

Why Silver Star Major

PLANTATION CAMP (South Vietnam) — (UPI) — Maj. Joseph A. (Bert) Westbrook, who won three Silver Stars as a combat commander in Vietnam, said today the Army has decided to accept his resignation as a conscientious objector after two earlier rejections.

Westbrook, a West Point graduate from Atlanta, said his experiences leading infantry troops into battle against the North Vietnamese during his previous tour

of duty here had changed his mind about the war.

The 30-year-old Westbrook said in an interview that twice he tried to resign because of his beliefs, but was turned down on the basis of technicalities.

His resignation was finally accepted about 10 days ago after he refused two assignments he said would have helped the war effort.

No Participation

Westbrook said he is now under orders to return to the

United States to be released from service.

"I tried to resign because I wasn't thinking then in terms of causes, or trying to undermine the Army," Westbrook said. "The military is really embattled these days, and it didn't need me against it as well. I just wasn't going to participate in it any more."

Westbrook commanded a company of 101st Airborne Division paratroopers from August, 1967 to August, 1968. He fought through some of

the toughest battles of the war, including the recapture of Hue after the 1968 Tet offensive and the A Shau Valley campaign that followed the siege of Khe Sanh.

He won his first Silver Star when he led his men up a hill near the A Shau Valley after two other 101st companies tried and were driven back by entrenched North Vietnamese troops. The other awards came for valor in rescuing wounded men under intense enemy fire.

Westbrook said he came to Vietnam already convinced that the war was a mistake, and his experience here and in the United States afterward convinced him that not only Indochina, but all wars, are immoral.

'Do My Duty'

"I never subscribed to the Domino Theory," he said, "and I never could conceive of Vietnam as Munich. I compared it to the French involvement in Algeria. The only intelligent people I ever knew who said they supported the war were in the pay of the government . . .

"But I was a soldier and I came here to do my duty as well as I could, and try to find out what it was all about," Westbrook said.

"We did a lot of fighting, and probably the toughest

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times were when we took a lot of casualties without knowing that we had done anything back to them. We spent a lot of time clearing Highway I and the mines and booby traps cost us a lot of blood."

Westbrook said: "I made it a point never to look at the people I killed. But one day I decided to do it, and I was devastated. We had set up an ambush with Claymore mines, and they killed a lieutenant and two of his men.

"I took his wallet and saw the pictures of his wife and baby. It brings the human factor to you. He didn't want to be there any more than I did. He wanted to go home to the same things I did. What it boiled down to was that I outsmarted him, and he was dead."

Turns Objector

"I'm not sure that was the watershed of my becoming a conscientious objector," he said. "In those days I felt that I wasn't being paid to be overly emotional. Of course I was, but if I wanted to cry, I used to go off into a corner by myself and do it. It wouldn't have been fair to my men if I'd done it in front of them.

"No, I think what I saw in Vietnam simply primed me to do this. It was when I saw

things like My Lai, and worse than that, like Hamburger Hill, that I realized how wrong all this was. That was the most devastating thing, Hamburger Hill (a bloody 1969 struggle for an unnamed mountain near A Shau).

"I was already back in the States then, going to Emory University for a political science degree. But I had still been an infantry commander, and I knew all along that we were going to leave the hill as soon as we had taken it, no matter how many lives were lost.

"The guys dying on Ham-

burger Hill didn't have the affluence or the influence to stay out of the infantry. I knew that too. And then came Laos and Cambodia.

"Finally, I decided I just will not do it any more."

Westbrook said he tried to resign his commission while he was at Emory under an Army program. His superiors turned him down, and ordered him stay at the university.

Afterward he was sent to the advanced Infantry Officers School at Ft. Benning, Ga., and said he intentionally washed out of the course there. He tried again to re-

sign, even going to Washington to plead his case with the Pentagon.

After he was turned down at Washington, Westbrook received orders to come back to Vietnam. He said he came within a hair of refusing to board the plane but was talked into going by his wife.

Before he left he sent a letter to the Army saying he was a conscientious objector and would not fight. But when he arrived in Vietnam he twice had to refuse assignments as an adviser or staff officer that would have left him helping to prosecute the war.