Bruce Walter

Headquarters, 4th Battalion (AW)(SP), 60th Artillery
Bravo Battery, 7th Battalion, 29th Artillery (Searchlights)
Vietnam, January 1970-January 1971, 1LT

Introduction

Bruce Walter shared his slide show and its accompanying script that he presented, as the 2025 Veterans Day chapel speaker, to the faculty, staff, and students of the Mount Calvary Christian School in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. With his permission these have been used to create this scrapbook that is predominately focused on An Khe, Vietnam. They along with his answers to specific questions about An Khe in the 1970 time frame provide an excellent look into life at Camp Ratcliff near An Khe and preserving air defense heritage through one soldier's story.

Presentation

Most of you will not enter military service, many of you will not even know someone who has. The recognition offered today to veterans is important because a simple thanks is the minimum necessary for any request for service or sacrifice. I hope to give you a small glimpse of one veteran's experience from own my somewhat unique experience.

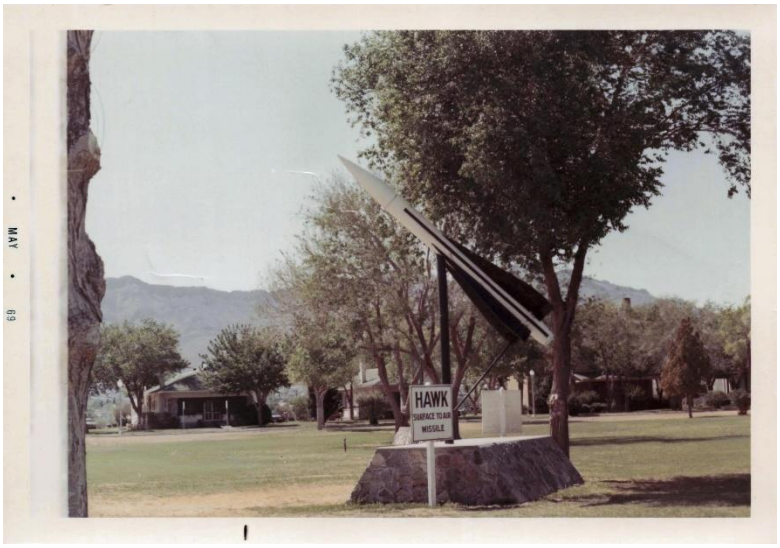
The then national Commander for VFW some time ago said that no one enters military service for the purpose of receiving free desserts and parades later on. True enough. The current commander has repeated that Veterans Day is not about sales or parades, but to acknowledge the commitment of those who have worn the uniform. The best definition of a veteran is someone who has taken an oath to protect and defend the US and the constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. In support of that oath, he or she has pledged their own life if necessary. Any comparison or analogy to the sacrifice of our savior is inadequate and deeply flawed ,but , if you use as a point of comparison the sacrifices in the form of voluntary surrender of prerogatives and privileges for the sake of others, it may help you to understand the sacrifice involved. As Paul points out in Romans 5 the willingness to die for others is a rare thing. Remember too that the weight of sacrifice does not end on the battlefield. It follows us home.

Commissioning and early assignments

Commissioning.
My own military service began at Bucknell University as a member of ROTC. I attended basic training at Fort Indiantown Gap after my sophomore year and was commissioned as a second lieutenant (2LT) at graduation in June of 1968. I also received orders to report to Fort Bliss Texas in El Paso to attend the air defense officers' basic school in January 1969.

Ft Bliss.
Ft Bliss originally was a cavalry post as shown in the adobe replica. Largest , geographically by acreage of any military installation in the US, especially if you include White Sands missile range next door in New Mexico. For years I thought it was named for Phillip Bliss, a cavalry officer in the civil war and noted hymn writer, including "It Is Well with My Soul" and "Hallelujah What a Savior." Actually, Fort Bliss is named for Alfred Bliss , also a civil war cavalry officer but son in law of President Zachary Taylor. Some things never change.

The Officer Basic training course included introduction to how the Army did things as well as weapons training. My class was trained to be platoon leaders for Hawk missiles.



Hawk missile.

The Hawk missile was the first of the radar guided missiles to be radar aimed at a single aircraft. They have now been succeeded by Patriot missiles and the Israeli iron dome system .The Hawk was not bad against high altitude planes but inadequate as to low flyers including helicopters. Previously air defense artillery meant throwing as much steel shrapnel in the air as possible in the hope of hitting something. Most of my class went to either Germany, along the iron curtain with Russia, or to the Demilitarized Zone in Korea. I was assigned to the general staff at the U.S. Army Air Defense Center and Fort Bliss, meaning I just moved a few blocks west in El Paso.

US Army Training Center

I was initially assigned to the Adjutant or G1 section which involve basic administration, daily reports and lots of paperwork . Here I met Command Sergeant Major Alfred Bubb. CSM is highest possible rank for an enlisted man and CSM Bubb had just been nominated for the position of The Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA). He was not chosen for that position and was in the process of retiring but, when combined with a wicked sense of humor, he was a very formidable man.

In the army any officer technically outranks any enlisted man , which meant I technically outranked him. In reality CSMs eat second LTs for breakfast. But for some reason CSM Bubb took a liking to me, or at least tolerated me, and from him I learned significantly more about the Army than the officer's basic course attempted to teach.

After a number of weeks I was reassigned to the G3, plans and operations section, across the hall from G1. I was involved in the plans for training National Guard troops and West Point cadets who came to Ft Bliss in the summer and contingency plans for Ft Bliss. My favorite was how Ft Bliss would react to an invasion from Mexico. The plan anticipated armed military units , not economic migrants, but I suspect it has been changed since then.

In August my wife and I were married and shortly thereafter I received orders to report to Cam Ranh Bay South Vietnam. I knew that there were no effective air defense units in South Vietnam for the simple reason that the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese military did not have aircraft by the time I was deployed to Vietnam. I called the Air Defense section in the Pentagon to ask what I might be doing. I was somewhat surprised to find that they did not know either but speculated that I might be an artillery forward observer, something for which I was completely untrained. I was then offered a slot in jungle school in Panama where you eat bugs and sleep with lizards. I politely declined. Eventually I was sent to the Infantry Officers Vietnam Orientation course at Ft Benning, Georgia, where I was still really a fish out of water.

After completing that course, and Christmas leave, I flew to Ft Lewis, Washington, in Seattle for transportation to South Vietnam. The shortest way from Seattle to Vietnam is north, over the pole. We stopped in Anchorage, Alaska, to refuel, which required everyone to get off the plane. There were no gangways then in the Anchorage airport, only steps down to the runway and then across to the terminal. Since we were all headed to the tropics, everyone on the plane was in khaki short sleeve uniforms, and it was January … in Alaska … and about 10 degrees. Once the plane was refueled, we all went back across the tarmac and climbed into the plane. Most of us did not warm up until halfway across the Pacific Ocean.

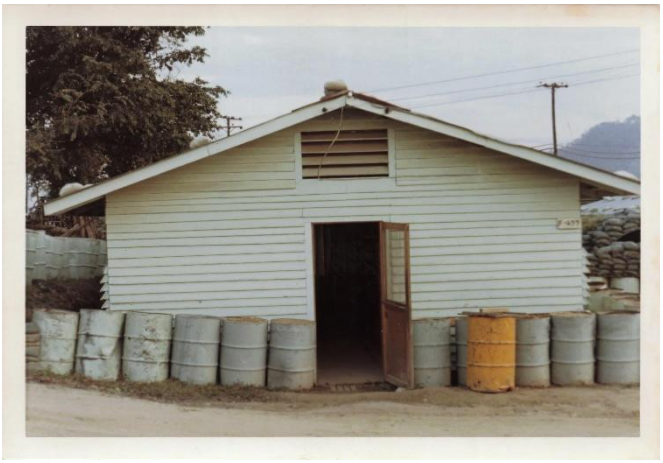
Vietnam

While I was assigned a bunk in a replacement area at Cam Rhan Bay, I never even sat on it because I was handed a ticket and orders to report to the Adjutant of the First Field Force Artillery in Nha Trang, up the coast a short hop. There I found that the Adjutant did not know I was coming or what to do with me. I was told to sit in the office. Almost immediately in came Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Huffnagel, commander of the 4th Battalion (AW)(SP), 60th Artillery, who was looking for a battalion adjutant. Problem solved . As he went back out the door, I was told to pick up my bags and follow. I got a helicopter ride to An Khe in the central highlands, now as the Battalion Adjutant.

The “AW” on this sign stood for automatic weapon, and the “SP” stood for self-propelled, which I will explain later.

Draped on the right side of the sign, when the picture was taken, is an 8-foot boa constrictor.

My position would be temporary since the Adjutant is a captain’s slot in the Battalion. I was fortunate to have two young sergeants who knew what they were doing and were willing to guide me along.



Living conditions at An Khe were a little spartan but comfortable and dry. The roof was covered with corrugated steel. The exterior walls were covered with louvered wood boards on the lower half with screen for ventilation on the upper part of the wall. The floors were concrete for all living quarters including barracks, offices, and the mess hall. The mess hall is where food is prepared and meals are served. The empty steel oil barrels were filled with dirt and surrounded all buildings as a blast wall to provide some protection from the flying shrapnel and fragmentation of enemy artillery, rocket, or mortar rounds.

My quarters were spartan but dry and comfortable. The officer barracks were partitioned off to provide some privacy. My bed had a steel frame with heavy wire and springs to support the thin mattress. The chair is someone's cast off who left it for the next guy.

If I needed any reminder that I was now in the tropics, bananas grew outside my window.

Weapon Systems

The 4th Battalion (AW)(SP), 60th Artillery was, as the sign indicated , an automatic weapons unit, which consisted of four batteries of a tracked vehicle called Dusters, a gun truck battery equipped with Quad 50s and a searchlight battery.

Searchlight mounted on a jeep.

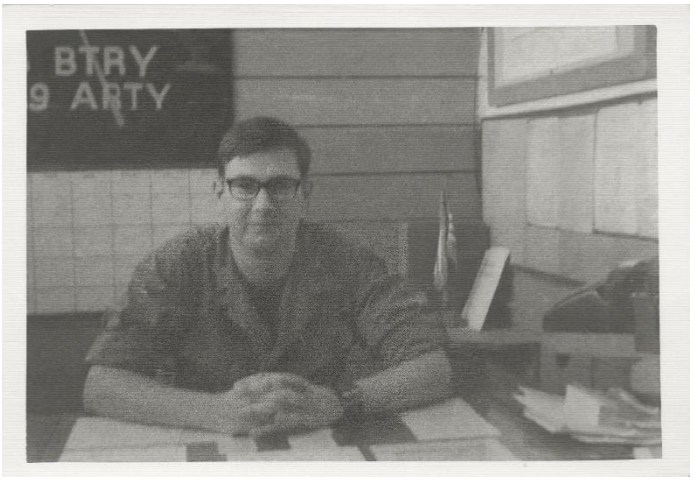
Dusters look like a tank, but they were really just a smaller gun platform on tracks like a tank. European tanks weigh about 60 tons, a duster less than 25 fully loaded. The difference is no armor and no inside crew compartment. The guns, twin 40 mm , were loaded and fired from on top. A 40 mm shell is a high explosive round about as big around as a soup can and about 20 inches long. They are fired in clips of 5, the fifth round usually a tracer round. Each gun fired about 120 rounds a minute depending on the speed of the loader. At 240 rounds a minute they were quite effective in breaking up attacking infantry. The 4/60th used them mostly for firebase and helicopter pad security.

Dusters were thought obsolete after the Korean war. In 1966 only the New Mexico National Guard used them and when called up, they deployed to South Vietnam as a whole unit. Dusters were recalled from courthouse steps all over the country, fitted with General Motor engines and sent to Southeast Asia. Eventually new Dusters were made in a plant in Cleveland.

The Quad 50 gun truck had four 50 caliber machine guns which fired simultaneously. They were primarily used for convoy escort. Maximum firepower was 2300 rounds per minute but usually they only used two barrels at a time to allow for cooling.

Executive Officer in Searchlights

Searchlights were 23 inches in diameter and very effective at night illumination, better than flares and capable of producing good enough light to read a book at a distance of 6 to 8 kilometers depending on weather and terrain. They ran off the special heavy-duty generator of the jeep that they were attached to.



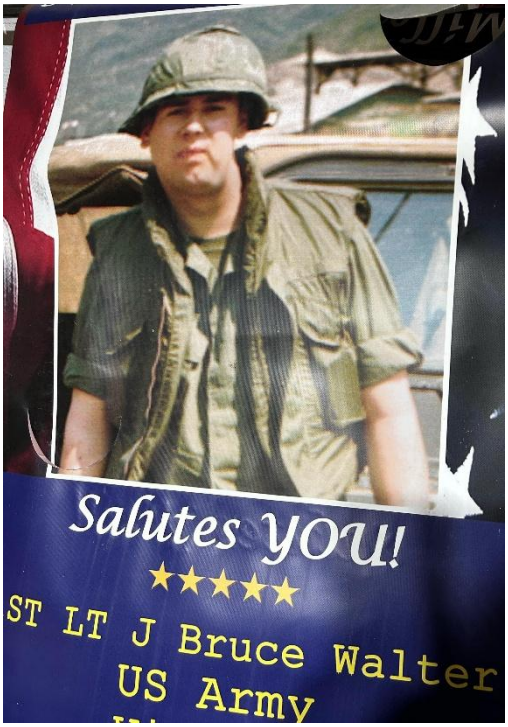
As indicated, when a captain was produced to be adjutant, I was transferred to be executive officer of B Btry, 7th Bn, 29th Artillery, the searchlight battery. I was responsible for most battery administration and was second in command.

When I was in my office this is what I usually looked like.

But we had a unique problem in that there were 23 different light locations in an area slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey. Our area, the IFFV, I Corps, Control Zone II is highlighted in red in the adjacent map. An Khe is under the big white pin near the center of the area. The battery commander would spend about two weeks a month traveling to different locations, exercising command and control and often negotiating with the units our lights were attached to on how they should be used or problems with support or rations. That left me in command at HQ.

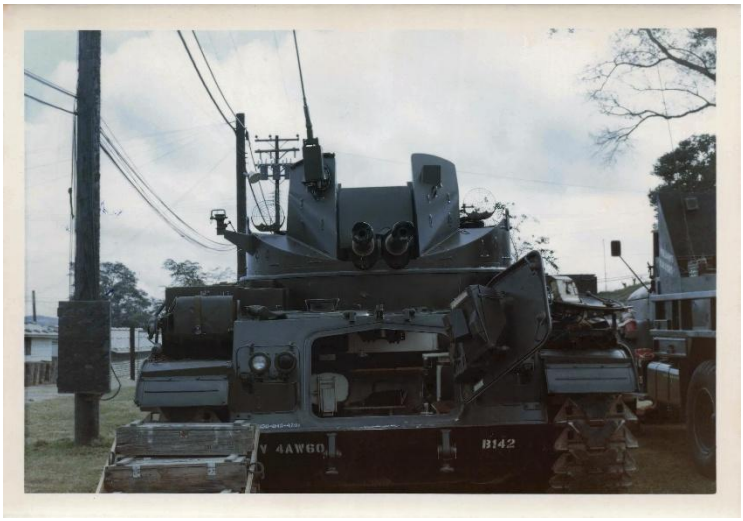
When the battery commander came back our roles were sort of reversed and it was my time to travel for a week or so.

Mostly by jeep but sometimes by helicopter.



Presidential Unit Citation

The 4/60 was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for action at a Special Forces camp on the Cambodian border. It was awarded to the Battalion by General Creighton Abrams, the senior commanding general of all ground forces in Southeast Asia.



General Abrams is inspecting the unit and equipment. He is wearing a boonie hat [cowboy hat] on a Quad 50 with our BN commander behind him . General Abrams was an armor officer (a tanker), and while it did not appear that he was familiar with Dusters or Quads he was really interested in how they worked.

This is the actual award ceremony. For an award like this a streamer is added to the battalion flag. Somewhat anticlimactic in the end.

Move to Tuy Hoa

After the monsoon season [rainy season] we were advised that as a part of the Vietnamization of the war we would turn our facility over to the 22nd ARVN division and move to an Air Force facility at Tuy Hoa on the South China Sea coast.

Quarters at Tuy Hoa were a little different, essentially modular housing units the Air Force used. They were also air conditioned and attached to units that were real bathrooms with hot and cold water, real flush toilets and showers. Tuy Hoa also had a movie theater and a

miniature golf course. Access to the beach was mostly limited because the south China sea at that place was quite rough and subject to very strong rip tides.

Security at Tuy Hoa was based on its size. The outer rim was concertina wire and guard towers. Next came runways, the maintenance and hangers, finally living and eating quarters that were close to the ocean. Our living quarters were well beyond mortar range, and as a result were about as safe as being in Etown.

That was my last two months in South Vietnam. Because of our withdrawal we did very little travel during that time. My replacement showed up around a week early and then I flew to Cam Ranh Bay to return home. Again, I spent almost no time there, leaving on a flight at 2 a.m. the afternoon I arrived. From there it was across the Pacific, across the international date line to Ft Lewis in Seattle for out processing, discharge from active duty, a quick meal and transport to the airport to fly to Baltimore, where in January it was rainy and cold. I went from a tropical combat zone to cold Baltimore in a little less than 60 hours, with only what sleep you can get on an airplane and little food. I was essentially by myself with no one to talk to or time to decompress. However, despite other veterans often discussed experiences, I never experienced any negative reaction while in uniform.

Home in Baltimore

When my wife met me at the airport, I was home, thankfully in one piece but completely disoriented by changes in time, location and circumstance. Only recently did I come to understand how difficult, the fact that my experience followed me home, was for my wife.

To paraphrase Major Richard Winters, central character in the HBO movie “Band of brothers” and the book of the same name by historian Stephen Ambrose. Dick Winters was a highly decorated paratrooper who fought in every major battle in Europe in WWII, a gifted leader of men and a superb tactician. He lived most of his adult life down the road from here in Palmyra. Once asked by a grandson if he was a war hero, Dick Winters, who, by any rational definition was a war hero, said no but he served in a company of heroes. I am not , was not, by any rational definition, a war hero, but I did serve with thousands of others who deserve to be treated as heroes. Some of them are seated here.