

Vietnam Challenges and Advice for Young Officers -- F.C. Porter, USAFA Class of 1963

I was a lieutenant in command of a mobile unit that worked out of Thon son Nhut AB, Saigon. My boss was an Air Force wing commander in the Philippines. I needed some parts I couldn't get and I issued a Red Ball emergency. It stops up the system until the order is filled and I figured that since I was in a combat zone, it was an emergency. The Colonel disagreed and ordered me to cancel the Red Ball saying he'd fly the parts in. I told him I'd cancel the Red Ball when the parts arrived. The next thing I know a Major is standing at my door, relieving me of command and handing me orders to get on the next plane to Clark AB to report for Court Martial. I landed and went to the Colonel's office. He asked me if I had anything to say before he court martialed me for insubordination and I proceeded to lay out twenty-six envelopes of problems I had had with his staff failing to support my mission which was in a combat zone. He kicked me out of his office and called in his key staff. The first man out of his office was a LtCol who put his arms around my shoulders and asked if there was anything he could do for me. I was sent back to Vietnam the next day with an admonition from Col Swan to let him know before a problem becomes too complex for a Lt to deal with.

For young officers: Be yourself, not what someone else wants you to be. Just because a man is wearing eagles or stars doesn't make him infallible. Anyone can make a mistake. If you are a subject matter expert and you have to disagree with a superior because you know a mistake has been made, remember... Being the expert is what you are being paid to be. MacArthur made mistakes even to the point of disobeying orders, but he was right when he said we were chosen and committed to duty, honor, country.