

As a 1958 high school graduate without a firm grasp of a career, I decided to pass on college and cast my lot with Uncle Sam. I'd sent post cards of interest to all the services. Only the Marine Corps responded. I signed on the dotted line and went looking for adventure. During the next six years I found it - in spades.

In February, 1962, I graduated with class number 1-62 at the Marine Security Guard School, Henderson Hall, Quantico, Virginia. The day we received our embassy assignments was memorable. As they called names off, I realized I wasn't going to Lisbon, Paris, Stockholm, Athens, or anywhere else equally exotic and cool. Tom Mollick, LeRoy Vestal, and I were being sent to Saigon, and I didn't even know where it was. I'd never heard of South Vietnam, though I was familiar with French Indo-China, a name which was offered as a reference point. I made a mad dash to the library and dug into whatever news magazines were available. What I read both chilled my spine and accelerated my pulse. "Holy s---," I remember saying aloud, "there's a shootin' war going on over there!" Little did I know.

After flying 9,003 miles, most of it by MATS (military air transport service and all of it facing the tail of the plane), with stopovers in San Francisco, Honolulu, and Guam, we landed at Clark AFB in the Philippine Islands. After a quick stopover in Manila to get our passports stamped with a Vietnam visa we boarded an Air France commercial airliner and continued. The whole trip was really weird for the three of us. As Marines now working under the auspices of the U. S. State Department, we weren't allowed to travel in uniform. So we made the trip from Washington D.C. in our brand new business suits. On February 24, 1962 three wide-eyed and excited young Marines arrived in torrid, muggy, stinky, exhilarating, and exotic Saigon. The Embassy itself

issued a notice of welcome in its March 2nd weekly bulletin, but the Vietnamese *welcomed* us on February 27th, when two South Vietnamese pilots bombed President Ngo Dinh Diem's palace, just a few blocks from our villa. I remember riding in our van to the Embassy for continued orientation, watching the planes out of the corner of my eye – not gawking, certainly, trying to be cool about the whole thing – wondering what on earth I'd gotten myself into. It wouldn't be the last time I'd wonder that.

On January 2, 1963, three Americans died in a prophetic skirmish near a village called Ap Bac. Not that I was aware of it at the time, but it was the single, most decisive Army of Vietnam defeat to date, and established the foundation for the coming coup d'etat. I was part of the detachment that had the dubious distinction of providing the Honor Guard escorting the caskets of the three American helicopter pilots into the belly of the plane that would take them home. Though our troops in the field were technically still *advisors*, it certainly wouldn't be the last time we did that. The killing had begun in earnest.

On October 6, 1962, several of us who were just heading into town for a beer or two were treated to a truly haunting, unforgettable sight. At one of the major downtown intersections a young Buddhist monk, right before our eyes, doused himself with gasoline and, with the clink and scratch of a Zippo, turned himself into a living and dying torch. The images of that act – the smell and crackle of burning flesh, the eye stinging smoke – will always be so close that a mere whiff of gasoline, or the smell of garbage burning can trigger a flashback to the scene and it's never welcome. It also would not be the last time we got up-close and personal with Buddhist monks.

During the height of the persecutions of the Buddhist majority by the Roman Catholic minority, several monks sought, and were granted political asylum in our Embassy – and we became baby-sitting body guards. None of the bonzes spoke English, at least not when I was on post. We had a small table and a chair just outside their room and except for when their meals (which *always* consisted of rice and fish covered with a nasty smelling sauce called *nouc mam*) were served, it was as boring as watching grass grow.

November of 1963 proved most memorable and contained the *event of my lifetime*. On the 1st I went to work at the Embassy Annex. By 0900 hours, reports started circulating that a coup by several South Vietnamese Generals was under way. By 1000 hours the radios went silent and our news sources dried up. For the next twenty to thirty hours, everyone but our Assistant NCOIC, who was stranded at the Marine House, was on duty somewhere in the city. Another Marine Guard and I drew post number four, which was the Embassy Annex, around the corner from the main Embassy. About 2200 hours I went up the street to see what the guys at the Embassy were up to but scurried back less than a half hour later when a column of Vietnamese tanks came rumbling down Ham Nghi Boulevard. It turned out they were looking for the Presidential Palace and had gotten lost, but they sure caught our attention. Sometime around 0300 I was leaning against the wall just outside the door of the Annex. It was quiet – oppressively hot, muggy. There hadn't been any sounds of cannon or rifle fire in a couple of hours. Suddenly, from somewhere very close but totally out of sight, a single shot rang out and about two feet above my head the round ricocheted off the wall. Paying respect to the cliché that *prudence was the better part of valor*, I moved back inside. I passed the rest

of my watch hot and sweaty, but at least a bit safer. Later that morning, before we were all relieved from post duty, we heard that President Diem and his brother had been assassinated and the country was in the hands of the military. That kept our attention, but as we were to learn, not much changed.

After the coup, when we finally got back to the Marine House, I discovered that the room I shared with Lance Corporal David Oman (then of Cincinnati, OH) had taken a stray aerial rocket, which blew the roof off and did extensive damage to our stuff inside. The damage included setting free Oman's pet boa constrictor which he'd kept confined in a glass case on top of his dresser. I saw the snake was loose and, reacting to my Ophidiophobia, I packed a bag and moved into the Caravelle Hotel. Two days later the snake was found, curled up and sleeping peacefully in the bottom drawer of a dresser two rooms down from mine. The maid was putting clothes away, found the critter and screamed. She promptly quit and I moved back. Three days later President Kennedy was assassinated. One of the cliché questions of our era is to ask, "Where were you when JFK was killed?" I was asleep in Saigon. About 0200 one of the midnight watch guards came to the Marine House to tell everyone the President had been shot. I remember being wakened and first thinking that such an announcement was a pretty sick practical joke. I also remember not quite being able to get back to sleep. The possibilities were just too scary.

Within a couple of weeks of the assassination, Condolence Books were set up in embassies and consulates around the world. The local citizens were invited to sign their condolences, and later the books were gathered up to be given to the Kennedy family. Ours was set up in the Consular Office, just to the left of our guard desk. On the second

day I had Honor Guard duty beside the book. The line went out the embassy door, down the sidewalk, all the way to the river. There must have been 250 people, all standing in line and waiting patiently for their turn. From where I stood I could see everyone in line. As soon as a youngster – no more than fourteen or fifteen, entered the lobby my internal warning system kicked into high gear. He was fidgety, looking around and reaching into his pants pockets as if checking something. The political situation in Saigon was still volatile, so when my arm hairs horripilated, I paid attention. The closer this young man got to the book the more nervous, agitated he seemed to become. By the time he was next in line my own nerves were bouncing off the ceiling. Then, just as he was about to take the chair at the Condolence Book, he whipped out a big black switchblade. There were some gasps and screams from the others in line, and it seemed like everyone tried to melt into the walls. As soon as I saw the knife, my hand headed for my holstered .38 police special. I remember thinking, “This little shit is here to hurt someone and I may have to shoot him.” But before my pistol cleared leather, he’d sliced the palm of his hand and was busy weeping and signing the Condolence Book – in blood. I found out what it felt like to be imminently relieved and thoroughly terrified - all at the same time.

Shortly after ushering in the new year of 1964 Dave Oman and I decided that we’d had quite enough of being cooped up beautiful downtown Saigon. Quite contrary to embassy security regulations, we rented a car and driver, drove out to the resort town of Vung Tao (known to the French as Cap St. Jacques) and spent a delightful day drinking wine, eating French bread and cheese, and washing away the stress and odors of Saigon in the incredible waters of the South China Sea. We spent the next day getting our hinnies reamed out by our NCOIC and the Embassy Security Officer. They didn’t seem

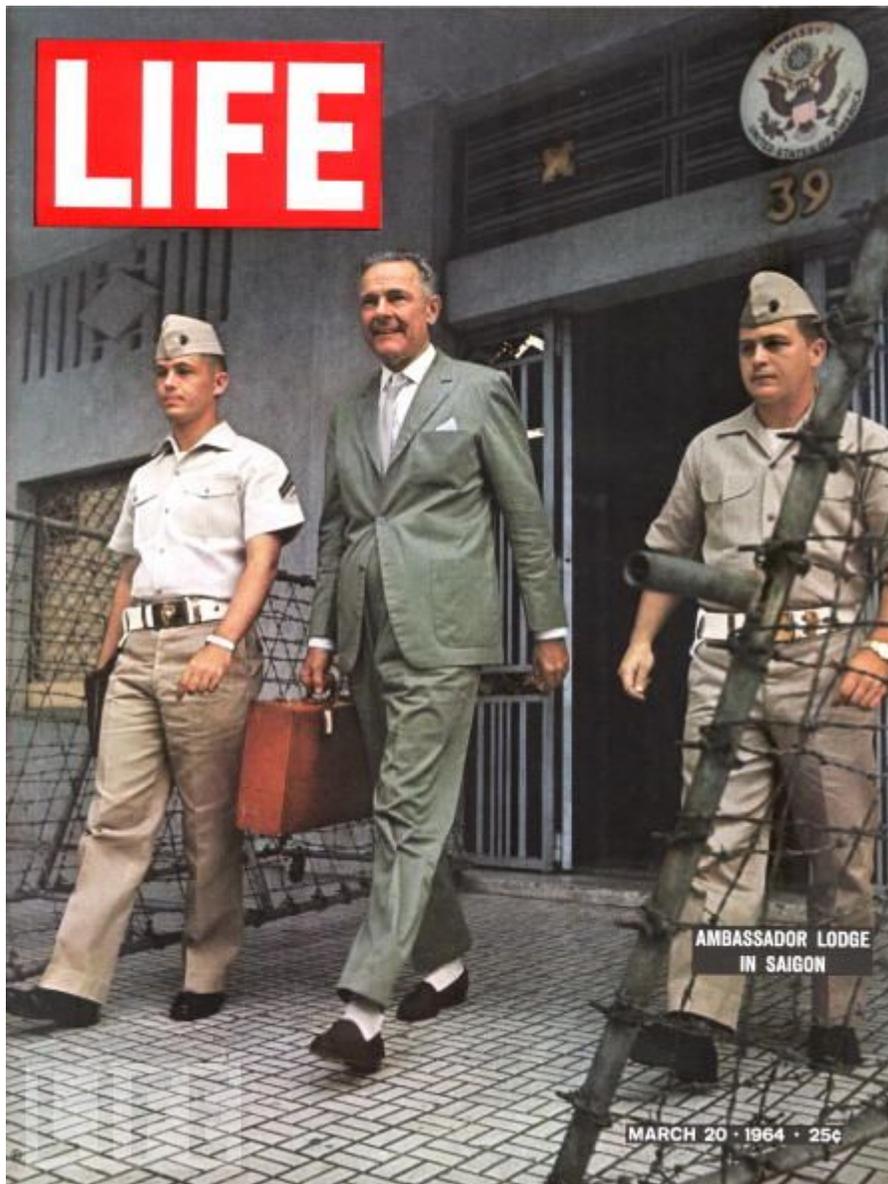
to take as much delight in our escapade as we did. They were aghast at our driving unarmed, without escort, through the heart of Viet Cong controlled territory – and after all, didn't we remember that the entire Marine Security Guard detachment was on a VC hit list? Well, we said to ourselves, they only assumed we weren't armed.

A week later, and I don't think there was any cause-and-effect here, Dave came down with a case of hepatitis. It wasn't serious and he was out of the hospital in another week, but on one of my visits there was a body a few beds down all swathed in bandages from head to toe. I asked an Army Captain who came by to see him what had happened. The wounded, a Private First Class, had been manning an observation post along one of the tributaries of the Mekong River. His job was to stay hidden, stay quiet, and observe and report of river traffic. Sometime during his watch he'd been attacked by an Indochinese tiger. The soldier, maintaining his quiet, fought the cat with his combat knife, and the cat had used its teeth and claws. His relief found him that evening. The private was hamburger. The cat was dead. That's always been one of my definitions of courage. I told that Army Captain I thought his PFC would have made a helluva Marine. I don't think he realized I was paying the man the highest of compliments.

In early February, 1964, I celebrated my second anniversary on embassy duty. Photo-journalist Larry Burrows, on assignment for Life Magazine, was in town from Hong Kong shooting and writing about Ambassador Lodge, who had been Richard Nixon's running mate during the previous presidential election. Back in the land of the big PX, the Republicans wanted him to return home to derail the Goldwater candidacy. I still remember the day when he'd made arrangement to take pictures of Lodge leaving the Embassy. It was the duty of my partner (Corporal Wayne Maupin, then from Jackson,

MO) and me to escort the Ambassador from the lobby to his vehicle, bracketed by barbed-wire barricades, as Burrows snapped shots. Burrows hung around for the rest of the week continuing his assignment, so not much thought was given to any one part or picture-shooting sequence. He told me that he ended up shooting over 30 rolls of 35mm film. Then he was gone and the event forgotten.

A couple of days into the third week of March I was on duty again when someone from the Marine House came running into the USOM lobby and tossed the March 20th issue of Life in front of me. There we were, Ambassador Lodge flanked by Corporals Maupin and West, in living color - on the cover of Life Magazine! I'm still in awe of that cover and of the photograph, even if it did irritate the Commandant of the Marine Corps (my nicely starched uniform shirt had, over the months, faded to almost pure white – instead of Marine Corps khaki). Years later I was saddened to hear that Larry Burrows died in 1971, chasing another story of the war into Laos during Operation *Lam Son 719*. He was such a class act – as professional as they come, gracious, and as courageous as an Army PFC fighting a tiger with a knife. I can still get goose bumps seeing that issue in an antique shop or offered for sale on *ebay*. I shake my head and marvel that it really happened to me. (Life magazine cover follows.)



In August of 1964 my relief finally arrived. Wayne Maupin, my Life Magazine partner, and other Marine Guard friends had already gone home. Now, thirty months after arriving for a twenty-four month tour, it was my turn. It is always with a smile that I remember one final image. I was packed and ready for my stuff to be shipped home. Three locals were hired to weigh and move suitcases, trunks, foot-lockers and a sea bag. They arrived bright and early, knocked politely and entered my room all business-like,

one carrying a pink bathroom scale under his arm. Their methodology? One stood on the scale, bent at the waist. The other two lifted a piece, placed it on his back and recorded the weight. Then, grinning like all three knew something I didn't, they recorded the weight of their partner on the scale, subtracted and with an air of triumph, slapped an official looking tag on the box and moved on. I can't help but wonder if I'd just been given a lesson about the future – *to accomplish our task we'll do whatever it takes!*

Looking back from a distance of nearly a half century I am torn by a terrible dichotomy. I thoroughly enjoyed my months in Saigon. For a wide-eyed, relatively naïve youngster like me it was a helluva place to broaden his horizons and slip into adulthood. Today it may be just another mega-opolis with something in excess of 7 million souls. But in the early 1960s it was the ultimate sandbox. A place to work and play and a place where everything I envisioned about being a United States Marine came to fruition. I left there believing in our cause and our commitment to that lovely little country. I grew to seriously question what came later, and our government's seeming unwillingness to do what was necessary - to win out, or realizing the futility, *to get out*. But after all is said and done, - after all the arguments, the hair-pulling, the charges and counter-charges, after the history books are all written and all the other lives moved on or repaired, it will still be Corporal West and Corporal Maupin, flanking Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., on the cover of the March 20, 1964 issue of Life Magazine. And for this old jarhead, that's about as cool as it can get.