



Vietnam Chronicles

“Je ne regrette rien.”

“LT Shoe”



**At the Infantry Museum in Fort Benning, GA
“Follow Me!”**

**John Shoemaker
First Lieutenant, Third Platoon Leader, Bravo Company,
196 Infantry Brigade, Americal Division.
U.S. Army Headquarters: Chu Lai, S. Vietnam.
1970
shoerfid@yahoo.com**

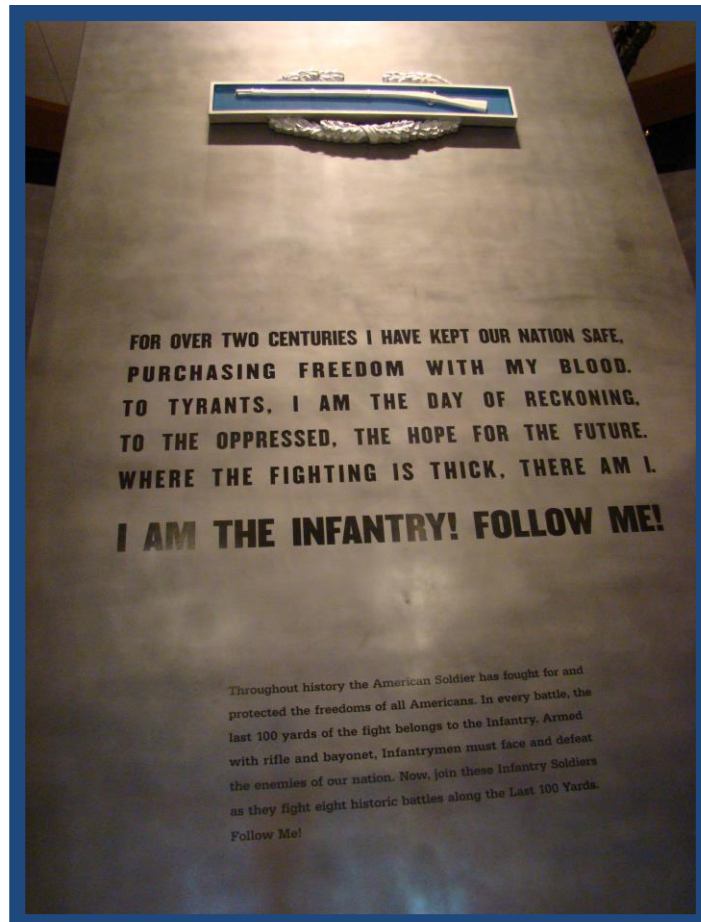
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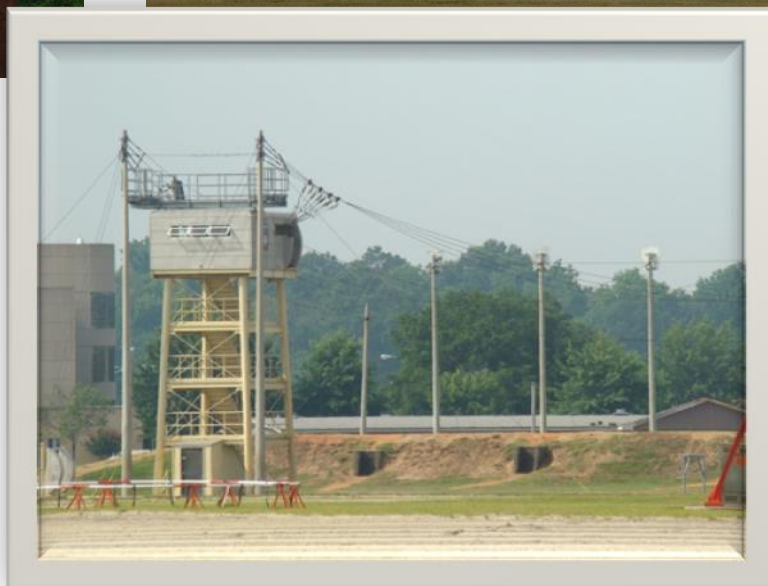


21 year old Author on Right at Officer Candidate School (OCS), Fort Benning, GA



Survivors at the 40th Class Reunion of OCS-66 (20-69) at Fort Benning in 2009





**Jump Towers at Fort Benning for training
in Airborne Paratrooper School**





On Route 1 North from Chu Lai





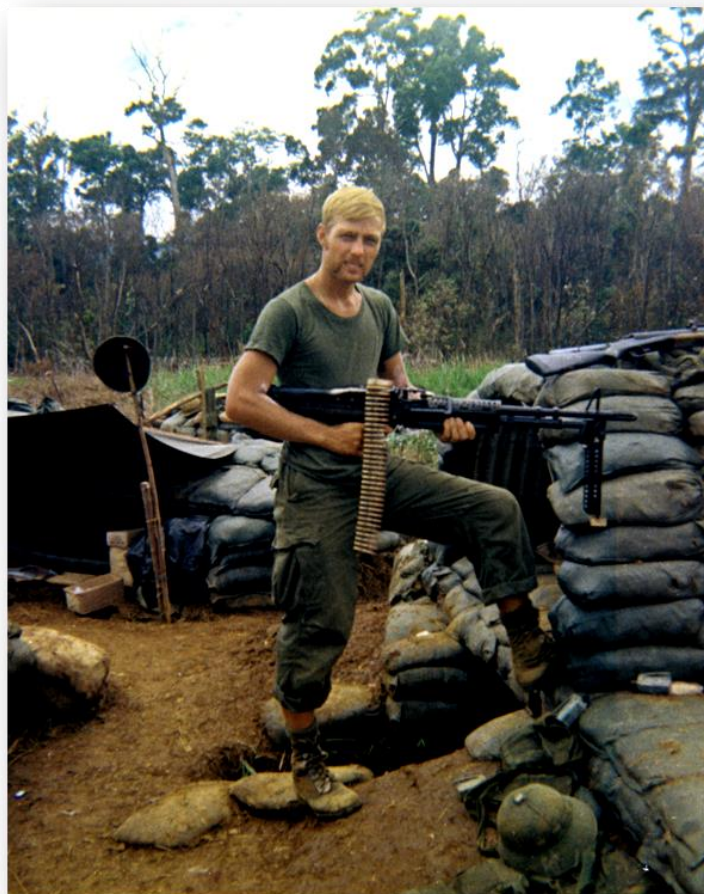
Third Platoon 2/1, 196th Infantry Bde, Kham Duc Airstrip



Airstrike in Mountains near Kham Duc



Author walking away from LT Lee Klein, Company Commander, after receiving orders to leave Kham Duc



Author in characteristic pose on bunker line at Kham Duc Airstrip

A Christmas Gift to Remember

John Shoemaker

It's that time of year again. However one views it, whether with pain, pleasure or as just another task on the "Honey do" list, for me, Christmas will always spark my emotions.

It is a time for giving and receiving gifts.

Our tree is up and decorated in the living room. I just set up our Christmas lights in the front of the house, even as the weather turned to freezing rain. It was classic New England weather: dark, dank and drizzly, as my Mom would say.

I stepped back to enjoy the fruits of my labor in my yard, and as happens occasionally, a helicopter fly's low overhead. It was the familiar "whop-whop-whop" sound that got me. It harkened back to a different time...Christmas away from home.

It was called Hawk Hill, a firebase halfway between 23rd Infantry Division Headquarters at Chu Lai and the old city of Da Nang, South Vietnam. A bump of a hill, it was home to a battalion of infantry, several batteries of artillery and other units, including dozens of helicopters. One of their many important missions was the constant re-supply to field units engaging the enemy in I Corps from the South China Sea to Laos.

The Hueys flew in and out all day and night in a never ending procession...making the signature "whop-whop" sound. No one ever forgets it as you will strain to hear when the Medivac is coming or the Hueys are coming to rescue you from harm's way.

More foreboding is when they crank up the Hueys knowing they are taking you back out to a hot landing zone or LZ to chase the enemy. Over the prior six months, I was on 27 of those combat assaults by helicopter.

Now, as a Company Commander at Hawk Hill for the 2/1st Battalion in the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in the fall of 1970, my mission was to ensure the safety of all personnel by guarding the firebase, circled with concertina and defensive bunkers.

It was a rugged Army base with fearsome artillery, 155mm howitzers, firing at all times of the day and night. There were dozens of bunkers dug deep and covered in sand bags 3 and 4 levels deep to protect against the routine call of "incoming!" when alarms wailed as enemy rockets came smashing haphazardly into the firebase.

In a few of the bunkers, the soldiers would erect a symbolic Christmas tree which may only be a foot or two high with crude decorations and even a strand of lights. This was considered luxury compared to those in the "bush" sleeping in foxholes or on the ground while leeches silently crawled on them.

Late in December, word came down from Brigade that we were selected for quite an honor. Since we had finished several months of bitter combat, suffering casualties but killing hundreds of the enemy, we learned that we will be transported north to Da Nang to see the incredibly popular "Bob Hope Show".

What looked like a very dismal Christmas now had us really pumped up.

Over a hundred of us loaded up for the hour plus trip up Highway One to Da Nang. My worries came back about how to protect against a potential enemy attack, but I would soon learn all would be quiet.

In an open theater filled with thousands of troops, for several hours we watched and yelled and laughed as Bob Hope did his magic with his troupe of courageous performers.

The atmosphere was electric. For a brief moment in time, all was well. Everything seemed right with the world.

We wanted to forget the reality of it.

Right then, the world was at peace and life was full of fun again.

When we got back to Hawk Hill, the Battalion commander ordered a turkey dinner for us. They really tried hard to make it exceptional under the circumstances – and it was.

Later, back in my bunker and on my crudely constructed bunk bed, I immediately grabbed pen and paper to write my wife and parents. It really doesn't seem so long ago that we had no cell phones, Internet, landlines, or Skype on laptops – just pen and paper.

Soon I could hear the “click-smack” of the dozen or so rat traps I set out under my bunk, as I did every night. I detested having them crawl on me. Often I would get two rats in the same trap at the same time. They were relentless.

Drifting off to sleep, I listened to a few Christmas songs on my battery powered, cassette recorder. We referred to home as the “World” as if this wasn't part of the world. I did miss home and all that I was missing back there.

Then it happened, “Bang!”

You could feel the concussion of the explosion as it dropped dirt and dust on me from the roof of the bunker. I can still hear the sound of the projectile screaming on its way to its target.

It was back to reality. I would try to sleep anyway with a bandana over my face.

My celebration was over, but the Christmas memory lingers.

Standing in the cold admiring my home in Natick, I smiled knowing I would sleep in a beautiful, warm bed tonight.

I reminded myself of the incredible gift I received when I left Da Nang on my flight home after a solid year of combat; that is, I had survived.

Now that is something to celebrate at every Christmas.

I will also remember those who were not so gifted.

#

A Day at War, A Lifetime Perspective

John Shoemaker

I stared out the tall terminal windows at the Zurich airport in Switzerland and looked down the long runway and then glanced over to the mountains that surround it. The view offered a perspective that brought back vivid memories.

The announcements were loudly declaring it was now boarding time for Flight 64, non-stop to Miami. My long and arduous business trip was over. It's time to go home.

I settled into my economy class seat with barely room for my knees and or enough room for my shoulders that rubbed against the stranger sitting next to me. He spoke little English. So I smiled and prepared for a long flight. As we lifted off, I stole another glance out the window at those mountains, snow covered and so beautiful. Then I took my Melatonin pills and drifted off to sleep.

These were mountains, but covered in green. I was back in Kham Duc, Vietnam, 1970, near the Laotian border in I Corps and at one of the main entrance routes of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. After two years, our Army battalion had returned to an area that was overrun during the Tet Offensive in 1968.

As the lieutenant in charge of the third platoon, Bravo Company, our mission was to provide security for this old Green Beret air strip. It consisted of one long dirt runway nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains and jungle. I both admired their beauty and feared the potential death that could rain down from them.

While my platoon was out on a routine patrol about a mile out from one end of the airstrip, we heard machinegun fire and explosions behind us. The enemy had sneaked up a river valley and just before dawn attacked the main perimeter guarding Battalion headquarters and the M-105 Howitzers positioned just off the center of the air strip.

Fortunately, one of the guards, only days in country, was awake and alert. He spotted movement and sounded the alarm. Some thought the green "newbie" or "FNG" was just scared and giving a false alarm until the flares showed two dozen enemy soldiers running at full speed toward the barbed wired compound.

All hell broke loose, firing point blank with howitzers using beehive rounds; they caught the enemy in the open and cut them down in minutes. Sappers carrying satchel charges never reached their intended targets.

A few hours later the hulking front end loader, used to clear the air strip of crashed planes and helicopters and smooth the runway, was now using its bucket to collect all the bodies for a mass grave.

I got word from Battalion that the enemy was moving in to shoot down the supply planes, mostly C-123's and Chinook helicopters, as they tried to land with valuable supplies and reinforcements for "Operation Elk Canyon". I remembered the excitement as three platoons rushed to load onto a dozen Hueys for a combat assault into an area north of the airstrip to patrol and confirm if the enemy was moving in on us.

Pathfinders had cleared a section of the jungle so that the Hueys could come in fast, hover momentarily to drop us off, and then lift off from the landing zone with their engines straining at max power. The pilots

scrambled to get out of there before the enemy could react while skimming just over the tops of the massive trees around the edges of the LZ.

Jumping from the vulnerable whirly birds, we quickly moved into the wood line. My "Third Herd", as we were called, was ordered to lead the march into the jungle with the other two platoons following behind us. Thick jungle forced vigilant map study to make sure where I was going at every step as we moved in one long single file. A navigation mistake here would be unacceptable. I felt incredible pressure to triple check each step forward.

At some points we had to hack and chop our way uphill in searing heat to create a path. We welcomed the brief shower that was enough to drench us but we also knew it would feed the jungle rot on our feet, arms, legs and just about anywhere else on our bodies.

After several hours of getting through this thick jungle growth, we reached the main ridge line that ran perpendicular to one end of the airstrip. I gave the signal and we all stopped, got down to hug the ground to take a moment to double check the map, drink water, catch our breath, pick off the bugs and leeches, and then just listen. The musty smells of the jungle floor were intoxicating while we tried to cool down from the incredible heat and humidity.

Tension increased since we could see the jungle thinned out and the top of the ridge line was somewhat narrow, dropping off on either side. The Company Commander ordered me to proceed.

In the line of march, I was third behind the point man and cover man so I could direct movement during contact with the enemy. We strained to see what might be ahead of us, peering out from under those heavy, steel helmets.

Maintaining silence was imperative as we skirted around heavy leaves and branches. It would only be a matter of time and we would find them or they would find us. The loser was that last to know.

Finally, the ridge line widened and the trail turned to the left. We followed it for about 50 yards. Slowly walking off trail to avoid booby traps, my point man spotted movement. Every one dropped. Sweat was pouring off of our bodies and eyes widened to see what would happen next. Faces contorted with questions that would not get immediate answers.

Thinking we might have the enemy to our right flank, with arm signals, the entire platoon of 25 young men did a right face movement and prepared to attack. Hearts pounding, fingers poised, and mouths dry, we moved in unison, just as we had practiced back at Folk Polk and Fort Sherman in the Panama Canal Zone. I thought it was a dream.

After going a few yards, both sides opened up at the same moment. The crack of gunfire was incredible.

Our M-16's and two M-60's laced the jungle in front of us with hundreds of rounds of ammunition. The enemy AK-47's report, with a distinctive difference in noise, sliced the trees around us. You could hear and feel the bullets whizz by us.

Yelling was heard on both sides as things went from silent, cautious movement to all out bedlam. We charged as we heard the enemy voices yelling but clearly moving away from us. We were running and shooting as we yelled. The adrenalin rush was unbelievable.

Within five minutes it was over. I checked to see if any of my soldiers were hit. I was surprised to find everyone made it. Not one wounded or even scratched. Unbelievable, I thought to myself. How lucky are we?

We had rushed around the main bunker and foxholes newly built and most unfinished. With several enemy bodies on the ground in positions holding backpacks and weapons in their hands, it was clear they were totally surprised. They tried to grab what they could and make a run for it. Their equipment was scattered everywhere.

But the big prize was the Russian-made, 51 Caliber anti-aircraft gun we captured. It was erected on a large tripod with metal shoulder supports to guide the gunner and with large gun sights, a smaller version of what everyone saw when "Hanoi Jane" Fonda was sitting in one during her infamous visit to North Viet Nam.

Later, while my men were policing the area of all weapons and gear, I went to an opening in the foliage and my mouth dropped when I looked down from this high ridge to see the air strip in plain view. At that same moment the unmistakable, thundering noise of a very lucky C-123 came in flying just over our heads to land. I peered up to see its belly, almost close enough to touch, pass quickly and drop down to the air strip.

The noise from the pilot woke me up with a start as he loudly warned us to return to our seats and put on our seat belts due to expected turbulence in preparation for our landing. Groggy and hot, I noticed my shirt was stained with sweat and my heart was beating.

The gentleman sitting next to me looked worried and said to me in broken English, "You OK? No problem!"

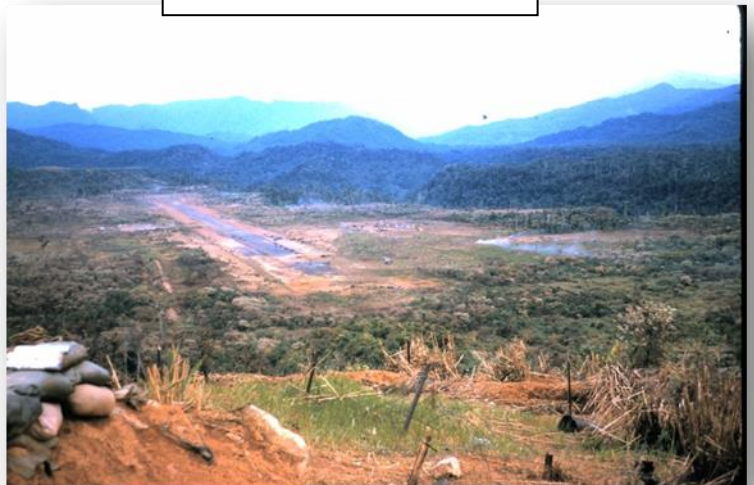
I gave the universal sign of a "thumbs up" with a nod of my head and thought about that other plane landing that day a long time ago.

*I thought to myself, life is all about perspective.
How lucky am I. #*

Supply plane coming into Kham Duc from south.



Kham Duc looking north.



Kham Duc looking north.



Color Me Red, White and Blue

John C. Shoemaker

A jewel of the Boston metro area, Blue hill juts up as one of the highest points on the east coast near the ocean with great hiking trails through areas that make you feel like you are totally disconnected from city life.

With my backpack loaded with 25 lbs of water to give me extra weight and more of a workout, I hit the trails aggressively; especially the “blue” trail.

Carrying a hiking stick instead of an M-16, I smell the trees and my mind wanders back in time...

On this day in July, 1970, the tension was high since my platoon took several casualties from booby traps. We marched single file to minimize chances of setting off a trap. Every step was, well, a matter of limb or life lost.

As the lieutenant, I always walked third behind the point man and cover man. Point looked for booby traps and cover looked for the ambush. I would direct the rest of the platoon as needed.

Leaving the paddies, we entered a small village and caught some Viet Cong sleeping. When warned, they jumped and one almost ran into me as he came out of a grass hut with his AK-47.

Both startled and surprised, we faced each other only for a split second and then he jerked sideways and ran. I yelled and then saw first-hand what bullets do to a human body.

He could not have been more than a teenager, but then again, so were nearly all of my soldiers.

Leaving a collection of huts and coming into a small village, dogs started to bark - warning the enemy, so we had to kill them. After we did a recon of the area for hours, we came back to that same village where a feast was being held. I looked and there they were, in large pots, the dogs were being boiled.

At the top of Big Blue, you can see the skyline of Boston and the Atlantic Ocean from the stone Watchtower. You can also see the “Red” and “Blue” marked trails branching out from the top. And yes, a “White” trail too.

A barking dog greeted me as I came down the Blue trail. Passing me was a young couple with their Golden Lab jumping around and quite excited. Sniffing me, he wanted to jump up and kiss me. I smiled and we all laughed. I also remembered...

A German shepherd was assigned to my platoon. He had been in training for more than a year with his dog handler before coming to Vietnam.

This was his first patrol. It was thick jungle in a free fire zone. We were sure to make contact with the enemy – not Viet Cong, but NVA Regulars.

In just a few hours of cutting and slashing, we uncovered or rather stumbled onto a trail that led into a wide dirt road carved like a tunnel through the triple canopy jungle. It was amazing. I stopped and realized we were on it... the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A bolt of electricity went up my spine.

Instinctively, I ordered one squad to cut through the jungle on my right flank as I led the rest of the platoon slowly up the road. On our left, the land dropped off sharply. Some moaning and groaning was expressed due to the heat and aggravation of this squad taking the “hard path”. I would have none of it this day.

We were all alert and nervous, our shepherd in the lead, followed by the handler, my cover man, me and the rest of the platoon behind me. Unfortunately, our dog did not smell the North Vietnamese soldiers lying in the road at the crest. The wind was drifting away from us. Little did we know what was about to happen.

Ambushed, the AK-47 automatic fire blasted our ears and broke the silence; all hell broke loose!

With bullets piercing the air only inches from my head as I hugged the earth, I could feel their pressure and hear them as they passed over me. Hit, our dog was yelping as it disappeared down the hillside into the jungle.

His handler was shot in both legs. He was screaming. I yelled back telling him to fire his weapon. He did – straight up in the air as he could not roll over and aim. That may have been enough.

The cover man, Private Larry Gatliff, was lying in front of me motionless. I thought maybe the enemy will come down on top of us. I fired over Larry to let the enemy know we were still here and ready for them.

OK, I was bluffing...and scared.

But the enemy thought they had it all worked out. Several of them broke from the road and ran to my right flank thinking that they would hit us from the side. They were running so fast that they did not see my squad waiting for them. Obviously alerted, they cut down the overconfident enemy easily.

We put grenades under their bodies and pulled the pins in case they were moved.

Later, I then put Larry into a chair at the end of a long rope suspended by a Medivac through the jungle ceiling down hundreds of feet to the precise location where we loaded Larry and then the dog handler. His last pleas were for me to find his dog.

I knew Larry would not make it. He had taken a bullet through his forehead in the first volley. He never knew what hit him.

Later that evening, we could hear a different kind of fireworks as the grenades went off.

I just could not risk looking for the dog.

It's a totally different day on Big Blue in 2011. This is a special time to remember all those who fought for a country that has changed the course of humanity. They took it from the hands of dictatorships and monarchies to create and implement a new idea: freedom under the "red, white and blue".

I show my colors every day. #



Machine Gun tracers from the Quad 50 over the southern end of Kham Duc Airstrip while Artillery is brought in by air.



• PETER P HUK • DAVID E
 • FRANCIS E MAUNE • RICHARD M PEARL • DO
 • GARETH M SILVER • MARVIN L WAG
 • PHILLIP G WRIGHT • JOHN M
 • MARK G DRAPER • DANNY JOE FRIES • L
 • GEORGE R KELLEY • LYLE A K
 • STEVEN A OLSON • WILLIAM A PAHISSA • THO
 • KENNETH W SLAUGHTER • LAUREN W S
 • LARRY A GATLIFF • PAUL L HAINING
 • MITCHELL JONES Jr • KENNETH P TANNER • WILFR
 • ROBERT L BOLAN • HAR
 • EDWARD F GLENN Jr • KENNETH D H
 • WILLIAM L SAWYER Jr • GREG D STEVE
 • WILLIAM A FAUGHT Jr • TIMOTHY M GREELEY • P
 • SALVADOR LEAL Jr • DONALD R SIMON
 • ROBERT W WARD • J V WATSON • MARTIN
 • WILLIAM D CHURCH • WALTER W HAMILTON •

Larry Gatliff above, left;
 Side: Panel 8W, Line 46 Vietnam Memorial Wall and Movable
 Wall, Natick, June 2011.



Larry Gatliff at age 10.



Natick Movable VN Memorial Wall, June 2011.

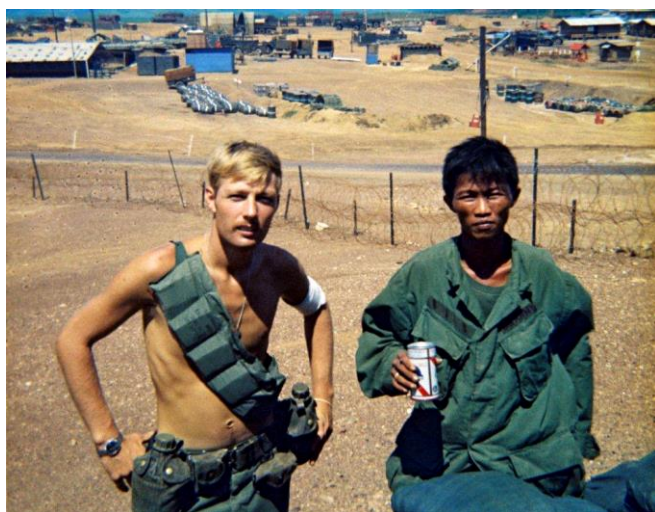
“Reflections on Pegan Hill”



Soldiers of the 3rd Platoon, 196 Inf Brigade, photo taken at Kham Duc near the Laotian border in I Corps.



For a month, this was my bed in Kham Duc, South Viet Nam.



Author with the Platoon's Kit Carson Scout, "Toe" on forward firebase Hawk Hill near Chu Lai.



Catching Hueys at Tam Ky for another combat assault.

War, Luck and Survival

John C. Shoemaker

It is a classic New England day with full foliage, birds singing and deer roaming, I feel alive and thankful. It is called Pegan Hill in Dover, MA; a very small, hidden piece of protected land on a bump of a hill overlooking a farm. Its hiking trails pull me this day, as it does many days, to escape with the sights and sounds of nature.

Hiking solo through the thick forest on narrow trails takes me back in time.

Seems like yesterday, in 1968, I was peering down from my dorm window in Tower 1 on the campus of UMASS, Amherst, at the concrete plaza below, moments after a student had jumped from the 22 story building.

Another suicide.

Pressure from studies? Nahhh, probably the threat of being drafted – war playing on nerves.

Over at the Administration Building, a sit-in rages on with students who invaded the offices in protest of the war. Routine for many campuses around the country, many were liberal arts students. Nearly all were anti-war. I was an exception.

It was a tumultuous time; more so than today.

I enlisted in the Army in Springfield, MA, to be an infantry officer. This was at a time when Walter Cronkite was reporting 500 plus casualties per week for years. Vietnam exploded with controversy and incredible violence on TV screens every day.

After infantry training at Fort Dix, Fort Polk and Fort Benning, there was OCS and Airborne school to be a paratrooper and officer.

Eighteen months later, what happens? I am sent to Fort Sherman, Panama Canal Zone, for more jungle training.

“Enough of this stuff, send me to war,” I said to myself. “After two years, I’m sick of all this training. I’m ready.”

I am walking up the trail at Pegan Hill and I seem to have lost myself in the memories of a 22 year old gung-ho, well meaning, adventurer willing to go in harm’s way. I walked more slowly as I catch deer grazing. Even now, at 67, I love to hunt...aiming with my camera.

I step in some mud and my mind wanders back...

Somewhere southwest of Danang, I see myself in a single file as we crossed a rice paddy, following immediately behind a soldier carrying a radio on his back and an experienced lieutenant in front of him. “In-country” for just a few days, this was my first time out. I was supposed to observe and learn the ways of this platoon. The lieutenant, with nearly 3 months in-country, was well respected because he was still alive.

Two hours after we left the top of “Hill 252”, as we slogged through the rice paddies with dark brown water filled with leeches and other nasty things, I was almost overwhelmed with the thought that I am REALLY here – South Viet Nam. No more TV news reports. I’m seeing it live.

A nice clear day, I enjoyed one moment as if I was a tourist. The paddies stretched far ahead of us to little islands where small villages housed local farmers. With full pack and gear, and my trusty M-16, I am working hard to breathe as sweat drips off my nose in blistering heat and humidity.

At that moment, all I remember was a loud, crushing explosion.

I lifted my head up slowly from the filthy water to hear the screaming of the radio man and the lieutenant just a few feet from me. The radio man in front of me stepped on a “booby trap” and the direction of the explosion went forward and hit the Lieutenant in the back, neither had much of their lower legs left.

Once the Medivac helicopter took them, the ranking sergeant, named “Red”, turned and looked at me and said, “now what do we do lieutenant?”

Thoughts raced... “How am I going to get out of this alive? Am I good enough to protect my soldiers? Welcome to Vietnam.

For the next several months, I learned real fast. The Army’s training was excellent. I was better prepared than I thought. You learned or you died. What counted was having both competence and luck.

At the top of Pegan Hill, I decided to go off trail...like we did that day in Kham Duc.

I was the lead platoon for a company of soldiers searching for NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regulars at the approach to an old Green Beret airstrip just a few miles from the Laotian border where the Ho Chi Minh Trail entered S. Vietnam. Years ago, it was overrun and nearly two dozen Americans were killed and their bodies never recovered. We came back to get them. But the enemy was all around us.

Like this Pegan trail, we were walking single file, deep in the jungle not far from where our planes were landing with supplies, one of my “grunts” stopped and gave me a signal. The NVA were on our right flank. I directed my platoon to turn right and in a neat line all 23 of us crept slowly off trail towards the enemy movement.

Gunfire erupted; yelling, screaming, we rushed forward firing our M-16’s. The M-60 machine guns thundered. The enemy returned fire with AK-47’s. Blood trails all around.

We surprised them completely. Leaving their food, rucksacks, supplies, and weapons, we were able to capture a very valuable 30 mm anti-aircraft, shoulder-fired, heavy machine gun on a huge tripod. They were just setting it up.

As we secured the area, a lumbering C-123 cargo plane came in for the approach just over our heads. That pilot and his crew would never know what just happened.

At the top of Pegan, I could barely see the sky through the tops of the trees. Springtime in New England is all about re-birth.

I could hear a distant helicopter...my mind wandered again.

Escorted by Cobra gunships, our Huey’s swooped down towards our landing zone. We made dozens of these air mobile assaults into enemy territory and wished this was not a “hot LZ”.

Incredibly, we found ourselves jumping off into a “cornfield”. I motioned for everyone to head to the wood line and take cover. An apparent food source on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we were there to recon the area.

With my platoon silent and wide-eyed, mostly teenagers, they hid in the jungle while I used my binoculars to scan the opposite side of the landing zone. On the hill overlooking the zone were soldiers walking around with

machine guns and full packs. I desperately called Battalion reporting we had ARVN's (South Vietnamese soldiers) across from us.

Over my radio I remember distinctly the response: "Negative on the ARVN's, attack. Attack!"

Knowing we were 10 miles from the nearest U.S. unit, across impossible terrain with no roads, I thought if we took on more than we knew, we could be killed or worse, captured. So, I called for gunships to strafe the hill.

U.S. firepower showed its muscle blasting the hill with 20 mm cannon, grenades and machine guns.

As the Cobra's were taking the strafing runs, my platoon followed the perimeter of the corn field and advanced up the hill until we saw them. We fired and raced as fast as our feet could carry us until we heard, "fire in the hold!" We dove for cover and grenades went off. Up again, running while firing. At their foxholes, we were firing point blank into the NVA soldiers hiding deep inside.

It was the ultimate adrenalin rush. Electricity sparked between my finger tips. Never would I feel like that again.

Best of all, we suffered no casualties this day.

We rolled their bodies down the hill, took over their foxholes and prepared to spend the night. Expecting a counter-attack, no one slept.

The next days and weeks were to prove even more challenging with more stories, good for another day of hiking and reflection.

Back to my SUV parked at the Pegan Hill trailhead, I unloaded my backpack. I could only thank God that I survived and went on to have two children with my wife I have known for nearly 50 years, and now have five grandchildren.

I know many did not get that chance. I did. How lucky am I?

Well, I think about it about every day.

Yes, every day, not just Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas or Memorial Day.

#



In a Free Fire Zone, villages are found in grass "hootches".

Hide and Seek at War

John Shoemaker

It was the kind of beautiful, warm summer day in New England that made you feel good about life.

Walking across the little park in the center of Natick, MA, to the Post Office, I noticed some young boys playing hide-and-go-seek. Two of them sought a hiding place behind the Civil War monument, crouching down and whispering.

They were sweating from running all around. Boys having innocent fun, I thought.

Their parents were nearby in deep conversation with friends, hardly noticing their children's antics.

I stopped, sat on a bench, smiled and drifted off to another time. It was the summer of 1970.

We were dropped from Huey's into a "free fire zone" to patrol where we were free to shoot anything that moves. It was "injun" territory where the Viet Cong roamed freely. I was in Vietnam only three months but already the most experienced platoon leader in the Company, given the short life span of infantry Lieutenants in I Corps, the northern sector of South Vietnam, assigned to the Americal Division, 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Most of the casualties had been to booby traps or explosive devices with trip wires that could easily take off your legs or more in an instant. They seemed to be everywhere.

It was also the area just a few miles north of My Lai where the infamous massacre of civilians took place. I was at Ft. Benning in training when Lt. Calley was preparing for his court-martial. The controversy was fresh on my mind.

Under the hot sun and high humidity, we were fortunate not to be in the infested paddies and were moving swiftly over solid ground. We moved in single file. This wasn't the jungle terrain I spent the last month patrolling, but still it had exotic plants for this Bostonian.

We came upon a collection of grass huts and approached cautiously; our senses were on full alert. We were told to expect that anything that moves can be considered the enemy, but use common sense.

Soon we saw little kids, some small goats and then some women came out to greet us. Lots of chatter was heard, not that I understood anything they said.

Then some yelling and one of my soldiers held his M-16 on an old woman. A younger woman was pleading but we could not understand her. Finally the old woman pulled up her shirt to expose a large bowl tied to her with a piece of cloth that wrapped around her body.

"A grenade?" my Sergeant yelled.

Slowly, she unwrapped the bowl and showed us what she was hiding. It was a two foot section of her intestines jutting outside her stomach wall. It was a months-old injury from shrapnel, we were told.

I asked our medic to do what he could but we had to move on. He just shook his head in a futile attempt to help her. What bothered me was that there were no men around.

We could not leave the area too soon, I thought, and several hours later with night fall, we set up a night-logger. I worried that the women might tell their men about our location so I doubled the guards that night. Finally we got a chance to have some C-rats or, for the lucky ones, LRRP meals.

The next day we continued our trek - over hills, through thick brush, avoiding cow paths, it was tedious. We were alert for booby traps and wires, ambushes, or the stray enemy soldier that sees us before we see him. But we knew it would be only a matter of time before all hell would break loose.

I walked third in the line of march. Suddenly our point man dropped to his knees and opened fire.

His cover man, the second in line, opened up as well firing into the bushes.

I yelled to stop. I did not hear the unmistakable sound of the AK-47.

The two soldiers went with a squad leader to check out the two "Viet Cong in black pajamas" seen running into the bushes.

They came back with blood drained from their faces, totally dismayed and one in tears.

It turned out to be two little boys dressed in black pajamas apparently hiding, maybe playing some kind of game or tracking us for the enemy. We would never know.

I thought, "Where the hell were their parents? Why are they out here?"

The two soldiers were distraught but we had to move on. Rotating others into their positions, we marched on and finally came to a river. Yet again, more yelling erupted from behind me and shots rang out.

We were lucky, we saw him first. We cornered him amongst some rocks before surrendering. He was poorly equipped but had the requisite AK-47. One of my soldiers asked me if we could just kill him on the spot.

Surely he was responsible for setting the booby traps that killed and maimed so many over the past few months.

Instead, I called for a helicopter to airlift him back to Division. "Let them figure out what to do with him," I said.

Swiftly a Huey came in fast, we loaded the prisoner and off he went. None of my guys were happy about it. I never heard what happened to him.

On we went for several hours following the river. While walking alongside some brush with thorns that was between us and the river, many of us could clearly hear the scrambling in the thick bushes beside us.

It really startled us.

"Ambush?" Everyone dropped to their stomachs and pointed their weapons at the bushes; more rustling and then a splash. Some fired, then more joined in.

"They're getting away, jumping into the water!" one yelled.

My M-60 machine gunner, the "Pig Man", opened up blindly and tore the bushes to pieces.

I yelled cease fire and listened...then someone said, "Oh, no, looks like we got him alright...it's a freaking huge water buffalo!"

After laughing and feeling a bit foolish, we learned that someone had hidden the buffalo in a pen next to the river, completely hidden from view even as we were just a few feet away.

Well, it did break the tension a bit.

Now I was worried again as all the firing could be heard for miles. We moved quickly and several more hours later, I selected another night position in a triangular batch of trees near an open field that would give us good visibility on two sides. At the other side that led into the forest, I ordered that our own booby traps, Claymore mines connected to trip wires, be set up on two possible approaches to our position.

Sure enough, about 4 am, our reflexes jerked us violently when we heard “Kah-BOOM!” as one of the Claymores exploded sending steel balls into the kill zone. No one moved but all strained to see what would happen next. Already exhausted, sweat dripped from my nose.

Waiting for daylight, we learned that we got two enemy soldiers trying to sneak up on us. Blood trails proved other havoc we inflicted on those who would sneak up on us. They lost the game this time.

We needed to get moving again, less the enemy can zero in on us. This game was relentless.

I remember thinking that same day... I still have nine months to go.

This was the daily grind of the game of “hide and seek” that we played day after day.

With this game, if you won, you got to go home alive.

#

Missions were frequently launched from Tam Ky. More than a dozen Huey's carried troops to Kham Duc at the start of Elk Canyon.



After minor surgery in Americal Hdqtrs base hospital in Chu Lai, Lieutenants were in short supply. I was sent to Tam Ky for our next mission to Kham Duc.

The Ghosts of War

We met on the battlefield at Kham Duc. They lost.

Exhausted, I laid back in my flimsy hammock to rest. My rifle lay across my stomach. I remember marveling at just how dark it was as I lifted my hand in front of my face and could not see it. It was pitch black.

As I slowly closed my eyes, BAMMM! It was so close and so LOUD.

I rolled out of the hammock in an instant. Clutching my M-16, I tried peering out in the darkness trying to see anything and seeing nothing.

"Do not move, I said to myself, "don't even breathe."

Our platoon had spent the entire day slowly hiking down a valley, across a river and up the other side. It took over six hours in the heat. We sweated every inch as we knew we were only a few meters away from the Laotian border and the NVA were known to be crossing through this area as they came south from North Vietnam through Laos to hit our positions in I Corps.

Their trek had to be grueling. Months on the move through mud and jungle without all the support and supplies Americans received. They mostly walked for hundreds of miles. They also had to dodge attacks from the air, especially those invisible but death-from-above B-52's. Then there was the disease, the bugs, lousy food, rubber tires for sandals, and no Medevac's if you got hit.

There were just so many ways for them to get sick or die.

Waiting for those who made it were Army and Marine infantry platoons on the search for them.

Platoons like mine. "The Third Herd", Bravo Company of the 2/1st, 196 Infantry Brigade, Americal Div.

When we crossed the river and reached the top of the valley on the other side, we could see the trail. Well used and wide enough to prove that this was a major infiltration route.

It was getting dark so I organized a circular night position just off the trail, in thick jungle, and ordered the placement of "claymores" on either side of us along the trail itself. Some had cleared shallow holes around the perimeter or hung hammocks to stay off the jungle floor.

Claymores are very powerful anti-personnel mines used with a trip wire that ran across the trail. Anyone coming down that trail was sure to trip it and the results were devastating.

Again, another explosion! BOOM!

Needless to say, we did not sleep that night. We felt like the jungle was crawling with the enemy coming all around us. Controlling fear is not easy.

This was just one night in a tour that lasted one year, 1970.

The next morning we learned we had caught two NVA soldiers by surprise. Fully loaded with equipment and weapons, the unsuspecting enemy soldiers ran into our "Mike-Alfa's" or mechanical ambushes.

Searching their bodies, I was struck by what I found. Pictures, drawings, poems all showed that they were just like us in some ways. They missed home.

The pictures were just a few of the many faces of war: young, full of energy, ambition and pride.

The drawings were penned with ballpoint ink, mostly blue ink, but some with color. The fancy poems and pictures were done on thin, fragile strips of paper.

To this day, I don't know all what they mean.

In pensive moments, I sympathize for their families knowing their bodies never made it back home.

I kept their pictures and those of many more that would meet the same fate in the months that followed. For this was our mission – to stop them in their tracks. We knew if we did not get them, they would surely not hesitate to get us. We were all in a race to kill or be killed.

When I look at these faces, a feeling comes over me that they wasted their lives.

But then, when you see the names of our American soldiers on the Vietnam Wall, like the Movable Wall recently on display in Natick, MA, you trust that ours did not waste their lives.

One fact remains, they all died young and away from home on a dark trail to nowhere.



The many faces of war, up close and personal...these enemy soldiers met their fate in the summer of 1970.

Pen Drawings by NVA Soldiers on Ho Chi Minh Trail



Đào đi!

Suối mây hôm nay đào lên dưới
rừng xanh nước mát, thì trời mùa
chiều nay còn chảy về thêm Đào
sét lạnh trên bầu mây gối đầu

Còn lại còn theo lời rồi quên
đời bên sông, gao ngạo nhìn lên
chúng in! Chàng như con neo mồi
phương lòng, tìm đường đời anh đến

Đào đi đi rồi. Sao Đào đi!
Mưa vẫn đang, dạt sóng xanh tới
mười năm sông thẳm, rồi ngày hôm
rút Đào lên thuyền, thấy Đào lên

Chợt biết hơi vùng ngớt rồi
thêm cho ai nữa, thì hơn nhau
con đầu lòng. Đào đi hôm nay
quanh mặt hồ in mây trắng bay

Có như đầu lòng được thành thời
nam cảnh, bất động, thì thường đời
Đào đi! tìm Đào, thỉnh thoảng thì
còn cái non sông, rồi hiệp, long trời.

Đào không bước đầu, Đào chỉ đầu
mới lo đến nước, rồi mới đầu
chỉ lo đến nước, rồi mới đầu
cho hôm nay và cho nước sau.

Đào sông như đào đất, đào
áp dụng ngôn luận, rồi sông hơn
tự do cho mỗi đời, nó là
nước để con chó lựa lông già

TÂM SỰ

Bên hồ và sao đất mặt này
ngay đến bờ, lên rồi tình này
hồ long, long, rồi không bay, long,
ganh, nồng, đường, xa, chẳng, chuyễn, bay

Có lẽ ngàn năm đã đến đây
mới từng xưa để giáng, hôm nay
thế đất, như một, rồi, thì, long, tâm,
quên, rồi, từng, chẳng, rồi, rồi, bay

Chợt, hôm, ngày, này, có, thời, rồi,
ngành, rồi, rồi, rồi, rồi, rồi,
thế, giới, rồi, rồi, rồi, rồi, rồi,
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Xo' Hồn 57



“War and Fire in the Mountains”

John Shoemaker

It happens every year. Memorial Day yanks me back in time.

For a soldier, if you must die, let it not happen in a helicopter or plane.

“I can’t fight back if I’m stuck in a tin can. At least give me a fighting chance”, I remember wishing to myself.

Last summer, I heard the news again and it was like a bolt of lightning striking the top of my head and reaching down into my stomach leaving me feeling just sick. It was déjà vu.

On August 6, 2011, an Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter carrying our finest war fighters in the mountains of Afghanistan was shot down and all 30 American lives were lost. SEAL Team 6 had 22 of its elite members on board that aircraft.

It was not the first time and it will not be the last.

This is a story with a twist.

We had stormed into the Kham Duc Valley with a vengeance. It is just east of one of the main infiltration routes, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, into South Vietnam from Laos. Helicopters filled the skies. More than a battalion of US Army and other units from the South Vietnamese Army combined to reestablish our presence in an area lost during the Tet Offensive. Over a thousand men came armed to the teeth and looking for some “payback”.

It was an area full of jungle, mountains, rivers and enemy soldiers.

Most important, we came to retrieve the remains of some Special Forces, “Green Berets”, lost during a bitter battle when 120 allied soldiers were reportedly surrounded by 5,000 of the enemy.

After a couple months, our mission was accomplished. We had retrieved the remains of our fallen Green Berets and conducted numerous patrols resulting in skirmishes with the NVA with lopsided results. Scores of the enemy were killed. One attack by sappers trying to hit Alpha Battery with their howitzers resulted in 16 enemy dead in just a few minutes.

The bucket of a front-end loader manned by the Seabees repairing the airstrip was filled with the enemy dead and buried them in one mass grave. Dozens more would follow the same fate.

Mission complete, it was time to leave.

I was a platoon leader of one of the two platoons of the 196th Infantry that was guarding the old Green Beret airstrip as other units were loaded up and flown out by helicopter.

We were all moving to a new firebase called “LZ Judy”, 49 miles southwest of DaNang. It was a small mountain with most of the top cleared off and bunkers dug around the perimeter and the howitzers in the center. LZ Judy had a commanding position overlooking the valleys below.

Even as a paratrooper, I never liked getting on a helicopter of any kind, especially a Chinook. Having made over 26 combat air assaults into enemy territory in my first five months, I just could not shake the helpless feeling getting into them. The worst is during take-off and landing, knowing it could be your metal coffin.

Finally, our turn came to leave. All we could do was scramble as fast as possible when the rear tailgate lowered, get on board, and pray it would take off IMMEDIATELY. No delay. Everyone yelled, "Go. Go. Go!"

I am sure we were all praying to ourselves to get "lift off" before the enemy gets a chance to shoot. Then you chant to yourself, "climb, baby, climb, fast, faster!"

Right behind my departure was the last platoon to leave Kham Duc. They were boarding their Chinook, along with a mortar squad, when it was frantically reported that some claymores and other explosives were left behind by mistake. Their Lieutenant took responsibility and went back for them.

Not to delay departure, he told the pilot to take off without him. Another small helicopter hovering above would surely come down to get him.

I heard the chatter on the radio. A courageous decision, I thought, as he was virtually the last American soldier on the ground with enemy all around.

We were second last to leave Kham Duc and second last to arrive at LZ Judy.

As the lumbering Chinook, heavily loaded with my Platoon and supplies, slowed for the landing on the top ridge line leading up to LZ Judy, it lurched with its backend dropping down and then slowly it levels off and lowers downward with the huge twin propellers noisily slicing the air.

When the rear door opened, we raced out as fast as possible even while loaded down with packs, weapons, ammo and other gear.

Whew! We made it. Relief sweeps over us. In the distance, we could hear the song by Bobby Sherman, "Julie, Julie, Do you love me?" blaring from a portable radio. We substituted the words with Judy, Judy...

We started moving up Judy slowly in the searing heat and humidity carrying our loads.

Right behind us was that last Chinook coming in to unload the platoon - without its Lieutenant.

I turned and waved vigorously at my guys to move up so we would not create a gaggle. I watched in awe as the huge inbound Chinook slowed, straining under its load, and trying to level off for the landing.

Then it happened.

The tell-tale "rat-tat-tat-tat" of a lone enemy's AK-47 automatic weapon firing two dozen bullets directly into the belly of the Chinook made it stumble before dropping backwards and capsizing just a few hundred feet below us.

When it hit the tree tops it exploded in a massive fireball. The twin rotary blades broke off and hurled at us like boomerangs, killing and wounding several trying to get up the slopes of LZ Judy.

One man – the co-pilot, Eric Reid – was blown free of the wreckage before the huge helicopter exploded. He rolled down the side of the mountain and lay unconscious and was later rescued.

In a little bubble-like helicopter we called a LOACH, trying to catch up and carrying the platoon's Lieutenant, he peered down to see that his entire platoon was gone. A huge plume of smoke rose high off the mountain. I could only imagine his thoughts.

31 died that day, August 26, 1970, on LZ Judy. Mortars on board kept exploding and the flames were so intense that we could not go near it for the rest of the day and through the night.

Immediately, all hell broke loose, with the Chinook explosions shaking the ground, Chinook pieces landing all around us, the Battalion's howitzers opened up with rapid fire to rake the mountain side hoping to get the suspected sniper.

But it was over. Some of us were very lucky. The realization of what just happened hit me hard and lingers still.

It would be the fourth deadliest crash for Americans in the entire Vietnam War.

It was a solemn night without sleep on the mountain as the crackling fire raged below us. Soon my platoon had to go down to the crash site with the Graves Registration personnel; we loaded about 22 body bags with what was left.

For sure, lucky survivors of war will always remember and give thanks. This time is no different. Those who did not come back are the true heroes, as has been said many times before.

And the song remains riveting..."Judy, Judy, Do you love me?"

For me, on this Memorial Day and every day, I hum the song and then whisper, "Oh, yes, we love you".



Disaster on LZ Judy



After two days, we inspect the site for remains.



Recovery of bodies and parts filling only 22 body bags.



Soldiers wounded on the ground from flying pieces from the CH-47 Chinook; all members of the 196th Infantry Brigade.

No Day at the Beach

John Shoemaker

The sound was so familiar. It was the unmistakable “whop, whop, whop” of the rotors. It still sends a chill down my spine.

I was driving back from New York on the Mass Pike. Just west of Springfield, I stopped for gas when I became transfixed on the old Huey helicopter flying right over my head. Huey’s make a sound one never forgets, especially after having made over two dozen assaults into enemy territory in Vietnam’s I Corps.

Daydreaming as I drove, it was the blistering summer of 1970 when I was going through the equipment check for each member of my platoon. Our “rucksacks” weighed over 60 lbs, plus ammo, weapon and more. We arrived early to position for loading on the Huey’s which were coming to take us to our landing zone or LZ which was at the southern end of the so-called, “Sands”, just south of DaNang where we were told the enemy was dug in and prepared for a tough fight.

The sight and sound is awesome to see over a dozen of the choppers coming in a neat formation to land and pick us up. With deafening noise, they swooped down and in seconds we jumped on and took off with their nose down while lifting upward. They did not linger as that might invite a rocket attack.

Flying north from the massive military base at Chu Lai, we flew along the coast to land on unfamiliar ground to chase the North Vietnamese soldiers. We were joined by Cobra gunships that flew alongside our flanks.

We watched as we leaned out the doorways with our feet on the runners as the Cobra’s opened up with machine gun fire strafing the ground ahead of us. Soon we would learn if it was going to be a “hot” LZ or a piece of cake. It was a time of extremes in most everything we did.

The Huey’s strained as if the pilots slammed the brakes to drop down quickly, rearing upward as it lowered to the ground and the blades cutting the air with loud “whopping noises”.

As soon as we could jump, we leapt from the flying cages with fear and purpose. Everyone knew we were easy targets. We relied on surprise, but time was working against us.

This time we beat them to the punch. Quickly we formed our marching positions and moved about 100 yards before the first enemy bullets started to dart around us in the white sand.

We dropped down to get cover, but this landscape was unlike the rice paddies and mountain jungles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail we had fought in for many months. Movement was tough with our boots digging deep into the sand on every step.

This was a large peninsula comprised of sparse tropical vegetation on flat, bleach white sand that stretched for miles. To the east was the South China Sea and beautiful beaches.

Our jungle fatigues were soaked in sweat. I was happy not to worry about leeches.

The enemy fire was sporadic and not very accurate until we were so close that it was deadly. It was very hot and the white sand reflecting blinding sunlight made it miserable.

We simply could not see them shooting at us.

We continued forward, returning fire whenever we had some idea where the enemy was. Too often we got pinned down and we lost time as we crawled forward.

Our Battalion called for help.

My platoon was the lead platoon and soon I looked up and there was this one little helicopter called a Loach or light observation helicopter (officially, an OH-6). It was primarily a two- seater flown by some of the bravest pilots I would never meet.

This particular pilot would fly very low, sometimes no more than a hundred feet off the ground looking for the enemy and hoping to draw fire. He leaned out the door-less chopper as if to taunt them.

Soon, all hell broke loose with fire coming from all directions. The Loach was hit and crash landed just behind us.

We discovered why the enemy was incredibly hard to see. They would cover their foxhole in the white sand with the parachutes taken from our artillery flares that were used to light up the night sky. Our white parachutes were used to camouflage the enemy in defilade enabling them to ambush us.

When they exposed themselves to shoot down the helicopter we ended up shooting at point blank range from sand hole to sand hole. Eventually, their sand hole became their gravesite.

A half hour later another Loach came to replace the one shot down and so the cat and mouse game continued. Again, the Loach drew fire and we attacked going from one hole to another. The action continued until this Loach was hit and crash landed. We rescued the pilot who quickly ran to a Huey that came to pick him up.

He simply waved and ran.

As if on cue, another Loach came and so it went. We lost 3 helicopters that day. Later I would confirm they were all flown by the same pilot.

My goodness, I thought, that is courage beyond comprehension.

Other Huey's came to pick up each of the downed choppers to be returned for repairs. They would be needed for another mission on another day.

As I looked up from the steering wheel, I noticed the sign on the Mass Pike at the RT 495 Exit for "Cape Cod".

I smiled. I survived the sands of time.

My thoughts are with those this Memorial Day who did not.

#

Howitzers blasting enemy positions from
Hawk Hill, south of DaNang



Beyond a Soldier's Endurance

John Shoemaker

How long could you take it?

Living hour by hour, day by day, thinking you might die at any moment, whether you make a mistake or not. You constantly think about how to outsmart the enemy, about how to live.

Then there are the mines, Bouncing Betty's, booby traps, Punji Pits, Claymore's, IED's or improvised explosive devices, roadside bombs, and so many other killing machines that create a world where no matter how well trained, experienced, smart, courageous, cunning and physically strong one is, if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, your number could be up.

For soldiers in the U.S. Civil War that lasted 4 years and was the most deadly of all American wars, the average time a soldier spent serving in that war was about two and a half years. I could find no records on how often they would actually see combat.

World War II lasted less than four years. The average soldier saw 43 days of actual combat. This is when we heard a great deal about a phenomenon called, "shell shock".

In Korea, a war that lasted 3 years, soldiers saw combat an average of 180 days.

Vietnam lasted over 8 years, and the average soldier saw combat 260 days.

In the combined wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, still unresolved after 10 years, soldiers go beyond 320 days of combat in total, with many going on 5 and 6 tours of duty. Many of those tours are one year long, some longer, some less.

The trend is ominous.

Staff Sergeant Robert Bales completed 3 tours in Iraq and was on his fourth tour in the other war, Afghanistan. He volunteered right after the awful events of 9-11. He wanted to serve his country and take the war to those who would harm us.

He went into harm's way and then something went terribly wrong for Sergeant Bales and some poor innocent Afghans.

Neither a draftee, nor a kid, Sergeant Bales was experienced, educated, well trained and a professional as shown by his rank and tenure.

We don't know what happened and I cannot speculate. Unfortunately, we will learn in excruciating detail in the coming weeks and months what happened.

But does anyone really think he did it of sound mind?

For sure, this is all part of the cost of war.



We may think we can fight a war cleanly, antiseptically with precision strikes and laser-focused arms that fly through windows from drones hundreds of miles away with pinpoint accuracy.

The fact is wars are won with boots on the ground. As a result, the costs of war go on for many years even after the battles fall silent.

No matter what the Afghans do, in no way should our Sergeant be handed over to them for justice under Sharia Law, as preposterous as their demands may be.

After all these centuries, what kind of justice and lifestyle is there in this barbaric land of cultural tragedy? Islam could not save it then or now. It is lost for generations to come.

Where was the outrage all these years to the tens of thousands of others who have died at the hands of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other corrupt criminals who have no mercy on men, women and children? Worse, they continue massacring hundreds of people with suicide bombings and other attacks nearly every day.

Of course, Sgt. Bales' actions are not excusable, but they can be understandable.

The whole situation is completely outrageous and inhuman.

The tragic loss of the 16 or so people allegedly killed by a Sergeant gone berserk does not alter the reason why we had to go into Afghanistan in the first place, but it may be the reason for us to leave.

After all, how much longer should we take it?

#



Wearing an old "flak jacket" on the hot, sun drenched bunker line at Hawk Hill with rows of concertina wire and 55 gal drums of "Fougasse" and Claymores in front to protect from enemy assaults.

Contradictions in War

John Shoemaker

Walking through a toy store, thinking about my grandson, I was truly impressed with all the different toys they have for kids today. Even more, I was stopped in my tracks when I saw the huge, wireless M1 Abrams Tank and Cobra Gunships in a full display. The detail was amazing. I stood in the aisle and stared at it and then drifted into the past...

I was back in Vietnam flying in a Huey with the rest of my platoon, rushing to provide security for a tank and its crew that hit a booby trap/bomb on one of the few roads in the region. The blast took off the hulking M48 Patton Tank's tracks and disabled it. The crew was only slightly injured.

Our formation of three Huey's came rushing in for a landing in a rice paddy a few hundred yards away from the tank. I expected that we would come under fire.

We scrambled off the noisy, wobbling choppers hoping to beat the enemy's aim and get to cover. Splashing knee deep through putrid water loaded with excrement from water buffalo, humans, dogs, and other living creatures, we made it to a dike, flopped down in the mud and breathed easier when we heard no gunfire.

Spending a couple days providing security for the tank as other service members came in to do the repair work, I became uneasy. I did not like being in any one place too long. Finally, we got the word to move out and patrol an area several miles away in what is known as a free fire zone – "Injun country". Anything that moves in a designated FFZ is considered enemy and should be engaged.

In the hot and humid summer of 1970, we slogged through the rice paddies and low lands southwest of DaNang. My 23 member platoon moved in a single file to avoid excessive exposure to tripping booby traps and other mines. We stayed off the dikes and in the relative safety of the rice paddies.

Finally, we reached some higher ground and rolling low hills with bushes and grassy fields. I ordered a stop to clean out our boots, change socks, and pick off the leeches. Always checking around us, never did I think we could relax.

Continuing, soon we came to the top of a small rise. I went forward first to look on the other side carefully. There, in the middle of this free fire zone, stood a Vietnamese man with classic dress and a black straw hat. I immediately raised my M-16 and had him dead in my sights. I could have fired but I hesitated. Was it really a rifle he was holding?

I decided to yell out and to my surprise he raised his arms and walked towards me. Soon I realized he was an old farmer with a walking stick and completely harmless. I shook my head at the thought that with only a second or two, I made a decision that saved this man's life.

Then I thought whether I would I hesitate next time and get myself killed. I was only in country a couple months and I was still learning.

My radio man whispered softly to me, "Sir, you should have shot him. You have to assume he would kill you."

Moving on, an hour later my point man signaled. We stopped and went wide-eyed looking for any sign of the enemy. Within minutes, there is loud yelling and finally automatic fire rang out. I ran up to see what happened

and decide how to maneuver the platoon. Along the way I cursed myself thinking the old man had warned the enemy and now we are in an ambush. Did I jeopardize the entire platoon?

Besides booby traps, the single most devastating fear is being ambushed knowing that it will all be over in 3-5 minutes and then you check to see who lives and who died. Once snared in such a death trap, the options are limited and the consequences are horrific. Many Platoon Leaders paid the price for even the simplest mistakes and did not make it home alive. The event is simply an explosion of small firearms and machine guns. It is quick death for those on the wrong side. In training we spent hours in "quick kill" training at Fort Benning and Fort Polk.

It was already over when I crawled to the front.

My point man saw two figures in black pajamas run from one bush into another. Without hesitation, he fired on full automatic. He was joined by his fellow soldier next to him. Crawling to where the enemy was hiding, they could see they were just children, two young boys playing some kind of deadly hide and seek. My guys were paralyzed with sorrow, one of them in tears.

Quickly, I changed their positions in the line of march, moved other soldiers into the point and cover positions and ordered everyone to move out. I could not let them dwell on it. Plus all the noise alerted anyone in the area that we were here. M-16's have distinctive sounds. We had to get out of there and stay focused.

The heat was melting us. The map showed us approaching a river. Good thing, I said to myself, maybe a chance to cool off and hydrate our sweating bodies. As we came upon a bend in the river, there they were: Viet Cong cooling off in and near the river. We opened fire, killing one, several others running off leaving their clothes and rifles behind and capturing another.

One of my soldiers started beating the prisoner senseless. We had taken many casualties from booby traps over the last few weeks. Most lost feet, legs or arms and a few their lives. It was an act of frustration and I understood it but could not allow it. I got the prisoner picked up by a battalion helicopter who relished the idea of getting intell from the VC. But my guys were grim about it.

Many years later at a reunion in St Louis, my radio man admonished me for allowing the prisoner to live. He said, "L-T, I still don't get why you let that gook live." Frustration runs deep.

With the excitement over, it was time to move on. The day was getting long and soon it would be dark. I had to get to our objective to set up a night position. We continued for several hours, following a few hundred yards away from the river but basically going parallel to it.

We came around a hill that sloped down to the river's edge. Along the river was thick vegetation. We moved silently but carefully alongside the river when we heard noises in the bushes. Without having to say anything, everyone dropped down on one knee and pointed to the noise which got louder. An instant later the machine gunner opened fire. There were lots of loud groans and finally splashes in the water.

Someone yelled, "They're getting away!" They're in the river!" The rest of the platoon opened fire, spraying into the bushes blindly and into the river. The noise and power of an Army platoon firing its weapons point blank is incredible.

Less than a minute later, I yelled to stop. A couple of the soldiers charged into the bushes to the river's edge and immediately broke out laughing.

What the hell is going on, I yelled!

"Sir, you're not going to like this."

The "Third Herd" platoon, Bravo Company, has just shot the hell out of one huge water buffalo that a farmer had put in a pen inside the bushes next to the water.

A bit embarrassed, we continued on to our objective and set up for some much needed rest but with the knowledge that we had just advertised our position.

Such was just one day in Vietnam on routine patrol northwest of the Pineapple Forest.

I heard the familiar sound in the distance, "Sir"...."Sir"...can I help you?" said the store clerk. I realized I was holding a stuffed animal.

"Oh, no, thank you...I was just thinking."

"I'm just looking around", I said. In the background I could hear some children crying and others yelling for Daddy to buy a toy.

The young lady smiled and walked over to help another couple... with two little boys in tow.

#



Combat Lessons for Life in War or Peace

Personal lessons about war, business, family and life

John C. Shoemaker

It was the end of another business trip to Washington D.C. and I peered down from plane as we left for my home in Boston. The magnificent monuments, the Capitol building, the Potomac, the Pentagon, and the graves were all clearly visible. As the plane's engines strained to gain altitude, my eyes closed and my mind took me back in time. I can never forget. It lives with me every day.

It was an ear splitting bang! My knees buckled and instantly I found myself under water.

I was trying to wipe the nasty water from my eyes to look up and see what the heck happened. I remembered an explosion, then screams. Diving or pushed into the rice paddy, I slowly emerged looking for the enemy. They were not there. I spent two years in training before arriving at this very spot and all prepared to fight, but there was no one to fight.

I was following an experienced lieutenant on my first mission off of Hill 252, west of Chu Lai in Vietnam in the spring of 1970. I was a 24-year-old second lieutenant in the Army, fresh off the plane from "the world," back in the States. This was to be my first "in-country" training mission before taking over the "Third Herd," as we called it. We were only into this mission for a few hours when the world around me exploded. Walking through a rice paddy, the veteran black lieutenant, just a few feet directly in front of me, stepped on a booby trap, a shaped charge that took off his feet and most of his legs and blasted forwards to catch the soldier in front of him in the back who died instantly. We rushed to help the screaming lieutenant who had been a trusted, experienced officer because he was in country for more than 4 months and was still alive. He had to be good or lucky to last this long. But today, his luck had run out.

The Medivac came, scooped up the dead and wounded, and a buck sergeant turned to me and said, "OK, Lieutenant, looks like you are in charge, what do we do now?" It was classic, just like they used to laugh about at Ft. Benning OCS where I trained to be an infantry officer. So much for an easy first mission when all I had to do was observe and learn.

My first thought hit me just as hard: how am I going to survive when I have almost a year to go? I was so close to them when things just blew up and it did not matter how experienced or skilled you were. It seems fate was at hand, or is it skill or just plain luck?

How lucky am I?

Over the next weeks and months, I led an Army platoon of 20-25 soldiers, the "Third Herd," to engage the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regular Army troops and destroy them. We humped through rice paddies, crossed sand bars south of Danang, hiked the jungles and mountains along I Corps' Laotian border and otherwise chased them everywhere we thought they might be or not. Ambushed by the enemy infrequently, we did set up a number of ambushes that were highly effective. I kept a mental enemy body count as if it was a way to measure our success, a kind of scorecard.

The combat operations came and went, with different names and places: Chu Lai, Tam Ky, Que Son, LZ Judy, Kham Duc, Hawk Hill. I still have the maps on which I marked key firefights.

I live with memories of my soldiers lost, like Larry Gatliff from Lebanon, OR, and James Gibson from Philadelphia. Their stories so gut wrenching, yet lost in time. Larry was especially tough to lose since he was the generous, always willing to help, quiet, genuine, nice guy. Larry would help you dig a foxhole after a full day of marching in full gear through rice paddies in near 100-degree heat. He was the innocent, shy, inexperienced young man from the forests of rural America who came to the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam.

On this day, Larry was the second man in the line of march as we cautiously moved on a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Road deep in the jungle highlands. He was right behind a scout dog handler with a trained German Shepard. Unfortunately, the dog was on his first mission, with the scent blowing away from us, he was one of the first casualties as the enemy opened up at point blank range as the enemy lay flat directly on the road at the top of a slight hill to ambush us. The dog was shot, his handler shot in both legs and Larry was hit in straight in the forehead. I was just a couple feet directly behind Larry and felt the bullets pass inches over my head.

Over the next year, we engaged the enemy enough for many members of my platoon to be awarded medals for valor, including one of my Staff Sergeants who received the Silver Star for storming a machine gun nest. But each day – each hour – was a challenge. The officers felt the burden and the pride of being a leader. A key motivator for infantry officers was to protect their troops while achieving the objectives as ordered and to come back home alive.

More than a decade after the war, I located Larry's mother and learned how much pain and suffering had come to his family. It was a closed casket for Larry. His mother never believed he had died and felt he was alive somewhere. She got divorced and became reclusive. I rocked her world with the real story. With the help of some friends, we were able to fly her and her daughter to Washington DC to see Larry's name on the Vietnam Memorial and hear a eulogy from Bob Hope. The emotions ran freely that day with so many praying to God.

Always, I was on a quest to learn from everyone during my military experience and have kept that attitude throughout my 35-year civilian career which has been in the equally unforgiving high tech industry. I have worked directly for 18 different CEO's and 10 different companies. These are lessons that worked then and still work today...battle hardened, so to speak. Many are obvious but not necessarily practiced. They are lessons I will pass to my children, grandchildren and all who thirst for knowledge and perspective, whether it is new to them or just reinforcing old notions. And truly, there have been times when I have not followed my own thoughts, intuition or "sense" and sure enough, I paid a price.

So consider these...Combat and not:

- **Anticipation:** At the top of the list is the concept of anticipating situations. Behind every tree is a potential ambush or problem. And to take it further – think quickly about what you will do if there really is an enemy there. I mean, in detailed slow motion, what EXACTLY will you do in reaction? Create the scene in your mind's eye. Evaluate it and decide on what actions are best. Today, those who anticipated events around them are less likely to get hammered. This applies to Wall Street or bicycling down the road. If you can anticipate, then you can react effectively or avoid the need for reaction altogether. However, we need to understand that in time we will all suffer a loss or major disappointment at some point. It is inevitable and part of life. The focus should not be only on the problem at hand, but how you react to it.

- **Relationships:** In combat and in life, the relationships you develop are all important. In the military and especially in real combat, it really is about teamwork. The leader does not have to have all the answers. Involving the team is a critical step in developing mutual respect and multiplies one's brain power by a factor equal or greater than the number of people on the team. Key to having and nurturing effective relationships comes down to simply having an interest in someone's welfare and communicating honestly with them. The best way to kill your credibility and destroy a relationship is to offer B.S. or comments that distort, deceive, evade or exaggerate the truth. It is so demeaning and distrustful to tell people what they want to hear. So many executives feel they cannot be truthful as they know better. Pick your employment and friends carefully as bad decisions can drain you in so many ways or, worse, affect the rest of your life negatively. With the right friends, trusted mentors and family, you can face most any problem or enjoy most any good fortune. This is not about relying on luck but deliberately making good choices. The choices we make shape our lives. One cannot make them lightly.
- **Discipline:** If anything, the military will teach you discipline. It brings order and simplicity to chaos and commotion. It means being decisive and organized. It means, if you want to really excel, to get up and do the things other people don't like to do or won't do. This is what separates those who take life casually from those who refuse to waste the precious moments we have on this planet. With discipline you can develop the right habits. The right habits give discipline to life activities that lead to personal progress, however you define it. Also important is to understand what does not work. Someone said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity.
- **Personal Habits:** Even in Vietnam, sleeping in foxholes or in bunkers, and under fire most every day, you still need to brush your teeth, floss, use sun block, and do all the other necessary things to stay healthy. This remains important every day for your life. No one should have to inspect you. Health is something that young people generally take for granted but unfortunately, it is fleeting. Personal habits are far reaching. Eat the wrong foods and you will pay for it. Ignore dental hygiene and the price will be paid. Exercise is needed all your life. Obesity is out of control in the United States. I believe in many cases it is because people get lazy and do not understand that you must burn off what you eat or the excess will be stored in your legs, stomach and butt. Failure here is quite visible. I have learned from those who smoke that many don't care and will continue to smoke – even if their voice box is removed or they have gotten a death sentence from their doctor. Others will tolerate diabetes and live with it rather than work to eliminate it. Get into the wrong habits and your life will be immensely more difficult...and so it goes.
- **Preparation:** Although I enlisted in the Army in July of 1968 during the height of the War, I was soon to learn that I would spend the next two years in training before going to the rice paddies and jungles around the world. One thing the Army does extremely well is training. BUT, one has to volunteer for training. So many did not. I decided that I could not get enough - knowing it was brutal to do it month after month. The more education and direct experience, especially those skills that are enhanced with repetitive drills, are life savers. Later, when I got back to a world that had little tolerance of veterans, I took more advantage of the GI Bill to get a master's degree in Boston. This was needed preparation for my business career. Believe me, after college and Vietnam, I had a wife, a son, plus I was a member of the Army Reserves and with a full time job at Xerox, I did not want to go to college at night for three more years. Who would? But those are the dues we pay that will earn dividends for decades.

- **Time and Perspective:** When I was young, life was never ending and full of excitement and promise. There is an old saying that if you are young and not a Democrat, then you have no heart, if you're old and not a Republican, then you are not smart. Well, that is a bit trite, but your perspective does change over time. Maybe it is wisdom or experience, but I will paraphrase another old saying that is often quite true, "it is never as bad as it feels or as good as it looks." Another thing to keep in mind, unless you are in a combat firefight, you always have more time than you think. We are so impulsive. That is our nature, especially when we are young. Take the time and think through things. Never react is less than a day or two to any important decision.
- **Leadership:** Bookshelves are filled with books on leadership. Leaders must have vision and a mission and the books detail it many different ways. To me, it comes down to trust. With trust, all things become possible. Yes, there are other key characteristics including competence, decisiveness, charisma, energy, respect and more. Napoleon is quoted, "leaders are dealers in hope." Whether in business or on the battlefield, you will follow someone you trust and who provides hope to a better future/outcome. Too many times we get burned. I have been burned by those I trusted. So trust is earned over time, not just from hearing some hype or rhetoric or reviewing their track record or that "they just seem nice." In Vietnam, I had a Kit Carson Scout assigned to me. He was a former Viet Cong who was assigned to my platoon to advise me during our tactical maneuvers. Clearly we did not trust each other for obvious reasons. Over time that changed as we proved to each other that we are mutually trustworthy especially when the bullets fly and you share a foxhole. In business, you will learn over time that you can trust selected people, but it does take time and the best time is when things go poorly. Then the disguise comes off and you get a rare chance to see them for who they really are.
- **Values:** I never realized how different people understand basic values. Some believe that you can tell white lies or exaggerations and it is OK. It is not. You cannot compromise on truth. Sooner or later, your lies will trip you. The Boy Scouts have their list. All the religions of the world have theirs. But in the end, each of us must resolve our own list of values that will guide you through life. Make that list a deliberate one that brings stability and strength to your character. It is more than just listing honesty, loyalty, bravery, and such. You must live it every day. Make it a point to develop that values list that will stay with you always. Please do not think for a minute that compromising truth will not be seen by others. Beware that many people lie from habit – bad habit – and they cannot help themselves. It speaks to their own lack of self confidence and poor self image. Same thing for cheating at school, work or life. Character stays with you and is your inner strength. So many think cheating, stealing, and other acts of wrongdoing are OK since others do it, or worse, they can get away with it. It is a compromise with costs. For me, honor is all important as I have never relied on luck.
- **Truth:** One of the more famous executives, Steve Jobs, seems has done it all...become rich, founded his own company called Apple, when he left he founded more companies that became quite successful, then he came back to Apple to save it from disaster, building Apple into a powerhouse technology firm know for creative, innovative products. But there is another view. From a January 2008 publication commenting on his battle against pancreatic cancer: "Reporters who have covered Jobs will tell you (off the record, of course) that he is the master of the honest lie, of a statement that is literally true but profoundly misleading. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that he is doing the same thing now with his health." What is worse: the honest lie or the outright lie? Many tell outright lies but justify it (and I can quote here for those CEO's and executives I worked for who practice it routinely) as sugar coating, sales pitching, embellishing, or simply describe it as marketing. Exaggerations, distortions, misleading statements, and the like is a poison that slowly destroys your credibility. Without credibility, you cannot be trusted. Worse, people will be polite and nod their heads and say nothing to you, but they know the untruths. And they will tell others. I know of more than one CEO who were oblivious to the fact that the employees did not believe or trust them. They were clueless to the ruse they had created for

themselves. Fearing loss of their convincing arguments based on distortions, they are prone to exaggerations that get progressively worse. Take the recent case of Satyam Computer Services (interestingly, Satyam is Sanskrit meaning Truth), a large Indian IT company employing 53,000, with a CEO, Ramalinga Raju, who describe his long trail of deceit this way: "It was like riding a tiger, not knowing how to get off without being eaten." How can you tell someone is a master at outright lying or the honest lie? Early on it is very hard. It is sinister. Over time, it becomes obvious. Some clues: do they EVER correct themselves in their passionate statements? Is there any concern about accuracy? Will they ever admit they are wrong? What are the proof statements or facts? Do they talk in round numbers and not real specifics? Does it add it? Does it pass the sniff test? Twenty five years ago, one CEO taught me early on that to survive I always had to insert wording in contracts that gives him an "out". He called it hedging. The more hedges, the better. Now I know where they got the expression, the Hedge Fund.

- **Religion:** This is a tough subject as it about a concept that has created arguably as much ill will as goodwill. Religion has long been a cause for war, death, and destruction of all kinds. The magnitude of man's inhumanity to man is unimaginable. Millions have been tortured, killed or have suffered in so many ways over centuries. Yet, people rely on it. People have a strong need to have faith in the supernatural. This need is stronger than life itself. They believe that there is purpose to all we do and that faith gives them strength to deal with life. It gives answers to that which we are ignorant. It comforts us. It also has done much good around the world with charitable and other services. And without it, how many more would turn to evil? Religion is a seriously important personal decision. Too bad that it is usually made for you at birth. The major religions of the world, especially Christian Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Muslims (Sunni or Shiite) and Sikhs, all have rules and customs. Most of these rules developed over time and started at a point in the history of humanity that was especially difficult where life was short, cruel, and very brutal in many ways. Religion gave hope. What is clear is that without hope people cannot cope. If your life is not good, don't despair, your next life will be better if... In the end, even some devout people of faith, especially Priests, Rabbi's, Imam's, and other religious leaders cannot be trusted and have lied, cheated and worse, as Catholics have learned, disguised themselves as sexual predators. Some Muslim clerics call for Jihad and suicide attacks against Jews, Christians and even other Muslims. Hindus kill Muslims and both kill Christians who, in turn, for centuries (remember the Crusades) killed Muslims and others. Catholics kill Protestants or vice versa. Their rules may prevent eating certain foods or drinking wine or mandate washings, medical procedures, social behavior and so much more. All in an effort to control their followers. In each religion there are rules that in some way make it sinful to kill another human being. No matter, the killing goes on in the name of God... again, it comes back to a personal decision to lead a life that is deliberately defined by your own behavior and choices, whether you have faith or not in God. I personally wish all of humanity would just follow one well known, ancient and simple rule...the "Golden Rule". Yes, it is still golden.
- **Your Life:** Life is truly short. It is an understatement. When you understand much of it, you have already passed most of your lifetime. Some truths stand the test of time. Family is all important. Your children are your most precious gift. Friends are important and deserve frequent contacts to keep them alive. Make the connections with them often. In business, it is quite the opposite. There is little loyalty and commitment for the long term. It is just business. Success in business will be easier if you have a clear focus. A sharp focus on what you want to do. Be thrifty in all your activities. Thinking creatively – where others have not gone or fear to go. Create or find the right relationships and mentors. And always look for others to give you honest feedback or opinions. Whatever is said, it is probably smart to ask a clarifying question like, if I heard you correctly, are you saying ...?

- **Your Personal Success:** Winners keep on winning. How true. To win, the formula each of us develops must adapt to the situation but key ingredients for success include persistence, positive attitudes, focus, social networking, and keeping things simple along the way. When you have a friend, mentor or manager that expresses empathetic concern about your personal growth and development, you have found gold. Protect these kinds of relationships and develop new ones.
- **Your Country:** The United States is not flawless, but is relentless in trying to seek a higher level for the common good with a unique and awe-inspiring Constitution and with principles that are time honored. Our founding fathers – men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin, and so many others – really did break with the history of mankind and sought a new vision. It is without question the greatest country ever in the history of man. The founding fathers are some of the most important figures in all of human history. Every year we learn more about how incredible they were in breaking away from all the chains of the past to give something truly unique to all humanity. For those who have fought to protect it, there is no higher common honor. Too many Americans either take it for granted or are too quick to speak negatively of it. Its weakness can only come from within. Make it a point to learn about our history. There is a reason why so many want to come here. In all my extensive travels around the world, there is something special about seeing the American Flag waving on its soil. Cherish it always. Regardless what negativity you hear about America, it is the most generous, the most committed to individual freedom, and the most successful country in history. As one American veteran, Colin Powell, put it, “the U.S. has sent many young men and women to fight in foreign lands but has never asked for any more land than is enough in which to bury those who did not return.”

As we go forward in life, combine these lessons with others you have experienced or heard. Develop your own ethical code that offers guidance and comfort in good times and bad. In the end, knowing life is so short, seize the day and get everything out of life that you can as this is our one and only trip. And when in doubt about most anything, just show love. That was the wish of a dying friend I visited for many months during his brain cancer treatment. When I asked him at his bedside about what to do when I shared with him a dilemma I was trying to resolve, he uttered, “just show love.”

#



Life Lessons from War

John Shoemaker

For several years the nightly news on television reported 300-500 soldiers killed or wounded each week in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam.

As a college student, the apprehension grew knowing my day would come soon.

Fresh out of UMass-Amherst in 1968, I learned the U.S. Army desperately needed officers. I volunteered rather than be drafted and proceeded to sign up for every training school before landing in Vietnam in 1970.

Basic and advanced infantry training, paratrooper “airborne” school and Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, GA, operations training and finally “Jungle School” in the Panama Canal Zone.

It was a time of personal transformation and trial.

The life lessons learned after two years of intense military training and a year at war made me value the time and effort spent, although I had different feelings at the time.

The Army’s training, at first tedious and always stressful, was truly outstanding.

Everyone knows that “education” is critical to achieving one’s goals in life. If you are going to be in harm’s way, a lesson for survival is that training saves lives. We should never stop learning and always seek training.

The most important lesson learned during nearly six months of combat as an infantry platoon leader in I Corps in the northern most sector of Vietnam could be stated in one word: “anticipation”.

At every step, it was critical to anticipate your next move in advance. Studying, planning, and preparing are all very important to survival at war and later at home in the business world. On patrol one must think ahead about what you would do at any moment if shots suddenly rang out.

In the most exacting detail, what would you do? What is your contingency plan?

Certainly, the same applies in business and elsewhere.

If you can anticipate, you can survive and thrive.

Another lesson: when all hell breaks loose, forget about calling for help. Seconds count. Act immediately.

The military organizes and functions in teams. It really is all about teamwork. In combat, the simple fact is each soldier is focused on how to safeguard their buddies and bodies.

I believed platoons that avoided contact with the enemy were at higher risk and suffered higher casualties. Those who took the fight to the enemy were more in control.

The aggressor usually has the upper hand.

It’s best to execute an ambush rather than walk into one. I will admit to being ambushed more often in business than in war.

With so many different personalities, it is another advantage to really know your soldiers and what makes them tick.

Hard to believe that the disheveled, thin, even frail looking soldier was absolutely fearless and would chase the enemy deep in Viet Cong territory at night.

No way can you always judge the book by the cover.

Too often, survival is about luck. Even in business, better to have the right timing than the best plan.

There was the Medic who was a slob and did everything wrong, yet made it out alive after one year. His replacement, only a few weeks in country, stood up to reach into his pocket when a shot rang out. He died of shock when the bullet hit his pelvis.

The point man for my platoon came face to face with the point man of an enemy platoon on the same trail. Both men fired at each other point blank on automatic. My point man was shot six times; the enemy soldier only once.

I put my soldier on a Huey while he was smoking and joking. None of the six wounds were life-threatening. The enemy soldier took one round to his head.

One lost, one won. It was called, "quick kill".

War shows you the poverty and despair of civilians who spend their holidays rummaging the dumps for food or clothing.

Fortunately, I got to a battalion mess hall for my turkey dinner at Thanksgiving and during Christmas at firebase "Hawk Hill". We slept in bunkers on cots with a sandbagged roof over our heads. It was great - except for the rats.

Spending time in a war zone during Thanksgiving and Christmas without being able to call home (we had no cell phones, satellite phones or PC's with Skype) is hard on your psychology.

The holidays are an incredibly lonely time. You miss family. You miss all the festivities. You miss the good life. You become so disconnected. You really wonder if anyone really cares.

Ever since, I try to remember and enjoy the small things in life, especially five grandchildren.

We all make mistakes, but for some, there was no second chance.

Life is about second chances for those lucky enough to get them.

The greatest lesson is not to waste them.

#

The Real-Life Platoon

By JOHN C. SHOEMAKER

The heat was incredible. I could hardly breathe. My muscles ached.

As an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam, I had it a little easier than some of the others. My rucksack weighed only 75 pounds or so. But when you added grenades, four or five bandoliers of M-16 ammo and machine gun ammo, it was quite a burden. But I could not think about that now.

I had other things to worry about; my mind was racing. "Anticipate. You must anticipate," I kept telling myself. Where would the next ambush come from and how should I react? My eyes were wide open in search of the unknown.

As I moved my platoon of 20-odd teenagers through the jungle, I chose to walk third in the line of march. I had no seasoned veterans with me—no sergeants who had been through it before. Some of my "men" couldn't even read a map. If I got hit, I reminded myself, they would have trouble finding their way back to the fire-base.

My point man was some well-meaning, poor soul who was on his first patrol. He had a well-trained scout dog, which looked like Rin Tin Tin. Right behind him was Pvt. Larry Gatliff. A tall, gawky guy, Larry was special. Simply put, he was one nice kid. Innocent, polite, cooperative. He wanted everyone to "get along." To defuse arguments and keep harmony among his comrades, he would dig their foxholes in searing heat after a long day's march through the rice paddies. He was the kind of boy who would make any father proud.

On this day, I followed behind Larry as we walked slowly and carefully forward. Having experienced the same scene during training in Panama, I had brought one squad up on my right flank for extra protection. I was "anticipating." As we proceeded up a hill, it happened.

Machine-gun fire. Screaming. Rustling. Groaning. More firing. Blood. Silence.

The scout dog ran off howling through the jungle, never to be seen again. The dog handler was shot through both legs, but was still alive. I yelled at him to fire his M-16 at the enemy.

Larry fell backward next to me. A bullet had passed through his helmet and taken off most of his head.

"Fire!" I screamed to the others. "Fire! Don't stop! Get those bastards." Bullets vibrated over my head. I could actually feel them. I was angry. It seems

crazy, but I wasn't scared. I was too busy.

The enemy tried to run around to our right. They always seemed to be in control. This time, however, they were too eager. Too cocky. They nearly tripped over my other squad, which was ready for them.

Minutes later, I placed Larry onto a chair that was dropped down from a Medivac helicopter hovering above. Up he went, as I stared at him. Tears filled my eyes. I had done everything. "by the book": I had anticipated; I had used my intuition. But I had still lost him. Although my voice was drowned out by the noise of the Huey, I yelled to him, "I'll never forget!"

Weeks and months passed. There were more ambushes. I lost several other soldiers every week. Such was the hazard of working in I Corps in 1970 in South Vietnam in the Americal Division. I made it a habit not to get close to them. I didn't want to be their friend. I was their lieutenant.

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In some way, she had found peace. So had I.

Mr. Shoemaker, a sales manager in Southborough, Mass., served in Vietnam in 1970.

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**Let us not forget those who paid the price
for peace.**

Fate Revisited

By John Shoemaker

IT HAD taken several years to muster the emotional courage to make my first visit. Standing there somewhat stiffly, the dark reflection of my image before me, I reached up to rub my fingers across his name. It could have been mine. Fate chose differently.

Eighteen years ago, I was a platoon leader for the Americal Division in South Vietnam's I Corps. The lead gunships were billowing smoke to camouflage our assault upon enemy territory. Only a couple of miles from Laos, we spotted the obvious sign of trouble—a cornfield carved into the middle of a jungle. Scrambling as fast as our legs could carry us, we jumped from the hovering choppers and headed toward the edge of the thick growth for cover.

In seconds, the UH-1 "Hueys" were gone. Huddled in the underbrush,

using binoculars, I could clearly see a half-dozen or more North Vietnamese regulars frantically setting up machine guns on a small hill overlooking the landing zone. My heart pounded in my chest.

They hadn't seen us yet. They were probably waiting for the Hueys to come back.

I called for the *Cobra* gunships to strafe the hill with grenades and cannon fire. Simultaneously, I moved my 23 teenagers into position, while my thoughts raced. What if we were trapped? What if we were up against a battalion of enemy regulars? The nearest help was miles away with no access by land. What if we get captured and . . . ?

With the last pass of the *Cobras*, we attacked. There was no turning back now. Adrenalin fed us energy we did not know we had. Finally, reaching the top, we were firing point-blank into their foxholes. Even so, a few got away as darkness closed in on us.

For once, we had caught them by sur-



prise, and this time we suffered no casualties. "Thank you, God," I said to myself as I closed my eyes to steal a few hours of sleep.

SOMEONE TO TRUST

Early the next day, a resupply chopper provided us with a German shepherd scout dog to track down the enemies that had escaped. With the dog and its handler at point, Pvt Larry Gatliff followed second in the line of march. This time, I would be third. As we left the hill, I watched Larry in front of me. He was an uncomplicated, pleasant 19-year-old from Lebanon, Ore. I appreciated his attitude. He didn't moan and groan about being there. He did no whining about whether this war was right or wrong. He did his job and just wanted to survive like the rest of us. I could trust him.

It wasn't too long before we came to a clearing in the triple-canopy jungle. We uncovered a road wide enough for an 18-wheeler. It was too suspicious. Sweat drenched my body in the suffocating heat. Bugs chewed freely on the back of my neck. My mind was racing as I tried to anticipate every possibility. I concluded that if we were going to be ambushed, that was where it would happen. I brought up one squad

In an oft-repeated action of emotional bonding, a child reaches up to touch the name of a fallen soldier.

to cover our right flank. The squad leader muttered disagreement and grudgingly followed orders. The scout dog gave no signals of potential danger. "Follow your instincts," I said to myself. We inched forward, our eyes bulging as we searched for any sign of the enemy.

Suddenly, their attack came from nowhere. With explosive sound, AK-47 bullets were smashing everything in their path.

Explosions, screaming, blood, silence.

I made a commitment not to forget Larry. Some time ago, I tracked down Larry's relatives and learned that Larry's mother couldn't afford to come to Washington, D.C., to see Larry's name at the Vietnam Memorial. In fact, she and Larry's sister had not ever been on an airplane in their lives. The trip would be expensive.

I contacted several organizations, but their money was tight and their priorities already established. Fortunately, a Boston-area businessman, Robert Jeffrey, was moved by my ear-

lier article, "The Real-Life Platoon," published in the *Wall Street Journal*, and he said he would fund the trip under the auspices of the Vietnam Veterans of Massachusetts. Jeffrey's letter stated, "... please assure her we will never forget the terrible loss of her very special son in the service of our country."

FITTING BACKDROP

On Veterans Day, 1987, Larry's mother and sister held hands with my wife and me as we listened to the ceremonial speeches at the "Wall." On that particular day, a howling blizzard of snow pounded the gathering that came to make tribute. It seemed an appropriate hardship. In 1970, I had seen Bob Hope's Christmas show in Da Nang. Somehow it was fitting to see him again while a foot of snow blanketed Washington. His presence helped to remind us of courage unfazed by the adversity of war and weather.

Following what has become a standard practice, I lifted up Larry's sister so that she could rub her fingers across Larry's name. Bowing my head, I whispered, "We remember you, Larry." Tears streamed from a thousand eyes that day.

Looking over my shoulder, as we walked up the West Wall to leave, I felt a chill streak up my spine as my eyes froze on another name etched in the black marble. It was that of "John Shoemaker." He was another story. Another time. The coincidence was frightening.

The weather cleared the next day, revealing a deep blue sky and a brilliant sun, and during the flight home to Boston, I tried to put things into perspective. I thought about what a great country this is and wondered if most Americans really appreciate what we have here. Do they understand how dangerous this world is and how cheaply life is regarded by so many on this planet? Peace is expensive, as no one knows better than those who volunteered to pay the price



John Shoemaker is a previous contributor to The Retired Officer. His last article, "The Real-Life Platoon," appeared in the September 1987 issue.

A former Army platoon leader in Vietnam remembers a young hero.

The Real-Life Platoon

By John C. Shoemaker

THE HEAT was incredible. I could hardly breathe. My muscles ached. As an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam, I had it a little easier than some of the others. My rucksack weighed only 75 pounds or so. But when you added grenades, four or five bandoliers of M-16 and machine gun ammo, it was quite a burden. But I could not think about that now.

I had other things to worry about; my mind was racing. "Anticipate. You must anticipate," I kept telling myself. Where would the next ambush come from and how should I react? My eyes were wide open in search of the unknown.

As I moved my platoon of 20-odd teenagers through the jungle, I chose to walk third in the line of march. I had no seasoned veterans with me—no sergeants who had been through it before. Some of my "men" couldn't even read a map. If I got hit, I reminded myself, they would have trouble finding their way back to the firebase.

My point man was some well-mean-

ing, poor soul who was on his first patrol. He had a well-trained scout dog, which looked like Rin Tin Tin. Right behind him was Pvt Larry Gatliff. A tall, gawky guy, Larry was special. Simply put, he was one nice kid. Innocent, polite, cooperative. He wanted everyone to "get along." To defuse arguments and keep harmony among his comrades, he would dig their foxholes in searing heat after a long day's march through the rice paddies. He was the kind of boy who would make any father proud.

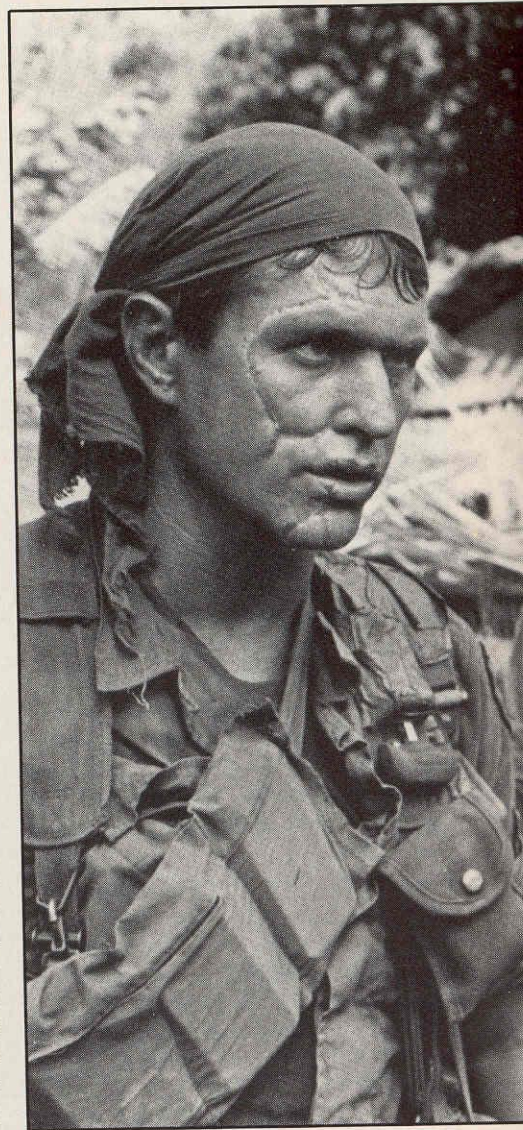
On this day, I followed behind Larry as we walked slowly and carefully forward. Having experienced the same scene during training in Panama, I had brought one squad up on my right flank for extra protection. I was "anticipating." As we proceeded up a hill, it happened.

Machine-gun fire. Screaming. Rustling. Groaning. More firing. Blood. Silence.

The scout dog ran off howling through the jungle, never to be seen again. The dog handler was shot through both legs but was still alive. I yelled at him to fire his M-16 at the enemy.

Larry fell backward next to me. A bullet had passed through his helmet and taken off most of his head.

"Fire!" I screamed to the others.



"Fire! Don't stop! Get those bastards." Bullets vibrated over my head. I could actually feel them. I was angry. It seems crazy, but I wasn't scared. I was too busy.

The enemy tried to run around to our right. They always seemed to be in control. This time, however, they were too eager. Too cocky. They nearly tripped over my other squad, which was ready for them.

Minutes later, I placed Larry onto a chair that was dropped down from a medical evacuation helicopter hovering above. Up he went, as I stared at him. Tears filled my eyes. I had done everything "by the book": I had anticipated; I had used my intuition. But I had still lost him. Although my voice was drowned out by the noise of the



Orion Pictures photo

Though no "real life" unit in Vietnam ever experienced all the external and internal battles of Orion Pictures' "Platoon," the powerful imagery of that film reflected the intense action of the war. The Academy Award-winning movie stars, (left to right) Tom Berenger, Mark Moses and William Dafoe.

Huey, I yelled to him, "I'll never forget!"

Weeks and months passed. There were more ambushes. I lost several other soldiers every week. Such was the hazard of working in I Corps in 1970 in South Vietnam in the Americal Division. I made it a habit not to get close to them. I didn't want to be their friend. I was their lieutenant.

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John C. Shoemaker, a sales manager in Southborough, Mass., served in Vietnam in 1970. Read Magazine, a publication for junior high school students, will also reprint this story of young heroism in an issue coinciding with the anniversary celebration of the opening of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., on Veterans Day. This is the author's first article for The Retired Officer.

Je Ne Regrette Rein!

John Shoemaker

It was hot, dry and dusty.

The temperature was around 100 degrees and sweat soaked my new olive drab jungle fatigues.

I had just arrived at the sprawling Army base at Chu Lai, South Vietnam, in 1970. It seemed only a few moments ago, I was standing at Logan Airport in Boston saying good bye to my family, especially my wife and three month old son.

In spite of two years of grueling, non-stop training before arriving, I was forced to do two more weeks of “in-country” training.

My anxiety grew each day. Each night I could hear the artillery blasting its loads into the darkness. Helicopters were always flying overhead going in all directions. Trucks were filled with newly arrived troops and sent off into unknown places.

As a newly minted 23 year old junior officer, I decided to savor every moment of training as one less day in the field with the enemy.

I got briefings on everything from enemy habits, known positions and deadly local tactics. We covered the details on explosive booby traps of all kinds, Punji traps with stakes covered in human excrement, ambush techniques, and more tricks that left any sane person's head dizzy.

Finally, I got loaded on a truck and headed north an hour on the famous Route 1 to a firebase called “Hawk Hill”. It was headquarters for our Battalion. It was fortified with mines, concertina wire, bunkers, and was the home of several batteries of artillery and a fully operational airstrip for helicopters.

From Hawk Hill I was choppered out to Hill 251 where my field experiences in war began. The next morning I was on my first patrol.

We searched for the enemy every day for months. Firefights were frequent but at small unit level, usually engaging less than a squad or handful of enemy guerrillas at a time. I always worried about stumbling into a much larger force that would change things quickly.

Many times my platoon had pulled “point” or was in the lead during movement of Bravo Company, but this day we were following last. That was safest, I thought.

The Company of men, about 80 or so soldiers, had been moving through rice paddies and low lands to a night logger position. My platoon was the last one to enter the position on a small, rocky hill, overlooking a village a few hundred meters away. My Commander directed me to the section that completes the defensive perimeter.

Getting teams placed correctly, I gave the order to dig in and secure their positions against a possible attack. It was standard practice.

The heat and humidity weighed heavily on us.

We were exhausted from humping our heavy loads, with wet boots, leeches to remove, rifles to clean and jungle rot to treat. We could only look forward to cold C-Rations for a meal and some rest.

As I was reviewing progress with one of my sergeants, behind me I could hear the familiar refrain, "Dam it, this war sucks."

The next thing I heard was an incredible explosion and a force that blew me off my feet. My head was buzzing as I lay face down in the dirt. I felt rocks and dirt hitting my back as I lay there motionless.

When I lifted my head I yelled, "Don't move! Booby trap!"

Shaken, I slowly tried to make sense of what happened. I felt for my legs. I still had them.

I would learn that my M-60 machine gunner, known as our "Pig Man", Private Gibson, had found a half dug foxhole and figured it was his lucky day. He dropped his M-60 beside the hole, took out his shovel and jumped in to finish it.

When his feet hit the bottom of the hole, he set off a huge bomb. Since the Mortar Squad for the Company was setting up near his position, half a dozen of them were injured seriously and screaming.

Gibson was killed instantly along with several others. The scene was horrific.

Tripping as I walked around, my Company Commander put me on a Medivac helicopter back to Hawk Hill.

I felt like I was in a dream. I had no sense for time or place. I could hear activity but it seemed someone turned down the volume.

When the chopper landed, I grabbed a hold of a couple others and we all stumbled to the Battalion Aid Station. I started to enter when I noticed a crude, wooden sign above the entry into the huge underground bunker with our unit's motto.

It read, "Je ne regrette rien".

I remember yelling at the Medic that I told my men not to use old foxholes, pleading my case while he was bandaging me.

I fell unconscious. Later, waking up I learned I was out of it for over 24 hours. After relieving myself, I fell back into the bunk and slept 12 more.

With a shortage of Lieutenants, less than two weeks later I was back with my platoon chasing the enemy in the worst of places.

And so the war went on.

After several months in the "bush", I glanced down from the Huey as we returned to Hawk Hill for resupply. I was dismayed to see dozens of Vietnamese women and children rummaging through the base dump looking for food scraps and anything useful.

They were just trying to survive like all of us.

After a year of duty, I remember walking by that same Aid Station on my way to the helipad and glanced over to the sign one last time. I was on my way to Da Nang to catch a plane back to "The World".

Our Battalion motto represented a lot of history. It means "I regret nothing".

In 3 years, the Army defined me. The training and experiences were exceptional with discipline at the foundation. I focused on the positive when it was easy to be negative. It taught me about having the will to face challenges, the persistence needed to achieve goals, and the confidence that comes from facing your fears.

I survived an unforgiving challenge in an unforgiving land at a time of tremendous upheaval for our Country.

As many platoon leaders will substantiate, our real mission was to save the lives of the men under our command.

For that, I have no regrets.

#

On Hawk Hill near the "BTOC" or Battalion Tactical Operations Center with the Kit Carson Scout, "Toe", assigned to my Platoon. He helped provide local info and was my interpreter.



On Road to Da Nang, just north of Hawk Hill.

Shoemaker: Close call in a killing field



This photo of a 155mm Howitzer was taken on Hawk Hill in Vietnam. Contributed photo/John Shoemaker

By John Shoemaker
Local Columnist

Posted Aug. 24, 2014 @ 8:45 pm

I was so excited when I hung up the phone.

Through friends I reconnected with my former Company Commander, Lee Klein, I served under during the Vietnam War in 1970. At the time he was a first lieutenant and 22 years later, he retired as a lieutenant colonel.

Little did I know what I would learn during a dinner in Alexandria, Virginia, about a tragic day in Vietnam – my first combat mission there back in 1970. Hearing the whole story 44 years later rocked me. I was both angered and stunned. I had not realized how lucky I was to have survived that day and how avoidable the carnage was.

We met in June of 2014. Right from the beginning, we embraced each other as brothers. Reminiscing, I related to Klein one of the stories that set the tone for my very first patrol with the infantry in Vietnam.

Back in 1970, after two years of grueling infantry training, I arrived in Chu Lai, just south of Da Nang. It was a sprawling air base and headquarters for the U.S. Army's Americal Division, commanding over 20,000 soldiers. Immediately, I went into what they called "in-country" training for orientation on enemy tactics and local practices, typical armaments and a lot of time on booby traps.

At Chu Lai, the heat was high and so was the activity by helicopters, planes, soldiers, artillery and all types of vehicles moving around in what would be called "organized chaos."

It was mesmerizing for a 22-year-old from UMass, Amherst, to witness the scale of the military operations.

After two weeks I boarded a Huey to join Bravo Company of the 196th Infantry Brigade on Hill 251, west of Chu Lai. From the air, I could see it was like a bowl turned upside down on a table, only this table was really a collection of rice paddies and the bowl was a little smaller than the popular "Big Blue Hill" southwest of Boston.



Hill 251 is hard to see, but is really a rounded hill above the rice paddies. Picture taken from a Huey coming from Hawk Hill. Bravo Company was positioned at the top.

I reported to my new Company Commander, Joe Genereux, on his second tour of duty in Vietnam. He told me that I would be going on my first mission in the morning with the 3rd Platoon. During the routine patrol, I was to observe and learn by watching the more seasoned lieutenant (from West Point).

Up early, we quickly formed and left the perimeter and slowly hiked downhill to the rice paddy. I soon learned how difficult it is to move through knee-deep rice paddies (not on the dikes as they could be booby-trapped) filled with putrid water and loaded down with rucksack, ammo, equipment and my trusty M-16. The paddies were filled with leeches, buffalo dung, insects, and bugs I did not know existed on the planet.

I had it easy compared to others carrying much heavier loads that included critical gear like radios, batteries, machine guns, extra ammo, Claymore mines and more.

As we slowly patrolled for a few hours across the paddies, I remember looking all around me simply captivated by all that I could see. No longer at home in Quincy, Massachusetts, the landscape was so incredibly different.

After watching the TV news and Walter Cronkite every night for years, I reflected that I am finally here in the rice paddies. My head was spinning, as if I was some kind of visitor on an exotic tour in a dream.

The point man, walking first in the line of march, was followed by the cover man, the lieutenant, the radio man, and then me, just a few feet behind him, followed by the rest of the 20 odd soldiers in the platoon.

Looking across to a distant line of tropical foliage, it happened: Ka-BOOM!

It was loud and the force blew me down. I fell completely under the water and, as I raised my head with my jungle hat still on, water draining into my eyes and my ears ringing, I could hear yelling and screaming, and soldiers racing around, splashing through the water.

I looked at myself to see if I was bleeding and if I had all my limbs.

The radio man, a few feet in front of me, had stepped on a booby trap in the rice paddy and it blasted forward, hitting the lieutenant in the back. Both were severely wounded and I did not think either of them would survive.

"Red," one of the few sergeants, came forward and organized a "dust-off" (a Medivac helicopter) to come and pick them up.

As we waited for the Huey to land, I thought to myself, "How in the world am I going to survive a full year of this?"

Later I would learn that Army platoon leaders, lieutenants in the northern sector of South Vietnam called "I Corps," would have the highest casualty rates in all of the Vietnam War.

Red came up to me, after the Huey came and left with all engines howling at max speed, and asked, "OK, L-T, what do we do now?" It was a classic scenario, just like they taught us in classes at Fort Benning.

Company Commander Genereux told me to move to a position to spend the night.

And so it went, week after week, month after month.

As the new 3rd Platoon Leader, I went on to fight the Viet Cong and NVA in the northern-most sections of I Corps. In a few days, Genereux returned to the States and was replaced by Lee Klein.

At our reunion in 2014, Klein casually announced that he had contacted Joe Genereux, who now lives in Florida, and confirmed the rest of the story about my first mission off Hill 251. That caught me by surprise.

When Klein asked him about it, Genereux said of course he remembered that day. He had called the 3rd Platoon leader to his command post and explained to him that he decided to record the known booby traps over the course of many months on a battle map to outline where the minefields were. This is the kind of real field intelligence that is so valuable to mission plans and reflected Genereux's experience and tactical judgment.

Genereux went on to describe to Klein what this lieutenant should do and where to go – and NOT go. The warning was clear.

When Genereux got word of the blast and the call for a Medivac, he got the coordinates of the blast site and compared it to his map.

He was upset at the time and was swearing as he retold the story even today.

Apparently, the lieutenant had either ignored the instructions or did not read his map or was simply careless. Whatever the case, he led us all straight into the minefield that Genereux was trying to avoid.

Now, it became quite clear to me that I did have unusually good fortune to take the platoon out of the area to our night position without further casualties.

As Klein told me this, my eyes welled up with emotion.

I realized for the first time that we could have avoided the whole incident.

I also remembered how close I came to getting hit in the first few hours of my first mission in a war zone.

My former company commanders, both Genereux and Klein, are real heroes. I am honored to know and have served under them.

I wonder how many times during our lives that we escape tragedy but never know about it.

This time, I learned the rest of the story - while still alive.

I realized again that I am one of the luckiest men on earth.

#



Huey helicopters shown on the ground at Kham Duc and Skyhook below with cargo.





A Kayak, Two Rivers and War

John Shoemaker

It was a beautiful, spring day at the Charles River Dam in South Natick. The water was clear, the sun bright with a dozen or so Mallards standing on the dam itself.

Fresh from the LL Bean store in Dedham, I was excited about taking my first kayak trip down the Charles River, twisting east past the Elm Bank Reservation.

Paddling slowly to take in the sights and sounds, I noticed how shallow the river is and yet so wide. At many places I could easily cross from one side to the other in no more than waist deep water.

Drifting along, I glanced at the turtles on tree limbs and the huge blue heron with suspicious eyes on me.

My mind drifted to another time and place on a river.

It was the summer of 1970 in South Vietnam. As the Lieutenant, I ordered my platoon to load up as we were going out for several days to patrol an area east of an old dirt airstrip not far from the Laotian border.

Assigned to the 196th Infantry Brigade, American Division, we were given orders as part of a new offensive codenamed, "Elk Canyon". Several hundred troops were transported by helicopters to seize the territory around Kham Duc in Quang Tin Province.

Controlled by the Viet Cong and NVA, "Kham Duc" had been lost during the great battles of the Tet Offensive.

We also came back to recover the remains of 12 U.S. Special Forces from when the Viet Cong overran the base in May, 1968.

The Battalion set up its Headquarters alongside the airstrip, near the old bunkers along with an artillery battery and their huge 155mm and 105mm Howitzers.

After a briefing, I welcomed a couple of new replacements that just arrived. My platoon would now number twenty-four, most experienced and with several months of combat under their belts. However, when one of the new guys heard about our exploits, he got real nervous. He pointed his M-16 to his left shoulder and pulled the trigger. He did not realize it would take off most of his shoulder.

With extra ammo and food, we quietly left the south end of the airstrip and hacked our way down the steep slope through thick vegetation and east to the river that runs parallel to the airstrip.

At the river, the current looked strong. We took no chances and strung thick rope across the river to guide the troops carrying their heavy loads. Filled with rocks, it started out being shallow but got chest deep as we neared the edge.

I was anticipating an ambush at every step. This is when we were most vulnerable as each soldier lumbered across holding the rope in one hand and their M-16 in the other.

After crossing, the hike up the long slope was arduous in the heat and humidity. Sweat poured off us, aggravating our “jungle rot” where skin seemed to peel off parts of our bodies. Once we reached the top, I picked a site to create a night defensive position for the platoon.

Scouting around the area we found an ominous sign –a well-used trail running north/south, parallel to the river.

Before dark, we set up our “mike-alphas”, or mechanical ambushes, on the trail using Claymore anti-personnel mines with trip wires.

With the jungle so thick, I decided to use a pouch hammock in the center of the platoon. Others slept on the ground in a large, circular perimeter. Everyone knew the drill for night watch.

It was so dark with no Moon that I could not see my hand as I touched my nose. Incredible.

All tasks done, I swayed before drifting off to sleep.

On the Charles, I broke my daydream to watch the huge blue heron launch from his perch with a wingspan that had to be over 3 feet. It took some distance before he could rise up and disappear downriver.

I noticed a trail alongside the river on the Arboretum Reservation and some people walking their dogs.

Soon they disappeared into the forest.

A half dozen turtles on a limb sticking above the surface of the water suddenly jumped off splashing in perfect sequence.

I stopped paddling and drifted.

Just before sunrise, the incredible explosions and gunfire woke me up in a fright. I toppled over, upside down from the hammock to the ground grasping my M-16.

What the hell was happening?

It took a few moments for me to realize that we were not being attacked. I got on the radio and could hear that Battalion Headquarters was under attack.

Worried that the Battalion might be overrun, we held our position and waited.

After the firing stopped, no one moved.

Silence and darkness in the jungle is nerve wracking. Your eyes and ears play tricks with you.

Then it happened, Ka-BOOM! The sound was deafening.

Then another, Ka-BOOM! The Claymores exploded just a few yards from our position.

Then silence again.

Were we surrounded? It would not be easy to retreat down and back across the river. That would be disastrous. We would have to stand our ground. A soldier’s worst fear is being captured.

Soon, a couple of my soldiers crawled out silently to see what happened. Running to join their comrades, the enemy soldiers tripped our mike-alphas. Three bodies lay mangled in the jungle.

It seemed any others with them decided to leave the area.

I soon learned that during the night, the enemy has come down the river from the north and up the steep slope between the airstrip and us. They were sappers, nearly naked, but carrying satchel charges to blow up the headquarters and the howitzers.

Fresh off the plane from the States and too scared to fall asleep, a new soldier noticed several of the attackers right away and could not believe his eyes. He called to his Sergeant, who was all too skeptical.

The Sergeant glanced and jumped out of his skin to sound the alarm.

Fortunately, the “arty” boys were alert and lowered their big guns and blasted the sappers point-blank as they tried to get through the concertina wire. The firing was furious.

It was devastating and in twenty minutes nineteen enemy sappers lay dead, one still holding a grenade in his hand. Unfortunately, we lost three soldiers, including a medic.

We continued our patrol south along the trail looking for the enemy.

All of a sudden mortar rounds started landing to one side of us. I yelled and we all ran like hell to escape. I was also yelling in the radio that our own artillery was pounding us.

Unfortunately, it was a South Vietnamese mortar team – friendly fire.

One of my Sergeants approached me to show his M-16 mangled by shrapnel. It was hit while he was on the run and holding it chest high.

We spent another night in the jungle. More mike-alphas were set. We were alert. Few slept.

As before, early in the morning, Ka-BOOM!

We nailed two more enemies on the trail. One was well dressed and looked like a high-ranking officer.

Eventually, we made it back to Battalion and suffered no casualties.

We never once pulled a trigger.

On the Charles, I had now reached the wide area just before the Mill Street Dam. Two large, white swans caught my attention. They paddled together in unison. They were captivating.

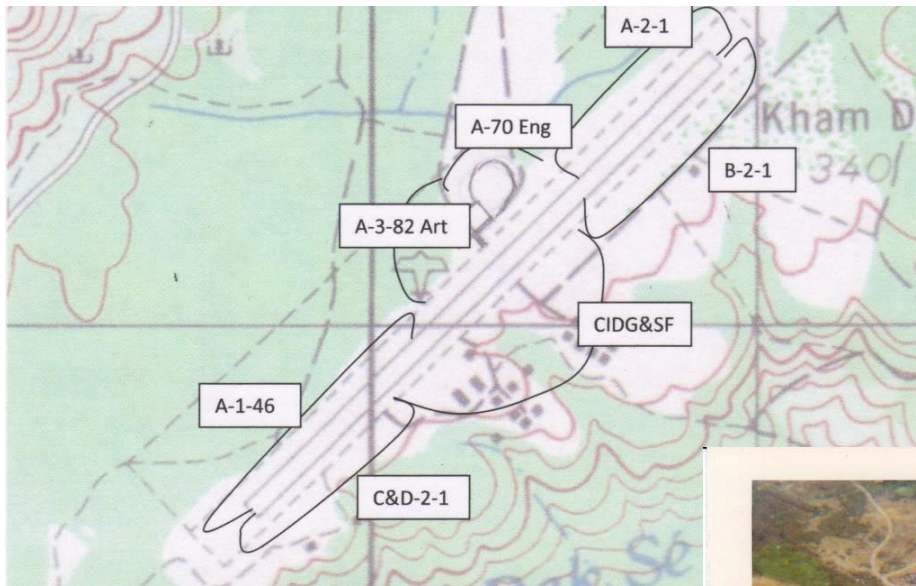
Yes, this is a great river for the love of nature and peace.

This is exactly what the world needs.

I was truly relaxed.

The Battle of Kham Duc

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Kham_Duc



Helicopters and Force at LZ Judy



SEP 70

The Kham Duc River



Supply plane landing at Kham Duc Airstrip....1970



Photos of The Charles River at Pleasant St, Natick & Elm Bank Reservation in Wellesley.



The Charles River at the South Natick Dam in Massachusetts





Two months in the field. Taking a break from the action: 3Rd Platoon RTO, Bob Dunphy, M-60 Machine Gunner "Pig Man", James Gibson (later KIA) and a new guy.

My weight dropped to little more than 150 lbs. at six feet in height. Later on Hawk Hill, I gained back 10 lbs fast on hot meals.

Epilogue

Just a few days before the article was published (titled changed from A Kayak, Two Rivers and War to the newspapers title: Rivers of Memory Lead Back to Vietnam), incredibly, I got this email. It includes a video of the dead enemy immediately after the attack while I was across the river from the airstrip on patrol as noted in my article.

The Video is graphic! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCRrHZdvom8>

From: Donna Elliott

To: shoerfid@yahoo.com

Sent: Friday, May 20, 2016 12:06 PM

Subject: Kham Duc

Hello John - I came across your Vietnam Chronicles (<http://airborneocs.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Vietnam-Chronicles-3.7-Shoemaker.pdf>) while searching for information on the sapper attack at Kham Duc in 1970, but first let me introduce myself.

My name is Donna Elliott and I am the sister of Jerry W. Elliott, MIA, 21 Jan 1968, Khe Sanh. I just returned from a trip to Hanoi a couple of weeks ago (my 11th trip to VN) where I met with Vietnamese veterans and family members who also search for their missing. We are trying to help each other find answers.

One case is the 19 missing sappers at Kham Duc. Family members saw Chris Jensen's video of the dead sappers on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCRrHZdvom8>) and recognized the faces of their sons and brothers. The families and vets have been digging for the past two years searching for the remains of 16 sappers our troops buried with heavy equipment next to the treeline, but no luck so far.

If you have any information on the burial site of the sappers, or would like to return any of the war artifacts you collected, as all combat soldiers did, it would very much be appreciated by the families who are very active in the search, and I would be happy to assist you in returning those items. We did this on our trip to Hanoi for a Marine who had brought home a helmet and a canteen and the Vietnamese showed much appreciation although they have not been able to find the family yet. I'll attach a link to news clip for your reference. <http://en.qdnd.vn/the-vietnam-war-file/joint-efforts-to-heal-the-wounds-of-war/408445.html>

If you have any questions please feel free to ask.

Donna



A Prayer for Courage Lord, I ask for courage. Courage to face and conquer my own fears.... Courage to take me where others will not go. I ask for strength... Strength of body to protect others... Strength of spirit to lead others. I ask for dedication... Dedication to my job, to do it well... Dedication to my country, to keep it safe. Give me Lord, concern... For those who trust me and compassion for those who need me. And please Lord..... Through it all, be at my side.

All gave some, some gave all.



References: Shoerfid@yahoo.com MetroWestDaily Newspapers, Boston Area: www.metrowestdailynews.com
Search on John Shoemaker for over 50 articles.
<http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/search?q=JohnShoemaker%26TaxonomyId%23297&Start=0>