

A blue-collar kid's journey to the Vietnam War and back

# 21 MONTHS, 24 DAYS



Richard Udden

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24 Days**

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**By**

**Richard Udden**

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*To Teresa, Christina and Jeremy*

*and*

*To the men who served with*

*“Ace High”*

*2/12 Battalion*

*1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division*

*in Vietnam - 1970*

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# Acknowledgements

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Writing this book was a two-steps-forward, one-step-back marathon for me. Without the help of many people, I never would have made it.

My wife Teresa was with me the whole way, cheering from the sidelines and offering advice. I never could have come this far without her support and encouragement.

Family and friends have read some or all of the manuscript and provided their thoughts. My son Jeremy said I had a *voice*. Hearing that gave me encouragement to keep going.

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Fred Freitas, a history teacher, author, and neighbor, marked up a proof of the book. He identified grammar issues and awkward writing. He also suggested ways to improve the flow of the story.

Rob George, Doyle Miller and Jim Branch, all Vietnam infantry veterans, read the manuscript. Their feedback gave me confidence that I have not said anything out-of-line or missed something important.

Finally, Amy Montemerlo, an educator in English and journalism, reviewed a final draft and found grammar and clarity issues still hidden in the text.

I am grateful to all. And that includes CreateSpace for providing a place where a new author can come to make a dream come true.

# Introduction

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In the late sixties, draft boards gathered young men for the Vietnam War. High school kids not bound for college had to enlist or wait for a draft notice. The burden fell on the children of blue-collar families because college was not an easy option for them. Instead of starting a career, they had their lives put on hold.

I was one of those kids. Threatened by the draft, I enlisted in the Army. I expected an easy two years working in a trade. Instead, they assigned me to the infantry and sent me to Vietnam. There in the jungle, I hunted and fought the Vietcong along with other young kids. I was wounded by shrapnel from a booby-trap when my company was sent to Cambodia to disrupt enemy supply lines. All of this happened before my twenty-first birthday. A year later, the Army discharged me and sent me home. I did my best to forget about the Army.

So why have I written this book now? Well, it began as a way to organize and caption the pictures I brought back with me. I did not want to leave my kids with a bunch of pictures and no explanation for them. Then, I met a fellow Vietnam vet who had written his own book. He planted a seed in me. I was off and running before I knew it. I did not want to write one of those typical war stories about battles won and lost. After all, I took my pictures between firefights, not during them. So instead, this book focuses on what it felt like to pass through basic training, infantry training then on to Vietnam and Cambodia. I wrote about the day-to-day grind of the job between firefights including combat assaults, jungle patrols, and pulling guard on a firebase. I wrote about lighter moments on a firebase. Late in the day, when the sun disappeared, we sat in a circle and passed around a joint while listening to music on a cassette deck. There were so many unique experiences there; I had to get them all down on paper.

I made two chance decisions in the Army that contributed heavily to this book. First, every three days or so, I sent a letter home to my family. The letters focused on things like where I was, the living conditions and the weather. I tried to avoid writing about anything that may worry them. My Mom saved those letters and gave them back to me years later when she discovered them in a bureau drawer. Without those letters, there is no way I

could have pulled together the *what, where, and when* in such detail.

Second, I do not know why, but I decided to use slide film instead of pictures in my Kodak Instamatic camera. Using slide film was a great decision. When I finished a roll, I dropped it in the mailbag for shipment to Kodak. Kodak did the processing, then mailed the slides home. I took over two-hundred slides while in Vietnam and Cambodia. Those slides have held up unbelievably well over the years. If I had taken pictures, they would be curled, dog-eared and faded. By scanning the slides, I used many of them in this book as a visual way to tell the story and make it more real. If you want to see the pictures in color, visit my website at [www.21months24days.com](http://www.21months24days.com).

Well, I hope I have sparked an interest and you have a few questions for me. I guarantee you will find the answers to those questions by reading on. If you do not find an answer, email me at [reudden@gmail.com](mailto:reudden@gmail.com) with your question or comment. I have tried my best to give you an honest and complete account of what it felt like to serve in the infantry in Vietnam. You will not find any *fish stories* here. Those I served with will attest to it.

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# Chapter1-Leading Up

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I did not choose to serve in the Army Infantry; the infantry chose me. Something in my childhood I guess was attractive to them. Being the oldest in a poor, blue-collar family of six kids may have had something to do with it. It forced me to fend for myself at an early age. I think the infantry liked recruits who had the confidence to stand alone when necessary.

Let me tell you a bit about my brothers and sisters. From the youngest up, my brother, Andy, was in the second grade when I joined the Army. Andy had it the easiest, at least back when I lived at home. Why is it that the oldest in a large family always seems to have it the toughest and the youngest have it the easiest?

Next up from Andy was my brother Jackie. He was in the seventh grade. Every family had a favorite and he became the favorite in my Dad's eyes. He helped my Dad around the house, though I suspect he did it because he was not old enough to know how to give him a hard time.

My two sisters, Peggy and Sara, came next. Peggy was a freshman and Sara a sophomore in high school. On Sunday mornings, I paid the first one that came down to the kitchen in the morning to make me eggs over-easy for breakfast. Of course, the eggs had to be perfect with the whites fully cooked and the yolks runny. I suspected that they both stayed in bed longer than necessary to avoid me. Most Sundays, I sat there in the kitchen and waited them out.

I was closest to my brother David who is a year younger than me. We slept in the same room upstairs. We spent much of our playtime in the field out back playing war and baseball. We stayed out until the streetlights came on, when my Mom yelled out the back door for us to come in.

Playing war out in the backfield was a large part of our growing up. Around the 4th of July we used firecrackers as if they were bombs. One time out back, the neighborhood gang got the idea to create a larger explosion than firecrackers could deliver. We used a half-gallon can of shellac we found in a railroad car close to home. Our next-door neighbor's father, Big Fred, burned trash in a bonfire in the empty lot between our houses. Someone came up with the idea to throw the can of shellac into Big Fred's bonfire. In it went, then we waited and waited some more. Finally, when little Freddy,

Big Fred's son, started crawling toward the fire to see what happened, the can of shellac exploded. An enormous, black, billowing mushroom cloud rolled into the sky. At the same time, the bonfire scattered into the tall, dry grass that surrounded the area. Big Fred, hearing the explosion, came out then grabbed his hose to put out the fire. A smoke ring from the explosion hung high in the sky for what seemed to be the longest time. My mother and father heard about it from Big Fred.

As Dave and I grew older, Dad bought us a BB gun. He set up a shooting range for us in the basement. When shooting in the basement became boring, we shot sometimes from our bedroom window upstairs. One December, we slid open the window and shot at the Christmas lights on Big Fred's house next door. It was a difficult shot but we had fun trying. When we were lucky enough to hit a light, we heard a pop, and saw the light flash with a burst of sparks before going dark. In all the time, we had the BB gun; we never hurt ourselves with it. Never shoot an eye out, my mother would say.

Another time, Dave was playing around with small CO<sub>2</sub> capsules. They looked like little bombs. Adults used them to make seltzer water and kids used them to accelerate small toy racecars. He was experimenting with stuffing one with match heads to see if it would explode. I joined him in the fun. To make a long story short, Dave ended up at Dr. Allen's office because the capsule exploded and hit him in the back. Lucky he was not seriously injured.

Yes, we acted wild at times and it got us in trouble with Mom and Dad. Punishment for minor infractions was having us do the dishes or not letting us go out and play. They graduated to whacking us with a stick or my Dad's belt. Finally, one day Mom threatened to send us to reform school if we did not stop. She had us pack our clothes into brown paper bags. We stood by the door begging and crying, "Please don't send us to reform school!" She finally relented. From then on, we did a better job at hiding them from our craziness.

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As far back as I can remember, my Dad worked as a tool keeper for a local valve manufacturing company. Tool keeper was a job that barely paid the bills. I am sure he would rather have had a much better job, but he never had the chance to go to college.

During World War II, Dad left high school to join the Army for four

years. While in the Army, he drove a truck, hauling supplies in France and Germany. Driving a truck was not the career he had hoped to return to civilian life with. So he planned to go back to school when the war ended. When he returned from the war however, his family was not doing well financially. He had no choice but to go to work to help support his parents, two sisters, and younger brother.

In contrast, his brother finished high school, and then joined the Navy. Once discharged, he attended college while my Dad continued working to support the family. His brother ended up an engineer while my Dad never got out of those low-paying jobs. He never did accept it. Bitterness ultimately coated whatever happiness he had over the years.

What Dave and I saw in my Dad while growing up was a man who was never happy. He could barely force out a smile. Most of the time, he was irritated with us about something. Some of that irritation of his existed because we were on the opposite end of most things with him. He could not accept us as we were. We liked rock and roll and he liked listening to Christian hymns. My Mom brought us up as Lutherans while he remained the lone Baptist in the family. Dave wanted to play the drums and Dad thought that only drug addicts played them.

So in return, when he tried to get us to sit and watch TV evangelists on Sunday nights, we found all kinds of reasons to avoid it. When he wanted us to go out with him in his boat, we steered clear of it whenever we could. If he wanted to be aggravated with us, then we were not about to be agreeable with him.

We did do things with Dad when we were younger. One reason I guess was he had more power over us then. To be fair, he was a better dad then. At Christmas, he made things for Dave and I that always amazed us. One Christmas he built us a train set mounted on an enormous table complete with lit-up buildings. My Uncle Norm painted a skyline on the cellar wall behind the set. Things like that made us appreciate him. But he changed over time for some reason and so did we. In high school, our newfound sense of independence clashed with him. He had a one-way view of the world and if we did not agree with it, we were wrong. He wanted us to conform to his world and it was not happening anymore. Lucky for us, he gave up and latched instead onto my younger brother Jackie. Jackie had not yet reached the independence phase of his young life.

My dad's father (my grandfather) was not the friendliest person in the

world either. At least I do not remember him spoiling us when we were young. Maybe that was where my dad's personality stemmed from. Maybe he was a chip off the old block. No matter, Dave and I felt his negative presence, and it drove us out of the house before our time.

It was years later when I sensed he was trying to change, trying to be more accepting, more understanding, and more human. I never did let him know that I noticed. It tugged at me to tell him. Maybe too many painful years had gone by to give him a second chance. I was neutral with him in later years. But he never got more than that.

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My mom worked as a registered nurse when she married Dad. Though she had the six of us, she continued to work nights while raising us. Even with working part time, she always found a way to be there for us. Mom was the peacemaker in the house. My dad would get aggravated and she calmed the waters. She also ran the house, paying the bills, cooking the food, cleaning, and helping us with homework. In contrast, my dad came home from work, disappeared into his workshop downstairs, and tinkered. If you asked any of us back then, "Where's your Dad?" you would hear, "Down in the shop." He only came upstairs when he needed something. Usually it was coffee. He would sit at the kitchen table, rattle his empty coffee cup on the tabletop, and my mom came running to fill it. No matter how much my father pushed her to wait on him; I never saw her do anything but respond. Some said she was a fool, waiting on him like that. I think she did simply because she loved a part of him that I had never met.

Later in life, I realized that in addition to being my mom and a nurse, she was an angel. My wife Teresa opened my eyes to when she told me how special she was. It was apparent when I saw how our kids were attracted to her. They loved her. In fact, everyone loved her. Like an angel, she was always in the background trying to make everyone else the important one. She would hide behind her hands if someone tried to catch her in a picture. Loving, sweet, and humble are words I would use to describe her. She never seemed to have a bad thing to say about anyone.

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With six kids, my parents did not have money to spare. That lack of money drove me at an early age to make my own money. The quarter-a-month allowance my mom started me on did not cut it.

I began work as a young kid shoveling snow in the winter and cutting

lawns in the summer. My mom did not like it, but I also shined shoes in barrooms for a quarter a shine. As I grew older, I cleaned washing machines for two hours a day, six days a week at the local laundromat. I also worked for a dry-cleaning business. I moved onto a five-and-dime store stocking shelves and ringing up sales at the register. From the five-and-dime store, I worked at a Caddy dealership, changing oil and jockeying around cars.

When I graduated from high school in June of 1967, I had grown into an independent, seventeen-year-old, still living at home but not liking it much because of my dad. I had made my own way in the world, earning my own money and not taking a dime from my parents.

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I was close to eighteen and eighteen-year-olds had to register for the draft as they do today. Registering for the draft in 1967 was a concern. The U.S. Government was drafting eighteen-olds into the Army or Marines if classified 1-A or available for military service. Once drafted, they sent most of those young men to Vietnam.

No one wanted to go to Vietnam. Patriotism during World War II created an Army that young men wanted to join. There was hate for Hitler in Germany and the Emperor in Japan. Young men wanted to help rid the country of these enemies. For me and most other kids in the late sixties however, there was no nationalistic reason enticing us to join. A Vietnam threat was not readily apparent. Yet we were there and Vietnam was on the news every evening. Walter Cronkite and Huntley-Brinkley provided a running update of those killed and wounded. If drafted, I could end up a Marine. I knew I did not want any part of the Marines in Vietnam.

Well, the draft was not a threat when I graduated from high school in 1967. The reason was I had made plans to continue with school. In response, when I registered for the draft that September, the local draft board classified me 2-S, which was a student deferment.

I had never been on a path to go to college mind you while in high school. My parents never encouraged me to go to college, and I never pushed it myself. My dad did encourage me though to become a machinist. They had many machinists where he worked. He would have liked it if I worked some day in the same place he did. I did not have any better ideas, so I signed up to attend a two-year machinist-training program following high school.

A local vocational school in the next town offered the program. School

could not have been better. I dressed in work clothes every day because most of our time was spent in the shop. No more shirt and tie like high school. Classroom work always had something to do with the machinist trade, so I never got bored.

I quit the Caddy dealer and made even better money managing jobs for a caterer. At the start of my second year of school, I left the caterer and started to work part-time in a small machine shop. I worked for a week, and then I attended school for a week. Money rolled in. I had owned a number of automobiles since my senior year in high school. I sold my latest, a Volvo, and bought a better car, a red, 1964 Chevy convertible. As the school year approached spring of 1969, I realized that the draft and Vietnam would soon become an issue again.

To avoid the Marines, I began to investigate signing up with one of the other services. If I joined, one way or the other, I wanted it on my terms. First, I looked quite seriously at joining the Air National Guard for six years. The commitment was one weekend a month and two weeks every year following basic training. It looked good until I learned I could not pass a flight physical due to high blood sugar levels. Over the years since then, by the way, my blood sugar has never been an issue. Oh well. The Air National Guard would not work for me.

I did not want to commit full time for three years with the Army or four years with the Air Force or Navy. I thought about the Army National Guard for six years but decided against it. Six years with the Air National Guard would have been okay, but six years in the Army turned me off. Besides, living at home was wearing thin with my dad, and I wanted to get out of the house.

Then I thought of the idea of joining the Army for two years. I do not know where the idea for two years came from. Maybe the local Army recruiter planted the seed in my head. Not many joined the Army for two years. Most signed up for three. If I signed up for three years, the Army guaranteed I could have a job of my choice. To get that job however, I had to attend a training school and finish with passing grades. If I did that, they would assign me somewhere in the world to perform the job. Three years though, was a long time. Signing up for two years seemed to have its advantages. I would be RA (Regular Army) instead of a Draftee. I thought as an RA, the Army might treat me better when considering job placement. I hoped as an RA, the Army would take more notice of my skilled training as a

machinist. It was logical that the Army would utilize me as a machinist somewhere. It made sense.

I asked my parents what they thought about my joining the Army. My dad had no problem with it. He had joined the Army and so to him, it was like starting a tradition in the family. My mom was not encouraging. Like any mom, she was not exactly enthusiastic about my leaving home for the Army. However, the thought of hanging around and waiting for the inevitable did not appeal to me. I wanted to get away, go out and do something now.

It took me a while, but in mid spring, I finally decided to join the Army for two years. The day for induction was set for August 11th, a few months after I graduated from vocational school. What else could I do? I did not want to wait and see what happened with the draft.

My best friend did not have to deal with the draft in the same way I did. He and I came from the same high school, and we both attended the machine shop program. We both started to work in the same machine shop. But his father had a heart attack. So he was classified 3-A which meant he had a permanent deferment for extreme hardship. His mom needed him at home to support her and the government agreed.

He and I graduated in June 1969 with a certificate in Machine Shop Technology. We continued to work at the machine shop after graduation. With induction into the Army getting ever closer for me, I finally quit and started getting ready to leave.

The workers at the shop gave me a nice going away party. I sold my Chevy. I would have liked to leave it waiting in my parent's driveway until I returned. I knew however, that a convertible would not hold up well through a couple of winters outside.

On Sunday August 10, 1969, the day before I left for the Army, my parents had the relatives over to wish me well. It felt good to see them all. That night, I lay in bed and realized that tomorrow night I would be sleeping in a different bed somewhere, as a member of the U.S. Army. My best friend would stay home. It was the beginning of the end of our close friendship.

## Chapter 2-First Day

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First thing Monday morning, August 11, 1969, my Mom drove me to the Post Office downtown. The Army recruiter's office was there on the second floor. The recruiter was nice enough to give me a ride to the Boston Army Base for induction. I did not realize it then, but he was not just being nice. Like any good salesman, he made sure the product arrived on time.

As I began my journey with the U.S. Army, much was happening in the world. The United States landed astronauts on the moon. France, the U.S., and the Soviet Union were competing to see who could test the largest atomic bomb. Race riots related to the Martin Luther King assassination were erupting everywhere. Woodstock would soon begin at Max Yasgur's farm in upstate New York. The Beatles were about to release *Abbey Road*. And demonstrations to end the Vietnam War were in full swing.

In fact, demonstrations against the Vietnam War took place at the entrance to the Army Base all of the time. If you attended any of the colleges in Boston or lived in Cambridge, you were fully aware of protests against the war. Innocent kids like me from the suburbs however, had no clue. Demonstrators marched in front of the Army Base and blocked recruits from entering. They would even infiltrate the place and cause problems inside. The demonstrators were generally peaceful, no explosions or anything, but they definitely upset the process at times. Well, as I passed through the gate, I did not notice anyone causing trouble.

The Boston Army Base was an enormous building built on a pier in South Boston. I later learned that it opened in 1920 and closed in 1974. It warehoused military goods in World War II. It was later when they began to use the facility to process new recruits for Vietnam. The building still stands. It provides space for various companies including the Black Falcon Cruise Terminal. Passengers board cruise ships there for Bermuda and elsewhere.

Walking into that building, I looked up in awe. It was like an airport hanger with wide expanses and a ceiling that seemed to rise forever. The place bustled with professionals processing new recruits. The sights and sounds were all new to me. It made me uneasy. Already I felt like turning around and walking back out the door, but I did not. Instead, I allowed those

in charge to herd me to the starting point of the check-in process.

One step at a time we processed through the building. There were medical exams including a vision test, hearing test, a height and weight check, and urinalysis. All kinds of paperwork had to be completed. They interviewed me to make sure I was morally acceptable. Then we took an aptitude test. Between each step, we had to hurry up and wait, standing in long lines or sitting on hard benches.

The purpose of the aptitude test was to find out what jobs we were most qualified for in the Army. Armed with that information and their needs, the Army assigned us to a job training school after basic training. If I had signed up for three years instead of two, they would have guaranteed I could attend a school of my choice. Now they would choose a school for me based on aptitude.

I wish at the time I had put more thought into how to answer the questions on that aptitude test. It would have been a good idea if I had a mentor who might have steered me a little differently. Without a mentor to advise me, I answered the questions as honestly as I could. I did not know any other way; I was still wet behind the ears. When the Army asked if I liked working outdoors, if I liked sports, if I was competitive, and if I liked to fish or hunt, I said yes, yes, yes, and yes again. In hindsight, I might have done a better job at emphasizing my technical capability and deemphasizing my interest in hunting.

The day was long, but they treated us well. Staffers fed us lunch, then supper, and it was good food. By early evening, I learned I had successfully passed the physical. They seemed happy with my aptitude test. I was morally acceptable. I was now into final discussions about the enlistment contract. It was getting serious. Then there were final interviews, signing of the enlistment contract, and fingerprinting. It all came to a crescendo when we all stood up to take the Oath of Enlistment.

Now, they allow families to come and watch someone take the Oath of Enlistment. Also, they allow someone to have their picture taken with the military officer who administers the oath. Then, there was none of that. We were on our own. The officer asked us to raise our right hands and repeat after him the oath. It was similar to what the president says when sworn in. Taking that oath was inspiring. At the time, it was the most important thing that ever happened to me. Pride replaced the uneasiness I felt earlier in the day. I began to have a good feeling about my decision to join.

With the oath out of the way, we received our travel orders and assignment. I learned they were sending me to Fort Dix in New Jersey for basic training. I would leave by bus that evening. The orders did not address job training, so I had no idea where the aptitude test I took earlier would lead me.

Then, standing there, pumped up and ready to go, a sergeant gave an order that let some air out of the tires. Now that the Army owned us and we could not walk away, they gave out brooms. They asked a bunch of us to sweep the area we had inhabited all day. A dirty trick, I thought. When we finished, the busses were ready and waiting to take us on a six-hour drive to Fort Dix.

Sitting on the bus waiting to leave, I thought about how busy the day had been so far. I had been here going nonstop it seemed for twelve hours. I could not remember a longer or busier day. It was tough going. I thought the bus ride would be a welcome relief. Little did I know that this day was far from over and days to come would be much longer and tougher.

# Chapter 3-Basic Training

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Guards waved us through the front gate of Fort Dix following a five-hour drive from Boston to New Jersey. We passed a statue of a U.S. infantry soldier called the *Ultimate Weapon*, and then drove on through the fort. We finally arrived at the Reception Center at around 11 p.m.

I had not slept on the bus ride, so I was dead tired. The day so far had been like a never-ending roller coaster. Though tired, I was excited. I did not know what would happen next. I expected we would get off the bus, find a bed somewhere, and get some sleep. After all, they pushed hard enough. Well, it did not work out that way.

Army personnel from the Reception Center met us at the bus. They wore these heavily starched green uniforms with their name stitched in over the shirt pocket. All of them were clean-shaven and their hair neatly trimmed. They looked wide-awake, relaxed, sure of themselves and in control. The contrast between them and us was readily apparent. We were a bunch of unconventional misfits from an Army perspective. We had long hair and some of us wore bell-bottom Levis.

One of them stepped on board our bus. He said they would be issuing us a set of Army uniforms then asked us to get off the bus and line up in the parking lot. Once everyone was off the bus, he arranged us in alphabetical order before marching us toward the warehouse area. Having a last name that begins with the letter U, I brought up the rear. Those in front of me shuffled along like a semi-controlled mob.

Entering the warehouse, the smell in there struck me immediately. You can get an idea of the smell if you walk into a real Army Navy Store. The odor of uniforms caught my attention. Maybe they had some form of moth protection or the combination of new clothes smell with the smell of new leather boots. The rich, earthy smell of quality and newness permeated the place.

Warehouse help were ready for us, even at that late hour. Walking from station to station, we slowly and purposely received a full issue of military uniforms. For work, fitters gave us four sets of green fatigues, one fatigue baseball cap, and two pairs of leather work boots. For dress, we received three sets of khakis, a green cap, dress greens, dress cap, dress shirts, tie, and

dress shoes. Then they issued socks, underwear, belts, insignias and a duffel bag. In a sewing area, civilian workers sewed a patch with my last name on the front of my fatigue shirts. A label machine cut a black, phenolic nametag with white lettering for use with the khakis and dress greens. Finally, they stenciled our name on a duffel bag. Before we left, we had to make sure that everything fit because returning uniforms later was impossible.

We walked out of there an hour and a half later wearing Army fatigues and boots for the first time. We jammed the rest of the clothes into the duffel bag. Now at least we all looked the same except for the hair, mustaches, and beards.

Then we moved on to another warehouse for sheets and blankets. When we had everything we needed, the soldier in charge marched us in the best way we knew how to our temporary barracks.

I had never been in Army barracks before. Each floor had a large room where about twenty guys could sleep. The room had two rows of twin beds with an aisle down the center. Beds were about four feet apart. At the head of each bed stood an open closet where leaders told us to hang our dress uniforms and fatigues. We stored underwear, socks, and the rest of our clothes in the footlocker located at the foot of the bed.

At one end of the sleeping area was the latrine or bathroom that served everyone on that floor. At the other end were a few private rooms. Those rooms were for the corporals and sergeants who were responsible for us. I could see that there was nothing private about where we slept.

Finally, after twenty hours or so, they said to pick a bunk and get some sleep. That was all I needed to hear. I grabbed a bunk, made the bed in the best way I knew how and hit the sack. It was about 2 a.m.

Since we had got to bed so late, the next morning they let us sleep in. One of the Sergeants in charge roused us out of bed about 9 a.m., and then gave us about half an hour to shower, shave, shit, and brush our teeth. Then they marched us to the mess hall for breakfast. The term mess hall was a new one for me. Where did that name come from? I later learned the name mess has French and Latin roots and means literally, a course of a meal put on the table. Well, eating at the mess hall was my first experience with the Army way.

Lining up to get into the mess hall was our first challenge. The Army had painted dots on the walkway leading to the entrance. Each dot was about three feet apart. Everyone had to stand on his own dot as we waited to go in.

When the person at the front of the line stepped into the mess hall to sign in, everyone in line behind him moved up a dot. While standing on a dot, I could not talk to the person ahead of me or behind me. If a recruit was caught talking, the sergeant immediately moved him to the back of the line. If he spoke again, the sergeant assumed he was not hungry, threw him out of the line entirely, and he was told to return when lunch was served.

Once signed into the mess hall, we quickly grabbed our trays, stepped to the chow line, and then held out the tray while servers ladled on food. Then we sat, ate, stood up, returned the tray, and moved out. Our leader told us we could not talk while in the mess hall. If someone spoke while eating, the sergeant assumed he had finished eating, and then told him to get up and leave. At the time, we thought this was bullshit harassment. What we did not realize was that our training had started. Right away, they started teaching us to conform. And if one of the recruits could not conform, the Army released him back to the civilian world quietly and with little fanfare.

I thought we were in basic training, but we were not. They told us that Basic would not start until Monday of the next week. We were in reception and would stay there for the next six days. Though we were not in basic, our sergeant fully intended to keep us busy training. They focused more on acclimating us to the Army way. Well, it was a beginning. We learned a smattering of skills like how to make a bed, how to wear our uniform, and how to march. Mainly, we learned that we must do exactly what they told us to do, without argument.

Mentally, that week was one of the worst weeks of my life, at least in a relative sense. Army life for me would get much worse in the future, but at the time, it was plain horrible. I felt like I was in a prison with guards focused on harassment and no way to escape. All I could see in front of me was one year, eleven months and twenty-nine days before I get out. What have I done to myself? I regretted my decision to go in. How could I have been so stupid? All I wanted was to escape. Homesickness made me miserable, but they would not let us call home. If only I had spent some time learning about Army life before I signed. I would have found a way to exist in the same house with my Dad.

What saved me that first week was my first Army haircut. One minute, I had hair like the Beatles. The next minute, I had skinned sides and top. Barbers used electric clippers like a lawn mower. From the front of my head, they mowed straight back over the top, taking everything down to the skin in

one swipe. From the side and back of my neck, they mowed upward to the top of my head. In less than a minute, the barber left nothing behind but a bald head. Hair from the slaughter covered the floor. After getting that haircut, I threw in the towel and realized I could not leave. At least not until my hair grew back.

Somehow, the week passed by and Sunday finally arrived. We packed our uniforms back into the duffel bag, piled into buses, and left the Reception Center. I was happy to leave the place behind and move on. I knew that things would only get better from here.

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It was a short drive to the barracks where we would live during basic training. Looking out the window of the bus, I could see a line-up of drill sergeants waiting for us in the parking lot. They are the men that take an undisciplined, longhaired, punk kid and in eight short weeks, change him into a functioning soldier in the US Army. It was hard to believe that they could accomplish it. It seemed impossible until I met my first drill sergeant.

Standing there, those drill sergeants all seemed so perfect. They had perfectly fitting shirts and pants with perfect creases starched in. They had perfectly shined boots that glistened in the sun. A perfect broad brimmed hat with a peak on top sat squarely and yes, perfectly on their head. Their chests were decorated with a mass of ribbons that represented who knows what. Their brass belt buckles shined like a mirror. Ray Ban sunglasses hid any sense of warmth or amusement that may have been there in their eyes. If there was ever an image in my mind of the perfect soldier, it was those drill sergeants.

One of them walked over to the open door of the bus, stepped up the stairs, stared down at us as we cowered in our seats and barked, "GET OFF THE BUS, RUN TO THE FRONT OF THE BARRACKS AND LINE UP!" Everyone on the bus was scared shitless. We piled off the bus dragging our duffel bags along behind us or carrying them in front of us in a bear hug. As we ran, a few tripped over their duffel bags and fell. Others had their duffel bags open up while running and clothes scattered over the parking lot. Most of us, thank God, made it with everything intact. Once lined up, he read us the riot act. "REFER TO ME AS DRILL SERGEANT, NOT SIR. I WORK FOR A LIVING." "DO IT MY WAY, THE ARMY WAY." "YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH ANY OF THIS, BOY?" "GIVE ME TWENTY FIVE PUSH-UPS!"

With that introduction to our friendly drill sergeants, basic training began and continued for the next eight weeks. Every day we got up at 5a.m.. By 5:30 a.m., we were outside, in formation, at attention, bed made, showered, shaved, teeth brushed and wearing the correct uniform.

While standing there at attention, the drill sergeant walked down the line, looked at everyone, and asked questions along the way. It was not enough to wear the correct uniform. Everything must be tucked in just so. The bill of my baseball cap must be two fingers from my nose. I must align the left edge of my brass belt buckle with my belly button. I could not have anything out of place or answer a question in the wrong way. The barracks had to be in perfect shape. If something was amiss, no matter who caused the problem, everyone paid for it with pushups. I learned quickly that not only did I have to watch out for myself, but I also had to watch out for my buddies as well.

From inspection, we moved on to calisthenics and running. There were jumping jacks, pushups, sit-ups, high jumping, squat bends and pull-ups. The Army worked every part of my body until I had worked up a good sweat. A one and a half mile run followed calisthenics. Out there on the track, recruits threw up, but the drill sergeants drove them on anyway. They loved to yell at people who threw up or ran too slow.

From the track, we marched to breakfast. Trying to get through breakfast in basic training was much worse than the week before. We had to march to the mess hall, form a line, and then stand, single file, at parade rest. Every time the line moved, we came to attention, marched a step or two forward, came to attention again, and then returned to parade rest. Over and over, it was parade rest to attention, march forward, back to attention, and then back to parade rest. Once signed in, we had to hurry up and get our food and quickly eat. Other than stuffing food in our mouth, we had to keep our mouth shut while eating. Once we ate everything on the tray, it was back out the mess hall door.

Training followed breakfast. We had classes, then marching drill, then more classes. Learning continued all day and into the evening until lights out at 9:30 p.m.. The first few days we learned all of the basic tasks we had to know to survive in basic. Footlocker and closet arrangement was a major one. Everyone had a footlocker where we stored most of the small belongings we owned. There was only one way to organize the footlocker. Underwear, boots, shaving gear, and socks all had their special place. It was not enough to put our possessions in the right area. We had to roll our socks

and underwear into a tube shape before setting them in place. Our extra pair of boots had to be perfectly polished. Closets had a specific arrangement as well. Drill sergeants had a specific, left-to-right order for dress greens, khakis, and fatigues.

We had to make our beds every day, the Army way. A drill sergeant had us drag a bed outside so we could all stand around and watch the correct way to make it. The result was perfect hospital corners with blankets pulled tight as a drum. The drill sergeant bounced a quarter on a bed as a test for blanket tightness. If it did not bounce to a certain height, it had to be tighter.

They taught us how to spit shine our boots. To spit shine boots, we applied polish with a cotton ball dampened in water. No shoe brush for buffing was required. I dabbed the damp cotton ball in polish, and then swirled it in small circles on the boot. While swirling, the paste dried, leaving a mirror-like finish.

We learned how to keep the latrine clean. We cleaned toilets, sinks, and mirrors until the fixtures were spotless. Urinals had to be perfectly dry and clean right down to the removal of the last pubic hair. We actually used a toothbrush to clean the grout between the tiles on the latrine floor.

Drill sergeants had us washing, waxing, and buffing barracks floors. There was a trick to using one of those large industrial electric buffers. They had a mind of their own so if I did not concentrate on what I was doing when using one, it would take off and slam into furniture like a bucking bronco. We placed a towel under the buffer so the floor glistened.

Also in those first few days, we made a trip to the PX (military store) to buy things we needed. As an example, we had to have a shaving brush in our footlocker though no one used one anymore. I needed some writing paper. There were certain items we could not buy. Our drill sergeant did not allow us to buy candy or anything sweet at the PX for the first six weeks. If we bought one of these banned items and a drill sergeant found it, they took it from us and everyone paid with push-ups. It was like having a super mom looking over my shoulder in the supermarket and telling me to put the candy back.

Drill sergeants' white gloves inspected the barracks and our personal space on a regular basis. If they found the smallest amount of dirt or the smallest thing out of place, they punished us. If one person did something wrong, everyone was punished. Punishment was usually push-ups, but it also included cleaning the latrine or KP (Kitchen Police) detail in the mess hall.

The good news was that the drill sergeant kept us so busy; we did not have time to think. Homesickness was no longer the most important thing in my life.

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Days in basic training became weeks. Our trainers focused the first few weeks on transitioning us from civilian life to military life. We had classes in Army Military Justice, Army Heritage, Army Customs, and Army Manners. Instructors taught us the rudiments of marching. When marching we carried full field gear including canteen, shovel, pistol belt, helmet, mess kit, ammo pouches, and a bayonet scabbard.

The Army started us early with rifles. We learned how to quickly disassemble then assemble an M14 rifle. It was not enough to learn how to disassemble then assemble the rifle properly. The drill sergeant demanded we do it within a certain time. Rifle use was a major part of basic training. Rifles were such an important part of basic; you would have thought we slept with them. They did not give us ready access to them, though. The drill sergeants kept them under lock and key at the armory. Every time we had a need for a rifle, we had to sign it out. They also doled out a specific numbers of bullets and expected the same number of empty shell casings in return. The Army did not want anyone accidentally killed. So every step in the use of rifles was tightly controlled.

Some of the random things we learned early in basic were how to administer first aid, what to do during an atomic bomb explosion, and how to kill an enemy soldier with a bayonet. Another was military justice. Army military justice was different from civilian law. As an example, they had a punishment called an Article 15. Articles 15s were for middle level offences. To get one, what I did must be worse than a problem with the arrangement of my footlocker, but less than robbery or killing someone. It was all about breaking Army rules. If I was disrespectful to an officer or if I did not follow an order, I could get an Article 15. A commanding officer administered an Article 15. No judge was involved. It was like having your boss punish me. For punishment, he may sentence me to extra duty in the kitchen, take two weeks pay, reduce my rank, or even restrict me to the barracks. It made me realize that I had not joined the boy scouts. No one wanted to get an Article 15. It would be a serious black mark on my record.

Another thing we learned about the Army was the unusual relationship that exists between an enlisted man and an officer. Everyone knows that

officers were the leaders and enlisted men were the doers. Okay, that was not much different from a civilian boss versus subordinate relationship. As an enlisted man though, we had to treat officers like gods. If we passed an officer on the street, we had to salute. Doing that was such a pain in the ass at times that we crossed the street to avoid it. There were hard rules about fraternization with officers. An enlisted man could not have an officer as a friend. We could not sit around with one and bullshit over a beer. Thank goodness, we rarely saw officers during basic training. We spent most of our time with non-commissioned officers (NCO), like the drill sergeants. I learned later in Vietnam that officers had their weaknesses like the rest of us.

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Once I had settled down and accepted my fate, the weeks flew by. We started expanding on many of the skills we learned earlier like marching and rifle training. After all, those basics were the skills that made us soldiers. We also continued learning new skills.

The first time we marched to the rifle range, we learned how to sight in our weapon, the M14 rifle. Instructors taught us how to shoot the M14 from different firing positions like lying down or standing up. While on the rifle range, we experienced eating cold C rations. C rations are canned foods that soldiers first ate in the field during World War II.

You would think that rain would delay a trip to the range. Either that or you would think the drill sergeant would arrange for a bus if it rained. Whom was I kidding? On one of those trips to the rifle range, we had to hike five miles carrying a rifle and full field pack in the pouring rain. When we got there, soaking wet, they had us fire our rifles in the rain. Then we walked and ran back to the barracks in a downpour with that same full field pack and rifle. As you might have guessed, by the end of the day we were soaked to the skin. Our feet swam in the bottom of our boots. That horrible feeling of being sopping wet did not seem to bother the drill sergeants for some reason. Drill sergeants were happy in the rain. The rain did not even seem to affect the sharp creases in their uniform. We may have treated officers like gods, but drill sergeants *were* gods.

Learning to throw a grenade was a big deal in basic. A modern grenade was about the size of a baseball with an outer skin made of sheet metal. Just under the sheet-metal skin was a layer of shrapnel made of serrated steel. The center contained TNT explosive. Screwed into the top was a blasting cap

with a spring-loaded lever and safety pin. Pull the pin and let the lever fly, in three to five seconds the grenade will explode with shrapnel flying in every direction. It was a dangerous little device.

Instructors began with teaching us how to throw a practice hand grenade. Then we threw a *live* grenade. Throwing a live grenade was a risky thing to do. It seemed simple, just pull the pin and throw it. Well, if I made a mistake in that little process, I could kill myself and others close by.

To avoid mistakes that could kill someone, instructors took grenade practice seriously. They pounded into us the steps involved in safely throwing a grenade. Even with all of that practice, when each of us threw a real grenade, experienced help stood by, just in case. For me, throwing the grenade was straightforward. Pull the pin, let the lever fly, heave it over the blast wall, duck down then wait for the explosion. But not everyone had my experience throwing cherry bombs as a kid.

Another new experience was working with and experiencing tear gas. In hindsight, it was more harassment, but you be the judge. We expected tear gas training to be a simple exercise, like throwing a hand grenade. Instructors first taught us how to correctly put on, cinch up, and then breathe in a gas mask. It felt confining breathing in that mask. Then they had us walk into a small building filled with the tear gas. With the mask on, I stood there and breathed. That confining feeling felt welcome in that building, like having scuba gear on while under water. Then one at a time, we had to take off the mask, and answer a few questions like, "Give me your name? What is your rank? What is your serial number?" To add to the fun, instructors mixed up the questions so we could not rehearse the answers in advance. When they were satisfied, an instructor allowed us to walk out the door and take that damn mask off.

You may think that answering a simple question in that room without a gas mask on sounds easy enough. Well, the tear gas made me paranoid without the protection of the mask. What should have been easy, answering a few simple questions, became troublesome without the mask. If we answered any question incorrectly, they had us wait and provide the right answer before leaving the room. While trying to answer those questions, we could not breathe. If someone had trouble answering the questions, eventually he needed air.

I watched a recruit go into a complete coughing fit after finally sucking in a lungful of tear gas. Only then did the instructor lead him out of the

building because he could not see through tears and pain. There was no failure. Those that failed had to go back into that room with a mask on and do it over again until they finally succeeded. I was lucky enough to make it through the first time.

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In early basic training, we focused on transitioning from life as a civilian to life in the military. Then the focus shifted to individual skills like rifle marksmanship and throwing a hand grenade. Then we shifted again to learn how to work and fight as a team.

I never thought about the U.S. Army as a team. In many ways though, it was like a sports team. There were international rules to follow when one country battled another. Politicians, with the help of the military, established the rules at the Geneva Convention. Geneva Convention rules involved fair play. A fifty-caliber machine gun cannot be used to shoot directly at a soldier was an example of one of those rules. When one of them surrenders, the game ends. For centuries, they have called this sport War. When two countries practice war, they call it war games. In Vietnam, the Vietcong and the U.S. played this game for real.

Once we trained in the basic rules of war, we moved on to war tactics. Learning war tactics was similar to playing tackle football. They both involve maneuvers on the field against an opposing force. If successful, we moved forward to reach a goal while minimizing casualties along the way. A stand out difference with football however is when a team loses a football game, they get to play another day. It did not always work out that way in war.

One of the highlights of war tactics training involved completing an infiltration course at night. We crawled on our bellies toward a fictitious enemy, moving under barbed wire, over logs, and down through trenches filled with mud. To slow us down and add to the fun, we crawled with a pack on our back. My rifle rested on my forearms as I slithered forward. To add to the realism, machine guns fired live rounds over our head. At least that was what the drill sergeants told us. Percussion bombs exploded around us when we least expected. The goal was to have us experience what war was like. It was quite a show, as if we were in the middle of a Fourth of July fireworks display.

Related to war tactics training was land navigation training. Classroom training involved learning to use a compass and a map. Navigating from

point A to point B on a map required orienting the map. Map orientation simply meant we positioned the map by aiming the map's north arrow toward true north with a compass. With the map properly oriented, we could plan a route and get there, again using our compass. Once we became proficient using a compass and map, instructors had us do a navigation exercise in the woods. Their goal was to get us lost. Somehow, we found our way to where we needed to be in spite of them.

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Now with everything I have said about basic so far, you probably think we did not have time to do another thing. Not true! We periodically had to work in the kitchens doing KP and even do office cleaning. One night, while cleaning offices, one of the recruits glanced at a report lying there on a desk. It was a company list of trainee names and identified where each person would go to school after basic training. He said he saw my name and thought I was going to Advanced Infantry Training.

I was stunned. I did not believe him of course. He must be mistaken. I fully expected to be a working machinist on some Army post somewhere. Though I did not believe it, a horrible feeling crept into my stomach just the same. I remembered earlier that I had volunteered to go to Vietnam. I wanted to serve as far away as possible so going home would not be tempting. I wanted to see some of the world out there. I thought working as a machinist in Vietnam might be interesting. Could I end up in the infantry in Vietnam? Well, there was nothing for me to do now. I simply had to wait it out and see what happens.

As graduation approached, the drill sergeants began to give us more personnel time. We did not get much time off, especially in the beginning. They had us going morning, noon, and night and even on weekends. Constant work was part of the master plan to break us down and magically transform us from civilian to soldier. Toward the end of basic training though, drill sergeants became more human. They allowed us to buy candy bars. And they gave us the opportunity to go on a weekend leave.

Getting away from Fort Dix had its appeal. New York City was close and many of us had never been there. We could drink at the age of eighteen in New York. So freedom and drinking was all the incentive we needed to get on a bus early one Saturday morning and head for the city.

The plan was to see the sites on Saturday and then drink in the hotel room that night. On Sunday, we would visit more sites, and then travel back

to the fort. The main attraction on Saturday was peering down from the top of the Empire State Building. That was the first time for me. The real adventure for me though was getting a hotel room and buying cherry brandy (I was not exactly a connoisseur of booze at the time). I planned to drink until I was good and drunk while watching TV.

I had never been drunk before. My parents did not drink. They both had strong religious reasons for avoiding booze. Booze was never in the house. My only experience with booze was when one of the mechanics at the dealership where I worked would occasionally buy me a pint of vodka or peppermint schnapps. I would mix the booze with soda from McDonalds so I could get a mild buzz while driving around in the car. That was it; I had to go home so I never pushed the limits.

Now that I was in the Army and free to do whatever I wanted, I drank that night to see how far it would take me. Well, the first thing I noticed as I drank away was I began to see double. If I shut one eye or the other, the doubling effect disappeared, but it immediately returned as soon as I opened both eyes again. That was interesting. As I drank some more, I realized that I could not tell which of the two television screens I saw in front of me was the real one. I was feeling woozy. It was as if I was in my own little world.

I had made the mistake of eating greasy French fries earlier. Those fries were no longer feeling so good down there. My stomach was churning like a washing machine. I solved the stomach problem by losing the French fries out the hotel window. They fell about three floors to the alley below. Ah, now I felt a little better! Then it was back to the television. The last thing I remember that night was the floor rising up to meet my nose.

Sunday morning was a new experience. I was not feeling well, for one thing. My head was pounding and I told myself I would never drink again. Well, that was not true but I never did drink cherry brandy again. It took a while to drag myself out of the hotel.

I did not mention, by the way, that we were all dressed in khakis while in the city. People were so considerate of us with those uniforms on. It felt good. There was something about a young man in a military uniform that warmed people.

We were out of money and found ourselves looking across the harbor at the Statue of Liberty. A stranger was doing the same with binoculars. I asked if we could look through them and he obliged. He asked if we had ever been out there and I said we did not have the money to get tickets. Well, that

complete stranger bought us all tickets at three dollars each. It was great. It made me feel special.

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Graduation week in Basic was like final exams. We had to get through and pass proficiency testing before graduation on October 9th. During that week, we took part in a military parade, marching in review in front of a group of old veterans. There were ten companies or about fifteen-hundred newly graduating soldiers in that parade.

As we marched, I thought back to a time when I was in grade school and looking at soldiers in those Veteran's day parades. Now, here I was a soldier marching in a parade myself. How far I had come in what turned out to be a short eight weeks. I began this adventure as a home sick kid, and now I felt like a man and a soldier. I felt this unbelievable pride in what I had accomplished. I could almost feel some little kid watching and looking up to me as a soldier, in the same way I had looked up to soldiers long ago. I felt honored and privileged to be a soldier in the U.S. Army. Forty-five years later, I still feel honored to have been a soldier.

On Thursday, October 9, 1969, I graduated from Basic Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. My orders said to report for Advanced Infantry Training at Fort McClellan, Alabama. I would not go home on leave. I would not be a machinist. The Army gave me an airline ticket for a flight to Atlanta, Georgia. From the airport, it was a bus ride to the front gate of Fort McClellan.

I never thought in a million years I would be heading for Advanced Infantry Training. All of that careful thought and planning to work in the Army as a machinist had gone down the tubes. Sure, I would not be a Marine, but it did not make me feel much better. Earlier, when I got the heads-up that they were sending me to Advanced Infantry, I had hoped it was not true. Now, it was reality.

# Chapter 4-Advanced Infantry

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October 12<sup>th</sup>, I passed through the gate at Fort McClellan, Alabama near the city of Anniston. I was still bullshit. How could the Army be so stupid? I did not need additional training! I was already a working machinist! On top of that, why in hell had I volunteered for Vietnam? Requesting Vietnam was far from the smartest move I ever made.

Fort McClellan in 1969 was the Women Army Corp (WAC) basic training site for the country. It seemed weird that I would go there for advanced infantry training. The fort, however, had been training infantry soldiers since 1966. Recently, the Army decided to expand their infantry training capacity at the fort. There was a need for more soldiers in Vietnam, I guess. As part of the expansion, Army brass was testing a program to increase advanced infantry training time from eight to ten weeks. We were the guinea pigs for the program. That meant I would be here until just before Christmas.

With the expansion, they needed more barracks. So I spent the first few days cleaning old barracks that had not seen use for a while. They were old wooden buildings sitting in a grove of pines. The barracks had the look and feel of buildings last used in World War II. A rundown mess hall stood close by. Cooks were busy there getting it ready for use. Someone had painted the buildings white and forest green. Pine needles had overrun any grass that may have been there at one time. The place looked like an old fashion Boy Scout camp. We swept and scrubbed and soon the area was ready to go.

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Everything I had heard about Army schools after basic training was wrong. Basic was a place to beat the civilian out of us and turn us into a functioning soldier. Harassment was a major tool used in the basic training process. Our next school I thought would be a place where the Army began treating us like an adult human being.

Well, it was worse than basic, far worse! Instead of getting up at 5 a.m. drill sergeants had us out of bed at 4 a.m.. We had to do the same calisthenics and run every morning before breakfast. In fact, we had to run everywhere. We had to run from the barracks to the mess hall and then back again to the barracks. We ran to classes, we ran to rifle ranges, we ran, ran,

and ran some more. Lights out was no longer 9:30 p.m.. No longer was the Army concerned that we had our beauty sleep. Here, the Army took sleep away from us as part of the training. Training was not limited to day work anymore. Now they added night work to day work. We were lucky to get three hours of sleep at times.

Actually, all of the extra work and pressure the drill sergeants put us through had its purpose. They wanted to ensure that no matter where they stationed us, we had the ability to perform all of the requirements expected of an infantry soldier. In addition, they wanted us to return home alive and not in a body bag. Why in hell did they not tell us that up front? It still felt like harassment to me.

I have to say, I did like some of the training. I like mechanical equipment. So I had fun learning about all of the new weapons I had not seen in basic training. M16 rifle training was much more extensive. In addition to rifle training, we learned to shoot a 50-caliber machine gun, a M60 machine gun, a M79 grenade launcher, a LAW Light Anti-Tank weapon and a 45 pistol. A new thing for us was using a starlight scope. It gathered star and moon light, and then amplified the light to a point where night turned to day. Looking through that scope, I could clearly see others at night that could not see me. It was cool.

Another major part of our training was learning to work and fight as a Squad (small team of six to eight men). In the classroom, we learned offensive and defensive squad tactics. We did a lot more navigating in the woods with maps and compasses. Navigation work took place both day and night. We learned how to use field radio equipment to communicate with each other. We learned how to move and shoot as a squad. We even performed squad tactics using live ammunition to add to the realism.

There were other subjects during training that held my interest as well. One of them dealt with how to escape from a POW camp. We learned how to live off the land if we broke out on our own. We had high explosive training. With high explosives, a rule they taught us was it takes an explosion to make an explosion. That was what made high explosives safe to use. I always liked to explode firecrackers as a kid so high explosives was especially fun. We learned how to use TNT, C4 plastic explosive, blasting caps and det (detonating) cord. Det cord looks like clothesline rope but it explodes like a blasting cap. We trained in helicopters. Helicopter training was important if we shipped to Vietnam. There, the primary mode of

transportation for an infantry soldier was by helicopter. We did not use them at all in training. It was more like a show and tell. A pilot landed a Huey in an outdoor classroom and explained things like how it takes off, hovers, lands, what it can carry, and finally, the various ways they use them in Vietnam. I hoped I would never have to take advantage of helicopter training. It seemed obvious we were sitting ducks when it hovered. We bivouacked more than we did in basic. Supposedly, we would live and work out of tents in the field a great deal if sent to Vietnam.

The outside temperature was unbearable at times when training at Fort Dix in August and September. Here in Alabama, it stayed as hot during the day through October and November. Nights though were cool, even damn cold at times. One morning, late in November, it even snowed on us at the rifle range. Those cold nights were good in a sense because it prevented us from doing more bivouac training in the field.

For whatever reason, probably because my Dad was a truck driver in World War II, I applied for a military driver's license. I drove vans and jeeps when pulling guard. I hauled trainees around in deuce and a half diesel trucks. It turned out to be a good thing having that license. I drove when others had to walk. I drove while others had to do KP. I wish I could say that having that license helped me later, but it did not.

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As in basic, toward the end of training, the drill sergeant finally gave us a bit more freedom on weekends. I took a bus to Anniston, the town just outside of the fort, a few times. Race issues were in a raw state back then. Governor Wallace, a former Alabama governor, had led the south in segregation practices in those times. Anniston recently had a race riot at the high school because the kids elected a black girl as queen of the prom. Eighteen months before, radicals planned and pulled off the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis. Memphis was only three hundred miles from here.

Outside of the fort, I could feel the separation between races. On the surface, there appeared to be order. Both blacks and whites understood their place in the South based on the last hundred years of history there. Underneath that façade though, I felt trouble simmering. Inside the fort, there was no such trouble. Black recruits trained alongside white recruits in our infantry company. There were many black drill sergeants in the Army training us. We lived and fought together in Vietnam. The Army did a better

job at ignoring a person's color and focusing on what a person can contribute. I think it was fair to say that the Army was already setting the example that Martin Luther King wanted to see in the civilian world. That is where society must judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Vietnam did expose more of the black power movement than what I saw in training. Black soldiers had their own special handshakes when they got together. On the firebases, they hung together for the most part. Black soldiers portrayed black pride with a tough image that had its roots in the Black Panther Party. When we were in the jungle, however, those things went away and we were all in it together.

As graduation approached, the Army surprised me with something that gave me hope. Unexpectedly, I learned the Army planned to send me to NCO (Non Commissioned Officer) school following training here. I had no idea why. I was a B and C student in high school and I never saw myself as college material. No matter, I was excited and flattered. NCO School meant a trip to Fort Benning, Georgia for five months of additional training. If they sent me there, I would not see Vietnam for another five months.

Then, soon after, the Army snatched it away. At the last minute, when it looked like I would go, Army brass decided to cancel NCO school for seven weeks. Vietnam was de-escalating, they said. Instead of going to Fort Benning, I learned I would go on leave then head to Vietnam instead.

I finished training on December 17<sup>th</sup>. I passed all of my tests. On paper, I was now a fully trained infantry soldier. I do not know if I felt the same way the Army did about my readiness. Before joining the Army, I never would have thought I had the qualities necessary for the infantry. What were those qualities? I did not know. The Army never sat me down and explained it.

I do know that I had come a long way since August. When I thought about it, a short eighteen weeks ago, I knew absolutely nothing about what I needed to know to be an infantry soldier. Now, I knew military tactics, hand-to-hand combat and the use of every imaginable weapon to kill a human being. They indoctrinated in Army tradition, discipline, honor, loyalty and duty. Maybe I was ready to serve as an infantry soldier after all.

Okay, let us say I had the ability to serve as a soldier. But would I kill? The Army trained us to kill. They did it by making training as painful as possible. Then they shifted the blame for that pain to the Vietcong in

Vietnam. Their goal was to have us leave training with enough hate to kill Vietcong soldiers when called upon.

Experts say that people are more likely to kill if insane or have no morals. With those traits, I would not have made it into the Army in the first place. Other reasons to kill are hate, greed, or the need for revenge. None of those reasons applied to me either. I did not leave training as a down and out *hater* of the Vietcong. Maybe the training was not convincing enough, or a bit contrived; I do not know. Fighting for honor, loyalty and duty to country was not enough of a reason for me to kill either. Not many in the enlisted ranks anyway associated terms like honor, loyalty, and duty to fighting and dying in Vietnam anymore.

So what if anything was driving me to go to Vietnam at this point? I had an obligation to go, for one thing. I had signed a contract and made a commitment. In addition, if I refused to go, they would send me to jail. I did not want that. So now, I was about to go off and do something that I had no interest in and I could be killed in the process. What should I do?

The answer for me and for most of the guys I served with in Vietnam was simple. Go there, and then find a way to survive each day, week, and month until the Army shipped us home again. I did not go there to be a hero or kill Vietcong. I decided I would go to Vietnam with the goal to survive.

With that plan in mind, I left Fort McClellan, Alabama on December 18<sup>th</sup>. I caught a bus to the airport in Atlanta and flew home. It felt good that I was heading home for Christmas. I had a few weeks to spend there and I wanted to make the most of it before leaving for Vietnam.

## Chapter 5-Home on Leave

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It was nice being home again. I had been away from home since August, the longest time span ever for me. I was no longer the same person. The Army had changed me tremendously and for the good, I thought. So when I stepped through the front door in my Army dress greens, I felt like a million dollars. On top of that, everyone treated me like a celebrity.

It was like old times in some ways. I convinced my sisters to cook me eggs again. I slept in the same room and same bed I had slept in my whole life. What changed was my parents were acting different with me and I was acting different with them. I felt more independent than ever. I felt powerful, worldly. My parents recognized and accepted that independence. That never happened before. I sensed an aura around me that was new and hard to describe. I was no longer one of the kids in my parent's eyes. My father was not bugging me to do this and that. If my parents wanted me to do something, they were more timid about asking, and I was more agreeable in accepting. There was a definite change in the air.

Outside of the house, I was always the center of attention. This attention was a new thing for me. I enjoyed it. We visited relatives and relatives came to visit us. They all wanted to talk to me about what it was like in the Army, what I thought about Vietnam. I wore my uniform to church. I stood out like a sore thumb in that uniform, but it was great. I did not have to say a word to attract a crowd of well-wishers.

When I had a moment to breathe, I hit some nightclubs in Boston with my best friend and the rest of the gang. It had been a while since I had seen them. It was like old times... almost. Something had changed with our relationship. It was subtle but it was there just the same. In four short months, I felt like I had grown in so many ways both mentally and physically. I was not the same person anymore. My friends' lives however, seemed stuck in time. They were the same, but I was not. It was a weird thing. Four months ago, before I joined the Army, I was one of them. Now it was different. It was like I had something snatched from me and there was no getting it back... at least fully.

Christmas is the best day of the year for me. I like listening to Christmas music, the gift giving, and attending special church services. There was

nothing quite like that feeling of peace and tranquility I get on Christmas Eve. This one was different though. There was a sense of finality about it. I may not see next Christmas from home. That concerned me.

Having my brother Dave home for Christmas made it nice. Dave had joined the Army after I did. He signed up in November, about three months after me. I had never received a letter from the draft board but Dave had.

Recently, the Selective Service in Washington held a first-time draft lottery. They threw three hundred sixty six capsules into a punch bowl. Each capsule contained a slip of paper with a birth date written on it. Then they drew them out one by one. Those in charge assigned a lottery number of one to the birth date of the first capsule drawn. The lottery number for the last capsule drawn was number three-hundred-sixty-six. The draft board was told to draft those kids with low lottery numbers first. If someone had a high number, he did not have to worry about Vietnam. If he had a low number, he should consider signing up as I did.

Dave's birthday received lottery number *sixty-nine*. So he was concerned in the same way I had been concerned a few months earlier. To Dave, it was a simple choice. Dad had been in the Army, and I was in the Army, so why not him? With that, Dave joined the Army for two years, same as I had. By Christmas, he was half way through basic training at Fort Dix and home on leave. He had no idea yet what school he would get following basic. I hoped it would not be the infantry.

Soon after Christmas, Dave caught a plane back to Fort Dix. That left me by myself in the bedroom that we had shared our whole life. With Christmas and New Year's over for another year, family and friends went back to work. I felt even more alone. My time at home was winding down. Uneasiness crept over me. A lump was back in my throat. Why did it have to play out this way? Others at the time ran to Canada. What was the matter with me, why did I not do that? Did I not care or realize what was happening to me? Was I simply not smart enough to see what was happening to me? The Vietcong killed American soldiers in Vietnam every day for God's sake!

I did not like it, but it seemed there were no alternatives. Time ticked by and my stay at home ended. On January 4, 1970, I left home, boarded a plane, and flew to California for Oakland Army Base. There I would begin the process of going to Vietnam.

## Chapter 6-Shipping Out

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On my way to California, I had a short layover in Chicago to change planes. There, I met with my Uncle Dick, Auntie Astrid, and their three kids. Uncle Dick and Auntie Astrid grew up in Boston. Uncle Dick, however, worked in sales for an insurance company so they moved frequently. Their latest stop was the Chicago area. They had traveled a ways for what was a one-hour layover, so it was nice of them to come.

Uncle Dick was an *overly* nice, to the point that he made me feel uncomfortable. The *niceness* stemmed from his strong Christian beliefs. My uneasiness was not from a sense that he was pushing his beliefs on me in any way. I simply felt inadequate somehow around him because I did not feel religion in my life as strongly as he did. The rest of his family had strong Christian beliefs as well. His oldest daughter in time became a missionary.

Their visit brought back those feelings that crept over me toward the end of my stay at home. I began to feel that all of my relatives had come out to see me in part because it may be the last time. They all seemed afraid for me. They did not say it exactly in those words, but that was the vibe. I did not need any more of that so I was glad the layover was short. Soon we said our goodbyes and I was off again to the West Coast.

Landing in the airport outside of San Francisco, I made my way to Oakland Army Base by taxi. Oakland Army Base was the Army's overseas replacement center for Vietnam. In 1970, it was the gateway to Vietnam, both coming and going. In 1999, twenty-nine years later, it was a ghost town.

My wife Teresa and I were living in Alameda, California, close to Oakland, in 1999. I was working for a company in Pleasanton, California. One Sunday, we took a drive up Route 880 to see if we could find Oakland Army Base. I do not know what possessed me to look; something to do, I guess. Maybe I hoped the place would rekindle a few memories. The Army Base was no longer on a map, so I tracked down its approximate location on the internet. We found it finally but it was barely recognizable. Many of the buildings were gone. The concrete parking lot was broken up with weeds coming up through the cracks. I could barely make out what had been there before. It was eerie. I could feel ghosts left behind.

Well, it was far from a ghost town in 1970. From the taxi, I walked through the entrance into the main building. It was bustling in the same way Boston Army Base had been when I first joined the Army. Hundreds of military people were there ahead of me going through the process that would take us to Vietnam. Others were processing out having returned from Vietnam. It was tough watching those veterans processing out. It made me feel all the worse.

The process began with medical examinations, more overseas shots to take, and more papers to sign. Warehouse workers took my stateside uniforms from me and replaced them with jungle uniforms. I received three sets of jungle fatigues, two pairs of jungle boots, and a new complement of underwear and socks. At one of the stations, they sewed my name over the shirt pocket, like at Fort Dix. Finally, they had me dress in the new fatigues. I stuffed the rest of my clothes back in my duffel bag.

In hindsight, the uniforms were like prison clothes. I do not mean the uniforms had black and white stripes like typical prison clothing. They were unusual though with their open necks, loose fit, big pockets, and camouflage print. Today, everyone in the Army seems to wear camouflage. Then, it was unusual looking. Even the boots were weird with green canvas tops.

No, what made the new uniforms feel like prison garb was they would not let us leave the Army Base once we had them on. There were no passes available to go into San Francisco or Oakland to hit a few bars. We all had second thoughts about going to Vietnam. So the Army did not want to risk letting us off the base and maybe lose us to Canada. If we ever had the idea to try to escape, MPs would have spotted us easily in those uniforms.

Once processed in with everyone else that arrived on that day, we transitioned into *hurry up and wait* mode. It took a while for the Army to cut our orders and assign us to a seat on an airplane. Those in charge said it took an average of two or three days before shipping out. So during the waiting process, we were required to attend an early morning, noon, and evening formation. We stood there and listened for our name. If they did not call your name, they had us do busy work in the warehouses between formations. At night, we slept in a large warehouse containing lines and lines of bunks. There were hundreds of people all thrown into this large common area just waiting.

On my third day there, I finally heard my name. Stepping forward, I received my orders for Vietnam. That evening, they transported a planeload

of us to Travis Air Force Base. My stomach churned through the one-hour drive. Out on the tarmac stood our freedom bird, a Douglas DC-8 with the name Seaboard World Airlines.

Veterans returning from Vietnam had nicknamed the planes freedom birds. The nickname was another thing that added to that sick feeling I could not quite shake off. A freedom bird was a large passenger jet, fitted with three seats on both sides of the aisle. In today's world, six passengers across is no big deal because the planes are larger. Then, we felt stuffed in as if we were in a cattle car. They had flight attendants that served us, but not the cutesy ones found on normal airlines. The flight attendants were all older for some reason.

The flight took off from Travis and made its first refueling stop in Honolulu for about an hour. They let us off the plane to stretch our legs a bit. Standing on the runway, I remember the feeling of those warm trade winds. I told myself, then and there, I would be back to Hawaii someday under better circumstances.

From Hawaii, we flew southwest, landing in Guam to refuel. Guam is a small island about twenty five hundred miles from Vietnam. It was also a United States territory though I do not know why. We landed late at night so I did not see much of it. From Guam, we flew on to Vietnam. Overall, the flight to Vietnam took about twenty hours.

On Wednesday, January 14, 1970, we began our descent into Bien Hoa Air Force Base in Vietnam. The plane dropped in on a steep angle. Someone said the pilot swooped in like that to make it harder for someone to shoot us down. That news did not help with the butterflies I felt in my gut. Soon we were on the runway and taxied to a stop. I was dog-tired from sitting in a plane for so long. An Air Force ground crew rolled the stairway up to the side of the plane and then the flight attendant opened the door.

If we had been at any other airport in the states, we would have been up and moving already. There was no mad dash this time to be the first one off the plane. There was hesitation and during the pause, an officer stepped through the door, looked down the aisle, smiled, and then said, "Welcome to the Republic of Vietnam!"

# Chapter 7-Checking In to Vietnam

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When the officer welcomed us; it struck me that I was actually in Vietnam. I saw it on the news every day with little effect. Now all of a sudden, *I was here*. I could not believe it! With that, I stood up with everyone else and moved down the length of the aisle. At the door, I hesitated, and then ducked slightly as I stepped out on the platform. I did not duck to avoid banging my head on the doorframe. I did it because I thought I might be stepping into the middle of a firefight, I guess. Instead, I looked down on what seemed like any other military airport in the United States.

It was a sunny, beautiful day. An odor of decaying vegetation was in the air. It was muggy and about 95 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat, mugginess, and odor combined into a feeling that wrapped around me like a blanket. It was like nowhere I had ever been before. Across the tarmac, a sign on the side of the terminal building bid us welcome to Bien Hoa Air Force Base.

From the platform, I stepped down the stairs and over to the terminal. While we waited for our duffel bags, we received a general briefing on Vietnam. An officer covered all of the basics: do this and do not do that while here. The main thing was stay away from prostitutes. We may catch a venereal disease they called Black Death. Catch it and the unlucky soldier may never return to the United States. Okay, I got the message. Following the briefing, an Army official addressed the Army personnel in the group. He said they would take us to the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion. Military busses were waiting for us outside.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion was where Army personnel processed in to Vietnam. In that sense, it was similar to Oakland Army Base and Boston Army Base. Infantry divisions throughout Vietnam received their new recruits from the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion. It was located a short distance from the air base between the village of Bien Hoa and Long Binh Army Base. Long Binh Army Base was the Army's main headquarters in Vietnam.

Army green military busses with heavy metal screens covering the windows waited for us. Someone asked why the busses had those heavy metal screens. We learned the screens were there to keep out a hand grenade

if someone tried to toss one in. Oh, I felt better then.

It was a short ride to the gate of 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement. Stepping off the bus, we filed into the main headquarters building and started processing in. Processing involved dropping off the personnel file we carried with us and signing in. Then we walked to the barracks where we stayed for the next three days or so.

What a difference in living conditions when compared to other places I had experienced in the Army. The barracks were plain filthy. The floor was concrete instead of polished tile. The beds were canvas cots with no mattress. The outside walls of the barracks had wood clapboards that loosely overlapped. Open space with screening between the clapboards provided ventilation. There was no inside wall. Dust and dirt passing through the ventilated walls had settled on every flat surface inside the building. The roof was tin. Living in those barracks felt like I was living in a chicken coop.

Sinks for washing up were outside. There was a roof over the sinks to provide protection from the hot sun and rain. If I had to take a crap, the Army offered a long, narrow outhouse (shitter) with multiple holes cut into a long bench. Forget privacy; there was nothing but open space between the holes. We took leaks into a fifty-five gallon drum that someone filled with gravel and buried in the ground close by.

Older Vietnamese women kept the place swept up. They wore dusty old pajama-like clothes and a straw, cone-shaped hat. What teeth they had were in bad shape. Some had a tar-like substance on their teeth. I had heard that blackening teeth was an old fashion way to beautify them. It was weird being around them for the first time. They were silent, not attempting to make conversation and for that matter, neither did we. Those older women did their job as if we did not exist.

As my year in Vietnam played out, I had similar experiences with the older Vietnamese women. I was sitting in a multi-hole shitter after breakfast one day when one of them walked in with a broom to sweep the floor. It shocked me at first, but she hardly acknowledged me; it was a glance and that was all. She seemed relaxed, actually indifferent, about the situation, so I relaxed. I thought she would step back out. Instead, she started sweeping while I sat there with my pants down around my ankles. The funny thing was I did nothing but lift my feet when she approached with the broom. Those women were different, like nothing I had ever run across. They had their language; we had ours. They had their customs; we had ours. We did our

job and they did theirs. Younger Vietnamese at least were friendlier, more human with us. The older generation did not want us there and it showed.

Food and water at 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement was not much better than the accommodations. I do not know where the water came from. It had a chlorine odor and taste that reminded me of swimming pool water. The food was nothing to speak about either. I remember thinking to myself, "God, I hope I do not have to live in a place like this for the next twelve months." It struck me that first day how far I was from the world that I knew.

I slept fitfully that night, had breakfast, and then began attending three shipping-out formations per day. The process was similar to what happened in Oakland. If I heard my name called, a clerk had orders ready that assigned me to the unit where I would serve my next twelve months. If they did not call my name, there was a good chance I would get KP or have to pull guard. I never had to do either while there. I do not know what was worse, hanging around and thinking about my troubles, or doing some busy work. Busy work at least took my mind off it all.

Homesickness crept back into my life again. What made it worse was I could send a letter home, but no one could write back. The 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion was temporary quarters so we could not use it as a mailing address. All I wanted was to get back on one of those freedom birds. Before now, I could have easily deserted the Army if I wanted to. Here, it felt like I had dropped down through a rabbit hole, to a place where there was no escape. It was the end of the second day before I finally accepted that I was stuck here for a year. I would have to make the best of it because there was no way to go back, only forward.

Finally, after three days of standing in formations, I heard my name called. The Army assigned me to A Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, First Cavalry Division. They called themselves the First Cav. The First Cav was one of many infantry divisions operating in Vietnam. What made them stand out was they were airmobile. Airmobile meant that when soldiers traveled to and from the jungle they travelled by helicopter. During my year there, I traveled in helicopters so much that I received an Air Medal at the end of my tour. The First Cav had more than troop-carrying helicopters. They had gunships and cargo helicopters as well. The largest of those cargo helicopters were so powerful it could lift and transport a bulldozer. It was exciting to know that I was part of the First Cav.

The first step in joining them was to attend their seven-day, new guy

training camp called the First Team Academy. The First Team Academy was located at First Cav Division main headquarters back in Bien Hoa. A bus was on the way to pick us up.

I walked back to the barracks and packed my uniforms. The bus arrived and we left the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion behind. I was moving forward and it felt good. It would be eleven months before I was back to the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion again. Then, I would process out of Vietnam.



A sign welcomed us to Bien Hoa Air Force Base.



This gate led us into the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion.



Someone wanted to remind us how far we were from home.

# Chapter 8-New Guy Training

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The First Cavalry Division sent all *green* (inexperienced, untested, new guy) soldiers to the First Team Academy for a week. They sent us there to get acclimated to hot weather in Vietnam. The training kept us outside all day to ensure we acclimated to the heat, drank enough water, and took salt pills. Then they shipped us off to our unit.

While there, they surprised us with good food, and even TV and radio. It was a refreshing change from the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Company where I had spent the last three days. I do not know why the place felt so much better. Maybe it was simply that I had a better attitude and I was not waiting anymore. I was doing something.

Some of the training there I had already had before in the states. M16 rifle training was an example. We had to disassemble, clean, then reassemble the rifle, take it to the range, and fire it. For some that had not had M16 training, it was a necessity. We also spent time in what the Cav referred to as Hanoi Village. Hanoi Village was a mockup of a remote village area in Vietnam. There, we practiced how to enter and check a village for enemy soldiers. Methods taught there would help keep us as safe as possible.

New to me though was learning to rappel from helicopters. Knowing how to rappel was a required skill if we had to exit a helicopter while it hovered in the air close to the jungle floor. “There would be times,” an instructor said, “when the helicopter simply could not land for some reason.” It involved learning how to slide down a rope using a harness and a D ring. The D ring acted to break and slow your descent.

We learned the basics of rappelling on the ground then practiced it from a forty-foot high tower. First, the instructors taught us how to put on the harness. They helped us with adjusting the harness so it fit snugly around the waist and through the crotch area. With the harness on, we climbed a set of stairs to a platform at the top of the tower. It felt high up there. Instructors helped us with connecting the harness to the rappelling rope using the D-ring. When connected, they left us with about ten feet of slack in the rope.

Why was it that Army instructors always want to harass recruits? It was not enough for them to have us carefully climb over the edge of the platform, and then lower ourselves down to the ground. No, with that slack in the rope,

they had us jump off the end of the platform. We would free fall, and then jerk to a stop in midair. Stopping suddenly like that caused the harness to yank hard on my crotch. If the instructor had not adjusted the harness properly, I would have been singing soprano and never have babies. Only when we hung there thirty feet above ground did they let us lower ourselves with the D ring. I never had to rappel from a helicopter, by the way, my whole year in Vietnam.

The week zipped by. Every day we had something new to do. Instructors kept us busy with training in the hot sun. We ate well and slept well at night from all of the work. Soon, graduation day was around the corner.

That week I turned a corner. I felt a little better about Vietnam. I was not considering how to sneak back on a freedom bird anymore. I managed to send out a few letters, though I still did not have a permanent mailing address to get letters in return. More importantly, time continued to march on. There was an end to this place.

On graduation day, I was ready to move on to my unit. Take that next step. The Army, however, had a surprise in store for me that I did not mind at all.



The entrance to the First Team Academy.



We rappelled from this tower at the First Team Academy.

# Chapter 9-Pulling Guard in Bien Hoa

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Army brass surprised me with orders that assigned me to pull guard at Bien Hoa Air Force Base for a couple of weeks. The duty was unbelievably easy though I did not realize that at the time. In hindsight, I wish they had left me in Bien Hoa pulling guard for the rest of the year.

Those in charge assigned me a bunk in barracks located at the VIP (Very Important Person) Center. The VIP Center was where the First Cav sent infantry companies to recover after spending a few months on jungle patrol. Infantry soldiers spent three or four days there mostly for relaxation and recuperation (R&R). I slept in a different area, but it was nice being there just the same. What a great place to end up in Vietnam.

While infantry soldiers relaxed at the VIP Center, maintenance people gave their rifles a good cleaning and repaired them if necessary. They had beds with mattresses to sleep on, not just cots. I never realized how important having a bed was until I found myself later sleeping on the jungle floor. During the day, soldiers could swim in a makeshift, above ground pool. Nightlife for the infantry included a bar operated by young Vietnamese girls. They sold cold beer, canned potato chips, and pretzels. Vietnamese bands played the latest American rock and roll every night. At an open-walled theatre, we could watch the latest movies. The VIP Center was a place where soldiers, worn down from fighting, could relax and let off some steam.

I could not take advantage of any of those services, however. I may have slept there, but that was about it. My days consisted of sleeping, writing letters, and working on a tan. A few of the days, I wandered off and visited some of the Vietnamese civilian areas near the air base. There was a mix of both poor and affluent areas. For me, areas of affluence were places where I found kids who looked clean, well dressed, and healthy. In contrast, I would later see grubby looking kids wearing old, cast-off Army clothes and picking through dumps for food. Run down, formerly French-owned homes dotted the area. It surprised me to find a Catholic church there instead of just Buddhist temples. During the day, these areas felt safe and I had no fear at

all walking through them.

Nights however were a different story. Safety was a major issue. Vietcong soldiers would overrun the airbase and kill Americans if they could. Vietcong were South Vietnamese citizens who had turned against the South Vietnamese government. They typically hid amongst the general population during the day and made war at night. So guarding the airbase with an increased emphasis at night was critical.

In the states, the Army referred to pulling guard on a fort as *fire watch*. The name fire watch I guess gave it a sense of purpose. We watched for fires that may start overnight. In that way, we protected those who were sleeping. The likelihood of a fire though was remote. The real reason for fire watch was to get us in the habit of pulling guard every night. Here in Vietnam, pulling guard was serious business.

This is a good time to tell you a bit about security around the airbase. Surrounding the airport along the perimeter was a system of elevated bunkers, with about fifty meters of open space between them. The bunkers were similar in look and function to guard towers found on the outside walls of a prison. The inside was about ten foot square. They had a roof to keep out the rain. The sidewalls had a large, open window area so we could see in any direction. From the floor to the bottom of the window area, sandbags were stacked to provide protection against mortar or rifle fire. If a bullet or shrapnel hit a bunker below the window, the sand caught it, not me.

I wore a helmet and a flak jacket to protect the exposed portion of my body in the window area. A flak jacket was a heavy vest made up of layers of a special material that collectively could catch a bullet. It was hot, uncomfortable, and I sweat unbelievably in it. I wore it anyway. Better to wear it than risk coming home dead.

In front of the bunkers and stretching out about three-hundred meters was an open area that was void of trees, brush, grass, and buildings. The Army had a name for everything and in this case, they referred to it as an open-field-of-fire. The purpose for the open-field-of-fire was to force the enemy to expose themselves if they tried to sneak in. Barbed wire weaved through this open area to prevent someone from running or crawling his way in. So trying to attack the airbase during the day was not a good idea from a Vietcong point of view. We could see them coming and barbed wire slowed them down. It gave us time to challenge them and even shoot if necessary.

Nighttime was a different issue. We did not use lights under normal

conditions. One of the big surprises for me when flying over Vietnam was the absence of street lighting below. The darkness looked eerie from above and felt unsettling when on the ground. There was good reason for no lights. If I was near a light, I was exposed. A sniper could pick me off. It was that simple.

You must think it was a field day for the Vietcong to attack us at night. Well, you would be wrong. If an enemy soldier tried to come in at night, we had surprises for them. A first level of defense was the use of trip-flares. A trip-flare was about the size of a Twinkie with a stake at the base of it. We planted them in and around the barbed wire that ran through the open field of fire. If an enemy soldier stepped on or kicked the trip wire connected to a trip-flare, it would light the area with a brilliant, white phosphorous light. It was inevitable that if Vietcong tried to sneak in at night, a trip-flare would light them up like a Christmas tree.

Once the flare exposed someone out there, we had the ability to light up a much larger area. In that way we would get a better idea of who, what or how many were out there. Artillery was available to pop an artillery round called a parachute flare over our heads at a height similar to a rocket exploding on the Fourth of July. Parachute flares popped open in a burst of that same brilliant white phosphorous light like a trip-flare, but many times brighter. Then it lazily drifted down toward the ground hanging from a white parachute. Parachute flares bathed the whole area in light, almost like daylight.

Once we established that there were enemy soldiers out there, we had many ways to deal with them. Depending on the number, we could respond with anything from a M16 rifle, to claymore mines, machine guns, artillery rounds, helicopter gunships, jets and even B52 bombers. We could step it up if there was a need. Before darkness set in, I had to be at the bunker with a canteen of water, some food, and an M16 rifle. Every other bunker along the perimeter of the base had a guard as well. Before settling down for the night, I checked the bunker's telephone to make sure it worked. The phone was there if I had a question or if there was trouble during the night. When all was ready, I sat and watched over the open area out in front of me until the sun disappeared. Once dark, I sat in that inky blackness, listened for unusual sounds and waited for a trip-flare to pop until someone relieved me in the morning. The first few days of pulling guard were nerve racking. My imagination ran wild. We had live ammunition in our M16s and those in

charge expected us to use it if necessary. It was a scary experience at first. Like anything though, I felt better once I got the hang of it.

Days turned into a week and the job did not let up. What happened to the weekend? And that was another new experience for me. We worked a seven-day week. In Vietnam, there was no such thing as a weekend anymore. Forget going to a church on Sunday if that was important. For the remainder of my stay in Vietnam, I never knew what day it was. We kept track of the date to write it at the top of a letter. We tracked how many days we had left in country. However, no one knew if it was Wednesday, Saturday, or what. It did not matter; they were all the same.

My letters were still going out but nothing returned. A permanent address still eluded me. What made it worse was I had heard it would take twenty days once I sent an address out to get a letter back. So even once the letter flow started, asking a question and waiting twenty days for an answer seemed ridiculous.

Getting letters from home meant so much to me. I had learned that in basic. The longer I waited, the more I yearned for them. Letters were the only link I had to the world and reality. They helped keep me sane, or about as sane as I could be in Vietnam. It hurt not having that link in place. I was envious of those who already had connected with home. At mail call, others received letters and I did not. I waited for a miracle until they called the last name then walk away dejected. I had time to stew about letters when on guard duty or relaxing during the day. That was the problem with pulling guard; I had time to think. Think about letters, think about home, and wonder where they would send me next.

Then, out of nowhere, my guard duty stint ended. In late January, I received orders to fly to my unit, A Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion, First Cav Division. Battalion headquarters was in Phuoc Long Province at Fire Support Base Buttons (called Buttons for short). Buttons was northwest of Bien Hoa and within twenty miles of the Cambodian border.

I packed my duffle bag, jumped in a bus, and rode to Bien Hoa air base, leaving the VIP Center behind. There I boarded a C-7A Caribou air force transport plane for Buttons to report for duty.



Bien Hoa is on the map above just northwest of Saigon. In 1970, Saigon was the capital city of Vietnam. Fire Support Base Buttons was located northwest of Bien Hoa in Phuoc Long Province, close to Phuoc Bin. Further north of Buttons was the Cambodian border.



The VIP Center sign with barracks in the background.



One of many elevated bunkers at Bien Hoa Airport.



Well clothed, well fed Vietnamese children in Bien Hoa.



A large, ornate, older French home in Bien Hoa.



Shack-like living conditions of Vietnamese civilians.

# Chapter 10-Fire Support Base Buttons

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One of the soldiers I met on the plane while heading to Buttons was attached to a supply company there. Over time, he had acquired a lot of knowledge about the place. I knew quite a bit myself from advanced infantry training. We talked about it as we rumbled along at three thousand feet.

The main purpose for a firebase like Buttons, or any firebase for that matter, was to support and protect infantry soldiers on patrol. Support of infantry soldiers in fact, was the role of the vast majority of military personnel in Vietnam. I had heard that for every soldier in the field, there were as many as fourteen people in the rear providing support. Fourteen people per infantry soldier sounds like an exaggeration, but the number was not far off.

Just feeding infantry soldiers out in the jungle on patrol required a tremendous amount of support. Soldiers out there need food and water delivered to them every three days. To do that, air force transport planes and Chinook helicopters moved supplies to Buttons as a distribution point. From the firebase, Huey Helicopters delivered those supplies directly to the infantry companies on patrol.

Firebases protected infantry soldiers out in the jungle using artillery pieces called howitzers. If you have ever watched an old WW II movie, howitzers were those large guns pulled behind a truck. In 1970, the larger howitzers propelled themselves on their own tank tracks. They were so large, if you were close to one when fired, it would rattle your brains. To load, aim, and fire one of those guns, it required a team of two to three men. Every firebase had at least one artillery battery (group of four to six guns) available when needed to support the infantry.

Buttons had a range of howitzers from small to large. The smallest had a 105-millimeter bore (about four inches). By bore, I mean the inside diameter of the barrel. It fired rounds (bombs) that were about the size of a water balloon. Though small, it could still land a high explosive round about seven miles away. The largest howitzers on Buttons had eight-inch bores. They could land a much larger round more than twenty miles away. In between,

the Army had 155 millimeter and 175 millimeter howitzers as well.

Howitzer support was critical to the infantry. Infantry companies on patrol in the jungle were always within range of artillery guns. If the enemy attacked an infantry company out there, the battery had to be close enough to bomb them. Those in charge of artillery batteries were responsible to know the location of every infantry company on patrol. Knowing their exact location was crucial if there was a request to provide support. Otherwise, bombs may land on us instead of the enemy. The Army referred to it as receiving friendly fire if an infantry company was accidentally hit by our own artillery. There was nothing worse than when our own artillerymen hit infantrymen in the jungle.

A firebase looked after the infantry and in exchange, the infantry defended the firebase from enemy attack. Typically, there were five infantry companies working out of a firebase. One of those companies guarded the firebase while the remaining four companies patrolled the jungle within range of the guns. Infantry companies patrolled for an average of fifteen days. Then they rotated back to the firebase to pull guard for three or four days. The company coming in replaced the company going back out. There was always an infantry company on the firebase pulling guard night and day.

While on the firebase, infantry soldiers slept and worked on its outer edge or perimeter. The outer perimeter of a typical firebase was circular and consisted of a dirt berm about five feet high. Sand bagged bunkers (fighting positions) were spaced along the berm every twenty to thirty meters. Just inside of the berm were culverts. Culverts looked like large, half sections of steel pipe topped with sandbags. Two infantry soldiers slept under a culvert when on the firebase. Culverts provided shelter from the rain and protection from mortar rounds. A mortar was a small, somewhat portable artillery piece used by the enemy to lob in small projectiles. We used mortars ourselves though not often.

There were large, permanent firebases and small, temporary firebases in Vietnam. Buttons was one of the large, permanent ones and the largest I would ever encounter. Buttons was so large infantry soldiers alone could not protect it. They also had Sheridan light tanks and armored assault vehicles with dual 40-millimeter cannons up on the berm.

Buttons even had an airstrip. The airstrip still exists today, by the way. All of the other firebases I spent time on had a landing area for helicopters only. Speaking of helicopters, Buttons also had its own squadron of Huey

helicopters. They used them to carry food and water but also to transport infantry soldiers to and from the jungle. The firebase even had its own Cobra helicopter gunships. The Army used gunships as another method to protect the infantry. Well, more importantly from my perspective, Buttons was also the headquarters for the First Cav's, 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion.

It was a hot, dry, sunny day as I approached Firebase Buttons for the first time. From the air, Buttons looked like a large, dirty, reddish scar in the middle of lush, green jungle. The reddish color I quickly learned was a coating of that signature powdery dirt found everywhere I traveled in Vietnam.

Next to Buttons was Nui Ba Ra, a small mountain that left me wondering why it was there. It protruded up out of the jungle that surrounded it like a solitary pimple on the landscape. I have since learned that Nui Ba Ra is what remains of an ancient volcano. There were a number of similar mountains in other parts of Vietnam as well.

As we dropped closer and readied to land, it became more apparent that Buttons consisted of a sea of large tents set in orderly rows on a moonscape of red dirt. Then we were down in a swirl of red dust. Stepping from the plane, I did not have a good feeling about the place.



Approaching Buttons, with Nui Ba Ra on the horizon.



View of Fire Support Base Buttons from the air.

# Chapter 11-Ace High

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From the runway, I made my way to 2/12<sup>th</sup> Battalion headquarters and reported for duty. There, I learned that A Company, nicknamed Ace High, had recently come in from the jungle. They were expecting me, and told me to report to Ace High's First Sergeant who was with the company out by the berm. Well, that was good. At least they were not going to ship me to the jungle right away.

Let me give you some background on the organization of an infantry company and where the First Sergeant fits in. A normal infantry company in Vietnam had about one hundred twenty men. There was a company commander, typically a captain, at the top. The captain had a first sergeant, radio operator, forward observer, and four lieutenants reporting to him. Each lieutenant was responsible for a Platoon of about twenty-five men. Directly reporting to each lieutenant was a platoon sergeant, another radio operator, and a medic. Each platoon had two squads. A squad consisted of a squad leader, a fire team leader, another radio operator, and six or seven grunts. A grunt was the slang term that infantry soldiers have for themselves.

Grunts carried a number of weapons. Most carried a M16 rifle. A few grunts in each squad carried specialty weapons. One of those weapons was the M60 machine gun. The M60 used up ammunition fast. So everyone in the squad had to carry ammunition for the machine gunner. Another grunt carried the M72 grenade launcher and a vest full of grenades. Grenade launchers lobbed their version of a grenade ten times as far as a grunt could throw one. Infantry was a well-thought-out organization.

Headquarters, as I said, had instructed me to report in with Ace High's First Sergeant. The First Sergeant assigned me to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon where I met the Platoon Sergeant in charge. He then sent me to the Battalion supply tent to get the equipment I needed for the field.

The first thing the Supply Sergeant did was take my extra jungle fatigues and underwear. He left me with the socks, underwear, and the fatigues I was wearing. At first, I thought he took advantage of me. Later I learned that infantry soldiers did not keep their own fatigues, socks, and underwear in Vietnam. There simply was no place available where we could wash our own clothes or store extra clothes. That was a surprise. When we needed

clean clothes, we simply grabbed something that fit from the clean pile and threw our dirty clothes in the dirty pile.

I also learned that no one wore boxer shorts so your butt and crotch could breathe better. We wore jungle shirts or T-shirts, jungle pants, socks, and boots. I went from having fatigues with my name on them and wearing underwear to nameless, generic fatigues that I grabbed when I had the chance. The only extra clothes I carried were spare socks.

The next thing to go was my duffel bag. In exchange, I received a rucksack (backpack). Then I received some basics. The first thing was a steel pot (helmet) for protection when in the jungle or pulling guard. He also gave me a boony-hat to wear the rest of the time. In my rucksack went two, 2-quart canteens, a 5-quart canteen that also served as a pillow, a canteen cup, a poncho for rain, a poncho liner that we used for a blanket, and an air mattress to sleep on.

I also received some of the tools of the trade that went into the rucksack as well. He gave me five fragmentation grenades, four trip-flares, a claymore mine, four smoke grenades, and a stick of C-4 explosive. He told me to keep the twenty clips of M16 rifle ammunition he gave me in a bandolier (cloth belt) for wearing over my shoulder. Finally, he gave me a box of M60 machine gun ammunition that I carried like a suitcase.

He told me to grab one of the empty M60 ammunition boxes that he had stacked to the side. It was waterproof. He said, "That is where the guys kept personal possessions that had to stay dry." For now, I put my writing paper and my wallet in the box. Later that month, I bought a camera and AM/FM portable radio with earphone and kept them in the box as well.

Finally, the Supply Sergeant walked over to the rifle rack and handed me my own M16 rifle. The rifle looked well used. Someone who had recently completed a year's worth of duty in Vietnam turned it in. For all I knew, he may have taken the seat on the freedom bird I came in on the month before. A rifle was the principal tool of an infantry soldier. Just like a carpenter's hammer or a mechanics set of wrenches. It was exciting, getting a weapon that I would not return at the end of the day. It was mine to keep clean, loaded with ammunition, and ready to use when needed. That rifle belonged to me from that day forward and was never far from my side when in Vietnam. It was like the Wild West out there, and now I was ready for it.

From the supply tent, I carried my equipment over to the culverts where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon had setup. The Platoon Sergeant introduced me to the men.

They were intimidating at first. Here I was with new clothes, new boots, new equipment, and no experience. The veterans gave new guys like me the label FNG (F'n New Guy) or simply green (not ripe, like a green banana). Green guys remain green until we made it through our first firefight. The veterans kept their eye on green guys in a firefight. They made sure we did not do something stupid like stand there and get ourselves killed right away. Once through that first firefight, we would transition from green to veteran.

The men I faced had the look of veterans. Many had beards and mustaches. Their boony-hats and helmets had a beat to hell, tinged with red dirt look instead of that new green color that I had. Every helmet I saw had something written on it. Every boony-hat they wore had words sewn into it. It might be their first name, Vietnam nickname, where they were from, or some saying or statement. Some wore strands of hippie beads around their necks. Most had a Saint Christopher medal on a beaded chain around their neck for good luck. Sometimes they pinned the St. Christopher medal to the camouflage cover on their helmet. Dog tags hung around their neck with plastic covers to prevent rattling. Some had dog tags strung through bootlaces. Their boots had the same ground in red dirt found on their helmets. Add a stogie clenched between their teeth and Clint Eastwood would have been proud. I was in awe of them.

Vietnam nicknames were a new thing to me. Only grunts had them. Soldiers used their first name or their Vietnam nickname. It was rare to hear a last name. I never knew why. Later in life, it was hard to track down friends because all I had was a nickname. My nickname was Boston Bean, Bean for short. New guys did not give themselves a nickname. Someone gave it to you and it just latched on.

Some of the men I met that first day were interesting characters. There was Lieutenant Huff, a powerful looking guy who led the 2nd Platoon. I heard later that he was a wrestler in college. In my squad was Randy, one of those Clint Eastwood types. He latched on to me, taught me the ropes, and made sure I did not do anything stupid. He had been out there awhile so had lots of experience. Randy was a small, wiry guy from Louisiana. He had a nasally southern twang for a voice and was easy to like. Randy's sidekick was Tony or Mr. Quick from Chicago. Tony was a street-smart with a Fu Manchu beard and mustache. There was Wade from West Virginia, an easy going, quiet type. Bob, the M60 machine gunner, was from West Virginia as well. Bob had the look of someone from the back hills. There was Doug

who had the look and manner of a college graduate, although I do not believe he had a degree. The majority of us had not attended college. Only the officers had degrees. Pete was short and burly with a Mexican accent and a ready smile.

Overall, Ace High's 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon was a nice bunch. Once over that initial shock, I felt at home with them right away, like family. For the first time in Vietnam, I felt like I had a place where I belonged. I was a new member of an experienced team. More importantly, I was not alone anymore; we were in this thing together.



A jeep parked in front of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Command Center.



Bundles of dirty uniforms outside the Battalion Supply Tent.

# Chapter 12-Living on Buttons

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With a few days of living on Buttons under my belt, I quickly realized that it sure in hell was not as good as the VIP Center at Bien Hoa. In one sense, it was a step forward on this journey of mine, but it was a definite step back in terms of living conditions. I have never been homeless, but living on Buttons had to be similar.

I mentioned earlier that infantry companies pulling guard on Buttons slept under metal culverts. Well, sleeping under a metal culvert on a firebase was similar, I would imagine, to living under a bridge with a dirty mattress, dirty blanket, and the rumble of cars and trucks overhead. At least my air mattress was on a canvas cot. It was good that I was off the ground. Who knew what critters ran around at ground level? Earlier, I had complained about the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion's sleeping accommodations. Living here was much worse.

Food at the mess hall was a step way back. The quality and variety of food was not impressive. At least it was hot. We used paper plates and plastic utensils. There was no place to sit down to eat; we plopped ourselves down anywhere we could find space.

Water was no better. We laced drinking water with Kool-Aid to curb the heavy chlorine taste. Bottled drinking water was a thing of the future for soldiers, not something I could take advantage of now.

A shower was a canvas bucket with a sprinkler head hanging from a rope. There was no roof or shower walls. We stood on a wooden skid under the shower so we did not have to stand in red mud.

Like 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement, we took leaks into an open, fifty-five gallon, steel drum buried in the ground. Also like the 90<sup>th</sup>, the inside of a multi-hole shitter looked the same. A big difference though was instead of a pit under the shitter, we took dumps into half of a fifty-five gallon steel drum.

A coveted job on the firebase was shit burner. A shit burner began work soon after breakfast by pulling the steel drums out from under each hole in the shitter and replaced them with an empty one. To avoid disrupting the person sitting over the drum, access to the drum was a hinged door behind the outhouse. Then he dragged the drums that contained human waste and paper into the shit burning area. Each drum received a healthy dose of kerosene.

With a stick, the shit burner blended the kerosene with the pee-poop-paper content of the drum. Next, he dropped a match into each drum and let the contents burn. A sooty, black smoke drifted through the area. Later, when the drums had burned out and cooled, he emptied the ash from each drum. With that, the shit burning process was complete. Shit burning took place morning and evening. When not burning shit, shit burners read books during the day. I did not understand why someone wanted this job until I had spent a month or so in the jungle.

Pulling guard on Buttons was similar in some ways and different in some ways to the guard job I had in Bien Hoa. At Bien Hoa, I pulled guard all night. It was like working the night shift. On Buttons, it was different. Our whole squad was responsible for guarding a bunker on the berm, twenty-four hours a day. During the day, there was stretches of down time because one guy pulled guard at a time. When not pulling guard we spent time reading books, sleeping when we could, and writing letters. There were other work details during the day, but not many.

Nighttime was different. Each squad member pulled guard for about two hours a night. Each squad had its own way to decide who pulled guard and when during the night. Once we all understood the sequence, it was up to the one pulling guard to wake up the next person in sequence before going to sleep himself. The job of guarding a firebase was easier because individually we spent less time doing it.

Once in the bunker, the job of guarding was about the same as Bien Hoa. We sat in a bunker facing out toward the open field of fire in front. We watched and listened for anything unusual. Buttons had the same barbed wire, trip-flares and claymore mines out there. A difference was we left the squad's M60 machine gun up on the bunker. It gave us additional firepower up there.

Finally, writing letters home and not getting anything in return would end. When I arrived on Buttons, they gave me a permanent mailing address. So the more recent letters I had written to family and friends included a mailing address they could use to write back to me. The twenty-day round trip clock had started. I could expect to receive letters back soon, I hoped.

As I wrote letters, I began a conscious effort to watch what I included in the ones I wrote home. My mother was very concerned about me being here. She watched the news about Vietnam every night and was afraid I would be hurt or killed. I did not want to add to her concern. So I wanted my letters

home to have a G rating.

So they focused on the weather, where I was, and the living conditions. As the year slid by, I avoided writing about anything that may scare her. Firefights, Vietcong, men killed and wounded; I left it all out of my letters. As far as she knew, I was on a camping trip in Vietnam for a year.

Years later, I read those letters and found where I had left little snippets of what I tried to avoid telling her slip by. As an example, I tried to reassure my mother once by saying, "Don't worry, no one has been wounded here in the past four and a half months." When she read that, it did not help her frame of mind.

As days passed, I became more acclimated to living on Buttons. It did not get easier, but it felt that way. Part of it was the realization that I could live with it. I could take it because everyone before me had. Also, it was a matter of what I focused on. Focus on good and you will find it. Focus on shit and you will find it everywhere as well.

There was at least one good thing I could say about living on Buttons. I was getting more sleep.



A typical sand-bagged bunker on the berm.



Culverts where infantry soldiers slept.

# Chapter 13-First Ambush

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Late one afternoon on Buttons, they ordered our platoon to go out and set up an ambush. There had been enemy activity on a road close to the local village of Song Be. Setting up an ambush was a new experience for me.

The goal of an ambush was to surprise and kill enemy Vietcong that traveled the roads at night. We assumed that innocent civilians from the village would not be out on the roads. Ordinary civilians followed strict curfews. So, if we ran into people on the road after the sun had gone down, we considered them Vietcong and someone to kill.

Vietcong were local citizens who want to replace the South Vietnamese government with the communist government from the north. They were more of a gorilla fighting force, unlike the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). Vietcong typically dressed in black, pajama-like clothes. On their heads, they wore straw hats, shaped like wide cones. Vietcong had Ho Chi Min racing slicks on their feet instead of boots. Ho Chi Min racing slicks looked similar to shower shoes. They made them from old rubber tires with straps made from inner tubes. For a weapon, they carried an AK-47 Chicom (Chinese Communist) assault rifle. They normally had a small amount of ammunition and for that, I was forever thankful. For food, they lived on rice and dried fish.

Vietcong typically traveled in small groups of five to fifteen men. They generally avoided us because, to be frank, we had much more firepower than they did. If they tried to take us on, it was likely they would die. Not only did we carry far more ammunition, but also we had backup. We had artillery, helicopter gunships, and even fighter jets just waiting to help. They had no one but themselves.

When we were in the jungle, if we ran across someone other than American soldiers, we considered them enemy Vietcong. We engaged them with rifle fire, no questions asked. When we were near villages, it was another matter. The enemy did not always look much different from South Vietnamese civilians. So what we could do and not do became much more complicated near a village. A village was a no-fire zone unless told differently. We could not shoot into a no-fire zone without permission, though some of the inhabitants in the village may be shooting at us.

We located our ambush site on a road where intelligence suspected Vietcong traveled at night. We chose a straight section of the road where we would have a good view in either direction. There was vegetation along one side that would keep us well hidden. Twenty meters up and down the road from our location, we installed trip-flares with trip wires strung across the road. During the night, if a trip-flare popped, we could clearly see who was on the road.

As a first defense, we set up and aimed a claymore mine toward each trip-flare. Let me describe to you what a claymore mine looked like. From the outside, it looked like a slightly curved, rectangular plate made of green plastic. It had the size and shape of four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches stacked two high then set side by side. Claymores stood up on edge using a couple of small metal legs. Inside the front of the claymore was a honeycomb of seven hundred large ball bearings backed by C4 plastic explosive. With the claymore set in place, we inserted an electrical blasting cap into the top of it. Connected to the blasting cap was a fifty-foot extension cord that linked the claymore back to where we set up for the night. The purpose for the blasting cap was to create a small explosion inside the claymore. A cardinal rule for all high explosives was it takes a small explosion to make a large explosion. So as long as the claymore had its blasting cap removed, it was safe to carry.

When everything was set up and everyone was out of the way, we connected each extension cord to a klacker. A klacker was a plastic device about the size of a pack of cigarettes with a lever on its side. When squeezed, it made a sharp, clacking sound and at the same time generated a spark that caused the blasting cap to explode. Once connected to the extension cord, squeezing the klacker was like pulling the trigger on a rifle. The claymore would explode, driving seven hundred ball bearings forward in the direction of the Vietcong. You would not want to find yourself facing a live claymore.

The final step in setting up the ambush was assigning the guards for the night. Someone had to be up all night, watching and listening. Pulling guard on an ambush was similar to pulling guard on a firebase except I had to be extremely quiet all of the time.

With everything set up, if someone came down the road during the night, the flash of the trip-flare would warn the guard. His first reaction was to blow the claymores. Blowing those claymores would wake everyone else up. Then, the rest of us would take it from there.

In a way, setting up an ambush on a road was like hunting deer from a tree stand in the woods. You find a trail or open area where you believe deer will pass. Then, you sit in the stand, quietly waiting for the deer to come to you. Sometimes you see them and get off a shot; most times, you do not.

When hunting deer or the Vietcong, there was this sense of heightened anticipation. Would we see something or would the night be uneventful? When hunting deer, the hope of a kill gets the adrenalin pumping. Unlike deer though, Vietcong can shoot back. Vietcong would kill us if they could. So when hunting Vietcong, there was this added anxiety and a sense of fear of what may happen.

Being the new guy on this trip, I was along as an observer. The ambush that night proved uneventful. Guard duty was like that most of the time. I lost sleep that night worrying about nothing.



Standing next to a bridge that I had booby-trapped.



Hiding a claymore mine in the grass near the bridge.

## Chapter 14-VIP Center

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Not long after the ambush, headquarters invited Ace High to the VIP Center in Bien Hoa. It had been a while since they had been there. The veterans were looking forward to the trip. Here it was only the second week in February and I was heading back to the VIP Center with them. Ace High surprised me by not leaving me behind on Buttons. After all, I had just come from there. I felt guilty in a way because I had not earned my way back. But the guilt did not sway me from going back with everyone.

This time, I was able to see and experience the place as an infantry soldier. I went to the outdoor theatre and saw a few movies. We swam in the above ground pool. The sun was vicious, so we could not stay in the water for long without getting a bad burn. I went to the bar and drank some beer. I was not a big beer fan yet, but I drank it anyway. As long as the beer was ice cold, I was okay with it.

I finally had the chance to listen to some of those Vietnamese bands that sang and played American rock and roll. It was weird hearing their version of the music and watching a group perform. The singers mimicked records as well as need be. I do not believe they knew how to speak English at all. All of the groups had dancing girls which helped make up for the lack of singing and playing skills.

A PX (Post Exchange) was close by, so I bought a camera and a radio. A PX was like a general store where we can buy food, writing paper, and electronics, all of the stuff that the Army did not provide free. The camera I bought was a Kodak Instamatic. I used it for my entire tour in Vietnam. Kodak made all kinds of Instamatics with different features. This one had basic features that included a fixed focus, fixed shutter speed, and a built in flash. An Instamatic was not as fancy as the 35mm cameras that were available at the time. That was all I wanted though, something simple to snap and shoot with.

The radio was one of those new Panasonic AM/FM transistor radios. It came with an earplug. I had to use the earplug, especially if I tried to listen while in the jungle. The Japanese made great radios and stereo equipment at the time. It was so different from the junk sold in the 1950s. By its look and heft, I knew that the radio was quality, inside and out.

When I moved through the dial, I found Armed Forces Radio. Depending on the time of day, I could listen to music, home news, and sports. Most of the stations though were Vietnamese stations. I could not understand what they said. Worse, they played strange music that I had never heard before.

The most important thing that happened to me while at the VIP Center was I finally started getting letters. They started arriving much earlier than I expected. What a relief! Standing in formation during mail call and finally getting something back felt unbelievable. I almost cried it felt so good.

Our four-day stay at the VIP Center zipped by. Before we knew it, busses took us back to Bien Hoa Air Force Base to catch a plane to Buttons. Before getting on the plane, I had someone take my picture with a freedom bird that sat there out on the tarmac. I wished I could have jumped on and left Vietnam behind. Then we flew back to Buttons where my first experience with the jungle was fast approaching.



Sandbags circled the VIP Center's open-air theatre.



Girls tending bar. The cans contained chips and pretzels.



Henry at the VIP Center above ground pool.



Visual entertainment with a Vietnamese rock-and-roll band.



Posing with a freedom bird at Bien Hoa Air Force Base.

# Chapter 15-Combat Assault

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Ace High had spent a good number of days on Buttons, then more days at the VIP Center. I had it easy so far. Now, everything was about to change for me. I was about to get a new experience. It was time again for A Company to do their *real* job. Soon after breakfast, we began preparations to head back to the jungle by helicopter. The lieutenant said we would be out for about fifteen days.

The Army term for moving infantry soldiers from a firebase to the jungle by helicopter was a combat assault. Battalion headquarters had ordered us into an area where they suspected a concentration of Vietcong. Our job was to hunt them down and eliminate them. We did that by patrolling an area until we found them or they found us.

It was dangerous work. When we set up an ambush and waited for them to come to us, we had the advantage of surprise. With us on the move, *they* had the advantage. They set up the ambush. They had the advantage of surprise. They fired first. It was like hunting a mountain lion lying in wait for you.

Preparation for a combat assault took place out on the log pad where helicopters picked us up. And no, the pad was not made of logs. Log was short for logistics. Logistics in part was the management effort involved in resupplying soldiers with food and water. Boxes of supplies waited for us out there.

The first step in preparation was to make sure my rifle was clean, lubricated, and ready to go. No problem there, drummed into me all through training was the need to keep my weapon ready for anything at all times. It was ready to go.

Boxes of ammunition and explosives were available on the log pad if we needed to replenish supplies. There were grenades, trip-flares, claymore mines, C-4 explosive, M16 rifle ammunition, and boxes of M60 machine gun ammunition.

Water was available if we needed to replenish empty canteens. They told me to carry at least ten quarts of water. On a scale, that weighed in at over twenty pounds. Headquarters expected us to make that water last for three days. Then they resupplied us in the jungle. I laced the water I planned

to use for drinking with a little Kool-Aid to kill the chlorine taste. The remaining water was left as-is for cooking and brushing my teeth.

One thing missing from my pack was three days worth of food. The food available to us consisted of C-Rations and LeRPs (Long Range Patrol Packets). We could take what we wanted within reason. Over time then, I learned what worked and what did not for me.

C-Rations were these individual meals in cans. I normally had them for breakfast and lunch. For breakfast, I carried chopped ham & eggs that I ate cold. It was like having pudding. I would also eat bread, pound cake, and coffee cake with cinnamon. They all came in cans. Fruit was always good to have for breakfast so I carried canned peaches, pears, fruit cocktail, and applesauce.

At lunch, we usually did not have time to heat anything. So for lunch, I would have a cold can of beans and franks, spaghetti & meatballs, chicken & noodles, or ham slices. When I say cold, I mean somewhat warm, because the cans sat in my pack all day. For a snack at lunch, I carried canned crackers with cheese or peanut butter spread on them. For dessert, there were cookies that came in a can. C-Ration boxes also provided some miscellaneous extras like cocoa, instant coffee, plastic spoons, salt and pepper, sugar, gum, toilet paper, cigarettes, and matches. I used all of it except the cigarettes.

To open all of those cans, we used a P38. A P38 was a small, hinged can opener that came in the C-Ration box. When folded, it was about the size and thickness of a quarter. It worked well considering its mini size.

The C-Rations we did not need or no one liked, we left behind on the log pad. When in the jungle, we destroyed food we did not like or could not use so the Vietcong could not eat it. Ham & Lima Beans was an example of a leave behind item. No one ate them. An affectionate name for Ham & Lima Beans was Ham and Muthas.

For supper, I ate LeRP's (Long Range Patrol Packets). A LeRP was a packet of freeze-dried food that I mixed with hot water, let steep, and then presto..., I had a meal. Flavors I remember were Spaghetti and Meat Sauce, Beef and Rice, Chicken and Rice, Beef Stew, Chicken Stew, and Chili Con Carne. Chili Con Carne was the worst. No matter how long I let them steep, some of the beans were hard and crunchy.

My pack weighed about eighty pounds with the equipment, three days of food and water, and my personal box. I weighed one-forty-five, not much

more than what the pack weighed. So as you might imagine, I had some trouble picking it up. The dilemma was I needed all of that gear!

I learned right away that I could not pick up the pack and swing it up on my back. I did not have the strength. There was only one practical way to get the pack on my back without help. I would sit against it on the ground, slip my arms through the shoulder straps, roll over on to my hands and knees, and then stand from there, using my legs to pick it up. When I was in the jungle, if bamboo was next to me, I grabbed it and pulled myself up, making use of my arms as well.

With the pack finally on my back, I could not stand up straight. I would have fallen over backwards. The only way to stand was to bend forward at the waist to center the load. With all of that heaviness, the straps pulled on my neck and cut into my shoulders. To lessen the pull of the pack on the straps, I hunched the pack up on my shoulders, close to my neck when standing. Some of the grunts slipped a folded towel under the straps for more cushioning. I did that as well. When walking, a periodic hunching and bouncing the pack upward was necessary to get that overwhelming feeling of weight off your shoulders.

Fully packed and ready to go, we waited for the helicopters. Huey helicopters were the primary means to move infantry soldiers to and from the jungle on combat assault. Hueys flew with two pilots sitting side by side up front. On each side of the ship was a door gunner. Each door gunner had an M60 machine gun mounted in front of him to protect the helicopter from ground fire. In the passenger area of a Huey, we could comfortably fit about six to eight infantry soldiers. So with a hundred and twenty men in Ace High, it would take five or six Hueys a few roundtrips to move everyone to the drop zone in the jungle.

It was quiet sitting there waiting on the log pad. I was lost in my own thoughts. Then off in the distance I heard the Hueys coming even before seeing them. The beating of the main rotors and the whine of the jet turbines combined in a low rhythmic tone that became steadily louder. Then out of nowhere, I saw them coming in low and fast over the jungle. In a moment they were there, all of them touching down together, one behind the other. Dust flying, main rotors churning at medium speed, the helicopters were ready to leap out again as soon as we were on board.

We loaded quickly, by platoon. Five or six Hueys could carry about two platoons. The scariest place to sit in a Huey was on the edge of the open

door. Sitting there, my legs hung over the side of the helicopter just above the struts. Hueys flew with the doors off, so when I sat on the door edge for the first time, it felt like I could easily fall out once underway. Surprisingly, holding the doorframe with one hand and the weight of the pack on my back kept me solidly in place. That was unless the helicopter tipped too much on a hard turn. Then I had that feeling again that I could fall. If I did not sit on a door edge, I sat on or in front of the jump seat located in the middle, just behind the pilots.

We lifted off, rising up and accelerating forward with increasing speed. When closer to the ground, the fear of heights affected me more when I sat on the door edge. Once we were up a couple of hundred feet though, the fear disappeared. We typically flew at an elevation of about two thousand feet and a speed of one-hundred-twenty knots. From that height and speed, I would see this panoramic view of the countryside while hearing the rush of the wind. A vibrant-green, never-ending jungle played out in front of us as we rushed along. Many times, we flew over rivers that divided the jungle with its wandering, weaving dirty-brown water. We never saw anything human or man-made from up there. Flying was pure joy. The joy did not last though because the flights averaged less than fifteen minutes. Soon we were dropping toward the jungle and flying low, just above the trees.

The role of the platoon landing first was to fan out and set up a perimeter. From there, they protected the rest of the Hueys as they dropped their load of men. Dropping in first was dangerous because we never knew what or who may be waiting for us.

As the helicopters approached the landing zone, fear of the unknown dominated my thoughts. What kind of reception would we get? Was there Vietcong in the area of the landing zone (LZ)? Would it be a hot LZ with machine gun fire coming at us? We were sitting ducks in those helicopters.

The Hueys slowed, and then dropped closer to the jungle. Door gunners raised the tip of their M60 machine guns, expecting trouble. Following their lead, I lifted the safety on my M16 and readied myself to fire if necessary.

Then before I knew it, the helicopter touched down and we jumped out. Once empty of men, the helicopter quickly lifted out and away. I moved in a crouch with the others toward the perimeter of the landing area. Once there, I got down, rested on my knees, and faced out toward the jungle with my weapon ready. Other helicopters dropped more men. Finally, everyone was down and the last helicopter lifted up, tipped forward and then disappeared

from sight. The sound of the helicopter remained until even that faded into the distance.

No Vietcong were waiting for us when we arrived. Anxiety lessened, and I had a moment to take in my new surroundings before we moved out.

My experience as an infantry soldier so far involved pulling guard on a firebase. A firebase was noisy and dusty. Vehicles, helicopters, planes and people were on the move during the day. There was energy on a firebase that I could see, hear, and feel.

Sitting on the jungle floor, I could see that this was different. It was quiet, peaceful, shady, and cooler. Sun filtered down through the jungle canopy above, leaving a splash of light here and there. I heard birds singing now and then and insects buzzing. It felt nice... though deep down I knew it would not last.



Soldiers loading packs with supplies.



Fully loaded and ready to go



The pilot and co-pilot from where we sat in a Huey.



A view from 2000 feet with the door gunner's M60 on the right.



A Huey helicopter flying in formation ahead of us.



The door gunner had his M60 up and ready for landing.

# Chapter 16-Working in the Jungle

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It was mid afternoon, so the company commander decided we would set up for the night, and move on in the morning. There were practical considerations on where to set up in the jungle. One rule, for example, was a site with good drainage if it rained. Rain was not a problem now, though. We were mid-way through the dry season. It had not rained since I arrived. More important were defensive considerations. Defending the top of a hill was easier than the side or bottom. Ultimately, the company commander made the final decision of where we circled up. Squads were evenly spaced on the outside of the circle. The captain, lieutenants, forward observer, and radio operator were in the center. Once we all knew our location for the night, the work of setting up began. We had to be finished before darkness closed in.

One task the captain and forward observer performed was radio the artillery battery. A forward observer was usually a low ranking officer skilled in working with artillery. They confirmed with the artillery battery where our actual location was on the map. If we needed artillery support during the night, it was critical that the battery knew exactly where we were. Otherwise, if we had a need for them, they may hit us instead of the enemy.

On that day, we had a good idea of where we were. We had not moved far from the landing area, which was a known location. To confirm, the artillery battery fired in two white phosphorous rounds, one at a time. Each exploded in a puff of white smoke high in the skyline nearby so the forward observer could see them. By pointing a compass at each puff of smoke and using the heading to triangulate back on a map he carried, the forward observer confirmed our exact location in the jungle.

At the squad level, we had lots of work to do. Each squad carried a shovel and with that shovel, we dug a rectangular shaped hole. The hole was the central fighting location for the squad. Holes were located on the edge of the perimeter and evenly spaced around the circle. Our job as a squad was to pull continuous guard duty from the hole. The hole was the focus of our squad's defense. It theoretically had to be large enough for everyone in the squad to fit in and fight from if attacked. While in the hole, the enemy could not hit one of us with a bullet or shrapnel. The hole was a remnant that

linked back to fighting from trenches in World War I.

In actuality, the hole was never large enough to hold all of us, not even close. The reason was we all hated to dig. Each man in the Squad had to dig one layer of the hole. The last layer dug never seemed to be as large as the upper layer that preceded it. The result was a hole that sloped inward. We were lucky if the hole could hold two or three people. No chance it would hold six or more.

With the hole completed, the machine gunner set up his M60 machine gun in front, facing it out toward the jungle. We all carried ammunition for the M60. During the night, we stored it next to the gun. The company had eight squads, so around the circle, there were eight M60 machine guns fully loaded and facing the jungle like spokes on a wheel.

We put out trip-flares and claymores to the way we set up ambushes. In the jungle, we put out more of them, at least four or five per squad. The klacker for each claymore ran back to the hole, next to the machine gun.

Before darkness set in, a fire team consisting of three or four rifleman moved out to set up a booby-trap on a road or trail nearby. A booby-trap was illegal according to the Geneva Convention, but we set them up anyway. If the Vietcong could set out booby-traps using sharpened *punji sticks*, it was only fair that we put out our own. At least that was how we justified breaking the rules.

The booby-traps we set up were crude but effective. It involved a claymore mine, blasting cap, trip wire, electrical wire, D battery, clothespin, two tacks, and a plastic spoon. It was not near as complicated as all of those components make it sound. The spoon, tacks, and clothespin were part of a switch that energized an electrical circuit if someone tripped the wire. Once the booby-trap was set up and armed, if a Vietcong soldier kicked the trip wire during the night, the claymore mine blew up and killed him.

Once we had the hole dug, the M60 machine gun in place, and trip-flares and claymores set up in front of us, we set up our sleeping accommodations. We slept near the hole. It was the dry season with no rain so we slept on an air mattress in the open air.

While we were all busy setting up for the night, someone had to watch for the enemy. To do that, the Captain sent out a couple of remote outposts. An outpost usually consisted of two men with rifles and a radio. The job consisted of moving out about fifty meters from the circle, sitting on the jungle floor, and then quietly watching and listening. We took books out

there to read while watching. Taking a book was not a good idea, but enemy activity had been quiet lately and we were lax. If we spotted enemy soldiers, the idea was to call in on the radio, ask for additional support, and then deal with the Vietcong from there.

When everything was set up in the circle, the Captain called the outposts by radio and told them to return. Before the outposts actually started back in, the company commander warned everyone in the circle so if a trip-flare accidentally popped, we did not blow a claymore on one of our own guys.

With our work done, we ate a LeRP for supper. The freeze-dried food required hot water so we heated water in a canteen cup. The Army supplied these blue heat tabs for heating water. Heat tabs came in a green packet similar in size to a York Peppermint Patty. They burned with a blue flame like sterno. The idea was to minimize flame size and brilliance. Heat tabs also minimized heat; it took forever to heat water with them.

To speed the process of heating water, we all used C-4 high explosive. I know, it sounds dangerous. But high explosive requires a blasting cap to explode. So C-4 was perfectly safe to light with a match and burn. When lit, it flared up, burned with a bright orange flame, and heated the water in no time. Once the water was boiling away, I would pour it into the open LeRP packet, fold over the top to keep the heat in and let it sit for ten minutes. When I opened it again and gave it a quick stir with a plastic spoon, I had a decent meal.

Before darkness finally closed in after supper, we had time to read a book, answer a letter, arrange guard for the night and hit the head. If I had to take a leak, I just stepped out in front of the hole and pissed away. A dump was a different issue. It was a process. First, I had to tell people that I was taking a dump so they would not shoot me out there. Then, I stepped out of the circle to find a place with privacy close by. I took a rifle, a shovel, toilet paper and a can of insect spray. With the shovel, the first thing I did was dig a small hole. One shovel full was plenty. Next, I took the insect spray and sprayed a circle on the jungle floor around the hole and me. When ready, I pulled down my pants, squatted (balancing on my heels) and then went. When done, I filled in the hole then walked back to the circle.

That circle we sprayed around us with insect repellent was a necessity. Well, land leeches were attracted to heat so they constantly bothered us during a dump. They would come at us from all directions while we squatted there vulnerable. Interesting though, leeches would not cross that line of

insect spray!

During the night, squad members had to pull guard at the hole for about two hours, like on the firebase. The squad leader worked out a system where everyone had the chance to pull first guard or last guard. Getting first guard was the best because I was already awake. When I finally went to bed, I could sleep through the night. Any other time, someone was waking me up out of a sound sleep to guard. Once awake, it was never easy to get back to sleep again. That was unless I had last guard. Then I was up and stayed up. All the other guard times involved waking from a sound sleep, guarding, and then trying to get back to sleep. When I finished guard, unless I was last in the chain, I had to wake up the next person. Then I had to make sure he was up and moving toward the hole before I could lie down again.

Every hole had a guard. So for a company with eight squads, we had eight people awake and pulling guard at any one time during the night. The company commander kept a guard in the center of the circle as well to listen for messages coming in over the radio. Now and then, someone fell asleep on guard. It happened, but not often, and never to me. With the hole left unguarded, it could stay that way for up to eight hours. Sleeping on guard could end up being the cause for getting someone killed. It was an Article 15 offence if someone fell asleep while on guard.

Pulling guard was a strange experience in the jungle. I sat there with my thoughts and the sounds of the jungle. It was boring out there because nothing happened most of the time. I would listen... think... listen... think... and then look at the glow of my watch and check the time. Then I would do some more listening and thinking. Now and then, I heard and maybe even saw animals such as parrots or monkeys in the shadows. Most times, I could not identify what the noises were out there. It might be creaking noises from bamboo. Insects made lots of noise and I had no idea what they were or what they were up to. It was perfectly dark out there, unless the moon was up and peeking through the jungle canopy. With no moonlight, I could see the hands on my watch with that phosphorous glow, but not much more than that. Moving around, I had to feel my way. Two hours could take forever. Finally, after checking my watch a dozen times, my stint ended, and it was time to wake up the next guy.

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In the morning, we got up when it was light enough to see. The first thing we did was have breakfast. Breakfast for me usually consisted of hot

chocolate, a can of fruit and coffee cake out of the can if I was lucky enough to find one on the log pad. To make hot chocolate, we had to breakout that C-4 again to heat the water. After breakfast, we retrieved our claymore mine and trip-flares out in front of the hole, grab our M60 ammunition and pack up. The fire team that set up the booby-trap the night before went out and retrieved it.

Catching malaria from a mosquito bite was a concern out there. So the medics made sure we took our malaria pills before we moved out in the morning. There was a small white pill we took every day and an oversized orange pill we took once a week. The medic handed them to us personally and watched us take them. If they did not watch us, some of the men would ditch them so they could catch malaria and get a free ticket out of the jungle. They would prefer fighting malaria for a month in a hospital to the job of a grunt. Soldiers tried other ways to get out of the jungle as well. Some even shot themselves in the foot and called it an accident as a way to get out.

Before leaving, we briefly discussed the orders for the day. This day and every day in the jungle, we had a mission to accomplish. For Ace High, missions were typically in remote jungle areas where there were no villages and no ordinary citizens. If we ran into anyone out there, we considered that person armed and dangerous. Vietcong tried to kill us if they had the chance and we would do the same.

Army brass decided where we patrolled each day based on their intelligence reports. If they thought there was a concentration of Vietcong in an area, they sent us there. We typically humped (walked) about eight hundred meters a day or about a half mile. I know you probably think that does not sound very far. You have to keep in mind it was hot, our packs were extremely heavy, and the jungle was so thick in places that we had to cut our way forward. Many days, we traveled far less.

The final step in the morning process was to take a final look around and make sure we had everything. Then we had to clean up. We made a pile of all of our trash and buried it. Trash consisted of mostly empty food packets and C Ration cans. We destroyed uneaten food by pissing on it if necessary. We did not want to leave anything behind that may have value to the enemy.

Moving out, we walked in single file spaced about ten feet apart. Walking with distance between us minimized how many of us may be killed or wounded if someone hit us with a burst of machine gun fire. If there was an easy or hard way to get to our objective, we always traveled the hard way

to avoid danger. That meant we traveled through thick jungle, swamps and streams. We never traveled on a road or well-used path.

As we moved forward, the lead person or point man carried his rifle in one hand and cut a path using a machete with the other. The compass man walked directly behind the point man. He directed the point man by telling him to veer left or right as necessary to stay on the compass heading. A pace count was kept so we knew how far we had walked in a particular direction. During training, we all learned how many normal steps we have to take to travel one hundred meters.

When moving, we moved slowly and deliberately, and then stopped and listened before moving on. Some of the stopping was due to the point man taking time to cut his way through thick vegetation. In that respect, it was like being in stop and go traffic. We stop, but do not always know why. We were careful in the way we moved. We did not want to walk into an ambush if we could avoid it. Navy seals say that there is no reason to hurry to your death and that was true for us as well.

Moving with a compass and keeping a pace count ensured that we knew approximately where we were on the map in case we needed help from artillery. Artillery batteries were accurate. A small howitzer could shoot a high explosive round seven miles and land it on a spot on a map within a thirty-meter circle. It was crucial then that we knew exactly where we were on the map to lessen the possibility of them mistakenly dropping a shell on us.

What complicated our ability to navigate and know our location in the jungle was a lack of landmarks. It was not as simple as saying I was standing on the road next to 295 Main Street. In the jungle, there were no roads, no houses, no ponds, nothing but thick vegetation. Navigation in the jungle was similar to navigating on the open ocean where all we could see was water in every direction. One advantage we had over navigating on the ocean was that we carried topographical maps. A topographical map provided information about land contour. If we thought we were in a particular place on the map and that spot indicated we were on the side of a hill, we could check that as confirmation. That was as good as it got though.

As we walked, the heavy packs quickly wore us down. Hunching then bouncing the pack up off the shoulders helped but not for long. We walked bent over most of the time like beasts of burden. So we got breaks during the day. The company stopped and then sent out small patrols to check areas to

the left and right of our direction of travel. During those times, if not on patrol, I could take off my pack, sit, and rest a bit. I could read or even write a letter during the wait. Those on patrol had it easier because they left their pack behind with the main group and only took a rifle and ammunition with them.

Insects were constantly after us out there. I had already mentioned leeches. Leeches were an irritant when taking a dump and an irritant when on the move. They were always working to get to bare skin so they could bite, and then suck blood. From the jungle floor, they jumped on and then inched up my boots. They could not get at a bare ankle because I tucked my pants into my socks. So they continued inching up my pant leg. There, if I spotted one, I knocked it off with a flick of my index finger as if I was playing finger football with it. If I missed one, eventually it inched its way up under my shirt and bit me just over the top of the pants.

As soon as I felt the bite, I reached under my shirt to find it. When I did, I ripped it away from my skin with a thumb and index finger and then throw it to the side. Many times, it fastened itself to one of my fingers as I tried to get rid of the little critter. Wherever leeches bit me, once removed, a bloody spot remained. I woke up in the morning and found bloody spots on my face from leeches. Of all the insects I dealt with, leeches were the worst.

One time, I set up for the night and put my air mattress down on a termite nest. They bit through the rubber material with pinchers and let the air out while I slept. I knew it was termites because a few of them got their pinchers stuck in the rubber. When I had the chance, I ordered another air mattress from the Supply Sergeant. While waiting for it though, I had to sleep directly on the jungle floor for a while. To avoid that hassle, I learned never put the air mattress down on the jungle floor until I had sprayed insect repellent on the spot. That solved the problem of waking up with a flat air mattress.

As we walked, we were constantly slapping at mosquitoes. We had a small bottle of insect repellent that we used to smear on ourselves to help keep them away. If we did not watch for them, red biting ants attacked by jumping down on us from an overhead branch. Bees both large and small were always an issue. A friend walked into a nest of small bees one time and was stung so badly, his whole face swelled up. A *medevac* (medical evacuation helicopter) had to pick him up and take him out of the jungle for treatment. Living in the jungle on a daily basis was a pain in the ass in so

many ways.

After three days of moving through the jungle, we were running low on food and water. The goal then was to find a clearing to bring in food and water by helicopter. Most times, we found a clearing within a reasonable distance that was large enough to land a helicopter. There were other times when no clearings were close enough or large enough to drop one in. Then, we would get the machetes out and cut bamboo for an hour or two. A few times, the helicopter dropped in supplies from the treetops because there was no other way to get it done. This time though, we found a clearing.

The supply helicopter had our position on the map and set a course to fly to our clearing. To help the helicopter find us, we marked the clearing using a smoke grenade so he could see it from the air. Smoke grenades produced smoke in different colors including red, green, blue and purple. There were times when Vietcong heard our helicopter and tried to use a smoke grenade to draw it toward them so they could shoot it down. To avoid having the pilot misled by Vietcong, we told the pilot what color smoke to expect.

Once the pilot saw the smoke, he would drop in fast, wait while we quickly unloaded, then immediately leave. They delivered water in five-gallon *jerry* cans made of black plastic. Altogether, they delivered about fifty cans, when you realize that we all carried about two gallons of water each. They also dropped mail bags filled with letters and sometimes packages if they were not too large. Sometimes we got clean gunpowder canisters containing a semi-hot meal that we ate on paper plates. We unloaded boxes and boxes of C Rations and LeRPs. It took a few helicopter drops to get all of the food and water to us. On the final run, we loaded empty gunpowder canisters, empty jerry cans, mailbags, and anything else that had to go back.

A new guy joined us, Rob from Georgia, on one of those food and water supply drops. Rob became one of my best friends out there. He was older than most of us; I believe twenty-four at the time. He had graduated from Kent State with a degree in Marine Biology. It was unusual to find an infantry soldier out there with a college degree. Only officers seemed to have them. Rob was a large-framed yet quiet with the demeanor of Abe Lincoln, as I would have imagined him. Maybe a better description of Rob's manner was like Fess Parker in the movie *Davy Crockett*. Rob had a gruff voice and was always to the point with everything he said.

So besides supplies, new guys joined the company on supply day. Also, veterans near the end of their tour left us on supply day. There was this

continuous turnover of men, coming and going. One minute I had a friend; the next minute he was gone and never seen again.

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The days zipped by quickly. Every day was similar; we packed up, moved, set up, slept, and then packed up again. Every day I learned a bit more. I had a lot to learn and that helped make the time move swiftly.

Besides the usual jungle and swamps, we walked through old rubber plantations abandoned by the French long ago. Rubber trees were evenly spaced in rows similar to an apple orchard back home. Now though, jungle growth was choking them to death. I gathered some of the raw rubber that bled from the trees like sap from a pine and sent it home in an envelope along with a letter. It was cool. My sisters took the raw rubber to school one day and showed it to the class.

I also found *Chieu Hoi* leaflets in the jungle and sent some home as well. Special planes and helicopters dropped these leaflets in the jungle hoping that Vietcong and NVA soldiers picked them up. Helicopters flew around with large speaker systems that further explained how to use the leaflets. *Chieu Hoi* leaflets were a free, safe conduct, pass that Vietcong and NVA soldiers could use to defect. With pass in hand, they could walk in to any South Vietnamese Army outpost and surrender.

Vietcong and NVA soldiers who surrendered in this way became Kit Carson scouts. As scouts, they served in the same way that Indians served with the US Cavalry out West. On one hand, they had a better life. If later captured by the North Vietnamese however, scouts risked execution. When we finally left Vietnam in 1975, many Kit Carson scouts came back to the United States with us and became citizens.

We found abandoned Vietcong bunkers and a Vietcong graveyard. One of the veteran Sergeants dug up some of the bodies because it was common he said for Vietcong to hide weapons in old graves. He carried an enormous bowie knife on his belt and used it to poke at the bodies. It was a sadistic thing to do, I thought.

Days out there in the jungle turned into a week. Soon we were closing on a second week. The first few days had seemed slow, but time seemed to accelerate the longer we were out there. During that time, I transitioned from an inexperienced recruit to a semi-experienced grunt. I was wearing the same clothes I began with two weeks before. I had a two-week beard. I was not asking as many questions. I no longer felt like an outsider. Now, I was one

of the guys. I must say that I was proud of myself. I had made it this far.

Just when I began wondering how long headquarters would keep us out here, the Captain announced early one morning we had orders to go back to Buttons and pull guard for a while. After breakfast, we found a clearing and radioed for a group of Hueys to pick us up. We were back on Buttons by noon.



In the jungle with M60 ammunition wrapped around me. It was easier to carry machine gun ammunition this way.



Sitting in the hole next to the M60 machine gun.



A sleeping area set up in the jungle.



Purple smoke popped to call in a supply helicopter.



A supply helicopter delivering food and water.



Looking up at the sky from the jungle floor.



Abandoned rubber plantation overrun by jungle growth.



Look carefully. The stacked bamboo and the dark hole below was an entrance to an abandoned Vietcong tunnel.

# Chapter 17-Back to Buttons

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Safely back on Buttons, I reflected back on my first time out in the jungle. We were out there for thirteen days. It was good that we did not make contact with Vietcong. It allowed me to learn without having to deal with the added pressure of a firefight. A newfound awareness of how tough it was out there dealing with the jungle, the insects, and the work every day was not so great. I could understand how it drove soldiers to drastic measures like not taking malaria pills or even shooting yourself in the foot.

I did not realize it at the time, but we were overly lax out there. The company had not made contact with the enemy for a while now, so there was a tendency to get more careless over time. The hole we dug every night continued to shrink in size because they were a pain in the ass to dig. It was risky not having a large enough hole with room for everyone. Our machine gunner had his machine gun constantly wrapped in a towel to keep it clean. If we had run into trouble, he would not have been ready to use it. We put out fewer trip-flares and claymores at night than we should have. We made more noise than we should have. Some even listened to a radio with an earplug when pulling guard in the jungle. No one seemed to care enough to make a stink about it.

Now that we were back at Buttons, my first thought was to clean up. We had spent thirteen days in the jungle and the only personal hygiene I practiced out there on a daily basis was to brush my teeth. Now and then, I had washed my face using a steel pot for a sink if I had spare water, but that was it. We stunk to high heaven, although we did not seem to notice body odor anymore after the first four or five days. The green jungle uniforms we wore had started out clean, but now they had a reddish tinge to them from the constant contact with Vietnam's red dirt. My socks were stiff with sweat and dirt. At night in the jungle, I took my socks off temporarily so I could sprinkle foot powder on my feet. Those socks were so dirty, sweaty, and full of foot powder; they would stand next to my boots. I could easily tell which had been on my left or right foot.

A shower was available, so I grabbed a shirt, a pair of pants, and socks from a pile of clean clothes. Then I showered and shaved. It felt so damn good being clean again. I left my dirty clothes in another pile. I was glad I

did not have to wash them. On a firebase as large as Buttons, and so close to the village of Song Be, Vietnamese women washed the clothes.

At mail call, I received my first package from my Mom. There were Swedish cookies from my grandmother, a batch of brownies from my sisters, candy, and Kool-Aid. Others had been sharing packages with me, so I shared with them. She used popcorn for cushioning and we ate that too.

My Dad had sent me a hacksaw blade. I planned to use it in the jungle to cut pieces of bamboo to send home. Since arriving in Vietnam, I had seen large diameter bamboo everywhere. I thought it might be fun to try to make beer mugs out of it. I never did make those beer mugs because the bamboo dried out, and then cracked over the years. For the longest time though, I used one of the pieces as a pencil holder at work.

I learned in a letter that my brother Dave had finished basic training. He headed to advanced infantry school at Fort Jackson. What I hoped would not happen, had. He would be an infantry soldier like me. With me already here in Vietnam, I did not think he would have to serve here. This was no place to be if he could help it, especially in the infantry.

I had a tooth pulled on Buttons to resolve a toothache. The dental office was like something out of the Wild West. It was dirty and dingy with antiquated equipment. Back then, rather than take the time to fill a tooth, dentists yanked it, especially if it was a molar.

Funny, I had a much more favorable feeling about pulling guard on Buttons this second time around. It felt good to take regular showers, eat hot food, have the time to wind down, and relax. Two weeks before, pulling guard on Buttons felt much more painful. Amazing how a little jungle living can change your attitude.

So here I was, back on Buttons as the month of February ended. I arrived in early January and now it was the end of February. I made some progress.



A typical shower used by grunts.



I believe this was a heated shower on Buttons for officers.

# Chapter 18-Candy

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In March, 1970, there was a chess game going on between the US government, the North Vietnamese government, and the American population.

Young Americans on college campuses demonstrated for peace in Vietnam. Everyone was sick of the war. The U.S. Congress wanted to leave Vietnam because they had lost the support of the American people. Also, it cost the U.S. a fortune to be there. President Nixon, however, did not want to leave Vietnam unless he could do it with honor.

Peace talks between the U.S. and the North Vietnamese government were on hold. The North Vietnamese wanted us to leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs. As a condition for peace, they wanted the United States to look aside while they overthrew the South Vietnamese government. If we stood by and allowed the North Vietnamese to take over South Vietnam, President Nixon thought the U.S. would look helpless and lose face in the world.

A new U.S. government program called *Vietnamization* (that was a mouthful) provided a way to get us out of Vietnam without losing face. Vietnamization provided aid and training to the South Vietnamese military. Instead of the U.S. doing almost all of the fighting for the South Vietnamese, we let them do more of the fighting. The NVA (North Vietnam Army) and Vietcong responded to Vietnamization by attacking U.S. positions in South Vietnam, killing many U.S. soldiers. The South Vietnamese responded to the Vietcong attacks with an ARVN (Army of Republic of Vietnam) advance. The South Vietnamese pushed the NVA and Vietcong back to the border of Cambodia. In support of South Vietnam, the U.S. responded with air strikes on NVA soldiers in Cambodia. It was a chess match with no obvious end game in sight.

I left Buttons in early March with the rest of Ace High for two weeks of guard duty on Firebase Candy. Candy was a small firebase, much smaller than Buttons. In fact, it was small enough that one company of infantry soldiers could easily protect it. Candy had a crude mess hall that served two hot meals a day. That left us with C Rations for lunch. The artillery batteries there consisted of 105-millimeter howitzers and the larger 175-millimeter

Howitzers. Candy would not be a permanent firebase like Buttons. The Army built it in February and planned to abandon it in April.

Candy was located northeast of Buttons and about seven miles from the Cambodian border. At the time, I did not realize that Cambodia was a sanctuary for the Vietcong and NVA. Army brass did not share information with grunts unless there was a real need to know. Vietcong infantry soldiers went there to escape the war in the same way we went to the VIP Center. They could relax, receive food and ammunition, and then return to the fighting in Vietnam.

What I did know was Candy's artillery pounded away with continuous barrages, day and night. It did not let up. It was later I realized that the purpose for that nonstop bombardment was to soften up the Vietcong and NVA soldiers located just over the Cambodian border.

Living on Candy during the day was much more trying than living at Buttons. The bunkers were wide open with no roofs over them. The sun baked down all day and there was no place to hide from it. Sitting there in a bunker pulling guard during the day, I sweat like a pig while baking to a crisp.

Adding to the problem was Vietnam's red dirt. During the dry season, the dirt turned into a fine, red, dust similar to talcum powder. Helicopters were coming and going all day, carrying in ammunition for the big guns. The wash of air from the helicopter blades lifted the red powder, forming red dust clouds that drifted over the firebase. The combination of those dust clouds and sweat left us with a coating of red from head to toe. It was a hellish place to be. I wished we would get some rain for relief, but the rainy season was still months away.

Nights on Candy were no better. The big guns never let up. They pounded away day and night. So during the night it was hard to get any sleep. Every time a big gun fired, the ground shook and I found myself lying there with my eyes wide-open waiting for the next one.

To help keep the Vietcong from infiltrating Candy at night, the artillery battery lit the place up after dark. They provided light by popping parachute flares high in the air on a regular basis. A thousand feet overhead, the flares popped open, lit up, and then drifted slowly back down to earth. It seemed like there was always at least one in the air keeping the field-of-fire continuously lit up.

It was a wonder I had any sleep at all on Candy. I must have been

getting sleep though, because some of the guys told me I was a loud snorer. Wow, maybe I could have gotten out of serving in the jungle because I snored too loud!

It was only March. There were nine months to go and I began to feel the pressure of living and working in this place. Candy was the next step in what was an ever-increasing mental burden. It was getting to me. It did not seem to matter where I was. Each place had its own brand of strain. How would I take it when faced with the added pressure of fighting the Vietcong for the first time?

Only a short while ago, I complained about the living conditions at the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Division. Boy, what I would give to serve the rest of my time back there. That would be like heaven. Even serving on Buttons for my entire tour would be great.

Interesting how every step forward, every new experience for me in this country was not as good as the one that I left behind. I needed to find a way to get some relief. What could I do to make it better?



Candy from the floor hatch of a Chinook helicopter.



A dust cloud from the wash of helicopter blades.



From left, Steve, Wade, Tony & Pete



Rob sitting at a bunker on Candy pulling guard with an M60.



175-millimeter Howitzer, one of the larger artillery pieces.



105-milimeter Howitzer, the smallest artillery piece.

# Chapter 19-Make It Better

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So I asked myself, what could I do in Vietnam that would make the living conditions better or at least more tolerable? On my first combat assault, I remembered that I lived in the jungle for two weeks while those helicopter door gunners headed back to the good life somewhere. It struck me that the door gunner's job on a Huey was far better than what I was doing. Sure, they were sitting ducks at times, hovering over the jungle where a Vietcong soldier could easily shoot them. On the bright side, they were back in the rear every night. I imagined they had beds to sleep in. They had Vietnamese hooch maids to keep their area spotless, boots polished, and clothes cleaned. They always had a hot meal. They could go see a movie, drink beer at a bar, and eat in a restaurant down town. Wow, they had it made compared to me.

No time like the present, so I started the process of applying for a door gunner position. I requested a transfer application. I signed up to take a flight physical. It may take six months to get the job but I did not care. It made me feel better that I was working on a way to get out of here.

Another thing I did that made things better was I started a beer and soda ration. At first, I thought it was not such a good idea. I was not a serious beer drinker and I was not a fan of soda either. On the positive side though, beer was alcohol and alcohol was an escape. For about three dollars a week, I could get about seven cans of beer and soda. I kept twenty-five dollars a month for spending money and sending the rest of my pay home. So I had the money to pay for it. Some preferred beer and others preferred soda, so there was horse-trading going on. I could trade for all beer! It made sense, so I signed up.

Well, once I started, I had a beer, just one beer, most every night. The beer was warm, almost hot because it had been sitting in my pack all day. So they would not explode in the heat, beer shipped to Vietnam in steel cans. Over time, I learned to suck down a hot beer and look forward to it! If I drank it quickly, I would get a quick little buzz. It did not last long, but it was enough to take the edge off the strain. It was nice.

Even better, there were days when I could turn a beer into a miraculous experience. To create the miracle, I needed a block of ice. Bulk ice was

available on a firebase. It came out by helicopter to the jungle sometimes with food. With a block of ice, I could spin a beer. Let me tell you how.

To spin a beer, you lay the beer sideways on the block of ice. If you are right handed, place the thumb and forefinger of your left hand on either side of the can to keep it from sliding off the block. With the can lying there between your two fingers, start spinning the can with your right hand. Spin it slowly at first, and then increase the speed until it is going as fast as you can make it go. By starting slowly, in less than a minute, the beer will melt a depression into the block. The depression helps keep the beer in place as you spin it faster and faster.

A mechanical engineer would tell you that the spinning of the beer optimized the heat transfer from a hot body to a cold one in accordance with the 2<sup>nd</sup> law of thermodynamics. That is why the can melted the depression in the ice so quickly. In addition, heat transfer by vaporization was at work here. Water on the spinning can evaporated into the tropical air and took heat with it.

I did not know any of those things then. What I did know was in three minutes I could transform a hot beer can into a beer that was so cold, drinking it was like a religious experience. Spinning a beer and drinking the result was another way for me to relieve some of the nervous tension I felt.

As I sat there spinning a beer, I noticed that many of the grunts had mustaches, beards, or both. I learned that when they were stressed, growing a beard or mustache helped relieve it for some reason. Growing *both* may even have doubled the effect! Beards and mustaches made grunts feel *good*. You know, it may have been a form of rebellion. Being rebellious can make you feel good at times. Maybe that was why we all wore hippie beads, Saint Christopher medals, and boony-hats. Well, I started a mustache and immediately felt better.

Mail piled into me now and mail was good for the soul. Getting letters and packages helped me remember that there was a different world out and I would back to it someday. I felt overwhelmed with all of the goodie packages my Mom was sending me. Besides the normal cookies, brownies, popcorn, donuts, and Kool-Aid, I was seeing new things. She would send canned goods like those small pop-top puddings. She sent magazines to read such as *Guideposts* and *Reader's Digest*. It was great receiving all of that variety. I had to tell her to slow down a bit. I could not carry it all, and there was no place to store or save it.

My mom told me that the local newspaper printed one of my letters. I never did find out which one. I must have said something that impressed her and she thought it was worth sharing with everyone else in town. It is interesting when you experience a place for a while. Although it is different from home, you take it for granted. What I put in letters was ordinary day-to-day events. To my mom, it was extraordinary. It made me realize that I was doing something special.



We could buy ice-cold Coke for a dollar from the local kids near Buttons. They had a foam cooler on the back of the bicycle.

## Chapter 20-Souvenirs

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Another infantry company arrived on Candy in early March. With them on the firebase, we could see that there was not enough space for everyone. So battalion headquarters ordered us to leave Candy and patrol the jungle close by. They said we could return in three days. Orders were orders, so we packed three days worth of food and water, and then walked over the berm and into the jungle.

Army brass thought the Vietcong and NVA in Cambodia may be pissed at us with the ordinance we threw at them. They may try to attack Candy, overrun us, and shut us down. So for three days, they wanted us to hunt for enemy soldiers approaching Candy. We had been fortunate so far. We had not been involved in a firefight since I arrived. We heard, though, that enemy activity was increasing near the Cambodian border. With that, the Captain said there was a good chance we may see some action.

It was a relief in a way heading out from Candy. We left behind that dirty, dusty, hot, and dry firebase. We left behind that continuous ground-shaking noise from the artillery. It was peaceful and cooler out in the jungle. I was more familiar with the process of working in the jungle now. Setting up at night, pulling guard, patrolling during the day, and then setting up at night again was routine.

Before leaving Candy, I grabbed some of the parachutes from those flares that lit up Candy at night. They were lying around out in the open-field-of-fire area. I kept the better ones and packed them in my rucksack. I began to think that sending some souvenirs' home might be a good thing. Along the same line, when we finished setting up that first night in the jungle, I cut some short lengths of bamboo about four inches in diameter. I wanted to send them home to make beer mugs someday. The hacksaw blade my Father had sent me did not work well. The blade had plugged with sawdust and stopped cutting because the bamboo was saturated with water. So instead of using the blade, I cut some pieces with a machete and then threw them in my rucksack.

On our second day out, we ran into another infantry company working the same area we were. They had seen action and we met them soon after their firefight. While there, I saw my first dead Vietcong soldier. He was

lying there on the ground in that odd, unnatural way that always seems to signify death. Machine gun fire killed him. It was strange seeing death like that for the first time. It struck me that the same thing could easily happen to me. As I stared at him lying there, I noticed the sandals he wore. I thought it would be nice to have those sandals for a souvenir. He sure did not need them anymore. I wanted to grab them, but I did not believe it was my place to do that, so I walked away.

I did tell one of the squad leaders though that I had an interest in the sandals. The next thing I knew, he handed them to me. He had gone back and grabbed them. I was too new to take those sandals off a dead body myself, at least without asking. Maybe I did not feel that I had a right to them. I may have felt different if someone in Ace High had killed him or even if I had killed him. I do not know.

As I had said before, we named the sandals Ho Chi Mien Racing Slicks because they made them from old tires and used strips of inner tube for straps. These particular sandals still had some tread left on them, so they were reasonably new. They were small, like a size seven. Vietcong men were little guys. Well, I threw the sandals into my rucksack along with the parachutes and bamboo.

When I got an idea in my head that it might be nice to grab some souvenirs to send home, it happened quicker than I expected. My rucksack bulged. I still have the stuff as well as some old Army magazines from back then. I take the souvenirs out now and then as a way to revive old memories.



Taking pictures during a pause while on patrol.



Taking pictures during a pause while on patrol

# Chapter 21-Combat Leader Course

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When we humped back to Candy, I was surprised to learn that I had been selected to attend a combat leadership course in Bien Hoa. Now another leadership-training program dangled in front of me. Maybe the Company Commander received some feedback that I had potential. Well, I was not going to complain because it meant living the good life in Bien Hoa for ten days.

The Army offered Combat Leader training in Vietnam because there was a shortage of NCOs. In past wars, like World War II, there was less need for NCOs. Battles were large so commissioned officers made the decisions. The Vietnam War, however, was a guerrilla war characterized by small squad and platoon level skirmishes. So here, the Army needed NCOs to provide independent thinking and decision-making at the squad level.

Another reason for the shortage of NCOs was the Army could not tap into the reserve ranks to get them. This strategy worked because we threw everything we had at large wars. Vietnam was a much smaller war, so President Johnson had made the decision not to draw from the reserve ranks. So the Army offered training in Vietnam as a fast track way to grow soldiers with leadership potential into NCOs.

In mid March, I flew back to Buttons from Candy to catch a plane to Bien Hoa. On Buttons, I realized I had an opportunity to ship home those souvenirs I had been collecting in my pack. So I grabbed an old C Ration box, wrapped the parachutes, bamboo, and Ho Chi Min Racing Slicks with an old poncho liner blanket for padding, and then shipped the bundle home. One of my sisters wanted me to send some live animals from Vietnam as well. I had to tell her the Army would not let me. With the box in the mail, I made my way to Bien Hoa.

The Army held the leadership course at the VIP Center. It could not have worked out any better. They began by telling us that the goal of Combat Leadership Training was to train and deliver future Squad Leaders. The Army wanted leaders that could run a team of six to eight grunts. In addition, if the platoon leader was wounded or killed, the squad leader could step in

and become platoon leader. All of that sounded like an awful lot of responsibility and I had no experience. Why did they pick me?

Training went over many of the squad tactics drills I had during infantry training. This time though, they focused more on leadership. An instructor taught us how to deal with different personalities when handling people issues in the field. They taught us how to make quick decisions. In a nutshell, they taught us how to lead. Throughout the ten days, instructors worked on building up within us the confidence to take control when required. We had to be more than a good soldier that followed orders and kept his powder dry.

I would like to tell you that the ten-day course was inspiring, eye opening, and made all the difference in my life from that day forward. It would be a lie though. What was truly important to that twenty-year-old back then was sleeping in a bed with a mattress, eating three hot meals a day, drinking cold beer and soda, watching free movies, swimming at the pool, and enjoying those Vietnamese rock and roll bands with dancing girls every night. More importantly, the course allowed me to spend a few less weeks in the jungle.

I have to admit that taking the course did have an impact on my future. As soon as I returned to Ace High, I became what the Army referred to as a fire team leader, taking out small patrols in the jungle. I made rank (was promoted) faster. In later years, I managed engineers in the design and construction of automated control systems for large industrial facilities. Leadership experience had to start somewhere. For me, it began in the jungle.



C-7A Caribou flew personnel between Buttons and Bien Hoa.



The classroom for Combat Leader training at Bien Hoa.

## Chapter 22-Calling Home

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March was almost over when I returned to Buttons from combat leadership training. I had managed to avoid the jungle for the final two weeks of March. It was great. There was a large packet of letters waiting for me on my return. I could never grow tired of getting letters. I learned the Army closed Candy while I was away. Good, I thought. I did not want to go back there again.

While on Buttons, I learned by chance that they had a way of allowing soldiers to call home. Calling home from Vietnam was not an easy thing to do in 1970. It took a team of people to pull off making the call. There were no cell phones or satellite phones back then to help.

On the Buttons end, the Army had a ham radio set up in a tent. A ham radio was similar to those owned by amateur radio operators around the world. Radio operators used ham radios to talk to other radio operators as a hobby. The hobby was similar in a way to the CB (Citizens Band) radio I used as a kid. It was not just the truckers using CB radios to jabber with each other like in the 1975 C. W. McCall song, "Convoy".

Outside the tent, there was a line of guys waiting to make calls. The line moved along quickly though because calls were limited to a few minutes. Soon, I found myself stepping through the flap in the tent. Wow, I thought. I could not believe I was doing this.

The call began with the ham radio operator on Buttons contacting another radio operator somewhere in the United States. The operator in the United States in turn called my parents on a regular telephone, long distance. Once my parents were on the line, the radio operator explained to them what was going on. They were stunned. He said to them that he would link the telephone to his radio so you can talk to your son Richard in Vietnam. "You must say, *over*" he said, "when you are through speaking, so I can switch the radio from transmit to receive." I got similar instructions on my end. Once we all understood the instructions, the operator handed me the mike. He said to "Press the transmit button and say something."

Nothing came out. Making that call was an unbelievably emotional experience for me. It brought tears to my eyes. I could not speak at first. I finally said something, only God knows what, and they responded. It was so

good to hear them. After that initial exchange, I remembered to watch what I said. In letters, I always said there was no need to worry. I had much more control over what I said in a letter. Communicating real time, by radio, was harder to control. I did not want to blurt out something that scared them. As I got going, I talked about the weather, the kids, and the leadership course I had just finished. My Mom told me they had received the box of souvenirs in the mail. She said that Dave finished infantry training and would serve in Panama. I was glad to hear he was not bound for Vietnam. They did not ask and I did not say where those sandals came from until I was safely home. Time ticked by so quickly. I was on the radio with them for four or five minutes. Others were waiting, so the call was over with before I knew it.

Making that call felt magical. I walked away from the tent as if I was floating on air. In today's world, it would be similar to standing on the moon and speaking with someone on earth. It was like talking to someone from a past life if you can imagine that. I said before that when I arrived in Vietnam, I felt like I had fallen through a rabbit hole into another world. Creating that temporary ham radio link and speaking through it to my Mom and Dad made home feel real again.

In thinking back, I cannot imagine how the ham radio operator on Buttons kept himself together doing that job. Hearing the emotion in those phone calls day after day had to be tough, but maybe not. He may have had the best job in Vietnam.



Posing with an artilleryman's pet monkey. I have a boony-hat on my head and letters from home in my pocket.

## Chapter 23-Rainy Season

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In April 1970, Apollo 13's commander, Jim Lovell, radioed "Houston, we've got a problem!" when an oxygen tank exploded 200,000 miles from earth. Also that month, Paul McCartney announced the breakup of the Beatles. Vietnam and politics churned in the news. Bending to pressure, President Nixon announced in April that we would soon begin a withdrawal of one hundred fifty thousand men from Vietnam. While we pulled out, the South Vietnamese Army would fill the vacuum by taking over the defense of their country. He followed by saying that the U.S. and South Vietnam planned to invade *Cambodia*.

Nixon saw the invasion of Cambodia as a way to demonstrate the success of the Vietmanization program. More importantly, the invasion would disrupt North Vietnam's ability to make war in South Vietnam. Doing that would buy time to ensure success of the U.S. troop withdrawal program.

I found myself in early April on my way back to the jungle. I had a nice two weeks in March training in Bien Hoa, and now it was back to reality. Before leaving Buttons, I checked in to see if there was anything new about my transfer to the door gunner position. I was looking forward to something positive happening, but there was no news.

What was happening however was the dry season was transitioning to the rainy season. Vietnam did not have seasons like those that I lived with in New England where we had four distinct seasons. Vietnam had two, and the transition was becoming noticeable.

When I arrived in Vietnam, it was the middle of the dry season. I had been living with it for the last three months. The dry season had hot days, high humidity, parched red earth, and no rain at all. With the heat and lack of water, the ground cracked in places. It looked like a broken windshield. In other places, like Candy, constant tramping reduced the earth to a fine talcum powder. When I stepped in that powder, I actually sunk in a bit. Then, when I stepped out, I felt this slight suction on your foot, as if it wanted to hold onto me. For me, the dry season was at its worst on Candy. It was a hot, baking, hell of a place to live and work.

The rainy season in April began subtly and predictably. Black clouds appeared out of nowhere in the late afternoon and it rained. I could almost

set my watch to it. We would get a touch of cool air, a ten-minute shower, and then it was gone. At first, it was like this refreshing gift from heaven. Then, the ten minutes became thirty minutes. Then, thirty minutes became two hours. Before I knew it, it changed from a gift to another pain in the ass.

The trouble with rain was the Army did not plan around it. The Army ignored the rain. In the jungle, it did not make a bit of difference what we were doing when rain approached. We had ponchos, but we did not use them because they made noise when walking. We simply got wet. In the beginning, if I got wet in the evening, my body heat dried me off as I slept through the night. If I got wet during the day, the sun came out and helped with the drying process. As the rainy season kicked into full gear, however, I stayed wet continuously.

With the rainy season, I could see the value in carrying my personal box (ammo can). It was heavy, of course, and we had more than enough to carry. It was a lifesaver, though, because it was waterproof. At least my wallet, camera, radio, writing paper and other miscellanies items stayed dry. Carrying that box made me feel better. *Something* at least stayed dry. Without the box, I would have felt a hell of a lot worse.

The normal day-to-day work process in the jungle changed because of the rain. Now we had more to do when we set up at night. Building a *hooch* (shelter for sleeping) at night was the major change. A shelter consisted of two ponchos, snapped together and then fastened down over a bamboo frame. Using a machete, we built the frame by cutting a crossbeam and then fastening it with shoelaces between two vertical posts. Stretching the two ponchos over the beam, we tied down the four corners with more shoelaces. Two to three men could fit their air mattress under a two-poncho shelter. In the morning, we disassembled the hooch and stored the ponchos and shoelaces in our pack.

Pulling guard in the rain was especially painful. When the guy that had finished woke me, most times, rain was beating down on the poncho over my head. Hearing that rain, I did not want to crawl out from under my blanket. There was almost nothing worse than climbing out from under a warm, dry hooch and getting soaked for two hours by the hole. The soaking, combined with the chill in the air, made me feel cold, shivery, and miserable.

A simple thing like lighting a match to heat water for cocoa in the morning or a LeRP at night was tough. Inevitably, the matches got wet and

would not light most of the time.

During the dry season, I wished for rain; now I wished for the dry season again. More pain, more burden; this job steadily worsened. It was never ending.

Long after I had returned home from Vietnam and even now, a simple pleasure of mine is waking to rain beating on the roof. The pleasure is knowing that I do not have to go out and sit in it. I do not have to pull guard anymore. I can roll over and simply drift back to sleep. Before I do, however, I listen to it for a spell.



In the jungle soaked from rain.

## Chapter 24-Pressure From Above

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Rotation: Every month had new guys dropping in and crafty, old veterans leaving us behind. One of the new guys that joined us in April was Steve. Steve dropped in on us on a food and water drop out in the jungle. He was a happy-go-lucky kid from California. He was younger than I was; he had just joined the Army right out of high school. Steve got married a few months before arriving in Vietnam. He was the only married person I knew in Vietnam. Others may have been, but they never mentioned it. Today, it is common to have married men in combat zones. Then it was unusual. One of the reasons was as a group we were so much younger. Another reason I remember was if someone was married, the Army could not place him in a combat zone. Well, if that was true, it did not help Steve.

The appearance of new guys was always a bright spot. It was fun razzing them about being a new guy. Also, it was nice being around them because they had not been in the country long enough to become jaded and bitter.

Another new guy joined us the month before. We had not seen or heard from him yet. It was his presence, like a dark cloud on the horizon, that we started feeling in April. Lieutenant Colonel Ianni had replaced Colonel Iverson as Battalion Commander.

The battalion's mission when I arrived in Vietnam was to patrol the area around Buttons. Patrolling prevented the Vietcong from organizing ground attacks and rocket attacks. Since I had arrived in February, it was quiet around Buttons with virtually no contact with the Vietcong. We had heard there were scattered enemy units in the area. But it seemed that they did not want to fight us. I thought at the time that they had no driving reason to fight, so they did not. Why fight an overwhelming force if all they had to do was wait for the demonstrations in the United States to force us to leave the country?

In Ianni's eyes, due to this lack of enemy contact, he believed the fighting force he inherited had become inexperienced, sloppy, and complacent. If we met a large, strong, and determined force, our lack of readiness would get many of us killed.

One of the reasons for the loss of experience was that we patrolled the

same territory repeatedly. Young leaders were not getting the experience they should have because company commanders did everything themselves. In response, Ianni began sending out platoon level patrols instead of full company patrols. He saw this as a way to give younger leaders more experience. So now, we patrolled more at the platoon level. The smaller the group, however, the more vulnerable we were, and the more likely that Vietcong would attack us. Traveling in smaller groups made patrolling more dangerous.

Another issue was our sloppiness with respect to good soldiering practices. A pet peeve of his was that we were not checking the condition of the ammunition we carried regularly. Rifle ammunition got dirty in those twenty round clips. Yet, soldiers were not monitoring it. They were not cleaning the ammo and lubricating the clips. Our rifles would likely jam if we used that ammunition.

We had other careless habits. I said before that the hole we dug every night was shrinking in size because it was a pain in the ass to dig. Our machine gunner had his weapon wrapped in a towel to keep it clean rather than ready to go. We put out less trip-flares and claymores at night than we should have. We made more noise than we should have. When pulling guard in the jungle or on a firebase, we used transistor radios. We knew better, but we did not care. These and other sloppy habits made us vulnerable.

So he bore down on us. He stopped the practice of carrying extra cases of soda and beer in the field. Lieutenant Huff carried a case or two of soda because he did not hump the same weight that the rest of us did. Instead of soda and beer, we carried more ammunition. He made his presence known by dropping in on us in the jungle using his helicopter. He did snap inspections and chewed out officers. If an officer gave him a hard time, he relieved him of his command on the spot.

Ianni was a tough bastard. Troops loved the old battalion commander, Colonel Iverson, because he was easier on us and was always looking out for our welfare. In contrast, under the onslaught from Ianni, we began to hate him. He added more pressure to the pressure we already carried. We heard rumors that a grunt tried to scare him off by throwing a dummy grenade in his hooch. Some even wanted to *frag* him with a live grenade. In hindsight though, Ianni's toughness was for our own good and served us in the months to come.

One other new guy I would like to mention arrived in early April. We got a new platoon leader, Lieutenant Coker. Lieutenant Huff had moved up to the temporary position of company commander in late February because Captain Gallagher was hurt. He was handling enemy munitions found in the field and one exploded. The blast wounded him. Everyone expected he would return. He never did though. We heard later that they sent him home. He must have had one of those million-dollar wounds. Considering what the next two months would bring, he was a lucky man.



From left to right, Wade, Steve, Randy and me. (A Rob Photo)

## Chapter 25-Chance Encounter

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As April wore on, President Nixon was taking heat from demonstrators for planning the invasion of Cambodia. We all believed, though, that it was the right thing to do. It was too easy for the Vietcong to run over the border into Cambodia. They rested there and were supplied with food and ammunition without concern that we would follow them in. Well, now we were going in and soon. If we want to win the war, we had to take away their source of supplies. There was no other way.

We spent a brief amount of time in April pulling guard at Firebases Marisa and Joan. For the most part, though, we worked the jungle close to Cambodia. Everything was building toward Cambodia. In March, we had bombarded Cambodia using artillery from Candy. Now we were inching our way closer and closer to Cambodia in preparation for a major incursion in May. We patrolled so close to the Cambodian border in April, the Army said we might have *accidentally* stepped in and out of Cambodia a few times. We were not supposed to be in there yet, of course. It seemed like we toyed with them.

For me, I had been working at my job of infantry soldier for a couple of months now. Every day in the jungle, we patrolled looking for Vietcong. Our job was to find and kill them and we worked hard at it. Yet surprisingly, I had not seen anyone out there. A few weeks ago, there was that dead soldier, true, but that was it. Imagine hunting deer for months and never seeing a live deer cross your path. Then, it happened. I had my first encounter with a live Vietcong soldier.

The Lieutenant ordered me one late afternoon to pull outpost duty while the rest of us set up for the night. I grabbed a radio, rifle, ammunition, and a book, and then I moved out about fifty meters from the circle. I *should* have taken someone else out there with me. I *should not* have taken the book with me. Finding a good spot, I sat down on the jungle floor and leaned against some bamboo for a backrest. It was quiet and peaceful. It could be nice out there at times. I radioed that I was in place and then settled in. I pulled out my book and started to read. Every few minutes or so, I looked up, glanced around, listened, and then read some more.

I do not know what it was, a sixth sense maybe. It was as if I *felt*

someone nearby. A noise followed the feeling, a faint crackle, or rustling out in front of me. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I glanced up. No more than twenty meters in front of me, I saw a Vietcong soldier. He was dressed in black, had a rifle and was walking toward me looking down. No more than a moment after I saw him, he saw me. We stared at each other in disbelief for a fraction of a second, and then both of us dropped low to the ground.

Almost instantly, I was on my belly, facing in his direction with my rifle tucked into my shoulder. My eyes looked down and through the rifles sites at the spot where he disappeared from sight. With my finger on the trigger and the safety released, I waited for him to show himself again. My heart was beating fifty miles an hour.

With my eyes locked on where he disappeared, I groped for the radio, found the mike and reported what I saw. The squad leader told me to stay where I was and reinforcements were on the way. A few minutes later, four grunts from my squad approached. They were hunched over, moving fast, and ready for anything.

Seeing them was a relief. You never know what we may run into out there and that Vietcong soldier may have been the leading edge of a larger force. I pointed to where I saw him disappear, and we all slithered forward to the spot.

No one was there. He was gone. I had set up on a flat area and behind where he dropped; the ground had fallen away in a gradual slope. While I waited and called in reinforcements, he must have backed down the slope and simply disappeared. That was it.

What I learned was we were not alone out there. I was lucky. It could have played out differently. It may have been six of them instead of one. He could have been more aggressive. While I read, he may have seen me first and simply shot me dead.

I survived this one but why? Was there an angel looking over my shoulder, watching out for me? Was it a matter of luck? Death may just as easily have been looking over my shoulder. It made me realize how vulnerable I was. It made me realize how little time I may have in this world.



Ready to go on patrol. I have M60 ammunition around my waist, cloth bandoliers filled with M16 rifle clips over my shoulder and a rifle in my right hand.

## Chapter 26-First Firefight

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My second encounter with Vietcong came in April as well. It was my first experience with a firefight. The veterans with Ace High had experienced firefights before, of course. It had been a while since they had one. And with the continuous exchange of veterans with new guys, now there were fewer veterans with experience.

We were walking single file through the jungle as usual, spaced about eight feet apart. Nothing was unusual about that particular day or time, other than Cambodia was looming. The point man was out front cutting his way with the machete. The compass man was behind him, pointing where to go. I was in the middle of the group somewhere, well back.

Suddenly, they hit us with a burst of five to seven rounds of machine gun fire. I heard a loud groan from somewhere up ahead, and then silence. My mind flipped from walking along thinking about another day of drudgery to instant terror. I froze with indecision, and I just stood there until someone yelled, "GET DOWN" and I did.

For every firefight that was to follow, they all began with that same initial shock. Everyone felt the same thing. It did not matter if you were a veteran or a new guy. This time it was machine gun fire. Other times, it might be an explosion from a hand grenade or RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). When it happened, it was as if the world stopped for a moment before we kicked into gear and reacted. We then hit the ground, settled down, and did our job. A concern with green, new guys, however, was they did not always react properly. They may stand there with a blank, bewildered look on their face. So if a veteran saw a green guy standing there like that he yelled, "GET DOWN!"

I was down with my rifle ready, waiting for the next order. Thankfully, I was okay. Men up front began to crawl forward to help the wounded and deal with those that shot at us. Word filtered back that Dave from our squad had been shot in the stomach. He had switched jobs with Randy for some reason and was walking point. The medic moved forward to take care of him. Not only is the point man's job dangerous, but then I realized how dangerous the medic's job was. At the same time, the others that moved to the front formed a line. All faced in the general direction of where the

machine gun fire came from. An M60 machine gunner moved forward and set up his gun on the line as well. The Lieutenant ordered the rest of us to move into positions left and right to protect our flanks and rear. When all of us were in place and facing outward, we had formed into a stretched out circle.

On command, those in front opened fire toward the machine gun burst. With the jungle so thick, we could not see enemy soldiers, so setting a direction to fire in was a best guess. In response to that small machine gun burst, we must have fired a thousand rounds. The Army calls a response like that a *mad minute*. It continued in a metallic clatter for a few minutes. The only hesitation was when the M60 machine gunner loaded more ammunition or when rifleman changed clips. The time seemed never ending with all of that noise and smoke. We fired so many rounds; the bamboo in front of us seemed to drop as if cut with a chainsaw.

Then silence. We waited, wondering if we had hit anyone. We did not know. None of us saw anyone while we were firing. Nor did we hear anyone cry out. Maybe we were not firing in the right direction. It was hard to tell where their rounds came from with only one burst. We waited at least ten minutes and more silence. Then, the Lieutenant ordered us to get up. A few at first, then all of those up front stood up. Nothing happened.

Those in front moved forward, looked around, and did not find anything. The Vietcong soldier who shot at us was gone. There was nothing left to do now except get the wounded man back to the rear. The Company Commander radioed back to the rest of us to prepare to move. Then we moved out.

At this point, we abandoned our original plan for the day. We look for an open area on the map to bring in a *medevac*. Following a short march, we found a small field. Within fifteen minutes, a helicopter dropped in and took away Dave. Then we moved on. I have no idea where they took him, back to 93<sup>rd</sup> Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh, I guess. I never saw him again. He did not die; that was all I knew. We would have heard. Another guy replaced him at point and we moved on.

I changed that day. Yes, I had a firefight under my belt and survived it. I was no longer green. That was not the big change. Until this point, the fight for me had been with living conditions in Vietnam. I had no beef with the Vietcong. The Army trained me to hate them but it had not worked. Army training sure in hell had not taught me to want to kill Vietcong. Now it

was different.

When the Vietcong hurt one of us, it was like hurting family. I felt this need for revenge. We all did. That was new. I wanted to pay them back for what they did. It had nothing to do with the U.S. position in the war, nothing to do with the spread of communism, none of that. It was a private affair. He shot my friend and now I will get him back for it. It was that simple.

Where did I get the idea that killing for revenge was okay? It was in Sunday school, I guess. After all, God did it in the story of Noah where the wicked were drowned in the flood. Moses, with God's help, drowned the pharaoh's army when he parted the Red Sea. We read in the Bible about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Since biblical times, revenge by killing has actually become the honorable thing to do. Samurai in Japan did it for the honor of their family. Some consider capital punishment in this country an honorable and civilized thing to do. Now that soldiers around me were getting wounded and killed, I reached back to my childhood to find the motivation and approval to kill.

From that day forward, I became more aggressive. I wanted to get even. In an unexpected way, it lifted some of the weight I felt from living out here. I wanted to get out of Vietnam, that was for sure. Now I had a purpose that was not there before. Having purpose took my mind off the day-to-day ache of it all.

I requested a bayonet from supply and practiced throwing it. I held it across my fingers with my thumb, and tossed it, allowing the bayonet to make half a turn in the air before it buried itself into a tree. I could do that three times out of five. I had this crazy thought that maybe I would get the opportunity to kill one of them by burying a bayonet in the back of his head. For some reason, I felt that would be much more satisfying than using my rifle.

Until now, I had been writing home about most everything that happened to me. I wrote about the rain, about sleeping under ponchos, and always being wet. I told them I had nothing to worry about except the leeches. I said a monkey had made a visit to my hooch and a number of other hooch's one night. I wrote about a one-week trip I planned to Tokyo, Japan in August. I told them I had a flight physical for a Door Gunner job coming up.

Now, I had something to hide that I could not talk about in a letter. It was like living a lie, with my parents and everyone else. I was now involved in actions that I would not write about. It ate at me not being able to tell

someone. Yet, I did not want to scare anyone.

As I thought about killing Vietcong, I realized how easily they could kill me. Thinking that dying in Vietnam was a reasonable possibility; it drove me to read a book someone finished about the life of Jesus called *The Crown and the Cross*. I told my parents about it in a letter and suggested they read it themselves. I was never very religious; my father, the Baptist, was the religious one. As a kid, I attended bible school during the summer and Sunday school during the school year. When I was older though, I grudgingly went to church on Sunday. Now all of a sudden, I told my parents to read a religious book. I wonder what they thought.

In reading those letters I wrote home years later, I noticed that my aggravation and frustration began coming through in April. It stemmed from the ever-increasing strain that we all felt. I hassled my Mom for sending too much of this and not enough of that in packages. I had received so many packages from her, it was a pain at times, and I let her know it. Through it all, she supported me without a peep.

That first firefight, by the way, lead to more in April. They were all similar. They would begin when we walked into a Vietcong ambush. It did not seem we were hitting them; at least we were not finding any bodies left behind. But they sure as hell hit us. We had a string of guys wounded. Worse, Vietcong killed Jerry Lofton, Michael Brown, and Robert Williams in April. They killed Jerry earlier in the month. Mike and Bob toward the end. None of them were from my platoon so their loss did not affect me as much as it might have had they been friends. But it worried me. Could I be next? It was getting to me. I needed someone to talk to about it. So I wrote home to my best friend.

I told him I had been in a number of firefights recently. How they all began by us stepping into an ambush. I described how chaotic they were. Everyone reacting in the best way they knew how when rifle fire buzzed around us.

I said that the first firefight fight had escalated to one in which we needed artillery support. The forward observer called it in. Normally, I told him we heard artillery rounds *whoosh* over our head as they passed by then exploded. We hoped they were hitting the enemy. Someone, however, made a big mistake this time. It may have been the forward observer or the gunner; we never found out. A howitzer round landed right in the middle of us. Three or four of us went down, badly wounded and screaming. One guy lost

both legs in the explosion. I wonder if the person who coined the phrase, friendly fire had ever been on the receiving end of it.

I told him about the shock I felt when Vietcong ambushed us. It was similar to someone blindsiding you with a punch from nowhere. It was similar to what a quarterback feels when he is looking one way and a lineman hits him from behind coming at full speed. It hit us all like a ton of bricks, immobilizing everyone for a moment. Then we reacted. Medics moved in to help those that were down. We radioed for a medevac while fighting continued. Before it was over, they killed Mike Brown with AK47 rifle fire. It ended with Mike and a number of other seriously wounded guys being shipped out by medevac.

The next day Vietcong ambushed again. They killed Bob Williams. They wounded Ebb, one of the medics, and Lieutenant Huff. The load of helping the wounded fell on another medic. Every company had medics. Medics walked with us in the jungle, doled out malaria pills, helped with minor cuts, and carried aspirin for headaches. That was the easy part. In a firefight, however, their job was first in to help the wounded. That was *not* easy. In this case, instead of doing his job, he sat down on the jungle floor, broke down into a crying jag, and stopped functioning. I remember him sitting there crying and he could not or would not stop. We tried to help him through it. Mentally, he was somewhere else however. When the medevac showed up, the medic left with Bob Williams and the wounded. I never saw the medic again.

I described all of this and more to my friend as a way to get it off my chest. In return, I hoped for some understanding. Like an arm around my shoulder from ten thousand miles away.

I did not expect what I received in return. He sent a letter back, pissed off because I sent him a letter that graphic. He told me never to do that again. I scared him, I guess. Funny how over time we can find ourselves doing something that someone else was shocked by. I simply told him the truth, no more, no less. I thought I may have had an outlet but obviously, I did not. That was the only time and last time I sent a letter home describing that kind of reality.

His reaction was like another nail in the coffin as far as our best friend status was concerned. Friends should be the ultimate outlet to share the good and bad. Maybe it was foolish on my part sending him a letter like that. Maybe what I expected in return from him was unreasonable. But as a

friend, he could have tried a bit better to understand. It was not something that one good friend does to another in a time of need. From then on, I felt cut off from the real world.



From left to right, Mike, me, Tony and Randy. We were sitting in front of our hooch in the jungle. My wallet, wrapped in plastic is in my right hand.

## Chapter 27-Thrill of a Lifetime

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Firefights happened in the jungle during April but not on firebases where we pulled guard for some reason. Earlier in April, we pulled guard on Firebase Marisa. It struck me while there that I had spent almost three months in country. I had spent enough time in Vietnam where I could see a faint light at the end of the tunnel. I had rounded first base and was starting for second. It would not be long before I would be home again. It felt good reminding myself that there was an end to my time in this place.

Also on Marisa, I learned I had a promotion to Specialist 4 coming. Well, that meant a larger paycheck. It was good news to hear. And with the promotion and the combat leadership training I had taken, the Company Commander decided to make me a Fire Team leader. I was not sure if that was good news.

A fire team was about half the size of a squad, but it performed similar functions. While on the firebase pulling guard, the lieutenant had me taking out small patrols. I went out with three or four squad members on patrol in the area just outside of the firebase during the day. When in the jungle, I went out with a small team and set up booby traps in the late afternoon. Going out with small groups like that was both exciting and worrisome at the same time. It was exciting because I was the leader, making the decisions. It felt good that they trusted me to lead. It was concerning because I felt like I was going one-on-one with the Vietcong out there. Thank God, the patrols I took out never ran into a firefight. We could have been in big trouble fast if we ran into Vietcong with such a small group.

Our stay on Firebase Joan, later in April, started quietly, but it did not stay that way. On Joan, I experienced one of the greatest thrills I have ever had in my life. It began with the arrival by helicopter of an elite group of Army forward observers. There were three of them. What was unusual was they did not arrive *in* a helicopter; they arrived dangling one hundred feet *below* the helicopter. They had some unusual weapons with them. In one hand and supported by a strap over the shoulder was a sawed off M60 machine gun. Another over-the-shoulder strap held a sawed off shotgun. There was an air of cockiness combined with a touch of madness in their manner. I thought they all seemed to have a few screws loose. The Huey

helicopter they worked from was fitted with three nylon ropes that hung below. Each rope was about one hundred feet long. A strap, like a noose, hung from the end of each rope. The strap acted like a seat. Those three guys and their helicopter were like something seen in that Vietnam movie, *Apocalypse Now*.

Their job function was to find Vietcong soldiers by *dropping in* on them in the jungle. During the day, they flew, dangling below the helicopter, to locations where Army brass suspected enemy activity. At each location, the helicopter slowed to a hover, and then it lowered them through a hole in the jungle canopy and down to the jungle floor. If they found Vietcong or Vietcong found them, they protected themselves with their weapons while the helicopter yanked them out. Once out, a Cobra helicopter gunship, hovering high above, dove in with rockets firing and machine guns blazing.

A Cobra gunship was a special helicopter where the co-pilot sat behind the pilot like it was a jet fighter. In fact, it was a helicopter version of a jet fighter. For firepower, the helicopter had ten and seventeen-pound rockets pods on each side of the cabin. Mounted below the nose in a turret were an automatic grenade launcher and a mini gun. A cobra dives at its intended target as a means to aim the rockets before firing them. I would not want to be on the receiving end of a Cobra.

The three forward observers were here today to recruit a few of us to join them in their work. They were providing *free* helicopter rides as a temptation. Anyone that wanted a ride could have one. Well, we all wanted a ride. None of us had had any intention to join them of course, but the helicopter ride sure in hell looked interesting.

We lined up with the expectation that the ride would be unbelievable. It looked dangerous and probably was. We thought it might be better than wing walking on a biplane. We were not disappointed. The helicopter began the flight by hovering a hundred feet in the air above three of us. The three seats made from a loop of strap material dangled in front of us at ground level. We each stepped into our own loop. A slipknot allowed us to pull the strap tight around our rear end. Then it was a matter of holding on to the rope for dear life. When the three of us were ready, the pilot lifted us off the ground, rose almost straight up to an elevation of two thousand feet, and then slowly accelerated forward to a speed of about eighty knots. Then we flew over the countryside while dangling below.

Eighty knots is over ninety miles per hour. Do you remember as a kid,

the feeling of holding your hand out of an automobile window at sixty miles per hour? Imagine then the feeling of your whole body out there instead of just your hand. Now imagine moving even faster. The air pushed us back like a pendulum to a point where we were behind the helicopter. When I glanced up, the helicopter was out ahead of us. The three of us held on to each other for dear life most of the time. Toward the end of the ride, we did some experimenting, pushing ourselves apart and catching the wind in different ways. The feeling of swinging out alone like that was a rush.

The pilot took us on a wide loop for about fifteen minutes before returning to Joan. He dropped us off by hovering high above and then lowering us slowly until our feet touched ground and we could step out of the loops. Then he picked up three more thrill seekers. We spent most of the morning screwing around with them. It was nice to do something like that now and then. It made me forget for a moment where we were. Almost the whole company tried it. Then they left us late in the morning. Surprise, they did not get a single recruit. Who wanted to be shot at while on the end of a rope anyway?

When I look back, I doubt I would ever have attempted to do something like that in the United States as a civilian. Many things could have gone wrong. We were crazy in Vietnam and willing to try anything. And why not? Who knew how much longer we had on this earth anyway.



Returning from our ride over the countryside



Cobra Gunships

## Chapter 28-Ganja

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Army brass ordered us to the VIP Center in Bien Hoa during the last week of April. As the airplane droned along toward Bien Hoa, I realized I deserved to be at the VIP Center this time. I had been in a few firefights finally. I felt a certain pride in my transition from *green* to *veteran*. I also felt proud that I was a grunt. We were an elite bunch.

We were dirty, we smelled like hell, and we had not shaved when we arrived in Bien Hoa. At the plane, they met us with duce-“ena”-half Army trucks. We rode in the back of them from the plane to the VIP Center like cattle. No one cared. We stood up, looked forward, and beamed in the back of those trucks like a victorious Army returning from a grand war. Along the way, we passed down a street with Air Force barracks on each side.

Wow, did the Air Force have it good! There were full-length aluminum lounge chairs out there on the lawn with airmen working on a tan. Their boots, spit shined by hooch maids, were on a platform outside the barracks. Air Force airmen hired hooch maids who were young Vietnamese women, to clean barracks, polish boots, and wash clothes. The military should have distributed work and play more evenly in Vietnam. We were a bunch of overworked *Rambo*’s while others in Vietnam lived the *Life of Riley*! One reason for it, I guess, was those in the Air Force signed up for four years instead of two like us.

The VIP Center was great; it always was great. We had the pool during the day, and beer and entertainment at night. Two events happened, however, that made this trip to the VIP Center different from the last time I was here. The first was my promotion to Specialist 4. The second was my introduction to smoking *ganja*, the Vietnamese term for marijuana.

I made it through high school and a two-year technical school without ever trying marijuana. The main reason I never tried it was I did not hang out with anyone that used it. My friends were a beer-drinking crowd.

I did observe some marijuana use one time. It was on a spring break trip to Miami with a couple of friends from the machine shop program. One was heavily into marijuana as well as other drugs. I watched him use it with fascination. He had glassy, blood-shot, far-away eyes that casually looked at us as he tried to convince us to try it. He talked about how good food tasted

and how great the buzz felt but I still was not tempted to try. Hell, I did not even drink a lot back then. My parents had too much influence over me. I was afraid of drugs.

Vietnam changed what I was willing to try. My parents were half a world away so they would not know if I tried marijuana. We all knew this trip to the VIP Center was our last before Cambodia. Cambodia scared the hell out of all of us. I felt like I could easily die here. What difference would it make if I tried ganja? Randy and Tony, some of my best friends in Vietnam, used it. It was cheap, cheaper than beer when comparing the cost of a buzz. It was easy to get. I simply had no reason any more to avoid it.

So one night out by the fence at the VIP Center, I tried ganja for the first time. It did not work. Nothing happened. Everyone else looked high as a kite and I felt no different. Why is it that the first time someone tries marijuana, nothing seems to happen? It seems to happen with most new users of the drug. All I know was that first night was a disappointment.

It did not stop me though. I was determined to make it work. So I tried it again the next night. I made more of an effort. I inhaled a lungful, held it in, and then waited as long as I could before letting it out. I did it again and then again. As I waited for something to happen, out of nowhere, bang, it hit me. There was a feeling in my head that had me giggling to myself for no reason. It was so overwhelming a feeling that I became paranoid. I thought an officer would bag me if he one looked me in the eye. But food never tasted so good. Wow! Why in heck had I avoided this for so long? From that point forward, I smoked it whenever we were not in the jungle. It was the best way I had to escape Vietnam without ever leaving.

We could buy ganja in a number of ways. The Vietnamese sold it to us right through the fence. We would ask, "You have ganja?" They would respond, "Two dollah!" We would say, "Okay" and that was it. Only the exchange remained. Neither of us could speak each other's language. But that did not seem to get in the way of completing a transaction.

For two dollars, I got what appeared to be a normal pack of Marlboro's. Or it might be another common filter cigarette, like Kools. If I removed the cellophane on top then peeled open the top corner as any other pack of cigarettes, what you would see was the filter end of each cigarette. Everything was normal looking so far. If I removed a cigarette however, you would immediately notice that the paper end was twisted shut. The Vietnamese had replaced the tobacco with marijuana. Two dollars was awful

cheap for twenty joints packaged so nicely. We could also buy ganja by the plastic bag. A typical bag for twenty bucks was about the size of a small loaf of bread.

The Vietnamese were clever in the way they packaged those marijuana cigarettes. They opened an ordinary pack of tobacco cigarettes by carefully peeling open the cellophane envelope from the bottom and then sliding out the pack. Then they opened the pack itself from the bottom, and slid out the individual cigarettes. Then, they removed the tobacco from each individual cigarette and then filled the empty paper tube with ganja. Finally, they reassembled the pack in reverse order. The top of the pack remained intact so we could open it like any other pack of cigarettes.

Toward the end of my tour in Vietnam, my mother saw a documentary about marijuana use in Vietnam and asked me about it in a letter. I danced around the issue with her in terms of my own use. She never questioned me about it again. I responded back then as follows:

*“So you saw a show on TV about pot in Vietnam? I do not believe that 50% of the guys use it as the reporter said, but still an awful lot do. A night does not go by where I do not smell it on the firebase. From what I have seen, the effect on people is not as bad as liquor. Rather than just being loud and wobbly, pot users seem more aware of what is happening around them when using it. I guess it is funny stuff. They use it as a way to relieve the strain of Vietnam. Also, it grows here, making it cheaper to buy than liquor or beer. Marijuana is too easily available to stop its use in Vietnam. The only way to stop it is to pull us all out of here.”*

The documentary implied that almost fifty percent of Americans in Vietnam used it. The number seemed high to me. Some drank beer and others did the hard stuff. Some drank and smoked marijuana and a few did nothing at all. I do know this. When kicking back on a firebase or at the VIP Center, there were two general classes of soldiers in Vietnam: the drinkers and the smokers. It was similar to the cliques we had in high school. When we were on the job pulling guard or in the jungle, we were together as a common team. When we had time to relax though, we drifted apart in the evening into those drinker or smoker cliques.

Our stay at the VIP Center did not last nearly long enough. With each day, our uneasy feelings about Cambodia increased. On the last night there,

we drank and smoked ourselves into a stupor. The next morning, someone even found one of the lifers out cold sitting on a shitter. That was how we made final preparations for Cambodia.

From the VIP Center, they flew us straight back to the jungle to patrol. I left the VIP Center this time with a new way to deal with the pain in Vietnam. For the next month or so though, there were few opportunities to try ganja again. Hell, I did not even have the time to write home.



We approached Mama-sans near the VIP Center to buy ganja.

# Chapter 29-Assault into Cambodia

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In May, the National Guard declared martial law at Kent State University in Ohio. Students, angered by the escalation of the war in Cambodia, burned down the Army Reserve Officers Training Building. Hostile acts by soldiers and students over the next three days ended with four students shot to death and eight students wounded.

Days earlier, President Nixon informed the American people that American forces and the South Vietnamese Army had invaded Cambodia and would stay there for two months, leaving by the end of June. The purpose of the invasion was to clean out the enemy and their supplies. Nixon would have preferred we stay longer, but backed off due to media pressure and public outcry. Removing the enemy in Cambodia, he repeated, would demonstrate the capability of the South Vietnamese Army and buy us time to withdraw our troops and leave Vietnam with honor.

In support of Nixon's goals, General Abrams, who was responsible for the Cambodian Incursion in Vietnam, created a battle plan. He began with air strikes to soften them up. He followed with a combined U.S. and South Vietnamese Army invasion into sanctuary areas where weapon and food caches were located. If all went as planned, the enemy would lose their ability to increase the level of combat when they pleased and instead force them to reestablish supplies. "Without supplies," Abrams said, "they cannot fight, and if they cannot fight, we have time to pull out our combat units and replace them with South Vietnamese units."

In support of General Abrams, Lieutenant Colonel Ianni, our battalion commander, planned to take us to an area in Cambodia called the Belly. The Belly was north of Buttons on a segment of the Cambodian border that bellied toward Phuoc Long Province. He hoped to find weapon and food caches there. The plan was to work the Belly in the same way we worked similar areas in Vietnam. We would build a firebase and then patrol the area around it looking for caches. Once we finished with an area, we would build another firebase and repeat the process.

In early May, Ace High boarded helicopters and flew from our jungle

location to Firebase Marisa, close to the Cambodian border. On the same day, the remainder of the battalion's infantry companies did the same. I had never seen all of us in one place before. Our company, Company A (Ace High) was their of course. Also on Marisa were Captain O'Neill who led Company B (Bad Bet), Captain McBride who was responsible for Company C (Wild Card), Captain Johnson who was in charge of Company D (Stacked Deck) and 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Camp who led Company E (Easy Winner). Company E also had a special Recon Platoon led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Hudnell. Finally, there was Captain Hardy who ran C Battery, a battery of 105mm howitzers.

There were so many men on Firebase Marisa that Company D had to set up in the tree line for the night, outside of the firebase because there was no room for them along the berm.

When all had arrived, Ianni told us we were going into Cambodia the next day. As an infantry soldier, we were not told much until we had a need to know. Now it was time. He said we would go in to take away the sanctuary areas where the NVA and Vietcong relaxed and received new supplies. It was as if we were taking away their version of the VIP Center. We would hurt them in a place they never expected us to go. We all thought going in was necessary and the right thing to do. In a way, we looked forward to giving it to them, but we all felt this fear of the unknown eating at our gut.

The next morning we packed up with food and water and combat assaulted into Cambodia to a place called LZ (Landing Zone) Myron. It was a massive operation. I had never seen so many Huey helicopters in one place before. The Army must have borrowed them from all over Vietnam to pull this off. We landed without incident. Thankfully, the NVA and Vietcong did not meet us with a reception committee.

Company D, the company with the most combat experience according to Ianni, left soon after landing and began patrolling the area outside of Myron. Company C stayed back in Vietnam on Marisa to pull guard. The rest of us stayed on LZ Myron and helped build it into a working firebase. With chainsaws, bulldozers, and shovels, we helped with clearing a field of fire, building the berm, filling sandbags, and building bunkers. Quickly, we had ourselves a firebase.



500-pound bomb craters filled with rain dot the landscape.



Standing in the crater left behind by a 500-pound bomb.

## Chapter 30-Rock Island East

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While Ace High was building Firebase Myron, Captain Johnson's Company D walked into a village close by. There they captured what they believed were North Vietnamese soldiers who were out of uniform.

Captain Johnson was trying to figure out what to do with the prisoners while Lieutenant Colonel Ianni was in his helicopter above. He was looking for enemy activity in the area surrounding Myron. Through a gap in the jungle canopy, he spotted NVA soldiers, trucks, and roads below. Immediately, Ianni ordered a cobra gunship close by to attack. The NVA soldiers ran, leaving three trucks behind.

Ianni decided that the roads and trucks were more important than the prisoners Company D was holding. So he ordered helicopters to move Company D and their prisoners back to Myron. The next day, Ianni had Company D dropped by helicopter within five hundred meters of where he saw the trucks and NVA soldiers the day before. They immediately took AK-47 rifle fire from NVA soldiers.

Looking for a better spot to fight from, they discovered a stack of weapon and ammunition crates covered by black plastic. More stacks of equipment were close by. As they got a sense of the extent of the stored equipment around them, NVA soldiers hit them with RPG's (rocket-propelled grenades) and more rifle fire.

In response, Captain Johnson called in support from the howitzer battery on Myron and Cobra gunships that were above. Through the barrage, NVA fire remained heavy. Ianni, trying to help from his helicopter above, called in jet fighters. F-4 Phantoms shrieked in with bursts of heavy machine gun fire. At the height of the Cobra and fighter jet support, Captain Johnson's men ran out of the smoke grenades they used to mark their location. Without them, pilots above were blind to their position below. Even so, they continued their barrage from the air.

Company D's radio operator contacted Ianni and told him that ammo was running low. Also, he said that shrapnel from the jet had wounded Captain Johnson. In response, Ianni dropped in Company E's Recon unit to help. The NVA hit them hard, pinning them down. Time wore on and fighting continued. Afternoon crept toward evening and darkness

approached. Ianni pulled men from Company C on Marisa and dropped them in to provide more help. Darkness had closed in when Company C reached Company D and the Recon platoon. That night, as the firefight waned, and then ceased, there were seven dead and twenty wounded waiting for medevac helicopters to arrive in the morning.

Soon after sunup, medevacs pulled out Captain Johnson and the remaining dead and wounded for medical treatment. Ianni replaced Captain Johnson with Lieutenant Huff; Ace High's acting company commander. He then replaced Lieutenant Huff with a new company commander, Captain McKenna, who had arrived in Vietnam the month before.

The Vietcong had abandoned the area. With that, Companies C, D, and E finally had the chance to look over the weapons storage area they had fought so valiantly to win. They gave the area the name Rock Island East after the Rock Island Arsenal in Rock Island, Illinois. Ianni gave both Company C and D the responsibility of guarding the overall perimeter because of its sheer size. The overall storage area was about a thousand meters (.6 miles) long and five hundred meters (.3 miles) wide. Even with the two companies pulling guard, they had barely enough men to get the job done. Later, Army Engineers dropped in to inventory weapons and ammunition. Their goal was to prepare the equipment for shipment or destroy it, whatever made the most sense.

While the inventory process on Rock Island East proceeded, we had the chance to size up our new company commander, Captain McKenna. He had recently arrived in Vietnam. He was a gung-ho, twenty-three year old from West Point. Rob told me a few years ago that he was amazed that they gave someone so young such responsibility.

West Point had a way of pumping confidence into cadets and he was no exception. In addition to West Point, he attended Army Ranger Training and Airborne Training. There, the Army infused him with even more confidence. When he finally arrived in Vietnam, he was ready to win the war all by himself if necessary. He was so different from us grunts with our cynical attitude about Vietnam.

Recently, I read a funny story about our new Captain I had not heard before. In an interview, he said his gung-ho attitude almost got him killed on his first combat assault with us. It happened because he wanted to be the first out of the helicopter. As the helicopter he rode in slowed to a hover and descended toward the jungle floor, he stood out on the helicopters strut, ready

to jump. He wanted to be down and moving before the helicopter itself touched down. There was grass below and he misjudged its height. What appeared to be grass a few inches high actually was five or six feet above the jungle floor.

When he jumped, instead of a reasonable drop to the jungle floor, he fell six feet, hit the ground, and landed on his back under the helicopter. His heavy rucksack held him there. The pilot did not know what happened so he set the helicopter down on the ground over him. Lying there under the helicopter, he thought, "How ironic it would be if before I even had the chance to fight, the helicopter's tail rotor killed me during take-off." Well, lucky for him he was not hurt or killed. Even luckier, none of us grunts saw it happen. If we had, he may never have lived it down. Grunts can be relentlessly unforgiving.

With most of the set-up work at Firebase Myron complete, Ace High started humping toward Rock Island East. Our orders were to look for more caches along the way, and then help pull guard on arrival. We made contact with the enemy soon after leaving Myron and the frequency of contact increased. This was a new thing.

Before Cambodia, the war in Vietnam was like a game of cat and mouse. We were the cat and they were the mouse. The cat roamed the area looking for mice while the mice focused on avoiding the cat. The Vietcong were far outgunned. They realized that engaging with us would result in their death. As I said before, their goal was to wait us out until we left Vietnam. So for the most part, they avoided us. Now and then, they made contact, fired a few rounds into us, and then disappeared into the bush.

Cambodia was different; the cat and mouse game had changed significantly. In Cambodia, the Vietcong had their caches to protect. Caches were enormous stockpiles of food and weapons dispersed just over the border from Vietnam. As we moved through the jungle looking for caches, if we happened to move away from a cache, they would have ignored us. However, if we happened to move toward a cache, they placed themselves between the cache and us to defend it.

Along the way to Rock Island East, we passed through the village where Company D had captured the NVA soldiers a few days earlier. Cobra gunships and artillery had driven out the villagers. We checked every hut and found the place was deserted. There was fresh fruit growing, ready for picking, so we ate bananas, pineapples, and coconuts. It was a treat. They

left a small pig behind, tied next to one of the huts. Our Vietnamese scout killed and butchered it for us. We all cut sticks and roasted raw pork over an open fire like marshmallows. That pig was one of the tastiest meals I have ever had in the jungle.

Three days later, we finally walked into Rock Island East. Visitors flooded the area. There were generals and congressional representatives there. News networks recorded their every move. Everywhere I looked there were strange weapons and ammunition sitting in open crates. All of it was brand new and covered with Cosmoline for protection from the weather. Cosmoline was a sticky, brown, grease-like substance that stuck all over us if we were not careful. It was similar to driveway sealer from Home Depot.

The Engineers had completed an accounting of what was stored there. The North Vietnamese Army had stored millions of rounds of small arms ammunition, mortar rounds, rockets, grenades, rifles, and pistols. I thought these black, 5.62-millimeter Chinese pistols were cool. They had leather holsters with a built in cleaning kit. The pistol had the look of a small German luger. Everyone wanted one for a souvenir to send home. That was until someone foolishly loaded one and accidentally shot another grunt in the stomach. Then officers took them away from us.

While there, CBS television interviewed me. Why me, I do not know. They needed something new to report I guess. I was in the right place at the right time. I wrote home about the interview but no one there saw me on television. Oh well.

We stayed at Rock Island East for two days, and then we humped back into the jungle looking for more caches. We only had another six weeks to find them all.



The outskirts of a deserted village in Cambodia.



Banana Tree with bunches of small green bananas.



Another view of the village.



A home built from bamboo and straw.



Sitting on the jungle floor with my pack behind me. In my lap is the ammo can I used to keep personal things dry. Again, my wallet, wrapped in plastic, is in my right hand.

# Chapter 31-Life in Cambodia

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With two weeks experience in Cambodia under our belts, we could see that the next six weeks would not be easy ones. Vietcong and NVA were wounding and killing Americans at a much greater rate in Cambodia. Vietnam was tough living. In Cambodia, however, we forgot about those tough living conditions. We forgot about writing letters. I wrote far fewer letters in May than any other month spent in Vietnam. Firefights dominated our thoughts.

Firefights were almost continuous. There were so many, it affected our ability to receive food and water at times. A supply helicopter could not land if we were in contact with the Vietcong. Instead, the helicopter dropped food and water to us from above the trees. They used sausage-shaped heavy-duty balloons to drop in water. Many times, the water sausages would smash when they hit the ground. C-ration cans would dent or crush. Food and water at times missed the target, and we could not find it. They would delay mail deliveries. Firefights affected the normal flow.

Not only had the frequency of firefights increased, but the intensity and duration increased as well. We were getting a dose of what Company D ran into when they found Rock Island East. Firefights always began the same. Heading in the direction of a cache, we would walk straight into their ambush. They attacked us with rifle fire, machine gun fire, or RPG's. They set up booby traps meant for us to trip and explode as we approached. It was similar to the way the U.S. Cavalry, in old John Wayne movies, always seemed to ride into an Indian ambush. Once we fired back in a mad minute and the dust settled, however, the Vietcong did not disappear as quickly anymore. They hit us with another burst of machine gun fire.

Our response to that second burst of machine gun fire was usually artillery. The work involved in maintaining our location with the artillery battery paid off when we needed them. In the heat of battle, the forward observer radioed the battery for help. He would give them our current position and the enemy's position on the map. Then he would ask them to lob in a few high explosive rounds behind the enemy's position. He did that to make sure the first few landed well away from us. If someone was slightly off with our position or with gun adjustments, it was less likely that the shells

would land on us.

Once they fired the first few, the forward observer had a sense of where the bombs were falling. Then, he would call for more. He would say something like, "Drop fifty meters, right fifty meters" to move the bomb pattern closer to the enemy's position. Once the shells were landing where he wanted them, the artillery battery fired for effect and dropped in a dozen or so more.

Many times, asking for artillery alone made the difference, allowing us to get up and move forward again. At other times, it did not. Then we called in more firepower. Usually that meant asking for support from a Cobra helicopter. A Cobra had ten and seventeen pound rockets. The turret in its nose contained a mini-gun that could fire over two thousand rounds of ammunition a minute. Think about that. That was over thirty-three rounds per second. Next to the mini-gun was an automatic grenade launcher that delivered grenades at two hundred forty a minute. I was amazed one day when I heard a Vietcong soldier firing his rifle at a Cobra while it was in a dive firing at him. It was an unbelievable display of courage.

We called in Air Force jets as the ultimate recourse. Jets had high-speed machine guns but their real firepower was five hundred pound bombs. The jet dropped one like an egg as he swooped in on an enemy location. When a five hundred pounder hit the ground, it blasted a hole in the ground about twenty feet deep. Many times, we were so close to the explosion that the ground shook violently under us. I actually felt myself lift off the ground. Shrapnel rained down around us following the explosion. I picked up a piece of shrapnel from one of those five hundred pounders that fell close and it was still hot.

We had this awesome firepower to throw at them and in return, all they had was rifles and RPGs. It amazed me how the Vietcong had the courage to keep coming when we threw everything we had available to us at them.

As firefights became more commonplace, I became more aggressive with my rifle. Revenge fueled me. They were wounding and killing us, and I wanted to get them back. I would be in a prone position or on my knees, looking down my sights, and firing with abandon into the jungle. It was rare we saw Vietcong, so I never knew if I hit anyone. With the jungle so thick, it was hard to spot them. I fired away though, as if I was invincible.

Not everyone reacted to firefights in the same way. Some of the grunts went out of their way to get into it and others were the opposite. One soldier

I remember had hunkered down behind a log, held his rifle up over the top of it and then fired away without looking where he was shooting. It was not something you would see in a war movie. Fear affected each of us differently. None of us wanted to expose ourselves to shrapnel or a bullet. Some of us just thought about it less in the heat of battle.

I received a break from the action in mid-May when the Army plucked me out of the jungle. They flew me back to Buttons to take my flight physical for door gunner. It felt like a million years ago since I had first applied for the job. The job still appealed to me though, and I passed the physical! Then just as quickly, Army brass snatched the door gunner position away from me. I learned on Buttons that through a special promotion, they made me a sergeant. Making sergeant so quickly was an achievement. I had only been in the Army for ten months! Part of the reason for the promotion I guess was they needed to replace sergeants wounded in the field. Whatever the reason, I was proud of myself yet disappointed because a door gunner cannot have the rank of sergeant. I might have taken the door gunner position and refused the rank but pride won out.

As I took the flight physical on Buttons, Ace High moved back to Myron to pull guard. So I arranged for a helicopter to drop me there. I could not get one to take me until later in the day so I took an interesting side trip to the dump of all places where Buttons buried their trash. A truck driver heading to the dump needed a guard with an M16 to ride along so I volunteered.

It was a sad place. As we approached the dump, kids jumped on the back of our trash truck to pick through the garbage. We had not even come to a full stop. Truck drivers made a game of it, seeing how fast they could go and still have the kids jump on. Why did we treat the Vietnamese like this? Why was it that we did not seem to respect them as fellow human beings? It was not just kids we disrespected either. Older women also waited at the dump to pick through our trash. We made no effort to help them. Most of the Vietnamese people I ran across during my tour were poor. But those trash pickers were desperate. One trip to the dump was enough for me.

Later that day toward evening, a helicopter flew me back to Myron where Ace High was located. I liked evenings on a firebase. In the early evening before night guard started, there was some relaxation time after dinner. Those that relaxed with beer and booze sat around together listening to country western music like Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee". Those that relaxed smoking ganja sat around listening to "In-A-Gadda-Da-

Vida” by Iron Butterfly.

Most sergeants were *lifers* (career soldiers) and drinkers. If I had been politically astute, as a new sergeant, I would have gravitated toward the drinkers. There I could have compared notes with other NCOs. I was a young kid, though, still wet behind the ears. The way I looked at it, I was a sergeant, but so what! I had no plan to become a lifer and make the Army a career. So I relaxed with my friends, who for the most part were all smokers.

As I said, we never smoked ganja in the jungle. Grunts had a rule that we only smoke on firebases or at the VIP Center. We left it alone in the jungle, though I still would have that can of warm beer. Officers had a different set of rules about smoking grass. If caught smoking by an officer, I could get an Article 15 and busted a grade. The lower grade officers turned a blind eye to marijuana on the firebase. An officer with a grade of captain and up would bust us. The lieutenants knew the pressure we were under and so they let it slide.

When smoking on a firebase, a bunch of us sat in a circle with a cassette tape player set up in the middle playing music. I can remember hearing *Abbey Road* for the first time in those sessions. We broke out joints and start passing them endlessly around the circle. When we ran low, someone lit up another and fed it in.

At the same time, we passed around food. The food may be from a package from home. We might pass a can of fruit from a C Ration box. Sometimes we passed food cooked in a steel pot (helmet). Into that steel pot might go a canned ham from home, a can of peaches, beans and franks, hot sauce, or Worcestershire sauce from someone’s rucksack. You name it; it all went in to the pot. I would take a mouthful, and then pass the steel pot to the next guy. It all tasted great with the help of a little ganja.

We had great discussions in those circles, solving all of the problems in the world. There were discussions about Cambodia. We got pissed when we heard the news about demonstrations against President Nixon. Most of us felt that liberals in the U.S. and politics were preventing us from winning the war. There was this political thing called no fire zones I mentioned earlier. The purpose of a no fire zone was to create a safe haven for the non-fighting Vietnamese villagers. Vietcong would fire mortars at us from those locations, and we could not fire back.

North Vietnam for some reason was off-limits to heavy bombing in the

cities. Many things could have done to shorten the war, but we did not because politics got in the way. It all seemed stupid from a grunt's point of view as we sat there in a haze of smoke and thought about it.

We also talked about going back to the world. The world was home, reality, where everything was good. We shared pictures of their worlds. Sometimes it was a car. Most times, it was a girlfriend. Girlfriend pictures gave us bragging rights. Guys showed off their pictures and in return, they would get a, "Wow!" and then a knowing nod. They were something we could stare at, pine over, relax with, and get lost in for a moment. Keeping pictures of the world and jawing about what we would do when we got back helped keep us sane in the madness that surrounded us.

Most every night on a firebase, after we ate and before guard, we sat in those circles in the moonlight, smoked grass, ate good food, listened to good music and shot-the-bull. That atmosphere allowed the tension to flow out like sweat in a sauna. It did not get any better than that. I spent the most relaxing times I ever had in Vietnam and Cambodia in those circles.

Somehow, we made it through the rest of the month of May. May was not a good month for us either. Earlier in the month, Joseph Pippenbach from the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon died from wounds received in a late April firefight. More recently, Vietcong killed Jim Unruh and Calvin Williams from the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon while they retrieved an auto-ambush with others. The Vietcong saw them set the ambush out the night before and waited for them. The dead in Ace High were adding up. There were three killed in April, two killed in May, and one died of wounds in May. Vietcong had wounded many, many more of us. The company was shrinking in size because replacements could not keep up with the losses. We were all feeling the pressure from it. Nothing felt right out there. There was this uneasiness attached to everything we did. As the month ended, we pulled guard on Firebase Speer for a few days. Then headquarters ordered us to load up with three days worth of food and water and head back out to the jungle. We still had four weeks in Cambodia to go.



Soaked from the chest down, I had walked through stream holding my wallet over my head.



Kids at the dump near Buttons picking through garbage.



Kids filling sandbags near an artillery battery on Buttons.

# Chapter 32-Wounded

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In early June we were in the jungle looking for more weapon and food caches. President Nixon made a commitment that we would be out of Cambodia by the end of June so time was running out.

We were running into Vietcong resistance daily so we suspected we were approaching something big. Moving up a heavily wooded slope, we were surprised to find a narrow road that cut into the side of the hill. It was a shock to find it. Normally, the jungle was nothing but wilderness.

The road led us to an open-sided hut with a thatched-roof. It was overflowing with bags of rice. We later learned there were three hundred bags, each weighing around two hundred twenty pounds. I had never seen so much rice in one place before. We found a similar hut close by with over two hundred bags. Altogether, there was about fifteen tons of rice. It was an unbelievable find! Also, there was a ton of salt in the second hut. Due to the large amount of salt found, the sight was nicknamed Salty's Cache.

No one was around; at least the Vietcong were not shooting at us. Inspecting the area around the huts more closely, we found a tunnel system consisting of five tunnels. One of our tunnel rats, a smaller grunt, checked each of the tunnels for enemy, pointing the way with a flashlight in one hand and a pistol in the other. He did not find anyone. We suspected that the Vietcong guards must have cleared out as we approached.

Near the huts, we found American-style bicycles with fat tires. They were next to what looked like a repair shop for bicycles. It appeared that the Vietcong over many months had strapped one or two bags of rice to these bicycles and then walked them over a hundred kilometers from North Vietnam to this spot in Cambodia. Keep in mind they had to build the road as well. It amazed me how resourceful and persistent the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were. How in hell could we beat someone willing to move rice like that!

Repeatedly, I had seen what the North Vietnamese and Vietcong were willing to do against long odds. Where did this determination come from? Well, it was not blind allegiance of a god-like emperor like the kamikazes in World War II. It was not a promise of paradise like Muslim suicide bombers in today's world. Where it came from was the promise of North Vietnam's

version of communism.

North Vietnamese leaders indoctrinated soldiers in communism in the same way that North Korea's people are today. Unlike North Korea however, North Vietnamese leaders lived at the same level as the general population. Doing this gave the North Vietnamese people the feeling that everyone was in it together for the future good of all. There were no fat-cat party leaders living high while the people suffered like in North Korea.

In contrast, there was a belief in North Vietnam that South Vietnamese leaders back then were living high while the South Vietnamese people suffered. So North Vietnamese soldiers willingly fought a far superior force and put up with tremendous hardship because they felt this burning, unrelenting obligation to save their South Vietnamese brothers.

Lieutenant Colonel Ianni ordered us to stay at the cache and guard the rice and salt overnight. Engineers using Chinook helicopters came out the next day to begin packing. They planned to ship everything back to the rear. There, they would distribute the food to Vietnamese civilians who could use it.

The next morning, Lieutenant Hudnell and the Recon Platoon from Company E showed up. Ianni had assigned Lieutenant Hudnell to secure the site and guard it so Ace High could continue looking for more caches. Army engineers arrived as well and determined it would take about five days for the Chinook helicopters to remove all of the rice and salt.

As soon as the Recon Platoon had settled in, we left. During that day, we carefully and methodically looked for more caches. Along the way, we ran into enemy ground fire from AK-47 rifles a few times and dealt with it as it happened. We also discovered, and then skirted around a few booby traps. I later learned there was a small ammo and weapons cache close by that Vietcong were protecting.

Just before sundown, we were walking single file along the top of a ridge looking for a place to set up for the night. It was cloudy and raining lightly. No one saw the hidden trip wire in the dim light. I may have tripped it with my foot or my friend Steve behind me may have, I do not know. I learned later that the Vietcong had used a vine for a trip wire. They tied it to a blasting cap from a grenade that was set into an old, unexploded artillery shell.

Suddenly an explosion blew me forward through the air. I ended up lying face down on the ground about ten feet from my last step. Turning my

head, I saw a cloud of black smoke behind me, and I smelled the odor of detonated high explosive. I never heard the explosion, but my ears were ringing. I felt something hot in the back of my thighs. The Medic was yelling, trying to find out who had been hurt. I heard him but I felt numb to what he was saying, as if he was in another dimension. I gave myself a quick check over to make sure all of the correct parts were in place. Then I slowly got up. It was a relief to know that I was in one piece, but I still felt dazed and vulnerable. I was so sure of myself before. Now that confidence was gone and in its place was fear.

Others were down. Wade looked the same way I felt. The medic confirmed that shrapnel had hit us both. I had wounds in the back of my thighs. Shrapnel hit Wade in an ankle. But we were both up and moving. Steve though, was not getting up. He was alive, but he was badly hurt and could hardly speak. Shrapnel had peppered him, and I could see blood leaking from him everywhere. Steve must have taken the full force of the explosion to look so bad. It was quiet after the explosion; there was no follow-up enemy attack.

Twilight was setting in. The rain continued and the wind was picking up. Captain McKenna grabbed the radio and requested a medevac. The dispatcher said it would be a problem getting in to our location. There was no clearing close by large enough to land a helicopter. He was concerned about the worsening weather. He said it might be possible to drop in a penetrator (aluminum frame with straps) through the jungle canopy to pull Steve out at least. The Captain was concerned that swaying bamboo from the helicopter's wash may set off additional booby traps if there were any. Dispatch responded with an alternative plan, saying they could get us out if we could get back to the rice cache we had left that morning. A clearing large enough for Chinook helicopters was available there. It meant we would have to walk about a four hundred meters as the crow flies.

So Captain McKenna decided to send Steve, Wade, and I back to rice cache. Darkness was closing in and it was dangerous moving at night. So he asked volunteers to escort the three of us back to the cache. Lloyd volunteered to walk point and Otto, one of the medics, volunteered to go. They were from other platoons so I hardly knew them. Others stepped forward. They volunteered because Steve might die if they did not get him to a hospital soon.

It was dark with rain and a blustery wind when we set out. Volunteers

carried Steve on a makeshift litter using ponchos fastened to bamboo poles. To light our way, artillery fired a steady stream of white phosphorous parachute flares. As the flares drifted to earth, others replaced them. We heard the flare pop high overhead above the low lying clouds. As the parachute broke through, the flare lit up the area and we could see.

As we moved, the parachute flares moved with us. It was surreal, walking through the jungle at night with white light filtering down through the canopy. It was a miracle that the Vietcong did not attack us along the way. The light made us a great target. We walked and walked. It was taking much longer than expected to get there. A few times, we realized we were lost and changed direction. The Recon Platoon at the cache tried to help by firing rifle shots in the air to guide us. But it was hard trying to pinpoint where the shots came from. They even popped a trip-flare but we never saw it through the gloom. Though my legs were stiffening, I kept walking.

For what should have been less than an hour's walk, it took over four hours to find our way back to the rice cache. It was still raining. Steve was unconscious and not looking good at all. Ten minutes before we arrived, a medevac that had been circling the area had to leave because he was low on fuel. Lieutenant Hudnell radioed the dispatcher again on our arrival. Word came back that with the rain, wind, low clouds and darkness; it was too risky to try to land a helicopter. They agreed to come and drop in a penetrator to pull Steve out. The helicopter arrived at midnight. The pilots tried their best, but the wind, rain, and darkness was too much to overcome. So they promised to return at first light. We had no choice but to wait it out.

Medics put Steve in a shelter using rice bags for walls and a poncho to keep out the rain. Rice bags inside the shelter formed a makeshift bed. Steve lay there with a plasma drip in his arm. The medics planned to stay up all night, watching over him until morning. Wade and I found a place to sit out of the rain and drifted off to a fitful sleep.

The next morning, I woke up to find out that Steve was dead. Otto said he had died around 3:00 a.m. I could not keep back the tears. Steve's death affected me greatly. It was the first time that someone died out there who was close to me. Why did he have to be the one to die? Steve was a young kid with a ready smile, a new wife, and his whole life in front of him.

In the recent past, I would have walked away with revenge on my mind. Now that driving need for revenge was not there. A numbing, beaten feeling replaced it. I realized that the past couple of months had been a game of

sorts. I felt untouchable then. I looked at others who were afraid and wondered what was wrong with them. I was tougher than they were then. Now, I was not so sure of myself. I had *had* it. I did not want to play the game anymore. I wanted to get the hell out of the jungle. What were we doing here anyway? I was alive. Was that just shit luck? Was Steve's death worth it somehow?

Off in the distance I could hear the medevac coming. It made its appearance soon after. Steve was loaded on first. Wade and I followed him in. The main rotor accelerated, we lifted up, slid forward, and were away, leaving the jungle behind.



A Huey helicopter on its way back.

# Chapter 33-Recovery

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Steve, Wade and I were taken to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh, near Bien Hoa. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Evacuation Hospital was one of the most capable in Vietnam. I cannot imagine what it would have been like if I had been wounded on a South Sea island somewhere during World War II, where a hospital was not so readily available.

Orderlies with stretchers met us at the helicopter as soon as it touched down and quickly moved us inside. The next half a day was like a whirlwind. Hospitals caring for the wounded were fast moving places. Everything there was clean and white. There were white sheets, white walls, and whiteness everywhere. I felt so out of place, dirty as I was. They whisked me away in one direction while they sent Steve and Wade in another.

X-rays of my legs identified pieces of metal shrapnel in the back of both legs. A doctor decided that removing the shrapnel might cause more damage than it was worth. So a nurse finished cleaning the wounds, applied bandages and that was it, I was out of there. I could walk but not easily. My leg muscles felt tight and sore. The good news though was I was okay. It could have been so much worse.

In three days, I was back on Buttons, and I visited the doctor there. My legs ached when I walked, sat down, and stood back up. There was pain from the shrapnel and pain related to the explosion. The blast had literally picked me up and thrown me. I had pain in the center of my chest that increased when I breathed deeply. I had a stiff neck from whiplash. They had given me a collar to wear for neck support. I felt like I had been in a bad car accident.

For the physical pain, doctors had me on pain medication. I was not sure what it was. For trauma, they had me on Valium. I cannot say I minded taking that Valium. It helped with the anxiety I felt. The thought of going back to the jungle made me feel anxious. My heart beat faster. I feared they would force me back out there. My job could put me in a position where something much worse could happen. They killed Steve; maybe they would kill me next. The Valium blunted those feelings and gave me temporary peace.

The doctor placed me on light duty and told me to revisit in a week to see how my wounds were going. I was okay with that for now. Sit tight on Buttons and get well. I liked the sound of it. There was no one around to share my experience with, though. Ace High was still in Cambodia somewhere. Wade had not returned with me to Buttons. The last time I saw Wade, nurses wheeled him into an operating room. I had no idea where he was or if I would ever see him again. The only thing I knew for sure was Steve was dead.

My first thought on Buttons was to write home or call home if I could. I had to make contact with family. So much had happened to me in the last few days, I assumed they all knew about it somehow and were worried. I had received some letters when I returned to Buttons. In one of the letters, my mother had sent pictures of our backyard. I wrote back saying, "It was nice to see pictures. I wish you knew how much I would like to be standing in the backyard right now; I would give a million dollars." I told them I was out of Cambodia and on Buttons because, "I fell the other day and hurt my leg. I will be here for a couple more days or longer." In later letters, I could see that my Mom had an inkling that something more was wrong with me. She pumped me for information. I never caved though and told them anything.

Three days later, headquarters moved me to firebase Speer in Cambodia. They put me to work on a temporary basis as a Supply Sergeant. I lived in and worked from the supply tent. What a great place to sleep, inside a tent! I liked the job and hoped they would let me stay in it for a while, maybe for the remainder of my tour. Anyone with a taste of working in the jungle felt exactly the same way. No one in his right mind wanted to be out there. I said before that some attempted to get out by shooting themselves or spitting out their malaria pills. Others tried to break an ankle jumping from a helicopter. My attempt to become a door gunner would have been another way out of the jungle. Maybe this Supply Sergeant job would last long enough that at least I would never see the jungle in Cambodia again. I could only hope.

A doctor would have to make the decision to take me off light duty, return me to full duty, and then send me back out there. I was not going to volunteer to go back. No one was going to protect me except me. So I focused on doing a good job as Supply Sergeant. With my mind on the job, the anxiety I had felt earlier lessened as days spun by. I was healing physically as well. I stopped wearing the neck collar.

I learned that Wade had what grunts referred to as million dollar wound. A million dollar wound was any wound that left one with all of his body parts in decent working order, but sent him back to the states. His wound in the ankle had struck bone. A bone wound apparently was much worse than flesh wounds. Wade was lucky.

With time to think, I wondered if I should go back to school again when I got out of the Army. I had not worked as a machinist for almost a year now. Did I want to go back to a machine shop when discharged? The GI Bill, which gave veterans money to attend school, would be there waiting when I left the Army. I should take advantage of that, I thought. Bleed it dry. Maybe I did not have to be satisfied with being a machinist for the rest of my life. God, did I wish I was back in school right now.

In mid June, Ace High returned to Speer to pull guard for five days. All of the guys wanted to know what was happening, how I was doing, and what I had heard. It was good to see everyone. They told me that shrapnel from an RPG hit Rob three days earlier. A medevac pulled him out and there was no word if Rob would be back or not. I was glad to hear he was alive and hopefully okay. We talked about a doctor's appointment I had coming up at Buttons in a few days. I had definitely improved physically. I was sure the doctor would see the difference in me. I hoped though that he would find some reason to hold off placing me back on full duty and send me to the field.

Three days later, I flew to Buttons to see the doctor. He checked the back of my legs and they were healing nicely. I told him I could still feel some pulling and tightness in my legs, especially in the morning. I returned the neck collar. I no longer required pain medication. I did not ask for more Valium. No further doctor appointments were scheduled. He did not take me off light duty. He did not say I should return to the jungle, and I did not ask him if I could. It was weird in a way. Maybe he did not want to be the one that decided my fate.

I returned to the supply tent on Speer and started working again. Ace High was gone. While I was on Buttons, they had returned to the jungle. For the first time since a medevac yanked me out of the jungle two weeks before, I felt this twinge of guilt. It was telling me I should be out there with them.

Why did I feel guilty? For one thing, if I walked back to the doctor I had just left and insisted he change my status from light duty to full duty, I was sure he would do it. If I insisted that I was ready to return to the field, I was

sure he would support it. If I asked Captain McKenna if I could return to the field, I was sure he would allow it. No doctor, no officer would stop me. The grunts in the field were my friends. I should be out there, sharing their pain the Captain would say. However, if I asked Randy, Tony, or Rob that question, their answer would be a resounding NOOO! They would say, “Stay out as long as you can!”

So I decided to continue working in the supply tent and hold on. I was not going to volunteer to put myself back in harm’s way. The job of infantry soldier in Vietnam was the most dangerous job in the world at the time. I did not want to risk dying if I could avoid it. Why do that?

I wish I had heard folk singer, Country Joe McDonald’s signature anthem, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin to Die Rag”, *before* I joined the Army. It may have made a difference in some of the choices I had made. He wrote the song in 1965. But it became famous when he sang it at Woodstock in August, 1969, a few days *after* they inducted me into the Army. Here is the first and last verse and the chorus. He sang it with gusto.

# “I Feel Like I’m Fixin to Die Rag”

## FIRST VERSE

Well, come on all of you, big strong men,  
Uncle Sam needs your help again.  
Yeah, he's got himself in a terrible jam  
Way down yonder in Vietnam  
So put down your books and pick up a gun,  
Gonna have a whole lotta fun.

## CHORUS

And it's one, two, three,  
What are we fighting for?  
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,  
Next stop is Vietnam;  
And it's five, six, seven,  
Open up the pearly gates,  
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,  
Whoopee! we're all gonna die.

## LAST VERSE

Come on mothers throughout the land,  
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.  
Come on fathers, and do not hesitate  
To send your sons off before it's too late.  
You can be the first ones in your block  
To have your boy come home in a box.

## CHORUS

And it's one, two, three,  
What are we fighting for? ...

words and music by Joe McDonald  
(c) 1965 renewed 1993 /Alcatraz Corner Music, BMI



Happier now that I had been away from jungle for awhile.

# Chapter 34-Holding Pattern

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When the month of June wound to a close, the United States pulled out of Cambodia and headed back to Vietnam. South Vietnamese soldiers remained in Cambodia and stayed for many weeks to come.

Invading Cambodia was a success. Army brass said that it would take the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong nine months to reorganize themselves. Fighting in Vietnam lightened up. It gave the United States the breathing room it needed to withdraw one hundred fifteen thousand troops.

Captain Anderson of B Company 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry said in a newspaper article that, "From July 1<sup>st</sup> until the end of my tour, I did not take another shot. We had wiped out all of their supplies and demoralized them so greatly that the Vietcong were not ready to fight. As we ran patrols in Vietnam following Cambodia, the Vietcong followed us to eat the garbage we left behind. Going into Cambodia saved us from taking more heat."

The downside of Cambodia was the U.S. Army had two hundred eighty four men killed in action, two thousand three hundred thirty nine wounded and thirteen missing in action.

Ace High lost seventy men in Cambodia, seven killed and the rest wounded. We went in with one hundred twenty eight men and came out with fifty-eight, a loss of over fifty percent of the company. I wondered if anyone thought it was worth it.

No one was pressing to see when I would return to the field. I was thankful and continued working as supply sergeant. They moved me from Speer to help build 11Bravo, a new firebase in Vietnam. It was close to the Cambodian border. Army brass may have left Cambodia, but they did not plan to be far away if we had to go back in. My job was to establish our supply system on 11Bravo. This was the first time I saw a firebase built from scratch right in the middle of a bamboo forest. Let me tell you how Army Engineers did it.

They start with a bulldozer. To get the bulldozer to the 11Bravo site, an enormously powerful helicopter called a Sikorsky Sky Crane delivered it by air. Working from the center of the firebase, the bulldozer cleared the area by pushing the bamboo and other jungle vegetation toward the outside perimeter. Where vegetation was too tall, engineers rigged daisy cutters.

They were long, tubular, connectible bombs used to blow away vegetation at the base. Then a bulldozer had an easier time pushing it. When done, what was once a bamboo forest was now a vast open area, roughly the shape of a circle.

The next step began at the center again. This time, the bulldozer pushed dirt back toward the outside, forming the berm in the shape of a ring about two hundred meters in diameter. The ring had to be large enough to contain the artillery battery, an infantry company that pulled guard, a cook tent, supply tents, and whatever else was required for basic services. With the berm complete, that signature red dirt was exposed. Monsoon rains quickly transformed the dirt in areas into a lake of mud.

While all of this building was going on, one of the battalion's infantry companies had the area encircled. Their job was to provide security to protect the equipment operators. Once they established the berm, infantry soldiers helped with filling sandbags and building fighting positions along the berm.

As the firebase took shape, work began on the necessities. A mess hall was set up. Chinook helicopters carried in the artillery battery of five or six howitzers and set them in place. Carpenters built shitters. Culverts for sleeping protection were set up along the berm and sandbagged. Engineers built log roads where necessary so vehicles would not disappear into the mud. In about a week, the firebase was ready for operation.

We were surprised when a two star general along with congressional representatives and a newspaper reporter visited with us for a few hours. The war in Cambodia had created unrest at home. So Army brass and politicians visited to see firsthand what was going on. The completed firebase was one of the first clear signs that we were out of Cambodia for good.

I began to relax a bit and for good reason. We were out of Cambodia. I was still serving as supply sergeant. The sun began to show up again. Sure, it was raining and dealing with the mud was painful, but the sun was creeping back! George Harrison's, "Here Comes the Sun" took on new meaning. Vietnam's rainy season and dry season had its bad points. When transitioning from the rainy season, having the sun peek out for a short time made me feel better about the world.

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In the second week of July, I received some bad news. Ace High's First Sergeant told me I would be going back to the field. I do not know who

made the decision and why. By this time, I thought I had the Supply Sergeant position locked up. Three men were leaving, and there was a need for someone. That someone though, was not going to be me. Someone finally made a decision and I was not going to challenge it.

It was bad news but for some reason, I did not exactly feel devastated by it. With the firebase built, I had less to do. I was beginning to feel lazy anyway. My legs had healed and they felt okay. And the guilt would not go away. Though I knew better, I thought I should return to the jungle. It was as if I was an injured member of a football team. When you no longer feel the pain of the injury, you want to get back out there and contribute. I wanted someone to tell me I was ready to go back though. Well now, they told me!

Hey, it was not that bad. I had been out of the jungle for over a month now. Through it all, I had turned the corner on July. From a tour perspective, I had rounded second base and I was starting down the baseline to third. I needed a way to survive and get through each day. Eventually, that day would come when I would fly back to the real world.

Ace High was coming out of the jungle and heading to the VIP Center in mid-July, so I joined them there. As always, going to the VIP Center in Bien Hoa was a welcome relief. The feeling of being clean and eating hot food was so special when we do not have those things. I saw the *Planet of the Apes* and *Where Eagles Dare* at the theatre. The movie *Where Eagles Dare* was not as good as the book. But watching it meant that I was an hour and a half closer to going home.

Looking around at the men in my platoon, I could see there were many new faces. Most of my old friends had disappeared. Some were recovering from wounds, some had had rear jobs because they were close to shipping out, and others had returned to the states. Most of the new guys were green with no combat experience. Now, I was the grizzled veteran. That was why I was back in the field, I thought. They needed experienced men.

From the VIP Center, we flew to Firebase Moe to pull guard. Moe was another new firebase in Vietnam, close to the Cambodian border. At Moe, the First Sergeant reminded me that I had an R&R coming on July 26. I was going to Tokyo, Japan! I had so many other things to think about, I had forgotten.

From Moe, I flew to Buttons, then on to Bien Hoa. On July 27th I found myself getting on a bus for Tan Son Nhut AFB in Saigon to fly to Japan.

The bus trip was an event in itself. I had never been out of Bien Hoa before, and now I had a twenty-mile bus ride to Saigon ahead of me. The highway that connected Bien Hoa with Saigon was a heavily traveled route. There were military vehicles on the road and I saw a few automobiles now and then. Most of what I saw out there was two and three-wheeled motor scooters. The three-wheeled motor scooters had a small cab behind the driver with a roof and an open back. They held six to eight small people. The two-wheeled motor scooters were generally for one person. They did not have much speed so they hugged the side of the road.

I was traveling on a military bus in a war zone so besides the bus driver and passengers, an armed guard was on board. The driver and guard played a game with the Vietnamese on the way to airport that shocked me. It was funny at first but sad too. It was just another example of how we treated the Vietnamese. The game involved approaching a two-wheeled motor scooter from behind as it pattered along close to the edge of the road. The guard positioned himself on the bottom step to the right of the driver with the bus door wide open. The bus driver edged the bus close to the side of the road so the guard was within reaching distance of the motor scooter.

Just as the bus was about to pass the scooter, the guard leaned out and grabbed the rider's hat. If he missed, well, then he missed. But if he plunked it off the person's head, the guard threw the hat on the dashboard, and then resumed the game. As you might imagine, the person on the scooter came close to crashing from the surprise of it all. The driver and guard collected hats in this way for almost the whole drive.

Once off the highway, traveling through the city was an experience. Everything was dirty and dingy. Everyone looked so poor. I saw a woman taking a dump in the gutter on the side of the road like it was common practice. Saigon intersections have no traffic lights so drivers barged through blowing their horns.

The airport at Tan Son Nhut AFB was nothing special. I was happy to be there, though. Wow, I was actually leaving Vietnam. I had a window seat on the plane. We left in daylight. Hours later, we approached Japan after the sun had gone down. Looking out the window, the lights shining up from Japan blew me away. Japan was lit up like a Christmas tree. There were lights everywhere. It all looked so welcoming and friendly compared to Vietnam.

Vietnam was dark from the air because few people used lights at night. I

know that sounds strange. Under a light, however, we were a target. So from above, Vietnam gave me an uneasy feeling. Recently I saw a satellite view of North and South Korea at night. It is striking how lit up South Korea is at night when compared with North Korea. North Korea looks like a black hole in comparison. That was how Vietnam felt back then from the air, like a black hole.

Landing in Tokyo, the first thing I did after grabbing my duffel bag was find a taxi. As you might imagine, taxi drivers did not speak English. No problem, the Army gave me a cheat sheet with common English phrases and the translation in Japanese. With that, I jumped in a cab, leaned toward the driver, pointed to the sentence that read, "Take me to Camp Zama" on the cheat sheet, and then sat back.

What a ride. Japanese taxi drivers wore racing gloves and for good reason. I held on for dear life. Whizzing along on the wrong side of the road, it was a blur of city streets, neon signs, and short people with black hair. Everything was so radically different in a visual sense; it felt like I was on a ride at the Epcot Center in Disney World. Suddenly, the driver quickly decelerated and came to a stop. I stepped out at Camp Zama.

Camp Zama was an American military facility left over from World War II. They had barracks there and that was where I stayed for a week. An American hospital at Camp Zama took in wounded service members from Vietnam. It struck me how quiet and peaceful it felt there. I liked that.

What a difference it was here in Tokyo with no war going on. There were lights everywhere at night and no barbed wire. Barbed wire was everywhere in Vietnam except the jungle itself, of course. Barbed wire made Vietnam feel hostile and confining. There was no such feeling here in Japan.

During the week, I took advantage of some city tours, visiting the Emperor's palace and Shinto temples. I went to the USO in Tokyo and unsuccessfully tried to go to the World Expo. My goal was not to go on a whirlwind of tours in Tokyo. It was to relax and enjoy the peace of it all.

I bought a few gifts in Japan. I needed a suit so I bought a classic three-piece, three-button suit in a herringbone pattern of green wool. It was tailor made to fit me perfectly. My name was stitched on the inside pocket. I fully expected to wear that suit forever. I bought a Seiko watch, one of those new, Japanese brands. They looked better made than the Timex watches we had at home. I bought a Yashica Electro GT, 35 mm camera. I even bought a vernier caliper. A vernier caliper is a precision measurement tool that I was

interested in adding to my machinist toolbox at home.

I picked up gifts for the family as well. I bought Seiko watches for my parents, a woodcarving of a Japanese farmer for my grandmother, and a music box for my sisters. I could not find anything for my brothers, so that would have to wait for another time and place.

Time passed much too quickly. Before I knew it, I was leaving Camp Zama, getting on a plane and heading back to Vietnam. On the plane, I had a chance to relive it all. I could not get over how different Japan and Vietnam were. The people were similar. I was taller than most of them and all of that black hair everywhere had a way of catching my eye. But that was about the only similarity. I said earlier how the bright lights and lack of barbed wire in Japan made me feel when compared with Vietnam. Another difference between Vietnam and Japan was how vibrant and alive Tokyo felt at night. Lights flashing, people on the move, restaurants and clubs bustling; Tokyo was electric. It seemed that the city was much more alive at night than during the day.

In contrast, Vietnam felt dead. It was especially dead at night. Civilians hid away at night. Soldiers pulled guard at night. Wandering around in the open at night could get me killed. Even during the day, Vietnam had a dead feeling about it with the stifling heat of the dry season and the gloom of the rainy season.

Japan reopened my eyes. I could see that the world was very much alive and waiting out there for me to return. More importantly, Japan released a tension in me that I had not realized was there. Replacing the tension, if only temporarily, was this sense of peace that washed in like a wave on a beach.



A Sikorsky Sky Crane helicopter dropping a bulldozer.



Using daisy cutters to clear vegetation.



Filling sandbags at Firebase 11Bravo



Mud everywhere at 11Bravo



Views from the bus when traveling to the airport.



Views from the bus when traveling to the airport

# Chapter 35-Back In the Jungle Again

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All good things come to an end, and I found myself back in Vietnam in early August. While in Bien Hoa, I shipped most everything I bought in Japan back home. I kept the new 35mm camera with me but left it in storage in Bien Hoa. I did not want to take the camera into the jungle. Two days later, I was back at Buttons where I replaced some missing gear and restocked with food and water. I was on the next supply helicopter heading back to the jungle.

On the flight out, I realized it had been two months since a medevac pulled me out of the jungle. Now, here I was heading back again. I did not like the idea of going back. Sure, it was disappointing. I thought I had the Supply Sergeant position locked up. Now, there was nothing to do but accept it. I could have challenged his decision, but that was a sure road to Long Binh Jail.

It was not all that bad being back. My focus on going home was still alive and kicking. I had survived seven months here, which meant I had a short five months to go. Time had a way of zipping by in the jungle. Cambodia was over. The continuous confrontations we had with Vietcong in Cambodia should now be zero confrontations. I made up my mind to live with the cards the Army dealt me as best I could. I would not try to be a hero, and I would find ways to survive each day until I was out of there.

With that, I returned to the work that I knew. The process of getting through the day-to-day routine was the same. Setting up at night, running patrols during the day, nothing had changed. Quickly, I was back into it, almost as if I had never left. I have to admit, I was paranoid, edgy, maybe more than edgy. It was a relief when two days later, we returned from the jungle to Firebase Jean. Okay, two days in the jungle then back to pulling guard on a firebase. It was not a bad start.

Jean was in Vietnam and thirty miles from the Cambodian border. The further we were from Cambodia, the better I liked it. Soon I was right back into the swing of working on a firebase. It was on Jean that I hit my one-year anniversary in the Army. Now, not only was I on the short end of my stay in

Vietnam, but I was also on the short end of my stay in the Army. Time was marching on.

Realizing that my Army career was more than half way over, I asked my Mom how much money I had saved. I had sold my red 64 Chevy Impala convertible before joining the Army. I began to contemplate buying my next one. I did not make much money in the Army, but I knew it was adding up. Sergeant pay was not bad. Vietnam was a war zone, so I had extra money coming in from combat pay. I was not spending much. There were no stores or bars to frequent in the jungle. Soldiers who were living and working in the rear, like Bien Hoa had places to spend money that I did not have. The only thing I paid for on a regular basis was my beer and soda ration. I looked forward to hearing what I had saved. I hoped it would be a pleasant surprise.

She never did get back to me, so I pressed. Turns out, they had borrowed some of it. Earlier I said they did not have a lot of money. So my father insisted they use my money to pay for all of those packages I was receiving. I had expected a different surprise. It gave me a taste of how my father must have felt when he returned home from the Army in World War II.

In mid-August, we flew to newly built Firebase Chris and worked the jungle from there for a while. Chris was close to the village of Duc Phong. We heard that South Vietnamese soldiers would take over Chris when we left it behind. That was encouraging. I had a sour feeling that we were doing all of the heavy lifting while the South Vietnamese Army sat in the rear, like a show piece. We heard they had a major role with fighting in Cambodia, but I did not witness any of it.

Rain continued with glimpses of sun. Rain was always painful to live with. Now it held up mail delivery for some reason. It was tough enough living out here. Not having regular mail coming made it so much worse. The days marched on though and the thought that going home was getting closer was a lift. I was now beginning to count the days.

When mail finally started up again, I learned that my younger brother Jackie wanted a jacket from Vietnam he had seen on a veteran back home. The jacket had a map of Vietnam on the back with the caption, "When I die I will go to heaven because I have already spent my time in Hell." I had seen them before and liked it because it felt like the truth.

In late August, we were preparing to leave Chris for the jungle. For whatever reason, the helicopters planned to pick us up close to the village of

Duc Phong. We had a few hours to kill before the helicopters swooped in to get us. While waiting, villagers spotted us and came out in a group, young and old alike.

For the first time in my experience, it was enjoyable being with them. Before, the Vietnamese were always distant, especially the older women. This time, it was fun. About fifty women and children greeted us with goods to buy from beads to cheap booze. It was a nice break from the drudgery of being a grunt in Vietnam. I was trying to take pictures and buy things at the same time. There was this young girl with a wash bucket full of trinkets to sell. She kept spinning away when I tried to take her picture. Later I learned that Buddhists do not like their picture taken. It had something to do with a picture capturing their soul. Before I knew it, our time was up with them. Helicopters lifted us out and dropped us back in the jungle.

We ended the month of August back at the VIP Center in Bien Hoa. August was a better month than expected for me. Time was moving along. I had quickly re-acclimated to living and working in the jungle. We had one minor firefight with the usual burst of machine gun fire. I had been walking along, heard that familiar burst, and hit the ground so fast I almost tumbled down a hillside. My box of M60 ammunition flew out in front of me. It awakened that old fear in the pit of my stomach. I survived it, and that was it for the month. No one was hurt. It was not Cambodia out there anymore and I was thankful. Yes, there was the rain and the insects, but I could live with it. They were not going to kill me.

August brought one additional surprise. Rob returned. Earlier I said that shrapnel from an RPG wounded him not long after me. His injuries were more severe than mine were. He had the opportunity to ship home. Instead, he volunteered to return to the field. Rob was the only grunt I knew that returned when wounded to the extent he was. He told me that guilt had weighed heavily in his decision. I had to tip my hat to him.



A grunt carrying a grenade launcher and grenade vest.



Former Vietcong soldiers, now Kit Carson Scouts.



Bartering outside of the village of Duc Phong.

## Chapter 36-Two Digit Midget

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September, I could not believe it was September! Where had the time gone? Our stint at the VIP Center in Bien Hoa ended. We were on our way back to jungle. Time was marching on. I started my ninth month and looked forward to two major milestones this month.

First, I was a few days away from becoming a *two-digit midget*. A two-digit midget was any person that had ninety-nine days or less left in Vietnam. When I arrived here and saw three hundred sixty five days looming in front of me, it seemed an impossible gulf to deal with. Now there were ninety-nine days left! I could live with that; it was not that much further to go. I could brag about being a two-digit midget. I could feel good at any time by simply remembering that I was a two-digit midget. We even had a special calendar to track days as two-digit midgets.

Second, my birthday was this month and I become the ripe old age of 21. There was something magical about the age of 21. I could legally drink anywhere in the United States, vote, and take out a car loan. I had been planning for my birthday for some time now. I had been asking friends back home to send me booze for the occasion. I had not received any yet, but I was hoping. I also hoped I was on firebase somewhere on *that day* so it was easier to celebrate. I could not do much celebrating if we are out in the jungle.

For now though, we patrolled the jungle near Firebase Chris. While out there, we passed near the village of Duck Phong again and bought from the villagers. Then we moved on, continuing with the grind of patrolling a jungle. We were out eleven days this time and nothing eventful happened. I got the sense that we had done ourselves an enormous favor by going into Cambodia. It was definitely more relaxed out here.

In mid-September, headquarters pulled us out of the jungle to pull guard at Firebase Sally. Sally was another firebase far away from Cambodia. While there, Ianni's replacement tried to become a bigger hard-ass than Ianni. He demanded that we get rid of our personal ammo cans as a way to reduce the weight we all carried. In addition, he would not let us carry a camera or radio anymore. They had us carrying our personal possessions in plastic bags instead. We did not take it well, but we had to follow orders.

Why was it when things became a little easier, the Army always seemed to find new ways to harass us?

Close to Sally, we found a new way to take advantage of a nearby stream. A wide spot had the look of an old-fashioned swimming hole. I had walked through a number of streams but never had the opportunity to swim in one in Vietnam. Well here, they gave us the opportunity. We stripped down and jumped in. It was a great old time. We almost forgot where we were it was so much fun. Captain McKenna allowed it, I believe, because we had not run into Vietcong for a while now.

Army engineers were making drinking water close by. So we took some time to see how they did it. Since I had arrived in Vietnam, the water always had that heavy chlorine taste. Well, they added chlorine to the water with this special Army truck. The truck pumped water out of the stream, filtered it, treated it with chlorine, and then delivered the result to a potable (drinkable) water storage tank. The volume of chlorine shrinks as bacteria die. So they add more than needed to ensure some remained to keep the water fresh. The heavy chlorine taste was better than getting sick, I guess. They had a complete water treatment plant in a truck. It was amazing.

Then, it was back to the jungle again. Going back was getting easier to take. For one reason, the weather was improving. We were getting more and more sun and less and less rain. Now it rained at the end of the day for a short period. It was similar to the way we transitioned into the rainy season earlier in the year.

I learned the Army had approved another R&R trip I had been hoping to take to Sydney, Australia. I would leave in October. The trip was a way to get out of the jungle and away from Vietnam again. October was just around the corner.

There was a rumor that a Christmas drop was in the works this year. If someones normal time to leave Vietnam were late December or early January, the Army would consider reducing the days I had left to get me home for Christmas. It looked like I qualified for a Christmas drop if the Army approved one, so it was exciting.

In the jungle, I received birthday cards in the mail from everywhere, which was great. I was even getting birthday cards from Sweden where my grandparents were born. Relatives back there were still in touch with my Mom. I felt good about the cards and felt good in general because I was feeling short. Feeling short was that feeling we had when we only had a

small amount of time left in country. I had to be a two-digit-midget to feel short. There was a light at the end of the tunnel and I could clearly see it.

In the third week of September, headquarters lifted us from the jungle to pull guard at Firebase Audie. It meant I would be on a firebase to celebrate my birthday. I never did get any booze in the mail. I thought someone from home would come through with a bottle but it did not happen. On the evening of my birthday though, Mike, one of the lifer sergeants came through with a bottle of whiskey.

That night, at the ripe old age of twenty-one, I drank beer, smoked ganja, and then took a number of pulls from that whiskey bottle to top it off. I was not a whiskey drinker and it showed. I had never been so out of it in Vietnam. I do not remember much of anything from that night, but they told me I had a great time.

On a firebase, we shared culvert hoochs for sleeping. Larry, one of my fellow grunts, had the spot next to me. I do not remember when he hit the sack nor do I remember when I did. Obviously, I made it to my air mattress because I woke up there the next morning with a pounding headache. Larry was gone and everything that belonged to Larry was gone. There was bare ground next to me. I stuck my head out of the hooch and my eyeballs slammed shut it was so bright. It was mid-morning and everybody had been up for quite a while. My head was throbbing and my stomach was queasy.

I made my way to the medical tent and took everything the medic had to ease the pain in my head and the churning in my stomach. I made my way back and found Larry. He had cleared out of the hooch because I had puked on him during the night. Larry was an easy-going, good guy and he proved it by not strangling me. It was day end before I felt close to normal and able to eat something. The last time I had felt that bad was in that hotel room in New York City.

As the month of September closed out, headquarters sent us back again to the jungle. I was still receiving birthday cards and it felt good. Though the rain soaked us every day, the sun now came out to dry us off. The Vietcong did not seem interested in attacking us anymore. What made me feel good though was there was less than ninety days until Christmas.



*Making drinking water from a brown-looking stream.*



*Making drinking water from a brown-looking stream*



*Having fun as well as a bath in a waterhole.*

## Chapter 37-Short

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The way I saw it, October was my last month in the jungle. I was approaching the end of my tour. Those in this same position before me spent time in a rear job before shipping out of Vietnam. I expected no less for me. Something will happen. Official word would come down this month that sent me to the rear. I was sure of it.

I was getting sick of the jungle. The same old slog of living day to day out here was banging on me again. The newness I felt in August had worn off. At first, working in the jungle had made time move faster. Now, the thought of being *short* made time drag to a snail's pace.

On top of that, I had that classic problem everyone had as I approached the end of my tour in Vietnam. I felt paranoid. It was not paranoia to the point of being irrational or delusional. I was functioning. But I thought that something bad was going to happen before I left. I could be wounded again and lose an arm or a leg. Or the Vietcong may find a way kill me in some strange twist of fate. It weighed on me and the feeling would not go away.

Letters were not providing the same pick-me-up they had before. Reading letters from home created a want to be there in me that physically hurt as I read them. My Mom had given my address to relatives in Sweden. I thought I had a fan club in Sweden with the quantity of letters I was getting. They did not pump me up though. Letters became a reminder of how close I was to getting back to the world.

Making it worse, there was still no word about getting a Christmas drop. Army brass had not confirmed it yet. The thought of the Christmas drop falling through added to the gloom I felt. I could not imagine spending Christmas here.

If it was not enough, we had been out in the jungle longer than normal for some reason. Typically, we patrolled for an average of ten to fourteen days. Well, we were well beyond that. They had us patrolling with no letup. It was getting even easier out here, mind you. The rain was lessening. We recently had a stretch of four days without rain. But why were they keeping us out longer than normal? No one had an answer. With the additional time out there, I had a heavier beard than I could ever remember having. My clothes could stand up on their own they were so heavy with dirt and dried

sweat. I smelled like holy hell though we all got used to it.

In spare moments out there, I wondered what it would be like to go home again. Would I recognize anyone after being away for such a long time? Would anyone recognize me? I did not see myself as different. I was more desperate maybe, more afraid of shadows maybe. Would my old friends be different with me? Would they still be friends? Maybe they all had gone off on their separate ways. My best friend was pissed at me for what I said to him about a firefight a while back. How would our relationship change?

I wondered how my parents had held up with me away. Had I kept everything hidden from them well enough? Had worry eaten them up and aged them prematurely? One side of me was looking forward to going home so badly it hurt. Another side of me was concerned about what I would find there.

One thing I looked forward to at home was to see all of those slides I had been sending there. The family member with the answers was not there to explain the pictures my parents had been looking at for the last nine months. They probably did not even have a slide projector to look at them properly. Well, I would buy one!

Finally, in the third week of October, we returned to Firebase Audi after working the jungle for twenty-seven days. Audi brought good news. I learned I would leave there for Buttons the next day to go on my R&R to Sydney, Australia. I had almost forgotten about my trip to Sydney, we were out in the jungle so long. I also learned from the First Sergeant that I would have a rear job waiting for me on my return. What a relief.

Two days later, I was sitting in the airport in Saigon waiting to fly to Australia. The day before, I had bought a suit at the PX in Bien Hoa for thirty dollars. It had a double-breasted jacket with bell-bottom pants. I was less confident that it would stay in style as long as the three-piece suit I had bought earlier in the year. But it was a good buy.

We took off from Vietnam for Sydney but landed prematurely in Darwin, Australia. The plane had some engine issues that forced us to stay there for the night. The next day we flew on to Sydney. From the airport, a taxi dropped me at the Koala Motor Inn downtown. Staying there cost \$10.50 a day.

Sydney made me homesick for Boston. Sydney and Boston were similar. For a non-American city, Sydney had more of an American feel to it than say New Orleans or Miami. The people were exceptionally friendly,

especially with American soldiers. I felt appreciated there. The foreignness of Sydney stood out, only when I spoke with someone and received that thick, Crocodile-Dundee-like accent in return.

I spent a good chunk of my stay in bars, as you might imagine. They had some of the greatest draft beer. It was smoother than American beers with a whipped cream-like head. One bar I went to handed me a basket of cold chicken at the door then asked for it back at the bar. That was strange. Someone told me the bars did it as a way of beating zoning laws in Sydney. If bars had saturated an area, to open another, the new owner opened it *officially* as a restaurant, and then handed out that cold basket of chicken at the door as a way to beat the system. I was not even sure if the chicken was edible.

Unlike Tokyo, I was not into sightseeing. Sydney Opera House was a major attraction for tourists. The roof looked like the petals of a flower. Then, it was nearing completion across Sydney Cove from where I was. I remember giving it a quick look from across the water and that was about it for sightseeing in Sydney. Maybe I should have made more of an effort. The opera house is such an icon now.

I enjoyed the peace and quiet during the day and the bars at night. While there, I bought my younger brothers boomerangs at a souvenir shop. That completed my entire gift-giving requirements. I had already bought something for everyone else at home in Tokyo.

As in Japan, the week in Sydney disappeared in a blur. Before I wanted to, I was on my way back to Vietnam. That was the bad news. The good news was Christmas was only fifty-five days away.



Tony, Pete and Randy earlier in the year in Vietnam.



Skip and Zeek standing in a hole after Cambodia.



Receiving supplies of food and water.



Eating hot food that arrived by helicopter.

## Chapter 38-Out of the Bush

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Back in Vietnam from my trip to Sydney, I found myself in a helicopter dropping in to Firebase Audi on November 3rd. I learned on Buttons that Audi was my last stop this time. There would be no more trips to the jungle for me. Headquarters gave me the job of unloading helicopters on the log pad at Audi for the rest of my time in Vietnam.

It was not much of a job but I was happy with it. Chinook helicopters arrived in the morning with supplies from Bien Hoa. Supplies slung in cargo nets hung from a hook below the aircraft. Once the helicopter had dropped its load, I would help with the unloading and distributing of the supplies. When I collected enough empty cargo nets, I would bundle them together and ship them back to Bien Hoa. That was about it. As you might imagine, I had a good amount of down time between helicopters. I worked about two to three hours a day. I used the down time to work on my tan.

Guard duty ended for me as well. Normally when on a firebase with Ace High, I pulled at least two hours of guard duty during the night. Now I was no longer part of an infantry company. Ace High and Companies B, C, D and E rotated in from the field to pull guard on Audi. From now until the day I left Vietnam, I could sleep through the night.

My sleeping accommodations also improved. As part of the deal, they gave me my own personal hooch. It was a culvert, but it was my own culvert. Since I had joined the Army, I never had my own place to sleep. Now I had my own private place where I could even sleep during the day if I felt like it.

I fixed up the hooch as if it were an apartment. I had mosquito netting on the front entrance to keep out the insects. I draped a poncho and poncho liner over the front to keep out the light during the day if I wanted to sleep in. The poncho kept out the rain. I also had a cot inside to place my air mattress on so I didn't have to sleep on the ground. It was nice.

Something else I would not do any more was going half a month between showers. I had a five-gallon black plastic water can (jerry can) that I filled with water every morning. During the day, the can absorbed heat from the sun, so by the end of the day, the water was actually hot. I could take a hot shower every night. It was pure luxury.

Meals from the mess hall were hot morning, noon, and night. I no longer had to eat C rations or long-range-patrol packets unless I wanted one for a snack or a fond remembrance. With my new easy-going job and a mess hall close by, I gained some weight back.

Finally, I could relax. That constant tension in the jungle was melting away. It probably helped that I drank cold beer at night. Cold beer had a way of reducing tension. Another tension reliever was smoking grass. I smoked grass at night and even during the day.

I figured out how to roll my own. The process began with setting individual filter cigarettes out in the sun. The heat dried the tobacco. Then, by rolling the cigarette vertically between my fingers, the tobacco fell out, leaving me with an empty cigarette tube.

With a large clear plastic bag of grass sitting open on my lap, I pointed the empty tube toward the sky in my right hand and then I would fill, tap, fill, tap, fill, tap with my left. When the tube was packed, a quick twist of the paper at the top and it was ready. Rolling beers, making marijuana cigarettes, I could live with this.

Boy, it would have been nice to have this job right from the start. The funny thing is, if I had the job from the start, there was no way I could have appreciated how great the job felt. Only when comparing the job with my previous one did it stand out as special. What a great way to finish out my time here. Part of what made the job so satisfying was the knowledge that I would never have to leave it and go back out in the jungle again.

I wrote home and let them know that I was out of the jungle. There was nothing to worry about anymore. I told them they could relax. It was not true, of course. When in a war zone there was always a reason to worry. The Vietcong could overrun Audi. Unlikely, but it could happen. They may bombard Audi with mortar rounds. I had not seen much use of mortars by the Vietcong in the past so it was an unlikely it would happen now. There could be a freak accident. I could be accidentally shot by someone making a mistake while cleaning a rifle. A helicopter might crush me on the helicopter pad. It was endless, the things that could happen or may happen before my time here would end. I was imagining all of them.

Though the job was great, I was still counting the days before going home. Rumors were flying that the Christmas drop may happen. Still no announcement, though. The thought of it made my stomach ache and time drag. It was not until Thanksgiving approached when I finally learned there

would be a Christmas drop this year. That gave me twenty days to go. Hearing that, the feeling was unbelievable. I thought the knowledge would relieve the pain I felt, but it actually made it worse. Time almost crawled to a stop. It was hard to believe that soon after having Thanksgiving dinner out here, I would begin preparing to go home.

Well, I made it through Thanksgiving somehow. They actually fed us a real turkey dinner. I have to admit, the Army made an effort to please at times. The day after Thanksgiving, I wrote my final letter home. I told them I should be back by mid-December and did not know exactly when. I told them not to get me a damn thing for Christmas. Coming home was all I want for Christmas; it would be the best present I ever had. I asked my Mom to stop sending letters because they would likely not reach me. With nothing else to say, it felt unbelievable to fold that final letter, place it in an envelope, and drop it in the outgoing mail.



My hooch. Shower water was heating in the jerry can.



A Chinook helicopter dropping a load of supplies.

## Chapter 39-Out of Vietnam

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The shipping out process began on Buttons on the first week in December. All I could think about was something bad would happen to screw it all up. The process began at the supply tent where I turned in those items issued to me almost a year before. I left behind my canteens, rucksack, grenades, smoke grenades, claymore mine, ammunition, and my rifle. It was nice to get rid of it all. I cannot say I was going to miss any of it except the rifle. I felt defenseless without it.

With everything turned back into supply, the next step was final paperwork. The Army required a set of orders when making a permanent change and leaving Vietnam was no different. A record clerk pulled together my personal file for shipment to my next duty station. Part of the paperwork included an accounting of all medals I would receive for my Vietnam tour.

Like boy scouts with merit badges, the Army provides medals for accomplishments. I had not thought much about them at all during the year other than the Purple Heart. I knew I would get one of those.

They gave me the medals right then and there, so I took them home with me. Each one came in a blue box, some fancier than others. There was no ceremony or anything when I received them and, to be honest, I did not need one. It was enough to be leaving with all of my parts in good working order.

Some of the medals did not have much importance to me such as the Vietnam Service Medal and Valorous Unit Awards. They gave out Valorous Unit Awards as a way to recognize that we were involved in a battalion or division level campaign. Five of those medals were important to me though, because they were personal.

In receiving the Army Commendation Medal for Heroism, the orders read, "For sustained combat operations against a hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam." The date on the orders related to a three-day period in Cambodia in May. I do not know who was watching me during that particular three-day period. I did not see much of a difference between those three days and any other three-day period in Cambodia.

The Purple Heart was for wounds I received in early June. No one goes out of his way for a Purple Heart. It happens, like fate and bad luck.

It would seem that receiving an Air Medal was a strange one for an

infantry soldier. Sounds like something for the Air Force. Well, if we participated in more than twenty-five aerial missions over hostile territory, we received one. All of those combat assaults by helicopter in and out of the jungle added up.

The Combat Infantry Badge was special. We received one "For satisfactory performance of ground duty while assigned to an infantry unit engaged in active ground combat." It was a badge of honor and I was proud to get it.

Finally, the clerk gave me the Army Commendation Medal for meritorious service in Vietnam. Why, I thought? I had expected a Bronze Star for meritorious service because I fought in a combat zone. That was what most grunts received. I was looking forward to it. "There must a mistake," I said. He said to talk to Captain McKenna.

Luckily, he was on Buttons, so I managed to find him. He was with another officer and rushing off somewhere. He stopped and I asked him why I received the Army Commendation Medal instead of a Bronze Star for meritorious service. He looked at me and said something about the amount of time I had spent out of the field when wounded. It was obvious there was no mistake as far as he was concerned. I half listened to him because what he said felt like a kick in the stomach. I did not know what to say. What could I say to an officer? With that, he excused himself and walked away.

Here I was, at the end of my tour of duty and he had managed to leave me standing there feeling like a failure. Only one other time in my working career did I feel failure like that. In one of the places I worked, they called me into an office one day and laid me off. What had I done to *not* be worthy of a Bronze Star? In his mind, once wounded, I took too long to return to the field. In my mind, I had moved on to another job. What he ignored, I believe, was I dutifully served as a grunt and a fire team leader before and after shrapnel from a booby-trap had wounded me. I spent at least nine months out there. Also, someone thought enough about me while out there to promote me to sergeant and site me for heroism in Cambodia.

I would like to tell you that was the end of it for me. It was the end of it as far as the Captain was concerned. However, anger got the best of me. In defiance, I foolishly had a set of ribbons made up in Vietnam that included the Bronze Star. Eventually, I threw the ribbon away. Anger turned to bitterness that still hurts me every time I have thought about it over the years. Did Captain McKenna make the right or wrong decision back then?

Maybe he had no choice for some reason.

Well, from Buttons, I caught a plane back to the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion to process out. It seemed so long ago that I had reported in to the same place. A sign at the entrance to the headquarters building of the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion had made me sick back then and now it was a welcome sight. It read, *Going Home? Report Here, USA Bound*.

The last time I was here, I was waiting for my assignment to a unit. This time I was waiting for a flight out of Vietnam. What had been a dirty, dingy place eleven months ago now felt like a four star hotel. I stayed for an anxiety-filled period of two days before receiving orders for a flight back home. Then, I boarded the bus that took me from 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement to Bien Hoa AFB to get on a freedom bird for the flight home.

This time, the name *freedom bird* took on a completely new meaning. On the way to Vietnam, a year earlier, the freedom bird sure in hell was not delivering me to freedom. Now, the name gave me a warm feeling that was hard to describe.

The airplane was another DC-8, from Overseas National Airlines. As I walked up the stairs and stepped through the door, it had the same six seats across, the same tight fitting aisle down the middle, and the same not-so-special-looking flight attendants. I sat down, buckled my seat belt and settled back. I thought how wonderful it felt to be here and how wonderful life can be at times. Getting on that plane was a special moment.

We took off and that last look back through the window at Vietnam was pure pleasure. Our first refueling stop was Wake Island. Wake Island was another territory of the United States like Guam. It was small though, only three square miles. Its only importance to the United States was as a runway in the middle of the Pacific for refueling. From there we flew directly to Travis Air Force Base, the same place I had left for Vietnam from. Overall flight time was a bit less than twenty hours because we had made one less refueling stop. As before, I was tired from the flight, but felt pumped.

From Travis Air Force Base, it was the same bus ride back to Oakland Army Base. Everything was happening in reverse. It felt good. It was strange getting back on American highways again. Everything seemed oversized; the road was oversized, the cars buzzing around the bus were oversized, and there were so many cars! I had come from a place where highways and the vehicles on them were smaller and more compact. Everything out there looked Texas sized.

At Oakland Army Base, they moved me right along this time. I traded my jungle fatigues for a set of Army dress greens. They fed me my congratulatory steak dinner. They told me I would have four weeks to spend at home on leave. Then, I must report to my new duty station at Fort Rucker, Alabama in mid January. There, I would finish out the remaining time in my enlistment. They did not know what I would do for a job yet. Then it was out the door to catch a cab for the airport in San Francisco.

Standing there waiting for a cab and again at the airport, it struck me how indifferent everyone was. Here I was having just finished a year performing the most impossible job, an occupation the average person could not even imagine. It was as if I had climbed Mount Everest. I was standing tall and feeling good about myself and no one seemed to notice or care. A brass band was not waiting when I stepped back into the United States. No one saw me; it was as if I was invisible.

I was lucky, I guess, that all I got was this indifference. I learned later that some Americans actually despised Vietnam veterans and attacked them if you believed the news. Demonstrations against the war in Vietnam had not let up. Some looked at soldiers from Vietnam as butchers and baby killers. Hey, I did not want to be an infantry soldier in Vietnam; it just happened. Surrounded by this indifference, I boarded a plane for Logan Airport in Boston where my parents were waiting for me.

I had not seen my parents in a long time, almost a year. I had talked to them by telephone and was always in touch through letters, but that was not the same as seeing them. What struck me first when I saw them at the gate was how much they had aged. They looked noticeably older, tired, worn down, and worn out. We all age and it had been a year, but they looked way beyond what I had expected. I realized then how much my being in Vietnam had taken a toll on them.

Now they had something good to focus on. They were happy to see me and I was happy to see them. On the ride home, I talked non-stop about what I saw and did that I could never put in a letter. I told them about firefights and the wounds I received in Cambodia and everything else I had been carrying around inside of me for so long. My mom had figured out I was wounded and told me she carried that worry with her for a long time.

Almost the whole ride back home, the words that spilled out of me were laced with F this and F that. I did not realize how flowery my language had become in Vietnam until I took a breath and my mom told me in a nice way

as we pulled in the driveway. I guess she did not want my sisters hearing that language.

Christmas was the best ever. It was such a relief to be out of that hellhole of a place. Just like that, the pressure, worry, anxiety, paranoia, all of those negative feelings was gone. Feelings of peace, tranquility, and happiness replaced the pain. Being with my parents, the kids, and relatives over Christmas could not have been better. When we go through life, there is always a smattering of both good and bad going on at any one time. For a while there, it was nothing but good.

Seeing old friends was different. I do not believe they knew how to deal with me. How do I talk with a bunch of friends that were all, in essence, the same, when I had been through so much? A few hours with them were not long enough to address those differences between us. It was simpler to go back to the way I was before I left as if nothing had happened. I knew doing that could not last. Maybe they saw it the same way. But it was okay for now to get through Christmas. My best friend, by the way, kidded me about the letter, and I laughed and let it go.

When Christmas and New Years were over, my friends returned to work and I had some quiet time. I was still home because I had four weeks of leave to spend and a chunk of that time was in January. With time to reflect, the thought that I was still in the Army reared its ugly head. I was going back and it seemed ridiculous, after where I had been. Why did I have to finish out another seven months in the Army? It all seemed like such a tremendous waste of time. How can I get out of it? There was no way. What began at home, as a magical moment morphed into this nauseating feeling about my remaining time in the Army.



Sign at the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement Company in Long Binh.



Last view of Bien Hoa from the window of a freedom bird.

## Chapter 40-Unforeseen Finish

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Time at home came to an end. I found myself processing in to my new duty station at Fort Rucker, Alabama on January 25, 1971. I did not want to be here. Returning home from Vietnam, in my mind anyways, had this monstrous sense of finality. Like the crescendo found at the end of the Beatles song, “Day in a Life” on the album “*Sergeant Pepper*.” If I had the stomach to extend in Vietnam for another six months, coming home *would* have been the end. There was no way though that I was going to stay there. So here I was until August 10 unless a miracle happened.

The new barracks was nice. In fact, it was more than nice; it was a pleasant surprise. Finally, they no longer considered me a trainee. No longer would I have to live in the same room with twenty others. As a sergeant, I learned I would share a room with another sergeant. I had a bureau instead of a footlocker. Overall, my living accommodations were a big step up. I felt like a grownup.

My roommate had been living in the room by himself for a while, but he was okay with me joining him. His name was Dennis. Dennis was a lifer and an alcoholic; at least I assumed he was an alcoholic. In his nightstand top drawer, he kept a fifth of whiskey lying there on its side where Gideon’s Bible should have been. When we sat around shooting the bull and his glass was empty, Dennis would open the drawer, slide out the bottle, pour three fingers into the bottom of that well-used water glass of his and then slip the bottle back into the drawer without missing a beat in the conversation. No ice, no soda was necessary. I believe he could pour himself three fingers like that with his eyes closed. As he drank, there was no change in his tone. His face got redder. That was it. Dennis had a radio and a television in the room that he let me use. He did not have anything to say about my smoking grass and I was okay with his drinking. For a lifer, he was a good guy.

For work, the Army offered me an assistant instructor position. Keep in mind they taught warrant officers how to fly helicopters here. My skill set as an infantry soldier did not seem to fit well. For the life of me, I had no idea why the Army sent me to Fort Rucker in the first place. What could I possibly do to instruct warrant officers? Then I found out. They wanted me to run a projector for barely a day per week. It was ridiculous. I had seven

months to kill. I needed to do something that would help make the time pass more quickly.

Army brass had nothing more to offer, so I looked for my own job. I learned there was a maintenance shop on post. Local civilians operated the shop. When any of the heating systems, air conditioning systems, water treatment systems, or you-name-it failed on the fort, they repaired it. They had a sheet metal shop, electrical shop, carpentry shop and yes, a decent machine shop. They had lots of skilled people but no trained machinists. I had those machinist skills so they had an immediate interest in me. That was it; I found my own job and never had to turn on a projector.

The civilians that operated the maintenance shop were all white, good-old-boys from Alabama. Whites provided all of the skilled labor. There were sheet metal workers, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, painters, and carpenters. Helpers, the men who cleaned up for the skilled workers, were black. That was the way things were in the Deep South in 1971.

A typical day for me was I woke up in the morning, had breakfast in the mess hall, took a bus to work, and then returned to the barracks in the evening. The mess hall made me a box lunch because I could not always get back for lunch. Sometimes I worked in the shop all day and other days we went out to where something needed fixing on the fort. Though I was a sergeant, I had no leadership responsibilities nor did I want any. I was simply a skilled worker like the rest of those white boys.

When traveling, we used a pickup truck. White guys rode up front in the cab and the black helper sat in the open back of the pick-up, leaning up against the window. I offered to switch places one time with Preacher, an older, black helper. They called him Preacher because on weekends, he was the minister at the local black Baptist church. You would have thought I broke one of the Ten Commandments asking to switch places with Preacher. The Preacher smiled at me and said, “no suh, I’ll ride inna back” and he did not want to discuss it further. I tried to insist but received a *look* from my white boss. Though I ruffled some feathers, those white boys cut me some slack because I was a northerner and did not know any better. More importantly, they liked me and needed my help.

This black/white relationship inside the fort was the same outside the fort. I had heard that young black kids had this unwritten obligation to serve as paid helpers to white families on weekends. A white homeowner on a Saturday morning would drive over to the black side of town, pick up a kid,

and use them for chores around the house. They cut the lawn, raked leaves, whatever needed doing. When the kid finished, they paid him a small amount then drive them back home. Again, that was the way things were back then.

Once I was back into the rhythm of work, I began thinking again about going back to school and using the GI Bill. Maybe my stay in the Army did not have to be a total waste of time. I already knew about the GI Bill as a way to get tuition money, but I did not understand much about the details. So I began to dig into it and discovered something that blew me away. As part of the GI Bill, the Army would discharge me up to two months early if I could find a school program that started before my normal discharge date and had duration of at least three months.

Learning about that two-month early out cranked up my drive to go back to school. Before, I had a mild interest in going back to school. Maybe I could go back and learn something in school that would be more interesting to do and would earn more than a machinist. Now, I could actually get out of the Army two months earlier by attending school! The thought of it was overwhelming.

I learned that a local community college offered a course during the summer that might work. The summer course ran for three months and that was a minimum requirement. I started working on the school anyway. Maybe I could get around the three-month requirement by signing up for the fall semester.

Working on finding a school helped make the time go by. It was not enough, though. My weekends were free and that was a problem. What do I do with my weekends? When in training, we did not have much time on weekends. Here though, I had weekends to myself. So I looked for a weekend job and found one right away driving a taxi. It was a great job and I made decent money. I was making forty percent of each fare. I found that on payday, everyone wanted to take a taxi. My first payday weekend, I made thirty-seven bucks for just over eight hours work. Not bad and it took my mind off home.

Living at Fort Rucker was going along okay. Work at the machine shop, planning for school and driving taxi on weekends kept me busy. I was doing okay until inspections became the biggest pain in the neck on post. When training, we had inspections all of the time. Drill sergeants inspected our bed making ability, footlocker arrangement, and the shine on our boots. They

inspected anything and everything to harass trainees.

Well here, the Army harassed veterans and lifers with inspections. They inspected the room where Dennis and I lived. They inspected the building where we lived. They inspected the grounds around the buildings where we lived. They inspected the work areas where we performed our job.

I guess I can understand the need for some inspections. Without inspections, some of the guys would live like pigs. At Fort Rucker, however, there were simply too many inspections. The only explanation was Army brass was using inspections as a means to harass veterans until they quit the Army. There were too many people in the Army at the time, and the Army did not know what to do with us all. I was a prime example.

In early April, I came home on leave primarily to work on the school early out. The community college I wanted to attend had not satisfied Army paperwork requirements. So I decided to visit them myself. I was glad I did. The school and I worked out all of the problems. I carried back with me all of the paperwork the Army required. It worked! Suddenly, it looked good that my discharge date would move up. I was so happy with myself I could not stand it. Now all I had to do was wait for final approval.

With what appeared to be only a few months to go in the Army, I quit driving taxi and started traveling on weekends. I went to Panama City, Florida with Dennis and a few others. Leaving the fort on weekends felt better than hanging around driving taxi. In Panama City, we could get an inexpensive motel on the Gulf, right on the water. The Gulf of Mexico in that area of Florida had sand beaches as white as sugar with clear, blue/green water. I have never seen beaches that beautiful anywhere since. A typical weekend was to drive down on Friday night and come back to the fort on Sunday afternoon. We drank beer, smoked grass, sat on the beach in the blazing sun, and got lost in the sound and rhythm of the waves.

In early May, I received final approval from the Army for an early discharge to attend school. It was unbelievable news. The Army planned to discharge me on June 5. The remaining month dragged by. I was not doing much of anything at the shop. I sat outside at lunchtime in the sun and worked on a tan that I planned to take home with me. The boss wanted me to make him a tool for installing new screen material into broken window screens. It kept me busy in those final weeks so I put my heart into it. My last week at work, I finished it and gave it to him. I missed leaving that shop. It was fun working with that bunch of good old boys. It was relaxing

and mentally took me away from the Army. They called me *the soldier* but while there, I did not feel like a soldier at all.

I spent my last few days in the Army completing paperwork, taking a final physical, then visiting with an Army recruiter. If the Army liked someone, they tried to get him to extend and offered a promotion. I thanked the recruiter for the offer but declined.

On the morning of June 5, 1971, the Army discharged me from regular duty. Everyone had a six-year commitment, so the Army placed me in inactive reserves for the remainder of my commitment. I stepped out of the headquarters building and caught a taxi for the airport. Sitting in that taxi, an enormous weight lifted from my shoulders. My 21-month, 24-day journey had ended. I was heading back to the real world.

# Afterword

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I left the Army on June 5, 1971, returned home, and went on with my life. I finished the course work that gave me the early out from the Army then went on and got a Bachelor's degree. I left the machinist trade behind and became a control system engineer. I met my future wife at school and we had two children. I finally did make it back to Hawaii. I stopped thinking about the Army and I did not join any Veteran organizations. I did not want any part of it.

Then about twenty-five years ago, I traveled by car to Washington DC with my daughter Tina, a Girl Scout and my wife Teresa, a Girl Scout leader. My son Jeremy came along as well. The troop had planned a trip to see our nation's capital so we all went. While visiting the Lincoln Memorial, I decided to run over and see the Vietnam Memorial for a few minutes.

It was so inspiring standing in front of that memorial. My eyes welled up and I fought back tears. The memorial conjured up all kinds of memories that I had hidden away for so many years. I wondered if I could find my friend Steve, who was peppered with shrapnel at the same time I was hit and then died soon after.

Nice thought, but I ran into immediate trouble. What was his last name? I did remember that Steve was from California and had a new wife but not much else. He was from Pomona I thought because we had talked about drag racing. Pomona was the drag racing capital of the world back then. It was frustrating, standing there, and not able to find his name on the wall.

When we returned home, I investigated a few other areas for clues of Steve's last name. I pinned down the date when Steve died by tracking down when I received the Purple Heart. I found the date on the orders that came with my Purple Heart. That was as far as I could take it though.

I happened to tell a friend at work about my quest and he told me his father had a computer program that might help. The program contained all of the people that died in Vietnam, the date it happened and where they lived. From that computer program, I was able to confirm Steve's last name by knowing the day he died and that he lived in Pomona, California.

From there I decided to look further. I called a local library in Pomona to see if the librarian could find an obituary for Steve. From the obituary, I

found the names of Steve's parents, brothers, and sisters. Reading the obituary was troubling because it said Steve was missing in action. I knew better, we had never left his side. I thought Steve's parents, after all of these years, might want to know he was never alone.

The librarian found their phone number and agreed to be a go-between between Steve's family and me. We both thought that might be easier on them if they did not want to talk to me for some reason. We worked out what to say to them then she made the call. Steve's sister picked up the phone.

The librarian told her that a friend of Steve's from Vietnam wanted to contact her parents. He wants to send them a letter describing what happened on the day Steve died. It is important to him that you know Steve was not missing in action and he was never alone. Steve's sister spoke with her parents and they all agreed that they would love to hear from me.

I mailed the letter to Steve's sister on October 29, 1994. Writing the letter dredged up all of those old, painful memories, but it made me feel wonderful at the same time. I also sent Steve's sister a picture I had of Steve, Randy, Wade, and me. She sent me a letter in return and was so appreciative. I felt like we were old friends somehow. I have not communicated with her since 1994. I do communicate with Steve's widow Joan now and then.

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Over the years, I managed to track down and contact a few of the grunts I knew in Vietnam. Rob was one of them. Communicating with Rob and others was a strange experience. The image I had of them in my mind's eye was someone in their early twenties, but here I was speaking with them over forty years later. Starting the initial conversation, opening that door, with someone from so long ago was not easy. I felt like I was intruding. Since then, I have made it a point to talk with Rob now and then. He had not seemed to change at all. We have shared old Vietnam pictures and thoughts about Vietnam. Other than speaking with Rob and a few others, I never ran into anyone in my travels that experienced what I did. It is not surprising. Few people in the world have.

Then about five years ago, I met someone whose conversation and pictures stunned me. My wife Teresa and I are skiers. We have skied on and off since college. More than ten years ago, a gang of us from the same neighborhood in Massachusetts, all bought condominiums at Sunday River Ski Resort in Newry, Maine. Five years ago, we met Jim Branch and his

wife Liz who were also from Massachusetts. They lived two doors down from us on the same floor. Jim and Liz became part of our circle of friends up there on the slopes.

We acknowledged each other's birthdays, so at a get-together one night, I received a few birthday gifts, one of which was a boony-hat. Everyone knew that I had been to Vietnam except Jim. Jim looked at my boony-hat and said he had been to Vietnam himself. That caught my attention. The rest of the conversation was like this,

Me, "I was there in 1970."

Jim, "So was I."

Me, "I was in the Infantry."

Jim, "I was as well."

Me, "I was in the First Cavalry Division."

Jim, "So was I."

Me, (with a strange look), "I was in the 2/12 Battalion."

Jim, "So was I."

Me, (in amazement), "I was in Company A."

Jim, "I'll check for sure, but I *think* I was in Company A."

At this point, Jim started asking if I knew this guy or that guy and I did not recognize any of the names. Frankly, I was having trouble believing what I was hearing. The conversation continued and I left with the feeling that he had been there all right but dates were shaky, places were shaky, and I did not know what to believe anymore. I began to question my own memory. There was no doubt though that he had been there.

Since then we had many other conversations about Vietnam, but I was always leery about our initial conversation years before. Then I started writing this book and adding pictures to it. I gave Jim a draft copy of the book to read. He read it and said to me that he had pictures just like mine. "The next time we come up to ski," he said, "I'll bring them with me."

He had quite a stack of pictures. Though dog-eared and faded, many of the pictures looked like mine. We looked at them all and talked about them. Some had notes on the back. One of the pictures was on a firebase and the washed out looking note on the back said, *Firebase Audi, November 1970*. Jim's note hit me like a lightning bolt. I had been on Audi in November 1970! To make sure, I re-checked the letters I sent home so long ago and

sure enough, a letter confirmed I was on Audi during my last month in Vietnam. My letter and Jim's note placed us both in the same place, at the same time in Vietnam!

Since then, Jim found some old Army orders, and confirmed that he had arrived in Vietnam in August, 1970. The Army assigned to Company C, not Company A in the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion. That meant that while I was working on Audi on the helicopter log pad in November 1970 and waiting to leave Vietnam, Jim must have pulled guard on Audi for at least five days during that month. Our paths never crossed to say even a word to each other that I remember. You never know though. Maybe I had joined a smoking circle one night on Audi and passed him a joint. God only knows. I do know that it took another forty years before our lives touched that close again.

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In recent years, Americans have openly displayed a newfound respect for those who have served overseas. Restaurants joined in by offering free meals to Veterans on Veterans Day. So I went to one of them, the Olive Garden, a few years ago with my wife Teresa. The waitress was so grateful I had served. Her reaction was so different from the indifference I felt on my return from Vietnam and for so many years thereafter. She left the table and I had to fight myself not to cry. I could hardly speak. I sat there for what seemed to be the longest time trying to control myself. It was embarrassing. I do not believe anyone else in the restaurant was aware of it except Teresa.

Why are returning soldiers honored now but not during the Vietnam era? Many would quickly answer that the war in Vietnam was unpopular. But has any war been popular since World War II? Maybe the current feelings about returning soldiers are simply a step in a passing phase. I do not know. What I do know is the appreciation feels good inside.

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I had been in touch with a few grunts from Ace High over the years but Doyle Miller was not one of them. I barely knew him in Vietnam, as we were in different platoons so we never worked closely together. So you can imagine my surprise when Doyle's daughter Rachelle called me out-of-the-blue one day.

When she called, she was traveling with her Dad. I was amazed to hear that she and Doyle had recently met in Pennsylvania with a few of the men from the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon. They met there to visit with the Jim Unrah's mother. Jim was killed in Vietnam in May 1970. Doyle and Jim were best friends

back then so Doyle had always meant to visit with his family. With Rachelle's help, they tracked down platoon members, organized the trip and then made it happen.

Standing back, Rachelle could not believe how meeting with men from his platoon and then visiting with Jim's family had picked up her Dad's spirits. It served as a healing process, she thought, from his experience in Vietnam. Why not help everyone who had served with Ace High heal in a similar way by organizing a reunion? So she convinced her Dad and they began the process of finding everyone. One of the guys Doyle remembered was Stan Wilson. Stan started looking for names and found my name on an old set of orders he had squirreled away. That is how she found me.

The thought of a reunion blew me away.. It would be in Oklahoma for three days in early June 2015. She told me the names she had so far, and then asked me if I remembered anyone else. I passed along some names she did not have and said that Teresa and I would be there.

That was the beginning of a number of calls with Rachelle. We talked about others she had found from the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon. She told me who was coming, who was not and her plans for the reunion. She said Randy and Henry were deceased. I was sorry to hear that, especially Henry. Henry lived in New York. It saddened me to know that he lived so close to me and I never knew. Tony from Chicago and Wade from West Virginia were not coming. I think the reason was they did not want to open that door to Vietnam again. She could not find Bob, Zeek, LT Coker, Pete and Mike.

As the event loomed closer, I found I was having second thoughts about going. I dreaded there would be an awakening of painful feelings about Vietnam that I had forgotten over the years. I did not want to deal with it, especially in front of everyone else. In talking with Rachelle, I was not the only one having second thoughts about attending. The thought of seeing everyone again, however, won out.

Flags waving in the breeze welcomed us as we pulled through the gate at the site of the reunion in Chandler, Oklahoma. Right away when I met Rachelle, tears welled up. With time though, it got easier. Nametags helped with the introductions. We were no longer easily recognizable as those slim, young men in jungle fatigues that I remembered forty-five years before. That first day was not an easy one.

Rob had not changed a bit. CAPT Huff was thinner but still the same gentleman I remembered. Larry did not remember when I threw up on him in

a hooch on my twenty-first birthday. Dave, the point man who was shot during my first firefight, was there. It was great to see that he was alive and healthy. Doug, Bill, BG, Richard, Stan, Bruce and Steve C. were all there and doing well. Then I saw CAPT McKenna.

Since Vietnam forty-five years ago, whenever the name McKenna or the Bronze Star medal popped up, it hurt me again to remember when CAPT McKenna did not award me the Bronze Star that I felt I deserved. The bitter taste of it all never went away. Now, there he was, standing six feet away from me. Well I shook his hand anyway. He liked my book. Funny, he did remember that incident so long ago. And with that, I was released from his power over me. The thought of the Bronze Star no longer hurt. Amazing!

The second day we shared what we had been doing with our lives since Vietnam. We had all gone in different directions with families and jobs. There was a school principal, teachers, police officers, factory workers and even an undertaker. Teresa shared stories with family members who were there. We traded stories about Vietnam and relived those tough times.

The third day was like meeting with old friends. The closing dinner was brimming with emotion and pride. Oklahoma dignitaries who attended called us heroes and thanked us for our service. We received a proclamation from the Oklahoma legislature. It was everything and more than what we never received on our return from Vietnam.

Driving home the next day, I realized that the uneasiness I felt leading up to the reunion was gone and had been replaced with a peaceful sense of closure.

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Even when considering all I went through, I am grateful that I chose to join the Army so long ago. Without the Army, I would not have gone to college and met my wife Teresa. I would not have my children, Tina and Jeremy. I would not have my grandchildren. It is amazing how the choices we make in life can start out so wrong yet end up so right.

Richard Udden