

APOs ~ VIETNAM/NEW JERSEY CORRESPONDENCE

By Jim Walker

The Army Post Office (APO) system has been around since World War I when U.S. military began operating overseas in a big way. The three digit numbering system in use through World War II was, in effect, a code to locate individuals without announcing a unit location. This system is still in use today.¹ In the years after WWII the APO system expanded to five digits, becoming a military zip code.²

This article takes a very limited look at the operation of the APO during the Vietnam War. As can be seen, all mail is to or from New Jersey addresses. All but one of the outgoing covers make use of the free franking privilege for military personnel serving in a combat zone³ which included most of Southeast Asia. (*See map on next page.*)

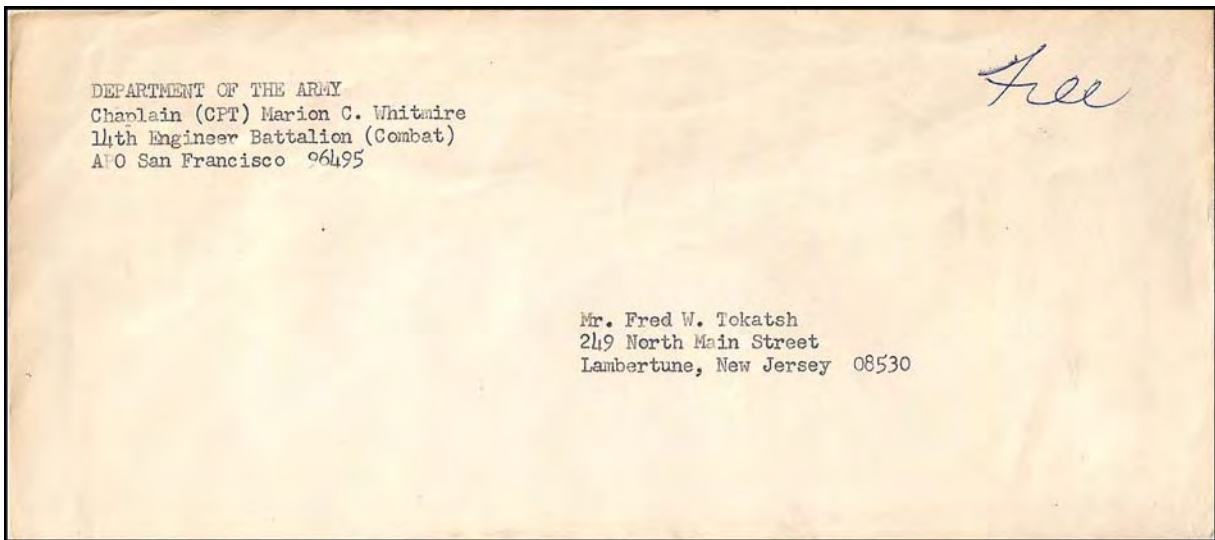


Fig. 1: Free-franked cover, using only a manuscript Free marking, carrying Christmas greetings to families with members serving with the 14th Engineer Battalion in December of 1968 – this one addressed to Lambertville (misspelled Lambertune – but the zip code did its job!), New Jersey. From APO SF96495 at Quang Tri.

The first cover, shown in *Figure 1*, a #10 size envelope, contains a Christmas Greeting form letter from the Chaplain of the 14th Combat Engineer Battalion dated Dec. 1, 1968. The cover is addressed to the family of Fred Tokatsh who was serving with this outfit at the time. The return address, APO San Francisco 96495, gives the location of this unit as Quang Tri, just south of the Demilitarized Zone. Demilitarized is a misnomer to which anyone who served there will attest. Also San Francisco was the location of the mail handling facility for the Pacific area. All mail going to or from Vietnam went through this facility.

The second cover (*Figure 2* below) from Tokatsh is canceled with an APO machine cancel on Armed Forces-supplied stationery with a map of North & South Vietnam. Fred located Quang Tri on the map for the folks back home.

MAP OF VIETNAM SHOWING TROUP LOCATIONS

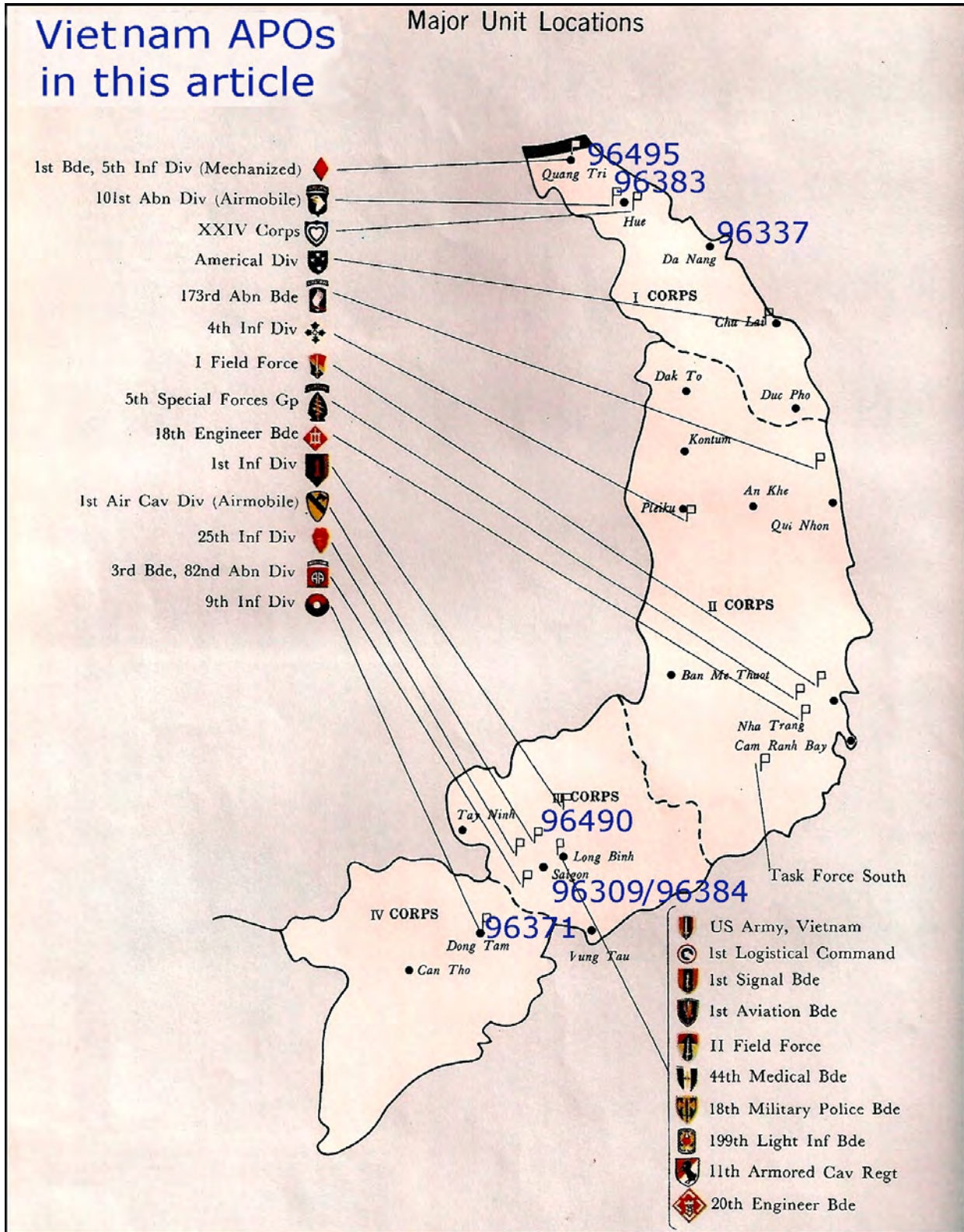




Fig. 2: Cover mailed from Quang Tri, Vietnam (APO 96495) to Lambertville with an Army Postal Service machine cancel over the Free marking.

This next cover (Figure 3) is from Lt. Virginia Bozarth, serving as a nurse at the 3rd Field Hospital, APO 96309. This APO is listed as Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon, a major facility handling much of the incoming and outgoing traffic for the military in Vietnam. Lt. Bozarth's father was a long time member of the New Jersey Postal History Society.

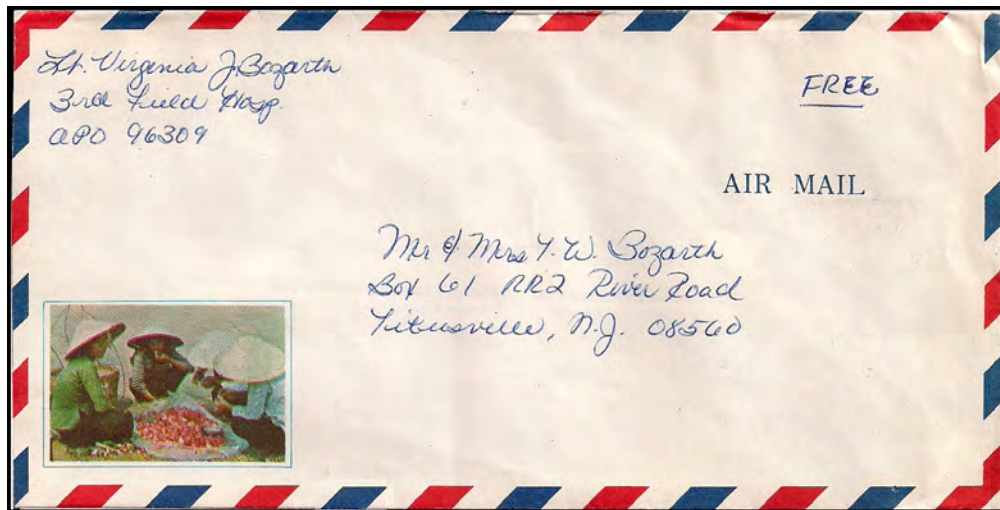


Fig. 3: A nice illustrated envelope, marked Free from APO 96309 (Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon) to Titusville, NJ.

The next two covers (Figures 4 & 5) are from my old friend from the neighborhood Dan DiSalvi, while serving with the 9th Infantry APO 96371, the location of which was Tan An, south of Saigon in the Mekong Delta area. This cover contains a letter datelined June 3, 1970 and was written in Cambodia while the 9th Division was taking part in the Cambodian Incursion in the spring and summer of 1970. The second cover is datelined August 23 after the division re-crossed the border back into Vietnam. There are no postal markings to indicate this operation, which was temporary. Mail from the troops in the field moved to the Division Headquarters at APO 96371 to be forwarded home. This operation caused quite a stir back in the States!

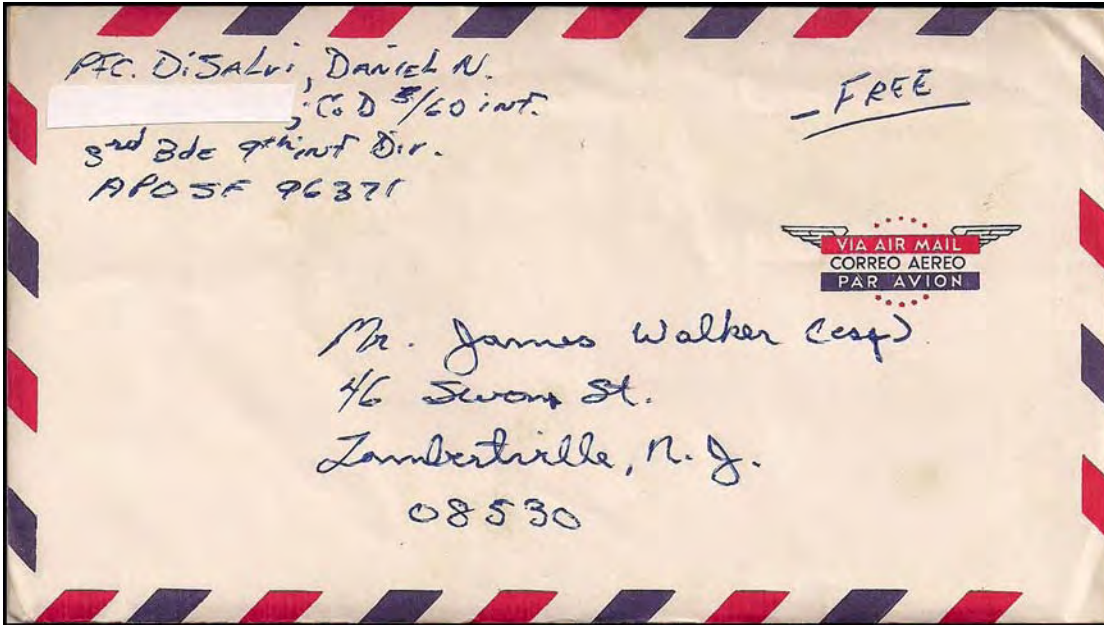


Fig. 4: From APO 96371, the location of which was Tan An, south of Saigon in the Mekong Delta area. The letter enclosed however, datelined June 3, 1970, was written when DiSalvi's division had crossed into Cambodia. Mail was forwarded to Division Headquarters in Tan An for mailing.

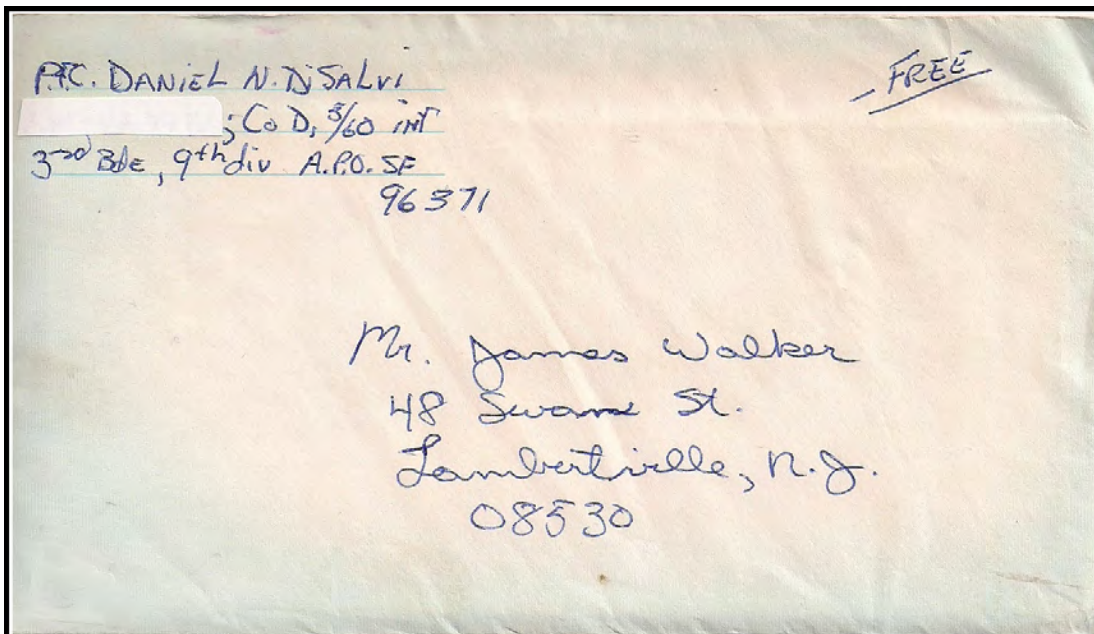


Fig. 5: A cover with a letter datelined August 23, 1970, when DiSalvi's unit had re-crossed back into Vietnam after the Cambodian Incursion. Sent from APO 96371.

As the withdrawal of American troops accelerated and units returned to the U.S., individual GIs that did not have a minimum amount of time in Country were reassigned to other units. As the cover in Figure 6 shows, SP/4 DiSalvi was transferred to the 101st Airborne Division APO 96383, located at Phu Bai in November 1970. This division was operating in Northwest I Corps south of the DMZ near the border with Laos.

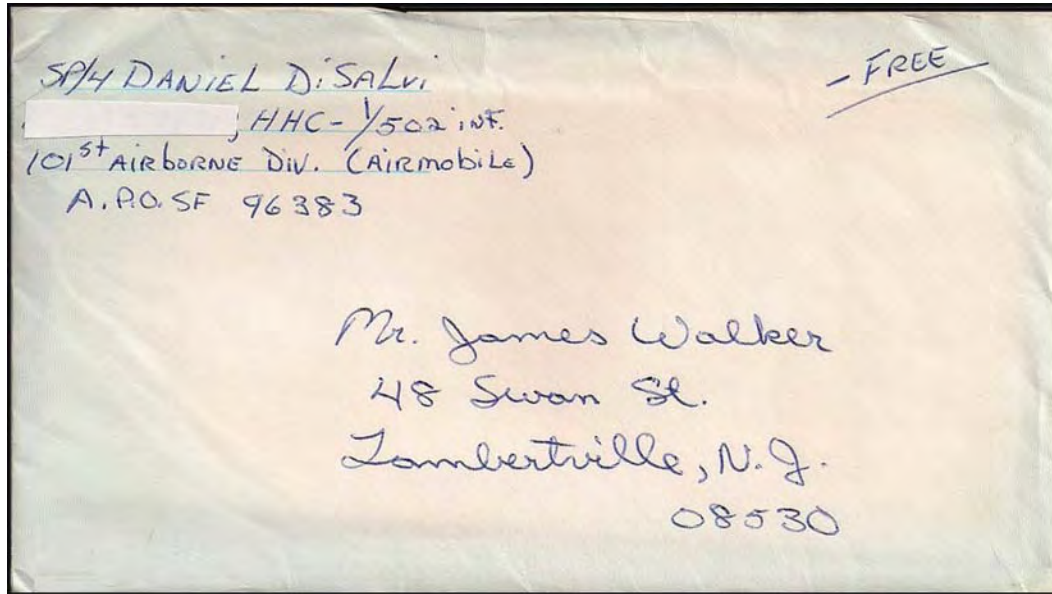


Fig. 6: This cover, datelined November 1970, is from APO 96383 located at Phu Bai, after DiSalvi was transferred to the 101st Airborne Division.

In May 1970 I received the cover below (Figure 7) from another friend also in Vietnam, at APO 96337. This APO was located at Da Nang, a large base on the coast where the Marines first entered Vietnam in 1964.

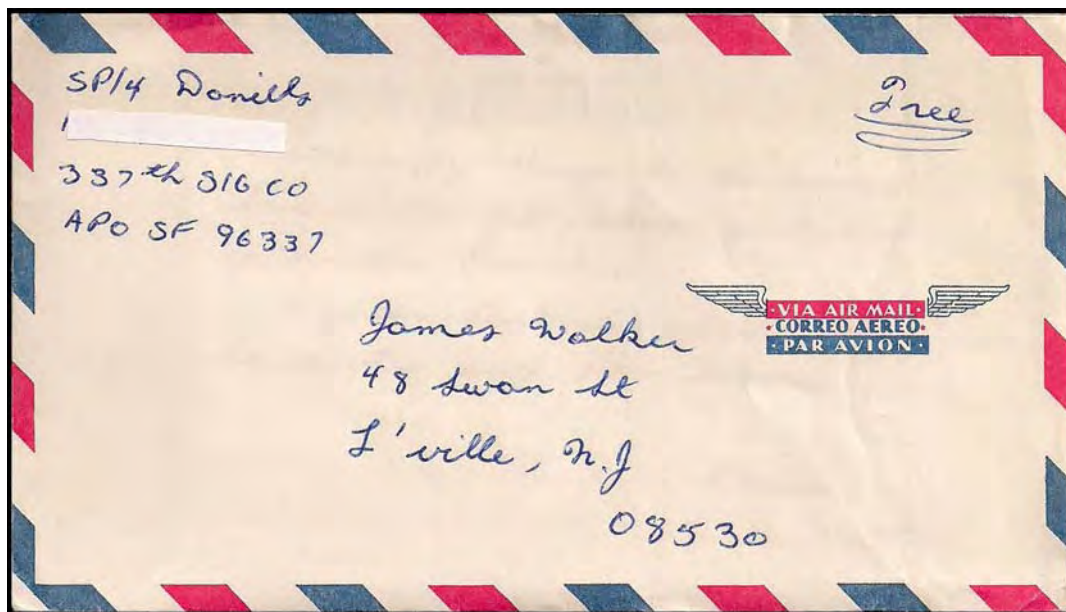


Fig. 7: Cover sent from APO SF 96337 in May 1970. This APO was located at Da Nang, a large base on the coast.

VIETNAM ~ NEW JERSEY CORRESPONDENCE ~ Jim Walker

I entered the army in early 1971. I reached my assigned unit by that summer, as the form letter shown in Figure 8 indicates, Headquarters 1st Brigade 101st Airborne APO 96383. The paragraph below my new address concerning the rapid mail service of from 5-7 days proved to be overly optimistic.

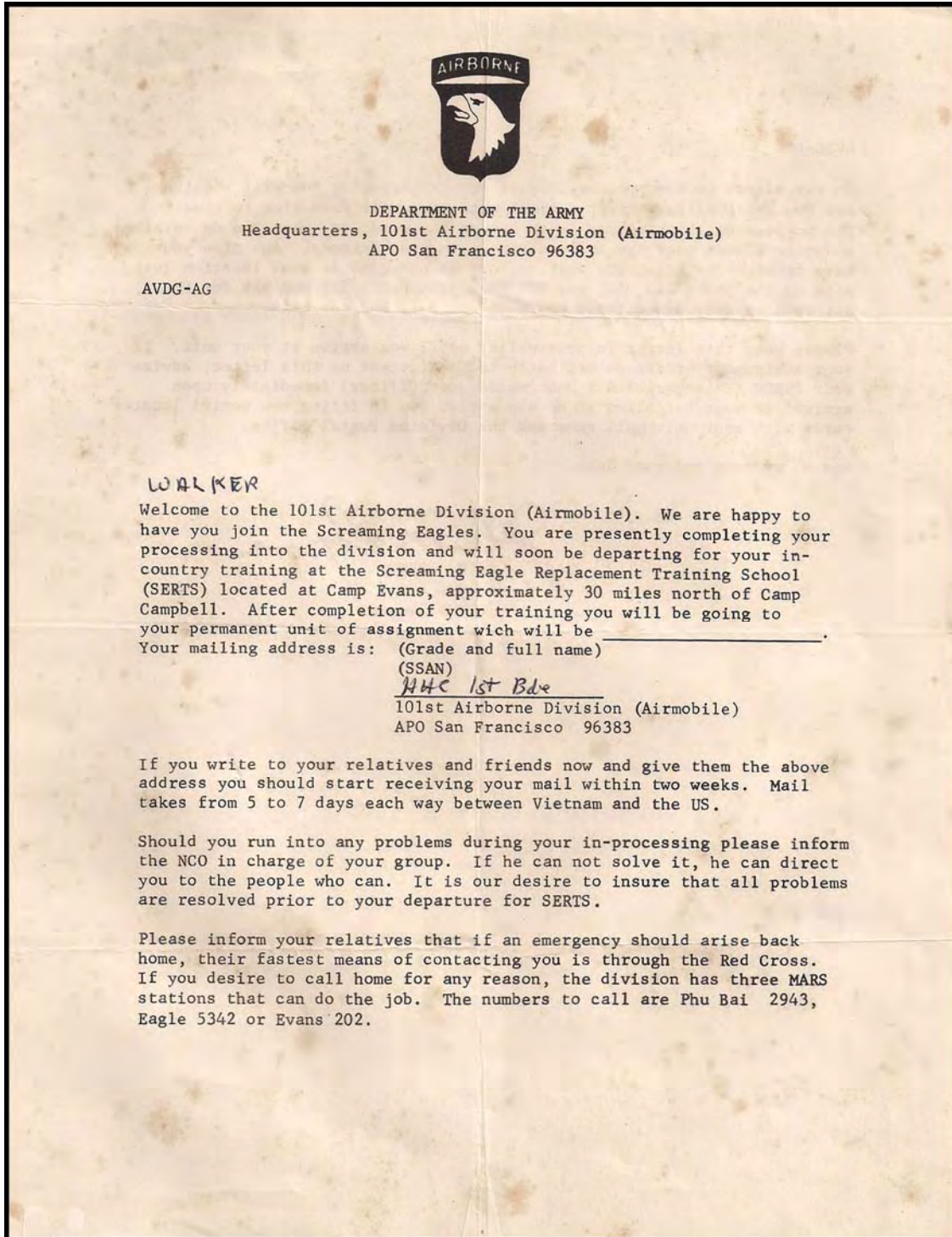


Fig. 8: Letter from the 101st Airborne with mailing instructions for me and my family, received in early 1971. The 101st Airborne was headquartered near Huế, with APO SF 96383.

By the New Year, the 101st ABN stood down and I was reassigned to another outfit. However, just before Christmas a GI-produced Christmas card was distributed (see *Figure 9*) for us to send home. I made an envelope out of a sheet of paper and since it was so late in December, I used a U.S. air mail stamp #C78a from a booklet my father had sent. I hoped a stamp would ensure a timely delivery. The stamp did ensure an APO cancel 22 Dec. 1971 with a faint APO # 96383.

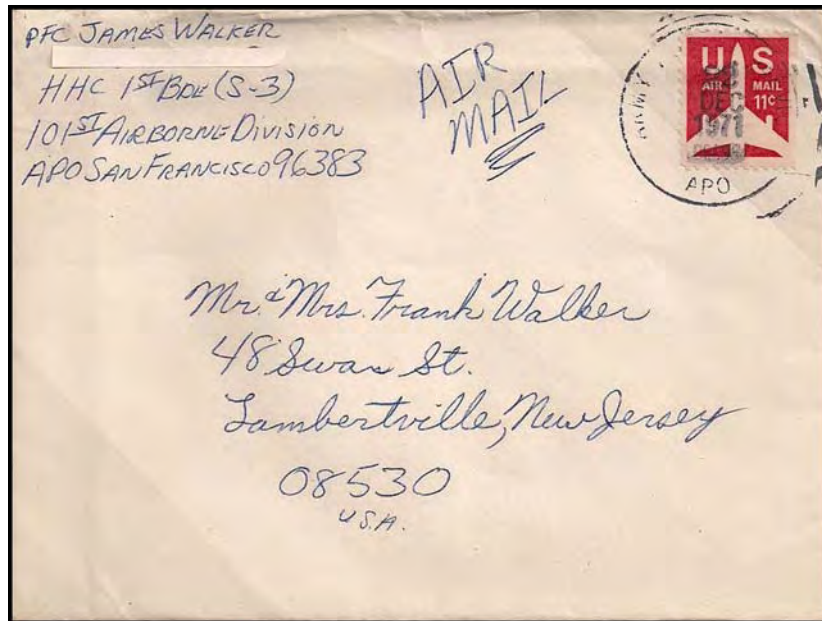


Fig. 9: A GI-produced Christmas greeting produced in 1971. The stamp was unnecessary, but I used it in hopes of faster delivery. It did at least insure an APO cancel dated Dec. 22, 1971 from APO 96383.

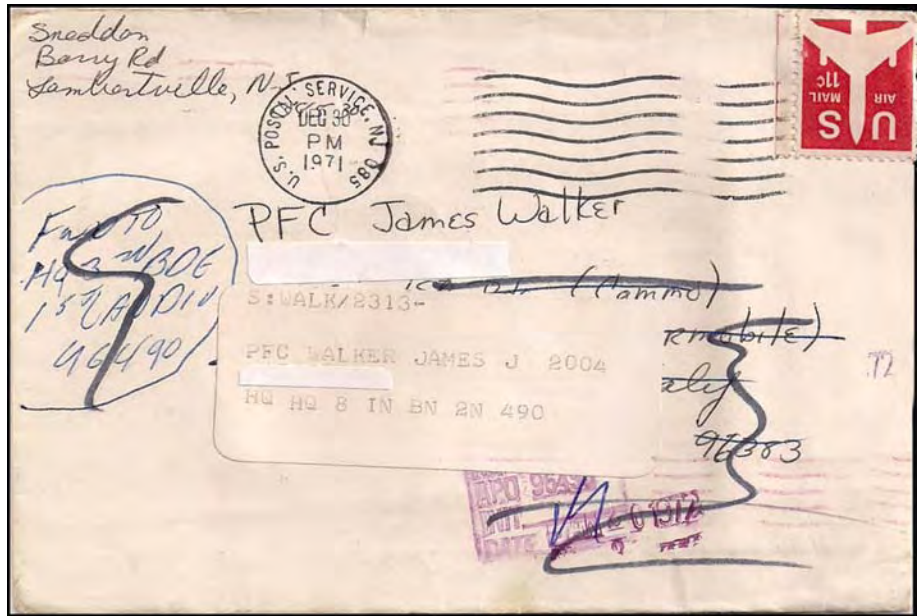


Fig. 10: December 30, 1971 cover sent from NJ to me, originally addressed to my 101st Airborne address, but redirected to my new address.

The cover shown in Figure 10 is mail sent to me from Lambertville, N.J., canceled Dec. 30th, 1971. By the time it arrived in Vietnam, I had been reassigned to Headquarters 2/8 1st Cavalry Division APO 96490, located at Bien Hoa northeast of Saigon. The label with my correct address was applied over the old one and the purple handstamp indicates a search was made on the 20th of January and the handwritten address at left was the correct Brigade but the actual unit was not indicated. The scan of the reverse of this cover (Figure 11) shows a purple Directory Service cancel of Jan. 20th and two APO machine cancels from Jan. 25th and 28th. The postmarks indicate it took almost a month to track me down.



Fig. 11: Reverse of the above cover, showing a Directory Service cancel Jan 20, 1972 and 2 APO cancels (with illegible numbers) Jan. 25 & 28, a month in transit.

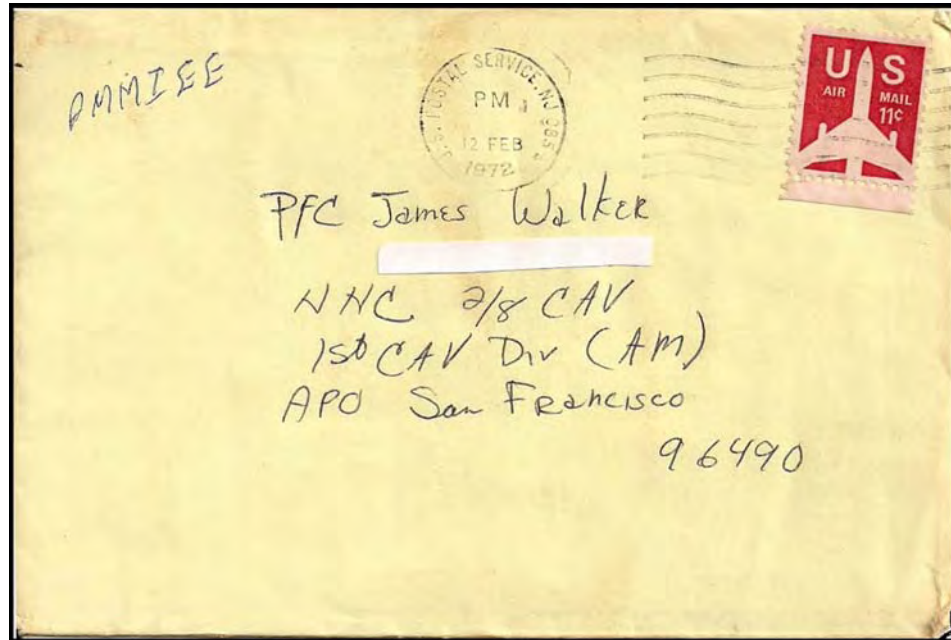


Fig. 12: Letter addressed to me at APO SF 96490 (Bien Hoa), mailed from Lambertville, NJ on Feb. 12, 1971, includes the additional notation by the postal clerk of Ammiee (Amiee) – a sub-base near Ben Hoa.

APO numbers often covered a large area with any number of small units operating within that area. The cover shown above (*Figure 12*), mailed from Lambertville, N.J. on Feb. 12, 1971 to the proper address, also carries an additional directive from a postal clerk at the upper left. Upon arrival at Bien Hoa, I was assigned to a fire support base about five miles east, and shortly after I was again reassigned to a mini-fire base, or satellite of the larger base. The name of this minibase, Amiee, is at the left. I took this picture (*Figure 14*) of FSB Amiee from a helicopter in April 1972.



Fig. 13: The author in Bien Hoa in 1971.



Fig. 14: Amiee sub-base near Bien Hoa, where I was stationed in April 1972.

VIETNAM ~ NEW JERSEY CORRESPONDENCE ~ Jim Walker

This last cover (Figure 15), mailed from Little York, N.J. August 18, 1972, arrived in Vietnam after I returned home. Addressed to APO 96490 which had been discontinued on August 16th, it was redirected to APO 96384 Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon where it received a three-line directory handstamp and my forwarding address stateside.

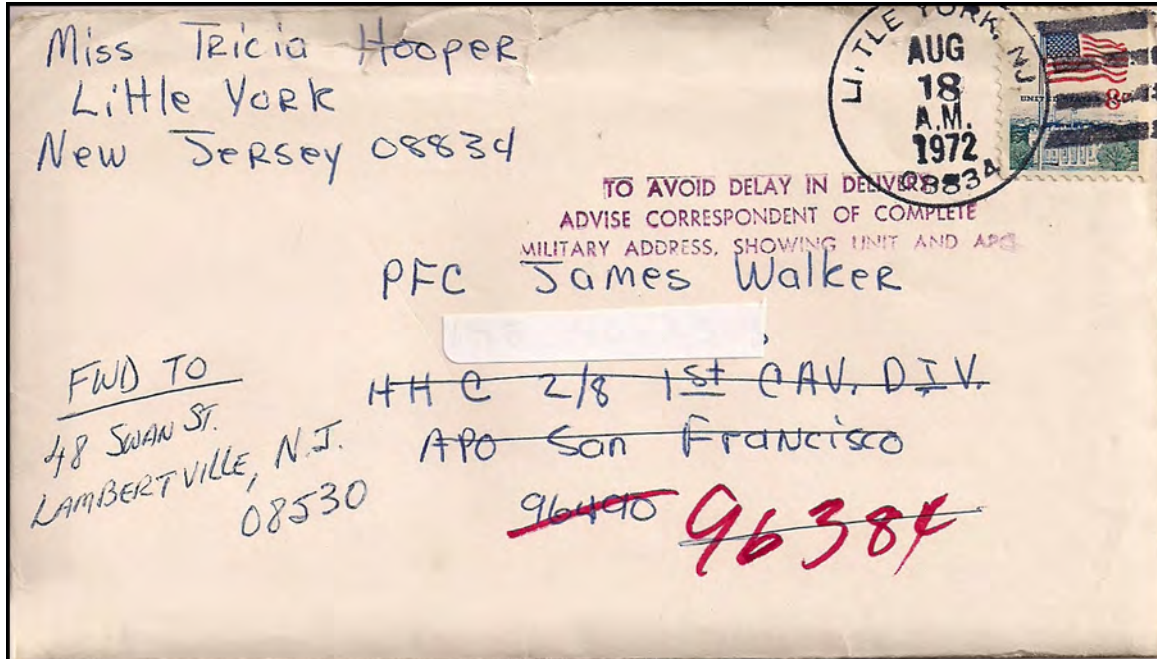


Fig. 15: The cover, addressed to me at APO 96490. That APO was discontinued on August 16th, and the letter was redirected to APO 96384 (Tan Son Nhut Air Base), and finally to me Stateside.

Three million GIs served in Vietnam over a ten year period as compared to fifteen million who served in World War II over the four years of that conflict. Vietnam mail seems to be much harder to find than the numbers indicate. As for the GIs whose mail was used in this article, all returned safe and sound and are productive members of society today.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Please see Military Postal Service Agency Publication 640, available from the USPS or online at <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub640.pdf#search='Military Postal Service Agency Publication 640'>. For further information, see *Geographic Locations of U.S. APOs, 1941-1984 (Fifth Edition)*, compiled and edited by James Shaffer, published by the War Cover Club, 1985, Bennington, VT.
- ² An APO is assigned to a large unit such as a division and it will move with the unit. So a unit may move around the country and its APO stays the same even if that unit is operating in the same area as another unit with a different APO had been operating previously. Having said that, certain APO's were assigned to big cities, like Saigon and if a unit assigned there was reassigned to another location it would receive its mail through the APO covering its new location.
- ³ Free franking privileges are afforded to all military personnel in combat zones (including Iraq and Afghanistan today). The sender wrote the word 'free' in place of the stamp. Only outgoing mail was free. Incoming mail paid U.S. first class rate.