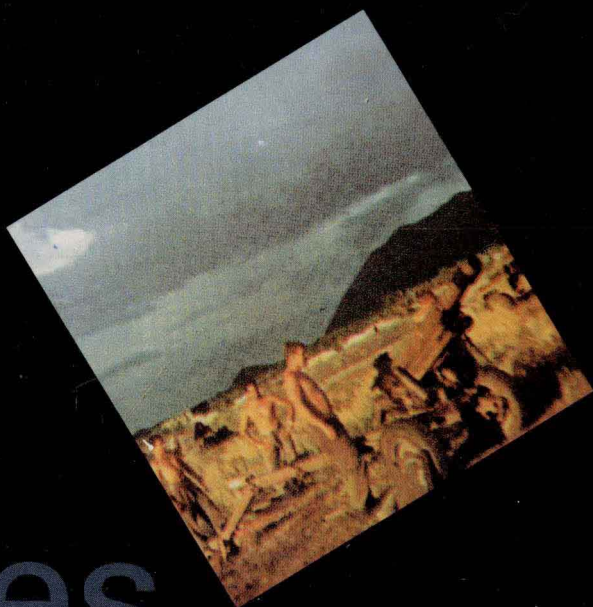


GORDON L. STEINBROOK



Allies AND Mates

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER
WITH THE AUSTRALIANS
AND NEW ZEALANDERS
IN VIETNAM 1966-67

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GORDON L. STEINBROOK

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Finally, I am forever and lovingly grateful to Frances and to our two sons, Lee and Scott, for allowing me the time, here and there, to put together this book about my Vietnam experiences.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1966, less than a year after my college graduation, my commissioning as a United States Army second lieutenant, and my marriage, I received orders for Vietnam. Going to war had been a boyhood dream, but the reality was another matter altogether. I suddenly discovered that the prospect of leaving Frances, my wife of only eight months, and perhaps being killed at age 23 or 24 was anything but exciting. Instead, a fear grew within me the likes of which I'd never felt before.

Two months later, on board a troopship and just days before landing on the shore of Vietnam, I wrote to Frances, "Save every one of these letters so that I'll always have a record of what happened." And a day later I also wrote to my folks, "Be sure and save all my letters. When I get home I want to consolidate all my letters to you and Frances into a memoir." What possessed me to contrive such an idea completely escapes me now. Perhaps I feared that my sacrifice, whatever it might be, would be forgotten. Seven months later, in a letter to Frances, I brought up the idea again, this time expanding on it, and apparently never doubting for a moment that I'd make it home to work on the project: "What a job it's going to be someday trying to sort out all my letters, to put everything down into one large diary and at the same time add to [it]. This is something I definitely want to do. Get it all arranged, perfected, and then typed and put in book form, for private use only. If I ever could accomplish this, I might even like to make a couple copies and maybe give one to the folks and your folks. It would give them an idea what a year is like over here, or at least what it was like for me. A pretty good description of my year, I think, is contained in my letters and should be a good basis for a year's running description of events." Ten years afterward—much

later than I ever intended—I finally completed the project for my family. And now, later still, those letters and memories have taken new form for an audience I never imagined back in 1966–67.

This book covers April 1966 to May 1967, encompassing most of my experiences from the time I was notified of my impending Vietnam duty until I returned from the war. It contains most of the letters I wrote home to Frances and my folks, plus additional memoirs. The memoirs fill in time gaps between letters, expand on some of the letters themselves, and detail events and experiences I didn't write home about. What I have tried to do throughout is fit letters and memoirs together in an understandable sequence that tells the entire story of my Vietnam experience as I perceived it then and as I recall it now.

The story told is that of an inexperienced field artillery second lieutenant from Nebraska who went to war not because he wanted to but because he was ordered to. It is not an account immersed in anger or dismay about the war; indeed, I accepted service in Vietnam as a patriotic duty and believed the war was necessary while I was there. Unlike many other books on war, mine is not about big battles, heroism, the rightness or wrongness of the war, or horrific combat. It is not written by an accomplished author, West Point graduate, or national hero. Instead, it is the story of a man with no particular claim to fame, an average reserve commissioned officer (like most officers), and of combat from the artilleryman's point of view. In short, it is the story of boredom, discomfort, homesickness, death, rumor, feelings, fear, and many other things encompassing an encounter with war.

Although I consider my war experiences mild compared with those of many who served in Vietnam, at the same time my duty was not without hazard or uniqueness. During my approximately 11 months "in country," I served as an artillery aerial observer, an artillery forward observer (FO), and an artillery battery fire direction officer (FDO). What made these duties unusual was that most of the time my battery supported our Australian and New Zealand allies in Vietnam. I flew with an Australian army aviation outfit and did my forward observing for the New Zealand artillery as well as our own, in support of the Australian infantry and armored cavalry. During these duties, I learned what it is to be shot at, mortared, and mined. And I learned about suffering and death on a

INTRODUCTION

small scale, except for one incident that unlike all my experiences before or after, gave me a look at death on a large scale.

Since my experiences were those of an artilleryman, they are for the most part not the high-drama adventures some others may have had. Of course in Vietnam, regardless of service, branch, or job, exposure to combat depended primarily on the enemy's actions in relation to one's own whereabouts. Concerning artillerymen in general, however, apart from the occasional incidents of massive enemy ground attack against artillery units, it has been written that cannoneers led lives that were monotonous and lacking in comfort or diversity. Except for the "comfort" part, this certainly applied to my own artillery battery.

Fortunately or not, depending on how you view it, my role as an artilleryman was more exciting for a time than life was for the cannoneers. As an FO, I was the eyes for the guns and spent five months of my tour flying (spotting), living, and working with the infantry and armored cavalry. My job was to see the target or, more likely, guess where it was, radio its location back to the artillery, and then adjust the fire onto the target. After this duty, however, it was back to my battery as FDO and back to the monotony and sameness of the cannoneers.

In putting this book together, I have omitted a few letters and deleted parts of others that contained information inconsequential to my Vietnam experience. I cut letters and letter segments in which I spoke of personal finances, family activities, the family farm, crops, the weather at home, and so on. I also deleted intimate expressions of love to Frances and my ramblings about the future: career plans, family hopes, and the like. For the most part I cut out duplication between letters to Frances and to my folks, salutations except those necessary for clarity, and all but two closings. A few explanations have been added in brackets. On the whole, however, the letters included have been reproduced as I wrote them, edited only to spare readers or to ensure readability.

There are a few cases in the letters where I have edited out the names of individuals, to avoid hurting feelings or causing embarrassment. Readers will also find that in the memoirs some names are avoided and some first names are absent when they could just as well have been used. The only reason is that I cannot remem-

ber them. All in all, missing names and deleted personal communications to family in no way alter or affect the overall tone or meaning of any of my letters or the book in general. All photographs are from my own collection unless otherwise noted.

One final word of explanation. There are portions of a few letters that were based on rumor, exaggeration, or plain misinformation. Where I have been able to recognize such inaccuracies, I have qualified and clarified them in brackets. However, readers should realize that this entire collection of letters and memories represents my perception of what was happening then and what I now recall as having happened. If I have not been entirely successful in my attempt to be clear and objective, it is due only to my own ignorance and inability to see the truth.

ABBREVIATIONS

1ATF = 1st Australian Task Force
1/Lt = first lieutenant
2IC = second-in-command
2/Lt = second lieutenant
2/35 Arty = 2d Battalion, 35th Artillery
5RAR = 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
6RAR = 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment
11th ACR = 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment
161 Recce = 161 Reconnaissance Flight
ammo = ammunition
APC = armored personnel carrier
arty = artillery
ARVN = Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
asst adj. = assistant adjutant
AWOL = absent without leave
BC = battery commander
bn = battalion
BOQ = bachelor officer quarters
btry = battery
cal. = caliber
capt. = captain
Chicom = Chinese Communist
cmdr = commander
CO = commanding officer
col. = colonel
COSVN = Central Office of South Vietnam
Cs = c rations
CSM = company sergeant major
div. = division
EM = enlisted man
FAC = forward air controller (U.S. Air Force)

FDC = Fire Direction Center
FDO = fire direction officer
FO = artillery forward observer
H&I = harassment and interdiction fires
how. = howitzer
HQ = headquarters
inf. = infantry
KIA = killed in action
ldr = leader
lt = lieutenant
LTC = lieutenant colonel
LZ = landing zone
medevac = medical evacuation by helicopter,
referred to as “dust off”
mm = millimeter
NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO = noncommissioned officer
NVA = North Vietnamese army
OP = observation post
PFC = private first class
plt. = platoon
PSP = perforated steel plank
pvt. = private
PX = post exchange
R&C = rest and convalescence
R&R = rest and recuperation
recon. = reconnaissance
RNZA = Royal New Zealand Artillery
RPG = rocket-propelled grenade
RSM = regimental sergeant major
RTO = radio telephone operator
SAS = Special Air Service
sgt = sergeant
tgt = target
TOC = Tactical Operations Center
USO = United Service Organizations
VC = Viet Cong
VD = venereal disease
XO = executive officer

ALLIES AND **M**ATES

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1. PRELUDE

Dearest Frances,

29 September 66

We just got in from the operation [Operation Vaucluse]. There were times when we were so darn cold and wet and dirty that we all couldn't have cared less if Charlie [short for Victor Charlie, the military communications code words for V and C, hence Viet Cong] had hit us, and hit us he did. Our third day out Charlie hit us five times. The first time we were just walking along and all of a sudden four vc hit our forward platoon. Then we moved on top of a small ridge and set up camp. About then four more vc walked up to a machine gunner about 30 yds away from us, and all hell broke loose again. After things were calm, we were joking about how we thought there were no vc around. As we shot the bull, Charlie hit us, this time pretty hard. Boy, did I do the fast 40-yard crawl back to my radio and weapon. I've never tried to get so low to the ground in all my life, because the old bullets were really whipping overhead. It's funny, all those times we were hit, not once did I actually see Charlie. All you see is movement in the bushes or something like that. The heck of it is they're shooting at you from about 20 yds. away.

27 December 66

The night before Xmas Eve I volunteered myself and my [FO] section to go out with the infantry on an all-night ambush. Well, about 2 AM five vc walked right in among us. They came up from behind us; we were looking down the trail the opposite direction. We opened up on them from a range of about five feet—you can imagine the panic. You know, it's funny, when you kill a vc it's just like getting your hunting limit of ducks or pheasants. Most of us don't think of vc as humans.

All my love, Gordon

Incidents like these and others, some that I wrote home about and others that I didn't, remain etched in my mind as if they happened yesterday. Through my letters and memories, the war in Vietnam seems almost as real to me today as it was in 1966–67. It's hard to imagine now that the events that took me half a world away began so long ago.

April 1966 was a busy month for me at Fort Carson, Colorado. My battery commander had gone on leave for a couple of weeks, leaving me to prepare the unit loading plans. In addition, our battery was in the middle of training troops, and I had the responsibility of running a .50-caliber machine-gun range. On top of this, battalion headquarters had selected me to act as defense counsel for a soldier who had gone AWOL.

The young private and I worked hard preparing his testimony for the court-martial hearing. On the day of the hearing I spent all morning with him going over how he was to respond to my questions. As we rehearsed his testimony for the final time, a messenger from battalion headquarters arrived and informed me that I was to report to the battalion commander immediately. We finished our hearing preparations rather abruptly, and I hurried over to headquarters.

I entered the battalion co's office and reported. It seemed he was being unusually nice as he inquired if I had heard that our barracks neighbors to the west, the 2d Battalion 35th Artillery (2/35th), had received orders for movement to Vietnam. Of course I'd heard—everyone on post had! We'd watched them train during the past couple of months, and in recent weeks three of our own battalion officers had been transferred to the 2/35th. As all sorts of thoughts raced through my mind, he told me that the Department of the Army had authorized a special augmentation of six forward observers (FOs) to the 2/35th and that I was to be one of them. He went on to say that immediately after the court-martial hearing I was to report there for assignment and instructions so that I could put my personal affairs in order before departing for Vietnam during the last part of May. Later in the day I learned I would be assigned specifically to A Battery as one of two new battery FOs.

On receiving the news I was speechless, terror-stricken, and dumbfounded. It seemed as if my life had been ruined, all future plans thrown out the window, and whatever I had on my mind

PRELUDE

wiped out forever. I recovered enough to say “Yes, sir,” salute, and stumble out of his office. The news hit me so hard that I left headquarters in a daze. Though my life seemed ended, there still remained a task to accomplish that day—the defense of the young soldier. Somehow I pulled myself together, had lunch, and went through the hearing as planned. We did quite well: the court-martial board gave him a light sentence. The day at least had one bright spot.

The hearing lasted until about 3:00, so I still had two duty hours before going home. Unlike my normal working habits, I said to hell with it all and went home early. Frances was at work and wouldn’t be home until after 5, so I spent the rest of the afternoon alone, lying on the bed in our Colorado Springs apartment and thinking about anything and everything relating to the news. Assignment as a forward observer! I had heard stories about FOS and how their life expectancy in combat was about 60 seconds. Actually, I should have known better than to believe such tales. I should have realized that the 60-second story probably originated during World War I, when FOS often observed from balloons above the trench lines, and that during World War II and in Korea observers fared better. Besides, in Vietnam the FO did not go forward; he simply accompanied the infantry. Accompany the infantry! The thought brought wild visions of horror. All I could think of was the big Vietnam battle of November 1965 in which the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) had run into a large force in the Ia Drang Valley and lost close to 300 men while killing nearly 2,000 of the enemy. This battle had received tremendous coverage in the newspapers, especially in cities near army posts. I guess it seemed exceptionally significant at the time because it was the first really large-scale battle U.S. forces had been involved in since American combat units were first committed in March 1965.

I lay there wondering if I would survive or whether Frances would end up a widow at 23 or 24. I prayed, remembered the stories Dad had told about World War II on Saipan and Iwo Jima, wondered how I would react under fire, and thought of those days 10 years earlier when my fondest boyhood dream was to be a soldier. I thought of all the previous “crises” I had endured—the biggest high-school football and basketball games of the year, whether I could get a date for the fraternity’s spring formal, and

how I had worried about college hour exams and finals. They all seemed foolish compared with what I faced now.

It was probably a good thing I had a little time by myself to think things over. In the two hours before Frances came home I managed to come to terms with the situation and resolved to make the best of it. After all, millions before me had faced the same possibilities but had accepted them and served. It would be no different with me. If I had to die at this age, then so be it. At least, I reasoned, it would be a more honorable death than being killed in an auto accident. Besides, hadn't President Kennedy said some years ago that we would "pay any price . . . oppose any foe"? I believed in that. By the time Frances got home I had accepted my plight, convincing myself that my destiny very simply lay in the hands of God.

When Frances arrived I told her the news. It was an emotional moment, but soon we began to plan for the coming year. It was quickly settled that she would return with me to Colorado Springs after my leave at home and see me off on the last day. We also decided that during the year she would live with her folks back home in Nebraska and try to get a teaching job. Then, too, there was the task of telling our parents. I wrote to mine the next day.

Dear Folks,

21 April 66

I'm afraid this will be a rather unpleasant letter. I got the bad word yesterday that I'm going to Vietnam. The worst part of it is the short notice. We (our bn) leave from here (Fort Carson) about May 24th for San Francisco and from there by ship across the ocean. We'll probably arrive in Vietnam about the middle or end of June.

I suppose this is pretty much of a shock to you. I knew it was just a matter of time until I had to go, but I sure didn't think it would be this soon. Needless to say I don't want to go, but guess I've got my duty, and so I'll do it the best I can. There's only one way to look at it now; apparently the good Lord wants me there for some reason, and you just don't dispute that.

This very memorable letter written, we set about doing what had to be done. During the next few days I had my will prepared, signed a power of attorney, wrapped up my affairs at my old unit of two months, and reported in to my new unit, A Battery, 2d Battalion, 35th Artillery, a 155-mm self-propelled (M109) howitzer outfit.