

I wasn't drafted; not exactly.

I was born in July, 1940, a year and a half before the United States got into World War II. I don't remember much about that war except that my father was away, I drew pictures of airplanes dropping bombs, some had stars and some had swastikas, and I had an elaborate game with a map of a Pacific Island and soldiers. When my Uncle George came home he brought a watch band made from plexiglas and aluminum taken from a Japanese fighter plane he had shot down while stationed as a Marine pilot on Peleliu.

I was 10 years old a month after the Korean War began. I remember seeing newsreels of the war on black and white TV. And I was 14 years old when the Army stopped drafting doctors after the end of Korea. Although doctors were subject to the draft, they could apply for deferment through the "Berry Plan," which was instituted in 1954: you could volunteer and go in as a general medical officer after internship; you could get a one year deferment and finish an additional year of residency; or you could be fully deferred to finish specialty training. Everyone had a service obligation, but because enlistees kept the medical corps adequately supplied with General Medical Officers, few if any doctors were being conscripted immediately after the internship year. That changed in the early 960's when the U.S. expanded its involvement in Viet Nam.

I was 17 years and 2 months old when I entered Gettysburg College in September 1957; one year later I was assigned my draft status; 1A! Although nominally in a "pre-med" track, I was totally unsure of my direction and interest when, as a 19 year-old Junior and thinking about what to do after college, I had a conversation with my father. I told him I was unsure. "Well," he said, "You can go to medical school or you can go to the army." I have told that story many times when asked why I chose to go to medical school, and the line invariably gets a laugh. I present it as though he was being facetious, but the reality is that as a 1961 college graduate, without a continued educational deferment I was almost certain to be called up as a foot soldier. Medical school did seem like the better choice at the time, so off I went.

Fast forward to fall 1964... the intervening 3 years had seen the beginning of social upheaval in the US: The Civil Rights movement: the assassination of John Kennedy: and the progressive expansion of U.S involvement in South-east Asia with the reaction/resistance to it. These would characterize the decade. Being busy with medical school, however, I was pretty much oblivious to what was going on. I remember where I was when Kennedy was shot, and I remember some arguments with acquaintances about the validity of our presence in Viet Nam and the justification for the war as it was being reported in the papers. But, I was totally accepting of the rationale offered by the government. Then, as a rising senior in medical school making applications for internship and residency, I was surprised to discover that the major academic programs would not consider my application unless I could assure them that I would not be conscripted after one year. The reason was that in 1964, for the first time since Korea, a substantial number of interns who had not assured deferment through the Berry Plan, enlistment in other branches of service, or other arrangements, were called up by the Army at the end of their internship. Expansion of the military presence in Viet Nam had created a need

for medical personnel, in particular General Medical Officers for front-line units. This left medical centers short-staffed, so they protected themselves by obligating their applicants.

I was counselled against applying to the NIH for a research associates position by the only faculty member with whom I had done any research, "You are not really planning a research career and we don't want to waste the recommendation;" and after fruitless phone calls and attempts to volunteer for extended service if assigned to the military academic medical center at Walter Reed Hospital, I finally applied to the Berry Plan. I was given a one-year extended deferment that would allow me to complete a second residency year. Some of my classmates, more savvy or getting better advice, enlisted in the Public Health Service or the Air Force. I was Army bound, but this was enough to get my internship and residency applications considered at the kind of academic institutions in which I wanted to train. I matched to Internal Medicine at UC San Francisco... not my first choice, but a plum none-the-less.

I remember not being worried about the possibility of being sent to Viet Nam. Rumor had it that assignment to Saigon offered an interesting experience in an exotic location, and as a doctor you could even take your wife! I was disappointed about not being able to stay in my residency; I loved it and I knew I wanted to continue training and ultimately stay in an academic setting. But, I remember distinctly thinking that the country was at war, and that service was my obligation as an adult in our society. In addition, I wasn't against the war, and I had been too busy in medical school to get involved in the activist movements of the early 1960's. Somehow I don't recall being concerned about not being able to secure a safer or "cushier" assignment. Clearly I was clueless. From the time I started clinical rotations as a third year student I did Medicine, every day and many nights and loved every minute...so who had time for any other reality.

My orders to report for basic training came in the spring of 1967, I don't remember exactly when. I remember that I had no idea of what else they said, since they were in acronymic army-speak. So I called and spoke with a very accommodating sergeant at the recruiting office. "What do the orders say?" he asked. The only thing I could read in plain English was, "Report to Oakland with fatigues and boots." "Well sir," he said, "That means that after basic you will be going to Guam or Viet Nam...[short pause]...but we haven't sent anyone to Guam in three years!"

I reported for basic training at Fort Sam Huston in San Antonio at the beginning of September, 1967. UC San Francisco Med Center had kept me on as a senior year resident for 3 months, and I worked in the program to which I would ultimately return after completing my active duty time. My wife, Lynn, was 4 months pregnant with our second child, and Jay, our first-born, was about 18 months old when we got to Texas. It was a reasonably pleasant 6-week stint. I remember learning how to salute, to march (in dry weather and in the rain), and a little bit about being a soldier. The crawl under barbed wire with tracers overhead, and the orienteering exercise when we missed our assigned rendezvous by something like a half-mile are standout memories.

In early October Lynn and Jay went home to Jersey City to live with her parents, and I reported to the Oakland Replacement Depot as ordered. I don't remember much about Oakland except that when they checked my files during the medical review, they discovered that I had only had the first round of required vaccinations. So that morning I got shots for typhoid and typhus in my right arm and plague and yellow fever in my left; by about 7 PM I had a fever of about 105°. The next day I got to take a very long nap on an Air America 707.

It was hot and steamy when we got to Ton Son Nhut.



I got my first lesson in Viet Nam etiquette in the repo-depot Officer's Club when we went in for a cold beer. Never enter the Officer's Club covered... cost me a round for everyone in the house... welcome to 'Nam.

Soon thereafter, I was on a line with the other medical corps replacements, we were stepping forward one-at-a-time to speak with the very senior NCO who was managing the roster listing where doctors were needed. He was a seasoned, gray-haired sergeant, with a lot of service stripes on his sleeve. The guys ahead of me asked to go to the convalescent facilities at Vung Tau or Cam Rahn Bay, or to the 3rd General Hospital in Saigon. Most got sent to this battalion or that LZ aid station. I asked to go to the First Cavalry Division! The sergeant paused and gave me a strange look. "I'm sorry sir," he responded, "We have no openings in line units." My second lesson in Viet Nam etiquette... if you volunteer for a dangerous assignment you must be crazy or naïve, or your motives are suspect. Either way you make the Army nervous about what you might do or if you might get yourself killed, so you are not safe to send. "Catch 22...." It's real!

Why the First Cavalry Division? My colleague Bill, with whom I had been paired through more than half of our internship year and who I took care of during his bout of hepatitis, also had a one-year deferment and had been called up 3 months before me, right at the end of the residency year in June. He had been assigned as a battalion medical officer in the First Cavalry Division. So what would be more natural than ask to be assigned where we could be a team again? Made sense to me...

Then I said, "OK, but I want to go as far north as possible." My intention was to be somewhere where Bill and I could possibly get together, since I knew from correspondence with him, and from the news, that the First Cavalry Division was in the north, in I Corps area. Now the sergeant was sure that I was a potential berserker. Flipping through the assignment book he stopped at Second Surgical Hospital. "They need an Internist. I see you have had two years of training in Internal Medicine. That makes you an Internist, you can go there; it's in Chu

Lai, way north.” The last part of that was true; the first part was only true in the “Berry Plan,” not according to the Internal Medicine specialty board! But, he had done what he needed to do to avoid having me either go on a killing spree or get myself killed. Doctors had done both in the recent past; the recently dead one being a graduate of my medical school one year ahead of me. Assigning me to Second Surg. put me in unit which, at the time, was located on a cliff overlooking the South China Sea on the outer edge of a giant Marine base. Although located in the middle of the Viet Cong stronghold area labeled “Pinkville,” 2nd Surgical Hospital was as protected from active shooting as was possible in Viet Nam at the time. In addition, I Corps was the area of administrative responsibility of the Marines, so if I did go nuts or get killed, it would not be the immediate responsibility of the Army!

Once assigned, I had to get to Chu Lai, but first I had to check in in Quin Nhon, where the 55th Medical Brigade (parent of the 2nd Surg) had its headquarters. This was about half-way up the coast between Ton Son Nhut and Danang. I actually have no recollection of how I got there, although I must have flown. I do remember lunch in the officer’s mess and a brief meeting with the brigade commander. “Don’t mess with the nurses!” is all I remember him saying to me as I left his office.

The next leg was on to Chu Lai. To get there I was told to go down to the airstrip and hitch a ride... no actual orders or travel authorization. I found a Dustoff about to return to Chu Lai. I don’t know why they were in Quin Nhon, but the Huey was loaded with a pallet of beer and cases of toilet paper for the return trip. My seat was on top of the beer. Seatbelt....are you kidding??? My first ride in a helicopter; doors open of course!! Arrived early in the evening reported in and discovered that one of the docs at the hospital was a medical school classmate.

“2nd Surg. Second to None”



The unit had a history going back to Korea and was one of the first close support army medical units activated to Viet Nam, arriving in '66. It was first located at An Khe, near Quin Nhon, and moved north to Chu Lai in the summer of '67, as the Army began to expand the deployment of units in I Corps. Although nominally a mobile unit, it was stationary for the full year I was there.

Memory tells me that there were 18 board certified surgeons covering all of the major disciplines, several anesthesiologists, 3 internists, and a couple of general medical officers making up the medical staff. There were both male and female nurses, and a both lab and x-ray techs. We provided acute medical backup for units of the First Cavalry, 101st Airborne Division, 173rd Airborne Brigade, Americal (23rd) Division, and assorted Ranger and LRP units all of which were operating in I Corps alongside of the Marines. From October '67 through April '68, through Tet and the Battle of Khe Sahn, we were very busy. I remember hearing that we took about 35% of all the army casualties generated during that period of time.



Chu Lai was my home for the next almost 365 days, but most of it is all a blur. I remember bits and snatches. We worked 24 on and 24 off, but when the Dustoff turbines started to whine and the rotors started to turn, we all headed to the receiving station for the incoming. My jobs included resuscitation, pre- and post-op management and sick call. The only time I was in the OR was when we delivered some Vietnamese babies. "Pappy" (an older GP) did the obstetrics and I played pediatrician. I distinctly remember caring for two Vietnamese young women. One had an infected shrapnel or stake wound to her foot. I asked her why she waited so long to

come for help..."You could die," I said. Her response: "No sweat die; you only die once." I think she was maybe 18!

Some other things I remember:



Receiving area on a quiet day.

- The young lieutenant with the jagged hunk of shell casing that had pierced his helmet almost midline in front and had then entered his skull and smashed the frontal lobes of his brain.

We put him behind the curtains and I held his hand as he died.

- The soldier, with no palpable pulse or audible heart beat lying on the stretcher by the door. I hit him in the chest to start resuscitation and he jumped up yelling... not as gone as I had thought.
- The regular morning Dustoff run, about 8:30AM, when they brought in the crew of the APC that hit the mine on the road to Tam Ky...day after day after day!
- Post op management in the recovery Quonset. We were seeing a strange pulmonary complication which made it almost impossible to effectively ventilate some of the patients, particularly those who had suffered major concussive trauma with lots of muscle and bone injury. We started to hear that the docs in Danang were seeing the same thing in Marines ...they were calling it "Danang Lung." We know it now as "Adult Respiratory Distress Syndrome."
- The NVA soldier with severe Malaria. I had never seen "Blackwater Fever" before.
- African-American GI's with acute hemolytic anemia. G-6-PD deficiency emerged when they were required to take their malaria prophylaxis. It was a problem that occurred in base camp...they rarely took the pills when in the field.
- The VC forced out of a spider hole when the "Tunnel Rat" threw in a purple smoke grenade. Everything was purple, including his urine, and what he continuously coughed up. I don't think he made it.
- The daily quota of fevers: no rash, thick smear positive...Malaria... start Dapsone; rash, thick smear negative, Scrub Typhus (Tsutsugamushi fever)... start Tetracycline. Fever resolves ...return to unit; fever persists after 24 hours, evacuate to Cam Ranh Bay.

- The Vietnamese family with fever, swollen glands and buboes. Plague! The CO said we should not bring them into the hospital. I got a group of volunteers together, we put them in the back of an empty ward unit behind some curtains and got tetracycline from the pharmacy... it worked ...at least I think so because I didn't get a reprimand!
- The anesthesiologist we got the CO to transfer out ... he was a war protester, and he took it out on the wounded "grunts" by not providing adequate anesthesia. We proposed that he be court-martialed for dereliction. I don't know what happened to him, but I remember his name.
- My assignment as "Morgue Officer." At some point, I was assigned to go to the morgue and sign death certificates. I can't remember how many times I walked down the short road to near the Dustoff helipad where the morgue unit was located, or over what period of time, or with what frequency. It seems as though it was once...maybe it was...but I don't really think so. I do have the specific memory of body bags being zipped open and then closed. I can still feel the chill of the refrigerator and smell the soft, sweet odor as a bag was opened. I remember what I saw...but I signed it out as sudden death due to gunshot wound... I signed them all out that way. I was told to do it because, they said, "It would be better for the family."

It wasn't all work.

We went off base to the 'ville and procured culinary supplements.



Peter Gurney, Nurse

There was the Officer's Club. I learned to drink Martini's; and, 25 cent beer. One night we covered the 4-top table and then went up 13 stories with the empties. Four of us...a lot of beer!!!



We had other amenities:



"Officers Steam Job and Blow Bath"
Hot showers ...heater ran on jet fuel.....



3-holer and 2-holer...rooms with a view

New Year's Party:



Larry Motor Ed Biernie "Pappy"

Visiting entertainers



Raquel Welch



And a visit from Nguyen Cao Ki then Vice-President of South Viet Nam later Prime Minister



I got to go to Saigon:



Tu Do Street

An unhappy vendor



I also got to go to Hong Kong and to Hawaii on R&R.

I remember doing a civil action visit to a small 'ville about 5 kilometers south of Chi Lai. It was after monsoon time, early spring. The place was called My Lai, and there was a report of rabid dogs in the area. It was a known VC area, but the day was very quiet. Sometime later it got very busy in that 'ville!!!



In March 1968, they brought the 27th Surgical Hospital to Chu Lai. Things really slowed down at 2nd Surg once they arrived. Then in September 1968, the 312 Evacuation Hospital was moved in. It was a reserve unit from Chapel Hill, North Carolina...the suckers were residents and attendings from Duke and UNC who had volunteered for the reserve as a way of getting out of Viet Nam... this was the only full reserve unit to be mobilized... we didn't feel sorry for them!!!

About two weeks later 2nd Surg was mobilized and moved to Lai Khe in III corps. They left me behind because I was short. So I packed my gear, went to the air strip and signed up for a flight. A monsoon storm was coming in and not a lot was flying. A C130 loaded with Marine tanks came in and a short list was called for the jump seats that line the side walls of the plane...my name was not on the list. So, I grabbed my bag and walked up to the plane... by this time I was wearing Major's gold leaves and the private calling the roster only said, "Yes Sir," as got onto the plane... If the plane had gone down I would have been MIA.



When I got to the repo depot, I looked up the duty officer, who was the brother-in-law of the 2nd Surg XO. He set me up with a bunk and a meal, and told me he would try to get me an early flight...I was about 2 days early on DEROS. A few hours later he came running in and told me to grab my gear and get moving...there was a flight about to leave and a seat was empty. As happy as I was to go...I traded about \$100 in scrip for a couple of greenbacks... I knew that somebody had missed getting out... I only hoped he wasn't dead...

Viet Nam etiquette...being short could be deadly. Guys died waiting for flights when airstrips got rocketed. ...and you never counted the days!!!

Sixteen hours to Anchorage... I remember seeing the Philippines go by under the plane...landed in a snowstorm wearing Jungle gear ... about 8 more to Seattle/Tacoma.. no time for phone calls and no cash anyway. Got a lift to the civilian airport and a flight to Chicago, then to Newark... 2 days in the same fatigues and boots... no applause or "thank you for your service." Changed and shaved in the men's room at Newark airport...still no time for a phone call. Got a cab and headed to Jersey City, a full day early. When I arrived I did not have money for the cab. I rang the bell and my mother in law came to the door... a bit of shock to see me a day early, and I had to push her to get some cash so I could pay the cab. I came in and Jay (now 21/2) was in the kitchen with Lynn and her father. He looked at me and said, "Are you my Daddy?" Later we hung the welcome home banners.



I wasn't drafted, not exactly; the army and I were not friends; and I haven't forgotten what I can't remember.

