

My quarter century in Asia – from war-torn Saigon to bubble-era Tokyo, a software Odyssey 1968 – 1993.

A memoir by John Siniscal

John and I are peers, having worked together for IBM in Saigon during the Vietnam War and now both in our ninth decade of life. For both of us, our time in Vietnam was a radical departure from what had gone before. It got us out of the United States, and gave us experience in the wider world. It got us both married and gave us an appreciation of life overseas.

It was a glorious time to be an American. The USA was the world's industrial powerhouse. John and I worked with the invention of the age, computers. We were with the right company, IBM, in the right industry at the right time. Add to that the fact that we were well-paid to be working for IBM in a war zone. John parlayed his experience with IBM into a business writing software and providing data services in Singapore. I parlayed my experience into successful investments in the software sphere and an early retirement.

Vietnam

John's book starts immediately prior to Vietnam. He was under threat of the draft. When IBM presented the opportunity to work in Vietnam, with a draft deferral, he jumped at it. For John, the fact that the pay was considerably better was a secondary consideration. It kept him out of the Army and gave him something meaningful to do in an interesting environment.

Just as military service would advance men beyond where they might have gone in the same number of years of peacetime, working for IBM in Vietnam presented us with problems to solve that were more interesting and more significant than what we would've faced had we remained in the United States. The business and software challenges enabled us all to grow. John built his later career on the foundation of experience and confidence that he developed in Vietnam.

John married a beautiful French Vietnamese woman, Jeanine, after which he returned to Hawaii where he worked for IBM as a marketing representative. While he was there, Bill Shugg and Bob Curtis, with whom I had shared a house in Saigon, got together with John and came up with the idea of starting a computer services company in Asia. They had relished living outside the country. John being the more management oriented by nature, with a degree in business, was the first to leave. Bob and Bill would have the technical expertise required to implement the plan once business had been found. Eventually, only Bill Shugg joined the business in Singapore. Curtis remained with IBM.

Singapore

Singapore was a different proposition than Hawaii. John does a good job describing the expectations of the Singapore marketplace and the difference in personal interactions that lead to business transactions. Essentially, Americans are very straightforward, upfront, and quick to conclude business relations. The Chinese are more reserved and take longer to do things.

The initial business in Singapore was offshore programming. Labor costs for programmers in

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Singapore were about one third the cost of skills in the US. In Saigon, half of the USAID staff which I trained were ethnic Chinese. We had a great deal of faith in the Chinese ability to learn programming.

It is worth mentioning that Singapore, under the government of Lee Kwan Yew, had a British type rule of law. One that respected contracts and contract law was rigorously enforced. It was a good business environment. You could trust that that your counterparties would honor their commitments.

The company they founded bought an IBM mainframe computer in 1974 and went into the service bureau business. John describes the business relationships that they had with various companies, Coopers & Lybrand and IBM among them.

Although he doesn't go into the details of how it worked, this is very consistent with John's personality. He is a likable outgoing, intelligent person and also amazingly energetic and athletic. The kind of man to whom other men are attracted and who immediately instills confidence. It was an effective team. Bill Shugg had impressed me when we worked together to implement some complex programs for USAID in Saigon. Bill's expertise was essential for building the team and building client confidence in Singapore.

Asian Computer Services

John describes his business relationships with many of the leading software companies of the era: Computer Sciences Corporation, SAS Institute, and McCormack and Dodge. Software was a small world at that time, or rather, these pioneering companies were the center of a small but growing world. Interestingly, I was working with software from these same companies in the United States. Before I started to specialize with Oracle in the late 1980s, I worked with mainframe software with all the above-mentioned companies. John tended the business end of the software; I became familiar with the technical end.

John notes that whereas Singapore was a country that aggressively banned corruption, as their business grew, ACS started to do business in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. In those countries bribes were a common business practice. He describes the difficulties that he had navigating through business contracts in areas where bribery was expected. It would've been a violation of both American and Singapore law and custom to offer them. He succeeded without them.

John faced issues in every country. Financial systems were different as well, and they remain different to this day. Checks are used primarily in the United States. In Europe it is electronic transfers. In Singapore it was electronic transfers as well. John writes with amusement about the problems he encountered having to negotiate American checks and even dollars cash.

Minicomputers took over a significant portion of the mainframe market in the late 1980s and early 1990s. John competed against them, but didn't really get involved with smaller computers until the personal computer era of the 1980s. Another innovation of the era was

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databases such as IBM's DB2, the initial one, and Oracle.

M&D

While working at Asian Computer Services, in the limited east Asian market, John was a distributor for McCormack and Dodge. They liked his work and offered him the opportunity to be the head of their Asian operations. He could work from Singapore or move to Sydney the headquarters.

John says it was an opportunity to move from being a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big pond. The worldwide software market was booming. This was time to take a step.

John's first year with McCormack and Dodge he lived in Singapore and traveled frequently to headquarters in Sydney and to Hong Kong, and Tokyo. He notes that life on the road was rather demanding, and it kept him from the sporting activities he enjoyed. The trade-off was that involved more money and a chance for growth. John experienced a surprise when McCormack and Dodge was sold to Dun & Bradstreet.

John was in charge of converting the software to operate in Japanese, a significant undertaking. I the reviewer was a consultant to CSC as they converted the same package to operate in Arabic. Arabic is an alphabetic language. Japanese is a character-based language and I can appreciate that this difficulty would be considerably greater.

At any rate, John successfully managed the conversion to Japanese. However, Dun & Bradstreet also later acquired MSA, Management Science America, which had a competing product. They put the executives from MSA in charge, so the McCormack and Dodge product was not emphasized to the degree that should have been considering its merit.

Japan was far and away the biggest single market in Asia, larger than any individual market in Europe. It made sense to make the McCormack and Dodge product work in Japanese. It required that John moved to Tokyo. The book has quite a bit to say about doing business in Japan. An indication of how successfully John managed the transition is that by his account some of his best friends are Japanese. He learned the language and how to negotiate in their culture. He learned to appreciate their honesty and to trust their advice in matters of business and personal life. John is currently married to a Japanese woman, having divorced Jeanine after he moved to Tokyo.

Exercise

John talks about the book *Aerobics* published by Kenneth Cooper in 1968. He says it was his Bible, inspiring him to run several times a week. It inspired me likewise. I was never nearly the runner that he was, but I had read the book en route to Vietnam in 1968 and I still faithfully follow it to this day 60 years later.

In Singapore. He joined the Hash House Harriers, a group of loosely affiliated worldwide clubs

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that go for runs throughout cities. John modestly recounts how he was generally among the leaders in their runs. This is consistent with what I saw in Saigon, where he was good at waterskiing, croquet, tennis, and almost every other sport that we undertook.

Conclusion

Biography offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on the huge variety among human talents and experiences. It is a pleasure to reflect on the ways in which the latent talents that were visible to the co-workers of his twenties were realized over the course of his career. It is humbling to try to imagine myself dealing with the situations he confronted. It would not have been in me; thank goodness others of us, such as Bill Shugg and I, had talents of our own. The book is concise, well-written, and very personal.