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President Thieu's Right Hand Man

A Province Advisory Team is a very small group of officers and enlisted personnel numbering about 100 to 120 guys dedicated to protecting and assisting each other to do our jobs and try to ensure that everybody gets to go home alive. There no one ever pulled rank over each other whether we be senior officers or privates. And everyone had multiple responsibilities. We had advisory responsibility in a Vietnamese Province with a population of about 500,000 people.

I was the "New Guy" in the headquarters element and all of the staff took me under their wings to assist me in my new role as Group Adjutant. I was in charge of the S-1 section which is the Administrative team. The S-2 section was the Intelligence guys, The S-3 section was the Military Operations guys. The S-4 section was the supply guys. The S-5 section was the Psychological Operations guys. We also had an Engineering section, a Medical Section who were a bunch of U.S. Air Force doctors and nurses. A U.S. Navy section supporting the South Vietnamese Navy. Our mess hall sergeant was on his sixth year in Vietnam who cooked up the best food I ever had in the Army. All of our jobs were to support the District teams and the Mobile Advisory Teams throughout the province. Everyone got along. And, since we were so small a group, everybody knew everybody. We also had an Australian Army advisory team in our group of six senior sergeants who fought in WWII, Korea, Malaya, Burma, and Borneo. They had some great stories to tell.

Also, Thailand sent their Tiger Division; West Germany sent several large medical units, South Korea sent several combat battalions, and the Philippines sent military construction engineers to build roads and bridges. We, the Americans, were not alone in fighting for South Vietnam.

I was not just the Group Adjutant. I was also the Recreation Officer, the Mail Room Officer, The Group Senior Advisor's hot water shower Officer, the Aid in Kind Officer, and the Colonel's Dog Robber; I'm the guy who gets stuff when the Colonel wants stuff. When he wants a special wine for a dinner party, I make sure he has the special wine wherever in Asia it might be, etc.

One morning, the Group Executive Officer comes into my office, sits down, and asks me if I spoke Vietnamese. I answered that I understand Vietnamese but I'm not perfectly fluent in speaking the language. He then informs me that General Thieu, the President of South Vietnam is coming in two days to Vinh Long at a Medal of Valor presentation in the soccer stadium and to give a speech and award military medals to seventy South Vietnamese soldiers and twelve U.S. Army advisors. And you, Lieutenant, will translate his speech into English as he is speaking in Vietnamese. I asked if I could get a copy of the speech beforehand. The Major then said, "The Vietnamese Province Staff were currently translating the speech into English, and all you have to do is read the English translation. It will be a piece of cake. I'm counting on you, Lieutenant, and please don't shame me or the United States Army." The following day, Chanh, my interpreter and I practiced all day and into the wee small hours of the night. We marked the landing point of each Vietnamese word with the corresponding English word so that I am not ahead of the president and that he is not ahead of me. Chanh and I believe that after twenty hours of work that we have got this sucker nailed. We timed the speech several times and it came out to about forty minutes.

The following morning, I began walking down the road to the soccer stadium and every twenty feet was a South Vietnamese soldier who was at attention and saluting me and I returned his salute. I crossed the road and looked back and I immediately became aware that the guys were not saluting me, but that I was leading President Thieu's parade into the soccer stadium and all these guys were saluting him! I guess that I was the Drum Major.

I got to the stadium and there was a large stage, flags, a military band, an honor guard, about three thousand people, and two television cameras. I was going to be a television star! The Executive Officer came over to me and said, "You're on deck, Lieutenant." President Thieu climbed on to the stage and walked to the

podium. The Executive Officer walked over to me and whispered, "Batter up, Lieutenant."

After the waving and saluting, President Thieu began to speak in Vietnamese and I took a deep breath and began to speak in English. I was hitting all of my word marks for about twenty minutes. Then President Thieu decided to go off script. He was winging it! I had no clue of what he was talking about! I had a major league panic attack. I could not breathe. My heart rate was about 180 a minute. I was sweating gallons. I was convinced that I was about to die. I had this thought that my mother was going to receive a letter from the Department of Defense that her favorite son died in Vietnam while giving a speech. Where was Xanax when I really needed it?

President Thieu paused and sipped from a glass of water, and during that pause, he looked over to me. I then realized that the Vietnamese in the audience didn't understand English and the American brass didn't understand Vietnamese. I took another deep breath and began to wing it, and I began the greatest military or political speech in the history of western civilization. Winston Churchill would have been put to shame, President Obama would have been taking notes, Trump would have been in awe, General Westmorland would have won his election in South Carolina, Osama Bin Laden would have converted to Christianity, and I ended my speech exactly when President Thieu uttered his last word.

After his applause, President Thieu, who spoke excellent English, came over to me, smiled, shook my hand, and winked at me. I am certain that he knew what he and I did. President Thieu left the stage, got into his staff car, and left for the airfield.

Chanh, my interpreter, came over to me laughing and said, "That lieutenant was the greatest speech that President Thieu never gave."

I said, "Let's go, Chanh, I think we both need a couple of beers, a cigarette, and a bowl of soup."