

## Coming In Country

### Repo-Depot

We landed at Bien Hoa in the middle of the night and were trucked to a tent city in the transit area called the “repo-depot” where we stowed our gear, flopped onto our cots, and slept until reveille. The repo-depot was a busy place, filled with GIs like us who had just arrived in country and were on their way to the units where they’d serve their tour. And there were also the lucky bastards who had finished their time in Vietnam and were en route back to the “world”. Initially we did little at Bien Hoa except for sleeping, policing the transit area, and performing other make-work tasks. There appeared to be a larger number of GI replacements in the transit area than normal, since an additional chow tent had been erected and there were not enough mess tables. So a call went out for recruits who were carpenters and about seven guys volunteered for the job, talking excitedly about how they would now be serving their tour as carpenters instead of infantrymen. But after building the tables out of two by fours and plywood sheets and completing a few more carpentry jobs, they were back where they started, to be assigned, like many of us, to infantry units.

### The Old Corporal

At the repo-depot there was a lot of down time interspersed with orientation sessions. On the second day there, the “fill” platoon I was temporarily assigned to was scheduled to run an obstacle course. Waiting to begin the exercise, we were allowed to fall out of formation and guys stood around in clusters smoking and shooting the breeze. An older GI wearing corporal’s stripes eased into the circle of men I was talking with and in a short while let us know that he had served in both World War II and Korea. If he was telling the truth, I thought to myself, he had to be over 40 years old. He definitely looked it. Yet he didn’t have the appearance of a career NCO: he was skinny and pale and completely lacked the bearing and bravado of a classic “lifer”. After quickly sizing the corporal up, everyone had the same question in mind - - “What the hell is this old guy doing here?” - - but no one asked. Sensing, maybe, what we were wondering about, the old corporal launched into a vague explanation about leaving the army and then coming back and being cheated out of a promised promotion and then volunteering for combat duty. Some of the guys in the group had already started to back away from him - - he was giving us more personal information than anyone wanted to hear and was weird enough to be instantly considered unlucky. At that point, the platoon sergeant had us fall in and march up to the starting point of the obstacle course.

The day was sunny and blazing hot. For the first segment of the course, we had to low crawl through the scorching sand. I started to crawl and immediately my fatigues were soaked through with sweat, my skin caked with sand, and my eyeglasses opaque with a film of perspiration and sand particles. I managed to finish the low crawl and then, in quick succession, I was climbing a nine-foot wooden wall, running on a giant log across a muddy ditch, crawling through a tunnel of truck tires, clambering up a rope ladder, and finally dodging around barrels, foxholes, and barbed wire to the end of the course. Dizzy with the heat and gasping for breath, I staggered across the finish line.

Like me, most of the other GIs running the course had just come off a thirty-day pre-Vietnam leave and had then spent an inactive week or so in the damp cold of Fort Lewis, Washington waiting for a flight to tropical Vietnam. On leave, most of us had partied instead of exercising and our bodies were unready for strenuous exertion or the searing heat of the tropics. Yet soaked with sweat, coated with sand, and gasping for breath, we had made it through the obstacle course. And with the jolt of this physical challenge, we began to feel in our bones, as though we hadn't truly realized it before, where we were and what a hard time lay ahead of us.

Then, looking back to the course, I noticed the old corporal was still out there, with a sergeant in his face giving him hell. Covered with sand, wheezing and turning even paler, it looked like the old soldier was suffering from heat stroke. He dropped to his knees and seemed to be crying. The sergeant poured a full canteen of water over the corporal's head and yelled for a medic; they carried him off in a stretcher. The incident disturbed me: Why was the old guy here in the first place and why did they treat a veteran of two wars so harshly, seeming to give him no consideration for all his years of service?

That afternoon, as I discussed the incident with the other guys in the platoon, I realized most of us were upset about the old corporal. But as we talked it out, the idea took shape that his failure on the obstacle course was probably for the best, the old guy wasn't going to be able to hack it in Vietnam, so better to find out now and send him home. I couldn't disagree with that thinking, but still felt bad that at his age the man had so few prospects that he had volunteered to serve as a grunt in a combat zone and even screwed that up. As the discussion continued, it became clear we all felt the old corporal personified bad luck and were relieved he had dropped out and wouldn't be standing next to us in whatever unit we were being sent to.

## Fire Power

That evening we were given a presentation that pushed the old corporal out of my consciousness. The major part of it was a film explaining all the weaponry available to

a U.S. infantryman, starting with a demonstration of a platoon's firepower: M-16 rifles switched on automatic, M-40 grenade launchers, M-60 machine guns firing streams of tracers, LAWS (light antitank weapons), claymore mines (a convex length of plastic that could blast innumerable small steel balls out into the kill zone), C-4 explosive, hand grenades, and 81mm mortars. Then, if necessary, a GI could call upon weaponry available at the company level: 50 caliber machine guns firing massive inch-thick slugs, shoulder-fired 90mm recoilless rifles, 4.2" mortars, and vehicle-mounted 105mm recoilless rifles; then the artillery of the battalion: 105mm and 155mm howitzers firing HE Quick rounds exploding on impact, airburst beehive rounds saturating the area below them with a deadly rain of steel pellets, and white phosphorus rounds bursting in spectacular white streamers and burning everyone and everything in their path with chemical fragments that couldn't be doused by water ("Willy Peter make you a believer."). There was also a variety of heavily armored tanks and other tracked vehicles as well as flatbed trucks mounted with quad 50 caliber machine guns and quad 40 millimeter antiaircraft guns. Finally, a call could go out to the 8" artillery pieces of the brigade, which were capable of firing a massive shell with unerring accuracy from so great a distance that the gun's report could not be heard anywhere near the point of impact. Larger still were the 16" guns of the U.S.S. New Jersey and the other vessels of the U.S. Navy stationed off the coast.

And that was only terrestrial weaponry - - the U.S. soldier was also supported by helicopter gunships: Huey's firing M-60 machine guns and Cobras hosing down the enemy with the rapid-fire mini-guns. These could be supplemented by fixed-wing aircraft: "Spooky" gunships, converted DC-3's carrying high-tech Gatling guns capable of shooting 7.62mm rounds at such a tremendous rate of speed that the tracers looked like a red stream from a high-powered fire hose; and F4 Phantom jets, directed by a forward air controllers and able to drop 500-pound bombs or canisters of fiery napalm on the enemy at close range. Finally, at the highest level of response, there was what the film termed "calling in the world" - - massive B-52 bombers capable of delivering eighty-four 500-pound bombs or forty-two 750-pound bombs that would shake the ground up to fifteen miles away, like an earthquake, and completely eviscerate the landscape and any enemy troops unlucky enough to be where they fell. After the film ended in a crescendo of firepower, the flash and thunder of countless explosions and gun reports, the lights came on and in the sudden silence an officer walked to the podium to reinforce the point - - the U.S. infantryman had unsurpassed weaponry at his disposal and that, if we ever got into a jam somewhere out in the boonies, massive firepower was only a radio call away. We had the finest armed forces on earth and we were going to win this war.

The presentation was reassuring and the platoon seemed to relax after the stress created by our running the obstacle course and the weirdness of the old corporal's

breakdown. But that night in my bunk, as I was falling to sleep, the image of the corporal floated into my mind and then quickly transformed into a vision of Viet Cong picking their way through the obstacle course in the dark, sneaking up to attack us. As I suddenly stiffened and emerge from my half dream, it came to me that despite our huge advantage in armament, the Viet Cong were still out there, after all these years, shooting back. The movie and the officer's concluding speech, meant as an affirmation of our invincibility, suddenly seemed like a testament to the enemy's.

## Radar Squad

A day later I learned I had been assigned to Echo Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 508<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. I wasn't surprised that I was going to an infantry outfit since my MOS was 11 Bravo, light weapons infantry, but I was still uncertain about what my exact job was going to be. Having started out for my new unit late in the day, the sun had set by the time the jeep got near Camp Hard Core, the 1/508's headquarters. The dark sky was dramatic canvass of smoking parachute flares and darting gunships trailing red hoses of mini-gun fire.

I checked into Echo Company, turned in my duffle bag, and was issued an M-16 and ammo, web gear, a poncho and poncho liner, a rucksack, a flak jacket, and a steel helmet and liner. I took my gear, went right to my assigned bunk, hit the rack, and was asleep almost immediately. In the morning, a Spec 4 told me that I'd be assigned to the radar squad and that the Platoon Sergeant wanted to see me. I walked over to the tent where Sergeant First Class Rodriguez was waiting. He was of medium height, heavily tanned, wearing well starched jungle fatigues. His most striking features were his deep brown, almost black, eyes - - large and angry - - and a huge black handlebar mustache, waxed and lustrous. He was lean and muscular and had a hard weather-beaten look. His name was Hispanic, but he spoke in a sharp Texas twang:

"O'Shea"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You were supposed to be in my platoon, recon."

"I guess, Sergeant."

"But you've been to college, so the Captain is taking you away from me. You've been to college?"

"Yes, Sergeant".

"So you'll be working radar in the surveillance platoon?"

“I think so, Sergeant.”

“Well I'm damned pissed that I'm not getting a replacement. I'll be watching you.”

With that, he grabbed my mustache between his calloused thumb and forefinger, twisting it so hard that it hurt. With his left hand, he slowly pulled his bowie knife from its sheath.

“I should cut that damn thing right off college boy.”

Thoughts of shoving him back, cursing him, flashed in my mind and just as quickly disappeared. I knew he could take me apart in an instant. He put his knife back, released my mustache and pushed me away. His eyes glowed. For a moment, I thought he would break into a smile, or somehow let me know it was an initiation, a hazing, but his face remain stony. Then, his voice dripping with distain, he growled “Get the hell out of here.”

That afternoon, I was driven over roads that got progressively bumpier to Fire Support Base Rock, about 15 kilometers northeast of Hard Core. The base wasn't much to look at, a few sandbagged bunkers, some strands of concertina wire spread out around a sprawling, stuccoed, tiled-roofed Vietnamese house perched on the side of the canal. Rock had been named after a sergeant who'd been killed shortly after the 82<sup>nd</sup> arrived in its III Corps area of operations. The Army had found the sergeant's Polish name unpronounceable, so it was shortened to Rock. The base was adjacent to a small French fort right next to a bridge over the Rach Tra Canal.

The Rach Tra flowed fast, flat and clear out the Plain Of Reeds. By the time it reached Hoc Mon, the canal, which started out not much larger than a trout stream, grew wider and murkier, although it still ran fast and shallow. Farther east at Rock, the Rach Tra was a roiling, muddy torrent as it passed over the partially sunken skeletons of two prior spans that had stood on the spot. The oldest bridge was of steel girders like the current one. The second was concrete and now lay on its side in the canal, its jagged fragments forming a kind of spillway for the current. When the water level was low, the bridges, destroyed in past wars, lay fully exposed like fossils from another epoch. Eastward from Rock, the Rach Tra was navigable, flowing for about 10 kilometers before it emptied into the Saigon River.

That afternoon, the squad I was taking command of arrived at Rock from the Hoc Mon Bridge, where they had temporarily been manning the radar site near Route 1. In the evening before it grew dark we climbed into two boats and, accompanied by an infantry squad, headed down the Rach Tra to a small island about 5 kilometers from Rock and five kilometers west of the Saigon River. I was to spend the majority of my first five months in Vietnam running radar on the island with the squad I had just met: Mike

Klassen from Hamtramck Michigan, Robert Thomas from San Antonio, and Al Lewis came from Kansas City. Mike was white, Al and Thomas were black.

Bob Thomas was quiet and kept to himself. When he did speak, he was terse and so emphatic that he sounded angry. His home town was San Antonio, but he had no regional accent and didn't sound black. A little over six feet, he was well-built and very strong - - not someone you wanted to cross. Thomas had been in country for over 18 months and had served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> up in II Corps. He had once been a sergeant, but after a lieutenant had given him an order that he didn't like and Thomas told him to shove it up his ass, he had been busted down to private. Despite the demotion, he had decided to extend his tour and had succeeded in working his way back up to Spec 4.

Al Lewis was from Kansas City, but he had been born in the Low Country of South Carolina and his rapid speech was hard to understand. Thomas's skin tone was light; Al's was ebony. Where Thomas was withdrawn and laconic, Al was sociable and ebullient. He had a line of chatter for every occasion and could get into a discussion with just about anyone. He'd talk excitedly with the Vietnamese and seemed to enjoy these conversations even if the Vietnamese didn't appear to understand him. Al had a big heart and would do anything for a buddy.

Mike Klassen was a kid from the Detroit area, quick-witted, but deliberate in his speech. He had been with Al and Thomas up north where they had seen a lot of action together and become close. Mike took it on himself to give me his insights into how the 82<sup>nd</sup> worked, to let me know what to expect from Al and Thomas, and to explain the complexities and practicalities of running the radar. He was unflappable and when bad things happened - - anything from trivial stuff like guys not getting the R&R they wanted to bad shit like GIs getting wasted in an ambush, he remained calm, shrugging off rotten situations with the classic Vietnam response: "Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."

