
Engineer Advisor in South Vietnam

Q: Your next assignment was in Vietnam. How did you get that assignment?

A: Well, that's another story. You can lay it on General Maxwell Taylor. Vietnam was just starting to get into the news, and in the late part of 1961 President John F. Kennedy sent General Taylor to Vietnam on a fact-finding tour. He came back and made a recommendation that we needed to have more advisers there at a lower level with the Vietnamese Army.

As I put it together in reading some other stories, his recommendation included that we should send some engineers over there to do development in the country. Certainly, when I was given my alert, which I suppose was in the fall of '61, it was to be part of forty engineer officers who were going over there supposedly with the mission of harnessing the Mekong River. I don't think anybody was going to harness the Mekong River, but it may have been a good cover story. Certainly that's not what I did when I arrived.

Another point was Vietnam didn't have any kind of stature like it later had, and I knew darn well I didn't want to go over and be an engineer doing design work on something to harness the Mekong River. I knew I needed to get back to troops and command an engineer company. So, I wrote to Engineer Branch and said, "I really want to go to Korea instead"—because I knew I was due a hardship tour and I thought the best thing to do was go to Korea and get that company. So, I wrote and said, "Look, I'm not fighting going to a hardship tour, I know I need to do that, but you don't have companies in Vietnam. Send me to Korea."

So, Engineer Branch wrote back and said, "No, it's essential. You've been selected, one of these key people to fill General Taylor's requirement, really help the nation of Vietnam and the Mekong." So, in March 1962, I went to Vietnam. I arrived in Saigon and was assigned as a battalion-level adviser to the 41st—later redesignated the 201st—ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] Engineer Battalion, with duty station Pleiku. So, we flew into Saigon. I had a room in the Hotel Majestic right near the waterfront. I checked in at the desk at the hotel and shared a room with Ted Bishop, who had come over with me, plus a Marine who was already there. He'd go out and patrol during the day and come back and stick his carbine up against the corner of the hotel room overnight, then go out the next morning to do something else.

In March of '62—this was very early, you have to understand, in the war effort—we would go up to the top of the Brink Hotel to the cocktail lounge, and we would sit there having a gin and tonic and watch the artillery fire on the horizon.

A couple of days later our orders came through. Everyone said, "Stay away from II Corps because the senior adviser to II Corps is Colonel Wilbur 'Coalbin Willy' Wilson." There were four engineers in the group as the orders were announced. One of them was to stay in Saigon, the next one was announced to go to III Corps, the next one was announced to go to I Corps, and I had a feeling that when I got mine it would be to II Corps. We were being dealt with individually. Captain Ted Bishop had come over with me and he stayed down in III

Corps. Mine was II Corps, and so the next day I flew north on a Vietnamese Air Force aircraft to Pleiku to be assigned to “Coalbin Willy” Wilson.

So, it was a very interesting time. That C-47 landed on the airstrip at Pleiku, which later was to become Camp Holloway, where the Americans came in full force a couple of years later. I remember well the landing. First of all, the airplane had all kinds of pigs and chickens and everything else on it. We landed, and there’s a big whirr as we rolled over the pierced steel planking and you could see the ends of the planks flipping up outside the aircraft. We moved down to the end of the runway, the plane did a quick spin around, and we noticed a little wood hut off the corner of the runway.

So, I got off, one other soldier got off, and we started walking toward the hut. There was no sign of any activity and nobody came out to meet the plane. We heard the engines rev and the plane took off behind us. Then there were only the two of us. We walked in the hut, and it was absolutely empty, no people, except for one little stool on which was an Army field telephone.

Now, we were outside the town of Pleiku—Pleiku is a very small town. It must have had a couple of thousand people, oh, 200 or 300 little shacks at a crossroads in the red laterite soil. We couldn’t even see it. We were on top of a plateau. There was nothing within vision above the horizon except that hut we were in.

We had no weapons. We began to wonder what was going on here. So, we rang the telephone, and rang it, and we must have rung that telephone for four or five minutes before an American voice answered at the other end. We identified ourselves as Americans who had just landed at an airfield that we thought was Pleiku and said, “We’re here.” He said, “That’s fine; we’ll pick you up in about 25 minutes” because that’s how long it took to drive from the then MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group], later MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam], compound to pick us up. So, we hopped in his jeep and roared off to our new home, MAAG, Pleiku with the II Corps headquarters.

Q: You’ve referred to this, but did you have any orientation or training before you left the States or when you first arrived?

A: No, absolutely none. They had some kind of a course people went to at Bragg, which gave an orientation to the area. Engineers were among the first to go over. I think when Taylor had come back it was easier to say, “Let’s send forty engineers.” That gave a cover for why we were being alerted. We had no orientations, no language training, and didn’t come by Washington, Belvoir, or anywhere.

Q: From Illinois to the—

A: Flew from Illinois to San Francisco, where we incidentally had a second honeymoon along with Ted Bishop and his wife. Ted had been at the University of Illinois with me, and they were friends. Then the wives flew home and we went to Travis Air Force Base, checked in, got on the plane, and deployed.

When I arrived at Pleiku, there had been an advisory detachment at the II Corps headquarters for some time. I don't know how long that time was, but it'd been staffed at about twelve people. There was a small horseshoe-shaped compound of eighteen rooms, motel-like. It had no security fence on the outside of it. It was a nice little area. Colonel "Coalbin Willy" Wilson occupied two of those rooms as commander.

There were mostly colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors. I was the eighteenth person to arrive. When I left a year later, there were 600 Americans in Pleiku, so that's how early it was in the build-up. When I left, it was still advisory; we didn't have units. We had some aviation detachments but not combat units. We had basically two fixed-wing aircraft, Otters, to service the entire II Corps tactical zone, which was the central highlands. One of them was a command aircraft for Colonel Wilson; the other was used to fly shuttle from one major MAAG installation to another. We had the major cities of Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot and Kon Tum in our sector. That sort of framed the Corps area.

Q: There were how many engineers out of that original eighteen?

A: Well, I don't know how many of the original twelve, but in the eighteen there were three engineers. There were two majors; one of them was promotable. He was the Corps engineer. The other major was acting as the deputy Corps engineer and was the engineer group adviser. The group consisted of three engineer battalions and a light equipment company, maybe a bridge company. I was the first of the battalion advisers to arrive. So, previously, that 2d Engineer Group adviser had been the adviser for everything in the group. At the point of my arrival was the beginning of pushing American advisers down to the battalion level in the Army, and so I was one of the first of those.

Q: Do you remember who the major was or the major P?

A: The major was Sadayo Nagata.

Q: Okay.

A: The major P's name was [John A., Jr.] Hughes.

Q: This is a really interesting period. What did you do on the day-to-day level? What were your activities like, being an adviser at the battalion level? How did it work?

A: Well, I think I need to get into that by getting me into the job because everything we did was freewheeling. I mean, we really created and did what we thought was right without really being told. It was an interesting time. There was not a lot of guidance. There was also a feeling that we Americans were going to make it happen. Without doubt we understood that "Coalbin Willy" Wilson wanted things to happen. He also did not like engineers or signal officers.

When I had my first interview with him, the Corps engineer, Major (P) Hughes, took me in and Wilson said, "Welcome," rather gruffly, and "Glad you're here." We just chatted, a very short, terse meeting. We walked back out and my boss was ecstatic because I was the first

engineer that Colonel Wilson hadn't just thrown out of the office. He thought engineers might finally be making some headway.

There was real pressure on engineers everywhere at that time. We were really there as advisers, but because you were an engineer you were expected to make everything run in the facility compound. So, Major Hughes, the senior Corps engineer, never went out and advised. He was trying to keep the generators running, and when the generator would cut off in the middle of the movie, I mean that poor guy was under the gun.

When they decided to expand the compound, he was supposed to design it and then contract out for it and make it happen. There were no divisions, districts, or command; I mean, there was nothing. So, it befell to the engineer on the spot in every MAAG detachment to do all those things.

So, with the advent of the battalion adviser, his point was, "Best to get out into the field. You're going to be doing the advice out there on the ground. I'll check with you periodically. Come back in and see me; I'll try to keep the compound generators operating."

On the second day after I arrived I went out on an operation. Major Nagata said he'd take me over to meet my battalion counterpart, and it turned out to be one of the more exciting days in my year there. We drove down Route 19 from Pleiku to An Khe through the Mang Yang Pass. You have to know from reading, as we all did back in those days, *Street Without Joy* by Bernard Fall that it was between An Khe and the Mang Yang Pass that the French Mobile Group 100 had been ambushed and decimated by the Viet Minh. So, we were driving that route, and there were still a couple of tank hulks off to the side of the road from Mobile Group 100's demise.

We drove up to the An Khe airfield, and there were several H-21 helicopters, which was the other aviation asset we had in the Corps, one company of H-21s. They were ready to lift off because there was an operation ongoing, and there was to be an infantry sweep north of An Khe. My battalion, the 41st Engineers, had two missions. One was to rehabilitate and expand and improve the old French airfield at An Khe. Second, to build a road north from there to a town called Kannack. I don't recall exactly, but I think it's probably about 40 kilometers north of An Khe.

The infantry sweep was a sweep up into this area, and my battalion sent a survey party along to survey the road that we were going to be building over the next several months. Both of those projects figured heavily into my daily activities over the next year.



Captain Kem was an advisor with the 201st Engineer Battalion of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in 1962.



In May 1962 Company B of the 201st Engineer Battalion was rebuilding the French airfield at An Khe.



In May 1962 Company C of the 201st Engineer Battalion was constructing a road north from An Khe to Kannack.

We took off in the helicopters. Later we came into a hot landing zone. A firefight was just finishing. There were a lot of bodies on the ground, a lot of smoke in the air, and a lot of jabbering in Vietnamese. A bunch of folks hopped out. I was aboard with my Vietnamese battalion commander, Captain Le Viet Tri, that I met just before we took off. He didn't take to flying, had been sick at his stomach the entire flight, and we hadn't communicated. As I found out later, we wouldn't have anyway because he didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Vietnamese. We later got along on my broken French—after my finishing 100 out of 101 at the Military Academy in French.

Then we started flying back, and I thought, "Routine, mission over." Then we started circling in the air and the other helicopter flew down and entered another landing zone. We kept circling and circling, and then our pilot was looking back to us and hollering at me—I mean, this is an American pilot. With all the noise and everything else, and two or three bodies they'd thrown on the floor of the H-21 to take back from the landing zone, we really weren't communicating.

Meanwhile, the other helicopter had lifted off and we flew back to the airfield. Our pilot jumped out of the helicopter and ran to the other helicopter. There began a huge argument between some Vietnamese officers and the Americans. Well, it turned out my pilot had been the commander of the unit, so the other helicopter was his. Piecing it together when it was all over with, there had been a grand misunderstanding. My Vietnamese battalion, that I just met that morning, had sent about seven people aboard the two helicopters, five in the other helicopter and way too many for what was needed. They were basically going up to resupply their survey team and maybe get some papers back and deliver some supplies. The American pilots thought they were delivering the officers to join the survey party in the field.

When they settled down into this landing zone, there was a Vietcong prisoner who was wounded and they wanted to extricate him. When they put him aboard, it overloaded the aircraft and they couldn't take off. As long as the Vietnamese got off that was fine, but these Vietnamese weren't getting out. So, there followed a standoff in that helicopter in which the

pilot came back and pulled out his pistol and said, “Off you go,” after which a Vietnamese picked up his Thompson submachine gun and said, “No, we won’t.”

So, all of this was taking place in the other helicopter on the ground while we’re up circling around. This was a very antagonistic affair, and the aviation people thought we advisers were at fault because we hadn’t properly advised them. Of course, I had started that morning by meeting them outside the helicopter about 10 minutes before take-off. Anyway, this was my baptism to being an adviser.

We then drove back to Pleiku. Next day, I drove back to An Khe, right down that same Route 19. It was obvious I couldn’t go to work that way. I mean, I’m driving this route where Mobile Group 100 had been decimated and there’s jungle close to the roads and it’s not safe. They were sending squads to pick me up at the Mang Yang Pass and secure me on the way back, but it was pretty obvious to me that to do my duty I had to move out with the Vietnamese.

And, again, there was nothing said, there was no plan. It was just obvious to me that that was where I needed to be to accomplish the mission. There were no tents; there really wasn’t field gear. As a matter of fact, as one of the most junior members of the compound the only thing they could arm me with was an M-1 carbine—didn’t even have M-2s. Colonels and majors at headquarters kept those. Nor was there a way of getting food. There weren’t C-rations. They bought food in large cans to use in the mess hall, purchased off the shelf. So, I moved to An Khe and moved in with my battalion commander counterpart in his mud hut with a thatched roof. It was sitting on a hilltop where there’d been an old culvert factory. He had two companies there, B and C Companies, and their perimeter was around this culvert factory. His troops had built him this mud hut with saplings for re-bar and so forth. So, I lived with him for several months.

You asked what my daily activities were. At this time my daily activities really followed his. We got up in the morning and had breakfast. I was bringing my food from Pleiku but I had no refrigeration. So, I’d have to open the can of peas and eat those, say, for breakfast. Then I’d open the can of meat and have that for lunch, and then the can of peaches for dinner that night. I wouldn’t have three balanced meals.

So, the day would start with breakfast and then we’d go out and visit all the projects. One company had the airfield. Lieutenant Can commanded that company, and we’d go over and check construction and follow up earthwork on the airfield. The other company—I don’t remember the commander’s name of that one—was working on the road north, and they were clearing and grubbing, moving north. So, we’d go over and check on that. Then Captain Tri would say, “It’s time for lunch,” and maybe I’d have that can of meat or maybe he’d stop down at An Khe and we’d go into a restaurant down there, four or five tables, and have a small beefsteak and big orange drink with all the beads at the door trying to keep the flies out.



Cantonment of Headquarters and B and C Companies of the 201st Engineer Battalion, Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Captain Kem lived in a mud hut with a thatched roof with Battalion Commander, Captain Tri.

Typically after that it was siesta time for the Vietnamese. I didn't want a siesta so I'd try to read a pocket book or do something, but usually there was nothing to do because they all stopped. So, after a couple of hours of siesta, Captain Tri, the battalion commander, would get up. He really was a pretty nice guy, but perennially he'd have a headache after a midday nap. It's pretty warm there—we're talking 90, 95 degrees with fairly high humidity during the hot season. He'd really take a long time recovering from that nap, and he'd decide probably the best thing to do would be to go down to bathe or take a swim, so we'd go down to the river, the Song Ba, which ran through An Khe, and we'd jump in there with the liver flukes and all and have our afternoon bath. Meanwhile, on down the stream 100, 150 meters would be the women of the town beating their laundry out on the rocks at the side of the stream.

Then in the evening we'd have either a meal in our mud hut or we'd run back down to the little restaurant downtown. We had no lights, so come nightfall we went to bed. Then we would hear the rats running in the thatched roof or running on the false ceiling under the thatched roof throughout the evening.

That was a time where you made your own work. As you started out you found that you couldn't dictate to them. So, you started then figuring out the way that you could recommend and suggest things and then make it their idea so that they would want to accomplish it. You'd try to work a productivity kind of thing, "Well, now, guys, I guess, you know, by the

end of the week we ought to be able to get so far, get this done.” Well, when the week went by and about half of it was done, it wasn’t something like, “Come on, tell me why you didn’t do it.” I might suggest to Tri, “Lieutenant Can really didn’t progress very well this week.” I would get that, “Well, you know, that’s the way it is. He did his best,” or something like that. I’d suggest, “Well, maybe you could tell him go do this, go do that.”

Meanwhile, once or twice a week I’d go back into the MAAG headquarters, and the questions would be, “How much did *you* accomplish this week?” After a few weeks of this, this was really getting tough for me to live with because it just wasn’t ever enough. You can’t be on the Vietnamese’ backs every minute, every day, doing things. You needed some space for the Vietnamese to accomplish something without looking over their shoulder, although they did things best when you were looking over their shoulder. Nevertheless, you needed some back-away time, and I had none because I was always with them. About that time came the big push on reducing the deadline rate.

We had a deadline rate, which must have been on the order of 45 percent of our equipment. I mean, it was terrible. The battalion had just finished a project down near Dalat. It was the Camly Airfield, and a lot of the equipment on the deadline list was down in the city of Nha Trang and some still at Camly—at Nha Trang because that was the maintenance depot, and they’d never been brought forward. I mean, I’m talking about 12 to 14 items of the battalion. So, I started trying to figure out what I could do about reducing the equipment deadline. I began to move, then, around the Corps’ tactical area to find the problem, and I talked to my boss, Major Nagata, to try to attack the problem.

The battalion headquarters company, the battalion’s rear of the 41st Engineer Battalion, was in Ban Me Thuot, and they had their other line company there also. Then the equipment, a lot of it was still strung out in the maintenance chain. So, I started going to Ban Me Thuot, first with Captain Tri and later I’d just go alone, then on to Nha Trang, trying to get stuff out. We probably reduced the deadline rate by getting stuff turned in and off the books down to maybe 15, 16 percent by the time I left.

The other thing I was doing, though, was standing over the battalion maintenance sergeant as he typed up requisitions. That seemed to be the only way—and then we’d almost have to



Captain Kem as an Engineer advisor talking with a local inhabitant near Pleiku in South Vietnam in April 1962.

hand-carry them through the system to make sure the interaction between the Vietnamese system and the American system would deliver a part.

The next major event was rather interesting. We started—"Coalbin Willy" Wilson's concept—a clear and hold operation. We would move into an area, first clear and then put in a security structure and a civil affairs structure to hold it. Like an oil blot, you know, start the blot and then as it moves outward you bring under control more and more of the population. So, he started a clear and hold operation in Phu Yen Province, a coastal province with the province seat being Tuy Hoa. They needed engineers. So, the 41st Engineer Battalion sent its third line company, the one that'd been in Ban Me Thuot, to Tuy Hoa. Then they wanted an engineer adviser almost permanently in Tuy Hoa. As this was my battalion, that was me. So, I flew to Tuy Hoa and joined the advisory team there of eleven to twelve folks, which began and operated this clear and hold operation.

That was a really interesting experience. We moved into Phu Yen, into Tuy Hoa, and lived on the beach, oh, three or four kilometers from the main part of downtown Tuy Hoa. We had a compound there near an old French masonry building. We put a couple of tents outside and tent frames and that was our compound. When we first went there, the Vietcong were in the town at night and the town was dark. With the arrival of the 42d Infantry Regiment to be the operational entity, and then my engineer company from the 41st, the town opened up and the lights came on at night. The Vietcong weren't there and it was friendly again.

Then we moved out from Tuy Hoa to the various other villages. My infantry battalion adviser, compatriots, were taking these sweeps out and going into the various villages with the loudspeakers and interacting with the locals. We were trying to open up the roads and access and fix bridges and do that kind of work with the engineer company. So, it was a very interesting kind of operation. It had some real challenges. How to fix a bridge? I mean, I got out my old engineering handbook from West Point and tried to figure out how many rails out of a railroad you would use to be stringers for a bridge. You look at a cross section of a rail and you don't get much. It's not much of an I-beam—takes an awful lot of them.

Then we could build a bridge for a jeep or maybe a small truck, and so we'd find a lot of bent rails where the tracks had been blown and we'd cut sections. I'd also go down to Nha Trang and scrounge the welding rod so my battalion could use it to cut the rails. You can see the kind of push the American adviser was giving. I mean, I was figuring out what needed to be done—that bridge needs to be fixed; figuring out how many rails we'd need; giving them the design; scrounging the welding rods; and then matching their welder with the steel with the rest to get the job done. This was going on in all branches and MAAG detachments. I mean, everybody was ad-libbing, creating and putting these kinds of things together.

So, now my activities had changed, you see. You started asking about activities. At one point my activities were, on a daily basis, awfully boring day in and day out. Now, my opportunities changed so I would fly from Tuy Hoa back to An Khe, spend a day or day and a half there checking up on the airfield and the road, then I'd fly down to Ban Me Thuot at the battalion's rear, figure out where they were with all their records and maintenance at the headquarters, then I'd fly to Nha Trang, go into the maintenance depot or the supply depot

and try to facilitate the moving of supplies or maintenance, then I'd fly back to Tuy Hoa. I was spending most of the time in Tuy Hoa because it was more operational there.

I would make that round robin at least once a week, maybe twice, always trying to hitch a ride on the Corps' shuttle of the Otter, or maybe with the H-21 helicopters when they would be flying. So, I was always hitching my own ride to make all that happen, even though I did have a jeep and a Montagnard driver that were either at An Khe or Pleiku. He didn't speak English or Vietnamese or French. We spoke with sign language. It was difficult to tell him I had to be back here at eight o'clock Monday in sign language. So, I was expected to work out the schedule, the activities to do them, and to report periodically to the major or colonel—but do it. Without doubt, within the American advisory chain there was a feeling of chain of command and “make it happen.”

Q: That was your responsibility, then, to get things moving.

A: When things didn't happen, then they were highly critical. So, it was a very interesting time. Every night I'd go back into that compound, and it was growing now in size, maybe it was up to 40. One of my roommates back there at that time was Robert Shaplen, who was writing a lot of articles for the *New Yorker*. We kept getting bigger, but for a captain, the headquarters was not the place to be. Once I got back there then maybe the generator failed, and they'd look to me as the engineer present. So, you were really better off out in the field—that was pretty apparent. You had to do your mission in the field. So, I came back to Pleiku less and less.

Q: So, most of your time was with Vietnamese engineers, not very much time with even American advisers, other American advisers.

A: That's true. Well, in Tuy Hoa, of course, I was with other American advisers, so we were in that advisory compound, and when we were there I would participate with the group. Our leader was a major, and so here's a major and maybe another major and five or six captains and four or five sergeants. Most of the time the infantry advisers would have a sergeant in the system. Engineers didn't. We engineers were doing our own creating of the plans and putting together what we were going to do, but it was rudimentary by the standards of command and control and everything else.

For example, at Tuy Hoa our basic way of communicating to the outside was a single side-band radio, and we couldn't contact a whole lot of folks. The Otter aircraft flying the regular shuttle route around from II Corps headquarters would fly over our compound, waggle its wings if it was going to land, and we'd have to drive to the airfield near Chop Chai Mountain to meet it. This was because no one lived at the airstrip. If you wanted that airplane to land when it came over and gave a low buzz, you had to throw out a smoke grenade. Otherwise it would go on if it didn't have anything for you. I mean, we're doing smoke signals for communication about whether you needed it to land or not.

Q: The advisory role with the battalion, the Vietnamese battalion commander, must have, as you've indicated, a lot of tact and skill at interpersonal relations with limited language

abilities on both sides. It must have been a difficult job because you didn't want to take command of the battalion, I presume, you wanted the Vietnamese captain to. But you had some very definite ideas about how he was doing things and some goals in your mind about how to work, so all of that required a lot of initiative and skill from a captain, I would think.

A: Well, without doubt. You described it very well. I came out of the 23d Engineers, which I've described—a can-do, mobile, heavy warfare, think on your feet, on the move, kind of operation. That's what I had been taught. Now I still had the same kind of can-do thing and wanted the battalion to do all of those things—but I had to bring it out of somebody else; it had to be their idea.

Not only that. We were there for seven days a week, and the Vietnamese didn't work the weekend or didn't fight the weekend. I mean, war to them had been going on for a long time. If you never took a day off you were never going to get a day off, so when a war lasts 20 years, I mean, you look at it differently than when you're there for a year and you want to accomplish something. So, I had the sense of wanting to accomplish the mission, but the accomplishment had to be through my cajoling, persuasion, break down the obstacles, and that sort of thing. So, it was a rather sporty course.

Q: How would you rate the Vietnamese officers? How would you rate the enlisted men in terms of training and initiative at this stage of the war?

A: Well, the officers were certainly in the higher class. They were very well educated, seemed to be well motivated, seemed to know basically what they were doing. There was no obvious noncommissioned officer Corps as we know it here. There were noncommissioned officers but they weren't take-charge people, and the soldiers didn't have any particular skills. They were put there and they did the kinds of jobs—they'd been maybe taught to run a dozer, but the rest of them were really laborers.

They spent their day, a lot of it, just in basic housekeeping. Up at the culvert factory, when we woke in the morning, soldiers had to do their own breakfast. There was no mess hall that'd been up for an hour and a half getting it ready so you could go in, eat, head out for physical training, and then hit the job site. The first thing they did was start the fire and then go figure out what they were going to eat for breakfast and then cook it. In the middle of the day they had to knock off the job for lunch, then the siesta. At night they had to knock off early enough to be sure they could eat before darkness fell. So, there weren't many productive days in that garrison kind of atmosphere.

The troops got their rations by getting doled out rice. The commander would be given money to buy chickens and pigs or something and issue that out to the troops, who'd have to carve it up, issue it, and cook it on their own. So, there was an awful lot of motion spent in just living, without being productive on the job. When your upbringing is "can-do," knowing what the 23d Engineer Battalion could do, you get a little frustrated with that.

I should move from there to say that after about eight months, more advisers had arrived, things were maturing, and we had a lot more people over there. There were some

reorganizations. Major Nagata came back to the United States and I replaced him as adviser to the 20th Engineer Group. The 41st now had changed its designation to become the 201st Battalion, and we had a 202d Battalion and a light equipment company.

My motivation was not to get caught up like Nagata had by being the assistant Corps post engineer in the main compound, which by now was up to 400, 450 people. It was getting to be a sizable responsibility, and I didn't want to get captured by the headquarters. I figured I'd better stay out with the troops, so we established a compound near the engineer group headquarters at a place called Suoi Doi. That was at a crossroads that was about one-third of the way from Pleiku toward An Khe.

We operated from Suoi Doi. The group commander was Major Chan, and that was an interesting four months because, as much as I had to cajole before, I now had a completely different kind of person to deal with. I now had a very political counterpart who spoke relatively good English, but it wasn't just a matter of persuading and making it seem his idea. There were these agendas and intrigue because he was tied into the Vietnamese political chain. He was tied close enough that he could follow what the Vietnamese command wanted to do, and it was not always easy to decipher what that was. There were lots of "I agree," and then lots of nonaction.

What became apparent was that maybe some of the nonaction I'd seen down in the battalion earlier had been because his instructions to the battalion commander were, "Don't do that." So, this was a period where we were often arguing, often persuading—very interesting kind of period.

It also marked another episode that had historical ties to what later happened when the country collapsed because, if you remember, the collapse was precipitated when the II Corps commander decided to withdraw his Corps to Nha Trang. They started overland, down toward Cheo Reo, then Cung Son and down to Tuy Hoa. Years later when I read that was happening, my comment was, "They'll never make it." They didn't. They were really carved up by the Vietcong as they made that withdrawal. In the late fall of '62 when I was an engineer group adviser, we were told to open that road, the same road that the Corps was going to try to withdraw on later on.

I made the initial recons. It was not bad as far as Cheo Reo. From Cheo Reo on to Cung Son, though, it was basically a trail, and then we had the Song Ba River, which came south from An Khe and flowed through Phu Ban Province. The Song Ba was quite wide and flooded considerably in the spring and needed a lot of bridging. Beyond the Song Ba River on the way to Cung Son—this is where I said I knew they'd never make it, later on—the old road was no longer even two beaten wheel tracks. It had overgrown down to one sandy path. As we cut the road, we would have to send people in to clear and grub by hand and by dozer as we would try to just scrape away the tremendous growth that happens in the highlands during the rainy season.



In August 1962 the 20th Engineer Group of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam was opening a road from Cheo Reo to Cung Son.

You know, there are two different monsoons, and so you'd have six months of dry season where all the foliage would almost go away it'd be so dry and hot, and then six months where, at least for the middle four months of the six, you'd really have almost a constant mist with a rain squall moving past about every five minutes for a duration of five minutes. So, it was almost constant rain. Then the foliage would just grow up to overhead height, just like that. Now we were cutting a path through the jungle, a plateau kind of jungle, not triple canopy but heavy foliage, to restore this road—really, really heavy work.

It overgrew at least twice more after I left and before that Corps commander decided to withdraw down that road. So, to think that he was going to pull out his Corps headquarters, all of his combatants and all of their families, down that road and make it in quick time—there's no way. When I read about it, it was obvious the Vietcong just chopped them apart, came in close and hit them from the side again and again, and just kept picking away at them all the way down that road until, by the time they got to Tuy Hoa, there were just elements remaining.

We did a lot of ad hoc engineering on that route in our time. On another river, not so wide, we found old French pontons. We sank them, filled them with rock ballast, and built a combination M4T6 and timber trestle bridge over the top to restore the road.

One other thing that occurred at this time was the thing I mentioned about their other agendas. We really needed to get some rock on this road. They had a rock crusher in the 20th Engineer Group. The United States had bought it, the same kind we had in U.S. engineer units, 75 tons per hour. I wanted that rock crusher down at Cheo Reo to produce rock for the road. They were producing rock for the road by hiring a contractor who put about 50 women and children up on the hillside who would chuck the stones down to the base of the hill. Then they'd squat on them with these little ball peen hammers and break them up into the right size. So, we'd get enough rock to do a few hundred meters every now and then. My American can-do approach caused me to figure out how we could do it faster. I wanted to move the rock crusher and the trucks that the United States government had bought and give them to this engineer battalion down there to operate and build that road—get it finished and get out. Mission accomplished.

I was really being stonewalled. So, I tried at the battalion level. I tried at the group level with Major Chan. It was always, "No." We finally came to the conclusion that the Vietnamese goal was not to use that rock crusher and wear it out, but to keep it for that day when Americans might be gone and all they would have left were these things. There also may have been the goal of, "Let's keep the contractor out to deploy the locals to build the road."

We worked that at every extreme. We had the senior Corps adviser, now Colonel Wilson's successor, Colonel Hal McCown, who, interestingly enough in your readings of *The Damned Engineers* and MacDonald's book, was captured at La Gleize during the Battle of the Bulge by Joachim Peiper and held as a hostage and taken with him when Peiper pulled out and abandoned his equipment at La Gleize. Anyway, this Hal McCown was our senior adviser, and Major General [Nguyen] Khanh arrived to be the II Corps commander. We all knew things were going to be better because he spoke wonderful English. Later he briefly became Chief of State, you may recall. Now we really had some folks who spoke wonderful English, and they were interesting, but they all had their own agendas. Trying to figure out just what those were and dice them all together was sporty work for those of us who were advisers. Anyway, I had Colonel McCown working on Khanh to tell my group commander he had to take that rock crusher to Cheo Reo.

Then we turned to Saigon and the senior advisers there on the engineer side of the house to work with the ARVN's Chief of Engineers. We tried every way to get that rock crusher down to Cheo Reo and never did succeed. The senior Corps engineer had changed about halfway through my tour, about the time that I went to the 20th Group. Major Casper Bisping came in to be the senior engineer adviser, a fine gentleman and good officer. He was one of those that I was appealing to for help and he was very helpful in trying to make all these things happen. So, my final delivery to him, as I walked out of the Five Oceans BOQ in Saigon to come home, was a six- or seven-page missive on why Major Chan was not supportive of the war effort and should be relieved. That was the American viewpoint; that wasn't necessarily the Vietnamese viewpoint.

Q: I know there was a variety of attitudes, but how would you characterize the attitude of the Vietnamese officers and the soldiers you encountered? Had they seen it before with the

French and this was simply another group of people they had to deal with, or do you think they felt differently about the Americans, responded differently during this period?

A: No, we weren't just another group they had to deal with, certainly not. First, they were strongly anticommunist and strongly supportive of their government. Of course, I'm talking about the officers now, and they're part of the government. They appreciated the Americans being there. They liked the French, though, too. I mean, there wasn't an anti-French thing. Captain Tri liked the French, and he spoke fluent French, taught by the French. He was strongly nationalistic; Lieutenant Can spoke the same way. I ran into Lieutenant Can on my later tour. I'd say they were Vietnamese—make it South Vietnamese—patriots.

The kind of negative aspects I mentioned were probably due to the cultural differences between the East and the West. They looked at things more for the long haul, "We're going to be doing this day in, day out. Yes, I know that we need to do this; however, I don't necessarily need to do it today."

Second, they had to win in their own environment. They didn't want to lose. They didn't want to fail in their structure. If we recommended something that put them at risk, then they in a rather human nature kind of way would push that aside. They might not tell you, "No," but they wouldn't do it because they knew it was against "policy." They would be at risk for something in their own hierarchy.

I got along famously with Captain Tri and Lieutenant Can. I thought we saw eye-to-eye on the world and doing things. Their understanding of what could be done over a period of time and mine were quite different because I had been places and I had seen what equipment and troops could do. They hadn't been places where they could see that same kind of thing. So, that's why I was there to advise them. "If we give you this amount of equipment, we ought to be able to achieve this result." They didn't have that perspective.

So, as long as I remembered that they had their own chain of command that was giving them orders too, then I could keep things in perspective. I thought with Tri and Can that I was respected for what I brought them. Certainly when Lieutenant Can, years later, came back to me and gave me a plaque, he was disturbed that they had never done such a thing for me when I left the battalion. So, I think we had the kind of professional rapport that you would have with soldiers anywhere.

The group commander, though, was as sinister as you could get. I think he respected me for whatever talent I had and more respected me because I represented the Americans and was the source of the money that came in to his arena and the wherewithal they had. He wanted to use my position to help what he wanted done, and then keep me out of the way of things that he wanted to meet their agenda. The higher levels, Major General Khanh, the Corps commander, I think certainly had his own aspirations for the country. But, yes he was a pretty good Corps commander and got around in all kinds of ways, thinking, providing leadership, and was certainly more dynamic and made decisions where others hadn't.

Now, what the Vietnamese soldier thought? I never could really talk to soldiers. I would see them around working, but with the language problem and everything else, everything I had was filtered by the officers. They'd do their jobs, they'd go into the face of fire, they'd do all kinds of things, but what they were thinking got lost in the translation.

Q: When did you leave Pleiku?

A: March of '63. So, I was there from March '62 to March '63.

Q: How had your perspective on Vietnam and the war changed or developed in that time, from, like most Americans, not knowing much about the country or the effort there, and it was a very small effort at that time. By the time you left in March of '63 it was a much bigger effort. Getting to be, I guess, a more complicated political situation in South Vietnam, though that may not have come down to—

A: It hadn't developed yet. All of the things later—self-immolations and the Buddhist uprisings—were not apparent to me up in Pleiku if they were starting. Those were Saigon phenomena. We didn't yet have all the coups—[Ngo Dinh] Diem was still in power. We didn't even sense negative feelings or know things that the folks who were in the senior advisory positions would. We saw some of our senior advisers out in the field. General [Paul D.] Harkins came up two or three times when I was there, sat down and was briefed by everybody.

Once, when I was in Tuy Hoa, a plane came over and waggled its wings and we went to the other airfield, the big airfield, because it was a Caribou. It was General Harkins and the Chief of Naval Operations. We saw four stars on each shoulder of two people, sixteen stars looking at us when we roared up in three jeeps. The Caribou had got off the runway, nosed over and buried its nose wheel into the sand. We took them back to our compound and started briefing them. General Harkins said, "Go get me an airplane." Well, I described to you earlier how we communicated. You just couldn't go out, radio, and get an airplane. Luckily, after about a half an hour of briefing, our regular shuttle came in. I ran out and I threw about eight smoke grenades to make sure that pilot knew that we needed him to land. We drove out to the little airfield and General Harkins says, "I'm commandeering this aircraft." The pilot said, "Yes, Sir, by all means." The two of them flew off and we said, "Phew." Big relief. We didn't need all those stars around our little compound.

So, then I made some trips down to Saigon here and there. It was very interesting. I got to see friends like Jim Ellis, who had arrived by that time. I mentioned to you before that we had interacted several times. We'd been together in Germany in the 23d Engineers, when he transferred from infantry to engineer, and been together in Illinois at graduate school. He had arrived at the University of Illinois a little later than I had, so I went to Vietnam first. He'd come over that summer when he'd finished his degree and was a battalion adviser down in the Saigon area.

Even my wife came over once during that period. Her mother had died and her father had brought her on a round-the-world trip. I got leave to go to the Philippines, Tokyo, Hong

Kong, and Bangkok with her for about three weeks. She had come in advance, so I'd flown down, and then we spent one or two nights in Saigon before we caught the rest of the party in the Philippines. So, there were other opportunities to get to see things.

I did manage to get around in the II Corps area. Nha Trang was certainly a lovely town with a great bay. I always thought that our hotel corporations would make that a great resort after the war because you could wake up in the morning and there was the beautiful lagoon and the islands off to the side. Of course, I was often at Nha Trang Airport too, flying out. I mentioned I flew the shuttle, but also I would fly the Air Vietnam commercial plane from Nha Trang to Pleiku. Often we'd be sitting on the runway, or in the terminal up on the second floor having an orange drink, and we could watch T-28s strafing Vietcong positions on a hillside down at the end of the runway. The T-28s were probably piloted by Vietnamese with American advisers. There were a lot of interesting things so early in this phase of the war.

We could go on an operations sweep out of Tuy Hoa, going out into the rice paddies southwest of the city, and we could see the columns of smoke rising from village to village announcing that we were approaching. We would get into the thicker jungle and come on a Vietcong training facility, a rather well-developed training facility.

Now, all this was additionally interesting because years later, when I went back to Vietnam, I went back to Phu Yen Province and back to Tuy Hoa. So, when we get to that point there'll be references back to these same kind of things.

It was a very interesting tour of duty. Many things I had to develop on my own initiative. I learned a lot about people and myself. I also just about had to arrange flights myself on my own initiative to get from one place to another to make things happen.

I remember our dismay at the Air Force at that time because as C-123s would come in to Pleiku, although we badly needed to hitch rides someplace, we couldn't fly on a C-123 unless they had parachutes. They invariably didn't have extra parachutes. When the Army Caribou came in, we could hook a ride anywhere they were going and they'd be happy to take us without a parachute. So, my way of life really depended on deciding where I was going, and then trying to figure out what flights were going and when, and then hitching a ride and making it happen. I would hitch around the area of operation so that I could be at the right place to influence and make an action happen.

Q: When you left there, were you optimistic about the situation in Vietnam? Did you think things were looking pretty good?

A: Yes, I'd been involved personally in one of the clear and hold operations that was being touted as the way the new pacification program was to work—more strategic hamlets. That's what we were doing, establishing strategic hamlets in Phu Yen. We felt that we were seeing the effort expand. After all, we turned on the lights in Tuy Hoa and we were turning on the lights in the villages, and people seemed to be responding. We knew there were still Vietcong around because of the columns of smoke out on the fringe, but we were pushing

influence outward. We didn't have any U.S. units and little of the aviation had arrived. All that was to come later.

When I left, I thought I was leaving something that was on the right course. By the way, I wrote an article for the *Military Engineer* on "Engineers in Clear and Hold Operations," which was published, I guess, in November or December '63. The article recounted briefly my experience and how you'd use engineers in the kind of operation we had in Phu Yen Province.

Q: Were you solicited to do that or did you write it up and send it to them?

A: I wanted to write it because I felt I'd been in something unique and it was early. Now all kinds of my friends were going over there to have this same experience of being an engineer battalion adviser, so that was my motivation. I submitted it to the Society for American Military Engineers and the editor sent it back, greatly edited. So, I wrote a strong letter back saying, "You've really edited so much, you've taken out the context. So, either we put a lot of it back in or I don't publish it." I suggested some things to go back in. Obviously, he also had some good points in what he said. I got to expand the article again. He gave me another half a page, took out a picture, and I re-edited his editing. Then we came to a satisfactory agreement as to what should be in the magazine.

Q: That's interesting because it's in this period of the early '60s that the Army's trying to come to terms with the concept of counterinsurgency as a method of warfare, how to do it and the engineer's role in that.

A: That's right. We were all reading the books. Bernard Fall's book, *Street Without Joy* was sort of a bedside table bible. Later I got into John Thompson's book on Malaysia, and we had a lot of the novels that I really enjoyed coming out of the French Vietnamese experience. Jean Larteguy's book, *The Centurions*, described the French airborne at Dien Bien Phu and the bitterness of the lessons that they took out of that. This was followed by his book, *The Praetorians*. There was another book too that described their thoughts about operations over there. So, I did a lot of reading before, while there, and afterwards concerning all of this kind of period and how you put it all together.

Q: What was the attitude towards the French on the part of the young American officers who were there? Was it their feeling that, "We can see how they messed the situation up and we can do better," or—but you said you also were interested in the lessons learned from the French experience, which had been pretty negative.

A: No, I don't think it was negative. I certainly didn't have a negative feeling, nor do I recall that sort of reaction on anybody's part. I guess I felt they were led to an experience in which they never had the wherewithal to succeed. I mean, you have to figure the lessons we had later, that they covered twice the area, all the north too, with many fewer capabilities. It was only when you sit there and evaluate the task that you understand the futility of their task. You see, Phu Yen Province is where Navarre's Operation Atlantis came ashore. He put people ashore in an amphibious assault, but if you look at the areas on the map of what they

attempted to achieve, they go way inland. Then when you get a feel for the terrain you say, “My goodness, how could anybody anticipate doing that?” I mean, you don’t do sweeps of whole units in the World War II mode in Vietnam.

They didn’t have the helicopters. Ours were still fairly rudimentary when we were there. The best we had to start with was the H-21, a pretty nice helicopter, but just a few of them. They had less than that trying to sustain things as deep as Dien Bien Phu. Figure out how far Dien Bien Phu is from Tuy Hoa—they really were extended. Look at Mobile Group 100. That was just one mobile group, and a pretty good one, but it didn’t have the air cover like we have today or the helicopters or the ability to reinforce. When they were caught at Kilometer 15 on Route 19 it was their own battle—how they fought their way out of that ambush or not. There was no help to be gotten.

So, my feelings toward the French were not negative at all at the local tactical arena. Maybe the lesson there was that nationally they never put into it what was needed to go at it and everyone lost faith. That was our own experience later on when the country turned down the war. We never had done enough across the border to assure a win.

So, to answer your question, there was never a negative feeling toward the French. They had their situation. They were more austere, less prepared. We were better prepared in a smaller area, and we knew more about it because we had their experience. So our typical can-do approach was, “We’re smart enough to figure this thing out, so let’s figure it out and go at it.”

Q: Anything else about the Vietnam advisory period? It’s a very interesting period because it’s so early.

A: I guess I could mention one other thing. We had a senior engineer adviser in Saigon, and at least toward the latter part of that period that officer had developed more influence. He pulled people in from all over the country to try to come to grips with engineer issues: “What else can we do? What more can we do?” He convened a senior leaders conference where he pulled people in to get their ideas. I remember, as the deputy Corps engineer and the 20th Engineer Group adviser, going down to Saigon and participating in one of those. We tried to bring the best of our ideas to bear, and so we would share information about our experiences. I think I needed to make that point, that it wasn’t all just Corps on down in the engineer advisory business. That was certainly our emphasis. We were in an executing kind of mode, but there was this attempt to pull out lessons learned, and determine how we could do things better and what else was needed.

Q: Another question. At the time did you consider this a good assignment? Was this considered a good assignment?

A: I certainly didn’t go there thinking it was a good assignment. Like I mentioned, I thought I should go to Korea because I knew I needed to have a company command. It was a frustrating assignment but it was satisfying. By the time I left, it was pretty obvious this was where the action was. So, I came back from having been one of the early officers there where

the action was. That manifested itself in a couple of ways. One was the fact that I never did get to be a company commander. I came back from Vietnam and they asked me what I wanted do and I said, "I want to go somewhere and be a company commander." Even then you understood you needed to be a company commander. Then they sent me to the Chicago District. I said, "There's nothing wrong with the Chicago District but, guys, I need to be a company commander." They said, "No, you have plenty of time for that."

So, my friend Jim Ellis, who, as I mentioned, had almost a comparable career to this point, got ready to come back and they said, "You need to be a company commander." Wait a minute! So, classmates at West Point, 3d Armored Division together, Vietnam together, civil school together, I mean, how can what you've "got to do" be so different? Besides that, though, they were correct with him, but not with me. So, anyway, I went to the Chicago District. He went to company command.

The second manifestation was that it was okay and a good assignment because after I'd been in the Chicago District for a couple of years, the promotion list to major came out and I was on it, below the zone, as was Jim Ellis. So, you say, "Well, what about company command?" The answer *was*, I was an adviser in Vietnam, and so there was a recognition of that experience at that time. I'm not recommending that today—not commanding a company is a very precarious position to be in. It is that important. In those days, with Vietnam being what it was and because the battalion adviser was recognized as a very close to the action kind of role, it was a good assignment. As I mentioned earlier, it was a good assignment from the standpoint of satisfaction and feeling of contribution.

Chicago District

Q: The Chicago District was your first civil works assignment?

A: Yes, as I mentioned before, I met my wife Ann when she was coming from Illinois to Germany. So, we met in Europe. "Join the Army, see the world," the saying goes. Then she spent our first three assignments back in Illinois, her home state, that being the University of Illinois, then she stayed at home in Waukegan the year I was in Vietnam, and then we were reassigned to the Chicago District. So, her first three assignments were right in Illinois.

Q: So, you got there, then, in March or April?

A: I think it was still March when we reported in.

Q: Of 1963. Went in as executive officer?

A: Yes.