Serving With Integrity in Viet Nam

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Dedication

This story is respectfully dedicated to the men of the West Point class of 1970 who died in combat mostly in the Republic of Viet Nam. They gave of their lives in service to their country; men who were in the prime of their youth. This story is being written as the time for the 50th reunion of our class, is approaching. Many of us have an ache in our hearts that they will not be with us to celebrate. As one of our classmates wrote as a tribute to one of our fallen comrades and he says it well, "I loved you as a brother. I think of you often and you are forever a young man. We have grown old, and blessed with wonderful families. I only wish you would have grown old with us." Another classmate continues to say, "You went and paid the ultimate price… Serve with integrity. You always did my friend." It is them we remember and, in their memory, I share this story.

Serving With Integrity

I was raised in San Diego in the 1960's, a tumultuous time in American history with street protests, riots on university campuses such as the Kent State massacre in 1970. My father was a retired Marine Corps officer who fought in the battle of Iwo Jima in the South Pacific in 1945. I lived the "good life" as a teenager in San Diego and went to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1966. Upon graduation in 1970, I volunteered to serve in the war in Viet Nam.

It was August 3,1971, as the large civilian jetliner began loading combat soldiers at Travis Air Force base in California. There were about 250 of us, all soldiers from a buck private to major. We were headed to Cam Rahn Bay, a military airport just outside of Saigon in the Republic of South Viet Nam. Six of my West Point classmates from the class of 1970 and I boarded together. We were all 1st lieutenants having been

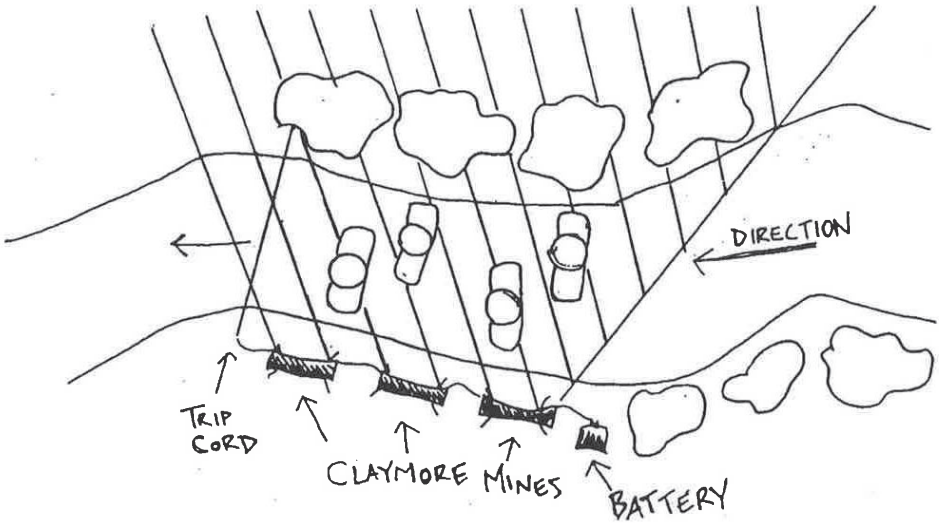
recently promoted from 2nd lieutenants. Our Class motto was, "Serve with Integrity, Class of '70."

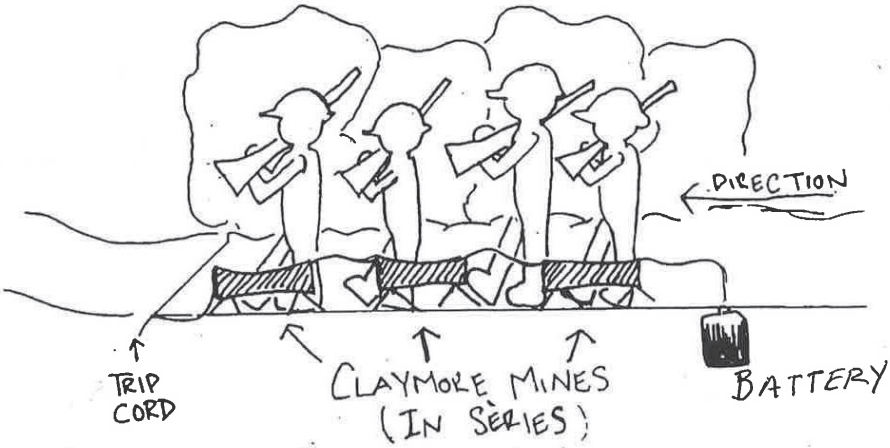
We all came from various parts of the country, and we all entered the United States Military Academy at West Point in July of 1966. We were then sworn in as new cadets and began summer training in "Beast Barracks." It was 3 months of hell with little sleep and hardly any food. All the upper classmen were continually yelling at us: "hazing" as it was known then. It was a time of extreme stress and about 20% of our classmates dropped out in the first three months. We graduated four years later in June of 1970 as second lieutenants. Then we headed to Airborne School and Ranger School at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Airborne Rangers they called us. The DC 8 we were flying in roared down the runway as we headed for Cam Rahn Bay and the battlefields of Viet Nam on the South China Sea.

While in the air, I began asking myself why I volunteered for Viet Nam. I was motivated by the speech of President John F. Kennedy when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Basically, I wanted to serve my country. I had gone through 4 years of military training, plus a university education, and I wanted to give back. The war in Viet Nam was extremely unpopular in America at that time. I was bothered by some of the violent protests by my generation against the war, but I would not let it stop me.

About that time, the stewardesses began serving lunch on this rather long 24 hour flight. It was followed up by a 4 hour movie. Then everyone began talking afterwards on this lengthy flight. I fell asleep and woke up as the pilot announced we were preparing to land at Cam Rahn Bay Airport. Thirty minutes later I looked down out of my window and saw the perimeter lights below. The first perimeter lights below were in a red oval followed by another one set inside as a green oval signaling the beginning of the safe zone around the airport. Minutes later we were on the ground, and it was dark. We were greeted

MECHANICAL AMBUSH (MA)





SIDE VIEW

by several buses accompanied by two jeeps armed with M-60 machine guns. It finally dawned on me that we had arrived and were in a hostile combat zone. Then we were transported to our temporary barracks for a week of in-country training. Cram packed with information, the training went quickly.

While there, the training that I remembered well was an hour demonstration on how to set up a "mechanical ambush or "MA" as they were commonly called. Typically, 3 claymore mines were joined together by an electrical wire, each about 2 meters apart and attached to each mine and a small battery in one continuous circuit. They were placed along a trail and with a trip string crossing the trail.

As an enemy unit marched randomly along the trail, the lead person would trip the trip cord causing all 3 portable claymore mines to ignite at once killing all in the kill zone, usually not a pretty sight. I needed to remember how to install one in the weeks ahead, as it would be my platoon's responsibility to put one out near our unit every night at dusk. (See the diagram on a MA on page 3A.)

Chu Lai

All six of us, Lt.'s John Colacicco, Ed Hirsch, Lynn Rolf, Scott Knight, Les Kahalekai and I were eventually assigned to units in I Corp, the military zone closest to the DMZ (the De-Militarized- Zone) separating North and South Viet Nam. We were like a band of brothers. Others from our Class of 1970 also went to Viet Nam. Only four of us were assigned to armored cavalry units in I Corps that I know about. They were John, Scott, Ed and myself. You will hear more about them later in the story and I will usually refer to them by their first names.

As point of clarification, a Cavalry Troop in Viet Nam was usually made up of about 15-20 armored tracked vehicles. Both a tank and an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) are tracks because they have metal rotating tracks and not rubber wheels so they can go just about

anywhere, rice paddies and jungle included. They have the advantage of having armored protective plates to shield soldiers from the small arms fire of the Viet Cong. I refer in this story to APC's as tracks and tanks as tanks – usually a light weight tank in Viet Nam known as a Sheridan Tank. All of our units were located around Da Nang, a major Vietnamese city. John and I were transported by jeep to the same Cavalry Squadron made up of several similar Cavalry troops. The only major exception to the organization of a Cavalry Squadron during this time could be a squadron that also included helicopter gunships like Cobras or troop carriers known as Hueys. John and my squadron base camp was located in Chu Lai, a small Vietnamese city just south of the much larger city of Da Nang. John and I were then transported by helicopter the next day to meet our new troop commanders, who each commanded 3 cavalry (cav.) platoons in their troops deep in Viet Cong territory near the South China Sea. John was immediately put in charge of his Cav. platoon. John took it out on patrol the next day in his area of operation. Within several days, John's unit was hit by a strong enemy force, most likely NVA (North Vietnamese Army). It was an ambush and they surprised everyone in John's platoon. The NVA opened up with RPG's (rocket propelled grenades) and automatic rifle fire. John's unit was dangerously caught in the "kill zone." The NVA fired RPG's at the lead vehicle which was a Sheridan Tank. John's platoon sergeant, a well experienced Viet Nam veteran was sitting on top of the tank. When the RPG hit the broad side of the tank, it exploded and entered into the cavity of the tank. The energy of this exploding RPG round ignited the basic load of main tank ammunition. In a flash second the whole tank went up into violent flames. Unfortunately, John's platoon sergeant and his crew were incinerated. This left John in charge of his whole platoon as they opposed a numerically superior enemy force. In the midst of the battle, John was wounded in the head. John was able to radio back to his Troop Commander, urgently requesting reinforcements. He was soon informed that back up was on the way.

Scott, who travelled to I Corp with us, had his own Cav. platoon nearby. In a short time, he was notified by radio that John's platoon had been ambushed and could be overrun if not reinforced immediately. Scott's unit was able to mobilize quickly and reached John's position just as they were about to be overrun by the NVA. Scott's unit entered into the fight! One of his mortar tracks began dropping mortar rounds on the enemy. Now the NVA were overpowered by the American forces and they rapidly retreated leaving John's platoon severely damaged. Medivac helicopters were called in to transport John's wounded men to the hospital. John was one of them. John was later awarded a Purple Heart for his injury and was grateful to be alive and able to come back and fight another day. He was also awarded the Silver Star for valor.

About the same time, I was transported by a Huey helicopter to the field to join my unit. I was greeted by my new Troop Commander, Captain Dan Cox, also a West Pointer and a year ahead of me (Class of '69) in my same company, H-2, at the Academy. With a simple introduction, I was off to meet my new unit in the field, a Cavalry unit patrolling the Vietnamese rice paddies along the South China Sea. My platoon, I learned, was composed of 5 tracks each manned by 4 men. My platoon sergeant, SSG Spivey, was a tall muscular Afro-American man whom I grew to respect immensely.

On the initial approach to my new unit by helicopter, there was a commotion near our troop command track. A Vietnamese interpreter had stepped on a "booby trap" and it blew his leg off. A medivac helicopter was called for and within an hour it was circling our site. It landed and picked up the wounded man and transported him to Da Nang for emergency care to stop the bleeding.

The next day Captain Dan assigned me to my platoon after a briefing the night before. I was feeling the tension in the air as we were in the midst of hostile Viet Cong. He ordered my platoon to patrol the neighboring

rice paddies near our unit on the next day. It was muddy work to try to drive APC's through the rice paddies, approximately 50 meters square. The rice paddies were usually covered by a ½ meter deep of water mixed with mud with stocks of rice growing in the middle. There were dikes surrounding the rice paddies to contain the water and mud mixture.

It was nightfall that evening when one of our light tanks, a Sheridan about 15 tons in weight, got bogged down in the mud of the rice paddy. We were going to have to pull it out with steel cables and track mounted winches. In our precarious position that night, I was concerned that the hostile Viet Cong were going to start dropping mortar rounds on us. Fortunately, it never happened. SSG Spivey was in the mud much of the night supervising the effort reporting to me by radio our progress while I stayed with the rest of the platoon along with an attachment of about 10 Vietnamese soldiers. I had my hands full supervising these 10 men. Once it got dark, they began to light fires to cook their suppers which included rice dishes mixed with chicken or fish. I was not against them having a tasty meal, but the fires would give the VC a reference point to zero in their mortars or a ready target for a sniper. For everyone's safety, I had to make the rounds telling them in English to put out the fires. If they did not comply, we had to extinguish them ourselves, much to their chagrin as they did not understand our English. As a result, we were not fired on that night and subsequently no one was wounded in our camp or out in the rice paddies winching out our tracks, especially the heavy tank. My personal goal while serving in Viet Nam as an Army officer in the last days of the Viet Nam war was doing my duty, as directed, and insuring that all men in my platoon returned to the United States, alive and unwounded.

The next night my platoon was ordered to set out a mechanical ambush along a trail. It was to be like the type I learned about before coming to my unit. (See the diagram on a Mechanical Ambush set up 3A).

Wisely, we sent a sniper along with the team to spend the night on a hill nearby, to watch and cover the ambush with a sniper rifle in case someone tried to booby trap it with a mine of its own. Early in the morning we heard rifle fire from the sniper. I sent out two tracks to assist our sniper. The VC soldiers that were actually trying to booby trap our MA got away. Yet our sniper told us that he had wounded one of the VC so maybe we could follow the blood trail. We could never find one.

Our brigade commander ordered us to put out two more MA's the following night. We had a soldier in my platoon who set up the mechanical ambushes for us. I told him he needed to do it. But he refused to do it because of the booby trap incident we had in the morning with our previous MA. I ordered him to do it, but he refused. After much discussion with Captain Dan and the soldier, he reluctantly agreed to do it or face a court martial for disobeying an order.

So, about 1800(6 pm) that evening, our two small track APC's, led by me, noisily motored out into to the jungle edge to set up the mechanical ambush along a well-used path. I was quite uneasy with the noise of the diesel engines of our tracks. This was to be a secret operation and the mechanical ambush needed to be set up in silence so anyone walking along the path we selected would not suspect the presence of the MA. Yet, I am sure we could be heard at least 200 meters away. At the jungle edge we found a clearing. I radioed to my two track commanders, "This is fine, let's set it up here." Both of the engines of the tracks were cut off so there was silence. It was now getting dark.

I was sure we were being watched as I could imagine the eyes of VC soldiers peering at us through the jungle forest from underneath their bamboo woven hats. Two of my men jumped off my vehicle with equipment to set up the MA along the path; 3 claymore mines, battery, and connecting wires.

They began by placing the mines about 2 meters apart, each mine facing the path. The silence was nerve racking as I nervously expected the forest to become lit with the gunfire of AK-47's. My men worked quickly and placed the mines where they needed to be, connecting them with copper electrical wires. They began to attach the connecting wire to the detonating battery. The tension at this point became almost intolerable for me, as I was hoping all the mines would not explode when connected to the large electrical battery. This last step in setting up the MA is critical. If an electrical pulse of the battery was accidentally discharged into the mines, they would all explode, sending small metallic pellets in all directions. Fortunately, there was only silence. My two men returned to my vehicle and began climbing up to the top and each gave me a "thumbs up" indicating the MA was ready to explode if someone walking along the path tripped the trip wire, detonating the 3 mines at once.

I then radioed my platoon, "Let's move out." Slowly but cautiously our tracks begin motoring toward the beach about two miles away. The sun had now set, and there was only dark forest. It was the first time during the war that I felt ominously afraid. Minutes later my own track commander radioed me through a radio head set I had on. He nervously communicated, "Lieutenant we are in the middle of a VC mine field!" "Dang it," I exclaimed to myself. "How can you tell"? I asked the track commander who was a veteran of two previous tours in Viet Nam. "We are surrounded by bamboo stakes driven into the ground." Through the darkness I could see the stakes he was talking about each sticking up about a ½ meter in height. I replied to him, "Hell we are going to have to back out the way we came in so we can avoid hitting a mine." At that moment, the tension and fear became almost excruciating for me as I feared the worst.

At that point, immediately red and orange flashes of tracer rounds from automatic gunfire came from the forest about 20 meters away from us.

The ominous silence of that dark foreboding night was broken instantly by the over powering noise of the automatic gun fire. At the same moment AK-47 rifle mounted rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) were coming at us. There were 4 of them rapidly coming toward our tracks. I could visibly see the white propellant of two of the rockets as they went swishing by us, seemingly in slow motion. It was like I was in a dream as I gazed at them. Simultaneously, one rocket hit the sand to the right front of the track I was riding on spraying sand up into my face. I knew the VC had us in the "kill zone" and we could be destroyed quickly if we did not react appropriately and immediately.

My track commander excitedly radioed to my track driver. "Let's get the hell out of here!" Our driver forcefully gunned the idling diesel engine, and our track lunged forward. I was sitting on top of our track as we normally did to avoid the possible explosion from beneath from mines that were in the mine field that we worriedly found ourselves located. The sudden movement forward by the track I was sitting on catapulted me into a large 4 foot X 6 foot opening in the track roof falling down where our ammunition boxes were being stored, breaking loose my commo connection to my communication head set.

I was horrified as I quickly understood I could not communicate with the rest of my platoon. I was now in the belly of the track. I had basically disappeared from my soldier's sight and could not communicate with them. I did not want them to think I was hiding out of fear inside the track. What can I do now I thought. I quickly grabbed a black M-16 rifle laying nearby. I rose upward out of the hole I was in and began firing at the jungle around us. In Army terms this was known as "recon by fire." The intention was to draw fire from any enemy troops hiding in the bushes or trees nearby. This helps to identify were enemy troops are located as they will fire back when they are fired upon. At this time, my track commander told our driver to stop immediately and turn towards the enemy that was firing at us. From the intensity of the gun

fire, I estimated that we had been ambushed by a squad of around 8 Viet Cong or possibly more. The driver obeyed the command and immediately our track rotated right and we were facing in the direction of the ambushers with our large 50 caliber machine gun pointed at them.

Besides personal M-16 rifles, our tracks had a 50 caliber machine gun on a turret and two smaller M-60 machine guns, on each side, each manned by a gunner. As my gunner grabbed the 50 caliber machine gun on our track, I saw that it jammed. Quickly by working on the ammunition feed, he tried to understand the reason for the jamming. I look behind us towards our other track behind us. They had also stopped and began firing in the direction of the enemy. Their large 50 caliber on their turret also locked up and probably also jamming from a misfeed. The large 50 caliber machine guns had long belts of large rounds about the size of a grown man's thumb. They were in large metal containers full of 50 cal. belts below the guns in the large opening below that I fell into when the driver gunned the engine. If these belts did not feed up right to the gun they could jam it. A 50 caliber machine gun was our best weapon, so overpowering were the large rounds fired out of it, they could destroy any bunker or a tree someone was hiding behind.

Malfunctioning weapons are any officer's nightmare. Sitting in the middle of the kill zone, we could not return fire, especially with our large 50 caliber machine guns, which could definitely neutralize any enemy.

Frantically, I began yelling at every one, as if that would do any good. In seconds, both large machine guns begin barking as we returned fire. Though it wasn't comical at the time, my Platoon Sergeant, SSG Spivey, had grabbed his M-16 rifle with his right hand and was shooting it like a pistol. Being such a big man, this was no problem for him. Amidst all the chaos, I reattached my communication line and radioed Captain Dan, who remained with our larger troop on the beach. I quickly explained

to him our situation and I told him that I was going to call in American artillery support. He replied quickly, “Proceed!”

My next action was to call the artillery firebase about 10 miles away. “Fire mission over!” Enemy troops in the open; coordinates,32425724.” Silence. Then “This is firebase ‘Thomas.’ Be advised you are in the gun to target line of fire, request denied, over”. A gun to fire line means that your unit could be in the path of incoming artillery rounds. It could destroy your unit if the rounds fell short or were not right on. My heart sank. Enemy all around us and I could not get fire support. At that point, I really did not know for sure what we were up against. It could have been at least a company of VC or NVA of about 100 men or even more. I thought rapidly and retorted, “Request illumination, over!”

“Roger, rounds on the way. Over.” About two minutes later, rounds of phosphorous illuminating projectiles began exploding overhead lighting up the battleground. Both tracks keep firing with all machine guns working now, much to the credit of my men who reacted quickly and unjammed their guns in the dark. I was thinking to myself, “Why in the hell did they let this happen?” Only recently we were on the shore of the sea nearby to test our guns firing into the empty blue sea. Everything worked fine then. It is paramount that a soldier does not let his weapon jam, his life depends on it. With machine guns now effectively firing on them, it was apparent the VC had lost fire superiority and left the scene. I radioed to my platoon, “Let’s get out of here and head to the beach.” We were able to avoid the mine field. When we reached the beach and the rest of our troop, I briefed Captain Dan on what had happened. He said, “We could see all the gunfire. Your platoon did a good job, Ray. Go ahead and join your platoon and grab something to eat”

Now standing in front of my command track, I knew that it was going to be a long night for me. It was about 1900 (7 pm) in the evening. Most of the men in our troop were eating C-rations, an assortment of meals in

a can like Ham and Eggs or beans and franks, etc. I did not want to eat. I was still on an adrenaline rush from the ambush about 2 hours earlier. As a matter of fact, I felt like vomiting, I was so tense from all the adrenaline. Instead, I took a position in our track, standing in the middle of it as the night approached. My men were all preparing for the night and each would pull a 2 hour shift on guard on top of their respective tracks or Sheridan tanks. They would watch closely for someone, most likely VC, trying to approach and penetrate our heavily gunned perimeter. If they succeeded it could be terminal for us. I never let my soldiers go to sleep while on guard. I slept lightly myself, not wanting some Victor Charlie (VC) or one of his buddies placing a knife to my throat or even worse. If I did find one of my soldiers asleep on their track during their guard duty, I would bring them before my 6 foot 4-inch, 280 pound, Platoon Sergeant Spivey whom they respected immensely. He would reprimand them verbally sometimes for 20 minutes at a time.

We had about 16 tracks in our troop of about 85 men including Captain Dan. The whole contingent of track vehicles were set up in what is known as a "lager position." This type of position goes back to the frontier days of the old West of the U.S. just after the conclusion of the American Civil War. The lager position is a fortified circle of tracks about 10 meters apart. In frontier times, they were covered wagons. At the conclusion of the day's journey for the covered wagon people, the wagon master would yell out, "Lager up!" So, it was with our modern troop of 16 vehicles. At days end of patrolling the enemy terrain, Captain Dan would radio out to the platoon leaders, "Lager up!" Each platoon of about 5 tracks each would get in line and begin to form 1 large circle with about a 50 meter diameter. RPG screens made of heavy wire metal fencing were put out in front of our tracks to deflect any incoming RPG's from the enemy. Then we felt we were secure for the night in the midst of Viet Cong held territory.

The night for me, as expected, was a long one as I processed on what had just happened, and I attempted to recount everything that occurred. The evening of the ambush, I had only been in Viet Nam for 2 weeks. I was in a war zone now and I began to realize that there were people here that hated us fiercely and wanted to kill us. I felt that we were very fortunate to have made it through the ambush alive, especially since the VC had us in the kill zone not more than 50 meters away. Not one of my men were wounded. Then I begin to question myself, "Why were we here in the first place?" Despite all the criticism back in the U.S., were we actually accomplishing something beneficial? Then I thought, was not South Viet Nam still free from the aggression of North Viet Nam and its communist allies with our help? My mind then wandered to the service of my own father in the U.S. Marine Corps on the island of Iwo Jima in 1945 during World War 2. He did not talk much about it as they lost about 2/3 of his Marine company to include his best friend during the 34 days of fighting the Japanese. He was wounded 3 times and received the purple heart. I admired him for his service to our country and the Marine Corps. Over the years my father became my best and closest friend and undoubtedly someone I admired and trusted.

As a young teenage boy, I admired his military service in WW2. I told him I wanted to become a military officer like him. He said in that case I should go to West Point which I did. Deep in thought, I realized that I needed to make the rounds checking on my soldiers to make sure they were awake especially with hostile, aggressive VC around. The long dark night passed slowly. The break of daylight came about 6 am. Everyone in the camp of the lagered tracks and tanks began to stir as we prepared to head out on our next assignment of reconnoitering the area for the presence of VC soldiers. Captain Dan came up to me and said, "Ray, I want you to take your whole platoon (of about 5 tracks and 20 men) to the area where you were ambushed last night." I quickly answered, "Yes Sir," glad to have the long night over and eager to find out if possible who ambushed us, knowing it was VC or NVA soldiers.

I briefed all the men in my platoon on what we were going to do. They were also eager to find out who ambushed us and eager for a fight. Minutes later, all my tracks were running and waiting for the order to proceed. I put on my communication helmet and radioed to each track commander "Let's go."

Then we all drove cautiously inland in the direction to where the ambush occurred. All the track drivers wanted to make sure that there was not a larger VC unit waiting to attack us again. We reached the small village near where we were ambushed after travelling 15 minutes. We saw no Viet Cong or NVA soldiers.

When we finally reached the small village, all the women came out to meet us. Unsurprisingly, there were no men present. Most likely, they did not want us to suspect that they were part of the ambush. The village was about 5 grass huts in a community circle. It was very meager and demonstrated the extreme poverty this war-torn country was living in. The women approached us, some with small children in their arms. The women were all crying with eyes full of hatred and fear. At this point my own track commander radioed to me, "Lt. let's shoot this place up." At the suggestion of this heinous and inhumane act, my mind raced to the recent accusation that the C Company, 11th Brigade commanded by Lt. Calley had killed 109 Vietnamese to include women and children at My Lai about 15 kilometers from where we were now located. I radioed back, "Negative, absolutely not!!" Then I radioed Captain Dan with a status report. I then asked him how we should proceed further. He told me to continue to patrol and return to area next to the beach. I said, "Roger, out."

I never returned to the field. My unit in Chu Lai was ordered to deactivate and stand down and turn over our armored tracks to the Vietnamese Army. It was part of President Nixon's plan of "Vietnamization" of Viet Nam in 1972: the preparing of the country to

fight and win their own war against the Communist North and their allies of China and the Soviet Union.

Da Nang Again

I was no longer a platoon leader in the field commanding an armored cavalry platoon in combat. As an officer, I was now made the Executive Officer of my new Cavalry Troop. I was assigned to Bravo Troop, 1st Cavalry Squadron located near Da Nang like my first unit. I was able to join up with my1970 classmates, Ed and John who were Platoon leaders in my new troop. Along with the Troop Commander, Captain Ernest Bubb, West Point Class of 1969, I was now responsible for administrative tasks for maintaining discipline within the Troop and resupplying our Cav Troop with ammunition, vehicle maintenance parts and hot food daily for about 6 months, usually via helicopter. One of my frequent responsibilities was being the duty officer in charge of our large base camp defensive perimeter during night. This was an important responsibility as the VC would often probe our perimeter to see if there was a weak spot they could attack and gain entrance into the base camp. Since our base camp was home to 4 Cavalry troops when in not in the field, this would be a strategic objective for a VC sapper attack. A sapper attack would happen when 3 or 4 daring, semi-naked VC soldiers with explosive TNT strapped to their body would cut thorough the perimeter barb wire fence under the cover of darkness. These men could become very creative and risk takers in their efforts to get inside the base camp perimeter. I was told once by a duty officer like myself of an attempt by a sapper to get inside their base camp, Camp Eagle near Hue in the north. It was the home of the 101st Airborne Division. The duty officer received a call late one night from guards on the perimeter, requesting his immediate presence at their bunker. The officer quickly went to the bunker and asked, “What’s up?” The men explained, “Sir there is a large dark barrel about 100 meters in front on us and it is moving slowly towards us.” The duty officer said, “What?” having

trouble believing them. He watched it himself and said, “You are right, it is slowly moving towards us. There must be someone in the barrel pushing it along.” The duty officer notified all the other guards in that area of the possible intruder. He said, “On my command fire on the barrel with rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers.” He gave the word, “Fire” and the whole perimeter opened up with a roar of gun fire and bright tracer rounds and exploding grenades. The barrel was no more.

Once sappers penetrated inside a camp undetected, they would move through the whole area, setting off their explosives on valuable weapons or troop sleeping quarters. Obviously, this would create havoc on a base camp and could mean several soldiers’ lives lost and equipment destroyed. To prevent this from happening, sand bagged bunkers manned by 2 to 4 soldiers were placed around the perimeter about 10 meters apart to watch for sappers and repel their attack or any other type frontal attack on the position. If one did occur, the base alarm would go off. Immediately regardless of what time it was, troops would begin pouring out of their barracks and begin running to the Squadron armory or weapons room where all the weapons were locked up. Quickly in file, each soldier would run up to the weapons room door and usually be issued a M-16 rifle with a clip or magazine of ammunition. The soldier was to immediately head to his assigned area of the perimeter and be ready to engage any enemy within site.

As the officer in charge at night, it would be my responsibility to initiate the alarm and then report to the Squadron Commander for additional orders. If quiet, it was my job to travel around the perimeter at night with a truck full of food and coffee to feed our guards to keep them awake and make sure they were not sleeping. Meanwhile I was hoping I did not get shot at by a sniper, as many of the perimeter lights were on so we could see any VC trying to sneak up on our position and they could see us.

I enjoyed making the rounds and talking with our guards. Some excellent conversations would occur after asking the guards, "How are you doing, see any movement of VC out there or are you getting enough to eat?" Often saying this would open a door to discussion with these guards, often many of them were young men. They would relish the opportunity to talk with an officer to express any concerns or complaints. It was a good way to understand what the issues were on their minds, and a good way to determine troop morale. One night after approaching a defensive bunker, one guard named Richard Wood, an Afro-American soldier, asked to talk with me alone as I was leaving the bunker, "Lt." he said, "Can I be honest with you?" I said, "Sure, go ahead Private, what is it?" I recognized he was a soldier from my own troop. Richard replied, "Sir, I have recently returned from Long Bin drug rehab center after testing positive on a urine test for heroin." I knew it was an addictive narcotic drug made from morphine. I knew there were some of our troops often using it by inhaling or snorting a half vial or more for a sensation of euphoria or a release from the daily boredom, tedium and stress while in the field or in the barracks. It left our soldiers constantly needing sleep. At night they could not stay awake especially on guard duty either in base camp or out in the field. This was extremely dangerous for us. Richard went on to say, "Sir it is everywhere. Lots of the guys are using it and the locals are even throwing it over the fence hoping to get a couple of dollars in return." (In some ways it was amazing that almost pure heroin tossed over the fence at around two dollars a vial could sell for around $200 dollars a vial on the streets of a big city like New York). He continued "Sir," I think the Viet Cong are doing this. They want us to get us hooked so we can't be good soldiers and do our job."

I thought to myself, he has a good point. Some power had to be subsidizing this heroin supply to make it readily available and cheap for our soldiers to obtain and use. "Sir they told me at the Rehab center that I would be helped in getting off of 'smack.'" I knew smack was heroin.

"Sir, they also told me that they would help me kick the habit, and if I tested positive again on a urine test after being released clean from the program, I would be discharged from the army with a dishonorable discharge and sent home from Viet Nam." "You know Sir," he continued, "I don't want to go home with this type of discharge. I would be a disgrace to my family, and I could not get a good job. I want to kick this terrible addiction." I said to him, "Pvt. Wood, is there anything I can do to help?" "Talking helps, Sir," he replied. I met with him several times more always at his request. I always tried to encourage him in his struggle against using heroin again. Our cavalry squadron was now being deactivated and all our troops sent home. I was hoping Private Wood would made the transition back to the United States successfully. I never knew for sure as we went to separate units after our unit stood down. I have always had a sense of compassion for homeless men, I have met on the street in America especially when I learned they were Viet Nam veterans. My mind would go back to Pvt. Wood and I wonder how he is doing now – hopefully with a wonderful wife, good job and children.

Going Home to San Diego

Then John, Ed and I were scheduled to board an American passenger jet in Da Nang with other soldiers going home on April 6, 1972. The passenger jet was headed to Travis Air Force Base in California. Bravo Troop was being stood down like my old unit in Chu Lai, 8 months before. I was to be with my classmates and friends again with whom I traveled with to Vietnam the previous summer of August 1971. As we were preparing to leave that day, our hearts were heavy when we learned that one of our classmates Scott had been seriously wounded by a land mine and lost a leg. It was Scott's cavalry platoon that rescued John when his platoon was being overrun by VC soldiers months previously.

I had that memory fresh in my mind when we landed at Travis Air Force base and were quickly shuttled to Oakland Airport for our personal

flights home. Mine was to San Diego. At this civilian airport waiting to meet John, Ed and me was a young, red-haired woman protestor cursing us and pointing her finger at us calling us "You baby killers you should be ashamed of ourselves!" My heart fell to my stomach as I still felt the sadness of what had just happened to Scott days before. It quickly became anger as I thought, "if you only knew lady what just happened to my classmate who had his leg blown off recently in Viet Nam." In haste, I rushed for my flight home to San Diego, glad to be away from the protestors. In the plane flight, I remembered talks with my father about World War II and the heroic welcome home most of the veterans received when they returned from the war. This was nothing like the ungrateful receptions many of the Viet Nam Veterans received. Scott, by the way, did not give up. His amputated leg healed partially, and they saved the other leg which was also wounded. Seizing the initiative, Scott became an army major in the Judge Advocate General Corps (JAGC).

While on the flight from Oakland to San Diego I noticed many of the passengers were young people reading text books. I assumed they were students flying back to San Diego State University or UCSD after spring break. It seemed surreal to me that the day before I was flying across the Pacific Ocean with a plane full of soldiers in uniform. It was quiet in this plane from Oakland. No one was protesting now. I had changed into civilian clothes to avoid another very unpleasant encounter like I just had at the Oakland Airport.

I knew my father, mother and sister would be at the San Diego airport with hugs and kisses to greet me. Then I settled back into my airline seat and began to reflect about my year in Viet Nam. Did I make a difference? I know I met my own personal goal of keeping the men under me alive and no one was severely wounded. The bigger question was, did America's presence in Viet Nam make a difference?

During the time I was there in 1972, the American military helped prevent Communist North Viet Nam from being able to take over South Viet Nam. The spread of communism in Indochina had been blunted at that time.

Two hours later, my flight landed in San Diego. I got off the plane and walked up the "gang plank" adjoining the plane. There waiting for me was my father, mother and my sister Marty, grinning and waving.

Years later at a Convention in Dallas Fort Worth

In 1985, I attended a Christian Convention of about 2,000 people in Dallas Fort Worth. At the start of the convention, the speaker Kenneth Copeland addressed the crowd and began with saying, "Would all the veterans of the Vietnam War please stand on your feet." I stood. "I think all of us here need to thank these men for their service to us and America in the Viet Nam war." The whole crowd then began singing a hymn. I believe it was "God Bless America." The speaker said to the audience, "Please select a veteran near you and start praying for them." Remarkably, as in the Oakland Airport 15 years previously, a young pretty red-haired woman now put her hand on my shoulder and began praying for me. "Lord, thank you for this young man and the service and sacrifice he has made serving our country. Bless him in the name of Jesus.'' No one had ever thanked me before for going to Viet Nam. My eyes began to water as she prayed. Remarkably, the spirit of shame, rejection and condemnation that was placed on me by that young red haired woman years ago in the Oakland, Airport vanished as I felt free of her cursing and condemnation. It was like a heavy evil spirit left me and I was free. Again, I was glad I made the decision to volunteer for Viet Nam, serving my country as many of my classmates did and have done since graduation day in June 1970, and have served in the military and America with honor and integrity, some even giving their lives in combat.

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