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## Interview with Mike Doherty

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Interview  
Friday, 1430 hours, by telephone  
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I was assigned to the 284th MP Company at LBJ from the first week in July 1968 to 29 June 1969. It was my only duty in Vietnam. I was a computation clerk--computed sentences of prisoners to determine when they were to be released. So I was there for the riot in August 1968.

The main entrance had two gates with a sally port.

When I got there, a black major was XO; a full COL was commander. He was of a liberal persuasion and believed in rehabilitation. He had recreational programs for the inmates like baseball, softball, weight lifting. He believed he had good rapport with inmates but during my first two months there, the prisoners ran the stockade. They made their own moonshine hooch, faked injuries, refused to work; they'd go to the infirmary to get exempted from work. They hated going to work at Big Red. They pretty much did what they wanted. They complained about the lousy food, but we ate the same things. They complained because of overcrowding. There was always tension. The majority of prisoners were black, so any statement that 'race was the issue' is just a copout. There was very little discipline when I got there.

Prisoners could work their way up to parolee status. They could go outside to Long Binh installation to work at odds and ends that needed doing--painting, cleaning, and so forth. They wore regular jungle fatigues with no rank and with yellow strips on their sleeves and trouser legs. Sometimes they were escorted, but some were allowed to walk back and forth unescorted. They had to be back inside by the dinner curfew.

Inprocessing was simple. We never knew when we would get somebody new. They'd come in with one or two guards. They were strip-searched, looking in all their cavities for contraband. We'd check their gear for contraband dope and weapons. Some brought hand grenades in their duffel bags, but I don't ever remember anyone who tried to smuggle in a weapon. They'd get a shower and a brush hair cut. It might take one or two hours to run a guy through the process.

When the riot started, the COL thought he could stop it and took a young CPT with him to quell the action. They went into the stockade without weapons. Prisoners jumped them both and they were beaten up badly. They were lucky to get out alive.

Then a platoon of 8-12 guys went in with M-14s and fixed bayonets.

We were called to fall out for the stockage about 11 or 12 at night. We had not had riot control training. We saw guards inside running for

their lives out through the main gate. The prisoners controlled the stockade the night of the riot. Some guards climbed the fence and through the roll of concertina wire at the top to get out and save their lives. The prisoners burnt everything down to the ground--the administration building and others. They destroyed files, went into the infirmary and confiscated drugs and got high. They beat on drums like tom-toms for awhile.

We just backed off. We threw bread over the fences so they had something to eat and put water inside the gate and just waited them out. As they'd give up and come out, we put them in a temporary stockade a little distance away. We had an administrative nightmare for awhile, figuring out what the prisoners' sentences had been, for they burned all the files. We sent notices to their companies asking them to forward to us copies of their court martial records.

After the riots, the Army sent in a Patton-type ass-kicker. A full bird. He was an infantry officer. He was a mean looking, rough-faced small man. His name was Ivan Nelson and the prisoners called him 'Ivan the Terrible.' He came in September and the first thing he did was crack down on the staff. Some were pretty lax. It was not a very disciplined outfit. He got rid of the potheads by bringing in other MPs and dogs to sniff. Anyone found with drugs was on his way to the front the next day. He worked us 12 hour days, 6½ days a week.

At first we thought he was just fooling around, but he wasn't. It was either his way or the highway--he'd send you right to the front. He loved the Army. He really did. He started riot control training. Every night we'd get our full gear and fall into formations and practice. We spent two or three weeks at it until we got it down right. After we got it right, maybe we'd practice for only half an hour.

He did away with prisoner privileges for awhile. He brought in the conex sweat boxes. Before the riots, prisoners slept in wooden boxes or in tents with wooden floors. They burned these. So Ivan called someone in Saigon and had metal conex boxes sent out. Holes were cut in them so the prisoners could breathe. They were allowed out for one-half hour a day, for PT, to shower and shave. We had to watch while they were shaving to be sure they gave the razors back. Otherwise they'd keep them. Those who were real hardcore were fed inside their conexes. For others, tables outside under a tent roof could be used. The conexes themselves were under a canvas fly. Normal temperatures were over 100° So it was pretty hot in them. The prisoners wore only their shorts and boots. There was no more diddly-boppin or black power salutes or peace signs or special handshakes. Do all that stuff when you get out, he told them. All prisoners marched or ran at all times everywhere. They had lost the privilege of saluting when they became prisoners, so when they encountered an officer, they had to stop and stand at attention until the officer told them to move on.

Ivan spent many personal hours at Big Red making sure the prisoners were working and the sand bags were being filled.

Ivan's guards used to beat up on the prisoners. They stopped at nothing to get control back. Nothing. Sweatboxes, PT, marching, ass kicking. In a while he had the stockade jumping, prisoners acted like they were in the military again. I think he did a good job.

If a guy was good and kept his nose clean, he did o.k. After he got there he might work for two or three weeks at Big Red and then make his way up to parolee. He'd get five days a month off the length of his sentence for good behavior.

Ivan had tarps put up between the two chain-link fences to protect the prisoners privacy. No cameras were ever allowed inside. He was tough on that.

The COL had air-conditioning, but we didn't and the prisoners didn't. He left a couple of weeks before I did. A big guy, a colonel, Boston Irish, took his place. I can't think of his name.

After the riot, the Army came to its senses and moved the admin building and infirmary outside the fence.

See if you can check out a CPT Alvin (Allen?) Frost. He was a counsellor. A young guy. Psychologist. He came right before the riots. He socialized more with the EM than the officers. He had a master's from somewhere on the West Coast.

The Air Force and Navy both held prisoners at LBJ and they served sentences there. We held Marines until they were picked up and taken to the Marine prison at Da Nang. Most of the AF and USN prisoners were screw-ups from down south in the Delta who were sentenced to LBJ