

A VIETNAM SOLDIER TELLS HIS STORY

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I was in college and exempt from the draft during the Vietnam War but when I heard that one of my best friends had been drafted and was putting his life on the line, it led me to enlist and join the cause with him. In my mind it did not seem fair that I was exempt and he had to fight. I didn't even know where Vietnam was until April of 1967 when I stepped off the plane that had brought us from Okinawa, Japan to Da Nang, South Vietnam. The air was full of red tinted dust and the heat and humidity reminded me of summer in Houston where I grew up. I was immediately engulfed in what appeared to be chaos with Marines scrambling in every direction, some just arriving and others preparing for departure.

On my second day in Vietnam a jeep pulled up and my name was called along with a couple of others. We were taken to our new home, Hill 34. Hill 34 was the home to 1st ATs (1st anti-tanks). I had been sent here based on my job designation, which in Marine jargon was called my M.O.S. 0353 Ontos crewman. Ontos was an anti-tank vehicle developed at the end of the Korean War. Their use in Vietnam was restricted so as it turned out I was given a new job. My new job was running patrols and ambushes from Hill 34. All Marines are trained as infantrymen first, so I was prepared for my new assignment. I would remain on Hill 34 until early July. During that time we participated in a search and destroy operation called Union II. It was during Union II that I first experienced being shot at and being mortared. This was around the Tam Ky area, south of DaNang off Hwy One. Marine Corps training prepares a Marine for combat, yet the crack of an AK 47 round over one's head or the thumping sound of a 60 mm mortar leaving the tube will give you chills! In fact, nearly 40 years later any sound similar to that THUMP gets my attention!

The patrols off Hill 34 would prove to be a good way to learn the skills needed to stay alive in Vietnam. Our point man was Lance Corporal Reed May. He walked point and he knew the lay of the land and just as importantly he knew the local Vietnamese. He taught me many things by example as well as through our friendship. Sadly, May was killed on a night ambush soon after I

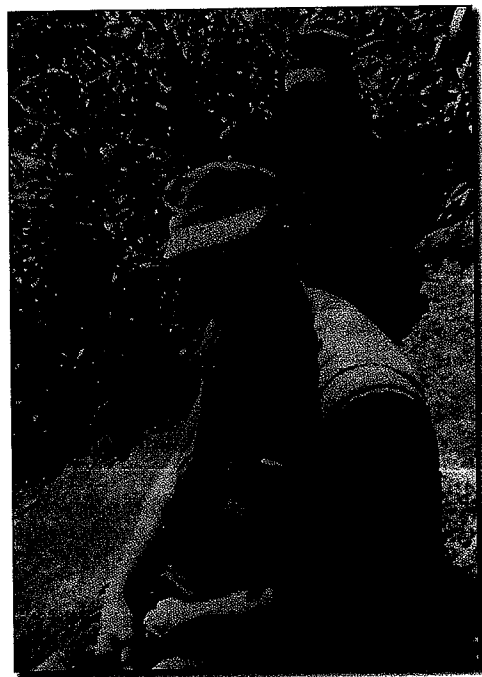
was transferred off Hill 34. I discovered this news on a visit back to Hill 34 several months after I had been transferred. I purposely went there to visit him and was stunned when I was told the news. I was saddened because I knew that he had been due to rotate home very soon. An additional shock was hearing that the word was that "I" had been killed at my new assignment!

Several of us were asked to volunteer for a new program the U.S. Marines designed. It was called a Combined Action Platoon ("CAP"). I was sent to China Beach near Da Nang to a special school for Marines going to CAP. The school lasted two weeks. The training here entailed everything from Vietnamese language, local government structure, sensitivity to Vietnamese culture as well as combat tactics. We were going to "win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese villagers."

Each CAP unit consisted of from 7-13 U.S. Marines, a Navy Corpsman and a platoon of Vietnamese Popular Forces ("PF"). The number of Marines varied depending on how many were killed, wounded or if men were on R & R or were rotating out of the country. The P.F.'s were the lowest group in the Vietnamese Army Structure...many were too old or otherwise unfit for the regular ARVN. Not only were they the least able, they also carried antiquated weapons that were left over from WWII.

The plan was rather simple and from stories I have heard, somewhat successful. However, that would not be my experience. Each CAP unit would be set up adjoining an "isolated" village. Our job at the CAP was a delicate and dangerous balance between "winning the hearts and minds" and being on constant alert and ready to shoot at a second's notice. The CAP would have a two-fold responsibility. First, they would offer protection to the village against attacks by the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Secondly, they would offer medical treatment and also assist with building projects i.e., water wells, schools, etc...thus winning the "hearts and minds of the villagers."

When I left the CAP school heading to my CAP assignment, I was pumped and ready to save these people from the communists. In fact, I wrote a letter to my mother



naively stating to her that the CAP program was the solution to winning the war and how excited I was to be a part of this "new" way of fighting the communists.

My attitude was positive as we traveled down that dusty dirt road called Hwy 7. The truck stopped along the way letting one or two of us off at each CAP we passed. Finally, I climbed from the truck and looked at the Marines who were standing around. I had seen some combat while on Hill 34 but when looking at these Marines, something told me that this was not going to be a good place. I was surprised also at the number of Marines. There were at least 30 to 40. Something was different here. I soon learned that in addition to the CAP Marines there was a full platoon of Marines from Lima 3/7. They were here to help the CAP Marines rebuild. CAP Bravo 2-1 as it was designated, as just having been overrun by the Viet Cong. All members of the CAP had been killed or wounded. I suddenly realized that I was one of the replacements.

I was told that the CAP Marines were divided into teams of two. My partner would be Johnny Marrero from Puerto Rico. He and several others were pulled from Grunt units to fill the void at this CAP. Our first meeting was not a warm one. Johnny had survived for eight months in the field and did not want some new guy getting him killed. I remember the first words he told me, "You just do what I say and walk where I walk, and we will get along." This "bad ass" Puerto Rican turned out to be my best friend. We served together for six months. Since the CAP had been overrun and the casualties so high, we

continued on page 50

A VIETNAM SOLDIER TELLS HIS STORY

continued from page 49

were all on edge. The village of Ami Ba had a population of approximately 300-400. The village was also divided by religion. Part of the population was Buddhist while the other part was Catholic. They did not socialize or like each other. It was a known fact that some of the villagers were either Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. There were no young men in the village, but there were young children and babies. It was strongly believed that the villagers had helped the Viet Cong to over run the previous CAP unit. Most of the Marines did not trust the villagers — so much for winning the hearts and minds. In fact, my personal opinion turned from winning the hearts and minds to one of a survival mode putting me and my fellow Marines first and the idealism of saving the village as a distant possibility.

I was no longer the idealistic student at a CAP school in DaNang but now I was a Marine on full alert trusting no one except a fellow Marine. Therefore, everyone slept peacefully when I was on night watch because I remained on full alert the entire night and unfortunately to this day, I still have trouble sleeping at night. I still feel the need to watch over my shoulder. My attitude and my overt actions became well known in the village, which led to the nickname of "Dinky Dow." It was given to me by the villagers. The definition of Dinky Dow I soon learned was "Crazy," but this attitude kept me alive. Some of the Marines trusted the people and tried to befriend them. Sadly they were not rewarded for their friendships in Da Nang. One incident, which demonstrates how dan-

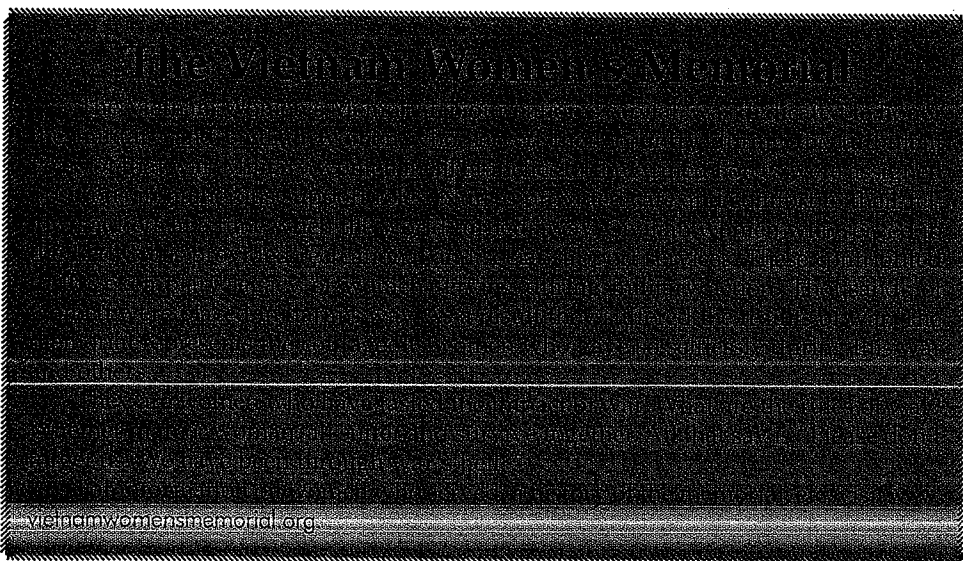
gerous it was to let your guard down, was a case of a sniper firing from a deserted schoolhouse. A hand full of Marines went to investigate and found several children who told them that the Viet Cong were gone and that the area was safe. One of the Marines went into the building and there was an immediate explosion. His best friend, who was waiting outside, immediately went inside to aid him and a second explosion was heard. Both survived, but both men lost their legs. These explosions were command-detonated which meant that the enemy was still in the immediate area and that this was a set up. It meant the children were part of the plan. At this point we realized the enemy was any and all of the villagers, and it was "us against them." The villagers were still beneficial to us as a barometer of our surroundings. As long as we observed normal village activities we knew we were safe. An example of abnormal activities would be the villagers dropping everything and running as we approached them in the rice fields. This told us we were in imminent danger. Therefore, our co-existence, although not meeting the original criteria of winning the hearts and minds, became one of accepting the necessary evil of each other.

January of 1968 ended with a bang — reports of attacks all over Vietnam echoed from our radios. In an effort to evaluate our situation four of us went on a long-range patrol. The patrol went rather routinely until we entered a deserted hamlet or village down by the river. Our patrol immediately knew something was wrong as we entered the village. The ground was well traveled making

it obvious that many people had been there. We found a complete tunnel system and after throwing smoke grenades into the holes, we began finding several openings. I crawled inside one tunnel and instantly knew that it was currently being used due to the distinct (and nasty) smell of Vietnamese cigars and the aroma of food permeating the air. Suddenly, the four of us were highly aware of the danger of our surroundings. We pulled out immediately returning to the CAP unit where we radioed battalion headquarters reporting our findings. The next day a ten man squad arrived to investigate what we found. As that squad entered the village, they were immediately engaged in a furious fire fight. They radioed our unit since we were the closest to them. They reported that the point man was down (which meant he was dead) and they were surrounded by North Vietnamese regulars. Several of us grabbed rifles and ammunition, then headed out to help them. About half way there we received a radio message to halt and to wait for more help from Battalion as this situation was viewed as a trap. Before we knew it we were joined by 300-400 Marines as well as tanks, Amtracs, F4 Phantom jets and helicopter gun ships. The battle seemed to rage for what seemed like hours, but eventually the remainder of that squad was rescued. One estimate by a jet pilot reported that approximately 400-500 North Vietnamese soldiers participated in that fight. Looking back, I realized this was to be the most intense and bloody fighting that I was to experience during my tour, and as history has proven TET was the major turning point of the Vietnam War. Everything changed after that. Even the President realized that the war was not going in our favor. His announcement that he would not run for re-election and that he would halt the bombing in North Vietnam was a shock to us in the field. The war had now become a battle of self survival. No longer were we fighting against the communists. We were fighting to live long enough just to get home.

Marrero rotated back to the states and I got a new partner, Steve Simon from Louisiana. The next three months were intense as VC/NVA activity increased after TET. I was counting the days to my rotation date. My orders to return to America were scheduled for May 13, which was a Friday — a very lucky day for me. I remember boarding the plane at DaNang. Other than the stop in Okinawa, the rest of the flight is a blur. I slept the entire

continued on page 52



The Day that Changed My Life

continued from page 51

I wasn't prepared for what I saw the first time I saw the Pueblo crew. Commander Bucher and his men looked like they had survived a living hell and apparently they had. They were limping, covered with bruises and looked like they had been half starved.

Then they brought out the flag draped coffin containing the remains of Seaman Hodges and, as the Air Force did with all military personnel who died in Korea, conducted a solemn plane side ceremony honoring his service to his fellow man.

In June of 1969, I was called into the Captain's office. He offered me a promotion if I would reenlist for another four years. I told him that I would if I could stay in Korea for another year. When he informed me that my orders read Little Rock Air Force Base, as politely as I could, I told him that I would be returning to civilian life. On July 4, 1969 I was honorably discharged from the U.S. Air Force and began a career in civilian law enforcement that ended June 30, 2005 with my retirement from the Irving, Texas Police Department.

Look out catfish! Here I come.

Texas Stars

continued from page 47

- role did Omaha Beach play in the D-Day Invasion?
3. Explain why you think Gordon traveled to the fighting front aboard a converted grain transport? Explain why it was dangerous to cross the Atlantic.
 4. Detail what type of training Gordon had to have to serve in the Medical Corp. Why would a young man have to be an extraordinary young man to serve in the Medical Corp?
 5. Why do you suppose Gordon, his friends and other young men wanted to join the services and go off to see what fighting a war was like. Analyze what these young troops thought the fighting front would be like and what it was like in reality. Explain what you think war would be like.
 6. Make a list of how war has had an impact on the nation, the state, families and communities.

A Young Soldier in Korea

continued from page 48

dropped below zero. Often "Rok Soldiers" were assigned to our company of troops. A "Rok soldier" was a member of the South Korean army who was attached to a company of U.S. troops.

Shortly after I arrived in Korea and at the battle front, government representatives negotiated a truce and cease fire. The war was over and I felt elation and very fortunate that it had ended without me actually engaged in battle on the front line. Nevertheless, I remained in Korea for sixteen months in order to serve my time. My commander heard that I had experience as a butcher and could cook, so the mess hall is where I spent the rest of my time after the war was over.

My family and sweetheart back home could breathe a sigh of relief. Just knowing their loved one was not engaged in battle against the enemy nor in any great danger of being killed, wounded or maimed. This knowledge made my absence easier to bear. They could hardly wait until the time came for me to return home and counted the days until my service would be terminated.

I finally said goodbye to Korea and my friends stationed there, boarded the *Marine Adler*, another troop transport ship, and returned to Seattle, Washington. Upon my arrival in Seattle, I boarded a train that would take me along the northwest coastline and across the desert to Fort Bliss in El Paso. When I arrived at Fort Bliss, I was overjoyed to receive my separation papers. As quickly as I could, I returned to my family and sweetheart in North Texas. It was certainly a happy homecoming, worthy of celebration

Teaching strategies

1. Compare and contrast how the U. S. fought World II, Korea and Vietnam. Detail how the strategies were different.
2. Explain the significance of the 38th parallel.
3. Create a map of Korea. Locate the 38th parallel. Describe the geography of Korea — its terrain and climate, etc. Explain the impact it had on the war.
4. Create a list of vocabulary words from this article.
5. Analyze the cause and effect of the Korean war.

A VIETNAM SOLDIER

continued from page 50

10 or 12 hours flight home knowing that I was finally safe and could relax my guard after 13 months. In less than 24 hours my life went from constantly looking over my shoulder and being on full alert, to returning to a world I had forgotten and had probably taken for granted. The simple pleasures of a hot shower, a clean and soft bed, and an array of foods to choose from were overwhelming. This was a far cry from sleeping on the ground for almost a year, spending many of those nights in the rain, eating C-rations out of a can, and taking cold showers. When I stepped off of the plane in Houston, my family hardly recognized me since I had lost almost 50 lbs and was drowning in the uniform issued to me before I left for Vietnam. My mother did not meet me at the airport, and when I walked into the house she fell back into a chair and whispered, "You look like a scarecrow!" We could look at each other and see the toll that the last thirteen months had taken on us. It was bittersweet to finally be safe and at home, but I felt as though I had deserted my buddies back in 'Nam. Fifteen years passed before I could even talk about my experience. Anyone who has ever been to war knows that the damage can never be truly measured. Each veteran has their own story and there is no right or wrong from their point of view. Only history will be the final evaluator.

Strategic questions

1. What was the TET Offensive and what was its effect on the war?
2. Compare and contrast how the media treated the war in Vietnam versus its treatment of the war in Iraq.
3. Compare and contrast the reception of returning troops from Iraq versus the way troops from Vietnam were treated.
4. In the Iraq war soldiers are sent as whole units and returned home as whole units. During the Vietnam war soldiers were sent individually and rotated home based on a personal schedule of 12 to 13 months. Compare and contrast the benefits/negatives of these two methods.
5. Analyze the problems faced by Marines living in close proximity to an isolated village with the responsibility of trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the local people while also conducting war activities in the area.