

Chapter 2; Basic training

“Are we having fun yet?” I thought as we stood at attention in the slushy Fort Lewis January snow. I was the victim of the delightful process known as the Selective Service draft lottery which picked birthdays at random where the first one drawn was number 1, the last was 365. The local draft board would determine the top number to be drafted for that year. I’ve never been on the winning side of games of chance and my luck did not improve when in 1969 the number drawn for July 21 was 27. The highest number drafted from this group was 195, and the number 27 applied to me when I no longer had a student deferment in June of 1970. When I left Longview, TX, I was immediately eligible to be drafted.

Living on a farm in North Dakota is great. Working on a farm in North Dakota, not so much! Milking cows and trying to get tractors to run in 20 below weather strengthened my resolve not to stay on the farm.

Aircraft always held a fascination for me. In fact as I entered the first grade at our one room country school, I promised my 4 year old girlfriend an airplane ride.

My passion for aviation continued through grade and high school, however when I took my drivers test, I found out that I needed glasses. At that time neither the military nor airlines were hiring anyone with glasses. I could however get my private flying license with glasses. If I wanted a career in Aviation, it would need to be in some position other than pilot. I settled on aviation maintenance and attended Letourneau College in Longview Texas studying aviation technology.

I graduated from Letourneau College in June 1970 with aircraft mechanics training and a private pilots license, and headed north with my trusty 66 Chevelle SS396. It wasn’t quite as trusty as I thought, because it started knocking about 200 miles south of Holdredge Nebraska. I called my brother Leland to meet me at Holdredge where coincidentally Cathy, my 4 year old girl friend who was now a college softmore, lived. I limped along at 25 mph till I arrived at Holdredge. Yep, I gave her an airplane ride. My brother Leland drove down to Holdredge and towed my Chevelle back home to Arena, ND.

I soon had a job repairing small aircraft, but Uncle Sam figured he needed me more than Mandan Air Service did. The news was full of GI’s dying in the jungles of Vietnam. Born and raised on a North Dakota prairie farm, the closest I got to a jungle was the woods along the Sabine River near Longview Texas. I wasn’t real thrilled with jungles to start with, and the prospect of getting shot at didn’t encourage me to run to the recruiting office to sign up. With the draft number of 27, I had 2 choices, get drafted and let the military decided where I would wind up, or enlist and have some choice. Draftees served a 2 year term and generally wound up in the infantry with minimal training. It seemed that joining and having at least a little choice would be better than leaving it all up to someone who

needed a warm body to fill a space recently vacated by the recipient of a Viet Cong high speed projectile.

My parents and community were very patriotic, and although some neighbors were Mennonite pacifists and against any war, the thought of running away was not in my nature. My parents taught me that "A person who shirks their duty to defend the country and the freedoms we enjoy does not deserve to have that freedom." Canada was never an option.

I investigated pilot positions in each of the armed forces. Unfortunately with 20/200 vision and the draft supplying a high number of "perfect" trainees, I was out of luck. "Oh well, I want to be in aviation, so I'll sign up for fixed wing aircraft maintenance", I thought. My reasoning was that fixed wing aircraft had to be stationed on an airport, and that had to be in a secure area right? The friendly Army recruiter said "sounds good to me, sign here, I'm sure they will give you fixed wing maintenance since that is what you wrote down as your preference". Amazingly the recruiter's years of training and endless practice allowed him to say that without even a little snicker.

On a cold January day in 1971, I boarded the bus to Fargo Armed Forces Induction Center and after some medical poking and prodding, raised my right hand, solemnly promising to defend my country against all enemies foreign or domestic. Even though I had endured a previous physical, the Army needed to determine that I was indeed worthy to be thrown in with the other target candidates, and had not rendered myself unfit to serve, which basically meant that I could walk and breathe without assistance.

After a delicious motel meal, the other inductees and I were herded into a train car on a rail siding in Fargo North Dakota. It was twenty below zero outside, and the folks in charge of the train car temperature must have thought that if a little heat was good, then a lot must be better, because the temperature inside the train car must have been 95 degrees. Looking back, the temperature must have been the Army's subtle way of acclimating the inductees to their ultimate destination, Hell.

With a lurch, the car was hooked up to the train and we lumbered off to the west. "Hey this Army stuff is pretty good," a kid from Jamestown said. "We have a great view from the observation deck; get to play cards all day, not bad." A couple days later, the training staff of Fort Lewis near Tacoma Washington greeted the inductees and promptly dispelled any myth that basic training was going to be fun.



Somehow getting up at 4 am, running around in the snow and slush with a drill sergeant bellowing in my ear did not quite measure up to the picture the recruiter painted for me. Camping out on the face of Mt. Rainier in February was not one of my favorite activities either. Crawling under razor concertina wire with live bullets zipping right over us was kind of interesting

though. Their supersonic crack reminded us how close they were.

None the less, the weeks went by and the day arrived when the orders were handed out. I was assigned a military occupation specialty (MOS) of 67N20, helicopter mechanic, aka flying target.

Advanced individual training (AIT) for aviation mechanics was held at Fort Rucker Alabama. My ears were plugged from the chronic cold brought on by the constant yelling at basic training, but replacement of the hard core discipline with a more relaxed training atmosphere was a welcome change. Looking at the situation I was in, I saw so many guys that were bitter at life, bitter at family, and totally pissed that they were drafted into the Army. Basic training may have forced them to comply with rules, but it couldn't change their attitude.



Mom and dad worked hard for their meager belongings. We had a family of 7 kids, and we may have worn hand me downs, but they were always clean, and we had plenty to eat. They taught us to be self-reliant and to love the country that made it possible to succeed at whatever our ambition and skills led us to. Even though I couldn't understand how packing lunch boxes on KP would help, I resolved to look for the good in each experience. Even if helicopter maintenance was not my first choice, it was still an aircraft, and I was fascinated with the

technology. A turbine powered helicopter was pretty cool stuff to this country boy.

The UH1 "Huey" helicopter crew consists of a pilot, an aircraft commander, a door gunner and a crew chief. The door gunner and crew chief help load and unload the helicopter. In flight they communicate with the pilot to advise him of proximity to other air traffic and obstacles on the ground. They operate the M60 machine guns in defense of the machine. The crew chief is assigned to a specific helicopter and is responsible for its maintenance. The training included weapons training with the M60 including in-flight firing exercises.



The barracks shown are old WW2 barracks where we stayed until we were assigned to the training companies, where we were housed in modern brick structures.

The Instructors at Fort Rucker were mostly Vietnam UH1 helicopter maintenance veterans. Most were decent guys, and the students respected their combat

experience. The training was geared towards system familiarization, and assembly replacements. The instructors taught by rote. On some of the technical aspects of electronics and similar subjects, they were soon out of their depth. It seemed the macho instructors had to have "all of the answers". If they didn't know the answer, they told the students some BS (bovine stuff) answer and expected them to accept it at face value. Some of the things they taught were just flat out wrong, and I soon got a reputation for arguing with the instructors on technical trivia.

When the course started, the instructors were quick to say that there were no stupid questions. My mechanical inquisitiveness and desire to learn made them think that "there just might be dumb questions." The instructors would reply to the questions with "You don't need to know why." type of answers. They expected the students to "memorize, not think." Fort Rucker had a nice library, which included quite a number of aviation related texts. I would go to the library at night and find proof to refute what the instructors were saying. It got to be a game, and I got into it enough to finish first in my class. For my efforts, I was

awarded a letter from the base commandant and an engraved cigarette lighter, a hollow victory since I didn't smoke.

After AIT, there were quite a number of possibilities for assignment. I could have gone to Germany, or Korea, or Stateside, or Vietnam. The orders were posted on a bulletin board at our barracks.

At home, it was just mom and dad to do all of the farm work. Dad had gone to check the cattle in the pasture and found a cow that was soon to be calving and having trouble. He needed help to bring the cattle in so Mom had to help. The cattle were not cooperating, but after chasing them all over the pasture, they finally got them in. Totally discouraged and exhausted, Mom sat down on the porch to rest. The phone rang. "I just got my orders Mom, its Vietnam".