

Preface

The path to a career as a mathematician is normally as straight and narrow as one of Euclid's lines. High school math club, college math major, math graduate school, tenure-track university math professor. No dangerous assignments, no daring adventures, no detours. My path was just the opposite. A mathematical carpet ride.

This book fulfills a promise I've made to several generations of students and colleagues, Army buddies, friends around the globe, and the sons and daughters of my widespread family of friends who call me "Uncle." For years they've badgered me to record these events. The civilian friends want details about daily life as a West Point cadet in the '60s and surviving Army Ranger School. The Army guys want to know what it's like to write a PhD thesis in theoretical mathematics, and *how in hell* I can claim exploring math ideas can be every bit as spine-tingling as a solo night dive off a remote Bahamian reef. All of them want to know more about those condemned houses in St. Louis, Berkeley, and Atlanta that were my homes for decades and how it felt to be invited to return to Saigon, thirty years after my tour of duty in the Iron Triangle, to lecture on my mathematical discoveries.

The last time a group of them cornered me in my living room, my good-natured inquisitors had the gall to *vote* on which episode they wanted to hear and then to correct me if I missed the odd detail. Each time, after the story smoke cleared, they again made me promise to get these happenings down on paper. When groups at San Jose and Cal Poly State Universities invited me to talk about my road trip behind the Iron Curtain and hitchhiking in Uganda during Idi Amin's reign of terror, their appeal for a written version finally clinched it. This book is for them and my extended family of friends, for Baby Boomers who missed or want to relive Haight-Ashbury and the Vietnam War, for armchair travelers who want to vicariously experience shoestring Third-World travel, for prospective math majors who fear a career in mathematics would necessarily be too dull, and for anyone else curious about how at least one unorthodox research mathematician thinks and works.

This manuscript has been four decades in the making. The first draft was typed in 1970, and as unexpected new adventures unfolded, I topped off my burgeoning box of notes every few years with what the Army calls "After-Action Reports." In the process of knitting these incidents together, I suddenly realized for the first time how mathematics was the ambitious dream that got me through my military years and how Army Ranger training in turn helped me survive both the PhD gauntlet in Berkeley and cut-throat academic politics much later. I now understand what might draw a midwestern country boy to shed his shyness, spend years at foreign universities, and devise an unusual classroom style. I finally appreciate the huge edge in life it gave me growing up with a dad who was half *The Great Santini* and half the father of "A Boy Named Sue." Wish I had seen that before he passed. These events span my experiences from Beast Barracks at West Point fifty years ago to present-day escapades, but not to worry. As

Salinger so succinctly put it, “I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography.”

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You asked for it, amigos!

Ted Hill