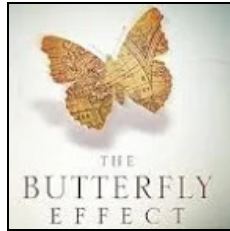


My Military Service

(...and how I received the US Army Bronze Star Medal)

By Bob Leuten – December 2023

Part One – The Butterfly Effect



The “Butterfly Effect” is a theory that a butterfly flapping its wings on the East Coast can cause storms on the West Coast. In other words, the Butterfly Effect is the idea that a small, seemingly trivial event may ultimately result in something with much larger consequences. ([Wikipedia](#) has an exhaustive section on this subject. Also, there is at least one motion picture [The Butterfly Effect](#), starring Ashton Kutcher. It is a 2004 time-travel / action movie, rated “R,” with a runtime of 113 minutes).



My Butterfly Effect happened in the summer of 1960 when I was 16 years old—I was about to enter my Senior year at Shaker Heights High School (in Northeastern Ohio, a Cleveland suburb). It occurred at Bowling Green State University (in Northwestern Ohio, about a two-hour drive from my home.) My Mom and I were at the orientation for incoming first-year students, a year hence—I had already been accepted to

BGSU. In addition to picking my first semester college courses, I had to decide whether to enroll in the US Army’s Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). I graduated from High School in June 1961 with a grade point average of 2.42—I was a mediocre student. I was more inclined to socialize and pursue my new-found athleticism on the Shaker Heights High School swim team, than study.



ARMY ROTC

The decision had been made right then; ROTC was a four-year college training program, that resulted, upon graduation, in being commissioned an Army Second Lieutenant—an “officer.”



The commitment was that ROTC graduates were obligated to join the Army upon college graduation and stay in the Army for three years. The alternative was to not enroll in ROTC and, upon graduation from college, take my chances with the draft. Being drafted resulted in a two-year obligation as an enlisted soldier; a “Private,” one who takes and obeys orders rather than gives them. The United States involvement in the Vietnam war was just beginning in the Summer of 1960 and surely, either

way, upon graduation from college, I was going to go to a war zone. Basically, did I want to commit to three years in the Army in a leadership position or did I want to take my chances with the draft and the two-year commitment as foot-soldier? My parents left the decision up to me—quite a decision for a 16-year-old to make. Either way, I was likely to go to Vietnam.

I chose to enroll in ROTC with the three-year commitment to serve in the Army. I graduated from the BGSU College of Business in June 1965. My major was Insurance. Ironically, my grade point average in college was identical to my high school average, 2.42.

Because of my choice to enroll in ROTC, I was eventually introduced to General Aviation (GA) and became a pilot and flight instructor at my Army assignment at Fort Sill—more about that later. Had I not chosen to enroll in ROTC, I likely would have been drafted with a two-year commitment. I would not have had the exposure to GA, been employed in the aviation insurance business, and met my future bride Sally in Milwaukee. The decision to enroll in ROTC when I was 16 was my Butterfly Effect moment.

Part Two – Fort Sill



As a result of that *Butterfly Effect* decision, upon graduation from BGSU, on July 30, 1965, I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the US Army Signal Corps—I chose, and was accepted, into the Signal Corps because of my hobby as an Amateur Radio Operator (aka “Ham Radio”). I served my country for three years, including a year (July 1967 to July 1968) as an officer in Vietnam.

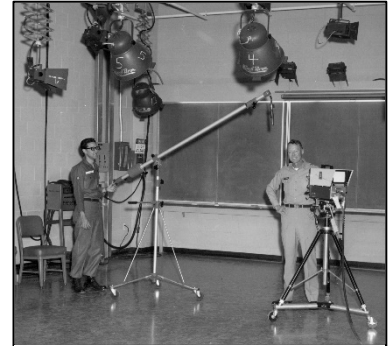


During my tenure in the Army, I was promoted twice: on October 12, 1966, to First Lieutenant and again on December 11, 1967, to the rank of Captain. All my time in the Army I had a “Top Secret” security clearance. I received an Honorable Discharge from active duty on July 7, 1968. All my time in the Army I was a bachelor. I married Sally in 1975.

My first assignment in the Army (after an eight-week “Signal Officer Basic School” at Fort Gordon, Georgia) was the US Army Artillery and Missile School at the Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in the newly formed **Television Division**. I was stationed at Fort Sill for a little over a year, November 1965 to January 1967. The school was just starting an educational television videotape system to teach soldiers the basics of field artillery. I was the head of the Division. I got the assignment through self-promotion that I was an *expert* in television production—clearly an exaggeration of my qualifications. My last semester before graduating from BGSU in June 1965, I took an elective course in Television Production. I received a grade of “A”—I’m ashamed to admit, that

was the only such grade I got in either high school or undergraduate school. At that time there were personal computers, no word processors, no email, no Google, and no internet. The only “tech” devices I had access to in my four years in college were my own portable typewriter (with carbon paper) and a portable transistor AM radio with a mono earphone. I would have benefited, academically, from a bit more technology that students now enjoy. Again, I put academics on the backburner in favor of pursuing an active social life (including my fraternity, ZBT) and being on the BGSU men’s swim team. (I was a “walk-on” swimmer but earned an athletic scholarship my last three years at BG.)

My work at Fort Sill consisted of hiring about a dozen staff, both military and civilian, to work on and operate the television cameras, lights, sound recording equipment, videotape recorders and playback machines. The videotape machines were not the home VCR variety but were broadcast-quality (at the time) commercial Ampex systems. We also had a mobile van for videotaping lessons from the field. The van was equipped with a gasoline generator to power the electronics (cameras, lights, audioboard, etc.). My unit was responsible for all the behind-the-camera work including camera operators, sound technicians,

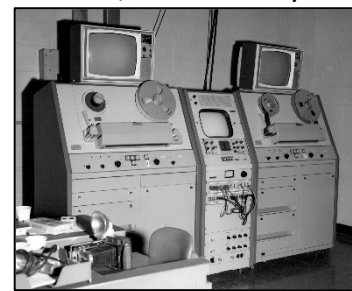


TV Videotaping Studio at Fort Sill



directors, and equipment maintenance personnel. The artillery school provided the lesson plans, scripts, props, and the on-air instructors. The school was also responsible for the wiring and maintenance of the classroom monitors and loudspeakers. My staff were never in front of the camera, always behind it. On two occasions I was the TV director that worked on the school-supplied scripts to produce the videotaped lessons. All the

equipment was of the black-and-white variety. Color TV was still in its infancy and hadn’t caught on with the Army educational television system. This technology was very low-tech and low resolution by today’s standards: no graphics, no animations, no special effects, and certainly no computer-generated imagery (CGI). We had the ability to add captions to our videos but nothing else. While at Fort Sill, I had my Military Operational Specialty (MOS) changed to “Motion Picture and TV Director,” code 8511. This assured me (or so I thought) that any future Army assignments would be in a related field. During my tenure at Fort Sill, we produced approximately 30 training videos for use at the Artillery School, and some for distribution to other Army instructional schools throughout the United States.



Ampex VR-1100 Videotape Machines

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Upon arriving at Fort Sill, I didn't know a soul. But I read in the post newspaper that the Officer's Club was offering on Sundays, for only five dollars, an all-you-can-eat buffets. On my first Sunday at Fort Sill, I went to the Officer's Club and began gorging myself on all the prime rib and shrimp I could eat! I sat at a table alone. But the

tables were close enough together that I overheard two other officers chatting about taking their flying lessons at the "Redleg Flying Club" at the Fort Sill Airport—I hadn't known that Fort Sill had an airport! I'd always been fascinated about being able fly a plane—and this was my chance. (No one else in my family was a pilot or in any way was connected to aviation.) As soon as I finished my meal at the Officers Club, I located a Fort Sill map and immediately drove out to Fort Sill Airport. There, I found the operations base for the Red Leg Flying Club. I inquired about flying lessons and was able to take a demo flight that afternoon in a Piper Super Cub (PA-18). It was an old, fabric-covered, single-engine landplane with a 150-horsepower, air-cooled piston engine. There were two seats in the Piper Cub: one in front (where the "pilot in command" sits) and a tandem seat in the back (where the instructor or passenger sits). The demo pilot that day, a moonlighting Black Army Sergeant, Ed Matthews. He turned out to be my instructor. In two months (47 hours of flight time) I got my FAA Private Pilot certificate with Airplane Single-Engine Land rating. I was thrilled and proud!



My work at the **Television Division** went well. At my next assignment, Fort Shafter, I received the US Army Commendation Medal for my work at the Artillery and Missile School at Fort Sill.



*First Lieutenant Robert Leuten receives the Army Commendation Medal from Major Vinhal on Feb. 7, 1967*

### Part Three – Fort Shafter

After two years at Fort Sill, the Army, in all its infinite wisdom, decided my talents would be better utilized at the **US Army Special Photo Detachment – Pacific** in Fort Shafter, Oahu, Hawaii.



My assignment in Hawaii began on February 1, 1967. The mission of the unit was to send specially trained Army motion picture film camera and sound technicians to Vietnam and record the combat troops in action. (The “camcorder” hadn’t been invented yet.) During my assignment at Fort Shafter, I learned the mechanics and techniques of motion picture film editing. Within a couple of weeks of my arrival at Fort Shafter, I was flown to the

Pohakuloa Training Area (PTA) on the “Big Island” of Hawaii to observe another officer while he trained camera operators. I was there for five days. PTA was an inland lava field on Hawaii’s high plateau (over 6,000 feet above sea level). The training area was located between Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea on the Hualalai volcanic mountains. It was very desolate. There was no beach, no entertainment, and no attractions (other than the after-work bar.)



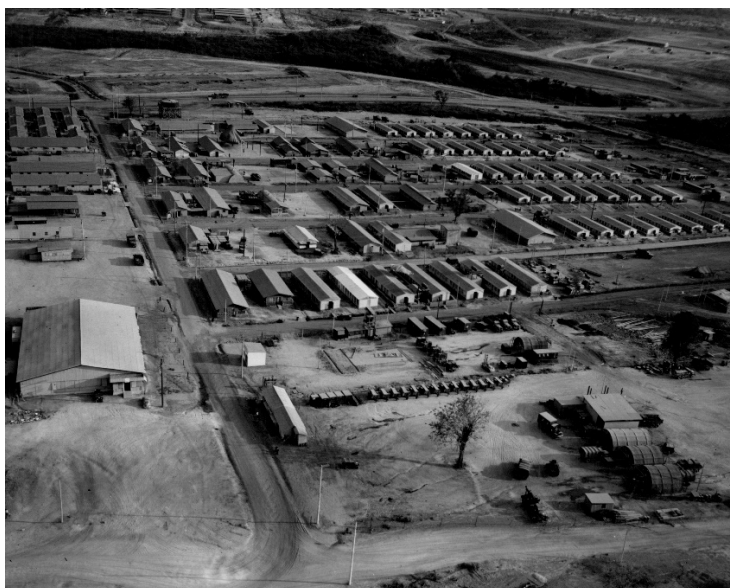
*Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii*

My stay at Fort Shafter was short-lived. A month after I got there, I was notified, verbally, that I would soon be deployed to Vietnam. I waited and waited for the orders, but they had become lost. Meanwhile, I reported to the office at Fort Shafter each morning to check if the reassignment paperwork had arrived, do some menial work, and take most afternoons off: During my time off I went to beach, tried (unsuccessfully) to get up on a surfboard, rent a Cessna 150 from Wheeler Air Force Base and fly around the Hawaiian Islands, or other such nonsense that passed for “work.” Finally, after six months, the orders for my deployment to Vietnam arrived. Before I was sent to Vietnam, I took a 10-day leave to visit my family in Shaker Heights, Ohio. As luck would have it, during the middle of my leave, my longtime, dear friend and Ham Radio mentor, Mike Treister, was getting married in Chicago. I was Mike’s Best Man.

### Part 4 – Long Binh

I arrived in Long Binh, Vietnam, on July 4, 1967. I was assigned to fill the role of **Adjutant of the 44<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion**. Long Binh was the largest military land-base in Vietnam and the home of the US Army Headquarters. Our battalion consisted of about 300 troops in three companies, A, B, and C. Long Binh is about 24 miles Northeast of Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City).





*Aerial view of the campsite of the 44<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion, Long Binh – Circa 1963*

The 44<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion had the mission of providing and maintaining secure communications, both by landline and radio, for all the US troops in Vietnam.

The duties of the Battalion Adjutant and his staff included personnel records (including troop rotations, reenlistments, casualty reporting, and leave), troop morale and welfare, discipline (including Court Martials), awards, entertainment (including movies and the Post Exchange), and safety. In addition, I was responsible for making periodic reports on all the Adjutant activities to the Battalion Commander. I had my own Jeep complete with a full-time driver.

Nowhere in the description of the duties of the Battalion Adjutant is responsibility for “Motion Picture and TV Director.” But I was happy with the assignment since it drew (somewhat) on my experience as a Ham Radio operator.

As Battalion Adjutant, when I was not running around gathering information from the three Company Commanders, I worked primarily in a Quonset Hut office. My duty hours were seven days a week, 10 hours a day. There were four of us in the office, two clerk typists, my assistant (a Warrant Officer), and myself. Mostly, my time was spent on Battalion legal matters. I was acting as prosecutor for the Courts Martial for two of our troops, one of whom went AWOL and one who abandoned his guard duty. I won both of those cases at trial. Previously, I had no experience or training in the law but was successful, nonetheless.



*Army Captain insignia*

On another occasion I was assigned to investigate and report an incident where some crypto gear went missing from one of the secure communication devices. I spent four full days flying around Vietnam interviewing Army personnel on what might have happened to the device. I wrote a five-page report on my conclusions: the crypto gear was lost (and probably destroyed) and could not be located. My report was accepted.

I was attracted to the Army Signal Corps because of my enthusiasm for my hobby, Ham Radio. So were other soldiers, including enlisted men. Therefore, there were a lot of Hams in the 44<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion.



*Let me digress: Amateur Radio (or “Ham” Radio) is a worldwide pastime involving radio transmissions over several narrow bands of frequencies. It can take the form of voice, morse code, and other modes. The intent is that the transmissions be non-commercial. There is no charge to use the airwaves by radio amateurs. It is conducted by licensed individuals who are tested to be proficient in regulations, radio theory, and electronics. In the United States, there are different grades of Ham licenses – the higher the license, the more privileges as to the frequencies and modes of operation. The stations that these Hams use need to be licensed also. **The radio communications are not secure.** That means that anybody, licensed or not, can monitor the transmissions. In the USA, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates Amateur Radio. There are many aspects that attract these hobbyists. Among them are those who like to design, build, and assemble their own equipment (including commercially available kits), participate in contests, remote operations from motor vehicles, distant contacts, and chat with fellow Hams on common interests. Hams also play a vital role in emergency communications such as earthquakes, fires, floods, and other disasters.*

The station we operated in Long Binh was primarily set up to allow troops in Vietnam to contact (via voice) family and friends in the United States. Integral to this operation is an electronic device called a “phone-patch.” In the early 1960s there were no social media, e-mail, texting, internet, or cell phones. Since the transmissions were only “one-way” (each station in the pair could only talk or receive), the parties at both ends need to be instructed to say, “OVER” when they wanted a response. In this case, the radio operator who was transmitting needed to stop and listen for the response via the other radio operator who would then transmit. We had to caution both parties that the transmissions were NOT secure and things like locations, troop movements, and deployments were not to be mentioned.



When I arrived in Long Binh, the base Amateur Radio station had just one old, low power transceiver. I put in a requisition for more state-of-the-art transceivers along with amplifiers to boost the power of our transmissions. I never had the opportunity of operating the radios. There were plenty of troops at our base to do that.

Vietnam is halfway around the world from the United States. Radio communications to the US were not dependable. But when they were good, it was a great morale booter for the troops.



While stationed in Vietnam my living quarters were in a 12-room called a BOQ (“Bachelor Living Quarters”). As such I had my own room (10-foot by 10-foot-?) with a cot, desk, chair, and a single 120-volt electrical outlet. The walls were thin sheetrock, and the floor was a concrete slab. My “door” consisted of hanging beads—which was all the privacy and security I needed since I had no modesty and stored nothing of value. The public BOQ latrine was outdoors, a few steps from the building.

I felt relatively safe while stationed in Long Binh. With the US Army Headquarters (a sort of mini-Pentagon) nearby on the same post as our Battalion camp, the perimeter security around Long Binh was as good as it could be, given the technology of the time. Nonetheless, in the middle of the night on January 31, 1968, the enemy’s “Tet Offensive” (Vietcong and / or North Vietnamese Army) did manage to blow up the Long Binh ammo dump. It’s a good thing that my cot was low to the ground because the blast (about a mile away) caused my sleeping body to fall to the floor; I was startled but uninjured.



*Lt. Colonel Cheney pins Captain bars on Robert Leuten - January 15, 1968*

I did take R & R (“Rest and Recuperation”) while I served in Vietnam. During mid-March 1967, I went to go to Bangkok, Thailand, for five days. There I took a tour to see the local sights and shopped for bargain jewelry. I came back to Long Binh refreshed and revitalized!

### Part 5 – The Bronze Star Medal



*Captain Robert Leuten receives the Bronze Star Medal on July 1, 1968, from Colonel Duarte*

The Bronze Star Medal is only given in a combat zone like Vietnam. It is awarded for meritorious service. There are two types of Bronze Star Medals: one is the plain, ordinary Bronze Star Medal—that’s the one I got on July 1, 1968; the other is the Bronze Star Medal “With V-Device” for Meritorious Service *with Valor*.

The United States Congress (not the armed forces) is the body which authorizes military awards and decorations. If the Congress does not authorize any awards (or does not have time to



authorize any), then nobody gets any of that type of recognition. I heard rumor (not substantiated) that if the armed forces do not use all their allocated decorations, they will have them taken away. If that is true, the Army Signal Corps had an excess of awards to give away when I got mine. I did a decent job in Vietnam, and I kept out of trouble. In addition, I did not complain (much). But I was not “gung-ho.” If anybody were to ask, I would let it be known that I did not want to make the Army my life’s career. Nonetheless, I was awarded the Bronze Star Medal—the ordinary one, not the one “With V Device” for my duty with the 44<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion.



*Memorabilia from my three years in the Army: Desk sign, uniform ribbons, dog tags, newspaper article*

### **Part 6 – Conclusion**

I am indeed grateful for the experience that I had in the Army. I came out uninjured, both mentally and physically. For a man in his early twenties, I crammed a great deal of knowledge and leadership experience into my three short years in the Army.



After I got out of the Army because I was a veteran and had become a licensed pilot, I used the GI Bill to obtain a master’s degree (MBA, at Loyola University-Chicago, 1973). In addition, the GI Bill allowed me to take advanced flight training including the Commercial, Instrument, Airline Transport Pilot (ATP), and Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) certificates and ratings. Since I gained experience in aviation, it became a lifetime career in aviation insurance, and occasionally, a professional aviation insurance expert consultant in legal matters. (How many people do you know that ended up with a career in their major field of study like I did in insurance?)

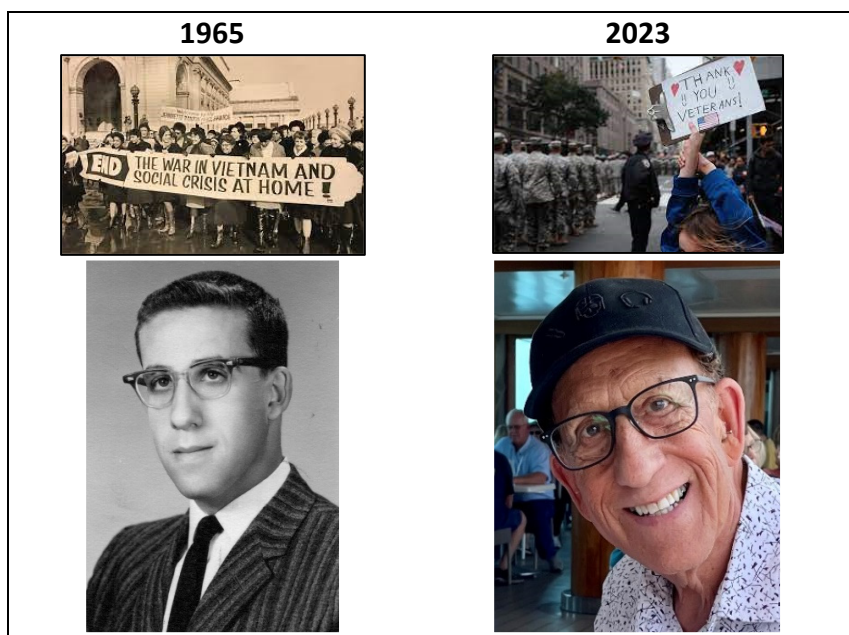
In 2016, I also earned the FAA Wright Bros. “Master Pilot” Award. To qualify, an aviator needs, among other criteria, 50 total years of Pilot-in-Command (PIC) experience along with no violations and no at-fault accidents. Except for the 12-months I served in Vietnam, my piloting experience has been continuous since 1966. Being a pilot and flight instructor has brought so much joy to my life; in many ways, it has been my life.

## Part 7 – Afterthoughts

The Vietnam war was very unpopular, especially during the war and for decades afterwards. Anti-war demonstrations were commonplace in the 1960s. Protesters were often violent and caused significant destruction. Afraid that the draft would send them to Vietnam, evaders would seek refuge in Canada or other countries that offered them a safe haven. Some people, if they could qualify and afford it, would seek draft deferments that graduate school (including medical school) could legally offer. Others would claim medical deferments (with the help of trusted physicians) to exaggerate known medical conditions to seek deferments—the coveted “4-F” status from their draft boards. Among the most violent, well-publicized protest demonstrations occurred at the Democratic Convention in Chicago during the summer of 1968—just when I was discharged from the Army and looking, in Chicago, for my first fulltime, civilian job. The Vietnam war was so unpopular then that I knew better than to emphasize my recent leadership experience and Army awards when seeking job interviews. In social situations, when others heard of my recent Army duty in Vietnam, the kindest comment I heard was, “...what, you couldn’t get out of serving?”



Today, it’s a different story. I feel proud when I wear my “Vietnam Veteran” baseball cap. Often, fellow veterans and others come up to me with the greeting, “Thank you for your service.” Now, businesses often offer discounts and freebies to veterans. For instance, Applebee’s Restaurants offer free meals to vets on Veterans’ Day. Several retailers offer close-in parking to veterans. The Home Depot and Lowe’s offer a 10 percent discount year-round on non-sale merchandise to vets.

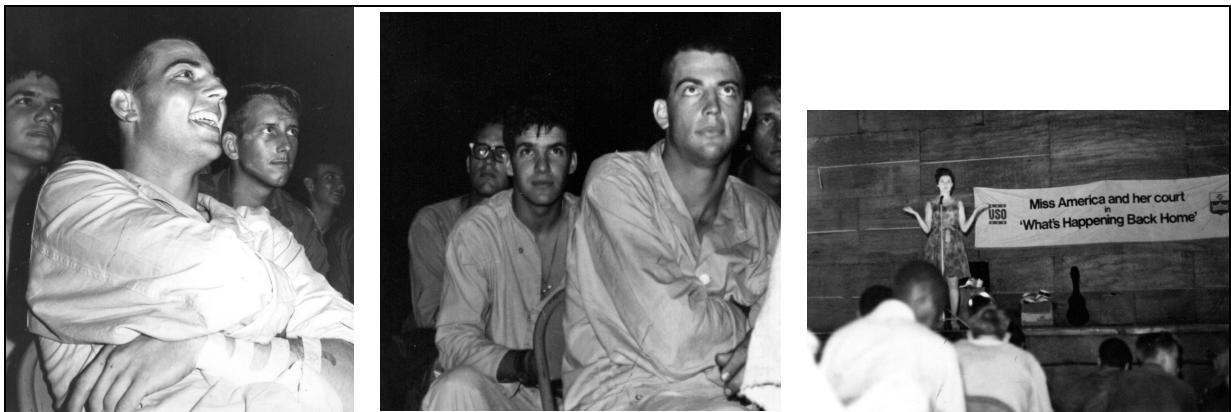


Often, I get asked, “Do you still have any contact with the Army buddies who served with you?” The plain and simple answer is, no. In no particular order, here are the reasons:

- Although I was friendly and socialized with fellow officers at the time, fraternization with enlisted men was prohibited—part of the military rank and file discipline
- There were not that many Army officers at the posts where I served
- There were no social media, e-mail, texting, internet, or cell phones in the early 1960s
- I was never stationed very long at any particular location: four posts in three years—either my fellow officers changed duty stations, or I did
- One of the officers who was my mentor lost his life in combat in Vietnam – I usually had a fellow officer to greet me upon my arrival a new assignment

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Another question I get asked, “There was a great deal of publicity every time Bob Hope or some other entertainer went to Vietnam. Did you get to see any of their shows?” Yes, I did see one show that came to Long Binh. (I do not recall who the headliner was, but it wasn’t Bob Hope—maybe it was a former Miss America.) I got to sit right up front. Right behind me were several rows of wounded soldiers from the Long Binh infirmary, still in their bedclothes, wheelchairs, and adorning their casts, slings, and bandages. I had a 35-millimeter SLR camera with me at that time, and I took more pictures of the expressions on soldiers’ faces than I did of the entertainers. It was apparent that the soldiers were thrilled and totally immersed in the show.



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While I was serving in the Vietnam, I supportive of the military principle that we were there to stop the advance of communism and America was correct to be fighting there. Although we knew about the anti-war movement at home, we believed in our mission. Slowly, after I got out of the Army, I came to realize that our involvement was mistake and 58,200 troops were lost needlessly.

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I cannot imagine how my life would have been different, as a 16-year-old, had I not chosen to take ROTC. I am glad I chose to enroll in ROTC.

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