

VIETNAM: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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I began this account as a short background to the photos. When I received several e-mails from veterans requesting more details, I added more and more. This was started in 1999 and continued slowly for a few years.

I was in Vietnam from February 1969 to April 1970. I was first assigned to XXIV Corps, 108th Artillery Group, 6th Battalion, 33rd Artillery, HHB stationed in Phu Bai (south of Hue) in I Corps. My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was 13E20 -- Fire Direction Control (FDC). With my spatial perception and map making abilities (thanks to archaeology), I was assigned to the Intelligence Section (S2). The unit was later relocated to Dong Ha, six miles south of the DMZ. When 6/33rd was deactivated and sent home in 1970, I declined to follow. I extended my year tour by three months and was transferred to 1/44th (Automatic Weapons Self Propelled) Artillery in Dong Ha.

My duties were extremely varied depending upon the circumstances. Although our unit was under strength, we still had to have people trained in all duties required by our organizational manual. I drove and maintained a jeep, performed security inspections at fire bases, was a courier for payroll and classified documents, stood perimeter, detail, and interior guard duty, made maps for forward observers directing artillery fire, operated a network of observers for artillery target acquisition, clerked for the section, wrote and conducted briefings on enemy activities, and was trained in nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare decontamination and Graves Registration. For most of the time I was a PFC earning less than \$200 a month.

The meaning of so much that I did was not really apparent to me while I was there. The S2 had two beside me: the Captain (not trained in intelligence) and the E7 Sergeant who had been trained). I was the unit's intelligence specialist with no training. The Sergeant trained me as needed. I received all of the written intelligence coming into the unit. I had to distribute information from each document on a need to know basis. Everybody got something. Nobody got everything. No one else saw the original. The original was in the safe. Everything I did was classified. If it is not written down, then it never happened. Nearly everything I did never happened.

My main responsibility outside of the wire was driving. I had to study maps of the route I taking to have one way out and a different way back. I might be going 10 miles or 70 miles one way. I never carried a map. I never had written directions. The person I was driving was not likely to know how to get where we were going. He might know the military installation, but not where an assignment was taking place. My wallet had only my military ID and scrip (military money). I was one of the few who passed through the gate of the compound without being logged. If I was not logged out, I could not be logged back in. The only person in the compound who knew where I was going was the one who sent me. I was expected to be back the same day, or the next day, or whenever I got back. I was completely expendable. As long I got to the assigned location, the mission was successful. Getting back was added bonus.

The longest I was gone was nine days. This started as my second three day R&R to Vung Tau (60 miles south of Saigon). The supply sergeant asked me do him a favor. A member of the battery had been medically evacuated to Saigon on his way to a hospital ship. He military gear, including his M-16 found its way to Vung Tau. The supply sergeant needed his M-16 back because it was in his inventory. He gave me a hand receipt authorizing me to pick it up. I did.

Vung Tau was an open city where only the cops carried guns and not in the open. The US maintained a very nice R&R center, a beautiful beach (with machine guns in the lifeguard towers in case of sharks), and a congenial relationship with the locals. We were free to take busses into town, walk the streets, and eat in restaurants without being armed or escorted. Although I was constantly aware of everything around me, I never felt afraid. Carrying a weapon in Vung Tau was very unusual, but I was a special case.

Everything went well on the flight from Vung Tau to Danang. When I tried to check in my flight

north to Dong Ha (about 100 miles), I was denied. Seats were assigned on a priority basis. Returning from R&R was a lower priority than families of ARVN enlisted me. I knew some guys in Danang, so I went to their base to socialize. This went on for five days. Every time I went to check in, my orders were stamped, "Seat denied: low priority" or something like that. My ninth day away happened to be Easter Sunday, 1970. I decided to hitchhike home. My first ride was to the top of the Hai Van Pass. I avoided the hookers, passed up a ride by Vietnamese civilians who wanted to armed protection, and finally got a ride. Just by coincidence, he was going to my base and wanted someone to ride shotgun. When I got back, I had to check in. The First Sergeant did not ask where I had been. He only wanted to know why I was checking in since nobody was supposed to be tracking me. I had not been missed. Somebody had been covering for me for nine days. Everyone was following the rule: Never talk about the job outside of the secure area.

DRIVING

Driving a jeep under combat conditions was an acquired skill. We were constantly warned not to exceed 35 miles an hour under any circumstances since jeeps were small, light, and prone to tipping. One of the Korean War-era sergeants taught me to control a jeep in a high-speed skid without flipping over. Many times I had to dodge obstacles. Once a group of water buffalo was being driven toward traffic. This could have been an ambush or an attack on a convoy. Standing orders were to never stop unless the vehicle was disabled. If we stopped to shoot, the traffic behind us was at risk.

I was at Con Thien (a mile from the DMZ) for a fire base security inspection when all flights out were cancelled. I had come in by Huey and had to go out by jeep. The driver was very agitated about driving less than 10 miles. He had seen a truck hit a land mine. I suggested we wait for another jeep to go in front of us. After waiting for an hour and not seeing another vehicle, he got bored and drove anyway.

Another time I was returning from a security inspection at Panther II, a fire base outside of Hue. I saw a series of small dust clouds in front of the jeep and realized I was being shot at. The officer I was driving expected me to slow down instead of driving into the bullets, but I sped up and the shooting stopped. The adrenaline was still pumping when I sped through the back gate at Camp Eagle, home of the 101st Airborne. As I started to slow down, I heard a siren, which usually meant incoming rockets, but this was an MP. I stopped, and he wrote a traffic ticket for speeding. I was doing 15 MPH in a 5 MPH zone. In the Army the ranking person is responsible, so the Captain got the ticket. The MP wanted the Captain's assurance that I would be reprimanded appropriately. As the MP turned to leave, the Captain started to scream at me about how unsafely I had been driving. When the MP drove away, the Captain smiled, tore up the ticket, and swore in Spanish at the MP.

My most serious driving incident was leaving Camp Eagle. I had gone into the camp through the front gate and parked to wait for the Captain attending the General's morning briefing. There was a lot of activity along the road on the way in and that was a concern. Anything that slows traffic could result in an ambush or attack. I decided to leave by another gate, go through an open area, and get back to Highway 1 to return to the southern edge of Phu Bai. As I came over a rise, I noticed that the dirt road was glistening. As I slowed, I completely lost control of the jeep. It was floating on a freshly oiled road after a brief shower. Road oiling was common to keep the dust down, but water and oil do not mix. I took my foot off the accelerator and steered into the skid. I was coming down a very steep hill and sliding back and forth. Hitting the steep ditch on either side of the road would have flipped the jeep. At times the jeep was sliding sideways, which also could have caused a flip. I was not gaining any control, but I was slowing a little. As I looked ahead, I only saw disaster. Highway 1 had a tank convoy moving south and mixed jeep and truck traffic heading north. If I had enough luck to shoot directly across the road, I would mire into a rice paddy with a sudden stop that would propel us from the jeep. My only real chance was to fall into line between the tanks. As I got closer to the intersection, the oil was covered by dust raised by the tanks. I still couldn't stop, but I managed to catch the right rear tire in the drainage ditch, wrench the steering wheel sharply to the right and fall into line behind a tank. I thought I was out of danger, but the Captain screamed, "GAS" and reached for his gas mask. Momentarily distracted by him, I almost ran into the tank in front of me. I was only a few feet away from impact when I regained control. The Captain had mistaken the diesel exhaust from the tank for a gas attack. After this, he would not let anyone else drive him anywhere.



The Duster (M-42A1 self-propelled 40mm gun system) was designed for a crew of six, but four were more common in combat situations. Although capable of convoy protection, I saw them used far more frequently for perimeter defense.



The M-55 Quad 50 consisted of four Browning M2 .50-caliber machine guns mounted in a power turret on a 2-1/2 or 5 ton truck. With an effective rate of fire of 1000 to 1500 rounds per minute, nothing stood in its way. I saw it used primarily in perimeter defense and convoy protection.

USING ARTILLERY

The 6/33rd had 105 mm, 105 mm Airmobile, and 155 mm artillery pieces. I could also use firepower from 175mm and 8 inch guns for perimeter defense. The 1/44th Arty had Dusters and Quad50s. I had seen these in action and welcomed the opportunity to be more closely involved. However, by 1970 field operations had been drastically curtailed because the US withdrawal was proceeding. All of our actions were limited to defense.

In Phu Bai, and later in Dong Ha, our most frequent encounter with the war was incoming 122 mm rockets. From late afternoon to early morning, rockets could be expected. They came in groups of 10 or fewer at a time. The worst damage I saw in Phu Bai was the PX complex getting hit followed by a major fire. In Dong Ha it was a fuel dump in the compound. We were aware that at any time a major rocket barrage could be followed by a direct attack. Because of this, we fired at every launch site. With three of the towers observing the same launch, I could plot the position of the site and direct artillery fire. On many occasions, unlaunched rockets were destroyed on the ground.



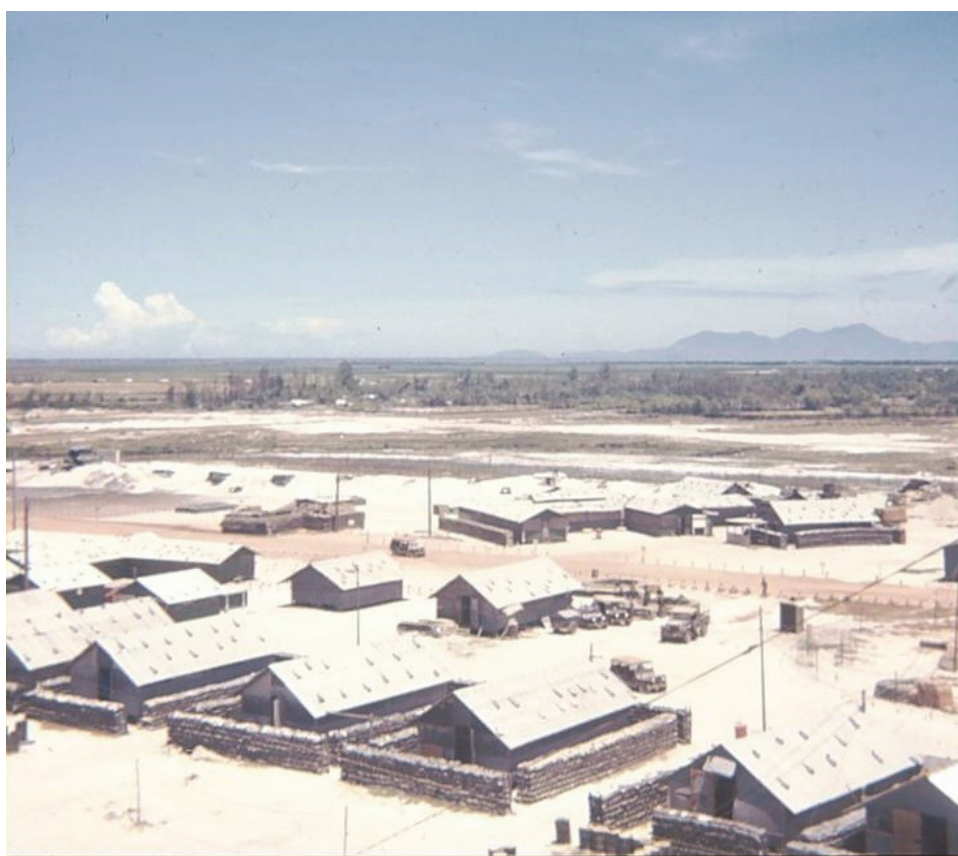
Entrance to 6BN 33rd Arty base in Phu Bai. Note the extremely sandy conditions.

MILITARY COURTESY

Having just completed Basic and Advanced Training in the States, I was accustomed to saluting anything that moved. This continued during the early in-processing at Long Binh (near Saigon). When I was sent to Dong Ha for assignment, even before being issued an M-16 rifle, I stepped off the C-130 transport at the airport and saluted a Marine Captain (the Marines still occupied most of the base). He just shook his head and walked away. A jeep soon appeared with the unit markings for 108th Artillery Group, and the driver read a list of names. I was the only one on the list that was present. I was full of questions, but he had no time for the new guy. As we approached Group headquarters, I heard a siren, the jeep stopped, and the driver ran toward a bunker as a rocket came into the compound. Nice welcome. Coming out of the bunker, I started to raise my right hand to salute a Lieutenant. He grabbed my hand and said, "Don't you ever salute in the open. They could be watching us, and I would be a sniper's target. Show your respect by following orders." When I was assigned farther south in Phu Bai, the rule was to come to attention and salute only indoors in the presence of an officer of the rank of Colonel and above. All officers assigned to the unit were to be verbally greeted as "Sir" with no mention of rank. Most officers who demanded respect did not deserve it.



HHB, 6BN, 33rd Artillery Sgt's office with red entry way for notices.



Hootches at HHB with individual blast walls.



A view from a tower on the northwestern perimeter of Dong Ha. Hootches (barracks) are behind the motor pool in the foreground. Note how seemingly exposed the base is. Outside of the perimeter are rice paddies and open fields.

One officer in particular was a clear and present danger. He needed to have his ticket punched: getting a combat assignment before retirement to up his pension. He had been so steeped in the culture of flying a desk through red tape that he wanted to experience everything. His driver (nickname Delta) for all of a month had four months left in-country and volunteered for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRPs), because he figured it was safer. These guys were inserted by Huey near/into Laos, hung out for a few days collecting intelligence, and then made their way back overland on foot. Playing Charlie's game in his own backyard was very risky, but safer than driving this officer.

When I had made a website (Quad50.com) for my Vietnam experiences, I got an email from Delta. He recalled when I had sent to pick him up in Danang. I was only told to drive to the Danang airport, go in the front gate, pass the refreshment stand, and someone would recognize me. Since jeeps had unit designations stenciled on the bumper, I figured that was the recognition. I did as ordered and heard my name called out. Delta threw his bag into the back just like he had just come in on a flight. He was back from a mission into Laos, but following protocol did not take a direct route home. We could not talk about the mission. As I drove to the top of the Hai Van pass, we were taking small arms fire. He said that I had no reaction to the gun fire. No white knuckles on the steering wheel, no swerving, no sudden acceleration. I was the calmest person under fire he had seen. I told him that after surviving five episodes of being shot at on the road, one more is no big thing.

My one experience substituting for his replacement driver was enough to make me want to go LRRPs too. He wanted to see the effects of a Harassment and Interdiction (H&I) artillery barrage. H & I was several batteries of six guns firing multiple high explosive (HE) rounds with various fuses. Some air bursts, some ground impact. The goal was to second guess troop concentrations or movements, destroy rocket launch sites, or even to clear (prep) an LZ (landing zone). As I came up the last high ground overlooking the prep/H&I site, I saw a perfectly clear blue sky. He urged me to get over the ridge and down here. I panicked. The barrage had not happened yet and we were in the open. The dark clouds and torn up vegetation from exploding artillery rounds were absent. Since the barrage was imminent, I didn't

want anyone down there to see us. Rather than try to explain, I just stopped and got out of the jeep to "check the back tire." And then it happened, and then it was gone. He got his show, but we were almost the opening act.

One night I was accidentally left alone in the target acquisition section of the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) bunker. Normally there was a radio operator, someone to plot coordinates for artillery strikes, and the officer of the day (OD). All of a sudden one of the observation tower guards reported a flash (incoming rocket). I started to plot the position (calculated from the azimuth and distance from his location), when he very excitedly calls for a fire mission. His tower is taking heavy machine gun fire. At this point a Major walks into the bunker. I tell the tower I cannot shoot at that target and pass the request to the FDC radio operator to contact base defense for suppressive ground fire. As the second tower reports the flash, I reach over my head to turn on the siren while I am plotting the position. As soon as the third tower reported the flash, I determined its coordinates and relayed the fire mission to the FDC. When that was done, I greeted the Major and asked if I could help him.

He did not know me and asked if it was normal for me to work alone. I replied that the regular radio man was in the latrine and that the OD was doing his rounds. Then he wanted to know why I did not plot the coordinates of the machine gun firing on the tower. That was not a PFC's decision to make. I told him that I could not hit it without risk. How could I know that if I did not plot the position? I knew the area and knew where the artillery batteries were. I could not shoot over the flight line at Phu Bai airport. I could not shoot over the village at the machine gun because it would have been on a direct line toward the bunker line. I did not have an available battery to shoot between the village and tower. When the radio man and the Captain returned, the Major took them outside to explain what had happened in their absence. I don't know the details, but, for the first and last time, the Captain brought me a cup of coffee.

Late one afternoon in Phu Bai, many of us were off-duty sitting around the hootch, looking out of the doorway, and talking about life in general. Almost absentmindedly, one guy put on his helmet, another his flak jacket, but no one was rushing or talking about what he was doing. I put on my boots and reached for my M-16 with a bandolier of 10 magazines. We were striding toward the bunker line when the first rocket came in and the siren began to wail. More rockets came in and exploded near XXIV Corps headquarters behind us.

After the all clear sounded, we wondered why the first person had reached for his helmet, but no one could remember who it was. Even stranger, no one knew why he had followed the lead or why we moved out before the first rocket came in. From the bunker line, rocket launches could be easily seen at dark as quick flashes of light, but it was not dark enough yet and no one could have seen it from the hootch. They sound like trains when they pass over head, but we were out before the first one came in. We had been through so many rocket attacks together that we all sensed the same thing: this was a good time for rockets. We had spent so much time as a team that we were very sensitive to each other's moves.

People are always deriding the military way of doing things, but the consistency had a very positive benefit. At Fort Sill we learned how to conduct artillery fire missions, how to select munitions appropriate to each target, and how to work as a team. One night in Dong Ha I couldn't sleep so I went to the TOC. As I walked in, a voice on the radio asked for a fire mission and gave the coordinates. I glanced at the map and said, "Friendlies in the area, no shooting" at the same time the sergeant told the person on the radio the same thing. In the background, we could hear a lot of gunfire, and the voice repeated the fire mission request. His unit was taking heavy fire from all sides and was calling the fire on top of his own position. We had little experience firing in direct support of field units; our missions were mostly perimeter defense. Intentionally firing onto a friendly position was against standing orders.

The situation was desperate. We were the only hope. The team put together a fire mission in a few minutes involving two batteries with six 105mm howitzers each firing two rounds of high explosive (HE) with variable time (VT) fuses. The VT fuses were set to explode the rounds at varying heights above the ground. We did not want to risk HE impacts among the friendlies. The 24 rounds with VT fuses would explode nearly simultaneously filling the air with steel fragments. The voice on the radio verified that his men were wearing flak jackets and steel helmets and were dug in, covered with sand bags, and anything else they could find. We gave them an estimated time on target (TOT), and they ceased fire to draw the enemy closer.

After the rounds exploded, the radio was silent. We called back several times before there was an answer. The mission worked perfectly with no friendly casualties. The voice thanked us, they had no wounded, and they were clearing out without checking enemy casualties. Not collecting intelligence on the attackers was a breach of procedure only allowed under the most dire circumstances.

If this had not worked out successfully, the ranking person in the room would have expected to have been court martialed for disobeying the standing orders. Everyone else would have faced some form of discipline for not disagreeing with the decision to fire. But, it was the right decision. The man in the field assessed his options, knew the risks, and made his decision. We knew instinctively what to do and agreed to do it, because it was what we had been trained to do: to achieve maximum surprise and injury for people in the open, fill the air with exploding artillery rounds.

TOURS and PROJECTS

Although I was technically on duty 24 hours a day, I had a lot of free time to go sightseeing. One day a large group of us with our M-16s formed a convoy of 2.5 ton trucks and jeeps with mounted machine guns. Someone had hired an English-speaking Vietnamese guide, and we visited the Royal Tombs outside of Hue. The tombs of Emperor Khai Dinh and Tu Duc were especially memorable. Each had sustained damaged during the Tet Offensive in 1968, but local people were maintaining them to some degree.



View of the entrance to the Tomb of Emporer Khai Dinh. The circular openings at the tops of the entryways once held translucent, colored, glass disks.

When living in Phu Bai, we were involved in a Medical Civic Action Project (MEDCAP) at a Catholic orphanage in Hue. The doctor would check the kids for diseases, treat common injuries, and offer health tips. We also made frequent trips bringing clothing collected by groups in the States. The nuns were pleased to get the clothing, but always asked for other "surplus" things. I saw the kids wearing the clothes, but never saw any of "surplus" items on subsequent visits. I suspect that they were sold for other things on the black market that the nuns could not get from us.



Boats on the Perfume River on the eastern side of The Citadel in Hue. The MACV compound is on the far bank. Local police are here because the province head was visiting a Catholic orphanage.

APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

After a security inspection outside of Mai Loc, I visited a Bru village nine miles from Khe Sanh. The Special Forces sergeant assigned to this Montagnard group was a true applied anthropologist. He really liked his assignment and trained the people to protect themselves. They accepted the military assistance, but resisted his other efforts. He had them dig wells because the VC had poisoned the river. The people still drank from the river and got sick because they knew that stagnant water was not good for them.

The people collected engineer stakes from abandoned positions risking cuts from barbed wire, land mines, and booby traps. They sold them for \$.05 to the Vietnamese when the going price was \$2.00. He told them to cut out the middle man. They refused since they needed an economic relationship with the Vietnamese (who thought that they were ignorant primitives) to gain a better social position.

INJURY

I was injured by a hand grenade explosion while doing recon for a new fire base. I was with a squad of 15 on a cleared hilltop overlooking a broad plain west of Phu Bai when someone noticed explosions about 1000 meters away. These were apparently mortar rounds being fired toward us, but not at us by an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) group. As the mortar rounds came closer and swept in a wide arc, the Captain got on the radio to ask what was happening. He told us that the ARVNs were going to be moving into the area and were firing to flush or drive away any VC that might be there. If the VC were being driven away from the mortar fire, they could be coming toward us. Since we did not see anyone, we did not call for artillery fire. Instead we fired a few magazines each from our M-16s toward likely hiding areas. The ARVNs kept up the mortar fire. At this point, for reasons I do not know, the Captain ordered us to throw hand grenades into the shallow channel in front of and about 10 meters below our position. The

first group of five threw their grenades. After I threw my grenade with the second group of five, I went back to the center of the hilltop and the third group went forward. I could not see any evidence of anyone anywhere around the hilltop. Since I would be coordinating artillery fire some day for this position, I was carefully inventorying all the natural terrain. All of sudden, someone yelled, "Grenade!" I looked up at a small black dot in the sky above the hilltop. I crouched on the ground with my head toward the grenade, pulled my legs under my flak jacket, and waited for the explosion. When I felt my helmet slide forward exposing my neck, I instinctively reached for it with my right hand. As the grenade exploded, I felt a burning sensation in my right hand. My hand had about 20 small, bleeding holes where the wires from the interior of the grenade were embedded. I wrapped it in a piece of gauze and checked the others. Everyone had similar wounds except for the Captain. He had a severe arm wound from a chunk of the grenade's body. We radioed back to the base to alert the medics and drove out. Everyone recovered from their injuries, but no one was really sure what had happened. It could have been a poorly tossed grenade, a grenade that was blown into the air by the force of the other exploding grenades, or a booby trap set off by the explosion of the thrown grenades. The least likely possibility is that a single VC tossed it. The Army never investigated, and no Purple Hearts were given.

OTHER THINGS

One night at Phu Bai I was off duty relaxing on top of the sandbags on a blast wall surrounding the hootch (barracks). With very little light pollution, there are millions of stars to look at. I saw a flurry of fire flies before I realized that they were tracers from incoming machine gun fire. I slid behind the wall, grabbed my flak jacket, helmet, and M-16, and started toward the machine gun. I knew that he could not hit me because of the height of the berm around the perimeter. The machine gunner was aiming high and sweeping back and forth to hit the towers, radio antennas, and helicopters. I had gotten only a short distance when I realized that no one in the bunkers was firing. As I got closer, the Quad50 and Duster opened fire. The machine gun stopped firing, and I went back to watching the stars.



Lt. Trung was the interpreter for 1/44th Arty. Originally from Hanoi, he was about 40 years old and had been fighting in Vietnam for 25 years. He fought against the French Army, US Army, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnamese Army, and Viet Cong at one time or another. He had fled North

Vietnam in 1954 when he had his first taste of Communism. He asked what peace was like. He wanted the future of Vietnam to be decided by the Vietnamese. He figured that the VC and NVA would never confront the Americans head on. They would chew up the ARVN, make hit and run raids on villages and US patrols, and just outwait the American's will. I heard that he was killed conducting an interview in Cam Lo.

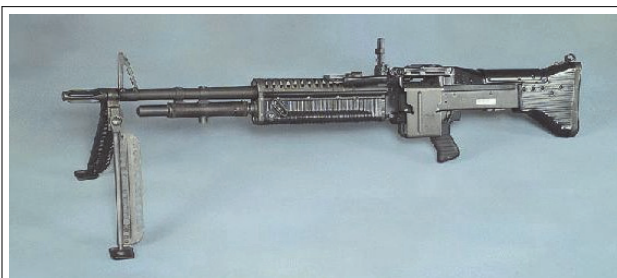
The building in the background is the Tactical Operations Center (TOC). The inner shell was built of 12" x 12" wooden beams, layers of perforated steel planking (PSP, used for runway construction), steel ammunition cases, artillery shell canisters, steel 55 gallon drums filled with sand, and sandbags. This could sustain direct hits from 122 mm rockets and mortars. The outer layer was covered with tarps against the monsoon rains and ultraviolet radiation. The top had sandbagged parapets with machine guns and grenade launchers.

GUARD DUTY

In Phu Bai I had perimeter bunker guard duty very infrequently. In Dong Ha, I averaged three nights a week when the normal rotation was once every two weeks. I am not sure if the First Sergeant disliked me, or whether he knew I took this duty very seriously. I always dis-assembled, cleaned, and re-assembled the M-60 machine gun while it was still light. More than once I found it had been left uncleaned or assembled incorrectly. I always watched the perimeter as it got dark to identify all the landmarks.

More than once officers new to the unit would try to sneak up and surprise bunker guards at night. This would have been a very dangerous practice if all guards were like me. Because the typical guard never expected to be surprised from behind the bunker, the officers caught many of them completely unaware. The bunker is a very obvious target in an attack from beyond the barbed wire, and could be destroyed by a few rocket propelled grenades (RPG). I preferred being in a trench in the open (unless rockets were coming in) where I could see and hear much better. The absolutely last time that a particular officer tried to surprise a guard in a bunker was when I suddenly appeared out of nowhere screaming in Vietnamese, "Dung Lai (Stop)!!" As he turned to face me, I sent him sprawling on his hands and knees. When I asked him the password, he didn't know it. Rather than prolong his difficulty, I helped him up and apologized for not recognizing him in the dark. Nobody ever mentioned this, but I had made my point.

Daylight bunker guard was supposed to be easier, but not the day I drew the bunker farthest from the guard house. I had an M-79 grenade launcher, an M-60 machine gun, my M-16 rifle, and a lawn chair.



M-60 Machine Gun



M-79 Grenade Launcher (high explosive rounds for shooting at distant targets and shotgun rounds for close ones).

I made myself comfortable in the shade on the upper deck of the bunker behind a chest-high wall of sandbags and steel plate. I was ready for a nice, relaxing day of watching the landscape. I saw an old farmer walking toward a rice paddy leading his water buffalo by a rope. I had seen him before and had no reason to be afraid. He dropped the rope, started digging, and the water buffalo wandered away. Water buffalo were extremely valuable for fertilizer, food, and dragging carts, among other things. There was a \$1000 fine in our unit for killing one without a very good reason. I am watching as the water buffalo gets

closer to the barbed wire, claymore and land mines, booby traps, and flares. The farmer looks up, realizes that he might lose his water buffalo and starts after him. The animal stops grazing when he senses the man coming and moves farther away.

I called the Sergeant of the Guard on the phone and tell him I have a problem. If I had not seen this farmer many times before, I might have thought that he was intentionally scaring the animal into the wire. A ton of stampeding animal would break through the lanes of barbed wires setting off flares and mines on the way. We would be very vulnerable to attack if the enemy were present. The Sergeant orders me to kill both of them if they get any closer. As they both get closer, I yell, "Dung Lai", and the farmer pauses, looks at me, and then continues toward the animal. By now the Sergeant can see what is happening from the guard house and wants to know why he does not hear my machine gun firing. I did not want to kill either of them when they were not acting aggressively, but I was imagining the chaos when the water buffalo started setting off flares and mines. The guards in the towers were probably setting the coordinates for an artillery barrage just in case. When I finally decided that the animal was within a few steps of setting off a mine and that I had to shoot, the farmer grabbed the rope and pulled the animal's head away from the wire. The farmer knew that he had crossed the line and gotten too close to the perimeter wire. He glanced quickly at me, but I stood up and away from the weapons to show him I was not a threat to him. The Sergeant was irate and claimed that I was the only one in the unit who would have disobeyed that direct order.

As I neared the end of my tour, I resigned myself to spending my last two months driving a jeep to the nearby outposts for security inspections, but I was relieved of almost all responsibilities except navigating a desk through red tape. The reason was that I took interior (within the compound) guard duty a little too seriously and actually arrested a thief in the act of stealing cases of C-rations from the messhall at 2 AM. I knew better than to break up groups of IV drug users or pot smokers, but no one told me not to make any arrests. I was called before the battery commander (BC) to explain my bad attitude. After that my only detail was to guard civilians filling sandbags. I screwed that one up as well when I gave each one a cold, unopened can of Coke. They just stared and then smiled. I doubt that a GI had ever given them a Coke. They were lucky to get water breaks from the other guards. Maybe 19 year old draftees are not the best good will ambassadors.

TWELVE MONTH TOUR

I enlisted for two years in the Regular Army. This was better than being drafted since I could delay reporting for active duty for three months (which counted for time in grade, but not active duty) and choose branch of service. I did not want Infantry and I needed a background in heavy equipment for Combat Engineers, so Artillery was my choice. I planned my military experience very carefully. By qualifying for Officer's Candidate School (OCS), I knew that I would get additional training whether or not I actually graduated or even accepted the appointment.

The normal tour of duty in Vietnam was 12 months with an extension of up to three months being permitted. The advantage of an extension was that if you returned to the States with less than five months to serve on active duty, you were put into the inactive reserves. No stateside army, no reserve meetings, no more Army. The trick was to get to Vietnam with less than 15 months left to serve on active duty.

I spent 8 weeks at Fort Dix in basic training before being sent to Fort Sill for advanced training in artillery and pre-OCS. I had delayed reporting for basic until September (cooler weather). This put me at Fort Sill in November, which I knew had a two week Christmas leave. When the reporting date for OCS was announced, I declined and had to be reassigned. Everyone knew they were going to Vietnam; it was just a matter of when and what you would be doing. During the week waiting for reassignment, I calculated that I was two weeks short of my goal. Then I got the orders to report for computer school.

The Army was developing a computer (Field Artillery Digital Automatic Computer -- FADAC) for artillery targeting. The table weighed 80 lbs, and the computer had to be carried by two people. Its ability to calculate was surpassed by 1972 by hand held calculators. The system has since been expanded to fill a truck, but it has wonderful capabilities and simultaneous, mixed mission, multiple targeting. We were

trained in how to use this beast for its stated goal of getting first round accuracy. The artillery slide rules made the calculations faster, but we had to have a spotter to make corrections to get on target.

After the basic classes, a few were selected for the advanced classes. The primary criterion was having at least a Secret security clearance and the background check for the Top Secret clearance, which I had since I had been in the Army longer than most of the others. The real purpose of the computer was not limited to first round accuracy of conventional high explosive artillery rounds. Using override codes and memorizing programming, we could develop fire missions for tactical nukes, chemical rounds, and a vast array of fuse and projectile combinations. I never had a use for the programming in Vietnam, and the unit had almost none of the extraordinary items in their inventory.

By the time I arrived in Vietnam, I had just about 15 months remaining on active duty. I had to do the twelve, but I had the option of doing another three. I finally spent a total of 19 months and 6 days on active duty.

If I had been in the Infantry on patrol in the jungle, I would have done the twelve and left. If I did exactly the same thing everyday, I would have gotten bored and wanted to leave. I had a very different experience. It took a few months to get acclimated to the routine and the climate, to develop the necessary survival skills, and to feel comfortable working with a team. Once all this was in place, a person had only full eight months left and the last part is spent training your replacement. By the time you got really good at your job, it was time to leave. I travelled around the country a lot and wanted to see more.

I kept branching out into different areas. The old Sergeants derided the "college boys", but we could learn from books. One day I was put in charge of laying out a softball diamond. The Sergeant told me to take three guys and get it done in a few hours. I already had a full day planned with what the Captain wanted done. I drew a sketch showing how two people could do the layout using a single 100 foot tape measure. Drive a stake at home plate, measure to the pitcher's mound and drive a stake, measure to second base over the pitcher's mound stake and drive a stake. Swing a 60 foot arc from home plate to third, from home plate to first, from second to third, and from second to first. Where the arcs intersect, drive stakes, place bases, mark pitcher's mound. Done in 30 minutes. The Sergeant was furious when he came to check on why I hadn't started. I told him we were done, and I had never left the desk. He saw the bases in place and thought they had just eyeballed it. He could not believe that the measurements were exact, and he checked every one.

LEAVING VIETNAM

When the time came to leave, a sergeant made the mandatory re-enlistment speech. I had a very valuable MOS and was offered a \$5000 signing bonus. I said that I would re-enlist for three years if I could stay in Vietnam and be re-assigned within my MOS. He thought I was either joking or crazy. I was very serious. I did not want to return home. I knew what the political situation was here. I would be the enemy with no protection. He declined my counter offer saying that the Army would decide where I should be.

I returned home, and the situation was almost intolerable. I did not fit in comfortably anywhere. My military training and experiences gave me very fast reflexes and a low tolerance for stupid behavior. In the next five years I nearly killed two people who did the wrong thing in the wrong place and set off a series of defensive responses. I intentionally slowed my reaction time until I thought that I would not act without thinking. Ten years later the flashbacks returned with nearly tragic results. Since then the flashbacks have only been a series of pleasant events with one exception.

CONCLUSIONS

After being back in the States for 30 years (as of April 16, 2000), I feel compelled to return to the only place where I was never depressed and where I could sit for hours watching the landscape. I find myself visualizing the dirt roads winding into the lush green jungle and wondering what is down that path. I have hoped that the US would live up to its promise to recognize Vietnam as a economic trading partner and to realize its potential. Look at a map of Southeast Asia. Vietnam is the easiest entry point to

the interior of Laos and Cambodia. Vast undeveloped areas are accessible through natural valleys leading to deep water ports. Planned development using state of the art technology would benefit the people immensely.

The MIA issue is a political distraction and an excuse for not normalizing relations. I really do sympathize with the families and friends of the missing on both sides: there are 300,000 Vietnamese and 1500 American MIAs. I know that everyone wants closure. If complete accountability of all missing US servicemen were a true cultural compulsion, there would be no ships underwater at Pearl Harbor, the South Pacific islands would have been vacuumed for bone fragments, and all active duty personnel would be carrying subcutaneous homing beacons. I see the pictures of peasants sifting the clumps of wet clay from rice paddies where someone thought they saw a F-4 Phantom crash in 1968, and I know that the Vietnamese are trying to answer our questions. We need to do more to help them. Did you see the press coverage of the flooding in Mozambique in 1999 - 2000? How about the press coverage of the flooding in one-third of Vietnam in November 1999? A "yes" to question one gives you an "A+" in watching television. A "yes" to question two likely means that you read Vietnamese newspapers.

A recent visit by Secretary of Defense William Cohen to take the first steps to normalize military relations is a positive move that confused me. Since we had abandoned so much equipment there, I thought that this was a move to sell repair manuals and spare parts. When I questioned a Department of Defense contact, the answer meant less than the question. I finally looked at a map and realized that a land base friendly to US interests in northern Vietnam would be quite close to Taiwan if China starts making threatening noises. HOWEVER, standing on Vietnamese soil and shooting into China would be a disaster to be avoided at all costs. China would stomp Vietnam just for allowing the Americans to come into port for fresh water.

And now for the really tough question: "Could we have won in Vietnam?" The answer is a positive, resounding: "YES", but only if we had been in the jungle fighting to drive out the French. Colonialism, corruption, nepotism, and incompetence lost the war. Nationalism, reunification, determination, and stoicism won it. The failure of Communism and then democracy in Russia is an interesting lesson to be learned, taught, and studied. A strong government is necessary to enforce the rules of law so that offenders can expect to be punished rather than expect to pay a bribe to escape justice. When the Communist dictator Marshall Tito was no longer in charge in Yugoslavia, things did not get better. They got worse for everyone, and we will be paying for our involvement there for generations.

The time has come for normal economic relations between the US and Vietnam. All companies wanting to establish a major presence in Vietnam should be required to promote the development of state-of-the-art infrastructure within their area of influence -- paved roads, reliable electricity, telephones, and running water. This will benefit them, their Vietnamese employees and families as well as the country as a whole. Remember the significance of the railroad in opening the western US. Although the robber barons controlled so much of the economic empire it created, it did create an economic empire with benefits for everyone. The political scene shifted, the robber barons lost control, but the benefits continued for the people living in the West. The bottom line is the long term benefits to the people.

In Vietnam the people need well-maintained, paved roads to promote commerce. Trucks are the most efficient means for carrying goods from ports to the interior and between many cities. In 1969 I drove a jeep 100 miles from Danang to Dong Ha on a clean, smooth, asphalt road with no ruts, no potholes, and no problems. I drove hundreds of miles on a network of dirt roads. The people deserve reliable transportation routes of all kinds.

In response to many comments from civilians and vets who wanted to know more about the effects of the military experience, I have enlarged upon certain sections here. The primary focus is my personal aftermath and reflections.

HOMECOMING

My initial reticence to return home was verified from almost the moment I arrived in Seattle. The plane that had carried us from Cam Ranh Bay via Japan taxied to the end of the runway where we were taken into a hanger to claim our duffle bags. We were transported by bus to the Vietnam returnees barracks at

Fort Lewis. Here we were briefed on the sequence and timing of events for our processing out of the Army. The first was to sleep until awoken for the next phase. Since I had no sense of time or day after the long flight, I really wasn't tired. I looked out of the window into the night and saw a candy machine just outside of the barracks. I remembered buying some things at the airport in Japan and getting real American metal coins (in Vietnam the only military money was paper scrip). I put my coins into the slot and reached for the handle under the chocolate bars. Chocolate that melts, not Army, C-ration, jungle chocolate processed to never melt. All of a sudden the hairs went up on the back of my neck. Somebody was standing right behind me. I glanced into the glass of the machine and saw the reflection of the sleeve insignia of an MP. Before I could pull the handle, he tapped me on the shoulder with his night stick, "Back in the barracks, Boy. You are out after Lights Out." He was a PFC wearing an NDR (National Defence Ribbon) indicating his major military accomplishment was completing Basic Training and MP School. As I pulled the handle, the stick tapped me again, "I said, 'Back in the barracks, Boy'". I picked up the chocolate bar, turned, and walked away without facing him. I heard his footsteps behind me, but I could see my buddies looking out of the window and in the doorway watching him. He stopped following me and walked away. Nobody said a word. We just went to sleep.

After a marathon of out-processing, I found myself on a military bus with a brand new dress uniform (Class A) complete with Vietnam battle ribbons, a full duffle bag containing everything I owned, an airplane ticket home, and \$2000 in cash in my pocket heading for Seattle-Tacoma Airport (SEATAC). After 19 months and 6 days in the Army being shuttled with at least 50 other soldiers by military busses, military aircraft, or military charters always in the dead of night and away from civilians, I was left, alone, at the curb in broad daylight in front of a civilian air terminal. I was extremely self-conscious, because the civilians just stared. Nobody said a word, but it was as though I could read their thoughts. There was a long line at baggage check in, so I bought a magazine, put my feet up on my duffle bag, and waited as far as possible from everyone else. In less than 10 minutes a PFC MP with NDR is rapping his night stick on the soles of my boots. I looked up expecting a friendly greeting, but he said, "I do not see an Airborne patch. Take off the combat boots and put on low cuts." When I out-processed, nobody had noticed that I was still wearing combat boots. I was issued new dress shoes, but had put them into the duffle bag. The boots were broken in and comfortable; the shoes were new, small, and stiff (there was really no time to get shoes or a uniform that actually fit.) He made me dump out the duffle bag, find the shoes, and put them on. Of course, they were scuffed, and we cannot have that now can we? The civilians were staring, but not commenting. The flight to the East Coast took forever. Only the flight attendant spoke to me, despite my many conversational attempts.

I returned home, and the situation was almost intolerable. I did not fit in comfortably anywhere. My military training and experiences gave me very fast reflexes and a low tolerance for stupid behavior. I was dazzled by the speed of the traffic and so many different colors. I was confused by all the new slang terms. The Army had done an excellent job of indoctrinating me, but there was no de-programming or preparation for the re-entry into civilian life.

GUNS, RIFLES, and OTHER WEAPONS

Before the Army, I had fired a .22 caliber rifle a few times. I had grown up with a BB gun and was an excellent shot. In Basic Training, I learned to respect the power of an M-14 rifle. We carried, fired, and cleaned it, but we did not live with it. Bayonet practice with an M-14 instilled more confidence. We fired an M-60 and .50 caliber machine guns, M-79 grenade launcher, and a Light Anti-tank Weapon (LAW) at trucks parked in a field. Basic Training was nearly completed before I fired my first M-16 rifle. At Advanced Training we moved up to 105 mm and 155 mm howitzers and could go to the pistol range for .22 caliber revolvers and .45 caliber semi-automatics. Compared to other small arms, the M-16 seemed too light and too difficult to dis-assemble and re-assemble quickly. It had a small crucial piece retaining the firing pin in the bolt that would get lost in the folds of my hands.

Of all the weapons I trained on, given a single shot at a target within 20 feet, I would pick the M-79 with a shotgun round. This is the ultimate sawed-off shotgun with a 16" barrel, 40 mm (1.6 inches) in diameter, and delivering 27 double-ought buckshot pellets. This would not be a good choice if the target

required two shots, since this was a single-shot, break-action. If long-distance shooting did not solve the problem, I would have preferred this to a bayonet any day.

When I saw my first AK-47, I was amazed at how crude and bulky it looked. The M-16 ammunition was a lot smaller and lighter, but had a far higher velocity and did a lot of damage when it hit something. The AK-47 was larger, had heavier ammunition, but could handle a 30 round magazine smoothly and continue to fire without constant cleaning. The 20-round M-16 magazines were easily dented and could reliably feed only when filled with 18 clean rounds. The choice then was obvious, but now I prefer the heavier, more reliable SKS, a near cousin to the AK-47, but not in full auto.

After living with an M-16 (and 200 rounds of ammunition) every day and every place I went (except on R&R) for nearly 15 months, I felt undressed without it. I had it with me in the jeep, in the FDC bunker, in the mess hall, next to my bunk, at the movies, in the latrine, and any time I moved from point A to point B. I was more likely to leave the bayonet and pistol belt behind than my rifle. Everyone was the same.

The only time that I saw a GI attempt to settle an argument with a gun was when the First Sergeant was attacked in the compound. A PFC grabbed a .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol and aimed at the First Sergeant, who was driving across the field. Not being used to the grip safety, the PFC hesitated long enough for the First Sergeant to almost run him down with the jeep. The PFC jumped onto the hood of the jeep, and then someone knocked him to the ground. The PFC was court martialed, found guilty, and sent to Long Binh Jail (LBJ), the military stockade near Saigon. With everyone standing around with M-16s, he was not shot at. There was a less dangerous way to solve the problem.

I do not recall any accidents or accidental discharges with rifles or pistols. One GI thought that if he shot off his small toe, he would be sent home. He was sent home, but he had mis-judged the power of an M-16 and lost his entire foot.

The funniest incident with a weapon happened in Phu Bai. I had been in the unit for only a short time. The siren sounded as rockets came overhead sounding like freight trains. They had not been this close before. We heard the explosions behind us and started toward the perimeter bunkers with M-16s. A new Captain, expecting a ground assault and figuring that the bunkers were well manned, gathered a squad to stay back closer to the TOC and the hootches. He stood in the open waving his .45 and pointing to various defensive positions. He had the rank and everyone followed orders without a single smile, smirk, or laugh. He was wearing his boots, helmet, pistol belt with holster, and only boxers. This might have seemed strange under other circumstances.

Living with fully automatic guns (not the 3-shot bursts of M-16s today) on a daily basis was not a cause for concern. I expected to see armed soldiers wherever I went. I was more worried when they were not armed. Maybe their unit did not trust them with live ammunition. Or maybe they were in such a secure area most of the time that they never thought to take a gun with them when they ventured out. Seeing soldiers with guns was very reassuring. The sound of gunfire was common place and no great cause for panic.

During the past few years when I was getting depressed, I would go the range to hear the gunfire and to smell the burning powder. Feeling the recoil of the various guns, hearing the shooting around me, and watching the targets fall reminded me of the days when I could take control of a situation. Gunfire never solves a problem, but it will do until another solution becomes apparent.

The present hysteria concerning guns in modern US society is a symptom of a far larger malaise. The thousands of gun laws will never prevent the criminal use of guns, inappropriate access to guns, or accidents. Everyone is sad after a shooting, looks for culprits, blames society for making the culprit do it, and then wants more governmental protection. **WAKE UP! HELLO!!** Criminals do not obey laws hence the term "Criminal." Children who only see make-believe violence on TV have no concept of the power of guns. Educate your children about guns. Show them what a gun can really do to a 3/4" sheet of plywood or their favorite stuffed animal. Putting a lock on a gun and then leaving the key out is just looking for more trouble. Ever hear of curiosity or forbidden fruit? Knowledge, education, and parental responsibility are the answers, not more laws.

Although I have no children, I did not have a gun in the house for nearly 15 years after I got back. I was too prone to flashbacks and defensive reactions, but still I missed the security of having one.

Gradually I returned to shooting, but decided never to carry a gun on a regular basis. Circumstances changed and I had the need for a concealed carry permit. For more than a year I carried a Beretta 9 mm semi-automatic absolutely everywhere it was legally permitted, including in a shoulder holster in and around my house. My day-to-day stress level decreased. I was actually calmer because I knew that I could handle any situation that got out of hand. I never had the urge to use it, but it was always there. At this point I realized things about post-traumatic stress and mental preparedness.

I felt really stressed in combat only when I had no idea what was happening. In typical fire missions, there were excited calls from the observers and a need for a very calm, rapid, accurate response. If the coordinates I calculated were incorrect, the shells could hit the observer, innocent civilians, buildings, farm animals or miss the target completely. If the gun crew made an error or there was a fuse or shell malfunction would my allowable margin of error still protect the innocent? After the initial few days, the stress level decreased. My ice-cold demeanor did not mean that I didn't care.

I recall an event at Fort Sill when we were doing a shack shoot. The FDC was in a wooden shack on a rise overlooking the prairie. About 1000m away were a number of trucks used as targets. We practiced firing live, high explosive (HE) shells with fuse quick (to explode on impact). Teams of three had to agree on the coordinates, powder, azimuth, and elevation of the 105mm barrel before the fire mission was sent to the battery commander (BC). The Sergeant in charge double checked these every single time. While we were practicing calculating fire missions, the gun crews were learning how to attach and set fuses, cut powder bags, set and re-set the azimuth and elevation, and load and fire the howitzers. Initially the pace was slow and methodical. As everyone learned the system, the pace became faster and faster. After almost hitting the target, we corrected on the point of previous impact. We were watching out of the window expecting a direct hit on the truck, when a shell exploded behind us spraying dirt onto the shack. We dove for cover, and the Sergeant was on the radio yelling, "Cease Fire!, Cease Fire!" He double checked our calculations and found no problem. The problem was at the gun. Somebody had cut the powder bags and loaded the remainder rather than the intended amount. Not enough powder, and the round falls short. The lesson was to be very careful in fire missions to know what is under the flight path of the round. Just in case.

The most stressful event I can recall now happened with less five days remaining in-country. I heard the rockets coming over the hootch, rolled out of the bunk into my boots, helmet, and flak jacket, grabbed my M-16 with a bandolier of 200 rounds, and ran for my assigned defensive position in a small bunker on top of the TOC. Surrounded by sandbags and steel plates I waited for the usual nothing. The fuel dump across the street had been hit. Bladders and drums of avgas, diesel, gasoline, and paving asphalt were flowing, burning, and exploding. All of a sudden another rocket came in and hit the fuel dump in our compound about 100 feet to my left. Then more rockets. The black smoke was getting thicker and thicker when somebody started shooting, which caused others to start. I was about 20 feet off the ground, had better visibility despite the smoke and darkness, but I did not have a target. This was the ideal setting for a ground assault, but I had nothing to shoot at. I had no idea what everyone else was shooting at. I am a sitting duck in a bunker that could shield me from small-arms fire and shrapnel, but not an RPG, and I am not shooting. In a few minutes the shooting stopped, and the all clear was sounded. The real stress set in the next day when the clean-up crew went in. They found two dead VC who had gotten through 10 lanes of barbed wire, passed booby traps, mines, flares, and sensors, and evaded the guards in bunkers and towers. They had set explosives that went off before they could escape. They died in the fire and explosions.

Post-traumatic stress is a result of being trained to respond in a particular way to certain stimuli. In a combat setting, these reactions can save your life. In a non-combat setting, the stimuli might appear to be similar, but the reactions are inappropriate. The stress comes in stifling your reaction. One side of your mind is playing the mental video tape of what you should do, while the other side is telling you to stop. The frustration reaches an extreme when you know what to do and you are ready to do it, but you lack the necessary equipment. Most Vietnam veterans do not want to call attention to themselves and will avoid public encounters that might provoke a reaction. Others attempt to avoid the public altogether. For me this was not good. If I had let the reaction run its course in reality, I would have killed many people. Going through the process mentally time and time again helped me, but it was better to verbalize it, even if it

meant talking to myself.

I have been dealing with the post-traumatic stress in a variety of ways. The first way was to not carry a gun or knife for five years. I never let a stranger close to me without watching very carefully, so I ended up hurting and scaring people I thought were friends. I warned everyone not to sneak up on me and make contact from behind. Two thought I was kidding, and I nearly killed both of them barehanded. What snapped me out of the automatic response was not having a knife on my right side. In both instances I had them on the ground in a flash and reached for a bayonet that was not there. This reaction was later muted to merely dropping the offender to the ground. Now I just have a disconcerting, churning sensation that I try not to display.

I had been back for about six weeks before starting a graduate program in anthropology. I was an assistant in an archaeological field school. One of the students refused to sleep in the old farm house we had rented for the summer. He told of being an ex-Green Beret who became a mercenary in the Middle East. He slept in a military hammock on the porch even in the rain. He had the right tools, attitude, and that far away look of someone who just wanted to do his job and be left alone. Neither of us spoke about specific operations, but we were going through the same re-adjustment. He had enrolled in fall classes and I saw him on campus, but we never could find the time to talk the way we had during the summer. The last time I saw him was toward the end of that semester. He was in a news clip on TV testifying about campus radicals and drug dealers. He was an undercover cop. He disappeared shortly afterwards. I don't know if his military experiences were for real, and he needed that constant adrenaline rush or that was just a cover story.

One of the graduate students went to study the people on a small island in the Philippines. He made the mistake of sympathizing too much with their problems. He was soon involved in assaults and ambushes on the oppressive government troops sent to quell the "Communist insurgency." When he escaped from the Philippines and returned to the States, there was a \$10,000 bounty on his head. During a severe flashback, he killed his girlfriend with a machete and went to prison.

Driving through the country on narrow roads lined with trees when I first returned, I reacted to every bird, every flash of movement in the brush by reaching for the M-16 to the left side of the steering wheel. Of course, it was not there, and I came back to the present. However, one rainy night I nearly intentionally ran down a hitchhiker dressed completely in black and standing on the left side of an entrance ramp to the interstate. I thought that he was lunging at my car, but maybe he just slipped on the embankment. His huge, round eyes caused me to swerve away at the last instant.

Sirens were the roughest. I would roll out of bed, into my boots, and reach for a helmet and flak jacket that were not there. I would panic for a minute, but after many, many times it got easier. Living alone and being alone for the first two years back helped a lot. I could go through the entire flashback and act out all the moves and then study how to short-circuit them.

I tried to hang out with Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion types, but they were no help. Experiences were too different, and I could not relate at all. I was talking to one non-Vietnam vet who seemed to understand, but he really pushed Veterans Administration group sessions. The VFW guys said to avoid the VA unless I was completely broke and desperate. I later found out why. I got involved with them in another program to help a disabled WWII vet. They strung him along for months, made promises to us, and then did absolutely nothing before breaking off all contact with both of us.

The biggest change in the 19 months I was in the military was the public acceptance of illegal drug use and a blatant disregard for authority. People claimed this was "free speech" and the government shouldn't do anything about it. Whenever I heard that marijuana doesn't hurt anyone, all I could see were the bodies of GIs with their throats slashed. The guards were in never-never land when the VC came through the wire and slashed their throats. Others who thought they were being protected died in their bunks without firing a shot. Drugs were an entitlement as a way to protest the war. The civilian ethic had been transferred to the Army, which really did very little to confront the issue. The only response I saw to very blatant IV heroin use was a face-saving policy of keeping the soldiers, who would normally have been discharged, in the Army, but transferred to a hospital de-tox unit before sending them home.

I spent years trying to understand why I did not feel stress during the time in Vietnam. Why should returning to the States bring on the stress? The reasons are that the reaction in Vietnam was completely

appropriate to the circumstances, the reaction could be carried to its necessary conclusion, and only the truly disturbed soldiers in Vietnam would intentionally provoke a reaction because they knew what would happen. I was among friends that would support me. At "home" none of my "friends" had been through the same experiences and just telling them never brought the message home. They had no idea of what really went on in Vietnam. They believed the nightly media show.

I mentioned this to a number of people who have known me for a long time or were likely to have been in similar situations. A big-city cop relates a story of recurring dreams of sirens, lights, and car chases. A salesman tells of tapping a Texas Ranger on the shoulder to ask for directions and having a gun shoved into his face. A retired Marine with intensive combat experience shrugs. People with normal lives as writers, teachers, and office workers are shocked. How could this happen? Am I too highly stressed? Do I need a vacation? I have come to a conclusion that "normal" is a relative concept. My concept is precisely in line with people who are or have been leading highly stressful lives and facing death on a daily basis.

These are technically not flashbacks. I am not reliving a particular moment. This paranoid reaction comes from years of not being able to trust anyone, of not having anyone watching my back, of having no place to turn. I have trusted people for periods of time since I returned, and it not just the combat experience that causes the paranoia. Before the military, I had trust issues and difficulties maintaining long term relationships. The difference is that the military gave me the confidence and training to deal with them. I am never the aggressor and not the one walking away from a confrontation. I am perceiving aggressively friendly behavior as a confrontation. The seeming oxymoron "aggressively friendly" includes unexpected physical contacts meant to get your attention or to emphasize a point: sudden slap on the back, a poke in the ribs, an arm around your throat.

Going too deeply inside of myself to understand my reactions and my depression is part of the problem. In sorting through the attic of my mind, I find old memories creating an ever-tightening spiral of increased hopelessness. Trying to dull the process with alcohol only adds a hangover to the mix. I have to block the bad with the good. The first step is constant background music. This brings in a lot of other memories and arcs of thoughts. The second step is to restore my confidence in taking control of a situation. I have a few ways, but the most effective has been going to the shooting range. I was next to some one with a new rifle, an AK-47. I had not handled one in 30 years. It took me a while to remember how to disassemble it. But it was just like falling off a bicycle. Once you learn you never forget how to. We cleaned out the last of the packing grease. He practiced disassembling and reassembling it. Soon he was shooting at the targets. Then his Tec-9, the .45 semi-auto, the .357 S&W, and 9mm Sig came out. I was back in familiar territory and on track.

Each has to confront his own demons, but it helps to know how others have confronted theirs. I have really tried to fit in regardless of the circumstances, but I have seen and experienced too much around the world to accept the confines of a narrow mold. The typical citizens who have never lived more than 100 miles from their birthplace, have never lived in a foreign country, do their 9 - 5 jobs, follow their favorite teams or actors, and accept all the news that their eyeballs can suck in in 30 minutes are really missing the big picture. They have never experienced a country involved in a shooting war. They have no concept of forcible displacement. I am not out to force anyone into my way of thinking. I will give my opinion, and they can decide to follow or not. I expect the same from others.

Twenty years after I came "home", there was a big hue and cry to recognize the service of Vietnam Veterans. One jerk wanted to shake my hand and welcome me back. I met him half way. I shook one finger at him and walked away. Not now, not after 20 years. Too little, too late.

DAY TO DAY LIFE

Day to day life in Vietnam varied depending upon whether you were a soldier, Marine, sailor, pilot, or a member of one of the various specialized support units, the size of the base you were assigned to, the year(s) of your tour, and where you were stationed. I was in the middle most of the time in Phu Bai and Dong Ha, but I did spend time at Mai Loc, Con Thien, Panther II, Camp Books, and on the road. Most of these places had three hot meals a day served in a mess hall (sometimes underground); a shower with

immersion heaters; electricity for fans, radios, and even TV; and daily mail call. Phu Bai and Dong Ha sectors had concrete floors in the shower, where hootch maids did the laundry. For \$10 a month the hootch maids also changed sheets, made beds, ironed fatigues, swept the floors, and shined boots. We had movies almost every night, and USO shows with Koreans and Philipinos phonetically singing rock and roll music occurred monthly. I had to wait to get out of the Army to figure out what the words really were to some of the songs, but it was entertaining.

Music plays a role in my flashbacks. A tape of Creedence Clearwater Revival songs was playing the night of a major rocket attack. I hear the songs now and expect the explosions that were actually not on the original tape. The early Beatles, Animals, Rolling Stones and others were background to so many events, some good, some bad, some terrible. Hearing music there that I was used to hearing here and then hearing it now brings up a lot of confusing images and memories. I am still glad I got out before Disco hit. Combat to a disco beat would have been too surreal.

Old habits die harder. I cannot use the light that comes on automatically when you open a car door. The light pinpoints you as a target. I drove a jeep at night without lights. I stayed away from soldiers who smoked in the open on the bunker line. The cockiest, least experienced man (nicknamed Troopie) in the unit was transferred to a field battery near Mai Loc. He actually turned on a flashlight one night to find his way to the latrine. He was immediately shot, right through the hand holding the flashlight.

In February the days were spring-like with occasional light rain. The rain abated, and the days got hotter gradually until mid-summer. The temperature was 100 degrees plus during the day with 90% humidity and almost no rain; evenings, 80 degrees and balmy. The weather was bearable because we could get used to it gradually. By early fall the monsoons began. We would get 2 feet of rain in a day with the sun appearing sporadically during the week. I thought things could not get worse until the temperature began to drop. During December in Dong Ha, it was like a summer in San Francisco: rainy and 40 degrees. We were not equipped for cold, since this was supposed to last for only a few weeks. I scrounged a wool sweater, long underwear, and a real hat. For guard duty in the wind along the bunker line I added a layer of fiberglass insulation wrapped in a piece of plastic sheet under my flak jacket. By the time I left in April, the temperature was back to a humid 90 degrees during the day, but I returned to an East Coast spring of a dry 70 degrees. Everyone else is wearing a T-shirt, and I am freezing with a sweatshirt and a sweater.

During my time in Vietnam, I never had a sick day. Even when wounded, I still reported for duty as usual. I had some kind of skin ailment that caused an outbreak of circular, silver dollar sized, dark brown rings over my entire lower body. The medics said it was because the river water pumped into the tanks for the showers had not been treated against parasites. After a few days of applying a thick cream, the rings disappeared. The early spring allergies and sinus condition from living in the Northeast never recurred in country. For the first time, I could actually smell things throughout the year.

Southern Vietnam is a malarial environment in most places. We took the primaquine and chloroquine (the little white one was daily, the big orange one was weekly) as a preventative. We were also given a three week dose to continue when we returned home. I never missed a pill and almost always had a mosquito net over the bunk or sleeping bag, but developed malarial symptoms anyway within a few years. The apparent reason is that the continuing dosage should have been for three **months**, not three weeks. This is still a recurring problem causing 24 hours of a high fever, followed by severe chills, and then a debilitating overall ache for three weeks. The most severe relapse was 25 years ago.

WAR PROTESTS

The war protesters fell into many categories: pacifists, isolationists, communists, professional activists of the cause du jour, and the weak-willed, easily led thrillseekers. A true pacifist would never be part of a mob burning and looting. I knew men who were conscientious objectors who accepted alternate service. One became a fireman. He was wearing shorts and I noticed a through and through bullet would on his leg. He was shot during the Detroit race riots. He survived, but still walks funny. For those who left the country rather than be drafted, I applaud them for having the courage of their convictions. However, if

they ever return, they should be put into prison.

Despite the government's tacit acceptance of mob-rule as a first amendment right, the policy of increasing escalation of the war remained unchanged for a long time. Following the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the siege of Khe Sanh (the American Dien Bien Phu that would never be), the media convinced the American public that the war was unwinnable. The seeming de-escalation (as suggested by troop withdrawals) was actually an escalation of the strategic bombing to ground assaults into other theaters: Cambodia and Laos.

The public had no idea of how the war was being fought or the day to day life of soldiers when they were not actually shooting. The military did not want to lose the war, and the politicians did not want to lose power. To give the impression that this was not an American war and that we were there to support the South Vietnamese until they could defend themselves, the South Vietnamese were given increasing decision-making and military roles until they were declared fit. This produced a lot tensions and problems. The anti-war protests added to the confusion and deceit.

I came home just before the announced incursion into Cambodia and the Kent State shootings. I was very confused. Why should the public all of a sudden get excited about Cambodia? They had never been told of earlier incursions. After mob rule for years, why was the National Guard still being called out? Their minimal training was military, and they had no experience in serious confrontations. They felt threatened and reacted. Riot police were the appropriate response to prevent any demonstration from turning into riot.

WINNING THE WAR

The war was winable, the NVA proved that. We could have won, if we had killed everyone else. In Asia, you can't win, if you don't stay.

While in Vietnam, I do not recall any conversations about the meaning of winning the war. If we had won, what would have happened? Would the South have re-unified with the North? If so, would they have re-partitioned the country and allowed free movement of refugees sympathetic to either side. If not, then the South is still the South, and the North is still the North. Conflict could resume at any time.

Would there be re-unification with the US supporting a provisional government which included Communists, holding elections, and then withdrawing? Would all the Communists in the North and South be transformed into capitalists with a wave of a pen? Would a re-unified Vietnam have become another Puerto Rico or American Samoa? Winning really meant we got to go home.

Of all the possible scenarios of what would have happened had we won, none would have lead to long term peace if we did not stay to defend it. Given all the hardships endured by the people of the North, they would not have stopped fighting. To have an occupation army in the North would have been a disaster. The only way for us to win in the long run was to lose in the short run.

While the US was advocating de-colonization in the rest of the world, it was actually propping up the remnants of French colonialism in Vietnam. We were sent to prevent Communism from taking over the world one domino at a time. We wanted to make the world safe for capitalism and democracy. After only 12 years, we lost the will to fight, declared the ARVNs fit to defend their country, and (except for a Navy presence offshore) left. Twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon, we are still dragging our feet to bring our brand of capitalism to Vietnam. The Vietnamese are scouring the world for economic support, industrialization partners, and new technology, but we are not finalizing the trade agreements. We could win their hearts and minds by selling them what they want. Am I the only one to see the irony in this? They "won", and now they want us. We get what we wanted after we quit fighting. They get to run their own country and preserve their own identity. What am I missing?

American foreign policy is an oxymoron. There is no policy, just short-term, politically expedient decisions. The involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo is typical. Josip Broz Tito (aka Marshall Tito) held Yugoslavia in a Communist grip for 40 years. He drove out the Nazis and kept all those ethnic groups under control. He knew the whole country would fall apart if the control was lessened. He died being right. We stepped in to help and will never get free. Unlike Vietnam, where we could leave when we got tired of the game, this will haunt us for hundreds of years. The side we supported will never come to our

aid anywhere outside of the region. The side we fought (or to protect the others against) will follow us anywhere in the world with terrorist attacks. The minute we step aside, they will begin killing each other again. Hard line Communism lost in Russia, but they now have what could best be called Democratic Anarchy with the Russian Mafia starting turf wars here.

The nearly 100 years of French colonialism severely changed the fabric of day-to-day life. The French way pervaded education, religion, politics, and even landscaping. When the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, they decided that enough was enough and that they would pull out completely. Sixteen years later, I saw Catholic churches, Catholic nuns, Catholic orphanages, and cruxifixes on gold chains. French was still the language of the educated and upper class. If you spoke French, you did not have a problem getting what you wanted. The tree-lined boulevard between The Citadel and the Perfume River in Hue reminded me of the boulevards leading toward Paris. The architecture of Saigon is more like Paris than any other Southeast Asian city. The Vietnamese had driven out the colonial power, but had not purged themselves completely of its trappings and effects. Compare this to China during the Cultural Revolution or the constantly changing, revisionist history of the former USSR.

The time frame of some events and identities of individuals have been altered to preserve the privacy of those involved.