Bradford's unit waits as the Hu1d helicopters—the Hueys—land to transport the Wolfhounds out of a Vietnam village.
BY ANNE BARAJAS

with excerpts from Some Even Volunteered: The First Wolfhounds Pacify Vietnam
by Alfred S. Bradford

Alfred S. "Steve" Bradford, OU’s John Saxon Professor of Ancient History, built a distinguished career studying and teaching the history, culture and warfare of the world’s early nations. But along the way, Bradford learned firsthand the nature of war as he volunteered to fight in our nation’s most controversial and wrenching conflict. His experiences—some tragic, others comic—as a young officer assigned to win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese people are the basis of his acclaimed book, Some Even Volunteered: The First Wolfhounds Pacify Vietnam.

On 24 October 1968, American troops were airlifted into an NVA rest area south of Dau Tieng. The American troops had been ordered to interdict the NVA supply line... the troops were expected to complete their mission in three days, but they uncovered such an extensive network of headquarters, hospitals, supply, troop concentrations and local support that the mission was extended to a week, then a month, and finally to eight months. For most of that period, I was the Battalion S-5 (Civic Action Officer). I went into the field, I participated in the fighting, and I attempted to win over the civilian population.

Steve Bradford followed a roundabout trail to Vietnam. As a young teenager, he became fascinated with ancient Greek history and later fell under the academic spell of a great professor who would help him win the prestigious Woodrow Wilson fellowship for post-graduate study. The U.S. Army saw the wisdom of putting his ROTC commitment on hold, and Bradford delved further into ancient warfare at the same time the United States was digging deeply into the Vietnam War.

"Those were the glory days for academia. I was offered a job just with a master’s degree," Bradford recalls from the living room of the comfortable Norman home he shares with his wife, artist Pamela Lenck Bradford, daughters Elizabeth and Alexandra, and a menagerie of pets that includes a well-spoken Quaker parrot and a loving English setter named King Zeus who dwarfs both the furniture and the children.

But in 1966, Bradford was not interested in beginning an academic career. Instead, he wanted to do his part in the war. A year passed without any word from the Army; it appeared Bradford’s papers had been lost somewhere in the infamous military paper shuffle.

"I wanted to fulfill my commitment to the Army, and I wanted to go to..."
Vietnam," Bradford says, his manner indicating gentle humor, pride and the practical, undramatic acceptance of his own history. "My family and I began writing to the Army each month, asking why I hadn't been called up. The Army told us to quit bugging them. Finally, we called our congressman. Within a couple of days, the Army was calling me."

The Army wasted no time in rectifying its mistake. In September 1967, Bradford was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, the home of the infantry, to receive his basic training.

We loved war stories. Even before we (ROTC officers) had gone to war, we imagined ourselves back, telling our own stories to an awe-stricken audience. After all, Vietnam was our generation's great adventure, and we had volunteered for it; we wanted to go to war. Training, however, was not war—it seemed to be a game of cowboys and Indians, and we couldn't take it seriously.

The instructors tried to get through to us with one bare statement: "Listen up, gentlemen, or you will die in Vietnam."

Benning, to us, was just another college... with P-T and firearms.

Physical training, firearms and Canal Zone Jungle School were supposed to prepare Bradford and his comrades for life on the battle front and a war that had captured America's full attention with the recent disaster of the Tet offensive. In late 1968, Bradford got his wish and was sent to Vietnam as a member of the 27th Infantry's First Wolfhounds rifle battalion.

As we approached the U.S. Air Force Base at Bien Hoa, the captain announced, "We are now beginning our final descent. The ground temperature is 99 degrees. The ceiling is 1,000 feet. Rain is predicted. Rocket fire is light to moderate."

Then we came down like gangbusters, and our stomachs flopped.

So this is it.

I expected the war to begin at the foot of the off-ramp, but we left the plane without incident, marched across the air strip and clambered onboard an ancient—and much scarred—bus. We passed a Hollywood papa-san wearing a straw hat and driving a water buffalo. Camera shutters clicked. A helicopter flew over the bus, and we stared wide-eyed like rubes in the big city. Costume, props, special effects, I could have been on the set of "The Green Berets," except there were no pyrotechnics.

Bradford settled into his new role as a civic action officer. Regardless of his training, the task was daunting. His job was to make contact with villagers in strategic locations and to convert them from intimidated people who were turning a blind eye to the Viet Cong to supporters of the United States and its military.

In return, the villagers received medical attention, food and a pep talk during "medcap" programs whenever they came into contact with Bradford and his troops.

"When we first arrived, the village people were afraid of us and very suspicious because of all they had heard about Americans," Bradford says. "They discovered we were humans, and we discovered they were humans."

That discovery came through the longing of American soldiers who missed their own children thousands of miles away. The Vietnamese children were the next best thing, and
Historian Steve Bradford, an authority on ancient warfare, was a volunteer; he wanted to fight in Vietnam. The reality was unlike anything he had studied, however, and eventually he had to speak for those who did not come home.

"Through the children, we could talk to the adults," Bradford explains, pointing to a series of his wife's pencil drawings that hang on their living room walls. The drawings, which illustrate Bradford's book and were inspired by his stories of Vietnam, show soldiers in battle, talking to villagers, walking through a landscape as alien as another planet—a planet where water buffalo are as highly prized as children and the poverty is so great that what appears to be trash could be a family's finest possessions.

"The villagers had no sense that there were things they shouldn't tell us. Mostly, the villagers didn't like the Viet Cong. We gave them things and didn't ask for anything. The North Vietnamese took their rice and forced them into labor. And they hated the Vietnamese national troops."

"I soon saw that we were in an impossible situation," says Bradford, who won the Bronze Star, Purple Heart and Air Medal during his military career. "We weren't really able to run things. Instead, we had to keep up a façade that the Vietnamese national troops were in charge. We could have given the villagers a decent government and improved their lives; instead, every time we secured an area, we had to hand it over to the South Vietnamese, many of whom were very corrupt. It made things worse for the people in the villages."

The Wolfhounds considered themselves lucky, even though they had the highest body count of any rifle battalion in Vietnam. However, they were mystified by a streak of bad luck that dogged the battalion.

"I was excited and nervous about my first combat mission...my first flight—in a bouncing helicopter, among armed men, rushing through a sky filled with falling artillery and machine gun fire. Suddenly, the LZ appeared, coming at us, fast. "We're going to crash," I thought, but no, we touched down, and everything was normal in a perfectly routine flight."

I tumbled off, fell flat and wriggled for a low spot. Were we taking fire? I listened. I couldn't hear anything that sounded like in-coming, but what did I know? I raised my head and looked around for someone, anyone, and saw...nobody. Shouldn't somebody be giving directions? Where was the village? Where is everyone?

A whistle blew. Men rose all around me, like lumps of clay on resurrection day. I didn't see any (village) people, and I was about to ask where they were when I heard sharp cracks in the air, and the captain and his command group went to the ground.

"Cracks in the air! Thought. Everyone around me going flat? This must be in-coming!"

I picked a soft patch of ground, no rocks, mud or miscellaneous debris, and I settled in beside Ervin and the others and with them crawled up behind the plastered wall of a hootch, where we felt safe...until the RTO pushed his fist through it.

"Oops," he said. "Hell, that wall won't stop..."

Holes the size of cantaloupes appeared above our heads.

Whomp...whomp...whomp.

A machine gun with a slow cycle of fire, as though someone were shooting it off with a crank. A .51 caliber.

"I don't like the looks of this," Captain Ervin said. He was a master of understatement.

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The Wolfhounds were having a spectacular success, but the Wolfhound hoodoo was still claiming victims. A private tried to set a claymore off; when it didn't explode, he removed the detonator. The detonator blew up in his
Bradford's Wolfhounds, sent to attack a Vietnam village, call in artillery and air support to secure their position.

hand. Another private was going to throw a stick of C-4 off the bridge near Ben Tranh to see if dead fish would rise to the surface. He lit the fuse.

"Throw it, man," someone said.

"Mind your own business," he replied. "I know what I'm..."

BAM!

It blew his head off.

And then a private returned to us. He had fallen for the extension scam. While out on patrol near Ben Chua, he borrowed a .45, put the muzzle to his head and pulled the trigger. (A grunt standing beside him said, "Ah, that son of a bitch! Now we have to carry him.")

"The general standard was, 'If you're going to get it, you're going to get it,'" Bradford says. "When death is so common, you think, 'I could die tomorrow, and this guy's killing himself.'"

Bradford recalls black humor as one way of dealing with Vietnam's harsher realities. "There are such bizarre things that happen; it's almost like cancer patients who can tell jokes to other cancer patients—but no one else can tell those jokes unless you're running the same risks."

I was sitting with the surgeon outside the aid station, and we were both wishing we had a martini, wishing the nights were shorter, wishing the moon were full... but I was sleepy, it was late, and I stood up to go to my bunker.

A bullet cracked past my head.

I sat down. A firefight broke out at the bunker line. I slid down the steps leading to the aid station bunker. A medic crouched next to me.

"Well, sports fans," he said, "here we are at the Boonie U Arena, and it's a great evening for this renewal of the Army-NVA duel. Both sides appear ready, and I think I can safely say we're going to have some real fireworks."

"I'm Dufus McCrae, and here with me tonight is someone all you Army fans will remember—Joe Bisatz. How do the two sides look to you, Joe?"

"Well, Doof, let's face it. NVA doesn't have the size of the Army, but they're gutsy little guys with an excellent ground attack, and they don't know when they're licked. They just keep coming until they wear you down."

"... Now what about the Army, Joe?"

"Doof, Army has a great defense and an explosive aerial attack. They can kill you from anywhere on the field. I expect a real ding-dong battle."

Some realities were harder to understand. Bradford became close friends with 1st Lt. James Artman, an architect who had received $100,000 for the sale of his first home design just before being drafted into the Army. Bradford admired Artman for his intelligence and his “patrician” wit.

He hadn't found much common ground with his fellow recruits in Basic... or, for that matter, with his fellow officers.

"I was lying on my bunk one Saturday afternoon reading," (Artman) said. "Not being illiterate put me in the upper 10 percentile—and one of the guys stopped."

"Geez, yuh sure read a lot, doncha?"

"Yes, I guess I do."

"Yuh like tuh read, huh?"

"I would say that was a fair assumption."
"I betcha redda hunnert books, aincha?"
"Yes, I probably have."
"Whaccha gonna do when yuh reddum all?"
"He thought there are maybe 500 books in the world, and at 100 books a year, in four more years..."

Following a harrowing day in the battlefield, Bradford and his crew returned to the base for a quiet evening. On his way to the mess tent, Bradford passed Artman and two other friends enjoying a late afternoon swim.

After a plate of spaghetti I went to our O Club, and I was drinking a beer, thinking about the day that had been and the day that was coming, how wrung out I was when the first mortar round hit. I was in the bunker before the second round exploded. Fragments struck the wall. Another round and another fell—dozens of rounds—I had never heard so many explosions in my life.

"Medic! Medic!"
There was panic in the voice. I ran outside. A man was down, his blood spurting in the air. Three of his friends, drenched with blood, were trying to stop the bleeding with a tourniquet. By the time I reached them, it was too late, he had no more blood to bleed. One of them said to me, "He'll be okay. He'll be okay."

They were just average young Americans, and they had tied the tourniquet around the wrong leg. Their friend was dead.

If it's happened, it's happened. Forget it. Go on. If you don't, you'll go crazy, because it can happen, right now, to those you know, or to you. My friends at the pool were walking back to our area when the mortar attack began.

And that's the way it happened. Lt. Artman was dead.
I saw him just an hour ago.
The tears came.
He can't be dead.
I had been so close to the enemy I had heard the bolts slide back and forth in their rifles; he had been there, as safe as a man could be, in-country.

When I arrived in-country, I had a fantasy—blast away a machine gun nest, save my platoon, receive a wound, perhaps a broken arm—a sling is romantic—win a DSC, rotate home, a hero's welcome.

My father had commanded a training company in Michigan during World War I. One of the recruits didn't want to go to France and die. The evening before Thanksgiving, when he was supposed to be on leave, he went into the...
boiler room, into the jungle of superheated pipes. He stuffed a rag into his mouth so that his involuntary cries of pain, when he insinuated himself in and around the steam pipes, wouldn't give him away. Then he cut his wrists. Five days passed before he was discovered. My father had to supervise the removal.

I could understand it—if the rest of my life was going to be like this single day, I'd prefer to get it over with.

When he completed Some Even Volunteered, Bradford dedicated the book to the memory of Lt. Artman and another friend, Spec. 4 Miles Touchberry, a popular and cheerful soldier who told Bradford that he did not really mind being in Vietnam.

"The Army's not so bad," he would say. "It's the first time I had all I wanted to eat and a bed to myself. It'll pay my way to college, maybe even med school, which I could never even have dreamed about before the Army."

Touchberry was the second person in Vietnam I cried for.

"I got a phone call last night from someone who knew Touchberry," Bradford said with a small smile. "This man was a radio operator who had been wounded in battle. Touchberry died trying to help him. He told me something I hadn't known before: Touchberry wasn't even scheduled to be in the field that day. He had finished his tour, but the soldier who was supposed to replace him was too ill to go out."

Three decades after his own tour, contact with Vietnam veterans who share his memories and appreciate his writing stir conflicting feelings in Bradford.

"On the one hand, I had a hard time sleeping last night. But on the other hand, I've borne witness for Touchberry and also done something for his friends."

Bradford began bearing witness for Touchberry, Artman and the others he left behind in Vietnam when he returned home in 1969. Much of his world had changed, yet it only had been a little more than two years since he had gone gladly to Fort Benning for basic training.

In 48 hours I went from a combat zone in Vietnam to my home in Appleton, Wisconsin. I dumped the contents of two dufflebags on the floor of the living room... my father wanted to touch me to reassure himself that I was there, and he wanted to hear about

The Vietnamese simply squatted on the ground; the Americans preferred to rest on their upturned helmets, as the soldier at right waiting outside the prostitute's hootch in the village of Tranh Ben. The prostitutes always arrived by bicycle.

My barber and his partner both are World War II veterans. I asked them one day, "When do you stop dreaming about it?"

My barber said, "We'll let you know."
Giving visual expression to Steve Bradford’s Vietnam memories was his artist wife, Pamela, the illustrator for his book. Shown with the Bradfords in their Norman home are their daughters, Elizabeth, left, and Alexandra.

it: What had happened, what was it like, were we winning, what did it all mean?

I said, “It doesn’t mean anything. The whole thing isn’t worth one dead American.”

I had been awake for 48 hours. When I finally got to sleep, I dreamed I was in Vietnam. I saw three lieutenants, my friends, who had died there.

“We want to live,” they said to me.

I dreamt about them every night for a week. When I stopped dreaming about them, I felt as though I had betrayed and abandoned them.

Migraines. Nightmares. Insomnia. I had to sleep with a revolver, and I had to sleep in a small secure room. Little noises woke me—a mouse eating birdseed two rooms away—and when I heard loud noises, I ducked, or ran for a bunker. I drank too much. I was angry and felt as though I was always on the verge of violence. In an argument with a stranger in a bar...

He said, “I’m from South Dakota. It really gets cold there.”

I said, “Well, I’m from Wisconsin, and it gets colder there.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

... and I was checking where the pool cues were.

In time, Bradford came to terms with his anger and fear. But he admits without a trace of bitterness or self-pity that he still deals with the aftereffects of his Vietnam tour. While he was writing Some Even Volunteered, Bradford suddenly realized he had not said the word “Vietnam” out loud in years. Elizabeth’s infant cries in the middle of the night even meshed themselves into battle nightmares.

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“One part is that the memories are so vivid they keep coming back, and the other part is that those memories are so searing.

Some Even Volunteered: The First Wolfhounds Pacify Vietnam, by Alfred S. Bradford, $19.95, Praeger Publishers, is available in bookstores or by credit card order at 1-800-225-5800.

“...and we are checking where the pool cues were.

“My 8-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, asked me, “Daddy, why did you do it?”

“My students ask me the same question (between were you hit and did you grease anybody?)

Vietnam was my generation’s great adventure. I wanted to be a part of that adventure, and I believed that it was my duty as an American, both to serve my country and particularly not to stand by while someone else risked his life in my place. I do not regret my decision to go, but I learned in Vietnam not to confuse America with the politicians elected to administer America, even when they claim they are speaking for America, and I learned that I have a duty to myself and to my country to exercise my own judgment based upon my own conscience.”

“I wanted to write this book both as someone who knew what happened and knew these men, but also as a historian,” he says. “I think I had a story to tell that should be told, and I didn’t think the junior-level officers had been adequately represented in other books.

“One of the nicest comments I got was from a veteran who said he’d never found a book about Vietnam that he wanted his daughter to read until he found my book. I told him I wanted it to be a book my children could read.

“What I tried to do is to tell the story with the point of view that I had when I was there,” Bradford says. “I relived a lot. That’s why I don’t teach modern warfare very much. Today’s students have no idea about what Vietnam was really like. After I taught a class in modern warfare, a student came up to me and said, ‘You know, you’re right—war isn’t fun.’

“I try to teach my students that war is not a computer game. I try to get them to sympathize with the people who are caught up in these wars.”

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