

A GETTYSBURG CONNECTION IN VIETNAM

We've all read numerous testimonials expressing how valuable the Gettysburg experience was and, for some, how enduring the bonds formed by fraternity life still exist. I couldn't agree more as I recall some uncanny events linking the Gettysburg battlefield with the Vietnam war zone.

My story began when, as an Army ROTC cadet in my Junior year (1966), we received our Army branch assignments. The Infantry became my destination—strangely, I was the only cadet in my class assigned to the “Queen of Battle”. My graduation year, 1967, was during the peak of the Vietnam escalation and Infantry Lieutenants had a very high “turnover” rate; thus, when I became aware that going to graduate school provided a two year deferment I jumped at this option! After graduate school, I was assigned to the Military Assistance Command and spent a year learning the language and the role of an Infantry Advisor. I arrived in Saigon in April, 1970 at a time when the U.S. was turning many military responsibilities over to the Vietnamese. I then reported to the Bien Hoa headquarters, 20 miles from Saigon, to be trained as an Advisor to a South Vietnamese Ranger unit. At that time, I was unaware that this unit was preparing for the incursion into Cambodia on April 30 to destroy the Communist forces operating there. One day I had a few hours open so I walked around the Headquarters building where I ran into a Major who was from Harrisburg and went to Franklin and Marshall. When I mentioned having graduated from Gettysburg the light-hearted banter began. He also happened to be in charge of Personnel at the HQ—lo and behold he offered me a slot as an Intelligence Officer to replace one whose tour was soon over. Invoke G-Burg Connection #1 which, gratefully, replaced my mission to Cambodia.

Later that summer I was in Saigon for an assignment and I had to go to the Army Personnel office. I walked in the door and was greeted by none other than Bob Coffey, my Lambda Chi “Little Brother,” class of ‘69! We exchanged our mutual miseries and promised to connect soon.

Meanwhile, one of my best Lambda Chi buddies was Vern Paulson, '68, and we kept in touch often after we both graduated. Vern was also an Army officer and he wrote to me that he would be arriving in Nam sometime in October. This was time to invoke G-Burg Connection #2 so I took a ride to Saigon, met up with Brother Coffey and discussed the impending arrival of Brother Paulson. Coffey was able to pull some strings and soon Vern was assigned to the CuChi area, 45 miles from Saigon, instead of the original assignment to the northern, much “hotter” region. For the rest of my tour, Vern and I managed to get together a few times sharing updates about friends and family. I've enclosed a picture of us enjoying an “in-country” R&R.

Now, almost 50 years later, Vern, with his extraordinary wife, Nancy (Class of '69) and my wife and I are dear friends, still connecting and reminiscing. Of course, these Vietnam escapades always make for entertaining conversation.

Whether these events illustrate nothing more than serendipity or, perhaps, a higher significance, I cherish the good fortune I experienced because of them. Gettysburg College as a significant influence in a Vietnam tour—who knew?

Barry McDowell, Class of 1967

