

## A QUANG TRI MILLIONAIRE

By Hank Neill

As the 1st Brigade's Finance Officer one of my highest priorities upon arriving in Vietnam in the summer of 1968 was to obtain operating cash. After erecting the tents



which were to be the brigade's Finance "office" on Quang Tri Combat Base, I headed south to Saigon out of the same air strip I had landed at just a few days earlier. Since I would be carrying a large amount of cash on the return trip, I was accompanied by my senior NCO, SSG Mark Mortenson, and two Soldiers from the Finance Section, PFC Gary Barard and PFC John Corente. Not sure of how to get to Saigon or what to do when we got there, we were off to find the Army's Central Funding Office (CFO) where I could draw the cash needed to operate my 30 man Finance Section and support the "Red Devils" deployed in northern I Corps. After waiting countless hours for flights at a series of air bases on our way south, we finally arrived at Tan Son Nhat Air Base in Saigon. Hot, tired and thoroughly confused, we immediately began our search for the CFO which we soon learned nobody had ever heard of! Fortunately, I had a former boss who was located at the Army headquarters in Long Binh, a suburb of Saigon, so we headed there to get directions.

**(Photo:** CPT Hank Neill in front of the brigade's Finance "office," Quang Tri Combat Base, August 1968.)

The first thing we noticed as we stepped out of Ton San Nhat Air Terminal was that most of the Americans we saw were in khaki uniforms, civilian clothes or, if in jungle fatigues, few had field gear. Here we were from northern Quang Tri loaded down with helmets, flack jackets, protective masks, weapons and ammunition. The contrast with those around us was striking. Saigon was certainly very different than our brigade's combat base we left up north a few days earlier.

Eventually we found a bus and headed to Long Binh a short distance outside Saigon. The Navy ran the military buses in the Saigon area utilizing color codes to designate routes. Our problem was when we got on the Blue route someone would inform us we should be on the Red route, or the Green route, or some other route. After transiting through most of the colors in the rainbow, we finally arrived at Long Binh hot, tired, hungry and thoroughly confused. The good news was I located my former boss who knew where we had to go. After a good night's sleep and our first real meal in several days our spirits improved and we set off the next morning to reach the elusive CFO.

Upon reaching our destination, we found the CFO to be a large nondescript concrete structure surrounded by a wire fence. To pass through we needed the approval of a very rotund Vietnamese guard relaxing at the gate, a carbine on his lap. Without rising, he cleared us to enter and we approached the building's heavy steel door. After pushing a signal button it opened and we entered. "Wow! Look at this!" I exclaimed upon first spotting the boxes of cash stacked clear to the ceiling--many millions of dollars!

I was told by the officer in charge that he had been expecting us and all I had to do was present the U. S. Treasury check I brought with us and the cash was ours. His only question was, "How much money do you want? Since I did not look forward to making the difficult Saigon trip on regular basis, I requested several million dollars. "Not a problem" was the response I got. There would be no coins as the currency used in Vietnam was all paper Military Payment Certificates (MPC) which the troops often referred to as "funny money" or "Monopoly Money." The requested currency represented a large volume as we could not receive it all in large bills. The currency had to be obtained in a number of different values, the smallest being a 5¢ bill and the largest being a \$20 bill. If we took only large bills, say \$20 bills, no one would be able to make change and the money would be relatively useless for most transactions.

We also had to acquire an extra series of MPC. The second series would be identical to the first except for its serial numbers and color. If a conversion between the two series of MPC was ordered by Headquarters, U. S. Army Vietnam, it would require Finance personnel to collect all MPC of the first series, e. g., a series printed in red ink, and issue the second series printed in the different color. This was all to be done in one day. Any of the old series currency held in the hands of personnel not authorized to use it, e. g., in the hands of Vietnamese citizens, would be worthless the day after the conversion. To me the extra series simply meant twice as much volume to haul back to Quang Tri. The currency we carried as we left the CFO filled several large canvas and leather money bags plus a number of heavy wooden boxes. In addition, we had to carry our helmets, flack jackets, protective masks, weapons, ammunition and personal items, a very full load.



**(Photo: CPT Hank Neill, PFC John Corente, SSG Mark Mortenson and PFC Gary Barard at Saigon's Tan Son Nhat Air Terminal with their load containing several million dollars!)**

Coping with all we had to carry and in an attempt to assure security, I requested transportation back to Saigon's Tan Son Nhat Air Terminal. I was told, "We usually try to help out but our truck is broken. You will have to go by bus!" I immediately asked for a Military Police escort but learned none was available. Under pressure to get back to Quang Tri and prepare for the brigade's first payday in country about a week later, we headed back to Tan Son Nhat via the Navy's dreaded multicolored bus system. That's when things got really complicated.

Transporting a large amount of cash along with our personal gear on a bus proved to be a challenge. Our basic security lay in the fact no one knew what we had in our possession while our secondary level of security was the weapons we carried--three M-16 rifles and one .45 caliber pistol! Thus we needed to get to the relative security of the military transportation system as fast as possible and that meant we had to get to the nearest bus as fast as possible. This involved two of us carrying some of our many pieces of cargo a short distance while the remaining two stood guard at our original spot. Then, leaving one soldier to guard the just moved items, the other returned to the original spot to join one of the remaining two of us in transporting more of the cargo to the new location while leaving the remaining soldier to guard the original spot. This tedious process was repeated until we reached the bus stop making sure we kept within eyesight of each other at all times. I suspect it all looked a bit like a Three Stooges kind of operation but it was the only option we had as incredible as it all seems now.

Fortunately, the trip to the air terminal required a shorter ride than the first day's bus travel. Nevertheless, it was a challenge toting our cumbersome load while guarding our cache of funds. I was relieved when we finally arrived back in the hot and crowded Tan Son Nhat air terminal to begin still another long wait for a flight north.

Since we now had "special cargo," we had a slightly higher priority to board government aircraft for the trip back north. It still took a couple of days to reach Quang Tri Combat Base as we often had to wait long hours for flights out of military air fields along the way. Once back at our home base, I breathed a sigh of relief as we secured the money I was personally responsible for in field safes in the sandbagged steel CONEX container we had earlier attached to the rear of my tent. The Finance Section was now open for business as I settled into my humble abode, the tent I was to live and work in as the brigade's Finance Officer--a Quang Tri Millionaire!



(Photo: CPT Hank Neill, where he lived and worked as a Quang Tri Millionaire!)