

Personal Recollections of
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Gettysburg College Class of '67

I grew up in nearby York County in Delta, a small town on the north side of and touching the Mason-Dixon Line. Kennard-Dale High School in Fawn Grove was 10 miles away and very rural, with about 600 kids in six grades. Our sports teams were never very good - anyone who wanted to play could be on the teams, because we never had enough kids for team competitions - yet I fancied myself as a very good basketball player (All-County for three years) and a decent baseball player. Our athletic director, Sterling Ecker, was a graduate of Gettysburg and he took an interest in me. He encouraged me to apply to Gettysburg - truth is that 5 of the top 10 grads of my high school class were accepted at Gettysburg, all because of Mr. Ecker.

I am not sure when I learned that my father had served in the Pacific in WW II - he never talked about it. I had been born while my dad was stationed in Long Beach, California, where my mom was a Rosie Riveter in an airplane factory. Donald and Hope returned to Delta to build their dream home (\$9300) in 1947 and my father opened a gas station on the main street (there were only two streets in town). My dad had an eighth-grade education and my mom had attended a teacher's college for two years - yet there was no doubt that I would be the first person in the family to get a college degree. They weren't heavy-handed about it, but I knew exactly what the expectation was. Fortunately I got great grades from grade school through high school - good enough for Gettysburg. There was never any talk around our home in Delta about the military or world issues.

Gettysburg College was only 60 miles from Delta, but it could have been a thousand and sixty. I had left home only a few times over those years, mostly to church-related summer camps. I wasn't lost, but I had to learn quickly. I truly think that pledging Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity two weeks after arriving on campus was a huge plus in my transition from high school and home to real college life. There were now 65 guys whom I could go to if needed, including 20 fellow pledges who would grow up together and support each other (along with some good food, served family style, with a housemother who helped keep us straighter than we might have been otherwise).

All freshmen had to take certain courses (Contemporary Civilization of the Western World, Religion, a language, etc), so much of our first semester was taken up by required courses. I don't remember all the options I had, but I do remember that my last course decision came down to Physical Education or one of the ROTCs (Army or Air Force). I had no interest in ROTC, but I also knew that I didn't want to get into some of the things they were doing in Phys Ed (volleyball, soccer, badminton, whatever) - I had hoped to play basketball for the freshman team and didn't need any other sports-like things. So - flip of the coin - I enrolled in Army ROTC, where I did OK for two years, getting easy A's (including basic military classes, showing up for drills every Tuesday afternoon in uniform, cleaning my rifle, etc). I had satisfied

that requirement for graduation. That decision to take Army ROTC eventually turned out to be a critical one.

During late summer sophomore year, an event changed things dramatically. I received a visit at home by an officer from the Army ROTC cadre. For the first time, the Army was offering full two-year scholarships (tuition, room and board, plus a monthly stipend of \$100) to selected students who had successfully completed Basic ROTC. WOW! I knew my parents had scraped hard to pay for Gettysburg. Both had worked many years at Aberdeen Proving Ground. I knew they had just enough to see me through graduation. The tradeoff for receiving all that money for two years was four years of active service; and this was the summer of 1965 as things were starting to ramp up in Vietnam. The decision was tough from an emotional standpoint, and easy from a financial standpoint. I knew that I would declare psychology as my major, but had no idea what I intended to do with it. I accepted the scholarship. Gettysburg ROTC was allocated two scholarships, and Kenny Henyan (great friend from Lambda Chi) accepted the other one.

The next two years I had little choice but to give ROTC my all - I had to justify the confidence in me and show others that I deserved the scholarship. After my junior year, I completed the required ROTC Summer Camp, conducted at Fort Indiantown Gap near Lebanon, Pennsylvania, despite 100-degree temperatures and a serious molar issue. I finished third in my company of 50 cadets. For my senior year, I was selected as the Brigade Commander, the highest cadet position - I remember standing on the high steps of Eddie Plank Gym giving commands to the rest of the cadet corps on Tuesday afternoons. We conducted several training exercises on the battlefield (our Little Round Top area mock engagements at night were memorable). On June 4, 1967, in a ceremony held in Christ Chapel, our class received our commissions as Second Lieutenants. I was designated a Distinguished Military Graduate and given a regular commission, essentially equal to the graduates of West Point. The experience at Gettysburg helped launch me to a very solid career.

I graduated from the Armor Officer Basic Course, and Airborne and Ranger Schools (both great preparation for Vietnam), before becoming a platoon leader in the famed 82nd Airborne Division of the WW II D-Day invasion. Within a few weeks, my platoon was sent to Washington, D.C., to help quell the riots which broke out after the assassination of Martin Luther King. It was the first time I was shot at, also great training for Vietnam. Exactly one year from graduation day, I was at the Replacement Detachment in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, where I had orders to the also-famed 101st Airborne Division of the WW II D-Day invasion. I was a young paratrooper and darned proud of it. But I was soon disappointed. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment was in greater need of new lieutenants than the 101st Division. The 11th, also known as The Blackhorse Regiment, had just completed a couple tough months of fighting after the 1968 Tet Offensive and was depleted of junior officers. Off to Blackhorse base camp I went!

The year (to the day) in Vietnam for me was lived in three parts:

- (1) After a few days of in-country training and acclimation, I was assigned to the Headquarters of the First Squadron of the Regiment, where I tried to soak up all knowledge as quickly as possible. During

those early days I would often travel around the Area of Operations in a helicopter with the Squadron Operations Officer, mostly avoiding enemy fire, but all the while observing how the Ops Officer directed troops on the ground with relation to the enemy - I learned quickly. At night I was the junior officer in the Tactical Operations Center, monitoring all the nighttime activities and briefing the Squadron Commander each morning.

2) Six weeks later, one of the platoons got into a tough firefight and the platoon leader had to be medically evacuated; and I became the First platoon leader of A Troop of the First Squadron of the 11th Cavalry Regiment. I was the new leader of 35-40 troopers in a situation mostly surrounded by the enemy near the Cambodian border. I will never forget the stench of decaying bodies from the pile of dead Viet Cong soldiers just outside our perimeter. I commanded that platoon for nearly 6 months in all kinds of terrain, weather (monsoon season was no fun) and situations. There were several convoy security missions - escorting other units from one place to another on the main roads. There were several missions to conduct bomb damage assessments after B-52 strikes. I can never forget the carnage that takes effect on humans and terrain after those 5000-pound bombs detonated.

We did extensive reconnaissance and surveillance missions in rubber plantations, in rice patties, and almost anywhere. We "busted jungle", our term for slowly forcing our armored vehicles through heavy jungle vegetation, where we could not see more than a few feet in front, and where the red ants would attack more often than we would have liked. There were several skirmishes with the enemy - I was very fortunate in that we were a mounted, armored force and the ground enemy didn't want to really deal with us directly. My platoon had eight vehicles (called ACAVS - Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles) with three machineguns each (1 caliber 50 and 2 M60 7.62mm) - unlike the infantry forces who were armed mostly with rifles, we could literally crush most opposition with our firepower as long as we were not totally surprised in an ambush. There were short periods back in basecamp (south of Xuan Loch at Long Gai) to do necessary maintenance on our vehicles.

There were several nights when we conducted nighttime ambush patrols outside our perimeter, and, since I was the only Ranger-qualified trooper, I usually walked the point leading the file formation - and survived despite some close calls and some nasty punji sticks. While leading three other vehicles from one safe place to another, my vehicle hit a land mine (40-pound estimated) - all of us crewmembers who rode on top of the vehicle were thrown off but were relatively unscathed. My driver had to be evacuated with serious injuries to his legs, but returned to lighter duty a couple of months later. We secured the surrounding area when the combat engineers (using bulldozers that we called "Rome Plows") were clearing brush and trees from along the main roads to make them safer for us and harder for the enemy to use for ambush. I was later awarded the Soldier's Medal, for non-combat valor, when I helped to pull troopers out of a burning ACAV before it exploded.

We encircled a small village to force out hidden Viet Cong soldiers and ended up staying nearby for a month or so - and I remember vividly befriending a young Vietnamese girl with one arm who initially begged for food, but later came around just to chat - I have always longed to know how her life was after we left. There were times when we had security duty at a critical place - like Tan Son Nhut Airfield outside Saigon. Our assigned sector was north of Saigon west to Cu Chi and north to what was known

as "The Fishhook" along the Cambodian border - towns like Lai Khe, Tay Ninh, Dau Tieng, Quan Loi, An Loch, Loch Ninh, Binh Co, Long Binh, and Binh Loch come to mind, many along Highway 13 going north, and a jungle area we called "The Catcher's Mitt" (shaped like a baseball catcher's mitt on the map), in the III Corps sector north and northwest of Saigon.

On the 11th of January 1968, the Troop Executive Officer, 1LT Harold Fritz, was standing in for another platoon leader who had gone on R and R (rest and relaxation leave, a pretty standard break from combat half way or so through the one-year tour). The mission was to have been a standard route security mission, until a battalion of enemy ambushed them. After a long firefight, there were several dozen enemy dead, and two Americans dead - 1LT Fritz's actions that day helped saved many lives, and he was subsequently awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. 1LT Fritz was medically evacuated that day, so the Troop needed a new Executive Officer. I was selected. What I am most proud of from my platoon leader time is that not one of my troopers was killed - several wounded/injured, none killed on my watch.

(3) The Executive Officer was second in command of the Troop (about 160 troopers) supporting the Commander, who was almost always "in the boonies" with the line platoons directing tactical operations. The XO was "in the rear" pushing logistics forward as needed. I spent most of my days during the next five months requisitioning, planning and coordinating for all of the necessities for the front lines: ammunition, fuel, replacement weapons and vehicles, food, water, replacement parts for the downed vehicles, and "whatever they asked for" (maybe even some beer if the situation allowed it). Typically late in the day I would oversee the loading of a resupply helicopter or two with all those needs. The big bonus for being the XO is that I most often slept on a cot under a roof in the base camp instead of under the stars on an armored vehicle wet or dry. The good part of the job was to go to the field at the end of each month and be the "paymaster" for the troops. No one had anywhere to spend those few dollars, but it always felt good to be paid!

The most difficult days were when the troop was in contact with the enemy and there were casualties. I had to set up makeshift morgues and identify the dead and wounded as they arrived and make arrangements for evacuation to the rear. On the 13th of April, 1968 at a hastily setup morgue at Dau Tieng, I had to identify seven dead troopers - the single most devastating day of my year in Vietnam.

I left Vietnam for home exactly one year to the day after having arrived in Vietnam, exactly two years after having been commissioned a Second Lieutenant. I arrived in Vietnam a First Lieutenant, and arrived home a Captain. Along the way, I spent about 7 days on R & R leave in Hawaii, where I met with my future wife (Delta Gamma from G-burg) - we married soon after I returned to the States. I bought the engagement ring in the American PX in Saigon.

Key points along the way - good, Christian, rural upbringing in southern York County, PA., good parents who worked hard so that I could have more opportunities than they had, a High School athletic director and alum of Gettysburg who helped get me there, a fortunate flip of the coin choice as an incoming

freshmen to take Army ROTC, really fortunate timing to be at the right place at the right time to be offered one of the first-ever ROTC scholarships at Gettysburg, some good fortune to be the top graduate of the class and be offered a Regular Commission, and great luck to have served the year in Vietnam without serious injury or wounds. I was truly blessed.

I subsequently served 28 years in the Army. [see bio sketch]

But my service in the Blackhorse Regiment did not end in Vietnam. I later served two more tours in Fulda, Germany (total of 5 years), as the Executive Officer and later the Commanding Officer of the First Squadron (about 1000 troopers). Upon retirement I was asked to chair a team to conduct a reunion of the Border Legion of the Regiment in Germany in 2000. It was such a success that we did it several more times. Those reunions helped to rejuvenate a near-dormant Blackhorse Association which had incorporated in 1970 to give college scholarships to children of fallen troopers. Since 2007, the Association has held annual reunions and given over \$700,000 in scholarships. I was elected President of the Blackhorse Association in 2012 and served until 2016. The Association is thriving with lots of money in hand to continue handing out scholarships for many years to come.

My relationship with Gettysburg College did not end when I graduated. I was assigned as an Assistant Professor of Military Science at Gettysburg between 1975-1978. Those were difficult years for military veterans - often we were asked to not wear our uniforms in public. The post-Vietnam culture was awkward. We taught some of our classes in civilian clothes. Things got a bit better over time and I taught a campus-wide January term course on World War II. We graduated several fine cadets. I personally enjoyed those three years in that we lived near my old fraternity house and I was their Advisor for two years. Our first daughter was born while there. During Alumni and Homecoming weekends, old friends would visit and stay with us.

I have lived most of my post-retirement life near Washington, D.C. That means that I have been to Arlington National Cemetery too many times attending funerals of friends and troopers. It also means that I am able to attend ceremonies downtown every Memorial Day and every Veterans Day. Veterans of the Blackhorse Regiment meet on those days to conduct a brief memorial service and to place a wreath in front of the Vietnam Wall Memorial.

And it all started at Gettysburg College.

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