



## **IN UNIFORM IN THE 1960S**

©2020 William B. McCormick. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information and retrieval systems without written permission of the publisher.

Published by Hellgate Press  
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)  
Hellgate Press  
PO Box 3531  
Ashland, OR 97520  
email: [info@hellgatepress.com](mailto:info@hellgatepress.com)

Interior & Cover Design: L. Redding

Cataloging In Publication Data is available from the publisher upon request.

ISBN: 978-1-55571-978-4

Printed and bound in the United States of America

First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# **In Uniform in the 1960s**

**A PRELUDE TO VIETNAM**

**WILLIAM B. MCCORMICK**

Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon

Books by William B. McCormick

*And What Was I Doing There?: Stories from  
the 174th Ordnance Detachment in Vietnam*

*Are You Ready to Ride?: Or...Heat, Dust,  
and the Smell of Dead Deer*

*Time to Serve: Or...Was There Life After Vietnam?*

*In Uniform in the 1960s: A Prelude to Vietnam*

*For my good friend Paul Masterson USCG,  
who was in uniform during the sixties.*



# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1 THE BEGINNING	3
2 "IF YOU CAN'T PEE NOW, COME BACK LATER"	7
3 DRILL SERGEANTS	11
4 BASIC TRAINING	13
5 THE MEN AROUND ME	31
6 "TO KILL, TO KILL, TO KILL"	33
7 RIFLE TRAINING	37
8 TEAR GAS	41
9 DEATH: JUST A SLIP AWAY	45
10 WEATHER	49
11 INFILTRATION COURSE	51
12 "THIRD PLATOON, WHERE ARE YOU?"	53
13 FORCED MARCH	57
14 FOOD	61
15 "THEY REALLY CARE ABOUT US"	63
16 A SECRET VIET CONG SYMPATHIZER?	67
17 BO-BO THE RECRUIT	71
18 CONTACT ME?	73
19 OFF TO AIT	75
20 INTRO TO REDSTONE	83
21 AIT	87
22 AMMUNITION RENOVATION	89
23 ANY QUESTIONS?	93
24 "YEAH, SO WHAT?"	95
25 "DROP AND GIVE ME TEN"	99
26 "HOW COME YOU'RE NOT READY?"	101
27 "WHAT, ME A TEACHER?"	103
28 IT ALL BEGAN WITH A SIMPLE CALL	105
29 DOING TIME IN THE 227TH	113
30 "THIS IS GOING TO GET UGLY"	123
31 JUST A COUPLE OF SECONDS	129
32 "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON OUT THERE?"	131

53	RIOT-CONTROL TRAINING	135
54	“GODDAMN IT, I SAID ‘EN GARDE,’ MCCORMICK!” OR “HEY, LIEUTENANT BOJAN, HOW DO YOU SAY, ‘OH SHIT!’ IN ASL?”	139
55	SQUAD LEADER	141
56	“I DON’T CARE IF YOU DON’T LIKE ME”	145
57	A FABULOUS FOURTH	147
58	A THIN RED LINE	149
59	RVN TRAINING	153
40	HOME ON LEAVE	159
41	INTO THE UNKNOWN	161
42	THE END OF THE BEGINNING	167
	EPILOGUE	169
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	171



# INTRODUCTION

**IN THE FALL** of 1967, I was an indifferent college student at Sacramento City College in California. I was on academic probation and not carrying a full load of classes. This combination led to me being drafted and told to report as of October 18, 1967. The Vietnam War was raging, so I knew being drafted was bound to lead to life-changing consequences.

The following pages will chronicle the next nine months of my time in the Army, until I left for Vietnam in September of 1968.

The late sixties were a very tumultuous time in our nation's history, and it seemed I would have a front-row seat. But unfortunately, being in the military seemed to guarantee that whenever something happened, I was out in the proverbial lobby, buying popcorn. This was the time before handheld devices so common today, and radio and newspapers (the *Army Times* and *Stars and Stripes*) were the only source for news. We operated in a vacuum of sorts.

Like many other men, I tried my best to stay the hell out of Vietnam. While in basic training, I even tried out for the Sixth Army band. I played the clarinet in my high school band. This of course failed, as did most attempts, I suppose. I did not mind serving my country but dying for it was not something I was quite prepared to do. I doubt anyone was prepared to do that.

Of course, what I did not realize at the time is that there are just as many ways to die in service of your country as there are men in it. No matter where someone was stationed, survival seemed to be more luck of the draw than anything else. Serving in Vietnam, or any combat zone for that matter, just decreases your odds of surviving.

As an example, I came close to giving up my life in basic training. I can't visualize a more useless death than being killed in basic training. I can't readily describe that as dying for my country, but some might, I suppose.

I hope in the following pages to show what it was like to be in the service during the late sixties. The look on everyone's faces when we learned about the assassination of Robert Kennedy, and how that act affected our lives. The absolute despair that seemed to develop when there was only one thing to do, and that was your duty. The almost certainty of duty in Vietnam and the repressive harshness of duty Stateside had a lot to do with it. There was just no way out.

So, come along and vicariously endure basic training at Fort Lewis and the spit and polish of Redstone Arsenal, which is the best way, I think. If it brings back bad memories for you, I am sorry about that.

I would like to thank my circle of close friends: Paul Masterson, Alicia Gutierrez, and Gay Machado, for all their support and for never getting mad when I invariably ask, "What do you think of this?" And of course, my editor, Laura Garwood, who is seemingly capable of performing magic when editing my writing.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE BEGINNING

**AS MENTIONED IN** the introduction, my indifference toward my college studies brought me to the attention of the Selective Service folks (the draft board), and I received my draft notice and was told to report to the post office in downtown Sacramento on October 18, 1967. To tell the truth, it was almost a relief to receive the notice, because it took the pressure off me to try to do well at something I did not really want to do at the time.

So, at six o'clock in the morning, all us who had been told to report that day boarded buses and left for Oakland Army Base, filled with foreboding and looking at a very uncertain future. As they put me on the bus, my parents' sense of foreboding and uncertainty must have mirrored mine.

Arriving at the induction center, the bus had to run the gauntlet of protesters. There must have been several thousand of them lined up on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. We had not even taken the oath, and already it was us versus them. I can still remember their faces twisted with what seemed like rage as they hollered and cursed at us with their fists raised. "Peaceful" was not the impression we got

from them. It felt more like they would tear us apart if given the chance.

Many of us figured the men were protesting the fact that they might be drafted themselves. Who knows about the women; they probably really were protesting the Vietnam War.

And thus we began our journey of being something less than everyone else. The Army brass did not care about us, and the general public seemed to think we were something to be ignored. Not that we were subhuman, but it seemed we were treated similarly. It may be hard for people to believe, but the homeless population is treated better today than GIs were back in the sixties. The protests may seem odd to anyone who has seen the almost adulation troops get today. I will let you read up on it yourself. It is not in the scope of this book to chronicle the growth of the protests to the war. This is my story, not theirs.

Later on, somewhere in the bowels of the induction center, we took the oath and took that fateful one step forward—and presto, we were privates in the US Army. We climbed aboard buses and drove around a seemingly random route, apparently to confuse any protesters thinking of following us. We were hustled onto a plane at Oakland Airport, final destination Fort Lewis, Washington. In a day of firsts, it was my first time on an airplane. From then on, the first times came fast and furious—fortunately most of them were never to be repeated either.

Perhaps this is a good place to back up just a bit. Prior to being drafted, everyone had to undergo a physical in order to be classified. It seems odd that we had to be healthy before we might be killed. To get a 1-A classification meant one could be drafted at any time. If a 4-F was issued, that meant a person was not eligible to be drafted and they were free and clear. If you got a 1-A, then it was like a Sword of Damocles hanging over, liable to drop, and if it did, you were gone. So, if you were

in college and had a 1-A classification, it was rather stressful to try to keep your college deferment. As I found out later, you really have to want a degree in order to study hard enough to get one. If you do not truly want a degree, it is really difficult to earn one, no matter what is hanging over your head.



## CHAPTER 2

# “IF YOU CAN’T PEE NOW, COME BACK AND PEE LATER”

**THE PHYSICAL WAS** done in Oakland at the induction center. The first thing we had to do was strip down to our underwear and socks and put our wallets and anything valuable in a small drawstring bag. It felt like we were rats trapped in a maze. Thus attired, and with our little bags in hand, we proceeded to follow various colored lines laid out on the floor. As we cleared each station, some NCO told us which colored line to follow to the next station.

Other than seeing several hundred men wandering around in their underwear and socks for hours, clutching their little bags, there were only a couple of incidents that still bring a smile to my face after all these years

At the first station, we were to give a urine sample. And since the Army had never heard of privacy, the station consisted of a large, circular basin about five feet in diameter that continually flushed. So, we were supposed to walk up and stand shoulder to shoulder to pee in our cups. At this station, there was an incredibly fat staff sergeant whose sole job it seemed was to belt out the same phrase over and over: “If you can’t pee now, come back and pee later.” That image still makes me smile today too.

If that image isn't enough for you, then second station with the check for hemorrhoids—or whatever they were looking for—just might do it. At this station, about fifty of us were herded into a room and told to stand in a circle. After we had done this, a doctor—I'm guessing that he was a doctor—walked into the center of the circle. He instructed us to do an about-face, bend over, drop our drawers, and spread our butt cheeks as he walked around and examined our butts, for god knows what. God, what a job! Now if that image does not make you chuckle, you are a step ahead of me, that's for sure.

After this invasion of our private parts, we followed a different colored line that led us back to our clothes and freedom from the Army's version of a physical. There must have been other stations, but these two are the ones that stuck in my memory.

I have read any number of stories of men who avoided the draft—Peter Coyote the actor, for one—when they had an interview with psychologist or some such doctor. They proceeded to give false answers to the questions put to them and received their 4-F classification. For the life of me, I cannot remember any such interview ever taking place. It must have really brief if it took place at all. But then again, I was not there to dishonor my country and lie my way out of serving, which I thought of and still think of as a personal duty.

The problem with the physical was that it was, by circumstance, rather superficial. Many men who passed the physical with flying colors found that during the rigors of basic training they just could not keep up. One GI who trained with me looked just fine but had broken his feet in an auto accident years prior. It turned out he could not double-time and was discharged, much to his disappointment it seemed. The problem is that many men sold everything they owned when drafted, figuring they might not be around to use their



possessions. With the war in Vietnam going at full tilt, this was a normal state of mind. But finding themselves immediately discharged again would be a negative surprise in more ways than one.



## CHAPTER 5

# DRILL SERGEANTS

**THE FOLLOWING MEN** had total control over us for the next few months: Sergeant First Class Jones, Staff Sergeant Reeves, and Staff Sergeant Smith.

Sergeant First Class Jones was the textbook image of a drill sergeant. Tall, handsome, and well-spoken, he was the drill sergeant in charge, and he looked it. We met him our first morning at the reception center. His introduction was loud and filled with expletives and comments about the possibility of us being a bunch of little girls. We met the other drill sergeants later when we got to the company area. My personal introduction to Drill Sergeant Jones was when he called my attention to the fact that I had my shirt collar buttoned. I believe this was the first time anyone had ever called me a “dud.” Supposedly, he was waiting for orders sending him to Vietnam as an advisor to the South Vietnamese Army.

Staff Sergeant Reeves was rather short and thin. He was missing a front tooth, but he was a very tough nut. We were told he was waiting for orders sending him to Officer Candidate School (OCS). I do not know if he ever made it to be an officer. He would have made a good one if he did. He

had that quality of leadership that made us do what he wanted without him screaming at us.

Staff Sergeant Smith was short, balding, kind of pudgy, and almost effeminate, looking something like a bookkeeper. He was not the ideal picture of a drill sergeant that anyone might picture in their mind's eye. He always took a subservient role under both Reeves and Jones. He was kind of a backup drill sergeant.

Two drill corporals were also attached to the platoon, both of whom remain faceless and nameless to this day—although they always seemed to be charge of physical training (PT), a job they seemed to relish. Compared to the drill sergeants they appeared to really like dishing out the pain, especially when we were doing PT in the mud and rain.

The platoon leader was Second Lieutenant Ronald Frank. We very rarely interacted with him, except during some inspections. Toward the end of basic training, he received orders sending him to Vietnam. Since he wore infantry brass, his future service in Vietnam was bound to be fraught with danger and hardship. But I did run his name in one of the databases of Vietnam casualties, and his name was not mentioned so I assume he survived.

His replacement was some second lieutenant named Almond. Since he was with us for a very short time, I remember little of him except his name.

The company commanding officer (CO) was a Captain Stango, whom we very rarely saw. The first sergeant hardly ever interacted with us, and I do not know his name.

There was one other noncommissioned officer (NCO); he was a sergeant E-5. I do not know what his position was, but it seems he was waiting for some kind of orders. He did not do much that I remember; he was just always around the company area since he was still recovering from a very severe leg wound he received in Vietnam. His name is also lost to time.