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A story of an Army Infantryman in Vietnam

THE START

As I was growing up, I had 3 older brothers and one younger brother, no sisters. My dad was a highly active boy scout leader and often went on camp outs, he also liked to hunt. All my brothers were also in scouting and hunted, but I preferred to stay home with my mom. I never went hunting and the one time I did go to Camp Friedlander on a campout I hated it. I did not like the bugs nor the mud and being in the woods at night was something that petrified me. My dad snored, and I was sure between the snoring and rolling over against me that there was a bear in the tent with us. After little sleep during the night, I slept in and when I finally got up all that was left for breakfast was a small box of Post rice krinkles. Well, I only ate Cheerios but Kellogg's rice krispies was OK but had no idea that they were basically the same thing. After much crying and complaining someone opened the box so I could see it was the same thing, so I got through breakfast. My childhood involved enjoying playing in the woods with my brothers and friends very much, including the mud, bugs and all the rest, but not at night. I never spent a single night at a friend's house. I never went on another campout until I was in the Army.

AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

I graduated from Elder High School in 1966 at 17 years of age, there was one guy that was 19 during our senior year and received his draft notice, it scared a lot of us. When I turned 18, I registered for the draft. I certainly did not want to, but it was required by law. I spent the next year and a half working during the day and hanging out with my friends in the evenings and weekends. We would go to Edgewater dragstrip, bowling, and to Price Hill Chili for some coneys. Mostly, we would hang out at one of our houses working on our cars. In early 1968, I received a letter from the draft board to report for my physical. I was the first of my group of friends to report. I had two brothers in the Army reserves, but their unit was already over manned, and no one else could join that unit. I reported for my physical and found out I was going to be drafted into the Marines. Panic time!!! Well, I found out that there was an opening in the 311th Field Hospital Reserve Unit in Sharonville Ohio for a Medical Corpsman. The pentagon was beginning to call up reserve units and sending them to Vietnam. The thought process was that there was no way that they were going to call up to active duty a bunch of doctors and nurses plus before I would go to basic training, they would get me into their unit. So, I signed up and on April 11, 1968, I was sworn in, fifteen minutes later they received a call from the Pentagon telling them they were activated. Most guys said they should tear up my papers, but Major Poe said I raised my right hand and took the oath, and I was going with them. The doctors and nurses had thirty days to get their practices in order and find another doctor for their patients and to be ready to fly out to Fort Leonard Wood Missouri for training. I had no uniforms and no clue and of course they had nothing for me to do so I just hung out and observed. We all had to report each weekend for the next 4 weeks to the reserve center,

after that on May 13, 1968, we were on active duty and reported every day for one week. Then on May 20 we flew to St. Louis and then onto small planes and flew to Fort Leonard Wood Missouri. It was my first time flying. Flying over mountains in a small plane provided quite a roller coaster ride, the air pockets caused a lot of unstable conditions.

BASIC TRAINING

Once we arrived on base, we were set up in old WWII wooden barracks, they were in very good shape, well cared for floors which I found out in basic training that the recruits are the ones that had to keep everything spotless. The doctors and nurses were all officers and stayed in separate quarters. The enlisted soldier's barracks is where I was assigned to which consisted of medics, radiologists, lab technicians, operating room specialists, pharmacists, cooks, mechanics etc. Of course, there I was with a trainee MOS; however, I did have uniforms now. The good news is the guys taught me how to march and how to make my bed and keep my boots shiny, also how to keep my gig line straight which I still do today. I also received my E2 stripe and wore a fifth Army patch on my sleeve. This all proved to be quite an advantage when I had to report to the reception station on June 10th right there at Fort Leonard Wood. As I left, we all said we would see each other in Vietnam after my training. Usually, the reception station is a pretty culture shock experience, and everyone is treated about as bad as you can imagine. The Army takes control of you right off the bat and you will comply. Everyone gets a haircut whether you need one or not then run you over to get your equipment and uniforms. I on the other hand had a stripe and 5th Army patch, so was treated like I was one of the guys in charge. Well, that lasted 2 of the 3 days there when the Drill Sargent figured it all out and ripped the stripes and patch off my arm and telling me something about being less than a worm under a rock. The next day I reported to my basic training unit E-3-3. The barracks were newly constructed brick with four guys to a room. Not bad, well until the drill sergeant noticed my service number started with "ER" that is "enlisted reserve". He knew ER meant that I would do my basic and AIT training and then go back to civilian life except for one weekend a month and two weeks during the summer at some Army base in the states. What he did not know is that I was a rare case and was going to Vietnam. When someone was drafted, his service number would begin with "US", and you would serve two years. If you enlisted, your service number would begin with "RA" and usually served three years.

So, for the next 8 weeks he would be a little tougher on me than most, more KP, longer hours in training etc. There was a lot of yelling and required response of "yes drill sergeant". When on KP there were several jobs, if you were a dining room orderly you would serve the officers, you could also peel potatoes which most of the time involved putting them into an electric peeler. If you let them in too long you would end up with some small potatoes and a good chewing out. You may also have to wash pots and pans, if so, no one messed with you because it was not any fun. When supplies came in, usually by truck, the sergeant would yell "KP's outside" which meant everyone went outside and unloaded the truck and brought everything in. For the first four weeks none of us had any time off except we could go to Church on Sundays, other than that we were in training or in the barracks, cleaning or polishing our boots and brass. We were not allowed to have any pop nor sweets. We had two pair of boots, one marked with a white dot and one pair not. We had to rotate them every day so you could not keep one pair clean for inspection. It seems to me that basic training is just that, basic. The Drill Sergeants would beat you down and then build you back up into someone that you needed to be in order to survive Army

life. The physical side involved walking or running everywhere you needed to go for training on base. I enjoyed the marching because we would call cadence, I wish I could remember some of the chants we marched by. The couple I do remember are not "G" rated. For the rifle range it involved miles. If anyone messed up or tried to think on his own everyone had to double time back to the barracks. Every morning involved jumping jacks, sit ups and pushups all before breakfast. Then you went to eat, I don't ever remember a time when you would not be allowed a meal, however sometimes those meals were only minutes long, just long enough to rush through the line and shove the food down your throat, sitting down on those days was not an option. If you were heavy, you became the crossing guard, as the company walked or ran to some training area, the road crossings required you to run ahead of everyone, stand at the crossroad until everyone passed by and then catch up to the front again until the next crossroad and it started all over, everyone lost weight with that job. Keep in mind that most of these crossings were in the field and rarely was there any other troops coming by. It also involved many shots, at the time it was new, needleless shots using high air pressure to inject the serum into your arm. If you moved at the last second, the pressure would cut your arm like a razor blade, and they would put on a band aid and give you another shot. Some shots made you sick and some made your arm sore. Later, in your years of service, if you made a superior mark, he would threaten to destroy your shot records which meant you would have to get them all over again, some guys were not very nice. One guy literally scratched himself all over his body so they would let him out, and they did. You became so physically wore out that mentally they could train you to become the best soldier you could be, and that they did, by the time you went to Advanced Individual Training [AIT] they knew what your abilities were and what they weren't. All through basic, we trained and shot an M14 rifle. It was a little heavy but shot very well, we learned how to keep it clean. When we would go to the range, they would at first give you one round to fire. They would line everyone up and have everyone put the one round into the chamber saying, "lock and load one round" then yell "is anyone down range?", if no answer they would say "fire". After several times of this they would give us three rounds, again saying, "lock and load three rounds" then "is anyone down range?", if no reply, then "fire, fire, fire". When it was time to learn how to throw a grenade, there were bunkers in the ground, and it was one man to each bunker. The first couple of times you would throw dummy grenades but when it was time for the real thing it seems there is always someone who panics. We had our guy and the Drill Sergeant had to jump in the bunker, grab the grenade and toss it, then the guy that panicked got a pretty good lesson about the danger he put everyone in. By the time we were in our 5th week we were feeling pretty good about ourselves, one of our chants, as we would march past some newer recruits was "three more weeks and we'll be through, we'll be glad and so will you". During our sixth week, we were told to put on some clean fatigues and report outside of the barracks at 1800 hours. Then they loaded us up in trucks and took us somewhere on the base and herded us around. At this point we found out the USO was putting on a show for us. I would guess there were close to a thousand people there. It was a nice break; I do not remember if there were any super stars or not, but they put on a good show. The only thing that I thought was weird was they held up sign's for when they wanted us to clap or cheer, just seemed odd to me. The seventh week was bivouac week, that is where you went into the woods and lived there for the week. It was wet and flat out nasty. I already expressed my feelings about camping out in the woods!! Some of my family came to visit me at Graduation, they were totally amazed that I ate a ham sandwich without pulling off any fat. I was a very picky eater but had learned to eat what was in front of me.

ADVANCED INDIVIDUAL TRAINING

At the end of my 8 weeks of basic, I received orders for Infantry Training at Fort Ord California. I complained that I did not sign up for that and my dad even called our congressman, but nothing changed their minds. The Drill Sargent said, "do not miss your flight". So, with no leave time I flew right out to California. AIT was a lot better; we were treated with more respect. I was assigned to C-2-2 and given an M16 rifle, which is what we trained with. We lived in old wooden barracks but again they were well maintained. I had nine weeks of training which involved shooting many types of weapons and riding in [APC's] Armored personnel carrier. Never rode in one in Vietnam but did see some and tanks on Highway 1. The view from our barracks was awesome, we could see Monterey Bay and Stillwell Inn which was an enlisted men's club. We had just about every evening and every weekend off, so we spent a lot of time there. I decided to try drinking beer but just did not like it as well as I liked good old Coca Cola. Training involved a lot of walking and marching sort of like basic except the California sand made it twice as hard as the Missouri soil. One day we had to charge up a large hill with full gear on while others already at the top would fire on you [blanks of course] then when you got to the top, you manned the foxholes while the first group moved on to more training and another group charged up the hill while you fired at them. For some reason there was a lull and I fell asleep in the foxhole, the next group charged up the hill and I slept through the entire thing. Of course, the Drill Sargent observed the whole thing and chewed me out with a lot of threats which fortunately never happened. On another occasion, we were trucked out into the middle of nowhere to see how well we comprehended map reading. They dropped us off on the side of the road and left, then we had to find our way to a particular site several miles away. We walked into the brush about 4 feet and there were a bunch of guys that captured most of us. They tied our boot strings together and had us lay down on our stomachs, the object at that point was to take us to another training area which was set up like a POW camp where they would torture you until you signed a paper saying you were wrong and were a spy and denounced America and other such things. We had been warned about this, all except the capturing us right off the trucks. So, I used another training lesson and escaped, when the guards were as far away from me as I thought they would get, I jerked as hard as I could and broke the boot strings and took off, I had already planned on which direction I would go. As I ran over a hill, I could hear them hollering to each other trying to figure out what happened. So, I kept running until I felt safe and then checked my map and proceeded on to the camp, I hooked up with some other guys along the way. We got to the camp about dusk, and they had been torturing about a dozen guys all afternoon, I think they all signed the papers. They put them in small wooden boxes in the sun, they hung them upside down over a maggot pit, that is all I remember. I honestly believe that I would have died before I would have signed it. I love America and what it stands for but then I was even more Patriotic. On the day we had to inject sugar water into our leg to simulate an antidote to a chemical attack I was on KP. I was also on KP the day we were taught how to operate a radio like I ended up with in Vietnam. Fortunately, I was with some great RTOs in Vietnam and they taught me very well. On the weekends, if you would stay in the barracks to catch up on sleep or write letters, the drill sergeant would make you do extra chores like clean the barracks or do KP. So, I would go to the movie theater and sleep during the movie. During my 7th week of training, I turned 20 years old with little fanfare. I must say that during the 8 weeks of basic and 9 weeks of AIT I never felt better in my life.

VIETNAM

So, I finished my AIT Infantry training and received orders for Vietnam, by this time I had accepted the fact that I was going there. I did receive 2 weeks leave so on October 12, 1968, I flew home to Cincinnati and arrived at 4:57 PM. During the two weeks I worked at the family business during the day and went on just a couple dates at night and hung out with my buddy's. I said my goodbyes and flew back to California. At midnight on October 28th, I flew from Oakland to Vietnam with a short stop in Alaska. I flew on a commercial airline with stewardesses, air conditioning, drinks and snacks. As we flew over Vietnam the view was beautiful, but the pilot warned of possible gunfire. We landed in Long Bien. When the door opened, and I walked out the heat was overwhelming. As I walked across the tarmac and into a building, there were other soldiers waiting to get onto the plane and fly home. I noticed a weird look on almost all of them, they mostly just stared straight ahead. I later learned that a lot of them had been in combat just 2 days previous and others were thinking about their year there and about how we were just beginning ours. The Army gave us time to adjust to our new lifestyle so for a few days I was on a fairly safe base with not much responsibility, police the area and a little KP of which I would hang out in the large, refrigerated coolers whenever possible, at night I would sleep in a hammock with mosquito netting. I moved from Long Bien to Bien Hoa where there was a lot of women and kids, then to An Khe which was a couple miles north of Saigon, I found it to be filthy and the people used anything for their homes and stores, mostly wood skids and cardboard from our Military. On November 1, 1968, I was assigned to the First Air Cavalry. The first thing they said was to forget everything you learned in training because it would get you killed. Over the next few days, I was trained to jump out of a moving helicopter with full backpack, ammo and weapon into the middle of a hot landing zone, meaning while a firefight was going on. Actually, I enjoyed firefights [as long as we had fire superiority], it really boosted the adrenaline in my body, even after 50 years I can still feel it if I take myself back there in deep thought. Some of the "Triggers" that also send me back are the sounds of a helicopter, certain songs, some smells and even Bible Verses such as part of Psalm 23, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" [which reminds me of Antenna Valley] and is read at a lot of funerals.

So now it is November 5, 1968, and because the Americal Division had heavy losses and needed replacements, I and others were reassigned to them. On November 6, 1968, I went north to Chu Lai and on November 9, 1968, was assigned to D 2/1 196th Light Infantry Brigade. So, I started all over doing details and taking classes, at which time I was told once again to forget everything I was previously taught "we do things differently up here". On November 19, 1968, the first sergeant called me in and said I was going to be his radio telephone operator [RTO]. The Command Post RTO!!! I kind of thought that meant I would safely be sitting on my rear, in the rear, monitoring all the other radio guys out in the jungle. WRONG!! What that meant was I was going to strap an additional 25 pounds of radio on my back along with all the other items an Infantry guy must carry and walk around out in the jungle as the new Lieutenant's RTO. Now the life expectancy of an RTO in Vietnam was only five seconds. In the thick jungle you had to use a ten-foot antenna to get any signal, the rest of the time a much smaller whip antenna did the job. The antenna made it much easier for the enemy to pick you out. Also, if the enemy could take out the RTO, they could not call-in support to kill them. So now we have 2 of us newbies, affectionately referred to as Freakin New Guy [FNG]. I cleaned it up a little. I did tell him that I had KP the day they trained our unit about the radio, he said to pick up my equipment and be on the helicopter the next day at 1600 hours.

The next day, November 20,1968, I was given my equipment which consisted of:

PRC 25 Radio	Spare Battery	Ruck Sack	Three Canteens	M 16 Rifle
15 Loaded Mags	Entrenching Tool	Bayonet	Poncho	Poncho Cover
Air Mattress	OD Green Towel	OD Green T Shirt	Shaver	Shaving Cream
Toothbrush	Toothpaste	Gas Mask	Pistol Belt	1 st Aid Pack
3 Ammo Pouches	Steel Pot / Liner	Frag Grenades	Smoke Grenades	C4
Comp H	C Rations	Blue Heat Tablets	Bug Juice	More Ammo

IN THE FIELD

At 1600 hours [four PM], six of us new guys flew by Huey chopper 45 miles north to our unit. I was assigned to the first Platoon. As we jumped off the hovering chopper, I looked out and there was my new company of about 100 men looking at us like well here are some FNG's that will either get us killed or die themselves. I do not think anyone who had been in combat ever trusted new guys and with good reason. I don't remember as much as I would like to at this time, but I do remember the company was setting up a perimeter for the night, there was a fence or hedge line on my left, everything was flat but there was also a wooded area ahead and to the right. My main concern was there was a rice patty between me and the company about 200 meters away. As I was taking all this in, I jump off the chopper and stand up instead of keeping my head down so the chopper blades don't remove my head from my body, well I showed my FNG trait right off the bat and got yelled at by everyone. I can tell you that that was the last time I did that. The six of us crossed the rice patty and reported in, no saluting the officers in the field, I have no recollection of who I talked to or even how I knew anything really. I do remember that before dark we got fired upon and it is amazing the distinct sound that an AK 47 makes, so we all fired back and that ended that short encounter. I do not know if we killed him or not but there was no more gunfire that night. I was assigned the first night watch, but they put a guy with me that first night. I remember that our foxhole was facing the way the earlier fire came from, our watch was from 8:00 PM until 9:40 PM. I could not see a thing that night, but I suppose I adjusted because I could see at least to some degree every night after that one.

I think every unit operated differently in Vietnam, in our Company the RTO only had to stand night guard if we were short of men and then would usually get the first or last watch. That is because of the extra weight we carried with the radio all day. Each night a perimeter was set up and depending on the size, that is how many foxholes had to be dug. Each position had to be able to overlook the one on each side of you. I am not sure but thinking there would be 8 to 10 positions with 10, 1-hour shifts. I am not sure why the first night I had more than an hour. We all had a wristwatch, mine was a self-winding, glow in the dark. Our company always had between 80 and 120 men. It fluctuated due to R & R, time was up, sick, etc. The officers, sergeants and medics never took a shift. All of this would be set up before going to sleep, two guys usually put their ponchos together to form a tent and each shift had to know where the next guy was sleeping because you set up your tent anywhere inside the perimeter. When your shift was over you went and woke up the guy that was next, then he would do the same as the shifts ended. Now some units would tell you it never happened, but it happened a couple of times that I remember, after days of walking up and down mountain sides and then going on night ambushes, the men would get totally exhausted. Sometime during the night someone would fall asleep in the fox hole,

or he might go wake up the next guy and thinking he was truly awake he would go to sleep, well that guy didn't really fully wake up and fell back asleep leaving a foxhole unguarded the rest of the night. Not ideal but it happened. There was hell to pay but everybody always passed the buck, so no charges were ever filed [article 15]. Fortunately, we never got an attack on those nights.

Also, one of my duties as RTO was to distribute to the First Platoon all the Mail, packages and Sundry [SP] Packs plus any new equipment that was sent out to us. I would give each squad leader their portions to pass out to their men. Mail and packages of course went to whomever they were addressed to, The SP's were supplied by the Army and each pack was supposed to cover 100 men. Each pack consisted of:

5 cartons of Marlboro cigarettes	5 cartons of other brands	10 Cigars
2 pouches of Pipe Tobacco	1 Plug of Chewing Tobacco	12 Bars of Soap
1 Razor	10 Razor Blades	2 cans of shaving Cream
2 Toothbrushes	2 Tubes of Toothpaste	2 Tablets of Writing Paper
24 Envelopes	2 Pens	6 Pounds of Candy

There would usually be someone who thought they should get the Marlboro's every time so at times it got a bit heated. It was easy for me to be fair because I did not smoke so I just rotated the goods so that everyone got what they wanted as often as I could. We did not shave much when we were out in the boonies so there was plenty to go around of that stuff. Very few of us brushed our teeth, you could only use the brush once anyway. When I first got to Nam, they lined us up, gave us all a toothbrush then squirted on some type of paste and then watched us brush for ten minutes. In retrospect I think it must have been fluoride or something like it as it was supposed to protect our teeth for a year. The next night I brushed with regular paste and then when I went to brush the next day the brush was full of mold so that was the last time I brushed there.

So now I wake up for the first time in the boonies, I think I slept OK, probably sleeping with your boots on and hugging a M-16 fully automatic, fully loaded weapon gave some comfort, not to mention you have claymore mines and a bunch of expertly trained and seasoned Army guys all around you, and the best part is they all wanted to stay alive. We get organized, cook some c ration meal using a blue heat tablet or a chunk of C4, they both burnt hot and lit instantly. You would use your good old P 38 can opener, leave about 3/8" uncut and fold the lid back then put a ham patty on the lid, light your fuel and quickly you had a wonderful meal, well something to eat anyway. Then stuff anything you had into your backpack, get organized without being in a group [too easy of a target], check your radio and weapon's. I of course was not involved yet but soon found out that everything was decided the night before, where you were going, how far you were going, who took point etc. Each Platoon took turns at point, and then it was broken down into squads as to the order you walked in. Since our Platoon was the Command Post Platoon, we had a lieutenant, an RTO[Me], and a medic. There was also a Platoon with a Commanding Officer, ours was affectionately called "snake", now he was a great leader, we all respected him a lot. He also had an RTO, a guy named Curt from out west somewhere, maybe Kansas, another great guy, he taught me a lot. In addition, each squad had riflemen and an M 60 machine gun guy and an ammo carrier. So, the point man would lead off carrying a M 79 with shotgun type rounds, they did not shoot far but you also did not have to be accurate. If a bad guy were anywhere near the blast, it would take care of them and it gave time for the rest of us to get down and ready to fire. The second guy would be a

rifleman with an M 16, then it was me with the radio, the Lieutenant right behind me, then the M 60 machine gunner who would carry a fair amount of ammo but right behind him was a guy with a M 16 and a bunch of M 60 ammo. Then the rest of the Platoon would have a mix of all the above. Some guys also carried M 72 laws which were the then modern-day bazooka's, they were much more compact than the bazookas. As we walked, we would stay a meter or two behind each other so as not to create easy targets. We would have to cross over rice patties and open fields at which time we would separate even more because of being in the open. Climbing mountains and heavy jungle we would close in a bit, so no one got lost.

This is my first day carrying the radio and full backpack, about 80 pounds plus M 16 and ammo. Of course, we come up to a stream that we must cross. It was over waist high, so we find a log to cross over on and I do not quite have my balance yet and fall into the stream, there goes the FNG again. With the heat it did not take long to dry out, so all was well. We had to climb up an embankment then back into the jungle. The jungle could be rough, lots of vegetation to get through but there were also many trails that were already cleared, some by previous companies that went through and some by the bad guys. Also, the defoliant commonly referred to as Agent Orange was used. Planes would fly over spraying the chemical and 3 days later everything was dead. At the time it seemed like a good idea but as the years went by many troops came down with cancer that either killed them or caused much sickness. Booby traps were something you had to constantly watch out for. In many cases the point man would unknowingly trip it and by the time it went off the third guy is the one that got the worst of it. Remember I was the third guy when we were on point. So, one time we were walking up a mountain side and as we rounded the top of it there were big boulders there and as I looked down, I saw the tripwire with a hand grenade pin attached and the grenade attached to one of the boulders, the point man had tripped it. I have the best guardian angel that God has ever made, the grenade did not go off. So, we took some C 4 and blew it up and carried on as if it were a normal day, I had overcome my FNG status. We would tape three 20 round magazines together in such a way that you could pop them out of your M 16 and slam another one in in a split second, then after firing that magazine flip it over and insert the middle one and fire away. We only put 18 rounds in each magazine because it helped to reduce jamming.

As we approached the end of November and Thanksgiving, the rain came down for days, we were still mostly in the mountains so had a hard time clearing an area to get a chopper to bring in supplies. Up in the mountains the temperature was quite chilly at night, and we had no blankets so just had to bear it. Most of us ran out of food but just for one day, then we got to the bottom of the mountain. We heard that much awaited sound of a Huey coming in bringing supplies, food and mail, they also brought us out a Vietnamese Interpreter because they were sending us into an area where suspected North Vietnamese Army [NVA] were suspected to have been at. He walked between me and the LT. When we were in the mountains and had all that rain, at night we literally wrapped ourselves around a tree to keep from sliding down the mountain. We still had to have our one-hour shifts of guard duty but stayed in place on the trail as opposed to setting up a perimeter.

Thanksgiving fell on November 28, 1968, we had made it to the top of a mountain that had been a Marine fire support base that had been overrun by NVA and then the base was abandoned, so our job was to rebuild it. We were in an area that allowed for those wonderful Huey Helicopters to bring us a hot meal of Turkey and all the fixings. They also brought us mail and packages from home and some SP packs. We had been walking for a week or more from 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM every day. We were grubby,

no shaving and had a lot of leaches each night. We carried a bottle of "bug juice" which was primarily to keep the malaria causing mosquitos away, which you put on your exposed body parts every day but also if you squirted it on the leaches, they would just fall off. I am sure it did not hurt my skin any!!! Some days we found some Vietcong [VC], some we caught, some tried to run, that didn't turn out well for them, if they did get away, we would call in artillery or gun ships and we would find them the next day resting peacefully. On December 4, 1968, a Catholic Priest was flown out to us on top of that mountain and said Mass. We made an Alter out of wood skids that the chopper brought out, we sat on the ground holding our M 16's just in case the bad guys showed up. We protected that Priest like he was Jesus Christ himself. Almost everyone was at the Mass, Catholic or not. Before Mass there was no time to hear confessions, so he gave everyone a blanket absolution, that was great.

After being exhausted from all the mountain climbing it was nice to be on that mountain rebuilding the bunkers. Although we still had to go out on patrols and night ambushes. Fatigue was working on us and our minds and we actually began to plot to kill our LT. Years later this LT got in touch with me and we talked about it, it is always good to hear both sides of the story, he said the higher up's were forcing him to push us so we could get our kill numbers up and he argued with them so much that when he would put one of us in for an award they would ignore it. He also was passed over for promotions and other assignments because of his persistence. After I left the Company in Vietnam they got hit hard quite often, he ended up losing his legs. He also told me that he had three RTO's while in Nam and if he had to go back, he would pick me to be his RTO. Maybe he made that up, but it sure felt good to hear it. On December 5, 1968, I received my first package from home, being out in the field we did not always receive all our packages, shall I say sometimes guys in the rear needed packages too. Do not get me wrong, it was a small percentage, if you were in Nam, you have my respect. The package had a small Christmas Tree and some decorations and even a can of spray snow. Our Medic [Doc Martinez] and I usually put our ponchos together to form a two-man tent and I tied the Christmas tree onto the center support, put on the decorations and sprayed the snow on it, we enjoyed it for a few hours until a Chinook flew in and blew it apart. I traded our interpreter for some Vietnamese Christmas cards and sent them home. They are quite beautiful, and I still have them. Went out on patrol with the Platoon Sgt [Chad], we would only go part of the distance we were supposed to but then I would call in false grid coordinates so we could rest. The draw back was if we would be attacked the Artillery guys would fire to the wrong area. The Priest came out again to say Mass for us, he gave me a religious medal and chain, I wore it for years. We were short of men, below 100 for sure mostly due to R & R and going home, so I had to pull guard duty in the middle of the night. It was extremely hard to stay awake, sitting in a foxhole, all alone, totally quiet and dark, I would pray three rosaries in that hour which helped. During this time, we ran into a fair amount of action and had to rely on B 52 strikes, artillery and mortars.

On December 11, 1968, we were out on a patrol, and we came across a hooch, we had our interpreter call the family out so we could search it, we were looking for VC or NVA that might be hiding there or even holding them hostage, stealing everything they had. We always had to check under their straw beds looking for tunnels. So, I had the job of guarding the family while the other guys searched the hooch. There were 3 mamasans and seven kids. Although I was holding my M16 to the head of one of the mamasans, they liked us. There are other stories from Veterans with conflicting views but where we were and the people we met, they wanted us there, we protected them from the bad guys, and we didn't steal anything from them as opposed to what the NVA did to them. A guy from Williamstown Ky

[Johnnie David Knight] took a picture of me guarding the family with his camera, more about that later. This same day the third platoon got a guy from Price Hill, my neighborhood, but I did not know him.

On December 13, 1968, we had the rare pleasure of getting picked up by Huey Helicopters and flown to a fire support base where we had bunker duty. Our Company had three main jobs, be out in the boonies on search and destroy missions, be on bunker line guarding a fire support base and third, guard highway 1, looking for mines and basically keeping the road open. So, on the fire support base we would be assigned to a bunker, at least 3 men per bunker. Each had an 8-hour shift of watching for an attack. When you were not on guard duty you could get a shower, a haircut which was by a Vietnamese old man. You sat in a chair with your M 16 rifle at the ready because he used a straight razor and that was scary. He also tried to shave your forehead which we would tell him no using some colorful language of course. Also, you had to pull KP and go to classes about search and destroy missions, how to find and search tunnels, study maps of the area etc. Even though it was somewhat safer than the boonies, we rather be in the boonies because we had less officers keeping an eye on you making sure you had shaved and looking clean, and you could only load your weapon while on the bunker. Most of the fire support bases we guarded were on the smaller side, I am guessing three or four acres. They were called Landing Zones [LZ] and were named LZ Ross, LZ Sooner, LZ Ryder, LZ Center, LZ Mary Ann, and others. They were set up with bunkers around the perimeter, they would have 105 and or 155 Howitzers and mortars. There would be a landing pad for helicopters to bring personnel and supplies and would have a command center in the center along with a first aid station. Outside of the bunkers was barbed wire and we would set up claymore mines. The mines needed to be checked every day to be sure they were in good shape and facing toward the enemy. Sometimes they would sneak up and turn them around. The landscape was usually barren for a rather good distance so you could see if anyone were coming in for an attack. However, sometimes the jungle was close and was much harder to defend. The bases were positioned as to be able to support the Infantry Units in the jungle and protect each other being able to fire the howitzers and having the rounds explode wherever the bad guys were. Our unit used them a lot to take out any enemy that our M16's and M60's could not handle. We would call in coordinates and they might miss with the first round but would be on the money after that. They were also able to respond within minutes of our requests.

We received mail and packages by chopper, I had written home asking for a cheap camera to carry around, they sent me a Kodak instamatic which was perfect. It was the perfect size to carry inside one of my ammo pouches and that way it was readily accessible. Of course, where we were there was no way to get film so I had to rely on my family to send the film, they never sent as much as I could have used, I took a lot of pictures but would have liked to have taken many more. As I used up a roll of film, I would send it home and they would get it developed then they would send the pictures back to me and I would write on the back what each one was then send them back home. They also sent me a small transistor radio, The Military had what was called Armed Forces Radio and they broadcasted across Vietnam, it was sixty's music and we enjoyed it very much.

Well, it was time for our next assignment, guarding highway 1, occasionally we would see tanks and APC's going by, kids from nearby villages would come out to see us and sell pop, flags and whatever else they could get their hands on. We would still have to go out on patrols and ambushes but for the most part we had a lot of time to catch up on letter writing and resting and enjoying the radio music. We would only move about 500 feet a day and the kids would carry your equipment in exchange for food. Usually, c rations that nobody liked anyway. Our job was to keep the road open and safe for traffic, both

ours and the Vietnamese that also used it. I received another package from home, this time it was a musical nativity in a plastic dome. It was about 10 inches high. One of the kids that came to see us regularly was a 12-year-old girl we called Sally from Que Son. I decided carrying that nativity was not a good option, I already had a lot to carry, and gave it to Sally. She beamed with joy and said "I keep for ever and ever". After high school and before I went into the Army, I bought a 1966 Mustang Convertible, I carried a picture of it along with pictures of a houseboat my dad had, a dalmatian that we had and various family pictures. I would show them to Sally and the other kids, they were so curious, I do not know if they could even comprehend what they saw but it seemed to make them smile a lot. The kids would gather under my tent where I would have my M16, radio and backpack just sitting there. They never ever touched anything. We always knew that if the kids were around, we were very safe, if they did not come by on a particular day you could count on an attack. I think of those kids and wonder what the rest of their life was like once we left. Also, in the package was some popcorn and a small pot with a lid to pop it, I made small batches, but we all loved every bite. We also toasted marshmallows using C 4 for a fire.

As the RTO we had to change codes often, I remember someone flying out to us on a Huey and using some type of device with a bunch of prongs, he jammed it into my and all the other radios then took off as fast as he had arrived. I presume that it totally reset everything, but we could change frequencies on our own, we did that every twelve hours. Sally came out to see me. I have been in the boonies for a month now and was comfortable with all my duties, this night we were un-coding grid coordinates which told us where we were going the next day. On December 24 and 25, 1968 we ignored all common sense. Under normal circumstances we would be as quiet as we could be, for guys that smoked they had to cup their hands so the glow couldn't be seen, and kept our radios very low, both our PRC 25 and transistor. So, these two days we test fired our weapons, set off flares, star clusters and smoke grenades. We fired off five M72 LAU's, 10 grenades and a pound of C4. Choppers flew by with smoke grenades spewing beautiful colors in the sky. It was good to be wild and free.

JOHNNIE DAVID KNIGHT

On New Year's Eve 1968, we were out in the boonies in I Corp somewhere between Danang and Chu Lai, we had been through a month-long series of climbing mountains, walking through rice patty's and from valleys to above the clouds. We would have 3 days of rain, then days of hot, dry weather except up in the mountains in which it would be very cold at night. This day we ended up in Antenna Valley, we found pamphlets from both south and north asking both sides to defect and turn themselves in to the other side. We knew we were in a dangerous area, well known for booby traps. Every evening the platoon leader, which in our case was a LT, platoon sergeant, squad leaders and the RTOs would get together and talk about the day and get orders for the next. We received fire from the enemy 3 times, but we eliminated the threats. After the meeting, guys were digging fox holes to set up a perimeter for the night when Johnny David Knight was struck with shrapnel from a booby-trapped grenade, he was hit in the right lung, throat and heart, 3 other guys also got hit but survived. I called in for a medivac and Doc went with them trying to keep him alive, but David died that night. We pulled guard duty in pairs that night. My mom & dad went to David's funeral, I told myself that I would visit them when I got home. It took me 40 years to do that, his mom and dad were dead, but I did get to meet his brother. He pulled out the pictures that David had sent home, in the pictures was the one he took of me "guarding

the family” I treasure that picture today, it is my favorite one. I got to know David well, I guess the original attraction was because he was from a town closer than anyone else from Cincinnati. He was a good old country boy, his family called him Johnnie, but we called him David, that is the way he wanted it. He is a cousin of the singer Skeeter Davis; my favorite of her songs was The End of the World which became a #2 hit in 1963. She was about 15 years older than David but would go to his family’s farm and they would hang out, David was immensely proud of her. The entire company was shaken by David’s death, and we were not in any condition to carry out any kind of sane mission. In other words, we were ready to take revenge on anything that moved. So, Command sent out some Chinooks to pick us up and take us to the “Charger Hotel” for stand-down. It was a 3-day let it all hang out party where you could clear up any records that needed attention, eat well, shower, and live floor shows every night. The floor show entertainers were from Australia, Thailand and California. There were movies and 3 guys got to call home for 3 minutes each through what was called “Mars Calls”. We played football, cards, had beach parties where they grilled steaks, burgers and hot dogs every day, got up when you wanted, and they had milk in the mess hall. We also had flush toilets.

After the 3 days, we spent one day on bunker line to get us back into mission status, then we were transported by Huey Helicopters out to a small hill then walked back into the mountains. We had another 3 days of constant rain, when it stopped the attacks began again, we were back to hunting down the enemy. You would think with all the rain you wouldn’t run out of drinking water, but we did, we were in the mountains and couldn’t get re-supply, we walked to the bottom of the mountain and there was a beautiful well, we didn’t have any purification pills, so we drank straight from the well. What we did not know is that the Communists had tainted the well and in 30 days a bunch of us would come down with hepatitis “A”. On January 10th we killed 5 NVA soldiers and it was clear that we were in an area that the enemy had some fortified camps. We were 10 clicks WNW of Que Son. We received a hot meal, supplies and mail by chopper even though there was a light rain. Ideally, we would receive a hot meal, one that was flown out to us, every three days. Actually, we might receive a meal two days in a row then none for a week. We basically lived on c rations and whatever someone would send us from home. It was great to get canned chicken chunks that I would heat up and enjoy, canned ham was also a favorite.

The next day was sunny and even though we were in some deep jungle the sun was shining through, as we walked along some well used trail, we sent out small patrols and sure enough we found an area with 3 NVA and plenty of small arm’s weapons and equipment, one NVA got away. We got word that we could again get a hot meal if we could clear out a landing zone [LZ]. That would be two in a row and very welcome, so we cleared an area and settled in for the meal and a relaxing evening, well as relaxing as possible when you just found what you believe was a forward guard post for some well-trained NVA soldiers that didn’t like you.

NVA COMPLEX

The next day our platoon went out on a short, 700-meter, patrol and found what we expected, a Battalion size NVA stronghold with bunkers, weapons as large as 51 Cal., rice and ammo. The bunkers were made of rocks. What we did not find was any enemy. We then called back to the rest of the company and when they caught up to us, they took over the search there and we went on another 500

meters. It was there that we encountered some NVA soldiers, as we fired on them, they took off running with us in pursuit, it appeared to be 2 men in NVA uniforms and 2 female nurses. As it was in some cases they disappeared in the thick jungle, whether they were close by or dropped into a tunnel I do not know. We did find more evidence of it being a Battalion size NVA camp, giant hooch's, NVA packs, radio equipment, documents, medical equipment and clothing. At this point we called in some demo teams to blow it all up and we moved on to the next part of our mission, to see if there were any more areas of activity. I had used up all my film so could not take any pictures here. So far, we had found abandoned areas, but the big question was if there were any NVA soldiers still hiding somewhere planning a large-scale attack for TET 1969 like they did in 1968.

Incredibly early the next morning at 4 AM I listened live to super bowl III; the NY Jets beat the Baltimore Colts 16-7. I carried my small transistor radio in one of my ammo pouches and the Kodak Instamatic camera in another. I was the LT's RTO, so my main responsibility was to carry and protect that radio.

Over the next few days, we walked around a lot, we found a bunch more weapons including American and Chinese weapons. I was able to send home an NVA gas mask, other guys sent home what they could. We were very limited on what we could send, no weapons for sure, I had to claim the gas mask was an oil lamp in case they x rayed the package. We would give whatever we wanted to send home to someone who was going to the rear for R & R or for medical treatment and they would hopefully send your items home. It did not always go to your home. We spent a lot of time cutting in LZ's to send back to command everything we found, including some NVA soldiers that we managed to capture rather than kill. As a company we sent several dozen soldiers to meet their Maker. We also found AK 47's, 51 Cal machine guns, mortars and rockets, not to mention NVA clothing. We were now walking along the base of a mountain following a stream, it was not a river but more like a large stream. All of a sudden, we see a waterfall cascading over some very big boulders, we were hot and tired and all thought the same thing, we set up a quick perimeter and the rest of us stripped naked and just laid down letting the water cool and clean us. After some time, we traded places and kept watch. It felt like heaven.

It was a terribly busy few weeks, but we felt good about what we had accomplished. I liked being in the jungle as opposed to being on bunker line because I could walk around with my M 16 fully loaded and ready to go, on a fire support base you had an unloaded weapon, unless you were in or on a bunker. You also had to be clean shaven. I also feel like a lot more was accomplished being in the jungle, of course along with that came a lot more danger. We walked most of the day and every few days went out on night patrols. On night patrol we would move out away from the Company a klick or two and watch for any night movement. We would seldom engage the enemy at that time but more important to see how many there was. Sometimes at daybreak, if there were just a few, we would take them out. We were getting worn down, so we went on bunker line duty on LZ Ryder. After a few days we ended up walking up Hill 800, found some "glowing leaves" and sent some home, I have no idea what that was, but I am sure not anything that I should have sent home. Hill 800 was rough, slippery and steep. The point man saw one NVA but missed him. On January 18, 1969, we were still on top of Hill 800, we received some supplies, the usual C-Rations but they also sent us some LURP's for the first time. The LURP's were great but gave us diarrhea, Doc said it was because we were not used to that type of food. I guess he was right because every time we would switch back and forth from C-Rations to LURP's and back the same thing happened. So, from then on, we stuck with the C-Rations. Although Doc had these

little white pills that seemed to cure everything. They also sent us a hot meal and another Priest for Mass; he was at St Mary's near Xavier University for 6 years. The other Chaplain had gone home. The fog moved in, and he had to spend the night with us.

The next day was Sunday January 19, 1969, the CO, platoon leader, 5 rifleman and I moved down the steep, muddy hill ahead of the rest, then at the bottom, the CO and two riflemen went ahead about two miles. They encountered two NVA and got them. We heard the rifle fire, so I called back to the company for them to hurry and catch up with us at the bottom of the hill. When they got there, the platoon leader, three guys and I ran to meet up with the CO. Well, while we were on our way the CO decided to go another mile by himself, he was very Gung Ho, if not half nuts, so the platoon leader and I went to meet him. Now the CO sends me back by myself to tell the other guys to go back to the bottom of the hill and lead the whole company up to meet us, then I had to walk back to the CO by myself again. I can still picture that area, it was hilly with trees and areas of thick bushes, with only a two-foot-wide trail. I had my M 16 on full auto. Is it any wonder that I do not like being in the woods by myself? While we were waiting for the company to catch up, we found and destroyed 5 booby traps. When we all got back together, we ate and then sent out a small patrol with another RTO, they ran into some small gunfire, but no one got hit. The next day we took a rest, I wrote a letter to David Knight's mom, answering a letter she had sent to me. It was a tough letter to write but I needed to do it. When I met David's brother, years later, he told me she had gone insane over the loss of David. My own mom was an extraordinarily strong independent woman who had a lot of tragedy in her life but dealt with it very well. She had five sons but only her "favorite" [well I think I was] is the only one to go off to war. One of my best friends, growing up, dad was a mailman and happened to be our mailman. He told me this when I got back home, if he had a letter from me, he would hurry to our house, if not it was like walking the plank to our house. My mom would be standing on the porch waiting for him every day, if he had a letter, she was all smiles, if not she would just walk back into the house. It was extremely hard on him to see that. I know it took quite a toll on both my mom and dad. Sorry to admit this but when I got home, we never once talked about any of it. I think one of the tragedies of the Vietnam war was when we came home, we had to almost deny that we were there. The small minority overpowered the silent majority and so the Veterans had to push all memory's down deep into their gut. I worked mainly with construction company personnel who were very Patriotic so I never got looked down on, however I worked with a guy for over 30 years and when he retired, I found out he had been a Marine in Vietnam, how pathetic that we couldn't have talked about that over the years. Mom and dad did throw me a welcome home party with some close friends but from that day until the Gulf War, discussion of Vietnam was taboo.

The next day we were back to the trails, found more booby traps, walked from mountains to valleys had small encounters with the bad guys, we were on a roll always taking them out before they got us. We got to a good open clear area at the bottom of a mountain and got picked up again by some chinooks and flew to LZ Ryder for bunker line duty. Some of the guys had cassette recorders so I wrote home asking for one. The idea was for the people at home to record on the tape then I could listen to them. Then I would record and send the tape back home to them. I sent some North Vietnam coins home. I was feeling sick this day but the next day felt better. Stayed on LZ Ryder for a few days, two hot meals a day, only had to go on one patrol every three days but did have to go to training classes. The next day I had a 104 temperature. The next day, back to a night ambush at Dayly Pass. I still tell my employees, when they say they have a stomachache or leg hurts or whatever that "when I was in

Vietnam, I couldn't say, Oh Mr. NVA soldier, don't shoot at me today I don't feel good". I tell them to go back to work, they hate it, but it is the truth. So, we go on this ambush, LT, M 60 Machine gunner, his ammo carrier and a couple riflemen and medic. We are on a hill side with a good view of the suspected trail. Sure enough, along comes seven NVA, we start shooting but our M 16's are out of range, the M60 jams and LT is standing behind us shooting over our heads, I grab him and pull him down then shoved my phone into his face, he calms down, I give him coordinates and he calls for an artillery strike which is on the money. Love those guys. We stayed there the rest of the night then the next morning we walked down to the trail and reported the seven kills. The rest of the company joined us, and we flew by Huey's to LZ Ross. It is now February 3, 1969, and we all got clean clothes and a hot shower then beer, soda and a movie. We also got one new guy. We stayed on LZ Ross fixing the phones in the bunkers along with any other maintenance to keep us busy. We got two more new guys, we have been short, maybe 80 guys in the whole company, we were ideally to have between 80 and 120 but the more the better. The weather had been a bit chilly, and we had no coat nor blanket. The whole company got shots for Cholera. Next, we went back to guarding Highway 1 again, this time with some engineers. Got to see Sally again, she was selling her usual wares. After a few days we ended back on LZ Ross, on February 9, 1969, I felt sick again and had a 102 temperature, the only thing I could keep down was canned peaches, everyone else got a 5cc shot for hepatitis in each butt cheek, the next day I was still sick, but they gave me those same shots anyway.

HEPATITUS A

On February 11, 1969, I went on sick call, my skin was yellow including my eyes, I had hepatitis "A". They called for a dust off and flew me to a larger clinic, they took blood and urine samples then choppered me to Danang. When I left LZ Ross by dust off I had to leave everything there, my M-16, my backpack, camera, radio, writing supplies, everything. It felt good to have a bed. The next day I went by bus to an Air Force Hospital. The next day after that I was flown to Japan on a stretcher in the back of an air force plane. Japan was cold but beautiful. I slept for 20 hours a day, mostly because of the hepatitis but I am sure part of it was from being so fatigued from the whole being in the boonies experience. I had a lot of emotional feeling's going on, I wanted to go home but I also wanted to get back with my company, we really gelled well even though we were truly diverse. We only had one guy that always felt underprivileged or wronged all the time. He complained about every assignment, he complained about me not giving him Marlboro cigarettes every time. He had met a girl in one of the villages and wanted to bring her along on our missions, to the best of my knowledge he also was the only one that smoked marijuana. Fortunately, our CO "snake" was able to control him.

With hepatitis you lose your appetite, you are fatigued, you have a fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, dark urine, jaundice, I had them all. The best thing you can do for it is rest and good nutrition. They took three vials of my blood every day for testing. After about a week of the 20 hours a day sleeping and eating whatever I could stomach, I started feeling better. I was at Camp Oji Japan, a US Army hospital near Tokyo, Japan. I was in Ward 7 with 39 other hepatitis victims. It was Ash Wednesday and the doctor made me class 3 which meant I could roam the hospital, go to the PX and snack bar. The first thing I did was to go to Mass, then got a facial and a haircut, I weighed 147 pounds, I had worms so had to take a giant red pill twice a day. The doctor said whatever you do, do not drink any alcohol. I never drank anyway but someone telling me not to after I had "been to Vietnam" was

something I could not handle so it was three Singapore slingers every night. It was the doctors' fault for telling me not to!! Two weeks later, on March 6, 1969, my liver was back to normal and I could now begin to be assigned duty's and soon I would go back to Vietnam. Four days later I was on "police call" picking up cigarette butts and other litter and passed out. I fell flat on my face and when I woke up, I was in bed and had amnesia. I do not know how long that lasted but not more than two days because three days later my equipment caught up with me, and I remembered what I had in it. Someone had switched cameras with me and kept the film that was in my camera. I would have liked to have those pictures. The doctor said I had a Motor Seizure.

One of my brother's collected postage stamps so I traded one of the Japanese nurses some American stamps for some Japanese stamps and sent them home to him. Everyone at the hospital was great, they treated all of us with great respect. They would have entertainment a couple of times a week, the USO had entertainers to visit us, one time an actor/wrestler named Mike Mazurki came to visit, it helped pass the time. By this time, I had built up quite a list of people to write to, and of course got letters back. Mom and dad, brothers, sisters in law, aunts, God mother, friends from school, moms of guys that were in our company and killed etc. Letters were the only way we could communicate back in them days and we all looked forward to mail call. In Nam and Japan, we did not need postage, we just put "free" where the stamp usually went. When my mail finally caught up with me, keep in mind that when I left Nam, I didn't fill out a change of address form, the US Army postal clerks had to figure all that out on their own, I am not sure how they did it, but they did a great job. So anyway, when it caught up with me I had about 3 weeks' worth of mail and packages. In the one package was the cassette tape player I had asked for. My parents had recorded some, my brothers and grandparents, and most importantly my parents had asked my girlfriend to come over and record something. Now that is another story. I was very shy, never went on any dates until after High School, no prom either. After High School but before Vietnam I had seen this beautiful girl, Bobbie Perry, in my neighborhood, she was babysitting for her sister's children who lived across the street. I had a 1966 Mustang Convertible and would take all day outside in the driveway waxing it so I could hopefully see her. Too afraid to even say hi but wanted to see her. Her sister who she was babysitting for was friends with my brother so at some point arranged a blind date for us at her sister's house. She lived about 15 minutes away so when I went to pick her up, I have 15 minutes of absolute terror with my stomach flipping out. So, the entire evening was Bobbie and everyone else trying to start a conversation with me and my answering with a one-word answer like yes or no. I think it took me a couple months to get the nerve to call her again, but I did. I took her to Edgewater to watch some drag racing. She was great to be with, but I had no ability to convey that message. So sometime later I went into the Army. After basic I went to California for Infantry training and somehow was able to write to her. Bobbie's sister's husband was in Vietnam at the time, so I think she felt sorry for me because it surely looked like I was going there. So, she wrote back, and we continued until I came home on leave. I was home for two weeks and I think we went out a couple times. I do not think I was any more of a conversationalist though. It felt so wonderful to just be with her but still I couldn't say it, the night before I was leaving for Vietnam, I managed to kiss her, a quick kiss I must say but still a kiss and then I left. While in Vietnam I was able to write things to her that I could not say to her face. Bobbie started off just being nice to me but eventually she felt about me what I felt about her since the first time I saw her.

So, back to the cassette player, Bobbie went over to my mom and dad's without ever meeting them and had to talk to me on this recorder knowing they would probably listen to what she said. She

did not even know me that well yet. Bobbie was just 18 at the time. No wonder I love her so much. My bed in the ward was just inside of the stairwell so I would sit out there and make a recording, it was hard to fill an hour alone so I would record some music or leave part of it blank. Speaking of music, one of the guys bought a reel-to-reel tape player, one day he called me over and handed me a set of headphones and said listen to this. The song was 7 O'clock news by Simon and Garfunkel. The news was playing in one ear and silent night in the other. I had an 8-track player in my Mustang and had a lot of tapes but never heard anything like that. So, the days passed by taking medical tests and listening to family recordings and listening to music, also hanging out in the snack bar. Sleeping was also something I did a lot. On March 17, 1969, I had to go to Camp Drake and get an EEG, they were trying to figure out why I had a motor seizure. The test was negative. On the 19th I went to Camp Zama and had a brain scan; it was a two-and-a-half-hour ride in an Army truck each way. On March 24, 1969, I got to call home for the first time since I had left for Vietnam on October 28, 1968. Of course, it was great, but we could not talk long, it cost something like \$3.00 per minute. In early April I received a care package from my old High School Elder, it had 5 cartons of cigarettes, food and candy. I did not smoke but the other guys were much appreciative. I did not give it a thought back then; it was normal, but today the cigarettes would be quite controversial. On April 23, 1969, I had my third spinal tap, they hurt a lot and would always get a headache afterward. They finally decided I am allergic to Chloroquine and Chloroplast which are ingredients in the anti-malaria tablets and the worm pills I was taking. I was given a permanent profile against going back to Vietnam or any other tropical zone. By this time, I just wanted to go home, I had been in the hospital for over 2 months and was told I would not go back to my Company anyway, they would assign me somewhere else, I did not want to start over. I ended up meeting some of the guys from my company, they got hit hard after I had left, they ran into many ambushes by NVA, and many were wounded or killed. The LT that I was RTO for had lost his legs but survived. Now I had to await orders. I was given a pass to leave the hospital so on May 3rd I went to downtown Tokyo. I went to a couple of stores and still have an electric train that I had bought. I also hung out at the USO club that was there. Three days later at 10 AM I left Camp Oji, my home for almost 3 months, I was transferred to Camp Zama. At Camp Zama I had to perform various duties while waiting for my orders. One job was to guard guys that were AWOL, I would have to take them from the brig and get them on a plane, I had a 45-caliber pistol, they had no handcuffs and were free to walk away unless I stopped them. I thought it was one of the dumbest jobs I ever had during my service. I was not going to shoot them; I do not remember but I doubt I even had any bullets. Fortunately, they always cooperated, and all was well.

HOMECOMING

A couple days later I received my orders to report to Fort Knox Kentucky after a 30-day leave. I caught the next plane to California. I had been in the jungle three and a half months, in the hospital for another three and a half months, seven months total, from the day I first got on the plane to head to Vietnam I planned to not tell my family when I was coming home and I would arrive home on a Sunday morning and take a Taxi to the Church that they always went to, I knew what time and all, I would walk in and sit right next to them in the pew. That is what I planned. Well, when I got to California, I guess I had too much layover time, so I called home. It was a Saturday night, the night before Mother's Day, my parents were out but my brother Bob was home, he was a drag racer, AA Fuel which was the fastest, he had a race to go to the next morning and that was the most important thing to him. He could not meet me at the airport but spent a lot of time talking to me that night. Cost my parents a fortune in long

distance phone costs. He was a great brother and best man at my wedding. So, he called my parents and told them what time my flight was coming in, they called Bobbie and my other brothers, and they all met me at the airport. It was Mother's Day and I suppose the best Mother's Day ever for my mom, I remember shivering but doubt if it was cold. We went to the house; Bobbie went home, and we went to that Mass that I had planned to meet them at. I know I did not spend much time at home, I called Bobbie and spent the day and evening with her. When I was in Vietnam, I received a letter from home saying that my oldest brother said they should sell my Mustang because the tires would rot while I was gone. The title was in my dad's name, and they did not ask me, they just sold it. When I got home, I found it, but it had been wrecked so I went and bought a 1969 Ford Torino convertible, it was a beautiful red color with a black top. I put an American flag on each front fender. Mom and Dad through me a Welcome home party at the Knotty Pine Tavern in Wilder Kentucky, the owner was a customer of ours and mom and dad struck up a personal relationship with them. They were great people and the four of them would go on vacation together. It was a good party except maybe the band, the only dancing that went on was two old ladies that probably should not have been out there. The next 30 days Bobbie and I went out all but one evening and we spent hours on the phone that night. We both worked during the day. Near the end of the 30 days, Bobbie was standing by a mirror putting on makeup half asleep and her mom said, you cannot keep this up, Bobbie told her I would be leaving for Ft. Knox soon. And I did. I-71 had just opened, and it made the trip much faster. I came home most weekends; I would sometimes bring home some buddy's that was from too far away for them to go home. They always said I was like Jekyll and Hyde the way I acted with them compared to being at home. I was assigned to a basic training unit and had my own room at the end of the barracks. It was not bad, and I even had an 8-track tape player in my room. They wanted me to become a Drill Sargent, I would be a buck sergeant and wear a smoky the bear hat, but I would have had to re-up, that was not going to happen, although I did like the Military, I didn't feel I and my room should have to be inspected like the recruits were. So, they just made me an acting Drill Sargent and promoted me to a corporal. When I was not working with the recruits, I would make flower boxes for the first sergeants' wife. The first sergeant called me into his office and asked me what I did before the service, so I explained about the family business that my grandfather had started in 1920 and that I worked there during high school, of course it was a metal fabrication shop, but he asked me if I could work with wood. I said sure so he introduced me to his wife, and she explained what she wanted, so the next day I went to their house, it was on base, and measured up the windows, went to town and got some wood and tools and made up what she wanted. They both liked them a lot. After that the first sergeant was more of a friend. On August 8th, my dad read in the local paper that the 311th Field Hospital was being released and coming home the next day. So, he called my First Sergeant and told him, so he checked into it and called me into his office again. This time he told me my dad had called him, he checked into it, and I had to be released immediately. Even though I had not been with, nor even talked to anyone in my reserve unit in over a year, technically I was still attached to them and when they were released, I also had to be released. So, he helped me load up my car with what I had in my room and bid me farewell. He thanked me and said go home. No physical, no paperwork, just go. So, I drove up I-71 toward Cincinnati, Ohio trying to figure out what just happened, it happened so fast. It was the weekend, so I had some time to process everything. The Vietnam war was so unpopular that we did not talk about it to anyone. I put all my pictures and souvenirs in the closet and kept it all out of my mind the best I could. In 1990 the Gulf War came along; people began to get Patriotic again. Flags were again being flown and credit card size laminated flags with clips were

attached to many shirts and dresses. I began to look at my pictures and read my letters that my mom, Bobbie and others had saved for me. A friend helped me create a website with my pictures on it.

Final Thoughts

Today I am 72 years old and have had a fantastic life. My childhood, growing up in the 50's and 60's had to be the best. I was so carefree, I didn't know it, but we were pretty poor until I was in the 6th grade at which time, we moved from an old farmhouse in Fairmont to a brand-new house in Price Hill. The farmhouse was so drafty I remember sitting on the register with a blanket trying to warm up. We had an old coal fired furnace and of course no air conditioning. The new house had a gas furnace but still no air conditioning. At both locations we had lots of woods and the new house was on a dead-end street with a million kids to play with. We built camps and tree houses, we played in the street until the streetlights came on and then it was time to go home. We played many games and never did anything too bad, if we did, when dad got home, we got a whippin' and never did that again. We ate lunch at whoever's house we were at when it was time. No abuse, no drugs, no killings. There are many more stories and events that I could add to this paper, I would instead like to ask you to do the same as I have and write your own story, I would like to read it. Start off just writing down little things that come to you and before you know it you will have the story of your life. God is good—all the time.

Vietnam changed my life, and I would say for the better. Never has there been a day that I have not thought about my time there. Sure, it was scary and dangerous and there are a lot of aftereffects and health problems, but it showed me so much. I saw what poor and suppressed really meant. It gave me confidence and how to deal with adversity. I would have never been able to talk with Bobbie without all the letter writing. I have made so many friends in life, through work, the Church, the Knights of Columbus, and so many other groups and the comradery of the members of VFW Post 10380 would not have been possible without this experience. I would do it all over again. I have very few regrets, but I do have some, when I came home from Vietnam, I should have visited both Johnnie David Knight's mom and dad in Williamstown, Ky and Mary Grooms in Xenia, Ohio. Also, I should have sat down with my mom and dad and talked to them about anything they wanted to know or tell me. I sincerely apologize to all of you. I do not know how Heaven works but am certain you are all there, give each other a hug from me.

Epilogue

You may have noticed that this story is overwhelmingly positive, that is both because I prefer to look at the bright side, but also because my life has been a series of Blessed days.

Updated 9/5/2022. Charlie Wilke cwilke@fuse.net For pictures go to: www.charliewilke.com

Doc Dennis Martinez

Doc was our medic. He and I would put our ponchos together most nights to form a two-man tent. He was a great guy and we got along perfectly. Sometimes we would go out on patrol and when we would get into a fire fight, Doc would be firing his M-16 with the rest of us, he loved to shoot, of course if someone needed him as a medic that would be his priority.

Johnny David Knight

David was a rifleman from Williamstown Kentucky. We became good friends and would talk a lot whenever we had time. He talked a lot about his cousin singer Skeeter Davis and the fun times they had on his family property. I got the impression that she needed an escape from her notoriety.

LT Mike Holroyd

Mike was a fresh LT and I was his radioman, we both had to learn together, he was gung-ho and we actually planned to kill him because he kept sending us on ambushes in the middle of the night and we were all so tired from walking all day. Fortunately, we never completed that task and worked very well as a team. A friend of his happened upon my website thirty or so years after Nam and got us together on the phone. Mike explained that the higher ups were pushing him to get more kills, he knew how exhausted we were, he put me in for some award after that trip alone in the jungle, but they ignored it because they did not want any of his men to receive any awards.

Snake

Our CO was LT Sanders, he was quite a leader that had the respect of everyone. He walked with us every day and when needed he took charge. Because of being an RTO I would be with him in most meetings. His RTO was a guy named Curt.

Curt

Curt was from out west I think, maybe Kansas, he taught me a lot about being an RTO, we would clown around a lot on the radios when things got too quiet.

The following is an article by Eric Milzarski on March 29, 2021:

Radiomen in the Vietnam War faced a 5 second life expectancy!!!!

At the height of the Vietnam War, up-and-coming commo guys who wanted to learn the art of radio operation would walk into a classroom and see a huge number five written on the chalkboard.

Inevitably, someone's curiosity would win out and they'd ask what the big number meant. The instructor would then calmly tell them, "That's your life expectancy, in seconds, in a firefight. So, listen up and you might learn something that'll keep you alive.

That number wasn't some outrageous scare tactic. During the Vietnam War, the odds were tremendously stacked against radio operations – and that 5-second life expectancy was, for some, a grim reality.

To make matters worse, you can't really control the volume on those radios since the dial was on the wearers back. Radio chatter could give your position away, too. In all fairness, that number was on the extreme side of estimates. The life expectancy of a radio operator in the Vietnam War ranged between 5 to 6 seconds all the way up to a slightly more optimistic thirty seconds depending on your source. If you look at all the things the radio operators were tasked with, it becomes abundantly clear why commo guys weren't expected to last long.

The first and most obvious tally in the "your screwed" column was the overall weight of the gear radio operators were expected to carry into battle. The PRC-77 radio system weighted 13.5 pounds without batteries. Toss in batteries, some spare batteries, and the unsightly, large encryption device called the NESTOR and you're looking at always carrying 54 pounds on your back. Now add your weapon system onto that and try to keep up as you fight alongside your encumbered brethren. It took a lot of getting used to – but they managed.

If the weight wasn't problem enough, next comes the antennae. They weren't all too heavy, but they were extremely uncomfortable to use and would often give your position away to the enemy. The three-foot version was easier on the radio operator, but it wouldn't work in thick jungles. For that environment, the radio operator needed a ten-foot whip antenna to stick out of their back, which was a great way to draw attention.

The Viet Cong knew what it meant to take out a guy with a giant, ten-foot antenna sticking out of their back – you might as well have painted a bullseye on them. You take out the radio operator and you effectively avoid dealing with air support. Additionally, it was well known that a radio operator's place in the marching order was at the heels of the officer-in-charge – two high priority targets in one spot. And it wasn't just the bullets that radio operators had to watch out for. The large antenna also acted as a targeting point for mortars and other explosives. All they had to do was aim for the antenna and they could wipe out anyone near the radio operator. As terrible as it sounds, this meant that the radio operator would sometimes move in isolation, away from the rest of the squad.

It's unclear exactly how many radio operators lost their lives during the Vietnam War. While many radio operators were fulfilling their MOS, others just had a radio strapped to them in times of need. One thing is certain, though: Being a radio operator back in the Vietnam War puts you among the most badass troops the military has to offer.