

*Dale Ritterbusch*

## **The Air Force Plays Baseball near the South China Sea**

—for Fred Kiley, Colonel (USAF, ret.)

He tells me a barrage of 8-inch guns  
moves a battleship sideways, leaving  
a vast plain of smooth water behind,  
glassy smooth, a pane of blue  
reflecting clouds, the cordillera where  
white puffs burst like flowers  
after a warm spring rain. And once,  
playing baseball, the count 3 and 2  
a mortar round bursts in the outfield  
far out in left, no immediate danger  
as they walk in the rounds, and the batter  
wants the next pitch, and no player  
wants the game called  
on account of enemy fire;  
the right fielder doesn't even look  
nervously over his shoulder  
as the next round explodes  
in reaches of elephant grass  
while the next takes out a stand  
of bamboo. The catcher sets up, gives  
the sign and location, outside  
because the batter is stocky and short,  
with powerful arms that will drive in  
the runners on second and third. Another round  
sings through the trees as the batter  
digs in at the plate, red dirt  
clumping on his boots,  
and the pitcher warns the runners back  
with a glance, almost a balk as the mortar  
opens up, and an 8-inch round blossoms  
just yards from that mortar crew set up  
in a high cave overlooking the field,  
and the next round hits the entrance

to this cave as the hillside collapses  
into itself, a perfect strike, like the pitch  
the batter whiffs swinging for his life,  
and the side is out, smoke moving  
in the wind down the mountains,  
like early morning mist.  
The outfield saunters in  
holding on to their lead;  
the stranded runners pick up their gloves,  
become lost in circles of smoke  
dissipating like a cigarette;  
they set up in the outfield, wait  
as the pitcher warms up tossing a few,  
as the hitter steps into the box.  
He looks to the green pleasure beyond them,  
as if the fielders weren't even there.

**Dale Ritterbusch**, a frequent contributor to **WLA**, is author of *Lessons Learned*. In Vietnam, Ritterbusch was responsible for coordinating shipments of aerial mines for dispersal along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.