

# Ex-infantry platoon leader satisfies need for adventure

By SKIP VAUGHN Rocket editor Sep 29, 2021



As a boy growing up in Quincy, Massachusetts, John Shoemaker knew he wanted to become a Soldier.

He was undeterred when he saw his classmates demonstrate against the Vietnam War while attending the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. A month after graduating with his bachelor's in business administration in 1968, Shoemaker joined the Army and went on to attend officer candidate school at Fort Benning, Georgia, to become an infantry officer.

Shoemaker volunteered on three separate occasions to go to Vietnam when asked. He finally did go in 1970.

“I thought I can be a small unit commander that can save American Soldier lives,” he said. “That was my focus. That was my goal.”

The 23-year-old second lieutenant went to Vietnam in March 1970. He served in I Corps, the northern sector of South Vietnam. He was a platoon leader with 3rd Platoon, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division.

He spent the first seven months leading his platoon in the field, chasing the North Vietnamese troops. He was promoted to first lieutenant that May.

“Small unit combat was definitely what we dealt with for seven months,” Shoemaker said. “It was really search and make contact with the enemy.”

There were day and night patrols in the rice paddies for three months. And then he spent a month in the sand, followed by three months in the mountains.

After seven months, Shoemaker was promoted to commandant for the battalion headquarters company which was located at a fire base on Hawk Hill. For the rest of his yearlong tour which ended in March 1971, the only action he saw was a few incoming enemy missiles on the base.

Shoemaker has vivid memories of the firefights he experienced while leading his platoon. The platoon usually had 23 members and the average age was 19. Shoemaker was the oldest at 23. About five of the Soldiers were killed and six wounded.

“In every case where we made contact with the enemy I remember the details,” Shoemaker said. “You have two types of contact. One was

direct contact with the enemy, which was sporadic. But constant patrolling exposed you to booby traps where I would have wounded or killed without having contact with the enemy.”

He estimated that more than half of his platoon’s casualties were from booby traps.

In May 1970, the company gathered all its platoons to one location to form a perimeter. The other platoons were already on a hill overlooking the rice paddies when Shoemaker’s unit arrived at dusk to close the last segment of the circle. Shoemaker positioned his men who were all tired from their day in the rice paddies. His M60 machine gunner or “pig man,” Spc 4 James Gibson, was upset and frustrated. Gibson tossed his M60 on the ground and jumped into a foxhole which happened to be a booby trap. Suddenly a 105 howitzer round exploded, killing Gibson and impacting a mortar squad which was 20 feet away.

“And I went down. I got blown over. Rocks pelting me,” Shoemaker said. “Next thing I know I was on a medevac back to the aid station at Hawk Hill.”

He was knocked unconscious and hit in the arm with fragments. After two weeks in the hospital, he returned to the field because the Army needed its infantry platoon leaders in Vietnam.

“I feel the time I spent in combat was the greatest experience in my life,” he said. “It proved who I am. It changed who I was and it created the person I would be for the rest of my life. And specifically, I would say what I got out of it was that it certainly gave me discipline and maturity. It established firm confidence in my abilities. And it also created a person who was action oriented. I do embrace adventure.”

He received the Purple Heart; three Bronze Stars, two for valor; the Air Medal which was for 27 combat assaults by Huey helicopter; and two Army Commendation Medals, one for valor.

Shoemaker was the oldest of three children of James and Phyllis Shoemaker of Quincy. He has a younger brother and sister. His father saw combat with the Navy in the Atlantic in World War II.

After returning home from Vietnam, Shoemaker left the Army in 1971 as a first lieutenant. Using the GI Bill, he earned his master's in business from Suffolk University in Boston in 1975. He found success in high tech industry for 45 years. Shoemaker spent 12 years with Xerox, 10 years in small startup companies and then went to work for Symbol Technologies which does bar coding. He retired in 2016 as an executive vice president for a radio frequency identification or RFID company, Identec Solutions, headquartered in Austria.

Shoemaker and his wife of 53 years, Paula, reside in Highland Beach, Florida, which is next to Boca Raton and north of Fort Lauderdale. Shoemaker serves as the town commissioner in Highland Beach. He and Paula have a son, Eric, who works in high tech software in Middleton, Massachusetts; a daughter, Lisa Magnes, who retired from managing television sales for the Boston Red Sox and Boston Bruins; and five grandchildren.

At 75, he satisfies his need for adventure by hiking mountains – he has hiked 18 mountains over 14,000 feet – and traveling, rappelling, kayaking and mountain biking. He plans to attend a reunion in April 2022 in Branson, Missouri, of his 1969 officer candidate school class.

Shoemaker shared his thoughts on this nation's commemoration of 50 years since the Vietnam War.

"I think that America had great intentions that trapped us in a political nightmare at the sacrifice of so many who gave some," he said, "and others who gave all."

*Editor's note: This is the 339th in a series of articles about Vietnam veterans as the United States commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.*

The Redstone Rocket is the official publication of Redstone Arsenal, based out of the Public Affairs Office in the Army Garrison.