Tim Benintendi (right) in Vietnam, 1966
I had the privilege of meeting John Steinbeck in the spring of 1966. He was 64 years old, I was 20. I’m now 58. We met in what was then the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), during my first tour of duty with the U. S. Army, which had me functioning as a classified documents clerk / courier. I met him purely inadvertently in a mess hall of the 25th Infantry Division at a camp in Tay Ninh Province, near the Cambodian border. This battalion-size camp was eighty-five miles northwest of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). On this day I had flown in by helicopter to deliver documents to the command office, then went to the mess hall, where I planned to have a late-afternoon meal.

Steinbeck was on a Defense Department tour, which many notable Americans and Hollywood celebrities were authorized to take in support of troop morale. Military commanders tightly controlled these individual tours, safety being the prevailing concern; however, stronger-willed individuals might get to go into riskier, forward areas if they pestered, and could convince command of the usefulness of it. As I would discover in my conversation with him, Steinbeck made his way to as many battalion-sized camps (usually 2000 or so personnel) as they would allow, and would push to go out to company-sized positions in the bush (usually 150 or so personnel). Extremely risky. Unlike many celebrities, he took touring seriously, and wanted to see men in the lowliest circumstances.

As I entered the battalion mess hall with two other GI’s, I recognized Steinbeck immediately. Sitting in the middle of the empty room with a lieutenant, his escort, he was waiting for a
chopper ride out to a forward unit. I told the other two who he was, but, unimpressed, they went right into the chow line, and eventually sat together in a corner and ate. I went up to Steinbeck, introduced myself, and told him that I had read every book he had published to that point, and was selfishly grateful for his contributions to literature. Sounds grand, but I was a bit nervous and a little intimidated because having a hefty two semesters of junior college under my belt, I couldn’t imagine talking to John Steinbeck about anything. Still, I had admired the man greatly, and at least wanted to say hello.

I told him I was born and raised in Palo Alto and as a kid had spent time on farms and ranches around central California, including Salinas, when the folks would visit friends in various places. I mentioned also that I had picked strawberries among the braceros in Monterey County parts of one summer during high school. The lieutenant told me to go get a plate of food, that Steinbeck was there to visit with troops, and I was a troop, and his chopper was going to be a while. So, I ate a meal, and had about an hour and a half with John Steinbeck, one-on-one.

_Lieutenant (JG) R. K. Martin with JS at Binh Thuy Air Base, South Vietnam, 1966_
The lieutenant left after about ten minutes to check on the chopper. After about that same ten minutes, I got very comfortable with Steinbeck. He made me feel like an equal. He spoke for most of the first fifteen or twenty minutes, asking me about my Vietnam experiences, my opinion of the Vietnam war effort, my family and upbringing, and my farm and ranch connections in California and Kansas (my father grew up on a wheat farm in central Kansas). I gave him my sketch on Vietnam from the perspective of my job, and that of several of the Australians I was billeted with in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon. He offered that he thought the Vietnam War was ill-conceived and poorly executed; that the military was fatally and unrealistically restrained, and that the South Vietnamese didn’t want a country as strongly as the South Koreans did in the war for their independence a decade before.

We talked of his son, John Jr., who was an enlisted man broadcasting over the Armed Forces Radio station out of Saigon that year. He had gotten a couple of days with his son when he first came into the country, and would have a couple of days with him on the way home.

We discussed farming and ranching (and farmers and ranchers), initially in terms of California agriculture, then from the Kansas perspective. As I had concluded from his books, he really knew the soil. I have to say that I caught myself marveling at his depth of knowledge regarding farming operations. I told him how we had Grapes of Wrath as required reading in the Palo Alto schools, and that I thought it was a wonderful but disturbing book, but that it had lasting impressions on me.

He asked me which was my favorite of his books, and I told him that I could not pick one, that I was impacted differently by several. I gave him my three favorite titles, *Grapes Of Wrath*, for its impact on my sense of humanity; *Pastures Of Heaven*, for it’s treatment of the human will; and *Tortilla Flat*, for the ribaldry, and it’s sense of freedom and detachment.

He obliged me enthusiastically when I asked about the development of some of his characters — those in *Pastures of Heaven*, *Cannery Row*, and others which I can’t remember now. Mostly, I wanted to know about the German officer in *The Moon Is Down*, simply because when I read it, I could not figure out
how he could have had such an intimate awareness of a foreign enemy officer, and I presumed, someone with whom he had had no contact. Any military always tries to keep your images of the enemy as an abstraction, dehumanized, yet he bucked all that. It turns out that the character was a composite of Germans he had met, and others he had known well. He reminded me that he had been an Army journalist in Europe in WWII. He told me that many of his characters were modeled on actual folks, but that he would often generate composites, or expand upon actual people he knew. Although I shouldn’t have been, I was so surprised that he was so open. I knew nothing of writing, so was afforded a fascinating window into the world of the writers’ craft.

He told me a couple of stories from his visit with Ernest Hemingway in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. Those stories weren’t very literary, but of drinking, and making their way around as Hemingway worked.

He asked me if I had heard about his emerging book, *Travels With Charley*. I said that I had not, so he gave me a rundown of it. It sounded wonderful, and we talked of our fondness for travel, and about interesting places along the American road system. He spoke in terms of what he had seen, but I spoke mostly in terms of what I wanted to see. Among other things, he told me that he relished travel for the joy of getting away from the world of business. *Travels With Charley* was the first book I read once I got home from Vietnam. Upon his departure to meet the waiting helicopter, he told me that if I ever got to New York, that I should look him up through his publisher.

This was the best hour and a half I spent in the Army. I recollect this story with great fondness, but also with a touch of sadness for the loss of one of its participants. Upon returning to the mess hall to take Steinbeck to the waiting chopper, the lieutenant brought an Army camera, and took a few photos of Steinbeck and me for possible use in Defense Department promotions. This was done routinely during celebrity visits. He said he’d get me copies, and took down my unit address and my mother’s address in Palo Alto. When I didn’t receive anything in a few weeks, I tried to look up the lieutenant during the following two visits to Tây Ninh. On the second visit, I found out that he had been killed in combat.
Just before Christmas of 1968, news filtered down to us during my second tour of duty in Vietnam, that John Steinbeck had died December 20th. But for my luck, and the chance timing of a late meal in 1966, I never would have met him.

Tim Benintendi served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam war. This account was written in October 2004.