

THE 3RD FIELD HOSPITAL

by Sterling B. Mutz, Maj., M.C.

The 3rd Field Hospital, with an illustrious history of service in the South Pacific during W.W.II and in Korea, was reactivated at Ft. Lewis, Washington on 11 March 1965 to provide medical support for a rapidly expanding US commitment in another fight for freedom. A 100 bed unit of the 51st Field Hospital supplied the nucleus of our unit which was designed to hold the gap while the full medical support could be assembled and deployed to Vietnam. Considerable care was taken to insure that each of the key sections including Professional Service, Nursing Service, A & D, supply and mess was under competent experienced persons. This was the prime factor that guaranteed success in its mission.

The unit left Fort Lewis on 23 April 1965 and traveled into two sections on MATS C-119 across the Pacific to Tan Son Nhut. The prevailing thought of our entire unit was the anticipation of an important job that needed doing and doing well, so that many Americans would return home who could not have returned if we had not come.

The expectation of living in tents was not realized since the excellent buildings of the American Community School Saigon were to be converted into a hospital with our field equipment which had been sent ahead from Ft. Lewis by surface. Direct medical support was needed immediately for the southern half of the country and as renovation of the buildings was completed, usually before the paint dried, nurses and corpsmen swooped into set up the wards. Steel elevated hospital beds were procured from the ARVN medical depot; eight refrigerators appeared mysteriously, the embassy donated typewriters, desks and bookcases and other school equipment including a mimeograph machine which proved to be most valuable. The unit stood tall on 12 May 1965 and declared itself operational to General Norton then commanding general of Support Command.

[It is interesting to know just how the school was converted into a hospital in record time. It is quite a story of how "the biggest crook and criminal" in Southeast Asia at the time was contracted by the U.S. Embassy, U.S. military services, and CIA to "take care of the details" of accomplishing the conversion. He was the only person who had the connections, contacts and influence throughout Asia and the Pacific Basin to make the conversion happen by whatever methods necessary. It has been estimated the conversion would have taken 2 to 3 years through "proper" channels – he completed it in just under 6 months.]

The air craft explosion at Bien Hoa AFB provided us with our baptismal operation within a few days after opening. Thirty-five casualties were received and cared for over a period of a few hours.

Our TO & E handicapped us from the beginning. Electrical power was a major problem. A 150 KW Caterpillar generator was "borrowed" from the civilian contractors to supplement our two generators, these latter were totally inadequate to handle the requirements of a fixed installation with its air conditioned operating rooms, refrigeration and resuscitation equipment.

The Bien Hoa explosion was followed by a succession of episodes which taxed the capabilities of our unit. A terrorist bomb exploded at the Tan Son Nhut terminal, the Dong Xoai outpost was over run, the 173rd Air Borne Brigade and the 1st Royal Australian Reg. initiated several conflicts, and the Bien Hoa air base was again mortared one dark midnight. In early June the 1st Brigade or the 1st Inf. Div. required medical support.

The casualty load was shared by the 3rd Field Hospital and the U.S. Naval Station Hospital Saigon. An excellent working arrangement was established to facilitate the operation of the two units and provide the best patient care. Cooperation was essential in both the deployment of personnel and supplies. At the time the My Canh floating restaurant in Saigon was hit with claymore mines, two surgeons and an anesthetist were dispatched to the Navy hospital. This practice was beneficial to the total casualty flow and was to be repeated many times.

At no time were we ever out of any critical supply item. The ingenuity of the supply personnel was frequently called upon and there were periods of anxiety over the quantity available but there was always enough to accomplish the mission. The sources of supply were numerous and highly variable and the methods of obtaining them were unique to say the least. The ARVN medical depot proved to be the most reliable source during the 3 month period of time it took to establish a regular flow through standard channels.

The mission began to change after the 3rd Surgical Hospital became operational on 15 September 1965 and the 93rd Evacuation Hospital on 1 December 1965. The 3rd Field Hospital was still in support of tactical troops but now began to function also as a holding installation and an evacuation hospital. This was not added strain since in the month of October 497 patients had been evacuated through this facility. On 3 November 1965 we were augmented by the HQ unit and two complete 100 bed hospital units of the 51st Field Hospital. This allowed expansion to 325 beds which had been set up in preparation for the new units. Surgeon General Leonard Heaton was on hand to cut the ribbon, signifying this expansion.

It was elected to retain the already established name of the 3rd Field Hospital. The incoming personnel were a welcome addition to the unit and the physicians, nurses, ancillary staff and enlisted personnel continue to work together to ensure that optimum patient care is given. Currently we feel we have the finest physical plant in South Vietnam staffed by an excellent professional staff of physicians, Surgeons and Nurses with qualified specialists in intern medicine, and a Neurosurgical, thoracic, vascular, orthopedic and general surgical capability. A complete new surgical suite is now under construction.

In the years to come it is felt that the basic foundations laid by those early arrivals will provide an ample base on which to build more complete and better medical support. The initial growing pains are now fading from our memory.

Sterling B. Mutz, Major/MC was born of Canadian parentage in Portland, Ore., 13 May 1929. The family migrated back to Vancouver, British Columbia after a few months and he received his grade school and high school education in Canada.

He received pre-medical education at Pasadena City College and the University of California at Berkley. He studied medicine at the George Washington University in Washington D.C., graduating in June 1956.

Shortly before graduation he joined the U.S. Army, completed an internship, at Tripler General Hospital and was commissioned a 1st Lt in the regular Army. Following a year of pre-specialty surgical training at Madigan Army Hospital, he completed an Orthopedic residency at Letterman General Hospital, including one year of pediatric orthopedics at the San Francisco Shriner's Hospital for crippled children. After serving a tour of duty at Ft Dix, N.J. he completed a course in Hand Surgery at Walter Reed General Hospital in December of 1964, and assumed command of the 3rd Field Hospital on 19 April 1965.