

# Meeting with the Estimable PIO of JUSPAO

Forrest G. Brandt

Some of the names have been changed to protect the guilty, nonetheless this is how I recall my meeting the estimable PIO of JUSPAO.

13:00 Hours, 6 March, 1969, JUSPAO: JUSPAO was another world. A world of sparkling new buildings made of steel and glass and air-conditioned to keep out the Vietnamese weather. A compound within a compound with paved streets, young trees and well-watered grass lawns cut to suburban perfection. We located the building and the paved and lined parking lot beside it.

Willy pushed his helmet back and adjusted his glasses, "Well, Toto," he said, "looks like we aren't in Kansas anymore."

The three of us stepped inside, the blast of cold air chilled my sweaty back and chest enough to induce a shiver. A Vietnamese secretary greeted us, "Mrs. Huntington will be right with you Lieutenant. Please, you and your men, have a seat." Five minutes later the clatter of thick, white wedgie sandals on the hard tile floor announced Huntington's arrival. She crossed the lobby and offered me a plump white hand.

"Lieutenant Brandt? Alice Huntington. How are you?"

"Shake hands like you mean it," I remembered my father preaching. "Don't hand someone a limp fish." Alice Huntington had just handed me a limp, moist, fish grip. I couldn't wait to let go.

I noted that she shook my hand, but deigned to let her delicate hand touch that of the two enlisted men accompanying me. In fact, she never once acknowledged their presence or gave them as much as mere eye contact.

"Won't you pull your chairs around so I can explain things to you?" she asked. She looked me straight in the eyes. "How did you happen to sneak by me, Lieutenant? I like to know who's out there doing PIO work for us."

Huntington was inferring that she had the authority to pick personnel, not my boss back at the division. I gave her a cautious answer, "I requested the job after I got here. I majored in speech and theatre and worked for three different radio and television stations during school. That's how I got the job."

"Well, I just wondered why you didn't have to go through me. I like to know where my folks come from."

My folks? That was rich. I smiled and let her live with her allusion.

"You are a DINFOS (Defense Information Officer School) graduate, aren't you?"

Why was she so concerned about my qualifications? Maybe she had an out-of-work nephew somewhere who needed gainful employment. I would gladly hand the job to him. "No, I'm not."

“Well then, I really have to wonder why they picked you up.”

I could have truthfully told her that I sometimes wondered also. It was a nagging awareness of my own unworthiness, kind of like Groucho Marx stating that he would never join a club that would choose someone like him to be a member.

“I didn’t know I had to go through anyone except Colonel Franklin,” I answered.

With that she seemed to be satisfied and moved on to the rest of her agenda. I made a mental note that though she felt free to harass lieutenants, she didn’t mess with colonels. I tucked that away for future reference.

“Lieutenant Brandt, here’s what I need from you and your men. I need you to help me get the real story out about the ARVN. We need to let the American public know that the South Vietnamese are really doing the bulk of the fighting and they’re winning the war.”

It’s a wonder that the three of us did not snort out loud or fall off our chairs laughing. The thought flashed through my mind, the ARVN? Really fighting? Actually winning the war? She must be smoking cigarette dinky dau. I stared at her, dumbfounded by the absurdity of what she had just said.

She detected my suspicions, “You’re from First Infantry Division, so you saw what the ARVN did outside Bien Hoa. You saw how the ARVN really got in there and mixed it up. Of course we gave them air and artillery support, but they really did the bulk of the ground fighting. Your division stood by in case something went wrong”

I suddenly understood why the press referred to the daily JUSPAO news briefing as “the five o’clock follies.” JUSPAO had created the term “selected ordinance” in place of napalm. They had invented “body count” and “light casualties.” Now they were going to tell the world that the ARVN was an effective fighting unit and that American soldiers were no longer bearing the load in this war.

That steamed me. I wasn’t in favor of the war, but I sure as hell supported the grunts in the field. They deserved truth and credit from the agency appointed to tell their story. But the politicians needed an effective ARVN and so JUSPAO would provide a fighting ARVN despite the truth.

I could not see what ARVN was doing throughout Vietnam, but I did know what was going on in our division’s area. There the only contest in which ARVN was doing “the bulk of the fighting” was the one to illegally appropriate Marlboro cigarettes, Cokes, beer and Martell brandy from the US Army’s PX. Didn’t Huntington know that?

She continued to yammer away about the fighting spirit of the new ARVN forces until I broke in on her conversation. “Maybe we didn’t see the same battle as you,” I suggested. “We’re pretty much limited to our division’s Area of Operations. Maybe you’re talking about another AO.”

“Well it was right there in Bien Hoa where they really tore into the NVA.” Huntington’s voice was developing a squeak.

The three of us, Wayne, Willy and I had talked with the infantry and armor units that had rescued the ARVNs at Bien Hoa. Most of the ARVN soldiers had broken contact and headed home toward Saigon. Troops from the 1/18th Infantry restored the line while tanks from the 11th Armored Cav including some new, flechette-round firing Sheridans turned the flanks and broke the back of the enemy’s attack.

Now I was being told to “re-see” things, to doubt my own sense of truth and to develop some creative ways to make the public believe that the ARVN was capable of winning the war.

I resisted until I saw that all I was accomplishing was making her more angry and determined. I lied back. “I’ll look into ways we can work the ARVN into our stories. I’ll pass the information on to my boss when I get back to Lai Khe.”

Huntington gave me that ol’ sorority girl smile, “That’s fine, Lieutenant, now just a few dos and don’ts before I let you go.” I listened, wishing the lecture would come to a merciful end. “Now, one last point,” she said, “and it’s a little one, but it’s so important when you’re dealing with the press; when you release photos, if you show American wounded, be sure they’re smiling.”

With that we stood up, said our good byes and headed for the doors. We reentered the sticky, hot day and the special smell of Saigon: equal parts of diesel exhaust, garbage, raw sewage and Nhuc Mong. I didn’t like the heat or the smell that permeated the city, but it was healthier than the air inside JUSPAO.

From: Ken Kalish  
Sent: August 9, 2014  
Subject: JUSPAO

Your piece, Forrest, explains why so many people sent from the various non-Saigon locales to Saigon held REMFs in such low regard. From the war-weary infantry guys manning the little round guard posts to the squids who wound up reassigned to Saigon commands, there was a universal feeling of “They have no idea.” I was once asked by an AP reporter new in town to explain my view of the Delta fighting. He cut the conversation short when I explained how it was frequently necessary to shoot at floating bodies in the river to sink them and thereby prevent disease if they washed ashore. He wanted to know how we told the difference between the American and the Vietnamese dead, and I said it wasn’t possible, we sank them all. He thought I was either making up the story or being disrespectful to our war dead. I hope he eventually had the good fortune to be assigned a week or so in the rural areas so he could experience the futility of trying to lift a body five days dead in summer heat.

Ken

From: Bill Altman  
Sent: August 9, 2014  
Subject: JUSPAO

Forrest,

A well-written story. It makes your blood boil to think how the spin doctors can take the truth so far from reality. The difference between the views of field troops and headquarters dweebs was unbelievable. I suppose that difference has been around forever in war but in Vietnam it was like two different worlds.

When I returned to Vietnam after OCS, I ran into a former classmate on a remote firebase called “T-bone” located northwest of Hue. My Vietnamese recon company had just moved into the base and was given responsibility for a portion of the perimeter while our recon teams operated northwest of the firebase.

As I headed to the TOC one morning, several slicks dropped off some grungy looking American troops just returning from the bush. I thought I recognized one guy, walked over and found their platoon leader, a former platoon mate from OCS. He was a recon platoon leader from the 101st Abn Div and his teams had been working the area where we were going. What a small world!

We spent several hours reviewing maps and exchanging tactical information. MY OCS friend told me he had already volunteered for another mission after a two day rest. I remembered this guy from OCS as a city boy from Brooklyn who had difficulty with topo maps and other routine infantry skills and asked him how he liked his job. He said "I really like what I'm doing. My battalion commander gives me a lot of freedom. I can choose my men. All of them are volunteers and if you don't like being in recon, you'll be on the next resupply slick going to Eagle. MY recon platoon has no race problems, no drug problems, no fragging. We would much rather be in the bush than in the rear. I hope they keep us in the bush until I get on the freedom bird." I was surprised by his attitude but I think his answer summed up the difference for some of us between life in the rear and life in the bush. The slicks returned to take his platoon to camp Eagle that afternoon. That was the last time I saw him. I hope you [i.e. "he"] got his wish.

From: Dick Ellis

Sent: August 11, 2014

Subject: Green Lt and JUSPAO

Forrest... I sent your story around to several friends including Barry. He was an Army Lt-Col who worked with me in the Pentagon. He had come on active duty as an airline pilot He is now retired in Dickie

*[The following is part of the message from Dick Ellis.]*

Super story. Don't think much has changed other than probably gotten worse. We will have to watch the story coming out of the Caliphate of Iraq with a very suspicious ear and eye.

Barry