

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia to Viet Nam Section Seven Rumors of War and Tall Tales I by Clenton Thomas, B Btry, '68-'69

Decided to put this into two or more groups, section seven will be the first and section eight will be the second. Being a medic I was probably exposed to lot more of what was Rumored to be going on. Although I'm not sure how reliable this information was. The reason I titled this *Rumors of War and Tall Tales* is because in some cases it is just a rumor or someone's tall tale. I suppose even so there might be some truth within them. Some of these I have personally been involved in and assure you that they really happened. Others I had minimal involvement in them and cannot state if I was given the whole truth. I'll be jumping from one event to the next and at different times and places. So with tongue in cheek I'll begin.

SHORT TIMER'S

One of the most dangerous times in our tour of duty is when we get close to going home. Somewhere in the last two or less weeks we relax and are not as watchful of things around us. One of the mechanics told me this: that a couple of "Short Timers" had went into Duc Pho to pick up some souvenirs for their family, girlfriend, children or friends back in the States. At the main gate to the base there were guards 24/7 and they had noticed some children playing in the dirt on the side of the dirt road that led into Duc Pho. Kids are kids and they didn't think anything strange about it. The two "Short Timers" had walked into the village and were returning to the base in the late afternoon and instead of walking in the center of the road where they would be safer. They were walking on the side where the children had been playing. When they reached the middle of the area where those children had been playing at, the ground erupted from a booby trap that had been set there. It killed both of them instantly.

It wasn't until the next day that we decided that we would go to the main gate and take a look at where it happened. So after the mechanic got off duty around five to six we went to the main gate. We did not go outside but there at the gate we could see the area where it had occurred at. It was far enough away that the guards could not clearly see what the children were doing, other than playing beside the road. They were not close enough to the gate nor were they in the middle of the road to cause an alarm among the guards. And it being children they did not

recognize it as being any danger. If the two men had been more alert it probably would not have happened.

While we were standing there we saw a jeep coming out of the village toward the Man Gate. It contained three GI's in it and they were evidently intoxicated, the jeep was all over the road as it came toward the gate. The guards opened both gates to give them plenty of room to get into the base. The two in the front of the jeep were laughing and shouting "Short". Most guy when they had a few days or weeks left in country would term themselves as "Short Timers" and some even made themselves a "Short Timers Stick". This consists of a short piece of bamboo and a fifty caliber bullet attached to it with a shoe string on the other end of it. They would waive it around and shout "Short". This was what the guys in front were doing. The third one in the back seat was leaning over the side throwing up. When they got inside the gate, I noticed that the one throwing up, his puke was a greenish looking puke. Oh my God! I'm a medic, so I called out to them and they stopped. The other two was shouting and carrying on, and responded to my question about the one throwing up. *He's all right he just ate some Monkey Meat.* I told them when they got back to their unit take him to the aid station and let them check him out. They said they would and took off. *"Yea, I passed the buck on, let their own medics deal with it. Better them than me."*

SHOOT, ASK QUESTIONS LATER!

There was this guy that was in HQ that was a distant relative to me, a third or fourth cousin to an Aunt by marriage. Don't remember his name and I haven't seen him since (will call him Tuck). Tuck was a truck driver that was overseeing some Vietnamese workers. The base hired several Vietnamese men to do odd jobs around the Base, some would work with the water supply truck filling showers etc. Others were hired to fill sand bags for use in building bunkers. Several of them had been caught pacing off distances from buildings to a visible landmark so that "Charlie" could sight in on the landmark and adjust their mortars or rockets to hit other key locations on the Base. I heard that Tuck had some workers outside the Base filling sand bags one day. One of them snatched a sand bag and took off running with it. Tuck tried to get him to stop by shouting for him to "Dung-Lai" and when he wouldn't stop he shot him. Don't remember if he killed him or wounded him.

Some would think that this wasn't worth shooting someone over, what's a three or five cent bag compared to the life of a person, even a Vietnamese. Before we judge let's consider the real value of the bag. In section five @ Chu Lai I related to you about a booby trap that they used in training. Remember that a trench shovel was used to get us off the trail and spring the trap. A common sand bag could have been used instead of a shovel to kill our troops. On our base in Duc Pho and on each of the LZ sand bags were a common material used to build with.

Or reckon how much explosive a sand bag could hold and be used to toss into a hooch or bunker. How many troops could be killed with just one five cent sand bag? When you consider the possibilities that the enemy could use it for, might be the cost of a bullet offsets the cost of a bag. I'm not saying all Vietnamese are bad people, but the problem was that you could not tell the good ones from the bad ones.

THINGS THAT GO BOOM IN THE NIGHT

While in Duc Pho we had on several occasions heard muffled explosions mostly at night. Every time we would fire a mortar or artillery round it was expected to explode. That wasn't the case sometimes it would be a dud. When this happened and the VC found it they would bring it home with them to remove the explosive from it to make a booby trap. When we heard those muffled explosion in Duc Pho it usually meant that the dud went boom and killed everyone in the house.

WE KILLED HER BABY

Most of the hooch's on the base had a "Hooch Maid", please don't think that the term "Hooch Maid" is used to describe a woman of low moral character. Those were called Madam "K". Although I cannot vouch for each and every one of them in that respect, but I know that our Hooch Maid in the aid station was a very respectable Lady. Lien High was the lady that was our hooch maid. She came in from Duc Pho each day and cleaned the Aid Station for us. It was also our living quarters for anywhere from two to three medic's. She spoke enough English that she could converse with us. She called Thomas Zigmant "Tom" and she called me "Thomas". We kidded her a lot, and we would accuse her of pacing off targets for the VC. Especially if the base was hit by mortars the night before. She would exclaim "I no VC, VC very bad, I not bad. At other times we would hint that she was a Madam "K", now she really would get upset when we did this. But we would always let her know that we were kidding with her.

The fact was that she was married to a soldier in the South Vietnamese Army. He was stationed up around the DMZ and it had been three months since she had received any word from him. She didn't know if he was alive, wounded or dead. We would question her often whether she had heard any word from him. And would try to encourage her to have hope that everything was OK and eventually she would hear from him and he would be alright.

It wasn't but a few weeks after those months of not knowing that, she told us one morning that she wouldn't be in to work for three or four days. She informed us that the Army was going to take several of the wives in Duc Pho up to Chu Lie to visit with their husbands. She had gotten word from him and that he was alright. She was one happy woman and had a smile on her face that reached from ear to ear. We rejoiced with her and told her that it would be hard on us without her, but

we would manage somehow. When she returned she had a song in her heart a smile on her face and even told us a little about their visit.

One of the things I noticed about the Vietnamese was that they didn't seem to sweat like we did. It was very hot in country and most of the time we had sweat on our forehead or running down the tip of our nose and our shirts were wet with sweat. The only way you could tell that a Vietnamese was hot was, if you saw sweat on their upper lip just below the nose. I image a lot of it had to do with what they wore, but also living there all their life, they were more acclimatized to the hot weather. When I returned from Viet Nam the weather was cool around 54 degrees and I was freezing. Most of the time Lien wore a blouse with sleeves that reached almost to her wrist. There was one day that the blouse she had on had shorter sleeves that came just below her elbow. We were meeting each other in front of the Aid Station. In speaking to her I noticed that about midway of her left arm there was a scar angled down at about a 45 degree and some two inches long. I realized that it was a bullet wound. Being curious I asked her what had happen it looked like a bullet had creased your arm.

This is her story, in broken English that she told me. Before I come work here, a lot of Mama-San worked in the rice paddies. The mama-san with smaller Baby-San would take them to the rice paddies with them and put them on the dikes so that if baby-san got hungry or wet she could go take care of baby-san. One day I work in rice paddies with several other mama-san and papa-san we had our baby-san together on a dike. A helicopter was on patrol and would be passing over us. One of the gunners had a firecracker and decided that he would lit it up and throw it out over us just to see us all run from it. He did not tell the other gunner what he was going to do. When he threw the firecracker and it went off, the other gunner thought they were receiving small arms fire. And when he saw the Vietnamese papa-san and mama-san running he opened fire with his M-60 on them. Everybody was running in different directions, except the mama-sans that had a baby-san on the dike. I ran over and snatched up my baby-san and took off running.

As I was running I wondered why my baby-san was not crying, with all the noise and my snatching him up and the running, it should have started baby-san to crying. I felt something wet and warm and figured that my baby-san had wet himself. But why wasn't he crying he always cried when he was wet. I stopped running to see why baby-san was not crying, I saw that a bullet had grazed my arm then entered into my baby-san killing him.

At this point with shock I asked: **Lien! Why are you working for us? We killed your baby! Why aren't you out there trying to kill us?** She placed her hand on my arm, "Thomas you no understand!" They took me to the Base Hospital and doctor fix my arm and he talked with me and everything all right now. He helped me get this job and clean for you and the others. I feel like

that due to the language barrier between us, she was unable to express all of what transpired between her and the doctor. Some may say that the doctor getting her a job on the base was an appeasement for the loss of the baby.

From her eyes, body language, and with what she said I didn't get that impression of what the doctor had done for her. At this point in my life I was not a religious person. I was a Baptist purely by the fact that on the enlistment papers I put down Baptist as my Religious Preference, so that made me a Baptist. But the impression I got, concerning this doctor was that he was a Christian man and he had explained to Lien about forgiving those who had done you wrong. Lien had found something that few people do and that was the art of forgiveness, and her job was a therapeutic way of working out her forgiveness toward us. I believe that if she had not worked with us and come to know us, her life may well have centered on revenge toward us instead.

When it came my time to return home, I would spend a couple of days in Duc Pho getting my paper work done, turning in my rifle and aid bag. I spent the night back at the Aid Station and the day I was to leave I met with Lien in front of the Aid Station. She asked me: "**Thomas go home**"? I nodded my head that I was. She then asked "**Thomas come back**"? No, Lien when I go home I stay, never come back to Viet Nam. "**You go home, you never come back! You forget Lien, not remember her no more!**" No Lien I will never forget you! You are my friend.

It's been almost fifty years now and over the years I often thought about her and although I never met her husband. I've wondered if they suffered when their country was taken over by the North. I have shared her story many times and in many places over the years, and each time I did I'm reminded of our friendship and I feel blessed to have known her. I have a feeling that I'll see her again when we cross over into Heaven.

24/7 GUARD DUTY

On each base HQ or LZ there were guard bunkers that were manned around the clock, while others were only manned during the night. Down from the Aid Station there was a night time guard bunker. I had guard duty only twice while I was in Duc Pho at this bunker. If there had been only one medic in HQ battery I would not have been required to pull guard duty. On one of the nights I was on guard duty, by myself, I was sitting on a stool in front of a pole with my back leaning against it. In front of me was a three layer sand bag shelf and I had my M-16 laying on it. There was a speaker hung on the side of the pole next to my ear and the Sergeant of the guard had some country music playing on it. The bunker was 12 to 15 foot wide and I was in the center section of it. There was only one door and it was in the rear of the bunker slightly off to my right some twelve feet from the front of the bunker.

The music was having a drowsy effect on me, when I sensed that someone had entered inside the bunker with me. With a slight turn of my head I seen a dark mass out of the corner of my eye. I slowly started easing my hand toward my M-16. I was within a couple of inches of the rifle when Captain Lance, figuring I was either going to turn and shoot or challenge him, clears his throat. I quickly have the rifle in my hands, as I do a 180 degree turn, and after a brief pause call out. "Halt Who Goes There". Truth be known I was so scared I forgot at first what I was suppose to say. He identifies himself and comes on in and we talk a little while and he goes back out. I didn't get sleepy at all for the rest of the night.

WHEN FEAR TAKES OVER

There was one guard bunker that was manned 24/7 that was close to our area. It usually had at least two guards at all times. This bunker unlike the one I was in had two doors and they were up front on each side of the bunker. There was a report that one night while one guard was sleeping and the other one on duty. The one on duty thought he heard some noise on the outside of the bunker. He was going to go out and circle around the bunker to enter in the opposite door. Before he returned, the sleeping guard woke up and not seeing the other guard, thought that the VC had captured him, and would be coming back for him. As he took up guard duty, he saw someone coming in the door to the bunker, fearing it was a VC coming back for him. He shot and killed what he thought was a VC but it was the other guard coming back in after checking on the noise he had heard. That day we lost two men. One in death the other one in mind.

YOUNG WARRIORS

When I moved to Tifton, I met and became friends with a guy named Gene. Gene and I were drinking buddies and worked with the State Sign Department. As a matter of fact he married Sissy's sister Brenda, she died from cancer a year or so after they married. Gene had also served in Viet Nam, and I can't remember where it was. We were talking one day about VN and he said that he saw this with his own eye's. He was going to a bar in the village close to the base he was on. Just before getting there he noticed that an Army Jeep was parked in front of the bar. It was empty and he figured they were inside the bar having a drink. Before he reached the bar a young boy around ten or twelve ran out of a side street. Went up to the jeep undid the fuel cap and shoved a hand grenade into it and took off running.

The grenade exploded wrecking the jeep but didn't hurt anyone. There was a Mercenary that saw what happen and he shot the boy. He then went to the boy and taking out a knife he removed the ears from him. This was done as proof of a VC kill and was the way he was paid for his service. One of the things you have to take into account is that Viet Nam has been at war with one country or another for some thirty years. There was a generation or two that knows only war. It was said that in

Duc Pho there was a mountain call Mount Montezuma, it had one road up to the top of it and reports were that so many different nations of people had set booby traps on it and no one knew where they were. So you only stayed on the road that led up to the top of it. I visited one of our Artillery guns, on top of it one day.

“On top of Montezuma, one fine day, my buddies and I were drinking away.”

Don't remember what Battery had a gun on Mount Montezuma but a couple of their men from that Battery was in Duc Pho and wanted to visit with them and they knew some guys in the motor pool. They talked them into checking out a truck and taking them up the mountain. I was invited to go along with them, they had a couple of bottles of whiskey. So up the mountain we go. When we got there the gun position had a full crew. The deal was only the ones not on duty were to drink.

That was the way it was supposed to be. We had polished off one bottle and was well into the second when in need of some fresh air I went outside. On one side of the gun position there was a short wall made out of logs, with a drop off on the other side of it. I looked over and saw a small plant on the slope down below. It looked like it was dry and I decided I would water it. Standing close to the wall I started pouring water onto it. I heard a jeep pull up behind me, still watering the plant I look over my shoulder and saw our Sergeant Major and his driver get out of the jeep and head into the bunker. Which I soon heard very loud voices with barked orders and a few choice words.

As I was finishing up with the watering I had just turned around when the Sergeant Major and his driver came out of the bunker. The driver headed to the jeep and the Sergeant Major headed toward me. There was a strong wind blowing on the mountain because I was standing there swaying from it. The Sergeant Major was a tall heavysset man I believe he was from Hawaii. The wind didn't cause him to sway at all as he came toward me. Stopping in front of me, *“Doc I would expect this out of those other men but it surprised me to see you among them. I would have thought you would have known better.”* To which he turns around and headed to the jeep, gets in and they leave. I'm standing there and thinking “OK? Whatever!

WHY I WANT TO BE CREMATED

This story starts with two Mormons, one of them I can't remember his name. He was real strong on a Bible Character and his weapon that he slew a Giant with. His name was David and the Giant's name was Goliath. This Mormon had constructed a sling from two leather strings and a leather patch. And he practiced with it just about every day and was quite good with it and hit his target quite often. I tried it several times and could not hit the side of a barn. The other fellow name was Gentry, they talked me in to attending a couple of their meetings. It was

just the three of us and being a Mormon was not my bag of tea. So that didn't last very long. Gentry wanted to become a "SRRP" (Short Range Reconnaissance Patrol) or he would take being a "LRRP" (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) if he couldn't do the other one. These were guys that went out into the jungle by their self armed with a weapon, a radio, food and water. They would spot enemy movement call it in and we would shell them. They would stay out for a week or so even longer if they were a LRRP.

While on the LZ one day I noticed a chopper coming in from a different direction than normal. It had something on a line extending from the chopper. When it got closer I could determine it was a man on the end of the line. Probable a SRRP. The only thing was he was hanging upside down, the chopper took him to the Infantry side of the hill, so I don't know if he just lost his grip on the line or he was wounded. When choppers picked up a SRRP or LRRP in the field most times they would drop a line because they didn't have a landing field to set down in. Anyway this was what Gentry wanted to do, don't know if he ever got to do it.

Each Mormon was required to do two years of missions, I believe that they were hoping that the time spent in service doing mission type work would count. Gentry decided to volunteer to work in a medical clinic that the Army had in Duc Pho and wanted me to go alone with him. I really didn't want to go, but he was my friend and it would help him, so I went alone. He had checked out a jeep and we headed into Duc Pho. Gentry was driving and had gotten some direction to the Aid Clinic. It was off on a side street to the main drag. We were riding along looking for a certain sign that would led us to the street we needed when all of a sudden Gentry swerved sharply.

Now jeeps didn't have seat belts and when he swerved it almost threw me out. My first thought was that he had seen a booby trap in the road and had swerved to miss it. When we got straightened out, I asked what the heck was that for. In answer he replied I'll show you and putting it in reverse we backed up a dozen feet or more. There laying in the middle of the road was a dead Viet Cong. He had been laying there for several days by the way he looked. His stomach was all swollen and full of maggots and flies were coming and going out of his mouth and nose. His eyes were gone and flies were in them also. I made up my mind right then and there my body would be cremated when I passed.

Gentry told me that because he was a VC nobody would touch him not even his own family. If they did they would be killed because it would look like they were sympathetic with the VC cause. And that it might be several days or even weeks that he would lay there untouched. Then at sometime late one night some Buddhist Monks would come gather up the remains and take it somewhere and bury him and nobody would know where he was buried at not even his family.

We found the road that we needed to go to the Clinic. When we arrived I'm not sure what they had Gentry doing, but I was shown into a room with a patient waiting on a medic and it would be me. He was a young man or boy that had stepped on a land mine or a booby trap some weeks earlier. He was in for a checkup and a bandage change. His entire right leg from just past his big toe up to his hip was bandaged. It was dirty and stained with pus and blood. I was to take the bandage off, clean the wound and apply some green salve to it and put fresh bandages on it. It took me over an hour to get the dirty bandage off him. I had to go slow removing it so as not to damage the wound or reopen it. Plus I didn't want to cause him undue pain, even though he was a Vietnamese he was still a human being.

When I got the bandage off and the gauze under it, I could see to what extent he was wounded. It looked like a bolt of lightning traveling up his leg. His wound started just past the big toe, traveled toward his ankle, a part of it went under the ankle and down toward his heel. Back at his ankle it went up over the top of the ankle on the inside of the calf and up to the knee joint. At the knee joint on portion of the wound went across the knee and the other portion went on up the inside thigh toward his crotch. Where it shot off to his right side toward the hip bone. Now from the main wound trunk line there was busted skin shooting off to the side of it on both sides. I then had to clean the wound area and remove any dead skin and after the Doctor had a look at it I applied the green salve over the area. Wrapped it with gauze and secure it at the top. Then I had to apply an ace bandage over all that. All told I had spent almost three hours on him. ***Would like to pause here and I'll ask you to join me in a Liverwurst and Sardine Sandwich?*** Just kidding wanted to see how strong a stomach you had.

On the way back to the base Gentry informed me that for all my time and supplies I used on my Patient. It most likely wouldn't stay on his leg for more than 30 minutes if that long. To my question of Why. He told me that when he got home he would carefully remove the bandages scrape off the salve. Fold it up where the salve would not get dirty. Find some old rags and rewrap his leg with them. The bandage with its medicine he would take it and sell it on the black-market. Most likely wind up in some VC camp and be used to patch up some VC so that he could fight and kill some more of us. Within a couple of weeks or sooner he would return to the Clinic and go through the same process again.

HEAVY LEAD

When I first arrived in Duc Pho, I was directed to the Armory to be issued an M-16 Rifle. It had a strap on it to carry it on your back. Problem was that the rifle was totally on my back with the barrel sticking straight in the air and stock down. To get it in action I would have to remove it off my shoulder and get it turn around

and up in a firing position. My having to deal also with my Aid Bag on the other shoulder would slow me down also. Now I wanted a weapon to protect myself and also any patient I might be assisting. I wasn't too keen on being killed because I could not defend myself.

So I decided that what I needed was a Pistol, that way I would have a weapon accessible that was easy to reach and I could take care of my patient using both hands if needed. I mention this to one of my friends (believe it was Ince), he said he would go with me and after I got it he would take me out to a spot on base that I could practice with it. There was a 55 gallon drum dump where empty barrels were kept. So we went to the Armory and I turned in my M-16 and was given a 45 magnum Pistol with a holster and two boxes of bullets.

Ince took out to the barrel dump, the barrels were in a recessed area and they were spread out so that a person could walk in-between them. Standing above them I loaded the pistol up and Ince told me he would stand off to the side of me and let me know when I hit one of them. This would help me because the noise from firing the pistol would prevent me from hearing it hit a drum. This was to be the first time I had fired a pistol, I was an expert with a M-16. And did not figure it being any different with this pistol. So gripping it police style I began popping caps.

Every two or three rounds I would ask Ince if I had hit any. Each time he would shake his head no and I would fire a few more. I emptied the pistol and reloaded and fired all of them again. After loading the pistol again before I could fire again. Ince told me: Doc the 45 has a heavier load than a M-16, that means that the bullet drops faster and you will need to aim higher. So I looked between my feet to see how many of them had rolled out of the barrel of the pistol. You know I didn't see a one laying on the ground and that surprised me because I hadn't hit a barrel yet and did not know where they had gone. After using up a box and half of bullets without a single hit. I decided that I needed my M-16 back. So back I go to the Armory and told the Armory Sergeant that I wanted my rifle back, I couldn't hit a thing with this pistol.

I still had the original problem with how to make it easier to carry and bring it into action faster. It took me two weeks to figure out what to do. I finally took the strap off and rearranged it so that the barrel was pointing downward away from my body. The strap was over my shoulder and the trigger was close to my waist. I could walk with it in a ready to lift up and fire position. ***John Wayne didn't have anything on me.*** The only thing that bothered me was that those 55 gallon drums didn't have any bullet holes in none of them.