



Dennis Nilsson

**Vietnam War
U.S. Army**

**25th Infantry Division
65th Combat Engineer Battalion
Alpha Company**

Sergeant (E-5)

Dennis L. Nilsson

**Veterans
History
Project
Transcript**

**Interview conducted
August 30, 2017**

**Niles Public Library
Niles-Maine Library District
Niles, Illinois**



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Veterans History Project Transcript

Veteran: Dennis L. Nilsson Rank: Sergeant (E-5)

Branch of Service: U.S. Army Theater: Vietnam

Unit: 25th Infantry Division, 65th Combat Engineer, Alpha Company

Interview Date: August 30, 2017

Place: Niles-Maine District Library
Board Room

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Interviewer: Neil O'Shea

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Transcriber: Charles Menicocci

This Veterans History Project interview is being conducted on Wednesday, August the 30th in the year 2017 at the Niles Maine District Library, on the 3rd floor in the Boardroom. My name is Neil O'Shea and I'm a member of the reference staff. I'm privileged to be speaking with Mr. Dennis L. Nilsson. Mr. Nilsson was born on June 11th, 1946 in Chicago and now lives in Niles. Mr. Nilsson learned about the Veterans History Project through the Vietnam Veterans Group that meets at the Niles Dunkin Donuts on Tuesday mornings. Mr. McGill arranged for the library's project to be discussed at the meeting, and Mr. Nilsson has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project and here is his story.

May I call you Dennis during the interview? (Neil O'Shea)

Yes, please do. (Mr. Nilsson)

Thank you. Thank you for coming in today and also for completing the biographical information sheet. So, Dennis, do you recall when you entered the service?

It was September of 1967.

And in September of 1967 were you living in Chicago at that time?

Yes, I was, on the Northwest Side.

Oh. Any particular neighborhood?

The Humboldt Park area

Humboldt Park. Can I ask what high school you attended?

I went to St. Philip Basilica High School on Jackson and Kedzie on the West Side of the city.

Oh yes, I interviewed a World War II Vet who lives in Niles, Mr. Kenneth Lee. He also attended St. Philip's back in the early 40s. So what were you doing at the time, were you drafted?

Yes.

And what were you doing at the time you were drafted?

I was in school. It was the summer between classes, but I had to drop out in the spring class because I got sick. So, I dropped out of school and about August 26th I came home one Saturday afternoon (I was driving a truck for Ruby Dry Cleaners in Chicago) and my draft notice was sitting on the table where my parents left my mail for us. I told my parents, "I'm going to go into the Army because this war isn't ending anytime soon and I could stay in college for four years and still get drafted" so I decided to go in.

So what school had you been attending when you had to leave, to take a break from your studies?

St. Procopius College in Lisle, IL.

So as long, at that time then, as long as you were in college you would've been able to be awarded a deferment until you completed?

Yes, it was an S-2 deferment.

S-2. Now that wasn't the time when people got draft numbers was it?

No, that was before.

Before. So, did you pick the Army to go into?

No, they picked it for me.

They picked it for you. Was there a tradition of military service in your family?

No. My oldest brother went into the Coast Guard. My father was born and raised in Ireland, became a citizen here but was never drafted or inducted into World War II.

And then where were you inducted?

In Chicago, it was on Van Buren St. It was the Selective Service Headquarters, and that's where you would go down and report for a physical. And then a few weeks after you passed your physical, you'd get your draft date.

And do you then report to Fort Sheridan or some?

You report to the building on Van Buren, which is still there. From there they took us to Union Station. At Union Station, we were put on trains to St. Louis. Then in St. Louis we were met by buses and they bused us to Fort Leonard Wood.

So that's where you had your basic training then at Fort Leonard Wood?

Yes.

So, had you been away from home for a length of time in your life before this Army service?

Not at all.

So, this is kind of a new experience?

Yes.

What was it like being away from home and drill instructors and living conditions or lifestyle adjustments?

It was a new adventure. It didn't bother me one way or the other. Basic training, the physical agility part of it was relatively easy for me. I played football in high school. So, in the Chicago Catholic League, at that time it was one of the most powerful football leagues in the country. And I felt that the physical agility was not very taxing in the Army.

And you didn't mind the food?

No, the food was ok.

And I imagine you're meeting lots of people from different parts of the country? Everybody was kind of a good guy, no problems?

No problems to speak of, there were incidents once in a while, something would pop up. But it wasn't something that was systemic.

Of course, when you're young, you're kind of naturally optimistic and you know it's all kind of an adventure. It's fun, but the war in Vietnam in this time is getting a little hot, right? I mean there's casualties, were you worried? Or were you aware you were going to Vietnam, not necessarily?

We pretty much knew we were going to Vietnam. Very few, when our orders came in after advanced individual training, very few of us were sent to any other place but Vietnam. A couple of guys went to Germany. Some went to other bases in the United States.

Do they all think they were lucky to have got those assignments?

Oh yeah. Nobody wants to go to a real war. It is scary, but it was an adventure.

So, you wound up in, you complete the six weeks?

Eight weeks of basic.

Eight weeks of basic. And then you're assigned to the 25th Infantry Division?

No, then I went to eight more weeks of advanced individual training, called AIT. And that was to be a combat engineer. And that was, I didn't leave Fort Leonard Wood. That's where they train the engineers. So, I did my basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, followed up by eight more weeks of AIT training. And then from there, went home for two weeks on leave and then went to Vietnam.

Were there any buddies from the old neighborhood that were along, drafted at the same time as you were?

No, by myself.

You were by yourself, yeah. And were you chosen or selected for the advanced individual training? I mean everybody didn't get it, right?

Everybody gets some training after basic training. It's called an MOS, Military Occupational Specialty.

You take a battery test when you first get into the Army, and that's how they kinda select you for your advanced training. So, I, instead of getting infantry training, which probably 90% of the people in my basic training company went to the infantry, I went to the engineers.

That was, and the engineers in the Army, they build things or they...?

You build, there's construction engineers, there's heavy earth moving engineers, there's combat engineers which kind of tells you that they're not just building buildings, they're doing fighting. Combat engineer fills in as infantry if needed. We'll do land clearing, we'll build bridges, we mine sweep, we do explosives. We work right alongside the infantry.

So, when you were at St Procopius were you like a freshman or a sophomore?

I was a sophomore.

A sophomore. And what was your major? What is it going to be in science or math or technology?

History.

History, ok. So, after you successfully complete the combat engineering advanced individual training at Fort Leonard Wood, and you get a time to come home and you said it gave you two weeks?

Yes, two weeks leave.

And then you, and then where do you go? Where do you join the unit?

From there I went to Oakland, California.

Is that by plane?

Right, I flew to Oakland, went into the reception center in Oakland and then they started processing you into, you get a number and you get a flight number and they call your number and you go get on a plane and you go. But you're there for about two days.

The plane from Chicago to Oakland, that left from Midway?

No, O'Hare.

Oh O'Hare. And was it a military transport?

No, it was a common carrier.

Oh. And were you, did you have to be in uniform for that trip?

Yes, because I had to pay for that trip. So, you would go by what was called military standby, and you would get a heavily discounted airfare. They would get you out to Oakland.

And then from Oakland you would fly to Hawaii or?

We went up over the top, instead of going around Hawaii. Going from Los Angeles or California to Hawaii - is going around the world. Instead we went over the top, it's a shorter route. And we went from Travis Army Air Force Base in California; we went from Oakland to Travis, Travis to Anchorage, Anchorage to Yukusko, Japan, Yukusko into Tan Son Nhut Air Base or Saigon Airport.

Quite a few miles.

About 23 hours.

Wow. So, you got to help me here, so you landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Is that near Saigon?

That's Saigon's international airport.

Saigon's international airport.

Or as today they call it, Ho Chi Minh's international airport.

Yes, so were there other men on the plane like yourself who were on a flight from Travis and Japan?

The plane was filled with us. There were no classes of like first class, business class. It was just one, all the seats were the same.

And were those other soldiers, were they people you remembered from basic training who had become friends or companions or no?

No, none of them.

So, then you get off the plane at Tan Son Nhut and what's the weather like? Does it make an impression on you?

It's a little hazy. Not real hazy. You can see the sun. Landed at 5:30 in the afternoon on February the 29th, 1968. And it was raining. There weren't clouds up there, it was a haze. But the air was so wet, so full of moisture, it was actually like little raindrops were falling. And I remember looking up at the sky thinking "where's the clouds?" but the humidity was just, it took your breath away when you stepped off the plane.

And then from Tan Son Nhut then, you get into a bus?

A bus, with screens on the outside of the bus so that nobody could throw a hand grenade at the bus or rocks or anything that would break the windows and injure the occupants of the bus. So, you were put on these buses and transported to, I can't think of the name of the base where they process you in the country.

And you stayed there that night where they processed you?

You stayed there for, again it was a couple days to process you in do the paperwork and that. You had to stand at formation every morning, the afternoon and the evening. And they would just call off the list of names and they would say "Nilsson, Dennis L. 25th Infantry Division" and they did that to me and they said, "Nilsson Dennis L. 25th Infantry Division" there were hundreds of soldiers there so they didn't know but I just yelled out "I'm an engineer" because they were telling me I was going to the infantry. What I didn't know was that the 25th Infantry Division had its own battalion of combat engineers. So, they didn't have to wait for other engineers if they needed them.

And then you, and then where was the base of these combat engineers and the 25th? Was that another place?

Yes, that was in Củ Chi.

That's also in South Vietnam and-

South Vietnam and about oh, I have to guess, it's probably about 20-25 miles from Saigon. The 25th Infantry Division was positioned between Saigon and the Cambodian border in an area called the Parrot's Beak, at the Cambodian border where the border comes south and then it goes east and then back west and it looks like the beak of a parrot. And that put Saigon within 60 km of Cambodia. And that was the shortest route. They would come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Parrot's Beak, to the tip of the Parrot's Beak and then they would start infiltrating into the Vietnam, South Vietnam.

So, then the Army food is still pretty good?

Yes, it was still fine.

So, that base you were assigned, how long were you there for?

I was there from February, the end of February until sometime in June and then we were moved. My company was moved to another major base of the 25th Infantry Division in Tay Ninh.

Tay Ninh.

That was right on the Cambodian Border. Tay Ninh province was, that was the border with Cambodia and Ho Chi Minh trail.

So, what would've been, maybe I don't know, a typical day that you would expect?

There were quiet days. Days you would get a little relaxed. But there were more than a few of those. It got very repetitive, kinda like "Groundhog Day" sometimes. You would get the same assignment every day.

What would that be to patrol or look for...?

There would be mine sweeps in the morning. We'd go out with the infantry in the morning and mine sweep a section of road for the convoys to come through. And then after we were minesweeping the road, we'd pull security on the road so that nobody could sneak up and attack the convoy. And for, I don't know how long, it was a month, two months maybe, I mine swept the same stretch of road every morning.

Did you learn how to operate a minesweeper at Fort Leonard Wood?

Yes. I have to say one thing about the military training. They have training down to a science. The training that I received at Fort Leonard Wood to be a combat engineer prepared me very well to become part of a unit of combat engineers -that I'd fit in. All that I needed was the guidance from somebody that had been there for a while and knew the ropes and what to look for. As far as operating equipment, we were well trained.

Did your schedule, your sleep schedule change a lot, or was there night duty or not necessarily? Or was it daylight operations at this time?

Daylight operations, you know the old saying was we had South Vietnam during the day and the VC or the ARVN's, or not the ARVN's, the Army from the North had the country at night.

Did you have to worry about, the weather was it very, very hot and was it hard to sleep at night or gotta worry about bugs or insects or malaria? You got mosquito screens?

All of it, all of the above. Malaria, the mosquitos at night were ferocious. Sleep was pretty much, we slept at night unless you had guard duty and then you would do two hours on, four hours off, two hours on, four hours off. So, if you got guard duty and you pick the straws or flip the coin, you could get guard duty from 6 in the evening til 8 o'clock and then you'd be off until midnight and then you'd have midnight until 2 o'clock and the other two-hour segments were eight 'til ten and ten 'til midnight.

So, if you pulled guard duty at night, you wouldn't be expected to go out on patrol the next morning, or would you?

Oh yeah.

You would just have to recover. Were there fans, was there electricity for fans there?

There was electricity in my company area, we had a generator and they would run the generator from six in the evening until ten I believe. And that was pretty much it, then they'd shut it down.

Then every day there would, the base would have trucks going in and out?

That's right.

You didn't have planes or helicopters coming in?

Yes.

You had that also?

There were airstrips. These were big bases. They were like small cities, Cù Chi and Tay Ninh. And they had airports, helicopter airports, they had everything. Everything you needed, they had a big PX there. PX is where you would go and buy cigarettes, you could buy cameras, you could buy pretty much everything you wanted.

Did you smoke or drink beer at that time?

I did both.

Oh okay.

I did both. Smoking is something you pick up in the Army, it gives you something to do. I didn't smoke before I went in the Army and I didn't smoke after I got out of the Army. I smoked in the Army and for a little while after I got out of the Army I smoked but then I quit.

Was it easy to stay in touch with your family while you were away, telephone, calls, or postcards or letters or...?

Letters, you'd send a letter off with a question on it and you'd get an answer four weeks later.

Four weeks later.

Yeah. Sometimes the mail would get back in three weeks, but most of the time it was-

And you didn't have to worry about censorship?

Not at all.

Not in this war?

Not at all.

Here's a question here. So, you went from one base Cù Chi, and then you went to-Tay Ninh

Tay Ninh. But you're still between South, between Saigon and the Cambodia area?

Yes.

Was there a lot of daily pressure and stress? Or a sense of danger or...?

Well, there was always a sense of danger. You were always watching, but there were days like I said earlier. There were days and days that would go by and nothing was happening. And then all of the sudden, all heck breaks loose on you. And, you're going out trying to get somebody out of trouble or help out somewhere along the line. But it was quiet. We used to, they'd send movies over and we had projectors. Battalions would have projectors and get movies and I was stationed at the rock crusher in Tay

Ninh. There was a mountain in Tay Ninh that went up 3200 ft. and it was the only mountain that you could see. There were no other mountains around, there was just one mountain, 3200 ft. And the rock crusher, was a rock quarry that we created there because we used rock to reinforce the roads. And we'd watch a movie at the rock quarry, and you could see the cigarettes that the guys or the Viet Cong or the North Vietnam Army soldiers were smoking, sitting up on the mountain watching the movie too.

Wow, wow.

Yeah. There were only two ways up the mountain. You either walked up the mountain which meant you really had to be trained in climbing a mountain, and the other way up was a helicopter. When I went back to Vietnam in November of 2015, you can now take a tram up the mountain. So, 50 years later, they're thinking about tourism.

Did you go up that same mountain in the tram?

Yes.

Oh wow. That must have brought back memories.

What it did, as we were driving out to where the mountain was in Tay Ninh. I was talking with my two brothers who I went on this trip back to Vietnam with and they were looking out the one side of the vehicle and I was looking out the other side of the vehicle. And one of my brothers says, "Hey is that your mountain?" And I went and looked at it and I said, "Yeah that's my mountain." I had finally seen something that I really recognized from being in Vietnam; it was that mountain and it gave me the feeling of yeah it was all true, it all really did happen.

Were you ever, sometimes you see it on television here, like Bob Hope or USO shows or entertainers, did you ever have the opportunity to see any of those?

None of the shows. I did see Joey Bishop. I was, we were stopped by a forward fire support base. These were smaller little compounds that we create overnight and we'd bring in artillery company with five cannons. They moved around because the infantry moved around and they had to stay within a certain distance of the infantry should they need support. And inside the fence of the forward fire support base was Joey Bishop talking to some soldiers. And we were just sitting outside the fence looking at Joey Bishop. But he was actually out in the field, he wasn't in a base camp or anything, he was in the forward fire support base.

So, are you entitled to like a few days of leave or R & R in this period? Where do you go?

Yes, you were entitled to an R & R, a seven-day leave and a three day in-country R & R. I never got the three day in-country R & R. I got the seven-day leave in September of 1968. I flew to Japan and met my middle brother in Japan and spent the week with him and some of his friends.

Was he in the service also?

No, he was in the Marines and was stationed in Japan years earlier, but he was just back there on a visit.

So, I noticed that you were a Sergeant. Was that a series of promotions to Private First Class and then maybe Corporal and then Sergeant?

Yes, I went through basic training, and my scores were good enough to get a promotion out of basic training. So, I was a Private E2 when I went into my advanced individual training or AIT. I was a Private E1 in basic training, a Private E2 in advanced individual training. My scores and record in my advanced

individual training got me a promotion to PFC, Private First Class. And then when I went over to Vietnam, shortly after you get there, they gave you another promotion, so I was a Specialist 4. And I was a Specialist 4th Class, I don't recall, four months or so, and then I was promoted to Sergeant with about 13 months in the Army.

That sounds like a good going.

That was good going for me, not for some of the Sergeants I had. Two of my squad leaders got sent home with injuries, I held the squad from October until February when I left Vietnam. And the guy after me supposedly didn't make it either, suffering a mortal wound.

So, those Sergeants in that unit that suffered these combat injuries and these mortal wounds, was that as a result of artillery fire or sniper fire or mines or?

No, the one Sergeant actually had set a charge, an explosive charge and then we were told not to set that charge off and he went back to the charge to try and pull the blasting cap out of the charge and when he did it blew up in his hand and he lost fingers on his hand. So that would send you home, and you were done, you were finished. The other guy hurt his back and they sent him home because he couldn't perform anymore.

So, you must've been a good officer, if that's the right term for a Sergeant. Did you see a lot of other good officers in Vietnam that you served under or...?

Yes, again my company commander was a very good leader. His name was Captain Frederick Charles and I remember that because one day he said to me "You know; I have two first names." And I managed to find him about three years ago and gave him a phone call and reintroduced myself to him and we've seen one another twice since then at battalion reunions.

Do you recall any particular, particularly humorous or unusual or just odd events that stick in your mind?

Yeah, the funny stuff, or maybe sometimes not so funny, is the stuff that sticks with you. To come up with the bad stuff I got to work hard at it, and I think that's a little different than a lot of people experience. They remember the bad stuff better than they remember the funny stuff. But for some reason I just remember the funny stuff that happened, it wasn't funny. It wouldn't be funny in a noncombat situation, somebody would say "Well what are you, crazy?" But I was driving a truck one night down the road and it was a five-ton dump truck and they had brackets on the side of truck that held the gas tanks on the truck, and I hooked the concertina or barbed wire for an ARVN compound, and it started setting off all their trip flares and their anti-personnel mines because I was pulling their wires. The guy behind me had to flash his lights to get me to stop because we were driving with what is called cat eyes, they're just tiny little lights on the corners of the trucks and I, so the joke was that was the day I overran over an ARVN compound, which is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. We were on their side helping, I damn near destroyed their compound.

And the people in the compound must've gotten excited when they heard-

Oh yeah, and then they were yelling because they could see what was happening and I couldn't see it because I had no idea I was dragging that wire.

That would've been a night mission or something when you were driving?

Yeah.

So, you're watching a movie and there's some of the North Vietnamese Army or Viet Cong watching the movie too. Did you think that the 25th was somewhat successful in stopping the infiltration?

Very successful.

Very Successful.

When Tet broke out, I didn't get there until the very end of Tet. Tet started early in February of '68. I arrived there as I said earlier on February 29th, 1968 which is leap year day. And I remember thinking, combat pay was \$65 a month and if you spent any time at all in a combat zone during a month you received combat pay. We landed at 5:30 in the afternoon and I remember thinking "Wow, I just made \$10 an hour" 6 and a half hours, it was \$65. And I remember thinking "\$10 an hour", and at that time \$10 an hour was big money. But I remember thinking "\$10 an hour."

So, passing time, did people play cards in the Army or anything like that?

Yeah, they played cards, if there's beer around, they'd drink beer.

Were they American brands of beer?

Yes.

And then you were able to keep up with the sports scores at home and things like that, the Chicago Bears or the Cubs or the White Sox or whatever?

For me it wasn't that important to keep up. You got *Stars and Strips* which was a military newspaper. Talked about some things at home that might be important, but it was mostly military focused, on the military and Vietnam and what was going on in Vietnam.

So, you were overseas at the time of the presidential election then in November of 1968?

Yes.

So, were you able to vote obviously over, there right?

Yes. You got an absentee ballot and voted.

So, so you're in this combat engineer battalion and then your unit is in combat?

Right. We didn't do a lot of missions at the company size or the battalion size. Actually, never a battalion size operation because what they do with the combat engineers is that they split you up into squads and then like my squad would go with Alpha Company, the 2nd and 27th Wolfhounds. And then two guys would go with A Company, 2 guys would go with B Company, 2 guys would go with C Company and they would be demolition teams. A demo man and assistant demo man.

Did you always go with the same regular company or regular squad?

Yeah, yes.

Oh, you didn't-

No, you didn't switch around. I had a squad. When I made Sergeant, I was a squad leader and I had, oh the squads weren't at full strength. I had maybe eight soldiers in my squad that I was responsible for.

Is a squad usually 12?

It's larger, it could be as large as 12 and I think it could be even larger than 12.

So, you received four campaign stars. Do you recall which campaigns those were awarded for?

No, I sent off to get my medals and they sent back those four campaign stars. I have tried to figure it out. I have a book that lists all the campaigns, but it's hard to figure out because there was Tet, Counter Tet, Counter-Counter Tet. I mean it was, there were a lot of defenses, campaigns that started around the time of Tet.

It seems like you were, were you surprised by anything during your service? It sounds like you were pretty well adjusted, you had an idea of what was coming, and you had resources of person and training that allowed you to deal with it. And most of the people that you were with seemed to be pretty well adjusted.

Yeah, yeah, we didn't have problems. We had good leadership, well trained, equipment was a little tired, you know like the bulldozer and the front loaders and the trucks. I think the trucks were all from the Korean vintage.

Well then, so you made Sergeant, did you ever think of making a career of the Army?

No

No?

No, they offered me Staff Sergeant when I was getting ready to get out and they offered me Staff Sergeant and they also offered me, if I took the Staff Sergeant, to become an officer. And I didn't want that.

Why?

I didn't want to go back to Vietnam. I figured, you tried it once, you played with the different outcomes and I just didn't want...Military was not for me.

So then, so your released from your service September the 26,th 1969, the two years. So, the last couple of months did you find yourself, all of two months to go or so many days to go? Were you doing that at all?

I started that the first day.

Yeah, yeah. So, when your term of service is up then, you're at the second base Tay...?

Tay Ninh.

Tay Ninh. And then from Tay Ninh, was that the day you before you fly out of Saigon? Tan Son Nhut?

A few days. You process out of the company. Then I flew down to Cù Chi, processed out of the battalion and then you process out of the division.

Was that also at Cù Chi?

That was also at Cù Chi too. The battalion and the division were headquarters out of Cù Chi.

And then you flew out of Saigon?

Then from Cù Chi, you got down to Saigon; you went to Tan Son Nhut. You processed in, you got a number, you got a flight number, and when that plane came in to pick you up you got on it and left.

And that was a military plane back to Japan then?

Nope, it was a private flight, TWA, I think it was or Capital Airlines. Back then there was a Capital Airlines.

And that flew to?

First place it flew to was Okinawa. I had one of the last boarding passes for that plane. People going home on emergency leave. They'd get them out of the country however fast they could, whether it was a military flight or...so they flew some people going home on emergency leave out of Vietnam and they went to Okinawa. And then they would get priority on the next plane going to the states. The next plane was the plane I was on. They started with the person with the last boarding pass, worked their way up into the group and I got bumped off my flight in Okinawa. I had a cousin who was stationed in Okinawa. I found him and spent two days with him and then got on a commercial flight to Travis Air Force Base, back to Oakland California to process back into the country and then flew from there to see my brother in California and then home.

What was your, I was just thinking there, during the time in Vietnam before you left, were there any politicians or generals who were visiting the bases to see how things were going?

No.

So, what was your first day like back in Chicago?

Back in Chicago, I had already been home for several days because I was staying with my brother in California. My mother came up with the idea that I was injured and that's why I wasn't coming home.

Oh mom

So, I had to leave my brother and we were hanging out together having a good time. Flew home and was greeted by my mom and my dad and my other brother, my fiancé at the time. I was greeted by them and that's then they could come right to the gate and meet you at the gate.

Yeah wow, and you were wearing the uniform?

Yeah, right. Still in uniform.

And then was the family still living in the Humboldt Park area?

Yes.

And this lady that was the fiancé at the time, you had known her before you went into the Army?

Yeah, we were in fourth grade.

Oh, wow!

I sat behind her.

Oh dear, yeah. So, then you come, when you come back then, did you find you had difficulties adjusting to civilian life?

No, no difficulties at all.

Did you go back to the job with the driving or you went back to school?

No, they wanted me to come back and drive but I wanted to become a police officer so I took the test for the Evanston IL police department and got the job in a couple of, less than a month and a half. Today a candidate could wait years before they get on the job. I took the test on November 7th, 1969 and I was sworn in on December the 15th 1969, so it was about five weeks.

Wow, so did you get advice to do that? Because that was pretty smart, I mean you didn't even go, you didn't even think of going into the Chicago police?

They had a process where you'd fill out a little postcard and then a year later they'd send you a letter saying come in for the test. The City of Evanston said, I went in there and asked the woman in the personnel department, and I said, "What do you have to do to become a police officer?" and she said, "Do you have four hours now to take the test?" and I said yes. And she went back into the office and came out and said, "What do you want to be? A police officer or a fireman?" I said "I want to be a police officer" Knowing what I know today, I would've been a fireman.

Yes, but you must've blessed the moment you thought of going up Evanston to find out. I mean if you go to Arlington or Oak Park or you know any other suburbs?

Evanston, got hired, the process was going so fast. There was no reason to go and try another department.

So, do you take the elevated up there or drove?

No, I had a car.

You drove up there. Boy that was really good thinking.

It was fast.

So, you didn't, I'm not sure about what I'm really asking, but there was no chance...is there an equivalent of a GI Bill then that would've been available to soldiers in your situation?

Yes, but it was for school and I wanted to be a police officer, I didn't have to pay for going to the academy.

Did you always want to be a police officer?

No. I decided I wanted to be a police officer when I was in Fort Stuart, GA after I came back from Vietnam. I spent six months still in the Army at Fort Stuart, GA and there were posters on the walls in the company office that said if you became a police, wanted to become a police officer and you were registered in a certified police academy anytime during the last six months of your tour of duty you'd get, they'd give you the rest of the tour off to become a police officer. They were very, if you wanted to be a police officer, they didn't even give you the re-up talk, where they would call you in right before you'd leave and they'd make all of these promises to you. And I saw that Anchorage, AK was making 10,000 dollars a year, police officers back in 1969. I thought, "I'm going to become a police officer." So, it was originally it was a scheme to get out of the Army earlier, but that didn't happen. I took the test for Cook County while I was in the Army, I took the test for Elk Grove while I was in the Army, and didn't get hired by either one of them and by that time I was close to getting out so I just waited until I got out and then I went to Evanston.

So, when you leave Vietnam though, if I may kind of double back here a bit, what were the dates you flew out of Vietnam then? Do you recall?

It was the middle of February it wasn't quite, I wasn't there quite a year.

I see, and then you come back. So, at that time, soldiers had to spend a year in Vietnam in combat?

You spent a year in Vietnam then you could come home, you don't know how long you'd be home and then they would turn around and send you right back. But you spent a year, the tour of duty was generally a year. But you could be back there in less than six months for another year. Because at the time I was in Vietnam they had built up to 550,000, it was a little over half a million troops because in '68 and '69 they kept building and building. Then they started pulling troops out and I believe it was Nixon that started pulling the troops out. And I voted for him because he was talking about ending the war.

Yes, he had a secret plan to end the war.

Yup.

So, then they, when they sent you back then, you still had time left on your commitments so then they sent you to Georgia?

Yes.

And was that also part of the 25th?

No, no I was part of Headquarters Company in Georgia. I was in an organization called Range Control and basically what Range Control did, and it had nothing to do with being an engineer, we controlled the live-fire of tanks because they had all these tank ranges down in Fort Stuart, GA. We controlled the live fire practice that the infantry and the mechanized infantry had to do to in the National Guard they had to do for their required training. But we were the authority on those ranges, we would run the ranges.

And it's when you were down there you hit on the idea of police service as a good avenue?

Because I had from the end of February to the end of September to go, so March, April, May, June, July, August, September...I had seven months to do. If you came back from Vietnam with under six months you could get an early out, but I came back with seven months. I could've extended for another 40 days, 45 days, and came home and be done with the Army, but again what I said was I felt that I was lucky; I was blessed that I got out of there without being injured and I just thought don't tempt fate.

So then when you're down there in Fort Stuart in Georgia, you're already planning the career as a police officer?

Yes.

And you already know some of these procedures and applications. So, did you stay in contact with any of your wartime buddies after the service.

One.

One.

And we're still good friends to this day. He lives in Pennsylvania, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I live here in Chicago area. And every summer for probably half a dozen years after we both got home, one of us would drive with our wives from, I'd go from Chicago to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the next year he would come from Lancaster to Chicago. And then one of us being the geniuses that we are, or were, realized that if we went half way, which was Cleveland, we could see one another more often every year. So, we would drive 300 miles, 350, each of us would drive and we would meet in Hudson, OH.

And this was a man you met in Vietnam?

Yes, in Vietnam.

And you're still maintaining that conversation to this day. Did you join a formal veteran's organization when you came back?

No, not when I came back. I didn't join a formal veteran's organization until two years ago. Pretty much forgot all about Vietnam. Didn't talk about it.

So, did you, the decision to visit Vietnam though, how did that come about? Was it obvious?

No, it was not. As I said earlier I have two brothers, in 1986 when our father passed away, at his wake we made a pact that we would go somewhere once a year on a vacation just the three of us -no wives, no girlfriends, no pets, no goldfish. We'd just go, the three of us, on a trip and my one brother, the middle brother, called me one evening and said "What do you think about going to Vietnam this year for our trip? I got a real good deal on a package." Tour package. And I said to my brother quote unquote "I didn't lose anything there, I didn't leave anything there, I don't know anybody there, I'm not going back" and he kept saying "But I got a real good deal" and I keep saying I'm not going back. He says, "Well think about it", in my mind think about it mean a couple weeks would go by, the good package deal for the trip would expire and it would be over with. No, the next morning about 8 o'clock my phone rings and my brother says to me "What do you think?" I said, "I haven't thought about it, I've been sleeping" he says "Well, I bought tickets" so off I went to Vietnam for a second time. And for me it was good. It was very rewarding, seeing the mountain just kind of reinforced that I did the right thing. And then, you know, what we experienced when we came home that still burns in the hearts of a lot of veterans, I felt comfortable there, but also the Starbucks on every other corner helps make you feel comfortable. And the Burger King and the McDonalds and the Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Pizza Hut. But there were Starbucks and I was like "Ok, this is an alright place, I can get Starbucks."

Do you like coffee?

Yeah, I do.

Did you drink coffee before you went in the Army?

No, no. The coffee went with the cigarettes.

So, the lady that was your fiancé, did you marry that lady?

Yes, I'm still sitting behind her.

So, she saw you in your uniform then?

Oh yes.

Yeah, yeah. And then, your career, you made a career then in the Evanston Police Department?

Yes, I did.

And you got, received more promotions there.

Yes, I did. Held every rank in the department from Patrolman, Police Officer to, I was the in the last nine months of my career I was the interim Chief of Police.

And you have to think that your military training and experience has helped you in that career?

Yes, in fact when I finally did find my company commander, Captain Frederick Charles, and I reintroduced myself to him because I knew he wouldn't remember one Sergeant out of many in his company. And I reintroduced myself to him, I thanked him because his leadership, what he demonstrated as leadership back when I was a soldier under his command, I took some of that, his skills, and incorporated them into my leadership style - which I think proved to be successful because I was successful in my career.

How would you describe his leadership style?

Hands-on, tolerate honest mistakes, correct mistakes without discipline unless it was something that was very calculated. Good, solid leader, good, solid, you knew what his expectations were and you knew what he was standing for.

Mr. Nilsson, I feel like we're coming to the end of the interview and there are always two questions that the Library of Congress likes to suggest. So, in closing and you may already have worked your way into this, how do you think your military service and experiences in the military affected your life?

Like I just said. I think we covered that. Police is a paramilitary organization; it is a uniformed organization. You carry weapons, you have responsibilities, you have great authority even if you're just a soldier, you're in a war, you can take a life and not be punished for it. In law enforcement, it's the only position in this country that you can legally take a life, where you could be judge, jury and executioner in a moment's notice because you make those street decisions in minutes, in seconds and it takes courts months to decide whether the decision you made in seconds was the right decision. So, the military did prepare me for law enforcement because of the paramilitary part of law enforcement.

Did your, has your military experience influenced your thinking about war or about the military in general?

I still respect the military. As I said earlier, the training they give, how they move, they can move thousands of people in a day. And in the course of moving them, they feed them, they take care of them. The military's got it down to a science. And I still, I believe in our military, I believe they're well-led, I believe they're well-trained, even the more professionally trained military, the Delta Forces, the Green Berets, the Navy Seals. They're highly trained, they're skilled at what they do, but they're also responsible for their actions and what they do. And that's what I like about the military. And again, I tried to have, I was a big proponent of something called community policing when I was in the police department. I believe that you work smarter, not harder. I believe that the community and the police are, well, Sir Robert Peel back in the 1700s or the 1800s.

1800s, Robert Peel, yes.

Sir Robert Peel, he had nine principles of policing and if you read those nine principles, they're as good today as the day he wrote them. They're still, the principles all work out today even with all of our technology. The principles are there and they still work today. And one of the principles is somewhere around the 3rd or the 4th in the middle of the principles, there's one that the police are the people and the people are the police. The police are only working and getting paid for what everybody's supposed to do, and the military, I'm sure Sir Robert Peel had a military background. So, the military prepares you for a lot.

So, if you steer by Robert Peel and Captain Frederick Charles, you're, if I remember the name right...

You should have a good police department. You should have people that understand what the community is, you're part of the community and the community is part of you. If everybody worked and believed in Sir Robert Peel's nine principles, we wouldn't be having the problems we have. And when I say everybody, I mean everybody. The citizens have their responsibility; the police have their responsibility. And if everybody followed their own responsibilities we'd be in a better place.

Thank you. Dennis is there anything else you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

There's probably lots of things I'd like to add, but I think we've covered them and I could give more examples of some of the things we talked about, but like the food, for instance.

Yes what about the food?

The food was ok.

You didn't lose weight in the Army?

Oh, we all lost weight in Vietnam, we were all like little kids. The interesting thing about the C-Rations, I'm in Vietnam and C-Rations came in a sleeve over a box. And then you'd open the box and in the box, there were little boxes with individual meals, and they had a date stamped on them. And I look at one of the boxes of C-Rations that I'm about ready to open and the date that's stamped on 'em is January 1946. The C-Rations were six months older than I was. And I ate them. So, the C-Rations weren't so great, but I got an example of C-Rations. This may be a little interesting. Did you ever see these C-Rations, how they came in a box?

I've seen - We had an exhibit here, I'm trying to remember. When you returned to Vietnam, did you sense any animosity from the people towards Americans?

None at all.

None at all.

They were, most of the people in Vietnam are younger than the war is old. So, the war, it's like here you ask kids about Vietnam they don't know about it. So, there was no animosity, in fact I felt very welcomed in Vietnam and treated with respect. Saigon has sky rises; I mean 60-story buildings. They have shopping centers that could have stores in them that we don't even have in our shopping centers because they're such high-end stores. It was a, I was very impressed and when I saw Starbucks on every corner...so C-Rations. This is a miniature scale box of C-Rations. The sleeve comes off, there's a date stamped on the side of every C-Ration box and when you open it up there's twelve meals in there. Twelve individual meals.

Each one of those is a meal?

Well it, the C-Ration box itself is this big.

Ah

This is just a small example of what they looked like, and on each box, it was stamped what the meal was.

So, this a miniature model or?

This is a miniature model.

Ah.

But that's what C-Rations are, and they actually come with a date stamped on them that has a date on it.

Oh yeah on the bottom, on the end of it tells you what food is in there.

Yeah.

Meal combat individual ham and lima beans, beef slices in potatoes and gravy, meatballs with beans and tomato sauce, beef steak, turkey loaf, fried ham.

And here's four other, four other...

Ham and eggs.

Ham, there was ham and eggs.

Spiced beef in sauce, chicken- bone-in, pork steak. Yeah there is some variety I suppose, yeah.

But this is a miniature mock-up and I mean this is how it really looked. When I first saw this, I was shocked.

Where did you see that?

At our Tuesday morning coffee meeting, one of the guys brought it in.

Wow.

And gave it to me. But that's what C-Rations look like. So, one form, when I talked about food, if you were in a mess hall or out in the field they would fly in meals. They would fly in one hot meal a day in the field for you. So, for breakfast you might have C-Rations, lunch you might have C-Rations, if you ate one of those, but in the evening, they generally brought out a hot meal.

Dennis, thank you very much for an enlightening interview.

Well, thank you and it's my pleasure and I'm honored to have the opportunity to do this.

Thank you, sir.

After the interview, Mr. Nilsson shared his painful and maddening encounter with a taxi driver in San Francisco who called him a "Babykiller." Mr. Nilsson threw his fare at the driver through the cab window. Mr. Nilsson met his future wife, Miss Nezda, in Sister Gertrude's fourth grade class at Maternity Blessed Virgin Mary Parish Grammar School at 1537 N. Lawndale. In class alphabetical order she was sitting in front of him. Mr. Nilsson also shared his lasting physical experience of the war as it continues in Parkinson's, caused by exposure to Agent Orange, and tinnitus, caused by artillery fire.

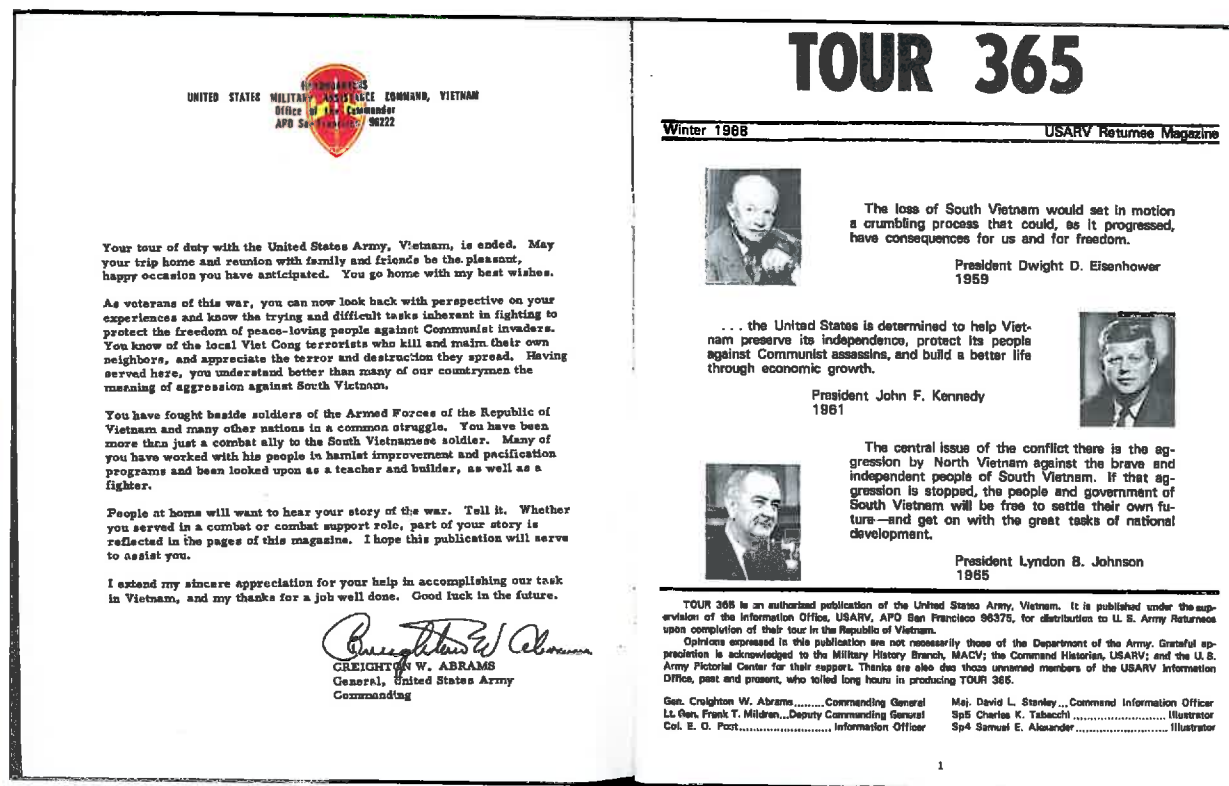
During a later discussion of the final draft of this interview on June 20, 2018, Mr. Nilsson mentioned that he was reading a service memoir, *19: I Never Had a Birthday in Vietnam* by Charles Restivo who served in the same unit as Mr. Nilsson during the time he was serving with the 65th Combat Engineer Battalion.

Mr. Nilsson also commented that the Library of Congress VHP procedures requiring his signature before acceptance and publishing of his interview reminded him of the time he was invited by U. S Representative Jan Schakowsky to testify downtown before a congressional hearing on local preparedness in responding to terrorist attacks mounted via anthrax. As "Evanston Police Commander" it was reported

that he wished he had better direction from the federal government (*Chicago Sun-Times*, July 3, 2002, p. 16). Subsequently, Mr. Nilsson was later sent a copy of his official remarks for his signature.

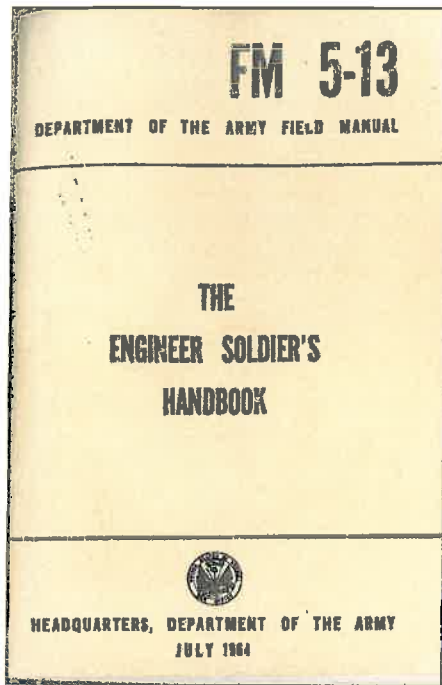
Reader's Note: The following pages of scanned photographs and booklets, provided by Mr. Nilsson, serve to illustrate his remarks.

Tour 365 was a booklet issued to returning soldiers by the U.S. Army. A later edition can be read as a pdf at http://web.ccsu.edu/vhp/Tollefsen_Kjell/Tollefsen-Tour_365.pdf

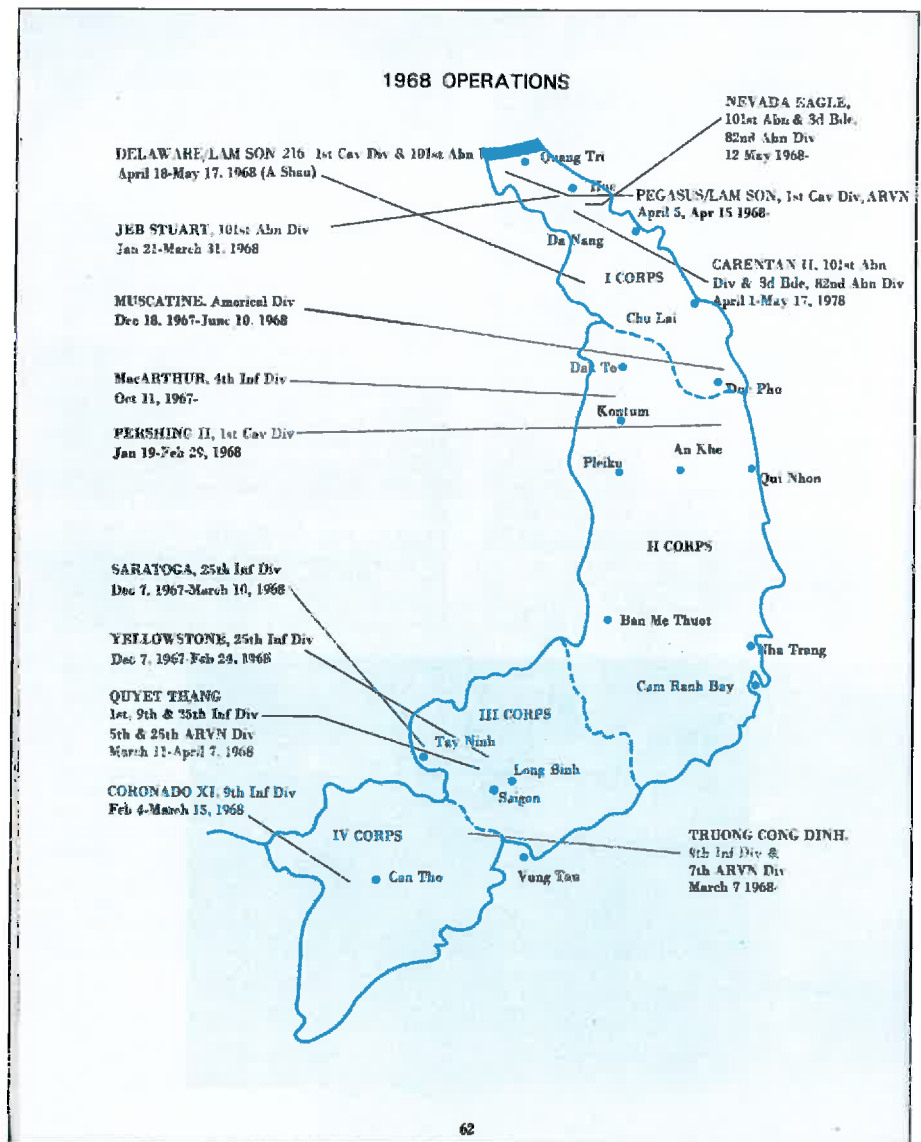


Mr. Nilsson, combat engineer,
on patrol





Bridge under construction

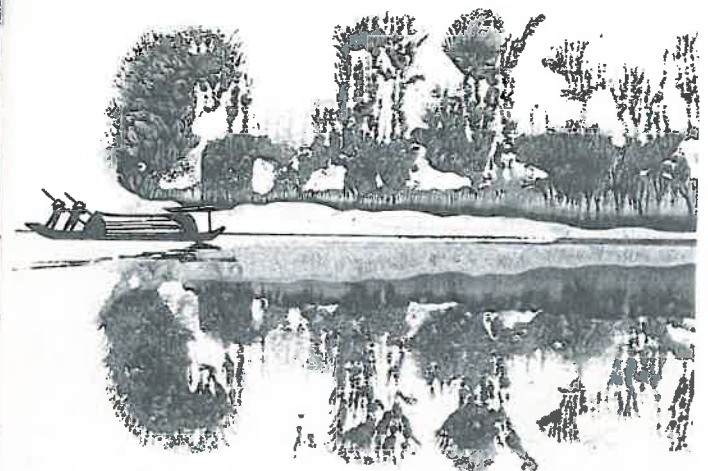
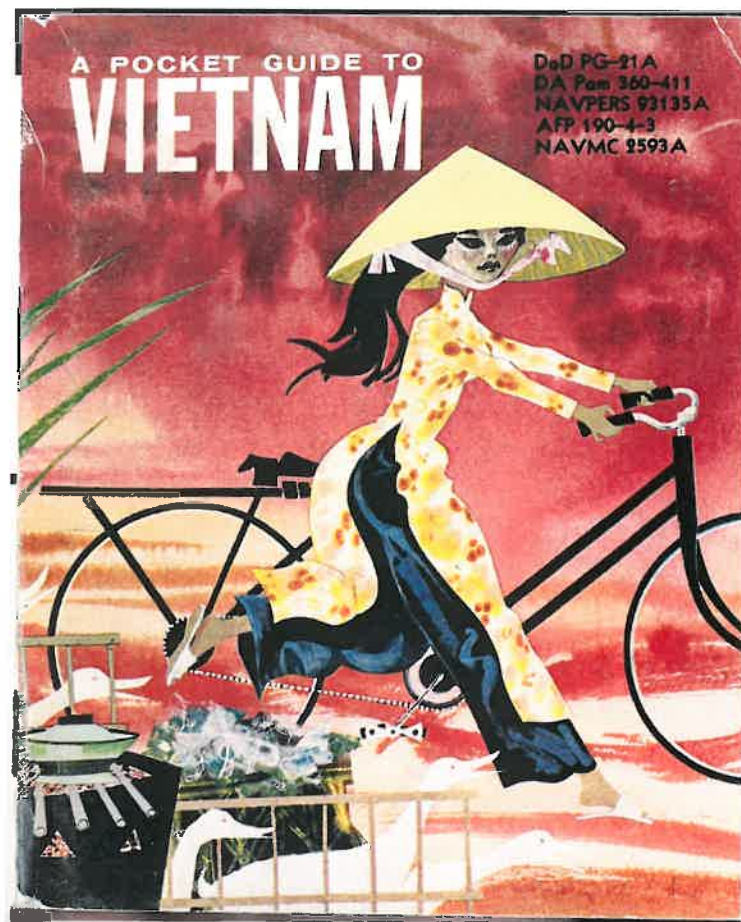


Map from "Tour 365"



Army 5-ton dump truck, stuck in mud, rainy season

Covers and two pages from introductory booklet provided to US troops



ARMED FORCES INFORMATION AND EDUCATION • DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

VIETNAM



HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT VIETNAM?

Why is it often difficult to tell a Viet Cong from a loyal South Vietnamese?

Page

8

Is *nuoc nam* something to wear, something to eat, or the name of an organization?

41

Why would a South Vietnamese be puzzled or offended if you used the American gesture for beckoning him to come to you?

29

Who is Ho Chi Minh?

13

NINE RULES

For Personnel of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

The Vietnamese have paid a heavy price in suffering for their long fight against the Communists. We military men are in Vietnam now because their government has asked us to help its soldiers and people in winning their struggle. The Viet Cong will attempt to turn the Vietnamese people against you. You can defeat them at every turn by the strength, understanding, and generosity you display with the people. Here are the nine simple rules:

"Remember we are special guests here; we make no demands and seek no special treatment.

"Join with the people! Understand their life, use phrases from their language, and honor their customs and laws.

"Treat women with politeness and respect.

"Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people.

"Always give the Vietnamese the right of way.

"Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill.

"Don't attract attention by loud, rude, or unusual behavior.

"Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege.

"Above all else you are members of the U.S. military forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions. Reflect honor upon yourself and the United States of America."

Then

The "Black Virgin" Mountain, about 3,000 ft.
near Tay Ninh, 1968



• MAR • 68



Now

Mr. Nilsson's recent return to Vietnam
with his brothers, November 2015



Tourist tram up mountain, 2015

Black Virgin Mountain, 2015