

From Southwestern Indiana to West Point

C. Erik Chickedantz spent the '60s in service to his country BY STEPH WEBER

When C. Erik Chickedantz arrived at the United States Military Academy at West Point in the summer of 1959—a long way from his small southwestern Indiana hometown of Washington—he began his “plebe year” with a grueling eight-week basic training session known as “Beast Barracks.”

“It was very regimented. Reveille every morning at 0530, except on Sundays. A lot of military training,” recalls Chickedantz. “We’d march to classes and to the mess hall for three square meals. You didn’t get to eat much and had to sit up straight on the front half of your seat, [bring] the utensil up in front of you and [make] a 90-degree turn.” Meals were punctuated by upperclassmen’s rapid-fire questioning, designed to acclimate cadets to organizing their thoughts and actions amid chaos. “While the entire four years were one of ‘be on time and be prepared,’” he adds, “plebe year was designed to be particularly difficult.”

Academics were largely standardized, though cadets retained some choice. For athletics, Chickedantz chose track and cross-country, training under coach Carleton Crowell, the legendary West Point figure, who became a mentor and eventual namesake of Chickedantz’s youngest son.

Following graduation in 1963, Chickedantz reported to Fort Benning in Georgia for infantry training. He subsequently completed Airborne School, then Ranger School. “If you’re going to go forward [as] an infantry officer, getting additional training is basically career advancement,” he explains.

A four-week intensive dedicated to military parachuting, Airborne School was held at Fort Benning, as were the first of three phases of Ranger School. For phase two, the group traveled north to the mountains of Dahlenega, Georgia, and conducted rappelling and night vision patrol and navigation exercises. “Part of the survival training in the mountains included a rattlesnake lunch,” he adds. The final phase at Eglin Air Force Base near Pensacola, Florida, offered a chance to navigate swampy environments.



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With airborne wings and ranger tab, Chickedantz was assigned in early 1964 to the 1st Battalion of the 502nd Airborne Infantry, a division of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. There he prepared for a yearlong tour of duty in Vietnam, completing crash courses in the country’s history, culture and tonal-based language. He learned enough of the language to make a fair effort at communicating—and still remembers some to this day.

In January 1966, he deployed with U.S. Advisory Team 162. “Our job was to advise and assist the Vietnamese Airborne Division in planning and conducting combat operations, mainly in northern South Vietnam and [tactical zones] I and II Corps,” he explains. The team located enemy forces, like the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units, and coordinated U.S. air and artillery support for the Vietnamese Airborne troops on the ground.

After six months in the field as the Assistant Battalion Advisor, Chickedantz spent most of the remainder of the tour in Saigon. Then, after a return to Fort Benning in January 1967 and a transfer to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, Chickedantz came back to Vietnam as part of a five-member Mobile Advisory Team.

“We were assigned to a regional Vietnamese infantry battalion and [trained] them to go on operations and nightly ambushes down in the IV Corps, which is



in the delta south of Saigon, to provide as much security as they could for the populace,” he says. Located in Vietnam’s rural countryside, he advised and assisted local units, helping residents build schoolhouses and a water station, and spent time together celebrating holidays and weddings. “Putting aside the conflict, the Vietnamese people were very peaceful, polite and always [willing] to share a meal,” he says. “They were family-oriented and deeply religious—good people.”

In the summer of 1969, Chickedantz returned to the U.S., having fulfilled his six-year service commitment. He soon embarked on another lifechanging venture: law school at the University of Michigan.

Now a member of Burt Blee in Fort Wayne with a mediation practice, Chickedantz, who served as president of the state bar from 2011-2012, has nearly 50 years of experience in private practice. But the lessons he learned in the military still resonate. “The most effective and successful leaders are the ones that lead by the example they set,” he says. “And by that, I mean setting the standards for work ethic, discipline, knowledge of the job, dedication, honesty and showing respect and consideration for the people you work with—and probably more important, the people who work for you.” **SL**