

*'My Quarter Century in Asia' is the story of a software pioneer whose exploits in the Asian markets of the 1970s and 1980s are captured in this detailed memoir.*

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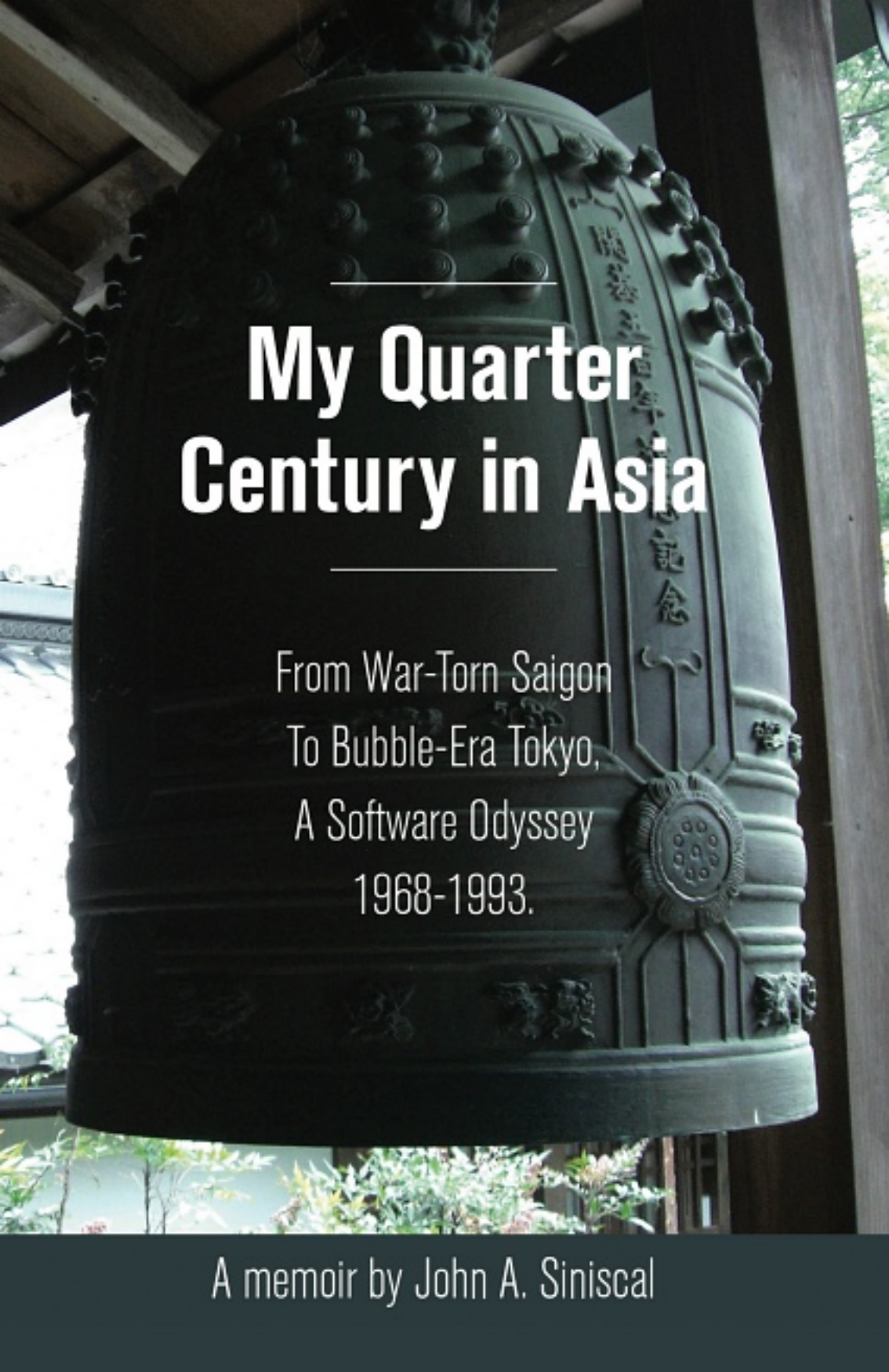
**From War-Torn Saigon to Bubble-Era Tokyo, A Software Odyssey, 1968-1993**

By John A. Siniscal

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# My Quarter Century in Asia

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From War-Torn Saigon  
To Bubble-Era Tokyo,  
A Software Odyssey  
1968-1993.

A memoir by John A. Siniscal

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## **IN MEMORIAM**

In memory of the young men of our generation who had their lives cut short, permanently damaged, or otherwise disrupted by the Vietnam War, especially those who faced the enemy in the skies and on the front lines of combat. May your sacrifices not be soon forgotten.

## **DISCLAIMER**

This work depicts actual people, places, and events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits.

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## PROLOGUE

In early 1968, at age 25, I left the United States on a flight to Vietnam and didn't return to live in the US mainland until 25 years later, in early 1993. In between, I lived and worked in Vietnam, Hawaii, Singapore, Australia, and Japan and traveled extensively in other parts of Asia Pacific. This is a collection of my thoughts and memories during that important period of my life.

It wasn't meant to be that way. In the fall of 1966, I was in the second and final year of my MBA program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in Philadelphia, after having spent the summer working in New York as a financial analyst for a multinational firm. My MBA major was finance and I was doing well in all the accounting and corporate finance courses. As well, my undergraduate degree from Benedictine College in Kansas was in mathematics. My goal and dream was to join a Wall Street investment banking firm upon graduation the following May and begin a long and prosperous career in the field of corporate finance. But as fate would determine, it didn't turn out that way.

By 1966, the war in Vietnam was turning uglier and the Johnson administration decided to double down by significantly increasing the number of US troops on the ground, reaching half a million men within the next few years. To fill those troop targets, the government turned to the military draft via the Selective Service System (SSS), which all US males had to register with at age 18. Tens of thousands of young men throughout the country started receiving draft notices that required them to join the army and serve a 2-year term including 13 months in

Vietnam. At that time, full-time students were exempt from the draft, so I was safe until after my graduation.

In early 1967, I started interviewing with potential employers. All the top Wall St firms came to Penn's campus to meet with prospective employees, as Wharton had the reputation of being the top graduate school for finance and accounting talent. Besides my good grades, I had the added advantage of having been elected the student class president for my final year, so I was confident in being able to find a choice job with one of the top-tier firms. However, it wasn't meant to be. In interviews with Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and others, I was bluntly told that due to my likely being drafted by the army upon graduation, they would not hire me until my military service was completed. This short-term attitude surprised and disappointed me, but apparently was typical of Wall Street firms.

However, other large companies were more forward-looking in their hiring practices and were willing to take on new hires even if there was a risk of losing them to the draft. One of these was IBM, who I interviewed with on campus at that time. I told them of my interest in working for IBM if they had openings in their New York City offices, and they made arrangements for me to visit their IBM Banking and Finance office in lower Manhattan. One day in late Spring, I took the train to NYC and met with the managers of the IBM office located on Lower Broadway St in the Wall St area. They gave me a programming aptitude test which I scored well on with my math background and offered me an entry-level position as a Systems Engineer which would include 3 months of intensive computer software training. When I discussed my draft status, they said they would welcome me back afterward should I need to depart for military service – it didn't seem to concern them like the other Wall St firms. I accepted their offer and moved to New York at the end of May to start work with IBM on June 1, 1967.



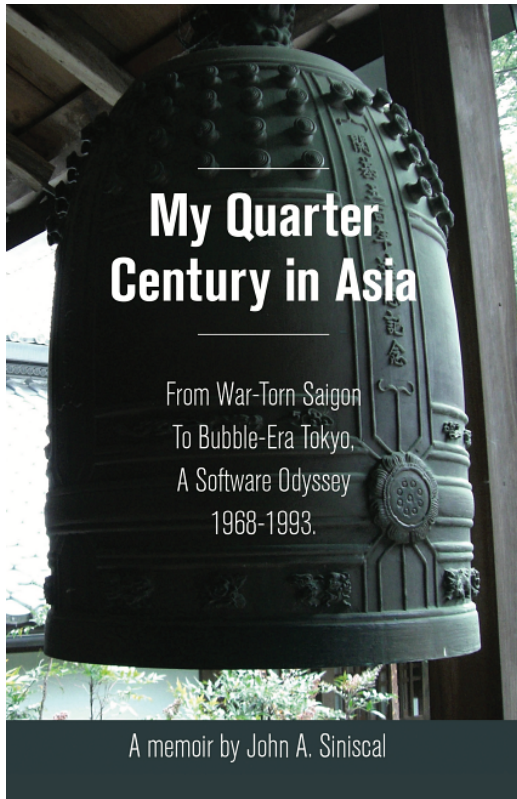
For housing, I was fortunate to be able to share an apartment in a brownstone townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side (East 74<sup>th</sup> St.) with a friend from school, and I commuted daily on the Lexington subway line to Wall St for my job with IBM. The first few months with IBM were filled with training courses where I learned to program in IBM Assembler, COBOL, Fortran and RPG, as well as learning the internals of the IBM mainframe operating systems, OS and DOS. After a few months, I was sent out on assignments to support the IBM customers which included some of the Wall St firms that earlier had declined to hire me due to my draft status. My favorite customer at this time was a new startup brokerage firm called Donaldson Lufkin & Jenrette, or DLJ for short, which purchased a new IBM mainframe to support their trading activities and needed to set up the back-office systems these firms relied on for transaction processing. It was my main assignment, and as they were new and competing against the established brokerage firms, they were more aggressive and flexible and relied heavily on IBM to support their IT systems.

Unfortunately, in September of 1967, the SSS reclassified my draft status from student deferment to ready for active duty or 1-A. This meant I was likely to get drafted within a few months. But first, the SSS had to schedule me for a pre-induction physical exam to determine if I was fit for service. I had no health problems and knew I would pass this easily, which would be quickly followed by a legally binding draft notice. I managed to reschedule my physical exam several times using excuses such as schedule conflicts which bought me several months while I tried to decide what to do. My older brother was already in the Air Force as a lieutenant, having done a ROTC program in college. He was stationed at an AF base in Utah, and he encouraged me to sign up for the Officer Training Course (OTC) of the Air Force, which was open to college graduates and turned recruits into junior officers in four months but then required 4 years of active duty to follow. Therefore, the choice was as follows: wait to get drafted and do 2 years of service as an enlisted man in the Army, including 13 high-risk months in Vietnam, or join the

Air Force and serve as an officer for 4+ years, and if sent to Vietnam, less likely to be in a frontline combat role. Four years was a big commitment to take out of my young life when I was ready and anxious to begin my working career, but it was the better of the two alternatives and was what I decided to do.

I planned to join the Air Force OTC program in January 1968 and hoped that I could get an assignment that involved using and supporting AF computer systems, and then decide after my release whether to return to IBM or go back to pursuing my investment banking career dream. Finally, in mid-November, I met with my IBM boss and explained my situation, and told him I would need to wrap up my assignments by year-end. He seemed to understand and was supportive. Then, about a week later, he called me into his office to tell me that IBM had set up an office in Saigon, Vietnam, to support the US military's use of IBM computers in-country, and they were looking for young, unmarried male systems engineers to staff the office. If I was interested, he would set up an interview with the hiring manager, Earl Ness, who was due to be in NYC later that week. Was I interested? You bet I was! This was way better than the other alternatives and offered protection from the draft via what was called a 'critical skills' draft deferment.

I finally got to meet the IBM hiring manager on a Friday afternoon, and after learning more about the job location and requirements, I confirmed my strong interest. He said I would need to be ready to move quickly to Washington DC for training on the military systems to be supported, and would then go to Vietnam early the following year. On the following Monday, I was informed I had been selected for the post, along with about 10 others, and about a week later I left NYC for Arlington, VA to begin training on the IBM mainframes and software used by the military in Vietnam. My adventure in Asia was about to start.



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