



A depiction of the author driving a dump truck in Vietnam near a herd of water buffalo. (AI illustration by Gerardo Mena, Army University Press)

How I Learned to Drive

Bob DeZenzo

There I was, a nineteen-year-old kid from New Jersey who had never driven anything before in his entire life! Suddenly, I was training to drive a five-ton dump truck in Vietnam.

Growing up in Newark, New Jersey, I never felt the need to drive like many of my fellow teens did. I could always find public transportation, or if wheels were required, I could get a ride from my best friend, Mike Callahan. Mikey was always trading in whatever he was driving for the next new craze. He once traded in a beautiful Cadillac for a junky Corvair because he heard it was

what everyone would be driving in the future. He did try to teach me to drive the Corvair, but after I nearly crashed into the statue of Columbus, he abandoned the idea. In hindsight, he should have let me crash into it. It would have saved the city money fifty years later.

So, why did I learn to drive? Did I suddenly get the urge to burn rubber, peel out, or maybe feel the wind in my hair? Nope ... I was drafted. What has that got to do with anything? Let me elaborate.

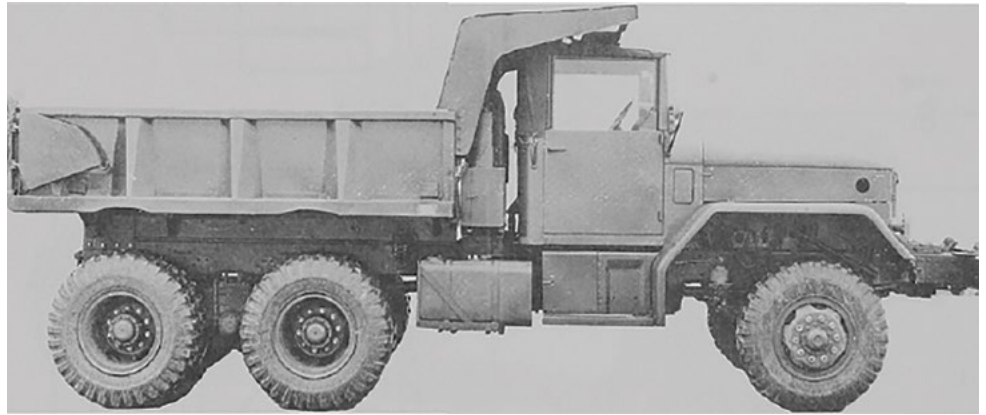
I was inducted in August 1968. After taking basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and advanced infantry

training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, I received my orders for Vietnam. I felt I was as ready as I would ever be after my rigorous training at Tigerland, and I couldn't wait to apply my newfound skills and courage to the enemy. Of course, this was the Army, so things didn't work out as expected. Instead of an assignment to a line company, I was ordered to the 18th Combat Engineer Brigade in Cam Ranh Bay where I would be assigned to an outpost to provide security for the road crews. This turned out to be the 116th Engineers, a National Guard unit from Idaho Falls, Idaho.

When I arrived at my new post, I was assigned to help build bunkers to fortify the perimeter from assault. This was not what I was trained for, but hey, it's the Army, so I had to do what I was told! After about two weeks of hard labor, we were told that we would be going out on night patrols to secure the perimeter. Charlie had been tossing in mortar rounds every night and the brass was tired of it. The patrol was to start after chow, so we had to hurry to finish the bunker. We formed a chain and started heaving the sandbags along to their destination when disaster struck. I turned to catch a bag but wasn't quick enough and it bounced off my knee, sending my kneecap into a spiral, and I could hear the crack as it ripped through cartilage and tendons. I was carted to the band aid station, but the doctor had no idea how bad the damage might be, so a dust off was called in, and off I went to the 8th Field Hospital in Nha Trang. I spent the better part of two weeks there, during which time I was encased in a cast from my waist to my ankle. While there, I acquired an appreciation for Agatha Christie mysteries and round-eyed nurses.

I thought for sure that the next step would be back to the world, but that was not to be. I was sent to Camp Zama Army Hospital in Sagami Ono, Japan, for rehab. I can't say I didn't enjoy this, but that's another story.

When I returned to my unit a month and a half later, I was put on light duty. The Civilian Labor Office needed a driver, and I was it. Problem was, as



An M51 dump truck. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

mentioned earlier, I had no idea how to drive! And this, dear reader, is where it gets interesting.

The next morning, I was told to report to the motor pool, and there I met Staff Sgt. Benedict. I had seen him around the post, or more accurately, I had heard him around the post. When he spoke, he bellowed, as if he were speaking to the hard of hearing. I met him in front of a line of jeeps and I thought, well, this won't be too bad; I've always wanted to ride in a jeep! Then he guided me to the back of the pool, past the three-quarter tons, the deuce and a half, and straight to the heavy equipment. My heart sank when he pointed out a huge dump truck and said, "This is it!" He went on to explain that he trains all new soldiers on the largest vehicle available, and since we weren't an artillery unit, this would have to do. His logic was that if I could learn to drive this, I could drive anything and be much more useful. He was to rue the day he said that!

At the time, all military vehicles had manual transmissions, stick shifts. I guess if I had to learn, it might as well be the more challenging. The M817 dump truck had two sticks, one for shifting and one for controlling the bed to raise and lower it. It also had four pedals on

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A market in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

the floor, gas, brake, clutch, and another one just for fun. I was instructed the use for each and told to ignore the last pedal and second stick, because I'd probably never use them. I learned all the basics of driving a stick shift: brake, then clutch, then shift, then gas, repeatedly. The compound sat on a plateau overlooking the countryside with the motor pool sitting right in the middle. We drove in circles around the motor pool for at least two hours, during which I stalled the vehicle at least twenty times. Each time this happened, I could see the sarge getting madder and madder. He would have made a great kindergarten teacher! Finally, things started to smooth out. I seemed to find the proper rhythm to coordinate the procedure. When the sarge felt I was getting the hang of driving, he announced that we were going to town. What? Drive among real people? The idea really shook me up. To make matters worse, a few of the guys heard we were going to town and wanted to tag along to do some "shopping." They climbed into the box, which is no easy feat, and made themselves at home.

As I mentioned, the post was set on a plateau with an access road that was at least a quarter-mile long and had a forty-five-degree incline. It blended into the paved highway that led to the town of Bao Loc, which was five miles away. I'm happy to report that I started off fine and was rolling down the hill like I knew what

I was doing. As I approached the highway, I noticed that off in the distance, there was a farmer with a herd of water buffalo, about ten cows, moving very slowly toward the highway. I knew this would not be a problem and went merrily on my way. The ride to town went smoothly until we reached our destination. We stopped at the village market that specialized in meat, vegetables, and raw fish. The fish stunk to high heaven! You could smell it a mile before we got there!

Out of nowhere, a piglet ran out into the middle of the road. Of course, I slammed on the brakes, accidentally throwing the truck in reverse, and stopped, stalling out the vehicle and throwing all the guys in the back forward. They gingerly climbed out and gave me the "what for." I'm not exactly sure what they were shopping for, but when they returned twenty minutes later, they were in a much better mood.

We started back to the compound without a hitch. I started at first gear, as instructed, and geared up when I felt the engine tighten up a bit. I kept this up until I hit fourth gear, by which time we were sailing smoothly along at around forty-five miles per hour. Most Army vehicles are equipped with governors that restrict how fast the engine will turn. Anyway, I was moving along at a pretty good clip when I saw that the farmer had his herd about to cross the road we were on. I judged that if

I pick it up just a little, I could make it past them before they reached the road, which is exactly what happened. Just as I passed them and approached the access road to the compound, the farmer started crossing his herd. Now, I hit the bottom of the hill running at about forty-eight miles per hour,



A depiction of the author accidentally hitting a water buffalo. (AI illustration by Gerardo Mena, Army University Press)

the max on this truck, and had maintained that speed about halfway up the hill when the unexpected happened; the truck started to slow down. At that point, the sergeant directed me to gear down. Say what? “Gear down, gear down, or you’ll stall out!”

I panicked. “What do you mean, gear down? You never taught me that!” He continued to shout in my ear as the truck went forward slower and slower, until it wasn’t going forward anymore. I put the clutch in as far as I could but forgot where the brake pedal was, so the truck started its descent backward down the hill. As I looked in the rearview mirror, I could see that the farmer had half his herd across the road.

The truck was picking up speed and the startled farmer looked up and started waving his hands. He was shouting something, and I don’t think it was God Bless America! I was still trying to get control of my vehicle, the sergeant was having a stroke, and the guys in the box were screaming their heads off, mostly because of impending doom, and partly because I kept hitting the stick that raised and lowered the box. I finally found the brake pedal, all too late, because as I hit the bottom of the hill, the last thing I remembered was a

resounding BOOM! The rear of the truck struck one of the cows’ broadsides and the cow exploded into a million pieces. Of course, the centrifugal force sent the poor animal’s innards sailing into the box of the truck, drenching my comrades in what can only be described as true blood and guts.

Oh, the humanity! We had a sergeant in desperate need of oxygen, a farmer ready to kill all Americans, and four gut-soaked soldiers ready to kill me. An ambulance appeared along with a jeep full of MPs trying to sort it all out.

After cleaning up the mess and assuring the farmer that he would be compensated (cost me \$125), things went back to normal, or as normal as they would ever get. The fellas ribbed me about it till the day I left, and I did finally get my Army license, but was limited to a three-quarter-ton pickup truck. This was kind of ironic because when I returned to the world, my last six months in the Army were spent driving M109 howitzers.

Now, fifty some years later, I look back at this saga and with a smile. I wonder if the guys who were in the back of the truck feel the same way. Oh well. Xin Loi! ■