

VIETNAM AND THE UNIVERSITY

David Glaser--April 2020

The following is a recently revised piece initially written in 1970 after my first year with the University of Maryland. It relates to the unusual experiences and academic demands we all faced teaching in 1968-69 in Vietnam.

It was November, 1968 and the young instructor put on his fatigues, his flak jacket and helmet. He then picked up his lecture notes and headed for the classroom. Assigned by the University of Maryland's Far East Division to Vietnam's Phu Cat Airbase north of Cam Rahn Bay, tonight he would instruct thirty G.I.s in the intricacies of early American history. The subject included an elaborate description of the Puritan ethic and a comparison of colonial life in New England, the middle colonies and Virginia.

Teaching American history in Asia, preaching critical thought in the midst of seemingly endless violence, watching a war movie on television in a war zone—these were only small aspects of this greatest of paradoxes and greatest of challenges: providing a university education to American servicemen under combat conditions.

Involvement in higher education had not always been quite so dramatic. The University of Maryland had been offering GIs and their dependents the opportunity to earn a college degree



overseas since 1949. In that year the University had been invited to accompany American troops to Europe following the formation of NATO and with the emerging Cold War. In a sense it was an on-duty extension of the GI bill. Spreading with the expanding American global commitment, by 1956 there was a Maryland Far East Division with offerings in Japan, Okinawa and Korea as well as Europe.

As long as the Cold War remained primarily an ideological confrontation such a program, though unusual, was comprehensible. But by 1963 the University also found itself in Vietnam. There, an effort to assist the South Vietnamese to resist what was considered a communist takeover turned into a painful and large-scale military involvement—the most violent since World War II. Accordingly, without really having planned it that way, Maryland now found itself providing one to six full-time instructors to bases in combat situations. Nothing of this sort had ever been attempted before; never before had an educational enterprise been carried out under more trying circumstances.

Instructors who volunteered for this effort arrived by C-130 transport and helicopter after a thirteen-hour flight on commercial aircraft from their headquarters at Fuchu Air Base, Japan. In all, they were as bizarre as their unlikely campuses. There was no such thing as a typical member of this group of expatriates. A Marylander might be drawn to Asia because of its exotic reputation or because of domestic problems in the United States. They might be academic misfits who lacked the terminal degrees for a tenured position stateside. Then there were the retired officers who found life among the academic gypsies a way in which to reap the benefits of a military environment one more time. There was always at least one newlywed among the college-out-of-a-carpetsack varieties. These had come to Asia seeking both their first academic job and a honeymoon. Now they found themselves separated, she languishing at Tachikawa Air Force Base, as he put in eight lonely weeks in ‘Nam’. And, of course, there were always former European refugees in the program, those who preferred this world and the ghetto of military bases in Asia to life in communist Europe

or even urban America. A final addition to this unlikely band, and the most paradoxical, were the draft dodgers. These were in Vietnam as instructors with a GS-13 rating and \$9,000 a year salary to avoid finding themselves in Vietnam with all its dangers, as privates, with rifles, at \$2,000.

Some of these instructors were dedicated lecturers and some were not. Some were on a second career and some had never had one. Some were whiners and some had courage. Some were of integrity and substance while others sold themselves for tax-free dollars and an officer's club card. They often began by leaping from the baggage compartments of the windswept C-130s with a suitcase in one hand and a typewriter in the other. They were members of an academic foreign legion, from all corners of the earth; for all their failings the perfect professionals for the job at hand.

Awaiting them was the base itself, the military milieu in which they were to teach, the war, and, most important, the varied group of totally preoccupied GI students. A description on one base which might be considered typical, Phu Cat, will serve to put the reader imaginatively into the Marylander's teaching environment. Phu Cat was located 400 miles northeast of Saigon, on the South China Sea, in what the military designated as II Corps. The 5,000 Air Force personnel who were expected to call this home for an average of one year quickly found that they were completely surrounded by the enemy, and the Vietcong could on occasion make their presence painfully known. Separating this unit from direct contact with the "hostiles", however, were several companies of South Korean soldiers. These ringed the base, defending it with a ferocity that had become proverbial throughout Vietnam. The R.O.K. troops, in turn were surrounded by a defoliated strip several miles in width. That was equipped with the latest, most sensitive detection instruments known to 20th century man. In the dead of night, upon receiving a signal from this area, specially equipped AC-47s, known affectionately as "Spookies" or "Puff the Magic Dragon" flew into the threatened zone. There they

destroyed all life by literally enveloping the area in a sheet of lead which spewed from three 100 round a second miniguns in their sides.



On the base itself, when the command was not preparing to provide daily “misty” observation flights over the north or F-100 fighter support for the war theatre, the men attempted to make life as much like home as possible. This meant providing themselves with

a wide range of American luxuries: such comforts as air-conditioning, television, thanksgiving turkeys, seedless grapes, Nativity scenes at Christmas and Playboy magazine. Mail was delivered daily from Saigon and Mass was held in an elaborate chapel on Sunday. Humor was maintained as GI humor is maintained everywhere, some sage writing “LOVE” in camouflage on their most exposed of bunkers and the fighter pilots decking their modest quarters with fairy-like castle turrets made of plywood. Indeed, to the impartial observer the base could only be compared to a fairyland: the uninitiated feeling like Alice-in-Wonderland having afternoon tea with the Mad Hatter. In the last tragic analysis, Phu Cat could best have been described as a small, isolated bit of American absurdity in an Asian sea of chaos.

When the Marylanders arrived at this Vietnamese-alamo and others like it, some clad in beard, sandals, and shorts, they usually brought with them a healthy skepticism regarding their ability to instruct according to the highest standards of academia. How, for example, could they be expected to conduct with total freedom a course in “American Foreign Policy in the Modern World?” How could the military machine possibly risk their speaking out against the war, in the very combat zone itself? Wouldn’t they attempt to muzzle them, perhaps force the instructors to transform

their podium into pulpit from which no heretical views would be tolerated?

Despite these concerns, the new instructors were soon amazed to discover that they would be given a totally free hand in expressing academic and even personal views. Local commanders generally insisted only on a commitment to the subject matter and asked that they follow the normal military base regulations. This was largely a result of the short eight week stay of this academic intruder, and his GS-13 rank which placed him in protected suspension between the academic and military world.

Whatever their views, the incoming professors had great intellectual latitude in dealing with sensitive subjects. A course in Government might begin with a discussion of American imperialism or the wisdom of the war in Vietnam. This was a tribute to the nation's commitment to adult military education even if it meant criticism of the war effort in the war zone!

Despite this positive note, arriving Maryland lecturers had enormous handicaps to overcome. Obviously, the environment was less than an ideal educational cocoon. The G.I.s first priority necessarily lay with the daily greasing of tanks, flying of helicopters or walking midnight patrols. In Vietnam these unpleasant tasks often consumed as much as twelve hours a day, leaving little time or inclination to leaf through Gunnar Myrdal's American Dilemma.

Additionally, the students were generally, but not always, enlisted personnel. They were often just out of high school. Many were from families at the bottom rungs of the society...and so they had been drafted. Then there were those who had gone to college only to find, for various reasons, their deferments lifted. There might be a scattering of officers among them. It was a challenging academic mix.

For the professor there were further unusual challenges. For a student shot down over Laos, was a withdrawal or an incomplete the better grade? And given the circumstances under which these adult learners worked; how strict should the grading be? What to do for textbooks, or clerical help, or even a duplicating machine? How to get advice or assistance from an administration which could not be reached even by telephone thousands of miles away?

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
Far East Division

ATTENDANCE WORKSHEET

Instructor GLASER, DAVID Center Fm Gat AB, RVN
(Print or Type) Last Name First Middle Term II: 68-69

Title of Course American Government: GAP 1

Enrollment Form (UMC-128) verified.

STUDENTS	CLASS DATES	Notes		Total Absences*	Remarks
		Days	#		
1. <u>ROLAND E. 442</u>			<u>+ 13</u>	<u>- 2</u>	<u>A</u>
2. <u>ROBE H. 600</u>			<u>- 57</u>		<u>FNA</u>
3. <u>STUDNY A. 560</u>			<u>- 21</u>	<u>- 22</u>	<u>B</u>
4. <u>CHARLES F. 324</u>			<u>+ 28</u>	<u>- 12</u>	<u>B</u>
5. <u>RUSSELL 691</u>			<u>+ 28</u>	<u>- 22</u>	<u>C</u>
6. <u>RALPH G. 263</u>			<u>+ 4</u>	<u>- 8</u>	<u>A</u>
7. <u>RAYMOND E. 612</u>					<u>Withdraw</u>
8. <u>JAMES E. 429</u>			<u>+ 12</u>	<u>- 22</u>	<u>C</u>
9. <u>HOWARD L. 568</u>			<u>+ 25</u>	<u>- 22</u>	<u>C</u>
10. <u>THOMAS E. 324</u>					<u>FNA</u>
11. <u>EDWARD L. 247</u>					<u>FNA</u>
12. <u>ARL L. 755</u>					<u>FNA</u>
13. <u>WILLIAM H. 403</u>					<u>Withdraw</u>
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The information recorded on this worksheet should be transferred to the Class Grade List and Record of Attendance for submission to the Registrar's office.

*A maximum of four absences is allowed. If the student has more than four absences, he must be notified to withdraw officially. If he fails to withdraw, he will receive the grade of F (non-attendance).

UMR-311 (7M 3-67)

Then, even on those rare occasions when contact with the administration in Tokyo was excellent and relations with authorities on the base were all that could be desired, an instructor confronted gross inadequacies. The home office library consisted of a few thousand volumes. Base libraries varied widely, but generally consisted almost entirely of light reading. Such trifles as maps, visual aids, projectors, classrooms, typewriters, secretarial assistance, even examination booklets, were often unavailable. When the possibility of disrupting rocket attacks or even armed infiltration by the enemy into the education area was added to this picture, the academic situation was less than auspicious.

Yet, despite all of this, and here is the strange part, by and large the courses offered by the gypsy professors to the combat G.I.s were an overwhelming success. For all the inherent deficiencies the situation contained, men were provided with an education that was the virtual equal of that which could be obtained in the states. The reasons for this lay primarily in the nature of the students themselves and the faculty. The lecturers, regardless of their origins, had been carefully selected with an eye to both their adaptability and academic credentials. These “flexible faculty” as they called themselves, made up for the deficiency in library resources by shipping their own volumes from the United States to Vietnam. They overcame the problem of visual aids by using military maps and buying their own projectors. Should an attack disrupt the base, these quixotic souls were quite capable of holding an impromptu seminar in the bomb shelter. Where classrooms were unavailable, they might commandeer the Disaster Control Center or the Judge Advocate’s office for an evening.

For all their limitations noted earlier, the students in Vietnam proved no less remarkable than the faculty. Military life had given them discipline and military life perspective. For many this was a radical shift from the nature of their day to day existence. For more than a few, the university classroom became an oasis, a slender contact with a normal world.

Because of this Maryland students in Vietnam showed an abundance of enthusiasm and a willingness to work. Far more often than was the case in the United States they took courses not because they wished to graduate so much as because it was a learning experience. The strains were great. For many, perhaps a much a one-third of the average class, hard work and willingness to learn simply could not compensate for the situation in which they found themselves. But the best of the uniformed collegiates were a match for the finest on any campus in America.

And so, flexible faculty and military students came together in Vietnam to explore the realm of high education in what was a unique educational experience. As he boarded his plane for Cam Ranh Bay, thence Saigon; when he returned to “the world” what could the Marylander say of his effort and what he had left behind?

There was, of course, the traditional educational contribution. Many students in Vietnam went on to earn associate and bachelor’s degrees. Many more would successfully participate in a learning program that by its peak in 1989 topped 85,000 yearly enrollments at over 100 locations in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Perhaps another answer to this question can be found in what the academics themselves represented and the intrinsic character of their vocation. In every sense they injected a radically different element into the orderly military setting. They disrupted the pattern of this with their very appearance, their questions to which there were no pat answers, their criticism of intolerance, their peaceful mien and peaceful vocation. It was a study in contrasts that provided a healthy balance to the existing environment. All could see that there was another way, that options did exist, even in Vietnam.

As for Vietnam itself, it was the wrong war, but for the professors who went there, the right profession at the right time.