPs catch him and find out he's AWOL or something?"

"Cruz, will you just take care of business. Thank you."

TWO WEEKS LATER

Colonel Hunt called me into the office.

"How the hell did you do it?" he growled, smirking.

"Do what?" I answered.

Hunter held up the latest edition of Stars and Stripes and pointed to the photo and headlines **9th Division Body Count Soars** was splashed across the front page. A photo of a mound of VC bodies supported the story.

"Oh that. Well, the CG said he wanted coverage. He's getting coverage."

"Don't be a smart ass, Funderburk. Just tell me how you did it."

"You hired me because I was a professional and as long as I perform, I would ask that you not question my every move. I will do things you probably never heard of, but remember one thing, colonel, I am going to get results."

"In other words, you aren't talking?"

"Yep. My secret. As long as I don't break any Army regulations, why worry."

LATER

My agreement with the Stars and Stripes worked so well even the major news agencies in Saigon took notice. I received a telephone call one day from George McArthur, Bureau Chief for Associated Press in Saigon.

"Major Funderburk, could you drop in some day and let's talk. I see your unit all over the Stars and Stripes and we never even covered your unit much before. We need to find out what you guys are doing in the Delta."

I made arrangements to meet with McArthur the next day.

When I found his office in the Caravel Hotel, I was shocked to see how well they were living. Each reporter had his own suite and all of them were stocked with food and booze. McArthur was a nice guy, a real pro.

"Call me George," he started. "I try to get to know all the unit PIOs because we call on you guys periodically for support. You seem to know the ropes, with all the ink you're getting in the Stars and Stripes. We never have any calls from your unit, though. Why?"

"George, I'm a professional journalist just like you. I know a good story from a bad. I know you have a war to cover and can't afford to send a reporter out to a unit every time some PIO hollers. So, let's make a deal. I'll only make a press call to AP when I have a real story. I won't call you when we christen a new mess hall, or expand our laundry capability. But when I call, I want an AP guy on the ground ASAP. I'll fly a chopper into Saigon to pick up your guy. I promise--only good stories."

"You've got a deal, Funderburk. Just don't waste my time with the human interest crap. I need hard news to ship back to the New York."

"I know what you need, and I'll make sure you get it."

THE SAME DAY

As I left the AP office, I noticed CBS was on the next floor up. So, I took the elevator and went up to their office. I was introduced to Dan Bloom, CBS Bureau Chief, a nice guy but all business. I proposed to him the same concept I related to AP.

"If you can promise me that when I send a reporter and camera crew out, they'll have a news story, not some soft news, I'll send them out."

"If I call you and tell you to get your crew to the helipad, that will mean I have a breaking news story--hard news. If you find out that's not the case, then I won't expect to see you anymore. I'll keep my end of the bargain if you will do the same."

"You're on, Funderburk. How about a shot of vodka?"

From that time on, CBS always sent out a camera crew when I made a press call.

I was able to convince ABC, NBC, and BBC to do the same thing. All I did was ask that they respect me for being a professional and knowing a good story when I saw one. It worked well. I never called the media unless I had a hard news story.

PAYDAY PARTY

I had a deep regret having sent twelve of my best reporters to the field, knowing the conditions they must live with to survive. C-Rations, mud, bugs, leeches, no running water. It really worked on my mind.

So I came up with a novel idea. Each payday all the field personnel would be recalled to the base camp for a Payday Party. I told SFC Cruz to set it up.

"We gonna' bring all those dirty, stinking guys back here to our nice, clean office?"

"Would you rather go out in the field for this gig?"

"I'm just kidding, major. No offense. What do you want me to do?"

"We need good food--those guys have been eating C-Rations for thirty days. Also, we need booze. We also need some music and some sort of entertainment. Any ideas?"

Cruz grinned. "Got a couple. I know we can get some steaks in Saigon. I'll call a buddy of mine who works at the General Officer's Mess in Saigon. He'll steal us some steaks. Booze? Well, I'll let Darnell take care of that. Music? Stone will be in charge. As for entertainment, what do you have in mind?"

"Can't you get some skin flicks to show?"

"Sure, if you'll send me to Hong Kong."

"Don't be a wise ass. Get some skin flicks to show the boys when they get drunk. It'll do them good to see what's waiting for them when they go on R&R."

SEPTEMBER 1st--FIRST PAYDAY PARTY

Darnell took Moss, made him a colonel, and stole some of the General's booze for the payday party. Cruz went into Saigon and came back with a case of frozen 'T' Bone steaks. Stone fetched some potatoes from the mess hall and borrowed one of their large charcoal grills, complete with charcoal and starter.

The men began drifting in from the field. As they entered the office, they were a little confused but very shortly got the drift of what was cooking. Cruz sent them all to the hooch to get a shower and clean civies if they had any. Most had stashed some jeans and shirts to wear on R&R.

Several soldiers from surrounding offices ventured in to find out what the wonderful smell was, and they were dispatched quickly by our door guards.

Around dusk, most of the men were either drunk or on the way. Everyone relished the steaks and baked potatoes and the booze flowed generously.

Then Cruz set up the 16 mm projector and began rolling the film of some busty broads bouncing around a single, nude guy who obviously was hung like a stud horse.

The men went crazy and laughed until tears showed. It made me feel great to know I had set this whole gig up to let the men escape the horrors of combat, the threat of death and the misery of the mud and filth. I took in all the smiles and laughter and it warmed me inside to know my men were happy and carefree, even if just for a day.

The party went on into the wee hours.

About 0300 hours, the MPs arrived.

"We got complaints about the noise, major," one burly MP shouted.

"Have a drink. Lighten up, Sarge. These guys have been in combat for a month. How many combat missions have you been on here in base camp?"

"We'll have to report this to the Officer of the Day."

"So report. Just leave us alone."

The MPs left after it became obvious their orders were not going to be followed. I assumed I would hear about it the next day. And, sure enough, Hunt wanted me in his office at 0700 hours.

NEXT HUNG OVER MORNING

"What kind of an example are you setting for your men?" Hunt started. "Drunken PIO people were staggering all over the base camp last night--even this morning at reveille this morning, I saw a couple puking on the parade grounds."

"They were just letting off some steam, colonel. They were out in the slime and crap for a month, eating C's while you and I dined on trays at the officer's mess--and had cocktails in the officer's mess while they grabbed an occasional hot beer in the field. They also are sending in some fantastic photos that are appearing all over the world in every newspaper. Those drunks are the men who are making you a general, colonel. And getting the old man his third star. Without them, we all have no press--none!"

"Well...well," stammered Hunt. "Maybe you could hold it down a little with your parties."

"We are going to have one every payday, from now on. So everyone should prepare to accept the PIO boys doing their thing once a month. I don't believe that is asking too much, do you?"

"They don't have to be so obvious, do they?"

"I will tone them down some, just for you, colonel." Knowing full well they would never be sedate and I wouldn't really give a damn anyway.

So, it became a monthly affair that everyone, field men and garrison men, looked forward to. I looked forward to it as well because it meant my guys were getting at least one good meal a month and all the booze they could hold. It meant a lot to me and I know it meant a lot to them.

ANOTHER PAYDAY PARTY CAPER

Lobsters were on the menu this time. From whence came the spiny crustaceans I had not idea. But I found out quickly.

Seems the MPs in Saigon found a vendor pushing a cart full of live lobsters around one of the military barracks. Upon close inspection, underneath the lobsters were grenades--live grenades.

The MPs confiscated the contents of the cart and put the lobsters in the General Officer's mess kitchen cooler. How the lobsters made the 20 miles journey to my office, I haven't a clue. But, I do know they were very tasty during our Payday Party. And, everyone enjoyed the creatures until the MPs showed up.

"We understand you had lobsters for your party tonight," said the huge MP, swinging his billy club back and forth.

I couldn't avoid telling anything but the truth.

"Yes, we had some lobsters. Came from one of our bases on the river near Me To. They have some great shrimp, too."

"We think you got those lobsters from Saigon. Stole them from the General's mess."

"Now, Sarge, making accusations like that will get you no where quick. What evidence do you have? You must have some evidence to prove your assertion."

"We checked your garbage. Found lobster claws and tails."

"Were they marked 'General Officer's Mess' claws and tails?"

The Sergeant was turning red.

"No, but they were definitely lobsters."

"Until you can identify them as the same lobsters taken, as you claim, from the General Officer's Mess in Saigon, I would appreciate it if you would exit the premises and not bother us anymore. Come back with evidence that you can prove these are the same lobsters, and I will confront whomever is to blame. Thanks and good evening."

The MPs left, obviously annoyed but never returned. My guys couldn't stop laughing after the left.

"Major, you sure throw one hell-of-a-party when you throw one. Lobsters, booze--man if the poor slob out there in the bush knew what we were doing, they'd riot and storm the place," Darnell said.

"Don't forget that's the guys you work for. It's their story you've got to tell. The story about young men coming over to this hell hole and putting their lives on the line for Freedom. I think that's what we are fighting for, but I'm not sure all the time. I just don't want you men to forget why you're here and the importance of what you are doing. We owe it to them to do our dead level best. To tell America how good they are and what heroes they are and how they slop through the mud and slime and never complain. That's why I bring you men in every payday to remind you of your importance. Yes, we eat well and drink too much, but we are brothers. We are one and we alone will make the difference in those guy's lives. Sorry about the speech, but I get real emotional thinking about those men out there while we sit eating lobsters stolen from the friggin' MPs. What a dichotomy--lobsters and C's."

HUGE WEAPONS CACHE

Hunt calls me into his office.

"The old man's had it with the national media. He want's some action on the home front. He's waiting in his office to talk to you. You'd better have a good answer."

Not knowing what my good answer might entail, I entered the general's chambers and reported to him with a crisp salute that he failed to answer, just waved me to a chair.

"I'm sick and tired of getting these damn letters from my wife." Sewell tossed a packet of letters bound with rubber bands at Funderburk, who dodges them and they spill on the floor and scatter. Funderburk makes a move to pick them up.

"Leave the damn things alone. God damnit I want to see the Old Reliable patch on national television. My wife keeps sending me letters wondering if we are still in country. She never sees the patch come across the screen. I'm satisfied you're getting press coverage in the Stars and Stripes, but damn it, the Stars and Stripes isn't circulated in Fairfax, Virginia, where my wife lives. Now, son, get out there and do something to get this unit in the news."

Shaken, I agreed to respond, saluted and left, not really knowing what I could do to make this miracle happen. Back at the office, I gathered the office staff.

"Gents, I just got my ass chewed by the CG. He wants some national news coverage. Has anyone got any idea what we might have in the way of news that could be interpreted to be national in scope? Is there anything happening?"

Moss speaks up. "The second of the forty-seventh found a huge weapons cache yesterday."

"What's huge?"

"Over five hundred weapons. Some even artillery pieces left over from the French."

I sucked in a large chest full of air and shouted. "THAT'S IT!"

Cruz quickly asked, "What's it?"

"The largest weapons cache of the war. Quick, Cruz, get the MACV PIO on the horn. I need to spread the news."

"Whoa, wait a minute," said Captain Reysen. "How do you know it was the largest weapons cache of the war?"

"Do you know of a larger one?" I asked.

Silence.

"See, you don't, nor does anyone else, probably. So who is going to shoot down our claim?"

Cruz motions for me to take the phone. I was talking to Colonel Jamison at MACV Public Information.

"Colonel, we just found the largest weapons cache of the war."

"How do you know that?" he replied.

"Over five hundred weapons, including old French artillery pieces. Many are still wrapped in protective grease, never been fired."

"I said, how do you know it's the largest weapons cache of the war?"

"Do you know of one larger?"

Long pause on the phone. "Actually, no."

"Then why are you doubting my word. Let's put the word out to the media and I'll bring some of the weapons to Saigon tomorrow for the press to see at the 5 o'clock follies."

"You get the weapons here, I'll notify the media."

"Thanks, colonel. We'll be there with bells on."

I motioned to Cruz. "Get me Colonel Tower, commander of the unit, on the phone."

Reysen was still shaking his head in disbelief. "I've heard of managing the news before, but this takes the cake. You're making all of this up."

"Reysen, if you can name me a weapons cache larger-- even larger by one weapon--I will immediately back off. Until that happens, we have the largest weapons cache of the war and you'd better get on board and start planning a trip down to the unit first thing in the morning, complete with at least two photographers. I want one shooting the weapons, another shooting those guys who found them. Understood?"

Reysen shrugged and sat down behind his desk.

Cruz motioned for me to take the phone. "Colonel Tower," Cruz whispered.

"Colonel Tower, congratulations. Your unit has found the largest weapons cache of the war."

"How do you know that," Tower responded.

"Just take my word. Please have your guys line the weapons up in neat rows, by type of weapon, because I will have my photographers there first thing in the morning to shoot some photos. I want those soldiers who found them available to be interviewed. Also, when we get through with the photography and interviews, I would like to take one or two of each kind of weapon with me to Saigon to show the media at the 5 O'clock follies. Then the next day,

I'll bring them out to see the whole bunch. How's that sound."

"Sounds like you're making a mountain out of a mole hill, Funderburk. We just were doing our duty and not looking for glory."

"Colonel Tower, you lead the battalion, I'll do the public relations, okay?"

"Okay, we'll be looking for your guys in the morning."

5 O'CLOCK FOLLIES

I stood on the stage in front of over 300 members of the press corps in Saigon at the daily press briefing the media named the "5 O'clock Follies." The name came from some of the ridiculous claims made by the senior officers briefing the media--most of whom had already been to the scene of action and knew the real story that was being blown completely out of proportion.

"The 9th Infantry Division has found the largest weapons cache of the war. Several of those weapons are in the foyer for you to look at and I have photos of the entire batch to pass out. At 1000 hours tomorrow, we will have a large chopper at the helipad to take camera crews to the unit to shoot the entire batch of weapons. Do I have any questions?"

A dozen hands shot up. I recognized one man from BBC.

"Just who is able to substantiate your claim for the largest weapons cache of the war, sir?"

"Good question. If anyone here can tell me of a weapons cache that exceeded over five hundred individual weapons, including some French artillery pieces, please raise your hand and be recognized."

I purposely paused for a long time, scanning the audience. No hands.

"The helicopter will depart for the field at exactly 1000 hours tomorrow. Thank you, and the weapons and photos are waiting outside for your inspection."

TWO WEEKS LATER

Hunt calls me in the office. "What miracles did you create to have the Pentagon calling the old man?"

"I don't understand," I answered.

"The friggin phone's been ringing off the wall from the Pentagon. Even the Chief of Staff of the friggin Army call the old man this morning congratulating him on the largest weapons cache of the war. What's going on?"

"Believe your press reports. We found, well the second of the forty seventh found, the largest weapons cache of the war two weeks ago. All I did was get the media involved in covering the story."

"Who said it was the largest?"

"I did."

"No one refuted your claim?"

"Nope."

"And the press went for it?"

"Yep."

"General Ewell wants you in his office, now!"

I walked in and found three others in the office. Two colonels and a captain from Personnel.

"Major, you have done something above and beyond the call of duty. Your quick reaction to my demand for publicity has resulted in every major commander in the Army calling me to congratulate me for something I didn't even know we did. I don't know how you do it, but I can't knock success. It is my please to award you the Army Commendation Medal for this outstanding job"

The young captain opened a box and handed the medal to the general who pinned it on my fatigue jacket.

"Outstanding work, Major. You are certainly living up to your reputation for creative PIO work. Keep up the good job!"

So, I got a medal for making up a story that everyone--including the Army brass--accepted without even challenging the claim. Actually, it turned out to be the largest weapons cache of the war. Man, I love this PR work.

ESCORT SERVICE

For some reason, and I have finally realized it was my ability to elaborate more than others, the CG chose me to escort all the VIPs that visited the 9th Division.

One day he called me in to announce there were four Air Force colonels waiting to be shown the results of their

bombing mission the day before. It was called an "Arc Lite", a code word for a massive B-52 strike that dropped hundreds of 500 pound bombs on a single target. Practically nothing survived an Arc Lite; humans, animals, trees--nothing. The explosive power was enormous and earth shaking.

The general told me to take him helicopter and to show the Air Force officers what they had accomplished for us with their bomb strike.

I gathered up four flack vests and four helmets and walked out of the headquarters to greet the four colonels.

"Oh, we don't need those things," one said, poo pooing the idea of wearing protective gear.

"After what we did yesterday, there won't be any living thing out there to harm us. Save your gear for someone who needs it."

I threw the four sets in the chopper and we took off.

As we circled the scene, below were hundreds of bomb craters, like someone had spread Swiss cheese on the ground below it was so full of holes. Trees were shredded to the stump, vegetation was missing. Just row after row of fresh dirt piled up around deep holes in the ground.

As we touched down, the Air Force officers jumped out and ran to the nearest bomb crater and leaped in. Like kids playing in a sand pile, they laughed and tossed dirt clods at each other.

Suddenly, shots rang out. Then a machine gun opened up. The VC were firing at the helicopter and the men in the depression.

Panic spread quickly. The four crawled out of the hole on hands and knees and moved to the helicopter and pulled themselves in and hugged the floor. Meanwhile, bullets were slapping the ground around the chopper and a couple whizzed through the open door.

"For God's sake, man, get us out of here," shouted one of the Air Force officers as he donned the flack vest on backwards and popped a helmet on his head. "Get us out! NOW!"

When we landed at the headquarters and the CG walked out to greet us, the four hopped out and shook his hand. One of them turned and pointed at me. "He almost got us killed," he said.

Later, the CG told me they were very appreciative of the trip to the combat zone, but were going to remain at 35,000 feet for the rest of the war.

FEMALE ESCORT DUTY

The CG called me and asked that I meet him and the senior WAC in his office. I hurried over to be introduced to a female Brigadier General in charge of the Women's Army Corp. She was over in Vietnam to see the war and wanted to be shown combat. She was very excited.

She also was dressed all wrong. With high heels and seersucker skirt and blouse, she wasn't dressed to go into the field.

"Get her some fatigues and boots while we chat," directed the general.

After I asked what sizes she wore, I called down to the office and told Cruz to fetch some clothes.

"I gotta' get duds for a woman?" Cruz complained.

"Cruz, just do it, okay?"

Begrudgingly, Cruz went to supply and brought back the right sized uniform and boots for the lady general. I took them into the CG's office, was thanked and went back out to round up the general's helicopter while the female general changed clothes. It wasn't long until she appeared, all combat ready, complete with a web belt and a .45 caliber pistol on her hip.

"If the girls could see me now," she laughed as we got aboard the helicopter.

I told the chopper pilot to take us down the river to Dong Tam, one of our forward base camps where I was sure she might enjoy touring the area.

On the way, she got on the mike and told me what she really wanted to do. "I want to see combat. I want to see gunfire and VC and all hell breaking loose. I didn't come four thousand miles to have a friggin' tour of the camp sites. I want action."

To satisfy my female charge, I got on the radio and called our division operations center and asked where we might have some enemy contact. They told me and I instructed the pilot to fly to that location.

"We are going to join a battalion in contact with the enemy. They are defending a small base in the reeds. The reeds are terrible, tall, hard to move through them, but the VC use the tall reeds to get close to our men."

As we touched down, the female general hopped out and ran to the sandbagged berm and plopped down next to a soldier firing his M-16. Before I could run to catch up with her, she had grabbed the M-16 from the trooper and was firing out into the reeds like crazy. She ran out of ammo and demanded the soldier give her another clip. He responded and she kept firing.

Enemy rounds were flying all around, some striking the sandbags where she lay. Without hesitation, I ran up to the general, grabbed the M-16 out of her hands, pulled her up on her feet and pulled her back toward the chopper.

"Take your hands off me, soldier!" she shouted.

"You're going back to the base camp, general. I can't afford to have a female general killed while I'm escorting here around the AO."

"Stop jerking me, okay. I will go quietly."

When we arrived back at base camp, the commanding general had already heard of the incident and met us at the helipad.

"Understand you got in a little combat," he smirked.

"Yes, now can I have a CIB?" she responded.

"Not quite. You have to serve in a battalion or lower for six months of combat to be awarded the CIB."

"Damn, that's why I wanted to see action. To wear a CIB so show those grunts in the Pentagon I was in combat."

"I'll give you a Bronze Star if that will make you happy."

"Oh, my, would you?"

"Step into my office, mam. It'll be my pleasure. I have a drawer full of Bronze Stars we give all the time."

"Can you have a photographer cover the awarding?"

The CG looked at me. I nodded and left to grab a photographer from the office.

So, it wasn't long before we received a nice letter from the Pentagon. Enclosed was a photograph of the female general standing next to General Westmoreland, sporting her shiny new Bronze Star awarded for valor in combat.
