



Then-CPT Strassburg returns to Camp Eagle from a case at Camp Evans while serving as a part-time military judge in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of COL (Ret.) Strassburg)

Pivotal Perspective

An Interview with Colonel (Retired) Tom Strassburg

By Major Alexander E. Hernandez

Colonel (Retired) (COL (Ret.)) Tom Strassburg, a distinguished member of our Regiment, kindly accepted my request to interview him for a Vietnam elective I took while attending the Naval War College. Then-Captain Strassburg served a year-long deployment in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971 in the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile).

Before the interview, I anticipated learning about how COL (Ret.) Strassburg's experiences as a judge advocate (JA) in Vietnam compared to our generation's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. We did share a lot of laughs about these differences—suffice it to say, his forward operating base did not have a Green Bean with wifi. After our interview

ended, however, and I reflected on COL (Ret.) Strassburg's words, it was not the differences that stood out most, but the similarities. Although they had yet to be formally included in our doctrine, the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps's four constants—principled counsel, stewardship, mastery of the law, and servant leadership¹—were present in COL (Ret.) Strassburg's recollections. More than fifty years later, COL (Ret.) Strassburg still appeared most visibly moved recalling the impact of the servant leadership he experienced while deployed. I share his words firsthand below to avoid doing injustice to his experience.

But first, I will set the scene: at the young age of seventy-nine, COL (Ret.) Strassburg was as quick with wit as he was with technology. If it were not for his overwhelming warmth and kindness, I would have felt embarrassed by how often I deferred to him on how to operate our

Zoom call. He shared his screen throughout the two-hour interview—which ended much too soon—to shuffle through photographs (he has a knack for photography). A minute into our conversation, my prepared questions were tossed aside as I enjoyed the privilege of listening to him describe his year in Vietnam as if it were yesterday.

Our conversation commenced with COL (Ret.) Strassburg sharing photos of his legal office at Camp Eagle, which hosted 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) Headquarters in northern South Vietnam near the cities of Huế and Phu Bai. The excerpts of our conversation provided below are edited for brevity and clarity.

Major (MAJ) Hernandez: What brought you into the JAG Corps?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: I came through what was then known as the excess leave program. I was commissioned out of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program. In the summers I worked in a JAG office, even as a lieutenant. My first assignment as a JAG Corps officer was at then-Fort Dix (now Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, and I spent a year there. I had a variety of experiences: from courts-martial to claims to administrative law, you name it.

MAJ Hernandez: Because you joined the Corps during wartime, did you expect to be deployed?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Yes. In those days, you would go to an assignment for one year, and then you would likely go to Vietnam after that. So, yes, I expected I would be. And at that time—1970-71—there was still quite a bit going on over there.

MAJ Hernandez: What was your pre-deployment training like?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: I think we had a three-day Vietnam familiarization and tactics course. We were out in the field with our M16s, and we went through some ambush situations. I had experienced some of that training in ROTC, but, you know, I thought, there's a war going on; I better pay attention to this!



Then-CPT Strassburg at his office desk at Camp Eagle in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of COL (Ret.) Strassburg)

MAJ Hernandez: What was your arrival to Vietnam like?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: There are some things you never forget. My arrival date in Vietnam was 21 September 1970. In those days, the division stayed there. They were rotating people in and out of units. I was scheduled to go to an engineer unit down in the southern part of Vietnam, and the living conditions were supposed to be pretty good. But one of my predecessors at the 101st Airborne Division—a very close friend of mine from the basic course—told his staff judge advocate (SJA) that he ought to get me to come to the 101st. So, when I got to Vietnam and said, "I'm supposed to go to the Engineer Command," they told me I'd been transferred to the 101st. It turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.

MAJ Hernandez: I'm curious about how your family handled your deployment. You were married at that time, right?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Yes, I was married. I also had one daughter, and my wife was expecting our second daughter when I left. My family was concerned that I was going to a war zone, but that was just the way it was. I corresponded with my family from Vietnam and let them know that things were not too bad for me. I was

relatively safe from the enemy. As I say, I was very, very fortunate.

MAJ Hernandez: What was your office like on Camp Eagle?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg pulled up a photo of a young, smiling then-CPT Strassburg in a wooden shack with windows sealed by plastic. He's sitting at a desk in front of an open binder, a rotary phone, and a banker's lamp.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: That was me at my desk. And you can see there is no screening up there because it's plastic. In my first full month in country, we had fifty-one inches of rain. It was pretty constant, and it would blow through the windows. Looking at this photo, I can't help but talk about that dial telephone on my desk. Of course, everything was analog. We didn't have push-button phones, and communication generally was a real problem. We could talk within the division, and we maintained contact with our JAG technical chain, but it was a challenge. Communication with the United States was difficult, which was necessary on a couple of occasions. That required a higher level of authorization, and a captain was not going to call anybody in the United States; that was out of the question. Even if you could get the authorization, the actual scheduling and technology to make the call was a challenge.



Then-CPT Strassburg stands before one of the officer hooches protected from the elements at Camp Eagle in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of COL (Ret.) Strassburg)

We went on to discuss how much communication has changed. COL (Ret.) Strassburg mentioned how he and his wife would send cassette tapes back and forth so they could hear each other's voices.

MAJ Hernandez: What was your duty position while in Vietnam?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: I had several roles. Initially, I was designated the chief of military affairs (or administrative law as we know it now). But, I mostly served as a defense counsel and a trial counsel. There was no Trial Defense Service in those days, so you served as both based on the circumstances. I am very much in favor of the idea of a separate defense corps, but I worked for one of the best SJAs, the late COL (Ret.) Richard S. Hawley, and he was completely even-handed. If you weren't doing a good job as defense counsel, he would let you know. Our clients got a good defense. In addition, with a special courts-martial caseload, which was substantial, they needed me to be a part-time military judge. That was very interesting work, and I got to travel

some because we held these cases all over the 101st area of operations.

The problem was that the power went out fairly frequently while trying cases. In those days, our court reporters were using the Stenomask technology, and in that humid, hot environment, the batteries were pretty much useless. So, if you did not have power, you could not do a record of trial.

MAJ Hernandez: How was your Office of the Staff Judge Advocate (OSJA) structured?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Then-LTC Hawley had a deputy, who was a major, and about eight captains, depending on the rotation. And that was nowhere near adequate to handle the caseload. But, the SJA had a very good relationship with our adjutant general. When anybody was assigned to the 101st who was a member of the bar, the SJA could interview them, and if he wanted to, he got them assigned to the OSJA—he wanted to get his cases tried.

Although they gave me the opportunity to move down south to what was known as a more desirable location in Vietnam, I decided to stay with the 101st.

Then-LTC Hawley was a fabulous leader. He had my back on a number of occasions, and it felt like leadership wouldn't get any better than this, so I stayed. I was happy to spend a whole year up there.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg shared photos of his "hooch," and he recalled memories—with astounding detail—about his living conditions. We laughed over his account of the informal duty roster to clear the always-full rat traps, and he explained the need to constantly fortify the buildings to manage the heavy rainfall.

There was not a whole lot else to do other than work. I can remember trying a case at eleven o'clock at night. Oftentimes, after the evening meal, there was time to write letters. But, again, we provided the full range of legal services. I also served as a foreign claims commissioner. I could approve claims up to a certain amount of money, and we had all kinds of them.

MAJ Hernandez: Is there a particular claims mission that stands out in your memory?

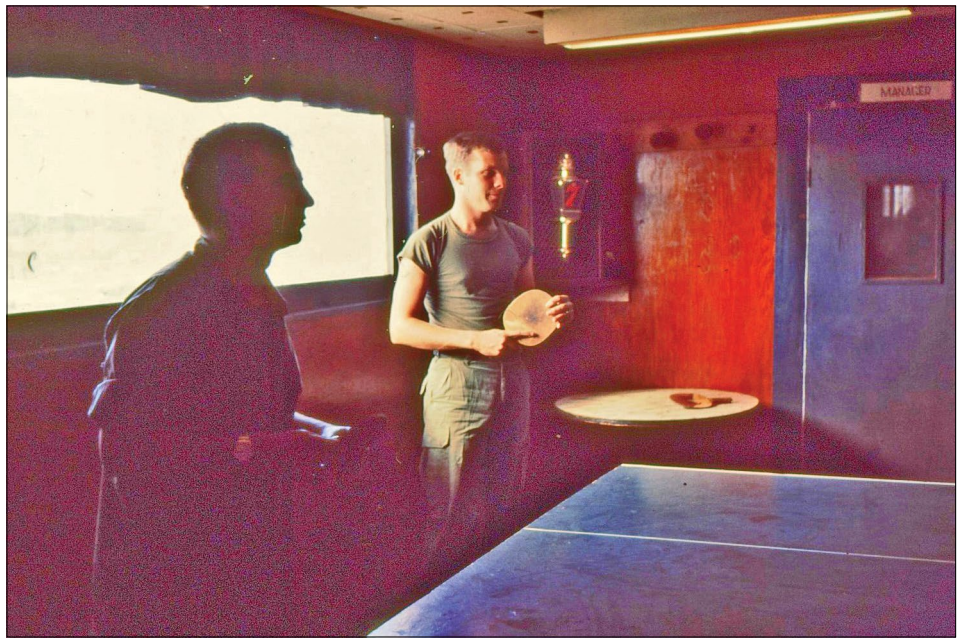
COL (Ret.) Strassburg: We had a case where, unfortunately, some Soldiers came back from Eagle Beach, an area on the South China Sea for 101st Soldiers that was a frequent recreation spot. A lot of drinking went on down there. On one occasion, U.S. Soldiers went through a Vietnamese village and tragically ran over and killed four local villagers. The locals were understandably upset, and they pretty much closed that road, which was our alternate main supply route. We had to do something as quickly as possible. So, we met with the province chief and negotiated and approved a large claim. It was the best we could do. We explained that we knew no amount of compensation could erase the incident, but it was something little we could do to help. But there's no excuse for what happened. Our Jeep was the first vehicle permitted on that road again after the incident.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg described more of his experiences traveling throughout Vietnam to support various missions. With a proud smile he noted that, as an airmobile division, the 101st had helicopters, which was his primary mode of travel. He described the air platforms with a level of detail you would expect from a pilot.

MAJ Hernandez: Were legal research resources available to you at Camp Eagle and in your travels?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: When we needed to do serious legal research, we had to go down to the Saigon area to Military Assistance Command Vietnam Headquarters, which had a first-class law library. The digital world was just getting started. The Air Force created an automated legal research system called FLITE, the Federal Legal Information Through Electronics. I got exposed to that, and I thought, wow, this is really something. It was just the beginning, though. But in Vietnam, there was nothing like that. And it was years before you got anywhere close to what you have today.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg went on to share photos he took during his downtime. One captured his friends playing ping pong in the hastily made Officers' Club. Another captured the "Eagle Bowl," a wooden stage on Camp Eagle. As he pulled up the photo, he smiled. He



Two Soldiers play ping-pong at the officers' club at Camp Eagle in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of COL (Ret.) Strassburg)



The Eagle Bowl served as the headquarters entertainment venue at Camp Eagle in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of COL (Ret.) Strassburg)

recalled the Bob Hope show and others coming through Vietnam to keep the Soldiers connected with life back in the United States.

MAJ Hernandez: In class, we discussed the impact of political and civil tension back home on the Vietnam War. How did that impact your experience?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Fortunately, I redeployed to an OSJA at then-Fort Lewis (now Joint Base Lewis-McChord), Washington, where tensions were not high, so I did not personally experience animosity. But, a lot of veterans did. Soldiers were often blamed for the decisions of political leaders. And so, yeah, it was real, it happened, but I personally did not experience it.

MAJ Hernandez: What stands out most to you from your time in Vietnam?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg's expression shifted slightly, clearly moved by the memory playing through his mind.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Well, then-LTC Hawley got into Vietnam about three weeks before I did, so he left about three weeks before I did. When he left, it was a very emotional time for everybody because we loved him and didn't know what we might be getting into next. He was an exceptional leader.

MAJ Hernandez: Were you able to stay in touch with COL (Ret.) Hawley?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Oh, yes. Did we ever. You bet. I met his wife and learned more about his family in the years following Vietnam.

MAJ Hernandez: Were you able to stay in touch with fellow members of the 101st?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: My wife and I went on a little tour after Vietnam to touch base with some of the people I served with because it really was a band of brothers. There's no comparison to the camaraderie and experience that you have in that sort of environment. It was all very, very meaningful. And we continue to stay in touch. The 101st JAG reunion five years ago was just amazing. To see what some of these people did and how famous they became as lawyers or entrepreneurs was really something. And they were all the same good, humble guys.

MAJ Hernandez: How did your expectations match reality from your time in Vietnam?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Well, thinking I would be assigned to the Engineer Command and ending up supporting the 101st was very different, needless to say. I'd heard about the 101st and where the operations were. I was frightened. I wasn't exposed to and prepared for that sort of environment. But once I got there and understood what was going on, it became very, very rewarding professionally. And again, memory

being such as it is, mine anyway, I would say, boy, that was a fascinating year.

[chuckling] Before I deployed, when I thought I was heading down south, I was told that I could bring an air conditioner and ship a lot of stuff over. So, I bought this air conditioner and brought it with me in this big crate box. Well, I had to get rid of it when I got reassigned to the 101st because I obviously couldn't use it at Camp Eagle.

MAJ Hernandez: You have talked a lot about leadership, and it was clearly an important part of your experience in Vietnam. Was there a primary leadership lesson you took away from your time in Vietnam and carried with you throughout your career?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Yes. It is something that COL (Ret.) Hawley lived by and something I tried to live by during my career. I hope I'm attributing this correctly, but I believe it was the late General (Ret.) Richard Cavazos who said you can't accomplish your mission if you don't take care of your troops. COL (Ret.) Hawley had my back. And I tried to do that for others. And I think that's probably the most important. You've got to take care of your people and you've got to stand up for your people. I hope that's what I did, and I feel very good about that. That's the leadership lesson that I hope everyone learns early.

MAJ Hernandez: What advice would you share with young JAs today?

COL (Ret.) Strassburg paused for just a moment.

COL (Ret.) Strassburg: Principled legal practice: you must be true to your values and be willing to speak up when somebody is going in the wrong direction. You have to stand up for what you know is right. The client might not always like to hear it, but we owe it to them, and we've got to do it.



As our time together concluded, I was left overwhelmed by COL (Ret.) Strassburg's graciousness, humility, and generosity with his time and experience. After returning from Vietnam, he had an illustrious career

in our Corps. He retired in 1991 after twenty-five years of service, with his final assignment as the commandant of The Judge Advocate General's School in Charlottesville, Virginia. He went on to work for Virginia Continuing Legal Education, where he led their publications department and eventually became executive director until he fully retired from the workforce. Of course, for COL (Ret.) Strassburg, fully "retired" means sitting on several boards, including his extensive participation in the Retired Army Judge Advocates Association. In 2022, The Judge Advocate General recognized COL (Ret.) Strassburg as a distinguished member of our Corps for his never-ending stewardship.

In anticipation of our conversation, I expected to learn how COL (Ret.) Strassburg's deployment experiences were drastically different from my own, and they were: he faced domestic civil unrest at home, communicating with loved ones only by letters, a draft Army, and the sheer number of casualties during the Vietnam War, which are all unfathomable to me. But as I listened to him speak, much of COL (Ret.) Strassburg's experience was still deeply relatable: he talked about mastering his craft, principled counsel, his hopes for the future of our Corps, and, most of all, leadership. COL (Ret.) Strassburg's experience—in both Vietnam and his career of service that followed—demonstrates why the four constants that guide our Corps matter regardless of the operating environment. From Vietnam to the Global War on Terrorism to the future fight, the four constants are, well . . . constant. **TAL**

MAJ Hernandez is a Military Professor at the U.S. Naval War College's Stockton Center for International Law in Newport, Rhode Island.

Notes

1. U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-84, LEGAL SUPPORT TO OPERATIONS 1-2 fig. 1-1 (1 Sept. 2023).