

Chapter 2

Getting Organized

That first day my senior NCO (Sgt Caldwell) and I went to the Base Civil Engineering Office to let them know our team had arrived. I was surprised to find Lt/Col Maggart was the Bien Hoa Base Civil Engineering Squadron Commander. He was my C.O. at England AFB, Louisiana before his assignment to Vietnam. Col Maggart briefed us on a list of requirements that our team was going to be asked to work on. They included a series of buildings that the Base needed.

We then drove to the Team's barracks where I found Sgt Ebbert and the other NCO's had already began to inventory our assets and organize the men into Masonry Crew, Plumbing Crew, Electrical Crew, Heavy Equipment Crew, 5 Erection Crews and a Site Development Crew.

I will digress here to quote Eric Hoffer from his book "Temper of Our Time" about American self-ingenuity:

"Whereas the American mental climate is not favorable for the emergence of mass movements, it is ideal for the building of viable communities; and the capacity for community building is widely diffused. When we speak of the American as a skilled person we have in mind not only his technical

but also his political and social skills. Once during the Great Depression, a construction company that had to build a road in the San Bernardino Mountains sent down two trucks to the Los Angeles skid row, and anyone who could crawl onto the trucks was hired. When the trucks were full, the drivers put the tailgates and drove off. They dumped us on the side of a hill in the San Bernardino Mountains, where we found bundles of supplies and equipment. The company had only one man on the spot. We began to sort ourselves out: there were so many carpenters, electricians, mechanics, cooks, men who could handle bulldozers and jackhammers, and even foremen. We put up the tents, the cook shack, fixed latrines and a shower bath, cooked supper, and next morning went out to build the road. If we had to write a constitution we probably would have had someone who knew all the whereases and wherefores. We were a shovel full of slime scooped off the pavement of skid row, yet we could have built America on the side of a hill in the San Bernardino Mountains.”

In June of 1966, not having read Eric Hoffer, the men of Prime BEEF Team 22 were accomplishing the same self-leadership motivation that Eric experienced in the 1930's in the San Bernardino Mountains. The NCO's sorted themselves out and realized that someone had selected the proper trades and skill-sets to accomplish the varied

construction tasks we were facing. Some pictures of different crews follow.



The entire 50 man crew minus one man that is missing and 3 men that had to return home for emergencies.



The Heavy Equipment Operator Crew (Sorry cannot remember individual names)



Electrical Crew (Sorry cannot remember individual names)



Erection Crew (Sorry cannot remember individual names)



The Concrete/Masonry Team - A1C Robert Taylor, A1C Grady Scott, SSgt Charles Bradshaw, TSgt Sidney Caldwell, A1C James Roberson, A2C Jerome Powell, A1C Julio Sanchez, A1C John Benefiel, SSgt Robert Troutman (names on back of the photo)

We immediately began to plan operations. Base Civil Engineering personnel came and briefed our leadership team on where to get supplies and vehicles. I brought all the Team together and told them that our work schedule was going to be 6 days per week, dawn to dusk, with Sundays off. I told them that it is my intent to get everyone home in four months and I wanted to accomplish as much as we could for these poor fellows that are here for a year. I said let's get them out of the mud. Everyone agreed. I took the Airman aside who had panicked on the aircraft coming over along with Sargent Caldwell and told him that he was to listen to Sargent Caldwell and he would get him home in

4 months. Any such further demonstrations and I would have Col Maggart sign him up for a year's tour, but we were leaving in 4 months. Never had any problems with him after that, he performed exceptionally.

We were assigned a few trucks and a $\frac{3}{4}$ yard cement mixer. Our Historical Report, attached as an Addendum to this document, describes some of the asset issues we continuously faced in accomplishing our mission. As in any war theater there were continuously shortages that required we devise work arounds. When our NCO's realized we lacked building insulation for the air conditioned buildings we had started to construct, they scrounged through the base dump finding foam flare boxes that we could use. Since flares were dropped all night long for security purposes coordination with the Munitions Squadron quickly solved the problem of insulation. Typical American ingenuity and innovation were evident throughout our deployment.

During the first few days I stopped at Base Supply to pick up some AR-15 ammunition. The supply sergeant told me that since I did not have a rifle on my orders I could not be issued ammunition. Well, I walked out saying to myself, "what a way to fight a war". A few months before I went to Vietnam I read about an "incident" where the Viet Cong had attacked the American Embassy at night and overran the guards and got into the building. There was a firefight all night and in the morning the Americans and the South Vietnamese found they were shooting at each other and the

V.C. had slipped out under cover of darkness. So how do you solve that: You take the ammunition away from the enlisted men, of course? So after that, the American's for the next year or so had weapons but the NCO held all the ammunition. So when there was a firefight we had unnecessary casualties before we could return fire. So I dejectedly went back to my "houch". There I told my Air Rescue buddies what had happened. They laughed and said, no sweat Tomich we have plenty of ammunition, how much do you want. So they fixed me up with two 20 round clips and taped them butt to butt so they can be switched quickly in case of a firefight. They laughed and said, all they used is tracer bullets, so the V.C. will know where you are. I said that's not a problem because I do not intend to win a war just want to take 10 with me if I am going to die. We had a good laugh. They then asked me if I wanted a pistol, they brought out a cardboard box full of 38 caliber revolvers. They said they were issued 38's, but they were useless in a firefight. So, they had their wives buy S&W 9mm automatics and mail them to them in Vietnam. Ala, a cardboard box of 38's. I didn't take them up on the 38's.

So, anytime I had my men on the road between Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nuht, or such, I would give them the AR-15 to take along. At one point in our tour Sargent Ebbert went with some of the men to a remote site to build a revetment around a communication point on the top of a mountain and I gave him the weapon as an insurance policy. We

never had to fire a round out of the gun, but it was a warm feeling to have some minimum defense.

At Bien Hoa we had a massive amount of plywood, but no nails. We had to get nails shipped from DaNang where they had nails but no plywood. Similarly, we had little cement at Bien Hoa AB but Ton Son Nuht AB at Saigon had great amounts of cement and no plywood. So we had several trips down to Ton Son Nuht with a flat-bed semi-truck full of full of plywood carrying cement back to our base. On one trip down I was involved and I did not check carefully what the Tan Son Nuht Civil Engineering people loaded on the truck for the return trip. Sargent Caldwell let all the guys know that Lieutenant Tomich brought back a bunch of 1 meter rocks for them. That took a while to live down. The shipment had gotten wet somewhere in shipment from the States or at Tan Son Nhut while in storage. I am sure the Tan Son Nhut Civil Engineering folks are still laughing at the gullible 1st Lieutenant they bilked.

We were supplemented by Vietnamese civilians from the Base Civil Engineers Squadron as we needed them. They were very good workers. Typically, at least one of the Vietnamese could speak some English so he translated for the team. I will interject some of my thoughts here that will set the stage for some of the decisions I made on the fly while in Vietnam.

Before coming to Vietnam I had been reading many newspaper articles and books of the history of Vietnam.

Additionally, while going to Purdue in the late 1950's and early 1960's I had a friend their studying Mechanical Engineering with me. He was Turkish and his name was Abraham Keskin. Abe and his wife and Sylvie and I used to eat supper at each-others apartment periodically. Abe was an enlisted man in the Turkish Air Force. He worked his way to the point where he was teaching mathematics at the Turkish Military Academy. He was then selected to come to the United States to get his BSME from Purdue. Abe told me that when he was in Turkey he hated Americans. He said that when he was at the Turkish AFB front Gate on guard, he was told to shoot any Turk that run the Gate without stopping. Alternatively, if it was an American running the Gate he was instructed to chase him down and call the American Air Police. He said after coming to America and experiencing what American's were really like in their country he totally changed his opinion. That always made me think about how we, American's, treated other people in their country.

As I stated above, I read a few books on the history of Vietnam in anticipation of maybe ending up there, before leaving for my Prime BEEF 22 assignment. Those included the book "The Ugly American" by William Lederer, "Dien Bien Phu" by a French author and "The Green Berets" by Robin Moore. Although truncated in their causation of the war the combination gave me a feeling for the ground activities and what to expect. One thing for sure, I wanted to ensure that I did not encourage or participate in any

maltreatment of Vietnamese civilians. I told myself to treat them as I would want to be treated.

So now that I set that stage, I can continue my story. Most of the day I would drive from site to site just seeing what was happening. One day I went to the III CORP Compound outside Bien Hoa AB where we were building two barracks and found the Americans sitting on the ground smoking and talking while the Vietnamese were working. I told the sergeant in charge that I wanted to talk to the American's at their "houch" at the end of the day. I met with them that night and told them that we were here to help these people and that in a couple months we were going to be in our homes in the USA and these poor people may be having their families killed. I told them I never again wanted to see the Vietnamese working while you are sitting. If they are working you are working. Well, a few days later I went to the same job site and everyone was working and they were all hammerings in unison while yelling, one, two, three, etc.etc. I asked Sargent Bradshaw what was happening and he said, "They want to learn English". I felt good about that. A learned lesson from "The Ugly American", treat the foreigners in their country like you want to be treated.

As you can tell from this reading, we Americans were not trained as a unit or briefed ahead of time as to who we were or what we were to do in Vietnam; we met in the airplane in this case not knowing anything of our mission or where it was. In retrospect, I came to the conclusion I was operating on my "internal compass" that was the result of

my formation in family and in Catholic schools and secular education I had received. Luckily, I was an avid reader and knew enough history to understand the dynamics that were ongoing within this war zone and this country. Many American officers failed because they were not prepared for what they were facing and the US Military was randomly sending people in-country as replacements and not as a trained unit.

Throughout this tour of duty I missed hearing from my family. I would go to the post office every day to look for mail. Sylvie was not much of a writer, so I would seldom get mail. That was the convincing argument that whatever I did with my life hereafter I would not be able to travel and be away from home for too long. After returning from this this TDY (temporary duty assignment) I was facing going to Aircraft Maintenance Officers Training School (My primary AFSC). This AFSC was in great demand with the war on and rotations of squadron's to Europe and the men faced a continuous sequence of remote tours. So I planned to leave the service the following March of 1967 and did so.