



## IN THE CLOUDS

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# IN THE CLOUDS

**Voices of Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam:  
1970-1971 ... and Now**

**ROBERT L. MENZ, ET AL.**

Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon



This book is dedicated to our adult children  
Strong, Caring, Giving and Blended  
From our oldest to our youngest

Ruth's oldest son David and our daughter-in-law Kim  
Robert's daughter Gwen and our son-in-law Todd  
Ruth's youngest son Matt  
Robert's son Shawn and our daughter-in-law Cathy  
Three decades ago, two became one

This is also dedicated to our six grandchildren  
Hannah, Jeffrey, Madie, Sofia, Hailey and Gracie  
We are Blessed!



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# INTRODUCTION

~I WON IN VIETNAM~

*It was cold in January when I swore the "oath."  
Colder was Ft. Leonardwood where I learned "dagger and cloak."  
Extreme "makeover" was the temp and place —  
The Central Highlands of Vietnam wore a different "face."  
The "World," oh the world, we longed to see.  
"Memories" of breakfast, hot showers, and iced tea.  
I learned that rats were tasty, "fish oil" wasn't for vets,  
Monsoons wreaked havoc, and loneliness was "wet."  
More than the sun there could "fry" your skin.  
Cobras and "3 steppers" were close and within.  
Mosquitoes exchanged "fluids" with us during the night —  
We were filled with "poison," some oozed with fright.  
I was shot at and missed a time or "three."  
"To thee and to thee, but not unto me."*

*Blasts took my dinner and my "balance" away.  
The "sounds of silence" in my left ear will stay.  
After one full year and a day and a "half,"  
It was 1971, and I completed my "lap."  
I finished the course – my "war" was over.  
My God — my God, "Red Rover, Red Rover."  
So, my "return," unlike many others,  
"58000" of my sisters and brothers,  
Calls for a "life" that now must count.  
Grace I've felt in an "infinite" amount.*

*That which was experienced — lost “innocence” and pain,  
 For me, turned into a “kaleidoscope” of gain.  
 An “agape” friend who would die for me,  
 A lifestyle to cherish, and the freedom to “be.”  
 Emotions in “Nam” ran very high  
 And to scale this span was to “know” alive.  
 “Broken” bones heal the strongest and perhaps inner ears too,  
 But it was my “Spirit” that expanded to a place all new.  
 When I returned to “riots” and experienced a calm,  
 I knew I “won” in Vietnam.  
 There still are wars and rumors with “spins” —  
 Wars raging “without,” yet a sanctuary within. (RLM)*

\* \* \* \*

**T**HIS BOOK REPRESENTS STORIES and narrative experiences from veterans who served on Pr’Line Mountain, Vietnam, during the time frame of 1970/1971. Many served on the mountain before and after that snapshot in time, and I’m sure their stories would be equally meaningful. The reason for focusing on this period results from the reconnecting, after about fifty years, of those who served during this time.

Mike Brogan and I stayed in touch after we were discharged from the army. Mike is from Massachusetts, and I was first in Missouri and now live in Ohio. We were in each other’s homes on many occasions. We learned later that others in our group also stay connected.

Several years ago, when Mike and his wife Rosie were visiting my wife Ruth and me, we talked about some of the others we had served with and wondered how and where they were. Of the names we were collectively able to remember, I set out to



Pr'Line Mountain in the clouds

find them with my limited knowledge of the world wide web. Through various means, I was able to locate two of my old friends who were deceased. The wife of one seemed appreciative and interested in our efforts. Later I was able to connect with Marc Bourque from Maine. Like most of us who get unsolicited calls from strangers, he let it go to voicemail. Marc, Mike and I roomed together most of our time on Pr'Line. When Marc heard my voice and message, he called back immediately.

Next, I tried to call Ken Ottens. Ken had extended his tour of duty and spent more time on Pr'Line than most of us. I found several Ken Ottens, yet found one who was the same age as I am and was from Illinois, as I remembered Ken was.

“Hello.”

“Hello my name is Bob Menz, and I'm trying to find the Ken Ottens who served on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam.”

“What year?”

I knew it was him! As it turned out, Ken went back to Pr'Line in the early 1990s, thus the question, "What year?" One month after the initial phone call, we met in a hotel at a halfway spot. After nearly fifty years, we picked up where we left off! Ken's wife Janice and my wife Ruth were amazed at our recollection of stories and experiences over our two-day reunion.

Here's where it gets interesting. Ken and Janice exerted great effort into finding the others with whom we served. As with me, Ken heard many times, "sorry you have the wrong person." But because of their persistence, the Ottens have located virtually everyone in our company that served on Pr'Line Mountain in 1970/1971. About ten of the thirty-five we have located are deceased. Several are not doing well. The rest of us are chugging along for a bunch of guys in their seventies.

On Veteran's day 2019, five of us had a reunion in Ohio. Wow the stories we resurrected! Since then, through the initiative of Mike and Rosie, we "zoom" on the last Sunday evening of the month. As of this writing, our next big reunion is delayed because of the COVID 19 virus.

There were about sixteen of us who served in the signal corps on Pr'Line at any one point in time. Because our tours were staggered, we knew those who came before and left after our given tours. My tour of duty was from September, 1970, to September, 1971. I was a "newbie" to those who arrived in January of 1970, and I was an "old timer" to those who arrived in June of 1971. Thus, the timeframe of 1970/1971.

Below is a list of my brothers who have contributed to this book. Through our tours of duty, we indeed became brothers. This is the ethos that permeates this book. We skipped the ritual of joining cut fingers, but we became blood brothers. I did not realize until we all reunited, how much I love these guys.



Tropo section of Pr'Line with our equipment and hooches

**Marc Bourque:** Marc served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from January, 1971, to November, 1971. He and Patricia have been married for forty-six years and live in Kennebunkport, Maine. They have two children, a son and a daughter. Sadly, their son passed away over twenty years ago. They enjoy spending time with their only grandson. Marc retired from the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard as a production shop planner after thirty-five years of government service. After his retirement, he worked part time at several jobs just to keep busy. When Marc fully retired, he and Patricia volunteered at the local food pantry two to three days a week. Marc enjoys gardening and starts his own flowers in early February for summer planting around their house. Marc and Patricia now plan to travel and see this beautiful country.

**Mike Brogan:** Mike served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from September, 1970, to September, 1971. He and Rosemary are approaching their fiftieth wedding anniversary. They have three sons and one daughter and are proud grandparents of nine, ranging in ages from nineteen years to twenty-two months. Rosie received an associate's degree as a Medical Secretary and Mike received an Advanced Electronics Certificate from a local technical school. In their early years they both worked in their fields. Later, after being sidelined by their kids, they worked in different disciplines for several years. Mike finally settled in for his last twenty-six working years as Buildings and Grounds Maintenance Supervisor, (the most challenging and fun working years). Now that they have retired, they are enjoying family, travel and some fun part time jobs.

**Ken Ottens:** Alias "OTT" or best known as "Water boy." He served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from January, 1970, to July, 1971 (one year, six months and two days). He and his wife, Janice, live in Fulton, Illinois. They have two daughters. Ken eased into the working world in the electrical trade and after an intense training period of five years, became a Journeyman Wireman Electrician with the IBEW. Ken was also a volunteer fireman for fourteen years. He attended extra classes to earn more firefighting skills and application of those skills. Janice worked as a Registered Dietitian. In 1983, Ken had a chance to go to the Philippines and work on a project at a school in rural Cavite Province. In 1992 Ken, Janice and their girls moved to the school to work on various projects at the school and surrounding area for over two years. While in the Philippines, Ken had the opportunity to go to Vietnam. The main reason was to look at the possibility

of starting an orphanage and clearly to return to Pr'Line Mountain and Dalat. He did make the side trip to visit his home "in the clouds." The North Vietnamese had taken control of the former site and was still using it to send out signals. Ken is now retired, but continues to enjoy numerous projects in his "Man Cave" garage.

**Jerry Sharp:** Jerry served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from January, 1971, to November, 1971. He and Dolores (Dee) live in Newman Lake, Washington. They have two sons, both of whom are married. They have six grandchildren and one great granddaughter. Jerry spent his working days in the sawmill profession and retired from Idaho Veneer Co. in 2010, as Plant Superintendent. Dee spent her working days as a jewelry salesperson. Jerry and Dee love to travel and spend time with family in the southern states. Jerry Loves to hunt, and both Dee and Jerry love to fish.

**Jim Singleterry:** Jim served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from January, 1970, to January, 1971. He and Shari live in Harrisburg, Oregon. Together they have three grown children and six grandchildren. They also have various informally adopted grandchildren and some great grandchildren beyond count. After his time in the army, Jim worked for the State of Oregon on a forestry crew then decided to get a job that was not subject to the weather. To satisfy his lifelong curiosity about how things work, Jim went to a community college to learn diesel mechanics. He now has time to putter in his shop making and fixing things and enjoys reading after his retirement as a mechanic for thirty-seven years.

**Jim (Tex) Thomas:** Jim served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from January, 1970, to January, 1971. After returning stateside, he served another year at Fort Monmouth, then he and Martha went home to Texas. Jim worked as a title company escrow officer overseeing real estate transactions for nearly forty years then spent another four years as a title consultant for a consulting engineering firm building highways and toll roads for the State of Texas. These days, Jim keeps up with his rental properties and three grandchildren who live about ninety miles from he and Martha. In 2018, Jim and Martha celebrated fifty years of marriage.

**Len Weir:** Len served with the Tropo brotherhood on Pr'Line Mountain, Vietnam, from February, 1970, to February, 1971. He and Ann live in Oakland, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburg. They have three daughters and eight grandchildren ranging in ages from two to twenty-one. Len spent twenty-eight years as a customer service manager for a large computer company. Prior to full retirement, Len and Ann lived in southwest Florida for fifteen years where Len worked in retail management. After retiring, they returned to Pittsburg in 2014, to spend more time with their expanding family.

My heartfelt thanks to these contributors. The stories of these men will be in italics.





Equipment in one of the Tropospheric Scatter Microwave Communication vans



## ARRIVAL

~SENSELESS~

*Nam had days too bland to savor.*

*Yet we tasted.*

*The essence of our surroundings could distort olfaction.*

*Yet we smelled.*

*The melodious noise orchestrated discord.*

*Yet we heard.*

*The panoramic scene was a frequent spectacle.*

*Yet we saw.*

*The emotional paralysis was novel.*

*Indeed, we were oftentimes numb. (RLM)*

\* \* \* \*

**S**ILENCE.

Dead silence.

Touchdown. More silence. Beep of the intercom.

“This is your captain, welcome to Cam Ranh Bay. Gentlemen, I tried to get you here before midnight where yesterday would have counted for the first day of your tour. I’m sorry we missed it by minutes. On behalf of all of us at Tiger Airlines, we wish you all safety and health.”

My mind was in a cloud. Defensiveness assured me that Vietnam could not be as bad as I read that it was or saw that it was on the TV news. It was the end of August, 1970, and I was a strong, albeit skinny, twenty-one-year-old. *I will survive this*, I thought. "I will be OK," I prayed.

After deplaning, we spent hours on the tarmac filling out paperwork before the sun rose. When forms were filled out in triplicate, and we walked toward a barracks in the daylight, I saw dozens of Vietnamese women walking hitherto. All were dressed in black stove-legged slacks and large cone-shaped hats, conical hats, called in native tongue, *no n la*. They were wearing the same hats I had seen on the news many times before. *Oh my God*, it occurred to me, *this is really how they dress*. The TV news was not creating drama! This was real! *Oh no*, I thought, *could the catastrophic reports of war be real too?* I wasn't sure about the other "newbies" in my group, but I felt perplexed. I was exhausted. I was in a cloud.

**Brogan:** *After graduating with my 26L20 MOS from Fort Monmouth, Uncle Sam asked me to suggest three places that I would like to be stationed. Looking for adventure, I wrote down that my first choice was to be stationed in the tropics of the Republic of Vietnam. Uncle was glad to accommodate my choice.*

*When I finally landed in Nha Trang, after flying for twenty-one hours, my excitement was peaked. As I stepped out of the Tiger Airlines air-conditioned jet, the extreme heat seemed to suck the air out of my lungs. In the distance, mortars could be heard. "This was my choice! What was I thinking?"*

As was often the case in the military, we hurried and then we

waited. Upon arrival, while the sun was asleep and my energy eclipsed, we addressed forms. Then for over a week, I waited to learn what I was to do in this country, and where, exactly, I was to go. I did my AIT (advance individual training) at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Fort Monmouth was the United States Army Signal School and a plush setting to gain my military occupational specialty (MOS). Students there were trained in installation, maintenance, operations, and repair of complex communications and cryptographic equipment. Training there was two to four times longer than most AIT's, and most of the "students" there had volunteered into the army and requested this MOS. Even though I was drafted, I had tested high enough in electrical, electronics and technology skills that the army decided it was worth the further investment in my training at Fort Monmouth. My father was an electrician, and I did not appreciate how much of his knowledge had rubbed off and blessed me. Further, I cannot begin to enumerate the many other ways that my dad blessed me, my siblings and my mother. While many troops were training to fight and shoot, I was in a classroom learning about ohms, amps, circuits and the like.

But back to my waiting in Cam Ranh. I grew more anxious day by day. I was told that I would be sent where I was needed. Being assigned to an infantry company was not out of the question. This kind of assignment would have been outside my training but not "out of the question." There was the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way! Clarity was often partly cloudy because many decision makers had their heads in the clouds!

Alas my orders came through, and I was assigned to the 362nd Signal Company on Pr'Line Mountain. Pr'Line (pronounced "praline," short for primary line and so named from

being the primary signal site in South Vietnam) was a signal site on the second highest mountain in South Vietnam and peeked out of the impenetrable jungles of the Central Highlands. I had heard of and had seen pictures of Pr'Line Mountain before, as some of my instructors at Fort Monmouth had served on Pr'Line. It was these pictures that first revealed the carpet of white clouds below the perimeter of the berm. And now I was on my way to what was to be, for the next year, my home "In the Clouds."

It was an amazing journey as we convoyed through small villages and hamlets. The ascent from the South China Sea revealed lower temperatures as we traversed over eighteen-hundred meters in elevation, yet it exposed a higher risk of ambush as Highway 1 penetrated the dense vegetation. The canopy of trees and vines turned the mid-day sun into twilight. Also being revealed as we moved into the Central Highlands (that was not evident on the coast) was a horrid smell. The smell of rotten, putrid unfiltered stink. This must be, I concluded, the colon of the earth. I looked down over the cliffs and traverses that our convoy had just traveled as we climbed higher and higher. The tiny road where we had trekked just minutes earlier, was just a ribbon of hair-pinned turns. This was not the colon of the earth, I mused. This tubular corridor was too small. These loopbacks must be the facsimile of the duodenum, Jejunum and the Ileum. This was some twenty-two kilometers of mucosal folds that emptied into what I hoped would be relief. As for now, however, I only experienced anxiety. This concentration of olfactory sensation was to become the fragrance of Vietnam. The striking beauty of the Central Highlands, was at times, very ugly.

Four of us in this convoy wore new fatigues. Two were headed to Lang Biang Mountain (LBM) which was a sister signal site to Pr'Line. LBM was about thirty kilometers further down the



Climbing into the Central Highlands toward Pr'Line Mountain

road and about ten kilometers as the chopper flew. Each mountain was visible to the other. Two of us, Mike and I, were to hop off the deuce-and-a-half (2 ½ ton truck) train at Pr'Line.

**Singletery:** *I left Seattle in January. After a brief stopover in bitter cold Alaska, I was on my way to Vietnam. I had not mentally prepared myself for the cold, which one would normally associate with Alaska wintertime, because my thoughts were on adapting to the heat and jungles of Nam. After arriving in Vietnam, we were directed from the plane to a bus where windows were covered in heavy metal mesh. I could not figure out if that was to keep us in a cage and to keep us from escaping, or to keep out the bad guys – either way it felt like a bad situation. As a result, I was scared spitless and didn't have a bowel movement for three days.*

*My first experience riding a deuce-and-a-half was my transit up the Central Highlands to eventually get to Pr'Line. I expected to be riding with a bunch of other GIs, however, I found that the civilian Vietnamese often utilized our trucks to get from place to place. A girl about ten or twelve years of age climbed aboard and smiled. I didn't speak the language, but I figured I should smile back. She asked me if I wanted to go boom boom. Still not knowing what she was talking about, I smiled and said yes. A more experienced soldier beside me said she wanted to know if I wanted sex. I didn't want to be involved in this behavior and resolved, then and there, to be wary of what I said before agreeing to anything.*

**Bourque:** *After arriving in Cam Ranh, we were directed to a covered deuce-and-a-half where we rode in a small convoy for the long ride to Nha Trang. I worried that we were going to get "hit" because no one on my truck had been issued a weapon. When we finally arrived at the base in Nha Trang, we filled out paperwork, got shots and were issued M-16 rifles. I found it strange that after being supplied my weapon and several clips of ammunition, I was not given a chance to site my weapon on a firing range. But then again, I was in the Signal Corps and felt hopeful that I would never have to use it. After several days, Randy and I were assigned to our duty station, Pr'Line Mountain. We first flew from Nha Trang to Dalat in a small cargo plane. The landing was bumpy as heck - like landing on a washboard.*

*Until now I had not been in a true Vietnamese environment. There were very few military personnel around us*



*at the Dalat Airport, unlike what we had experienced for the past week, which was wall-to-wall military protection. Then there was the language barrier. I had no clue what was being said by the local inhabitants, and there was no way to tell who was friend or foe. From there we took an armored personnel carrier (APC) and rode to our rendezvous spot in Dalat. The APC had no windows and it was like riding in the dark for what seemed like an hour. When we finally stopped, we found ourselves in front of a large white building and were told that this was Ann's House. This, I was later to learn, was a common checkpoint. We were advised to stay near the APC because we would shortly join a convoy from there to Pr'Line Mountain.*

*After waiting a few minutes, a young Vietnamese girl, about ten years old, came by and asked, "GI want Coke?" Randy and I looked at each other and thought a Coke would be nice, and I asked, "how much?" She replied, "Price \$5.00." We were both shocked at the asking price and replied at the same time, "that is too much." She responded by saying, "Number one very best Coke." She then pulled two small green plastic containers from her pocket. This is when we realized she was selling drugs and not a soft drink. No wonder so many became addicted while serving in Vietnam! Drugs were so accessible and so cheap!*

*On the convoy to Pr'Line, Randy and I rode in the back of a deuce-and-a-half and were able to see the beautiful city of Dalat. There were picturesque homes with manicured lawns, and the "step" gardens on the outskirts of town were impressive, indeed. One would not know one*



Church in Dalat did not escape the damage of war

*was in a war zone. People went about their lives as if we were not there. Yes, there was evidence that a war had been there by the bombed-out shell of a church and several other buildings, but for the most part the town of Dalat was thriving.*

*As our convoy proceeded, however, the terrain became more ominous. We began to enter into the dense vegetation growth and experience the vile odor emitting from some of the small villages through which we traveled. The smell could take one's breath away. It finally dawned on me that the evening news that I had seen back home began to look like my present surroundings. I prayed that the soldiers on this convoy were better trained in combat than I. This was the first time in Vietnam that I feared for my life.*

Upon arrival on Pr'Line, we got to the essentials before the sun would set in a couple of hours. Sergeant Parten showed Mike and me to our hooch. We each had a small room in the six-room dusty and bug-ridden building. Next, we were assigned to a bunker. These were fortified holes cut into the berm. Layers of corrugated metal, railroad ties and sandbags lined the sides and top of the bunkers. Large rats had free roam on Pr'Line, and cobras and three steppers were among us. We were told that if bitten by a three stepper, one had three steps before death. True or not, we believed it to be true. I encountered one of each of these snakes during my tour of duty. The cobra made sphincter muscles slam shut! I did the "Moonwalk" before the dance step had a name. After peeking inside my bunker, bunker number six, I swore an oath that I would never set foot in it!



Menz's bunker, number six

Next our Sergeant took us to the mess hall. I'm sure I ate there through the year, yet I have only one memory of being in this place. I remembered the cook breaking eggs into a bowl, one at a time, trying unsuccessfully to find an egg that wasn't bad. Occasionally we had C-rations. I think these were made available when we were off the hill. The military issued P-38 can opener, needed for opening the C-rations, was a useful tool. I carry my P-38 on my key chain to this day! Amazingly, as our group has reunited, none of us can remember eating in the mess hall. Since what goes up must come down and typically what goes in must come out, we were next shown the three-hole toilet and cautioned with further instructions. Alongside the toilet, a six-inch diameter metal tube rose from the ground with a small privacy fence, labeled with this vital information – 4U2P. Other necessary introductions, such as "Tropo" would be necessary in the coming days.



How do you spell relief?

That evening all of Tropo, except for the three men working the communication vans, had a “newbie celebration” for Mike and me. Everyone seemed to be older. One was twenty-six, five years older than I, yet in reality, everyone else just appeared older. Fatigues were faded, tattered and torn, faces were tinted, if not tainted by the environment. Attention to creased trousers, clean boots and military rank were all unimportant. The contrast to our initial differences proved irrelevant. These men were to become my family.

On special occasions, such as this night, the men of Tropo would open a tin canister of Ritz crackers. This was a common item found in “care packages” sent from home and cherished on the hill. I remember when Tex (we never called him Jim), our senior member of Tropo, accidentally dropped a Ritz cracker on the concrete floor and the dust splashed from the impact, as if the cracker had fallen on flour. Tex immediately picked up the cracker, took a deep breath and blew off the dust. Into his mouth it went as he savored the morsel. *My soul*, I remember thinking, *this guy has been here for a while!* It wasn’t long, however, until I acclimated and caught up with this veteran and other collective practices.

**Ottens:** *We loved getting care packages. My mom would send Chef Boyardee pizzas. We would cook them in an electric skillet and then everyone enjoyed the pizzas.*

We had some exposure to the communication vans while training at Fort Monmouth, but nothing like the rapid learning curve we experienced on the hill. Tropo was short for “tropospheric scatter tactical microwave communication.” To oversimplify, we ricocheted microwave signals, coded with com-

munication, off the troposphere to the intended receiver. This allowed for a greater distance than simple “line of sight” communication. Secret and highly classified communications passed through our equipment. Because of this, all of us in Tropo had top secret security clearances. Before the microwave was used for cooking, it was used for communication. More information to the previous sentence will be offered in chapter three. Yes, we did find a way to cook with our equipment.

The 362nd Signal Company (Tropo), was a part of the 73rd Signal Battalion, 21st Signal Group, 1st Signal Brigade. The 362nd was not the only company on Pr’Line. The other primary Signal Company was the 556 (mountain men). The motto of Tropo was “keep the shooters talking.”

Even though most of us on Pr’Line have some amazing stories to share, and I will share a few, our primary job was to facilitate communication in its various forms, including teletype. This was the purpose of Pr’Line.

On the hill also was a company of soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and most importantly, the 194th and the 61st M.P. Companies. Pr’Line was the headquarters for the 61st. They offered the protection for the hill and the many convoy missions to pick up supplies, mail and water. Even though mixing of the M.P.’s and Tropo was minimal, honored respect was mutual.