

## 365 And a Wake-Up

By Dick Ammon

It has been more than forty-five years since I returned from Vietnam - yet I can still remember many of those days as if they happened yesterday. Unfortunately, there have also been far too many nights when my mind insisted on revisiting some of those difficult days in Vietnam in lieu of providing me with much needed sleep. Clearly I do not have the power to change events that occurred on the dark side in Vietnam. However, I do have the literary ability to choose memories that have a more upbeat tone. I decided to focus on a few interesting memories that may bring to mind similar reflections from other veterans who served in Vietnam.

Before we get into the real "ham and lima beans" narrative, it might be helpful to provide some background information about my personal situation. I came from a middle class family and was the first child to ever receive a 4-year college degree. I was a Distinguished Military Student at the University of Cincinnati, graduating in 1966. The DMS award afforded me the opportunity to accept a Regular Army commission rather than a normal Reserve Army commission. Three important military criteria came attached to the DMS designation. They were: (1) I would serve in one of the Army's combat arms branches, (2) I would receive orders to attend Airborne School, or Ranger School, or in my case I had orders for both schools, and (3) I would be given the opportunity to select my first duty station. For the later, I chose Europe thinking that a little on-the-job experience might not be a bad thing before heading to 'Nam where the real bullets were flying. My 18-month tour in Europe resulted in two promotions, so I held the rank of Captain upon my



arrival in Vietnam. My tour in Vietnam took place from December, 1968 to December, 1969.

Being a typical college grad, I had not thought much about life in general, my future, personal values, or even my ethics. In retrospect, I think I was a bit naïve about most things. Nine weeks of Ranger School changed all of that. Only about 20% of my Ranger class (many were West Point graduates) actually completed the course. But those of us who received the "Ranger Tab" knew about leadership, dedication, commitment, loyalty, and integrity. We also knew how to deal with adversity and the importance of teamwork. And most important, I knew myself.

I volunteered for Vietnam because I thought I would be on the right side of history years later when it was all said and done. When that first bullet whistled by my head, and when they continued to fly during my tour, I knew I would have to adapt to the new realities of war - or pay the consequences. The Vietnam War did several very important things for me. It changed my entire outlook on life, it defined my priorities and values, and it gave me a sense of commitment and perseverance. I cannot count the number of times I have heard people complain about how bad they have it here in the United States. Vietnam proved to be a virtual textbook on the meaning of "bad." It was a place filled with unrelenting misery, daily adversity, real fear, and tough choices. Fortunately I created ways to deal with each of those issues. I found that I could function effectively under the most challenging conditions. Sometime early in my tour I believe my focus also changed from personal survival to group survival, adapting the motto of the Three Musketeers, "One for all and all for one."



Vietnam was a place where you could laugh, cry, pray, curse, face outright fear and panic, feel alone and be mentally isolated, all in the span of a few hours. Your entire emotional spectrum was tested on a daily basis. It was a place where you wanted a close friend and need a buddy. But it was also a place where you were afraid to maintain lasting relationships for fear that they would not survive your time in Vietnam. It was a place where you counted days until your orders arrived sending you back to "the world." It was a place where time could stand still for extended periods and also a place where events could move at warp speed. Vietnam was a place of beauty during quiet times and a place of death and destruction during engagements with the enemy. It was truly a place filled with conundrums.

I had my meeting with the Grim Reaper early in my tour. About ten days in country I hopped on a chopper that took me to a new fire base literally situated in the middle of nowhere. There was thick jungle completely surrounding the base, there were no roads, it was located in a shallow valley with multiple hilltops surrounding it. The first evening I was there we were attacked with a heavy barrage of mortars. I had spent most of the day filling sandbags for a simple foxhole. As I was sitting down with a plate of food from our makeshift mess, the real "mess" was about to unfold. The first mortar round hit about 40 feet in front of me, severely wounding a soldier who was headed to the perimeter. I dove into my foxhole and grabbed my rifle. It was then I felt the Grim Reaper smiling at me. I had no way to fight back against a mortar attack. I thought maybe this would be my day to die. The mortar attack continued for about 5 minutes until our base camp mortars and artillery pieces began to return fire. We sustained heavy casualties, but the Grim Reader left me standing. During those minutes it seemed my entire life flashed through my mind. I felt fear but my panic was gone. I knew what I needed to do and started about doing those things. Later that evening, I felt a sense of accomplishment because I had beaten the Grim Reaper. I surely was not

invincible, but I had erased any doubts about how I would react under fire. I felt I had some control over my destiny. I knew how to respond in difficult situations with logic, purpose, and resolve. Most of all, I recall trying to maintain my sanity in the midst of absolutely insane conditions.

Vietnam was a place that provided long lasting memories. There was the oppressive heat and the unrelenting rains during monsoon season, the leaches on your legs from wading through rice paddies and streams, and the raunchy brown drinking water laced with purification



tablets. Then there were the C-4 explosives you took out of claymore mines to use as cooking fuel, the C-rations that were so old the chocolate had turned white, the awful smell of kimchi, and of course the rice and mystery meat available at your favorite roadside deli. Your sense of smell could easily pick up pot along any defensive perimeter and the distinctive odors from cordite during artillery fire missions. My most memorable smell has to be the burning dung from the latrines in base camps.

I remember trying to pretend that I was not the prime target of every enemy sniper when holding the radio handset to my ear and standing next to my RTO. I remember "popping smoke" to mark our location at the end of a successful mission. There was the thrill of riding on a "slick" with the doors open, and at the same time trying to ignore the bullet holes you saw in the side of the chopper. There were the endless rumors swirling through the grapevine where information traveled at light speed and much more efficiently than any military network. There were the love letters and the dreaded Dear John letters.

I remember watching "Puff the Magic Dragon" cut loose at night; seeing the endless stream of tracer rounds was better than any fireworks show in the US. And finally, I remember the putrid smell of death, decay, and destruction from combat. It is a smell that is hard to describe to anyone who didn't serve in Vietnam. It never, ever leaves you.

Finally, there were two very good friends who made a difference to me while serving in the military. The first is Ranger Jerry Miller, my Ranger buddy in Ranger School and surely one of the few Air Force officers to ever earn a Ranger Tab. We spent nine incredible weeks together. We were a good team. Jerry served in Vietnam after completing Ranger School. The second man is Captain Craig Stewart, a JAG officer with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade at LZ English. He and I would spend our nights drinking a cold beer and talking about Ohio State football and the world in general. He helped me keep my perspective and sanity while at LZ English. I have lost track of both men but want to thank them for their friendship and their service. I found pictures of both men and included them with this article. Ranger Jerry Miller is the really big guy in the photo.



The bottom line for my 365 days in the Republic of Vietnam is quite easy to summarize. I am very proud to have served in Vietnam. I think I gave it every ounce of effort I had in my body and every resource I had to offer. The lessons learned in Vietnam and all those experiences can never be duplicated. My time in Vietnam has served me well over the last forty-five years. I could not have asked for more. I think about all those men and women who gave their lives in Vietnam and I truly honor their sacrifices. I wake-up every day knowing I will never encounter any challenges more difficult than Vietnam.

No regrets. No apologies offered. No apologies accepted.

**RANGERS LEAD THE WAY!**