

'Play the Game'

By COL Richard D. Hooker Jr.

U.S. Army retired

The colonel took command of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, in Vietnam in June of 1970. Headquartered at Phan Thiet, the battalion, like the times, was ... unusual. It was an independent mechanized infantry unit, one of the very few in country. Not attached to any of the glamorous divisions, it had been formed too late for World War I and fought in World War II, but it was not, apparently, where any ambitious officer would choose to serve. Low on the priority list for soldiers and supplies, its primary mission was to safeguard the critical Highway 1 along the coast in the II Corps Tactical Zone.

The colonel was young, maybe even the youngest lieutenant colonel in Vietnam, but he'd been around. After six years with the paratroops, he'd learned Vietnamese and gone to war in 1964 as an advisor to an Army of the Republic of Vietnam infantry battalion. While there, he'd eaten a lot of dog meat, busted a lot of brush and learned about fighting the Vietcong the hard way. Later he'd gone back, as a major, for a second year as a staff officer. He'd been home only a few weeks when the phone rang. The 50th was open. Did he want it?

He thought about it, but not much. True, it was not a premier command. It was not the place where careers were made. Maybe, if he waited, something better would come along, perhaps a famous battalion under a rising star, a general who could take him places. Then there was the family. The old folks were aging and not well. The wife was struggling with three kids, the oldest a young teenager. This would be his third tour in six years.

If all this crossed his mind, he did not linger on the "what ifs." This was command. Command! The nation and the Army were at war. It was a bad war—an unpopular war—but to the professional soldier, those were not reasons to shirk. Professional soldiers

exist to fight, and professional officers exist to command. He hoped they'd all understand. He made his decision quickly.

A couple of weeks later, he found himself flying to his firebase to take over. On short final, his chopper was hit by ground fire and autorotated into the landing zone, trailing smoke and crash landing in front of the reception party. It was not an auspicious beginning. There was a hurried briefing, a quick tour of the firebase and a brief ceremony. The old guy flew away, and the weight of the world descended upon the young colonel.

On his first day in command they gave him a pair of unit crests. He noted the unit motto, "Play the Game." Most of the unit's soldiers would not recognize the reference, but in the early part of the century, Sir Henry Newbolt's poem was famous around the world.

*There's a breathless hush in the Close to—
night—*

Ten to make and the match to win—

A bumping pitch and a blinding light,

An hour to play and the last man in.

And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,

Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,

But his Captain's hand on his shoulder

smote

"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The poem was archaic, written in the vernacular of a different age and people. The colonel looked it up and pondered. It seemed to talk about youth, teamwork, leadership and inspiration. The Central Highlands were a long way from an English cricket pitch, but maybe there was something here. Maybe the poet was trying to talk about timeless things. He read on.

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—

*Red with the wreck of a square that
broke;—*

*The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel
dead,*

*And the regiment blind with dust and
smoke.*

*The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the
ranks:*

"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

Now he began to understand. He already knew that units don't win just because the commander gives orders. In his combat career, bad things had happened and would happen again. He hoped he'd be up to the task of setting them right, but he knew that the troopers would.

This was the hardest thing he'd ever done. The war was winding down. No one wanted to be the last casualty, and few in the unit harbored ambitions to be a "lifer." Still, there was an enemy to be found and fought. He got the troops off the carriers and into the bush. He taught them to shoot with aimed fire and not to "spray and pray." He fought in the field and worked the awesome power of artillery, close air support and attack helicopters. The battalion responded. In one month, they killed more Vietcong than the entire 4th Division next door.

In a brief six months—almost before it started, it seemed—his tour was over. The battalion rotated back to the United States. As a parting gift, some of the troopers gave him a boonie hat, embellished with a Combat Infantryman Badge and power beads around the crown. Embroidered on the side was a laconic inscription: "Lean on Chuck." It would become a treasured possession.

The nation hurried to forget Vietnam and the soldiers who served there. He would go on to complete an honorable career, rising to full colonel and serving in Iran, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia and Beirut. He would never command soldiers in battle again. Yet he was content. It had been enough to play the game. He hoped

he'd done it well. That was enough.

Years later, he came upon Newbolt's poem again. Now, the last stanza held new meaning for him. Once more, he pondered.

*This is the word that year by year,
While in her place the School is set,
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind—
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"*

His son was commanding a battalion now in some faraway place. In time, his grandson would also fight on the far frontier. It occurred to him

with a quiet pride that the poet had been right. He had passed the torch.

The colonel is an old man now. His wife passed away years ago, and even his grandchildren are grown. Most of his Army buddies are gone, too. These days he has time, too much time, to think and remember. He likes to look out his picture window at the Choptank River, at the marsh grass waving in the breeze, at the wheeling eagles framed against the brilliant blue sky. The smell of cordite, the cacophony of outgoing artillery, the harsh thump of massed rotor blades beating against the heavy air—all are fading memories, like the yellowed photos of that long-ago war. Still, he holds on to them. They are constant reminders of when

he was young, and in command, and played the game. □

COL Richard D. Hooker Jr., USA Ret., *Ph.D., entered the Army in 1975 as a rifleman in the 82nd Airborne Division and retired as an infantry colonel in 2010. He is deputy commandant and dean of the NATO Defense College. His service included tours in Grenada, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Sinai, Iraq and Afghanistan. He also served in the offices of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he has master's and doctoral degrees in international relations from the University of Virginia.*