

1965

**Memories of my year as a
broadcaster in Vietnam**

Bill Altman



AN ARMY BROADCASTER IN VIETNAM...

Bill Altman's reflections on 1965:

My first tour of duty in Vietnam was as a broadcaster, MOS 703. I arrived in January 1965, passed a required audition, and was assigned to AFRS (Armed Forces Radio Service) Saigon. At the time this was the only broadcast facility in Vietnam. AFVN would come later as additional detachments, locations, and TV stations were added to build a country-wide network. AFRS was a joint service operation. The staff included Army, Navy and Air Force and Marine personnel. I completed this tour of duty in January 1966.

Before arriving in Vietnam, I had been an army broadcaster at KANU Radio-TV in Asmara, Eritrea (East Africa), and Station ACE radio in San Juan, Puerto Rico, along with broadcast assignments in various Public Affairs Offices stateside including; Ft. Jackson, SC; Ft. Hood, TX; and Ft. Benning, GA.

When I arrived, the AFRS studios were located in the ground floor of the Brinks Hotel. These were officer's quarters. Most AFRS enlisted staff members lived in The Ambassador Hotel across the street. The studio facilities were a mess with temporary cables and wires strung everywhere and evidence of serious fires from an exploding car bomb that had been driven by VC into the Brinks building the previous month. I believe two American officers were killed in the explosion.

At that time our uniforms were civilian clothes with dark trousers and white short sleeve shirt. A small AFRS logo and microphone were embroidered on the shirt pocket. Later this was changed to standard class "A" tropical military uniform.



Above is a photo taken December 24, 1964 of the car bomb damage to the Brinks hotel officer's quarters where AFRS studios were located. I arrived about three weeks after this photo was taken.

Initially, Captain John Canty, USAF was OIC (Officer in Charge) of the station and Airman1C Roy Heitman was news director. Air Force Master Sergeant John Rice was the station NOCIC (Non Commissioned Officer in Charge).

My friend, Bob Nelson and I arrived in country at approximately the same time. We were both SP/5 (E-5)'s. However, Bob was smarter than me, so shortly after arrival at AFRS, he found himself a slot with an advisory team located at Train Compound, Bien Hoa. Within weeks of joining the advisory team, he was promoted to Staff Sergeant (E-6). I was promoted to SSG (E-6) a couple of months later.

Army Lieutenant Sturges Dorrance was second in command during part of the year. Sturges is a Dartmouth graduate, nice guy, and very capable. I connected with him a few years ago when I retired to the northwest. After Vietnam he moved to Seattle and became the General Manger and President of Channel 5, KING-TV, the NBC affiliate in Seattle, Washington.

The following photo album includes some photos of Ron Engleman. He was one of my room mates and a good broadcaster. He requested reassignment and was sent to Da Nang to run a press camp. He had some interesting adventures in that job. Ron and I reconnected about 8 years ago. He continued his broadcasting career after Vietnam and had a successful talk show. Soon after we reconnected, Ron was diagnosed with severe lung cancer. He lost his cancer battle approximately 4 years ago.

One of the people I remember from the newsroom staff is Frank Vehorn. I have no photos of Frank but remember him as an excellent navy journalist and a fast writer who didn't stress about hourly deadlines. On the internet, I found some NASCAR and other sports stories written by Frank Vehorn for the Virginian Pilot and Charlotte Observer newspapers. I'm not sure if that's him but it seems likely. He was a southern boy, who had already served more than a year in Vietnam when I knew him, and he loved sports.

Although assigned to the news department, I occasionally worked with other broadcast buddies on their programs and, later in the year, did a country and western program as "Cousin Cootie".

This was early in the Vietnam War. News department members were allowed to travel to the "field" to cover news stories, do interviews, Etc. This meant I saw a lot of the country and met a number of civilian news correspondents and photographers.

Some events I remember covering for AFRS news in 1965:

1. February 6 - A large attack by VC (Viet Cong) on the US advisor's compound in Pleiku (central highlands).
2. March 8 – The first Battalion of US Marines arrives at China Beach in northern portion of South Vietnam. They were rapidly reinforced with more Marines.

3. March 30 – A VC (Viet Cong) car bomb blasted the old American Embassy, a few blocks away. 21 were killed and 190 wounded. Many of the casualties were Vietnamese in an open air restaurant across the street. We felt the shock wave in the lobby of our AFRS studios.

4. May 16 – A massive accidental explosion at Bien Hoa airbase destroyed 22 aircraft and killed 21 airmen.

5. May/June – Lead elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first army combat unit in Vietnam, arrived from Okinawa. Bob Nelson and I, along with many reporters and photographers, were at Bien Hoa Airbase to cover their C-130 aircraft arrivals.

6. A VC package bomb exploded in the Air France office at Tan Son Nhut Airport. I was in the terminal building preparing to fly home on emergency leave when the explosion occurred.

7. June – Battle of Dong Xoai (Dong Zwuy). An estimated VC regiment attacked this small hamlet where a Special Forces Detachment was located. A team of US Navy Seabees was there also, assisting in the construction of fortifications.

This intense battle resulted in the award of 2 Medals of Honor; one to Lt. Charles Q. Williams, XO of the Special Forces Detachment and one to Construction Mechanic Third Class Marvin G. Shields, of Seabee team # 1104. Shields received the first Navy MOH of the Vietnam War. He is also the only Seabee to ever receive the Medal of Honor.

I hitched a ride into the battle assembly area with the "Razorbacks", a unit of Huey gunships. The unit commander let me ride with him and gave me headphones to plug into the radio/intercom system. It was strange to hear AFRS rock music on the intercom while door gunners test fired their M-60's in the background.

8. September – The 1st Cavalry Division (airmobile) arrives at the port of Qui Nhon and begins preparing their new base of operations at An Khe.

9. November – 1st Cav. Division's Battle of Ia Drang (yah drahn) Valley. This is the first major American battle of the Vietnam War. Years later, it became the basis of a best-selling book and movie, "We Were Soldiers Once...and Young". The movie featured Mel Gibson portraying Lt. Col. Hal Moore. More soldiers died in this single battle than in the entire Persian Gulf War.

10. December – I accompanied a group of reporters and photographers aboard the US aircraft carrier Enterprise on the day she became the first nuclear powered carrier to launch her planes into combat. She lost 2 aircraft that day – one to ground fire and one ran out of fuel after several unsuccessful landing attempts.

11. A constant parade of visiting dignitaries including senior US officials, members of Congress, entertainers, Etc.

However, this was not civilian radio, so having the news first (or sometimes at all) was not always desirable. Some of our coverage never saw the light of day after the clearance officers at MACOI (Military Assistance Command Office of Information) killed or seriously edited the stories. Gradually the field travel was eliminated and we provided coverage from newswire teletypes connected to shortwave receivers in the newsroom. This gave us a lot of experience in rewriting when bad weather occurred.

Anything with the word Vietnam had to be cleared with MACOI before it went on the air. Draft stories requiring clearance were initialed by the writer and with the clearance officer's initials. Many stories were killed outright.

On one occasion a story I wrote included a quote from the Pope about Vietnam. The entire story was killed. On another occasion a quote from the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, was edited from the story because he mentioned the word Vietnam...

Looking back it was a good learning experience. I had the opportunity to work with some very talented people.

I would return to Vietnam in 1970 for a second tour, after graduating from OCS and jump school. That duty tour included a year with the 1st ARVN Division and a period with the Division's Recon Company. That would be a completely different experience...and another story.

Bill Altman
Anacortes Washington
September 2012

Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



21 March 1965: Rob Newman (w/ Phone), Bob Nelson (foreground) and Bill Altman in AFRS newsroom, Saigon, Vietnam. Note early days civilian uniforms. Shortly after this photo, Nelson moved to a Bien Hoa advisory team and was promoted to SSG (E-6).

Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above: Morning AFRS crew on the way to lunch. Foreground; Don Busser (the Dawn Buster DJ). A roommate, Don was one of the smartest and funniest people. Sadly, Don died a few years later in Germany. Background left, Bob DiRoggi (destination noon DJ) who followed Don in the Mornings and Bob Nelson, from newsroom. Don't remember name of camera guy in rear.

Below: background, A1C Roy Heitman, news director, and Bill Altman in AFRS Saigon newsroom.



Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above: early '65 Morning AFRS crew at lunch in enlisted mess. Left, (laughing as usual) Bon Busser, the Dawnbuster, right facing camera, Bob Nelson, newsroom. Backs to camera; left, unknown; right, Bob Di Roggi (or Di Rogge), "Destination Noon" DJ.

Below: The liquor collection in our hotel quarters which kept growing during the year. (Unidentified visitor on bunk) We had friends in the building who worked at the port. Some of us used those connections to cook canned goods on a hot plate in room (against regulations.) and save ration funds for other uses. With my savings I made a down payment on 1966 GTO when I returned to U.S.



Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above: Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Rice.
NCOIC of AFRS in early '65.

John



Above: Miss Pham Thi An Mai
(Miss Mai) Secretary.



Left: Bob Di Rogg,
"Destination Noon" DJ,
(air name – Bob Ray).
Followed Don Busser's
"Dawnbuster" in the AM.
Funny guy, talented, the
Best DA haircut I ever saw.
Senior army folks gave Bob
A hard time about the hair,
but Air Force people
didn't care. This photo
was taken after the
change to regular tropical
military uniforms.

Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above: Airman Adrian (Ade) Cronauer.

This is the only photo I have of Ade and I took it when we worked together on a brief, 10 minute special program on the history of Veterans Day. Ade and I shared the narration and writing. He helped select the music and did almost all of the editing. Ade is very talented and especially good at editing.

When the program aired, the station received a phone call from one of General Westmoreland's Aides. He said the General heard the program, liked it, and requested that we broadcast it again later in the day. Needless to say, the General got his wish.

Ade came to Vietnam directly from an Air Force radio/TV station in Iraklion, Crete. Initially part of our newsroom team, he later took over the "Dawnbuster" program but was always involved with additional projects.

In the 1990's, after retiring from the Army, I lived in the Washington, D.C. area and we reconnected. By that time the "Good Morning Vietnam" movie had given him some fame and he was an attorney, specializing in Communications law and FCC related cases. He and his wife joined Scooter and me for dinner on several occasions and we caught up on our lives in the years since '65.

He had some really funny stories about how his original script for the movie changed so much during the process from outline to finished film. He said that Robin Williams was so funny and such a good "ad libber" some of his original script was just left out to make time for Robin's flights of fantasy. Ade is a practical type and made a smart choice when he took the money he received for the movie and used it to pay his tuition through law school. Ade worked for a number of years at a radio/TV station in Southern, Virginia – I think the Roanoke area. Although we have lost contact again, I believe that Ade retired to that area.

Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Left: Part-timer Sgt. (E-5) Ben Moses Interviews Australian singer Lynn Fletcher who entertained American and Aussie Troops during a tour with her Band. Ben had been a DJ With WINZ in Miami before The Army placed him in an intelligence unit.



Left: Navy Journalist First Class (E-6) Jack Holgate. Jack was a real professional and joined the AFRS newsroom later in 1965.

Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Left:
SP/5 Bob Nelson locked and loaded, grenades and all. Shortly after his transfer to the advisory team

Right SSG Bob Nelson and unidentified Friend at Train Compound, Bien Hoa, where Bob's Advisory team was headquartered. I visited him there several times. The living conditions were not bad and the food was good. Bob and his friend are leaning on the Monument dedicated to Lt. Train Who was killed in action. (Hence the Compound's name).



Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above and below: Staff sergeant (E-6) Bill Altman on the Main studio gates console. In addition to news duties, I did a country and western show as "cousin Cootie" and filled in for other DJ's occasionally. The photo below was taken in front of one of the gates to the old city of Hue. I can't remember why I was there in '65. I would return to Vietnam in 1970 and be headquartered in Hue but on that tour I spent a lot of time in the field as the senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division Recon Company. Our recon teams worked the areas North and west of Phu Bai and Hue.



Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Left:
Can't remember this Navy Chief's name but this was his most common Position – sleeping off his hangover in a chair in the station's lobby. He did this very often. Great example of NCO leadership!

Right: SP/4 Austin ^{CYAMER} Kramer
(on the left in this photo)
Operates the Gates control board while I deliver a newscast from the news booth.



Some of the AFRS staff in 1965



Above and below: SP/5 Ron Engleman. These photos were taken at a special services recreation facility on the river outside of Saigon, left over from the French. Ron was from Colorado. He was a room mate only for a brief period. Like Nelson, he requested reassignment and was sent to manage a press camp in the DaNang area. He really liked his new job and would occasionally drop in to see us when in Saigon. He had some great adventures and stories about his press camp job.

After Vietnam Ron worked at a number of western stations and had a syndicated talk show for a while. He died of lung cancer about four years ago.

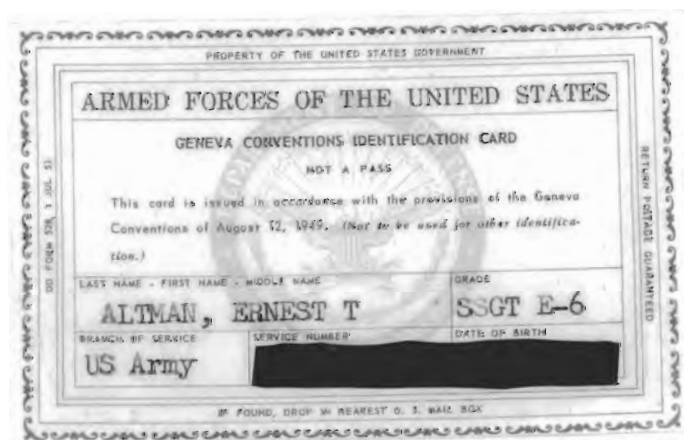


Some things I carried in 1965

While I was there, the black market in U.S. green backs went crazy and the Military leaders decided to use a technique that had been used in the past. They switched to military payment certificates without warning. Below is five cents in MPC. The black market in greenbacks mostly disappeared.



Below is the Geneva convention card all military personnel were required to carry in 1965



Promotion to Staff Sergeant



Left:

I was promoted to Staff Sergeant (E-6) April 15, 1965 and continued to work in the AFRS Saigon newsroom. All military support and administrative jobs in Vietnam were 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Saigon Street Scenes - 1965

Below right:

Vietnamese policeman directs traffic. They were called "white mice" because of the color of their uniforms and the fact they disappeared when shooting started.

Below left:

Cyclos were a common sight on Saigon streets. They were cheaper transportation than taxis.



Charlton Heston visits AFRS



The nicest, most interesting celebrity I have ever interviewed. When we started he said "call me Chuck." I looked at him and said "You really expect me to call the guy who parted the Red Sea, Chuck?" He got a laugh out of that and we settled down to an interview that became a very enjoyable conversation.

When I asked him why he came to Vietnam, he said, "I can't sing or dance . I have no musical group. I plan to visit our military folks even in small places and let them know that we're proud of what they are doing. It's just me and an AWOL bag so I can go to remote locations and I plan to do that."

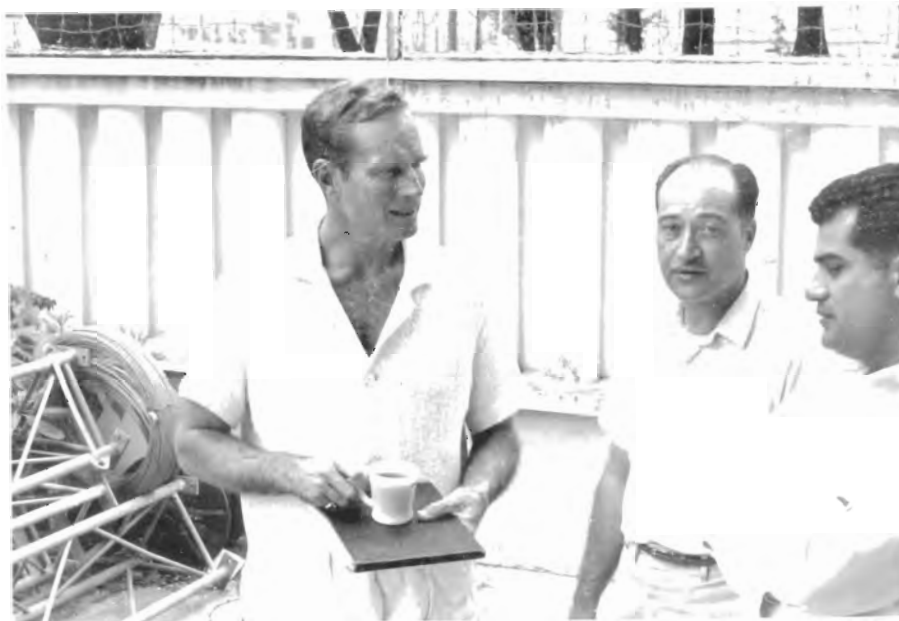


Charlton Heston visits AFRS



The interview lasted over an hour. Heston was relaxed, engaging, and appeared to be in no hurry. Staff members kept looking for an excuse to come into the studio but nobody asked for his autograph. I got the feeling from Heston that he liked that. I think he just wanted to be one of the guys that afternoon. When we finished he got another cup of coffee and stood around with our staff outside the lobby talking with everyone

Below: Heston, with his coffee, talks two of our staff members. I'm Not sure but I think the guy in the middle was our new NCOIC and the guy on the right was our new OIC.



The Embassy Bombing – Killed 21 Wounded 190 · MARCH 30, 1965



May 16, 1965 – Aerial view of Bien Hoa airbase showing aftermath of Accidental chain reaction explosions that Killed 21 airmen, wounded many more and destroyed at least 22 aircraft



Bombing at Tan Son Nhut Airport



Above: On emergency leave, I processed early at Tan Son Nhut and went upstairs to the snack bar. About 15 minutes before the bomb went off I stepped outside and took this photo of our waiting plane. When the explosion came I was in the back of the snack bar far from the flying glass. There were a number of injured people but I don't remember if any were killed. I called the AFRTS newsroom and reported what I knew. The story was held for an hour or so for security reasons. They removed all baggage, piled it off the side of the ramp, used bomb dogs to sniff it out, and covered it with a tarp. The plane flew immediately to the Philippines. We all went back to our quarters and returned to fly out the next day. Below: The VC package bomb was in the upstairs Air France office shown here after the explosion.



Bombing at Tan Son Nhut Airport



Above: injured bystander looking for medical help.

Left: Security outside terminal after the explosion.

Below: The check-in counter area after the explosion.



The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965



The fight for Don Xoai began on June 9th when the VC 272nd regiment attacked a Special Forces Team and their CIDG unit. The battle raged for several days. My request to cover the story on site, was finally approved and these photos were made in the newsroom as I prepared to leave for the field. I don't remember the names of the other staff members.



At the airport I hitched a ride to the forward staging and refueling base With a Huey gunship unit nicknamed "razorbacks". The Major who commanded the unit was from Arkansas. He kindly gave me a ride and a pair of intercom phones to listen to the radio chatter

The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965 – The Razorbacks



These were the early gunships. No cobras in-country yet. I was the only passenger seated atop a metal case of m-60 machine gun ammo connected to two M-60's on each side. Below the guns was a pod of 7 rockets. The gunner and crew chief's M-60's hung on bungee cords.

Above: the weapons are being armed after the Hueys set down in a safe area immediately after take off.

Below: A photo out the left side door as we approach the forward refueling base.

During the flight they played AFRS radio on the intercom while radio traffic flowed among the Hueys and their controllers. Talk about multi-tasking? I don't know how these guys kept track of everything that was going on.



The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965 – The devastation



The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965 – The devastation



Shell holes in one of Dong Xoai's few permanent buildings are testament to the intense fighting

The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965 – The devastation



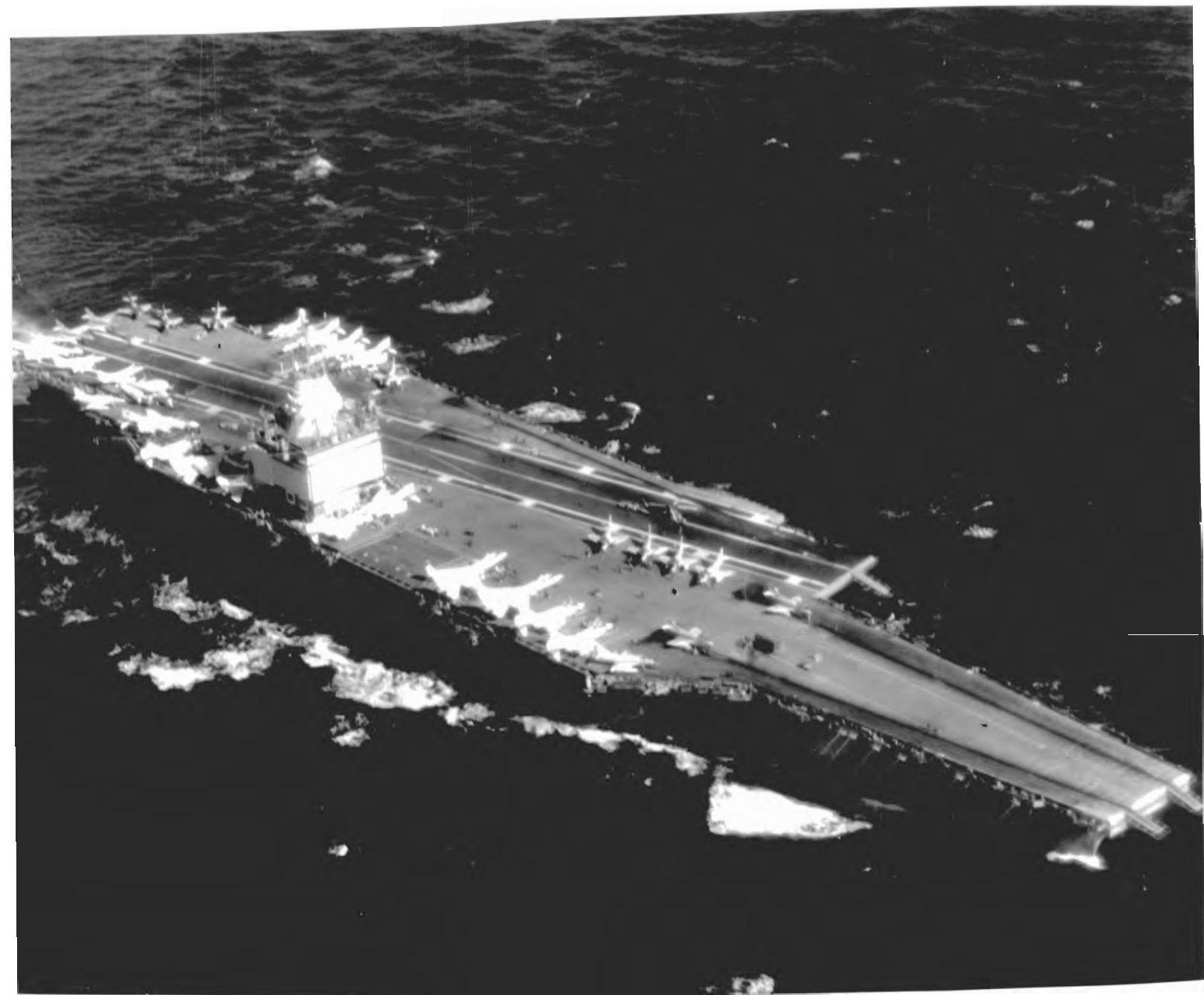
A wounded refugee awaits transportation to a safer rear area where medical care will be available.

The Battle of Dong Xoai – June 1965 – The devastation



Only one of many tragedies. The woman with the child on her hip stands near her husband's corpse wrapped in a poncho and protected from the sun with a piece of corrugated metal.

The Carrier Enterprise – early December 1965



I was a member of a group of reporters who came aboard the first day a nuclear powered carrier launched her planes in combat. She lost two planes that day – one to ground fire and one failed to land and ran out of fuel. The pilot was rescued. This US Navy photo is from the press kit distributed that day.

I thought the navy food they served was great but I heard sailors complaining. It must be universal.

The Children of Vietnam - 1965



Left:

The kids were really cute but amazingly stoic. They did not cry or laugh. They just looked straight at you. I suppose most of them had seen enough bad things that they didn't have those emotions available or they had driven that far down inside. Every kid also worked. Whether it was taking care of their siblings or Doing something else productive, they worked. In the country side you would see very small boys herding giant water buffalo with a switch, I have seen these same little boys asleep on a buffalo's back as it grazed.

Below:

This child is a shopkeeper in a sidewalk stall Selling a multitude of hardware items – another Common street scene in Saigon.



The Children of Vietnam - 1965



The Internet brings Vietnam broadcasters back together in the year 2000

For most of the time between 1963 and 1972 it was know a AFVN (Armed Forces Vietnam Network). When I was there in 1965 it was still AFRS (Armed Forces Radio Service). Television broadcasting was added in 1966 and detachments were built around Vietnam as military units were added to the U.S. and allied forces in country.

As the internet appeared and matured so did some of the opportunities it offered - opportunities for people with common experiences to get back together and share their memories. Around the year 2000 a few of us were online with each other through the Yahoo Geo Cities website. We sought out anyone who had worked in Vietnam broadcasting or listened to our programs. Our online numbers grew steadily. Today it is a community of more than 300 people around the world linked through e-mail. One message from a member of the group goes to every other member of the group. Replies go to all of us. Bob Morecook moderates the e-mails and makes sure we keep discussions focused on broadcasting experiences while we avoid alienating individuals by straying into political discussions. It is now an electronic conversation.

Using this tool we have found old friends, developed new friends, and shared our stories. We were not there at the same time yet we had many common experiences. These electronic conversations have refreshed faded memories and provided new perspectives

Most of the credit for our website and Facebook goes to our webmaster, Jim White. Jim is a retired US Army Sergeant Major who was the Administrative NCO for AFVN when it was a much larger organization than I experienced. Today Jim is a professor living and teaching in Japan. He contributes many hours creating and maintaining our AFVN presence on the World-Wide Web.

-30-

Note: "30" was telegraph operator symbol for end of transmission. Journalists later used it to signify the end of the story.