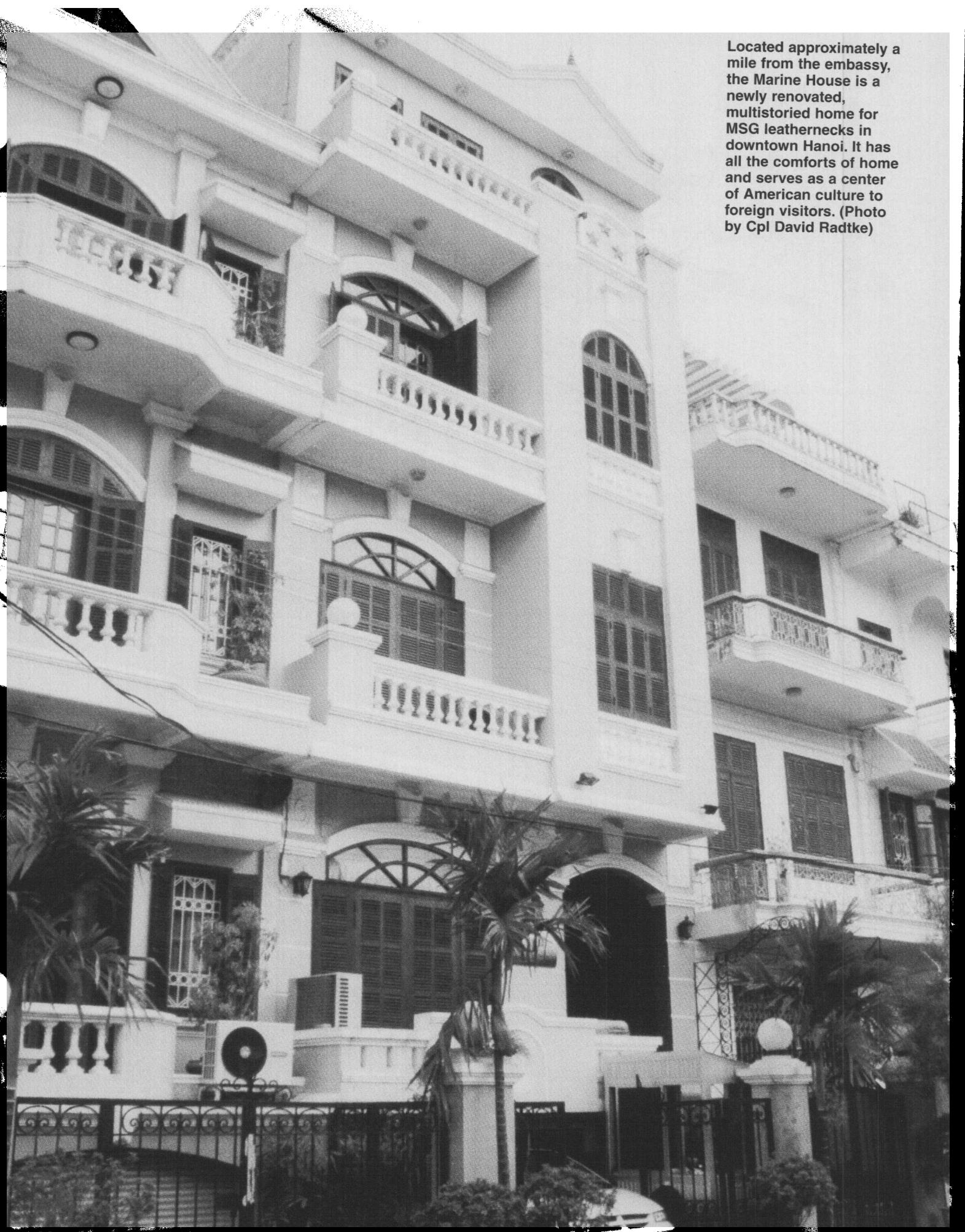


Marine security guard, Hanoi

Keene, R R
Leatherneck; Aug 1998; 81, 8; Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines
pg. 38



Located approximately a mile from the embassy, the Marine House is a newly renovated, multistoried home for MSG leathernecks in downtown Hanoi. It has all the comforts of home and serves as a center of American culture to foreign visitors. (Photo by Cpl David Radtke)

Marine Security Guard, Hanoi

Southeast Asian Assignment Offers Unique Personal, Professional Satisfaction

Story by R. R. Keene

Burton Brown is a deceptively slim young man in a perfectly tailored button-down shirt and crisply pressed trousers. His eyeglasses make him look as mild-mannered as Clark Kent.

He walked down the marble steps of his French-style apartment with a clothing bag carefully balanced over his shoulder. His vehicle, a highly polished and spotless Chrysler van with CB, had the engine and air running.

The Vietnamese driver greeted Burton Brown with a friendly "Morning, sir" and chauffeured him to 7 Lang Ha St., Hanoi, Vietnam. There, Brown, a 20-year-old corporal in the United States Marine Corps, changed into his dress blue uniform and reported for duty as a watch stander at Post Number 1, Embassy of the United States of America.

He, after three months in that Southeast Asian country, still marveled at being there. It's a long way from Muleshoe, Texas.

"That's Muleshoe: one word," he said of the west Texas town where some people have seldom crossed the state line much less the international date line. "What's different about Vietnam?" He looked out the van window. "These people at zero five in the morning. The whole town is out for P.T."

It would seem so.

There are 2.2 million Vietnamese in Hanoi, and every morning they all, mostly in Western dress, seem to be along the banks of the city's many lakes, playing soccer, doing martial-arts exercises, jogging and strolling.

As the morning air becomes heavy with the aroma of *pho*, a wonderful soup staple consisting of noodles with chicken or beef, garnished with ginger and spices, the city comes to life. The sounds of motorcycles, scooters, bicycles, buses and trucks galore are muffled under the arched boughs of flame and sandalwood trees lining the boulevards and traffic circles. Hanoi, for now, is old-world architecture similar to New Orleans' French

Quarter. Shops thrive in structures ranging from hovels to modern buildings. Government offices are in red-tiled stucco structures, saffron in color and streaked with aged stains of green and brown, all bearing the tarnished red star of Communism. Behind them, dominating, overpowering and ever expanding are the modern-day monoliths: high-rise glass offices and hotels that make the skylines of the world's cities nearly indistinguishable from one another.

Cpl Brown smiled. "I'm still taking it all in. I like to travel. I was an infantryman at Twentynine Palms, California. I've been on deployment to Okinawa. Duty in the fleet wasn't bad, but this is something new."

Being a Marine usually entails becoming a world traveler. However, leathernecks learn quickly that there is travel and there is traveling with the infantry. Infantrymen travel the world over and learn that the sands of the Mojave Desert

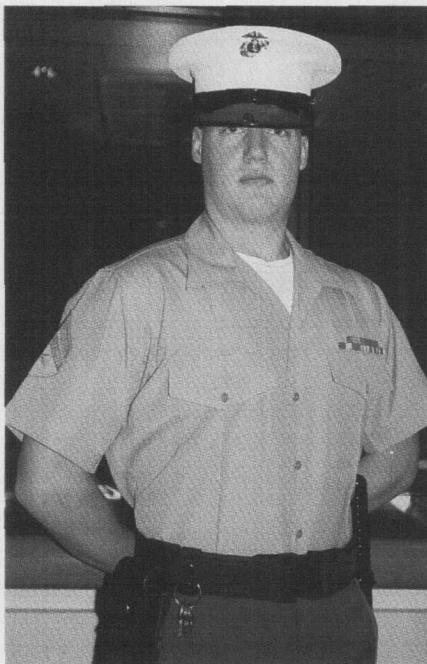
are remarkably similar to the sand in the desert of Kuwait. Humping hills at Camp Pendleton, Calif., isn't noticeably easier than humping hills bordering the Bosphorus, and mud, well, mud is mud anywhere in the world. While the life of an infantryman has its moments, it doesn't take a tactical genius to quickly surmise that every once in a while it would be nice to see the world as more than a non-combatant evacuation operation. What's the point of having fancy blue trousers in a seabag if one seldom wears them? Perhaps a change of pace and something a little more exotic are in order.

"This is different. It's like paradise," said Brown and then added, "I can think for myself." No doubt about it. Not many corporals in the Corps are responsible for the quarterly training plan, physical fitness and military-oriented training of himself and those senior to him. He keeps them fine-tuned in the use of handcuffs, pressure points, control tactics and reminds them to use the least amount of force to resolve a problem, but to also use the amount of force necessary. He then dutifully enters it all in their records as well as overseeing correspondence courses and off-duty education.

Yes, thinking, initiative and assuming responsibility are basically what Marine Security Guard duty is all about.

Brown is the junior "thinking" man of the five-Marine security detachment at the embassy. With the exception of the deputy defense and naval attaché, a Marine lieutenant colonel, who has a separate mission and assignment, there are no other Marines permanently stationed in Vietnam.

Three other leatherneck watch standers stand duty around the clock at the embassy: Sergeant Troy Mittleider, Cpl David Radtke and Sgt Earl Parker Jr., none of whom was born the last time Marines manned the embassy in Saigon in 1974. These Marines share a commonality with most Vietnamese since more than half the population of 71 million people was born after the war ended.



Cpl David Radtke is one of four watch standers at Post #1, American Embassy, Hanoi.

R. R. Keene

The Marines' boss, Gunnery Sergeant Matthew H. Zoernig, on his twilight tour as a leatherneck, recalls the war. He watched it on television and was almost a freshman in high school when it ended. Yet, they all share a sense of history at being "plank holders" who, in December of last year, established the first MSG detachment in Vietnam since the war.

"There is a sensitivity that goes with being a Marine in Vietnam today," said Zoernig. "Those Vietnamese old enough to remember see Marines and have an established picture in their mind."

He remembered arriving north of Hanoi at Noi Bai International Airport in July 1997, six months before his MSG detachment. It occurred to him that "I'd never met Vietnamese people. I didn't know what to expect, except to realize that these were people, who like people everywhere, keep busy scratching out a living."

The gunny should know. There are few skylines that can fool him. He's been posted to embassies in Conakry, Guinea (West Africa); Caracas, Venezuela; Damascus, Syria; and Seoul, Republic of Korea. He met the woman sitting next to him in Damascus and married her. Catherine, the daughter of a Canadian Army major working for the United Nations, had four years in the Middle East region. She is used to living in far away places and is comfortable in diplomatic communities where people of many nations, colors and customs congregate. Alexandra, their youngest daughter, was born in Seoul, and Christina was born in



R. R. Keene

Whenever detachment commander GySgt Matt Zoernig's Marines have a problem with the mail, they go to a specific person in the Fleet Post Office. She happens to be Catherine Zoernig, the det commander's wife.

California, a place the Zoernigs, with a bit of humor, consider foreign.

On the first drive in from the Hanoi airport Mrs. Zoernig remembers overloading her system with details. Visually the ride in was, and is, a breathtaking kaleidoscope of green colors on the flat, diked rice fields of the fertile Red River Delta. Randomly interspersed are countless ponds, and it took a moment to realize these were once craters made by American ordnance. In the cane breaks are farm villages, and in the paddies

well-muscled farmers in conical hats are painstakingly bent over tending their crops.

Catherine Zoernig likes such places. "I wanted to take it in before it became old hat," she said. "Give me assignments such as Africa, the Middle East or Asia. When we arrived in Vietnam, I knew I was doing something not everybody can do."

She stated it matter-of-factly because it is true. An MSG detachment commander is usually authorized to have his family accompany him. While the perks usually include travel, prestige and meeting interesting people, there are potential problems that require a spouse to be patient, levelheaded, diplomatic at all times and willing to take on challenges.

The first home the Zoernigs occupied was plagued with electrical problems. It was decided it would be best for them to move into a six-bedroom, four-story house located in a small compound where they had the option to employ a cook and a maid. "It's great," said Zoernig. "It has heat and air and is only two miles from the embassy, but it is really too big."

They decorated, using much of the local décor which consists of wrought iron, hardwood and silks which they found to be hand-crafted, beautiful and inexpensive. They further adjusted by consolidating and converting the garage into a dining room. There was still room in their compound for their Jeep Cherokee when it arrived. When the monsoon rains came, they discovered water came up to the vehicle's floorboards.

That brought up the question of driv-

During daylight hours, traffic on Hanoi's main thoroughfares is a slow-moving rush hour. The side streets, however, are not always so crowded. This particular street runs past the wall of the old "Hanoi Hilton," only blocks from the Marine House.



R. R. Keene

ing. In Hanoi as long as there is daylight, there is a rush hour. While people generally drive on the same side of the road as Stateside, there seems to be no requirement for them to do so. Consequently, like halfbacks in American football, Vietnamese drivers run to holes in traffic. Fortunately, the traffic flows at reasonably slow speeds. It is not that way on Vietnam's main arteries. On the highways traffic is often too fast and too reckless for conditions. Approximately 18,000 people die each year in traffic accidents throughout the country.

With the exception of the detachment commander, MSG Marines are not allowed to drive. "Taxis are plentiful and inexpensive. We also have full-time driver support for official duties," said the gunny. As a family, the Zoernigs initially said, "We're hiring a driver." They soon thought better of it. It wasn't, they reasoned, that much different than driving in many of the other countries they'd been.

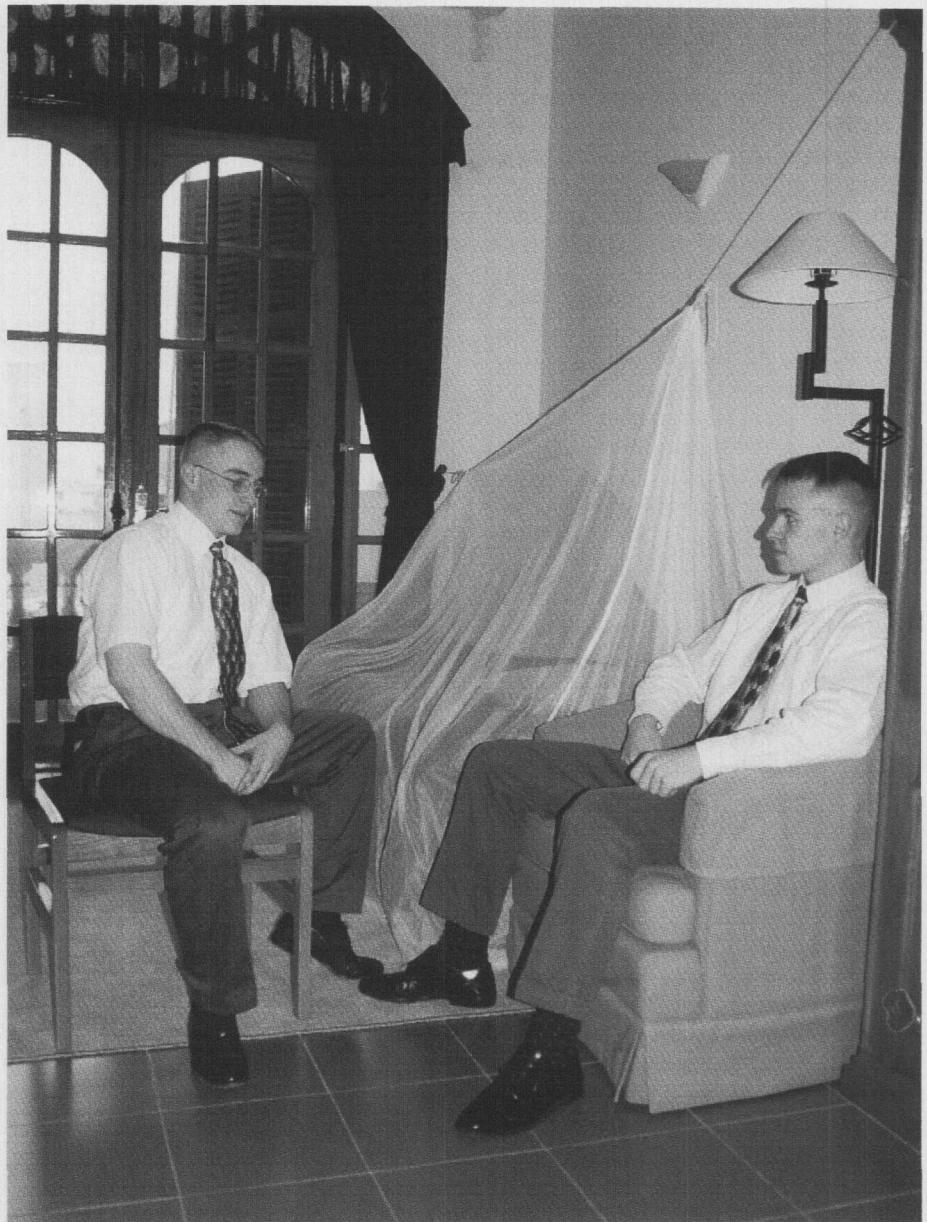
"Once you understand it, driving in Hanoi is not difficult," Zoernig explained. "It is a slow-moving ballet with the larger vehicles having the right of way. Of course, you have to drive defensively because if there's an accident the larger vehicle is also considered to be at fault."

There are other problems with vehicles. Crime statistics indicate that a person is safer in Hanoi than in most major American cities; however, petty larceny is common.

"We've lost outside view mirrors and wiper blades. We were warned this would happen. However, they are quickly replaced." The gunny quietly smiled and noted that the replacement parts sometimes look remarkably like the ones that were taken.

Mrs. Zoernig explained that for spouses most of the challenge "is just coping. He [the husband] is away a lot." Spouses of diplomats and their staff fill many positions at the embassy, and Catherine found a job working in the Fleet Post Office. The children are being educated at the U.N. International School and getting used to the daily routine of life in a foreign country such as bargaining when shopping. "Shopping for food is different. There are no supermarkets. You have to go to different places for different items. I've never been sick because I've learned to soak vegetables and drink bottled water."

Becoming ill or injured can be a serious problem. Vietnamese medical facilities are less than modern. "The diplomatic community has an Israeli doctor and a Canadian dentist," said the gunny. He ex-



R. R. Keene

In Hanoi the living is good as both Cpl Burton Brown (left) and Sgt Earl Parker Jr. can attest. The mosquito net is a necessary and exotic touch to Sgt Parker's room. Members of the detachment live in spacious individual apartment rooms with private baths and French doors which open onto balconies overlooking the street.

plained that major problems could require a person to be medically evacuated possibly to Singapore or, as in the case of his dependents or Marines, to the naval hospital at Camp Lester on Okinawa.

However, those assigned to various embassies, legations and missions draw much of their support from the diplomatic community. It is also the center of much of their social life. One of the chief attractions for foreigners living in

or visiting the world's capitals are the Marine Houses.

The Marine House in Hanoi is no different.

With the exception of the detachment commander, all Marines on such duty must be single and must agree to remain so for the duration of their tour. Other than casual meetings, all contact with foreigners must be reported. Therefore, the Marine House is first and foremost

They all share a sense of history at being "plank holders" who, in December of last year, established the first MSG detachment in Vietnam since the war.

home to bachelor leathernecks of the embassy. Watch standers work eight-hour shifts, and in a small detachment, such as Hanoi, time off is precious.

"One reason MSG School is difficult," according to Gunnery Sergeant Zoernig, is because "they are looking for Marines who demonstrate maturity, professionalism and common sense."

"They are very busy with the duties entailing security of the embassy and properly safeguarding classified material. Each man also has collateral duties, and among them is responsibility for the care, upkeep and running of the Marine House."

This particular Marine House, situated a good mile from the embassy, is newly renovated. Multistoried and trimmed in polished wood, it houses a large kitchen, dining room, bar, entertainment and weight rooms as well as spacious individual apartment rooms with baths and French doors which open onto balconies overlooking the street.

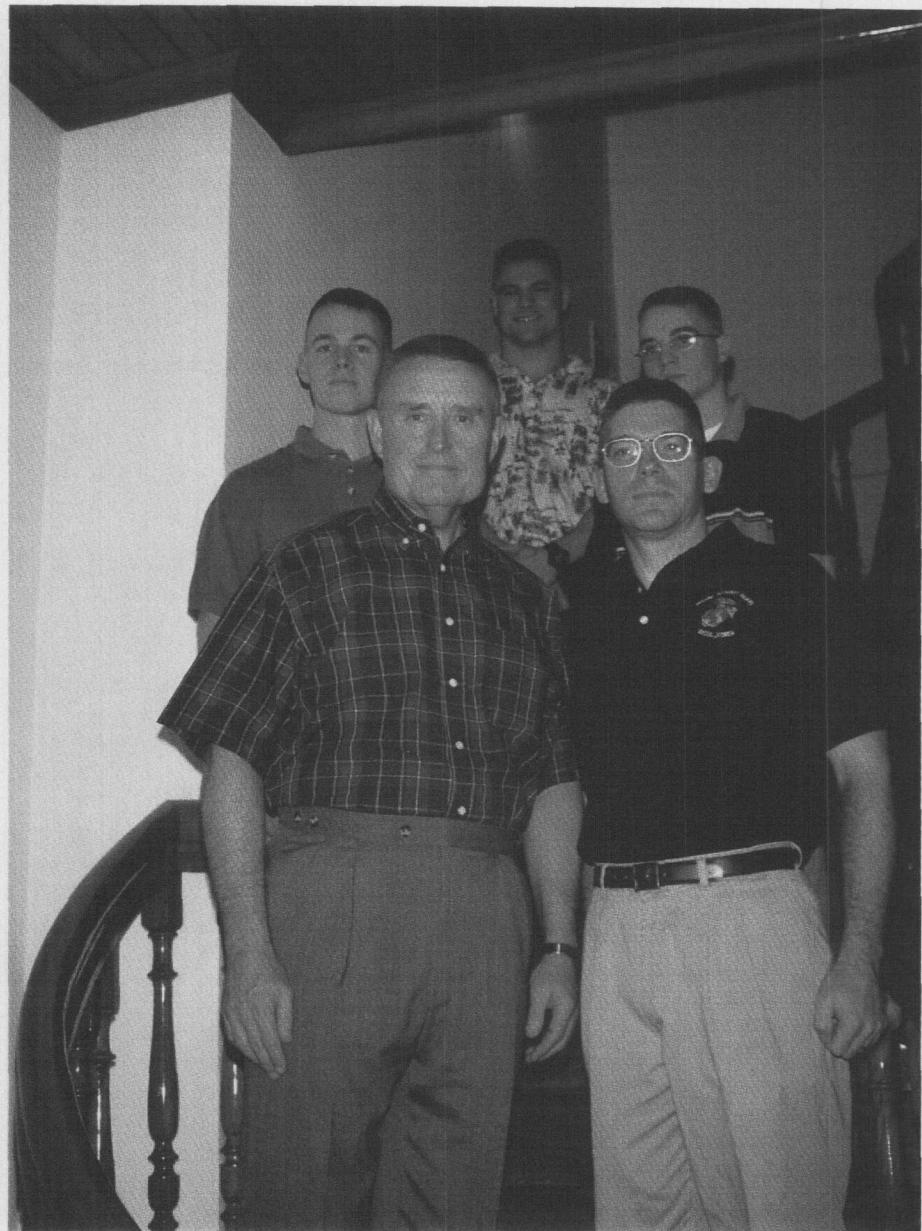
The Marines, of course, must pick up after themselves and keep their rooms inspection-ready as in barracks anywhere, but their involvement entails much more. Cpl David Radtke, an infantryman by trade, is a veteran watch stander who came to Hanoi from the embassy in New Delhi, India, and sides as the mess NCO for the Marine House. He collects his fellow leathernecks' basic allowance for subsistence and cost-of-living funds, and with the help of the Vietnamese cook named Oanh turns it into three squares a day.

This, according to Radtke, is no easy chore because Marines, in addition to being chow hounds, have tastes running from junk food to gourmet meals. Consequently, Radtke has become a nutritionist and dietitian. Having cooked since he was a kid in Wisconsin, he's somewhat of a chef himself, filling in on the cook's days off.

"I plan the weekly menu and manage the cook," he said. "You can't let them eat everything they want. I checked out the MCI [Marine Corps Institute] course on basic nutrition, and plan low-fat, low-cholesterol meals."

"Because everything was new here, I started from scratch with recipes and a cookbook. Now, we have a cookbook library."

The cook was new, too. "It was hard



R. R. Keene

One never knows who'll drop by the Marine House for a visit. In March, a former Commandant of the Marine Corps, retired Gen Carl Mundy (front left), was with a group of former Marines visiting Vietnam with Military Historical Tours. On their first night in Hanoi they attended a spaghetti dinner hosted by GySgt Matt Zoernig (front right) and (left to right rear) Sgt Earl Parker Jr., Sgt Troy Mittleider and Cpl Burton Brown.

for her to understand English, let alone read a recipe," Radtke said. Something like a grilled cheese sandwich is totally alien to a Vietnamese, and the results were often alien to the Marines. Radtke introduced her to the Vietnamese who cooks for members of the Joint Task Force (Full Accounting). She started off making pretty good soup and has been discovering her culinary creativity since.

Radtke orders most of the meat, as

well as other items unique to Americans, from the embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, which has a commissary on the compound. He also ensures that the meat is fully cooked, the fruit is bleached (except, according to Radtke, "for bananas. Bananas are good.") and that nobody gets eggs over easy. Initially, he accompanied the cook to the markets to buy the chickens, eggs, vegetables and fruit. "I started noticing, however, a difference in

It is to the diplomatic international communities as well as foreign visitors to Hanoi what "Rick's Café Américain" was to the movie "Casablanca." Sooner or later "everybody comes to" the Marine House.

receipts. These are hard-working people; however, when they see me coming with the cook, they jack up the price." The cook now does most of the shopping on her own.

The senior resident at the Marine House, Sgt Earl Parker Jr., is a bulk fuel-man by military occupational specialty and assistant detachment commander "A/Det Cmdr" by billet, with a previous posting in Cairo, Egypt. He also finds time to fill in as Marine House supply NCO. Gunny Zoernig said Sgt Parker's billet is the toughest.

Zoernig explained: "He is my liaison with the other Marines in the detachment and their liaison with me. He lives with them and has to maintain his professionalism. When not standing watches, he drafts cables, correspondence and does the filing. He is versed in the detachment commander's duties and responsibilities."

At the Marine House he's the supply guy. He honchos the issue of cleaning gear, toilet paper, towels and linens, sees that things get fixed and escorts workers. He is also the keeper of many good things. If a Marine wants sporting goods such as bats, balls and gloves, Sgt Parker is the man. He also issues the administrative gear, military hardware and Marine Corps property needed by the detachment.

"The one thing the detachment does not yet have is its own tradition," said Zoernig. "We are responsible for establishing it. Others will have to carry it on." Sgt Parker, however, realized that until tradition comes along, something is going to have to decorate the Marine House besides the furniture. Thus the autographed jersey from football quarterback Neil O'Donnell, New York Jets helmet and autographed football signed by Barry Sanders and the Detroit Lions are courtesy of the quiet, observant and thoughtful supply guy from North Carolina.

Establishing the Marine House with the international community is, in part, Sgt Troy Mittleider's other job. He's another infantryman turned watch stander and somewhat of a publican. As the house's bar fund manager, he orders and procures the refreshments and libations served during social events and also is accountable for every penny taken in. Mittleider negotiates with Tiger Beer Brewery and the local Coca Cola plant as well as making purchases from the Bangkok commissary's package store.

More importantly, Sgt Mittleider is also akin to a social director. He plans and advertises social functions like those held in most Marine Houses around the world every other week and attended by nearly everyone in the diplomatic and interna-



Sgt Troy Mittleider

Cpl David Radtke, the Marine House Mess NCO, is responsible for the meals. He occasionally accompanies their cook, Oanh Thi Nguyen, as she shops in the local markets. Cpl Radtke tries not to make many trips to the market because he noticed the price of produce and other items went up when he tagged along.

tional communities as well as foreign visitors to Hanoi. It is to them what "Rick's Café Américain" was to the movie "Casablanca." Sooner or later "everybody comes to" the Marine House.

Gunny Zoernig said the Marine House is more than that. "It's the culture center in this city for America. People don't understand Americans and what it means to be a Marine. We try to enlighten them."

They do it not only by routinely setting positive examples, such as community relations, coaching Little League baseball and children's football, but by

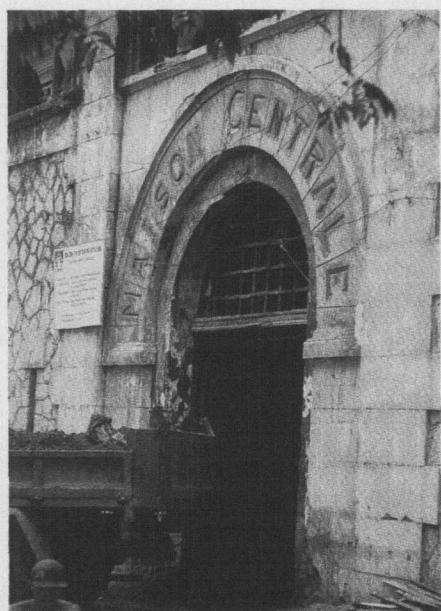
sponsoring events such as a "haunted" Marine House on Halloween and old-fashioned July 4th American-style picnics and barbecues.

"There are no movie houses in Hanoi," said Zoernig. "We have a satellite dish decoder for AFRTS [Armed Forces Radio and Television Service], and the Navy Motion Picture Service sends movies."

While American movies are popular, Zoernig said what he will remember most is gathering with friends from many countries at 2 or 5 a.m., with coffee, to watch the Super Bowl and other live American sporting events at the Marine House.

Funds taken in from food, drinks and T-shirts all go toward the social event of the year. In the diplomatic and international community it is the Marine Corps birthday ball on or near Nov. 10. The detachment had its first ball last year, even before it was officially established. Gunny Zoernig coordinated with the American Chamber of Commerce in Hanoi for some assistance, and MSG Marines flew in from detachments in Hong Kong and Bangkok to help. With more than 210 guests, it was a resounding success.

Each of the Marines has his own idea on how to unwind. There are softball and volleyball games on weekends, a few discos, a go-cart track and dart leagues, and all agree the local food is "really, really good and not expensive." They also "take an hour two days a week to learn Vietnamese." They are motivated to learn the language because the



R. R. Keene

The entrance facade to the "Hanoi Hilton" is all that remains of the infamous prison which is now the site of a modern high-rise building.



Cpl Burton Brown

A new American Embassy (above) marks a new beginning for Marines and Americans in Hanoi. However, modernization in Vietnam is going to take time. Parking for bicycles (below) and other vehicles is tight.

Vietnamese have welcomed them and seem genuinely happy to have Americans in their country. But, as stated earlier, time off is precious.

"Shift work is difficult on the body of Marines whose average age is 21 or 22 and with only two to three years' experience in the Corps," said Zoernig.

Parker shrugs it off by saying: "You get used to shift work. I like it better than daily hours. You get a change of pace."

Overall it is the type of duty they want. Because they are men with extraordinary self-discipline, they've all managed to save money, and some have squeezed in a little off-duty college taught by embassy employees proctored in several fields of study.

Mostly, they sincerely enjoy what they are doing. Parker said part of it is that the detachment is smaller than most and everyone gets involved. "We can see that we are making a difference. We're a tight team."

Radtke feels similarly: "I like the closeness with the guys. We're almost like family. I wanted a change and got it. Now, I'm dedicated to getting a job done."

Cpl Brown is just happy to be there. "My whole fire team went out on the

program. Two didn't make it for various reasons. The other ended up in Vladivostok, and I came here. There's also a possibility for a meritorious promotion, and I get 100 points added to my cutting score for promotion."

Part of it, at least for the gunny, is setting up a new detachment and learning as they go. "It's a great way to cap a career. There's also the challenge. It keeps you going. You learn to comprehend a situation, and you may have to sidestep, but you don't step back."

He then said with candor: "It's a chance to live well and see the world."

And Cpl Burton Brown, only months out of Muleshoe, Texas, remembers that Ambassador Douglas "Pete" Peterson, a former U.S. Air Force prisoner of war at the nearby "Hanoi Hilton," calls the Marines by their first names. He remembered answering, "Yes, sir!" and smiling.

Editor's note: To obtain more information on Marine Security Guard duty, contact your career planner or visit MSG's Web site at <www.quantico.usmc.mil/msg/msg.htm>.



R. R. Keene