



# Where Did Thirty Years Go?

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

A few months ago I received a letter from a couple of guys I hadn't heard from or spoken to for almost 30 years. They were Army buddies, men I was stationed with in a military police unit at Long Binh, RVN, about 25 miles north of Saigon. I got to know them and scores of others really well during that 1969 - 1970 period of my life.

I hadn't thought about them much, either. When I returned to Wisconsin in October of 1970, I was right back to grad school under Professor Love, working as a TA in his soil science course, studying hard on my own course work, and organizing a research project. Most important, I was trying to be a good husband and father. Army buddies, sad to say, were pushed to the back reaches of my mind.

Over the many years since that time, I have exchanged Christmas cards with one guy from Connecticut, and for a few years after my discharge from the Army I occasionally would speak to a buddy in Minneapolis and another in Michigan. But that was it.

The years have whizzed by. I have been really busy, it seems, and have not dwelled long on that difficult part of my past.

But then there was the call from my Dad two summers ago. The soldier who was with Dad's 18 year old brother - Malcolm, my uncle - when he was killed by the Germans in France in WWII wanted to stop and see any of Malcolm's family still living in southwest Wisconsin. We gathered in our hometown and the meeting was emotional beyond words.

The movie *Saving Private Ryan* was an overwhelming experience for any GI who had been in a war. It

inspired me to record my Uncle Bud's WWII duty - his foot march across Europe as a rifleman in Patton's Army.

Like most American families, ours has a past firmly entrenched in military service to the country - Korea, the war against the Nazis, the war to end all wars, the Civil War and on back to the American Revolution. Duty, honor and country carried meaning.

The day after graduation in 1968 brought me a draft notice. When all was said and done, I entered into the military in the cold weather of January 1969 when the UW - Madison campus was torn apart by student riots. What a sendoff to a group of young people, off to be trained to be "baby killers", the protesters said.

For whatever reasons, I didn't ask questions about the Vietnam conflict and its legitimacy. We all owe something to our country; we all have an obligation. And my turn had come. It was really quite simple. As I took off for a trip that would lead me to Fort Campbell, Kentucky for basic training and Fort Gordon, Georgia for military police school, I only prayed for good luck and maybe a break here or there. It was the best I could do.

I will never forget standing at attention in the company compound at Fort Gordon, lined up alphabetically, to receive our duty orders that had come down from the Pentagon. Actually, after the first fifty guys or so, I was nearly euphoric; every assignment was a plum. There were orders for guarding missile sites in the Dakotas, guards for the Army finance center somewhere in Indiana, duty with MP units in Germany, Italy and Turkey. I was

already making mental plans for some serious travel! The guy next to me, on my right, was sent to Fort Lee, Virginia, and I was thinking that was where I was going, too. The company first sergeant called my name. I stepped forward. Then, he asked me an odd question.

"Are you a tiger, boy?"

I wasn't exactly sure of what to say, but in the Army you learn not to question, so I replied loudly and confidently, "Yes, First Sergeant!"

"You better be, boy," he returned, "'cause you're goin' to 'Nam."

I nearly fainted as I stepped back into line. I could hear guys on either side of me - those already given good assignments and those not yet assigned - gasp. From Miller on to the last man in the company line, the destination was our nightmare come true.

Afterwards, I faced the horrifying task of telling my wife and my parents, so that they would know as much as I did and when I knew it. I

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Field Sales Representative

**Bayer Corporation**

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Fax: 630-443-7839

Voicemail: 888-242-4200

Extension: 3101

john.turner.b@bayer.com

was headed home in a few days, so it could also have been that I didn't want to tell them face to face.

Two weeks of leave went quickly. As with most GIs headed to a war zone, I was sure, absolutely positive certain, that I'd be coming home in a black body bag. So as I saw family members, I was fearful it was for the last time. I stopped to see Jim Love in his campus office, drove to Nakoma to say farewell to Jerry O'Donnell, and went to my college fraternity house to see that group for the last time.

In my adult life, I've cried only a couple of times. The night Cheryl took me to the airport was one of them; of course I thought that would be my last moments with her. The sadness I felt was overwhelming.

The trip to Asia started in California - Oakland, to be exact. We were outfitted, given more shots, and herded onto aircraft that was so overloaded that the 707 (no kitchen, one bathroom) hardly got off the ground. On to Alaska, landing for fuel, and from there to Japan. Another fueling took place before we left on the final leg to Tan Son Nhut airport near Saigon.

The first impression I had - from the air - was the unbelievable green. From the triple canopy jungle in the more north areas of South Vietnam to the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta, plant life abounds. The view from the air is amplified, too, once you are on the ground.

And why wouldn't it be green. The DMZ, way north of the Saigon area where I was to be stationed, is at the 17th parallel. We were at about the 10th parallel, well below the Tropic of Cancer. The climate made you feel you could almost throw a softball or hit a golf ball to the equator.

It was funny, flying into that war zone where nearly 500,000 GIs and their equipment and material were carrying on a war, because it looked so peaceful and serene and beautiful. I was almost swept with relief.

Until we landed. Officers pushed us hard to deplane and get aboard Army buses that would take us to a replacement battalion where our final assignment would be made. There was constant fear of mortar and RPG attacks on the big planes shuffling Joe in and out of Nam. There was a lot of swearing and confusion, made worse by the high and debilitating humidity and heat. Late July, when I arrived, as my luck would have it, is at the peak of the summer monsoon. That part of the world gets about 100" of rain a year, much of it during the summer monsoon season. Heat, humidity and heavy rain define the summer. Heat and humidity define the winter monsoon time from November to March.

Golf course superintendents can relate to my crude rain gauge that first August; it rained so hard and so often I didn't want to risk exaggeration, so I would set a jar outside our hooch (tent-like living quarters) and measure the precip each day with a foot ruler. I would measure and empty every day and recorded over 20 inches of rain in those 31 days of August 1969 at Long Binh. As an aside, we experienced over 60 consecutive days of 100 degree heat.

Everybody was especially jumpy

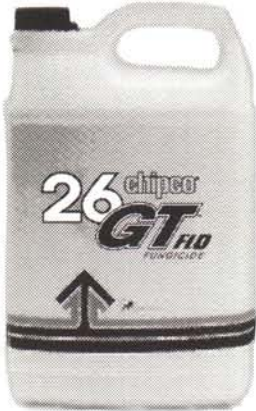
when I got in-country. The Tet Offensive had caught the US and the ARVN forces by surprise and the VC and NVA had killed a lot of men on our side. New guys like me were scared anyway, and the nervousness of the veterans impacted us heavily.

I recall the screaming and hollering of the FNGs ("funny" new guys, as we were all called upon arrival) about our lack of weapons. War zone, Tet, Cobra and Huey gunships in the sky, tanks and APCs and V-100s absolutely everywhere on the ground, and we couldn't get an M-16 to protect ourselves from Charlie. "You'll get a rifle when you get to your unit," we were told.

Small comfort. That night - my first night in RVN - Viet Cong sappers penetrated the perimeter of the Bien Hoa AFB and hit the fuel depot. The base was adjacent to the replacement battalion. The explosion was huge and loud and lit up the night sky. We were frightened to death and . . . no weapons!

In time I received an assignment to an MP unit right near there at Long Binh, and to this day I am thankful I made it home from the worst experience I could ever have. I lived through it without a scratch, and sadly there are over 50,000 GIs

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who did not. Hundreds of thousands of others lived but still today carry physical and mental injuries. The whole experience seems like it happened yesterday, yet it was thirty years ago today.

As events of late have reminded me of that time in my life, I have

been thinking about the experience a lot. It certainly is not an obsession, like it has been for some Vee-yet Naam (as LBJ used to say) vets. Actually, as I've led my life for 30 years since, I haven't thought about that place and those times more than infrequently. I wasn't, at 22

years of age, wise or sophisticated enough to wonder whether war was right or wrong. The US was engaged in it, I believed in our country, and raising my right hand to take the oath was an easy choice. Really, it was the only choice I could have made. I will always wonder why Clinton couldn't muster the minimal courage to do the same. His failure to do so will be his legacy (along with a thousand other immoral, unethical, dishonest and probably illegal acts).

It is easy for me to say that it was the worst time of my life, because it was. But it has also been a powerful influence on me for the last three decades. I think military service is good for anybody. The lessons of discipline and order, cleanliness and neatness, respect for others, camaraderie and a hundred things are often an edge I have that works in my favor.

That time away deepened my relationship with Cheryl. It is almost a relief always knowing your worst time is behind you.

Army service and the 15 months spent in Asia give me a reference point that keeps life and its problems in perspective. Hot days on our course, when considered in that context, are pretty minimal. Any weather event is.

Irrigation problems in the middle of the night, tough situations with players, diseases, and any of the other innumerable troubles we face, pale in contrast to running the risk of losing life in a war zone. Long days, a hundred consecutive of them on the golf course, are pretty tolerable compared to 12 hours on/12 hours off, seven days a week, months and months on end in war.

Although it was not what I could call a life defining experience for me as it was for some, I think I am a better man for it. Also easy to say for a survivor.

And I would guess that for as long as I live I will always say, "it seems like it was only yesterday." 🌿

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