

# VIETNAM, 50 YEARS LATER

## Reflections and Memories



Capt. Ted Stroup, USA, working on recovery operations after the Hotel Victoria bombing on April 1, 1966, while assigned to Navy Public Works.

*Looking back 50 years ago and my time in “NAM,” or Vietnam, caused a stirring of emotions and, at one point, some doubt. Doubt as to whether I remembered what happened, what I did, and where I was during that time.*

Well, looking back wasn't so bad—and it verified I had not gone “silly,” or some other indication of the aging state. And the good news is that there are still other veterans from World War II, Korea and more recent conflicts who can be called upon to stand to be acknowledged. Our nation does remember its soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who have served over the years. It was for that purpose SAME embarked on this commemorative issue of *The Military Engineer*.

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I would first like to thank all who have contributed to the development of this issue. We were honored to have a number of engineer veterans (military and civilian) from all services—plus industry veterans—support our efforts and contribute time, energy, ideas and articles to complete the mission undertaken to “remember and honor” our Vietnam veterans from the Military Engineering family. An examination of this issue and a review of other histories from unit logs and reports, command histories, oral histories, and articles written during the period and after yield a great deal of “things to be proud of,” whether they be individuals, units, battlefield operations, devices developed and fielded by the services, or equipment produced by our industry partners.

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I arrived in the Republic of Vietnam after a long flight on Pan Am airlines that started at Travis AFB in California, refueled at Hickam and then Wake Island, and finally landed at Tan Son Nhut AB, just outside of Saigon. It was February. The year was 1966.

I had volunteered to go, as I wanted to command a unit in combat (which really had not yet erupted on a large scale). My detailer, needing to rapidly fill growing requisition requirements, told me in no uncertain



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terms that there would be a company command waiting for me. There was a lot of talk of stateside units deploying rapidly and being understrength in officers and non-commissioned officers.

Stepping off the plane at the bottom of the ramp, we were met by Capt. Archie Kuntze, USN, welcoming each of us, a mixed roster of all the services, to the Republic of Vietnam. I had arrived. Going down the stairs, I observed the handshake and words of the captain and the gesture pointing the arrivals to a processing center. All flowed as expected—process in, get your assignment, and get to your unit quickly.

Captain “K” welcomed me as “Mister Stroup” and asked me to stay behind for further instructions. When all had deplaned, he turned to me and said, “Welcome aboard, I am your new skipper here.”

Needless to say, my tortured explanation of my orders went nowhere. The Navy was in charge of Public Works during this rapid buildup and needed engineer officers. I was to be in the Public Works for Headquarters Support Activity, Saigon (HSAS, or HeadSuPac, Saigon in Navy lingo), which encompassed Saigon and south to the Delta. I would be in field inspections that reported to the OINC (another Navy term, Officer-in-Charge) and would have a detail of senior Seabee petty officers on my team along with some local-national engineers. Overnight, I learned a new language—not Vietnamese, but Civil Engineer Corps and Seabee talk, along with an amazing array of Navy acronyms.

It was a great few months. I learned a lot and got to know the countryside to the south. Then the Army arrived with a headquarters, USARV—U.S. Army Republic of Vietnam. The initial mission was to receive incoming units and get its arms around the rapidly expanding demands for base infrastructure. HSAS was decommissioned and its personnel and base operations missions dispersed to the new Army command. Army units were arriving in country rapidly, as were Air Force and Marines Corps. It was a new opportunity to get to an Army engineer battalion and command a company.

*Not so.* I was shanghaied into the rapidly growing 1st Logistical Command, part of USARV—there was no Engineer Command stood up yet—and its initial engineer section had the mission of in-country engineer. Its job was to



create bases, welcome the “tail” that would be supporting the arriving combat units, and establish the logistical base for supporting land operations. Part of the mission was building the massive Army portion of the base infrastructure. The new commanding general of 1st Log wanted a set of engineer eyes to tell him what was going on and what was needed. The command engineer tasked me to be those “eyes.” Still no company, but the command engineer promised me that if I survived the position for six months he would get me to a company command.

The diversion turned out to be a remarkable development assignment for an engineer captain. I traveled all over South Vietnam and watched USARV grow in stature and infrastructure. As USARV developed in the first few weeks, the new commanding general of 1st Log outperformed the television show *The Apprentice* on his end, including at the headquarters. By default, I became his aide, with strings still attached to the command engineer.

Well, I survived, and I finally got my company: C Company, 864th Engineers (based at Cam Ranh Bay). My new company was located some 60-km north in Nha Trang. We had multiple missions—build

Camp McDermott, a logistical base; build a Hawk missile site and an Air Force radar system that looked north, all on Hon Tre Island, about 1.5-km off the coast; and keep the roads between Nha Trang and Ninh Hoa open and maintained. We also shared in base-perimeter security tasks. It was a great unit with multiple missions.

We were blessed with a high mission priority and extra equipment not normal for company-size engineer units: BARCs, LARCs, our own LCM, a diving detachment, a well-drilling detachment, and a quarry/rock crusher platoon. Like everyone else, we were busy 24/7. It was a great mission set for an engineer company away from its battalion.

I was in country over 18 months. I enjoyed every minute of my duty in theater; learned a lot about other service engineer units; and experienced the big picture flying around with 1st Log. Commanding C Company, 864th Engineers was the best of my many jobs in Vietnam.

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Today, working with the *TME* staff has been a great experience for me to help us recall and honor all the engineers of the Vietnam era (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, civilian, and contractor).

So join me as you page through this special issue of *The Military Engineer* and reflect upon and remember this proud piece of our nation’s Military Engineering history. Particularly, remember the fallen engineers who served there, and all the servicemembers who gave their life. They are national treasures of our heritage as soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, and a solemn reminder of the sacrifices made in serving our country.



(Above) Capt. Ted Stroup, USA, with the 171st Well Drilling Detachment at Hon Tre Island, while commanding C Company, 864th Engineers. (Opposite) In the C Company prefabrication yard at Camp McDermott, Nha Trang.

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