

In the Army now...

Drafted!

Age 24. Not paying attention, part time student at Michigan State University, Theater Department. At the time I was also the Studio Supervisor for the MSU Closed Circuit Instructional TV Network. I ran 5 TV studios on campus used primarily for lectures and TV student classrooms. The beginnings of “online learning”. I trained student camera operators, designed sets, lights etc., etc.

When I received my draft notice I began to look around the Army for a facility that might use my expertise. I found the TV studios at West Point and exchanged some letters with the commander. They did indeed want my services. The problem as it turned out was getting me there.

It all began with the doofus that interviewed me at the induction center in Detroit. I did enlist for the three year stint and some control over my deployment. (Laughter please.) With letters from West Point in hand overwhelming his mental capacity, he scratched his head and wisely enlisted me as “unattached”. Another term for “cannon fodder!” “It would get fixed up at your next post.” (Insert laughter.)

Basic training was mostly uneventful at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. With my theater background I took the GI role on as I would any other character. They gave me a costume and I already knew the lines, so it was just a matter of role playing. As the “old man” in the company kicking butt, the kids most often referred to me as “John Wayne Seeley”.

The thing that made it all tolerable is that I got a few weekends off. As luck would have it, I had family just down the road. I could hop a bus and be on the farm in just an hour. Home cooking, soft bed, walking the woods and a little gopher target practice. Gophers dig holes, cows break legs, gophers are expendable. It all worked out just fine and I was a top shot in the company. Did one pushup for the DI on the last day. Said he couldn't let me go without it.

The Army in its wisdom thought it would be best if they sent me off to a fire control computer maintenance school. First, a few weeks in electronics school at Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Al. also known for Marshal Space Flight Center. The electronics school was as it turned out a long-term investment for me. It gave me the understanding, language and skills that I would need off and on throughout my life. It was also the key to the rest of my story.

I discovered shortly that Huntsville had a community theater. I directed three plays for them that season. As the town's one “out on the town social event site” the theater saw the likes of Wernher von Braun and all those rocket science guys.

Ok, back to the Army. While out and about one day I was fortunate to walk by a television studio on the base. In full curiosity mode I wondered in to see what it was all about. Note here that I am in civilian clothes. I walked up to the counter and introduced myself to the receptionist. I was lounging against the counter schmoozing a lovely lady about my background, local theater, etc. when an officer who was apparently listening in the adjoining office peeked

around the door jamb. He invited me into the office.

We shook hands, made introductions and sat down. It seems he was a Major. I continued to fill him in on my theater and instructional television background. He was apparently in shock that the likes of me was a walk-in. After a bit with an entirely confused look on his face he asked if I was in the Army. I was like, oh, ah, yeah, I had failed to mention that! I explained to him that I was in school there and was couple of weeks from being sent off to West Virginia to another school. We immediately began the paperwork to get me transferred out of the school and into the TV Studios.

As the Army would have it, nothing happened. The paperwork was lost or misplaced or AWOL. It was down to the wire, only days left, fingers were taping nervously... we were in a quandary. And then luck or fate stepped in. Congressman Gerald R. Ford from Grand Rapids, Michigan (my home town) who I had introduced a few years earlier at a State Student Council Conference and whose mother knew my mother and was on the Congressional Military Appropriations Committee, was just a phone call away. A miracle, within 24 hours the deed was done.

The Redstone Instructional Television Studios turned out to be mostly mobile. The control room and all the studio equipment were in a tractor-trailer. That was back in the day when Ampex video tape was 2" wide and it took two men to pick up a B&W RCA camera. We even hauled our own 40KW generator so we could work in the field. The duty was tough! I was forced to let my hair grow out and wear civilian cloths! It seems I had to tell officers what to do. Rank could not be an issue. Tsk, tsk, so difficult...

The first day I was introduced to the crew I would travel and work with. Again, as fate would have it, events turn interesting. The engineers had just installed new Riker video synchronizers and the systems were down just as we were to hit the road for Fort Polk LA. Well, as if destined, I had seen the same problem some months earlier in the studios at Michigan State. In this type of application there is a little hidden resistor that needs to be cut out of the circuits. One little snip and the whole system was up and running. Needless to say the "new guy" got the "look" from the whole crew. It was one of those things that could have gone either way. I think it turned out good and a little respect came early. All and all a pretty good time.

A few months down the road and Armed Forces Radio & Television requested my services in Vietnam. At the time we were shooting at the Command & General Staff College in Leavenworth, KS. Back to Redstone ASAP, a couple of weeks at home and the loong flight. Upon arriving Tan Son Nhut Air Base a couple of LTs boarded the commercial aircraft and asked for anyone with Military Assistance Command(MACV) orders to follow them. A Captain and I walked off the plane. We were escorted through all the check-in falderal and boarded on a two passenger, two bus convoy. Two buses in case one broke down on the way to Saigon.

I was checked into a small enclosed hotel enclave* somewhere in Saigon. I never did learn where I was. I had a small room to myself and went through a few days of orientation. Then a meter-less Renault taxi ride or two to AFVN Headquarters while they decided what to do with me. Somewhere in there I was issued an M1 Carbine. Then a flight to Nha Trang on a Caribou

full of actual soldiers and a landing craft to Hon Tre Island.

* Some weeks later a very large quantity of C4 was discovered smeared on the back wall of the building.

TV station in tractor-trailer... not too exciting. Cutting spots for the Donut Dollies with an occasional date at the Nha Trang Press Club as a highlight. Nothing like an Army SP4 riding around at night in civilian clothes being pulled over by the MPs, while driving a Navy pickup with three Donut Dollies stuffed in the front seat. That followed by being the lowest ranked guy at an officers' party with the only women on his arm is a story for another time.

It's pushing my memory, but I think it was Jill St John that was choppered up to the island. I did a live interview with both of us stuffed into that closet studio in the van. That's about as hot as it ever got. Except the night the VC hit us. They had an R&R center on the other side of the island and there was a kind of detente between the two sides until that night. They fired some mortars into the compound, wounded one and holed our water heater. Puff the Magic Dragon showed up and they were never heard from again. Not bad except for the anti-aircraft missile company on the hill above shooting down at us!

Then there was the day I was on the mail run to the mainland. In the mail we received a notice that there was something on the beach to pick up. I drove the jeep down to take a look. It seems the paperwork for this piece of equipment was bleached out. All they could read was AFV. They asked me if I would take it. That "it" turned out to be a 20-ton crane. I had 24 hours to get it off the beach. I called my LT and told him what I wanted to do. A little later in the day I acquired a jeep in trade with an engineering company. Repainted the next day and we never knew who it really belonged to.

Six months into my stay they sent me down to the AM Radio Station in Dong Ba Thin outside of the Cam Ranh Air Base. I guess nothing much happened worth remembering. I had a ream of in-country travel orders and hitch hiked around the country a bit from a local heli-pad. I did get in trouble for sharing on air how hungover I was one morning and I didn't think there was enough coffee in country. The next thing I knew there was a huge pot sitting on the studio steps. My LT got all over me, he didn't give a shit how I felt... No fun!

So, that's the story of how I got to AFVN. I have no memories of the long flight home. There are some flashes from the LA airport and then being seated in First Class for the flight to Detroit. My next duty station and believe me that is a story, was the Army Pictorial Center, Long Island, NY. Essentially a year of making movies out of Paramount's old East Coast Studio blocks from Manhattan. Living and working in the City. Oh, my...