

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia to Viet Nam Section Twelve

From Duc Pho to LZ San Juan

by Clenton Thomas, B Btry, '68-'69

Convoy to Chu Lai

I had walked into the Aid Station one day and Tom Zigmant told me that there was a plan to go to Chu Lai for the Bob Hope Show. Would I like to go, if not he would. He told me that he and George Karsiladze had already been the year before. There would be several trucks going and they would also pick up some supplies that was needed. There needed to be a Medic on the Convoy, so one of us is required to go. I agreed to go and he said that I could either ride in the first vehicle with Captain Lance. Or I could ride in the last vehicle that had a driver and an M-60 gunner. After a minute or so I told him I would ride in the rear vehicle. I didn't have anything against the Captain, as a matter of fact I liked him. But what I considered was that if I was in the front of the convoy, I would not know if anything happened behind me. Where as being in the rear I could see if anything happened and could react faster.

It was a milk run up to and back from Chu Lai. The only event that occurred was we were delayed going up, due to the mine sweepers having to clear a section of the road ahead of us at one point. I rode with Markham and Whitney and we went to the South China beach there in Chu Lai (it was on the base). The next day was the Bob Hope show and we all went to it. I enjoyed most of the show the heat was extremely high I reckon because of so many troops congregated into one location. I was at the Viet Nam Wall display in our County and they had a tent with a big screen TV and they were playing the full version of Bob Hope in Chu Lai 1968. There was one portion where I saw a clip that I was in. Been trying to find an uncut cd or video ever since and have not been able too. I got one that was cut and it showed only portions of Chu Lai and I was not in it.

FROM DUC PHO TO LZ SAN JUAN

In April of 69, I went into the Aid Station and Tom and George informed me that I had been in Duc Pho for six months. It was now time for me to spend the next six months on a LZ. There was two Medic due to come off, one on "C" Battery and the other one on "B" Battery, I could choose either one that I wanted. Tom told me he had served with "C" Battery and would recommend them. In Basic

and in A.I.T. I had served in "B" Battery so I didn't see any reason to swap now. So the next morning I caught a ride on the resupply chopper headed for LZ San Juan. I was to replace Tom Cowan he was still on the hill for another week when I took his place. He introduced me to Lance and Ramsey, I would be bunking with them.

"B" Battery had just made the jump to LZ San Juan some two or three weeks prior to my coming. And construction was going on everywhere you looked. The spot for our Hooch had been dug out and some of the wooden beams (4"x 6") had already been placed in it. When the jump was made building material was also brought in and it was given out on a first come, first serve basis. If someone had gotten to the good stuff first you might be able to trade for it. Both Lance and Ramsey had bargained for some 3/4 inch plywood and for some more 4"X 6" studs. In Ramsey's case he traded with who would get electricity for their hooch first. Electricity would provide light and run a fan. And Lance traded with who got a phone first. Since most of what we needed had already been secured, there wasn't anything more to trade for. My part was in building and filling sand bags to cover it with.

We just didn't fix our own place, but would lend a hand wherever it was needed. For several weeks we either slept out in the open or under a half metal culverts with sand bags over it. Some of the guys built their hooch out of the empty 105's Ammunition boxes. They would fill them with sand and stack them on top of one another. With the material we had for our hooch it was in our opinion the best built and the most secure. The Battery Commander's hooch was built next to FDC above ground I believe, the first time with Ammo boxes, and it fell in after a couple months. He was constructed another one and it was sunk lower in the ground where the walls were not as high. It also had off to one side of it joining it with the Chief of Fire hooch, his door faced gun one. Whereas the BC's door faced FDC, the inlet into his hooch had six or seven steps that led down into it. With an ammo box wall on both sides of it. Plus the walls had sandbags beside it.

Lt "B" built himself a one man hooch close to the area the other hooch had been that had fallen in. He would not let anyone help him build it. In my photos there is a picture of it.

Inside the B.C. hooch there was a hall way to the left of entering into it. The halls inside wall, had a doorway that led straight into the B.C. quarters. Back in this hall way as you entered in there was racks for storage of the mail. It was my job to get the mail bag off the resupply chopper and put any outgoing mail on the chopper. Each one of the gun positions had a mail slot, FDC, Ammo, the BC, LT's, and our hooch also had one. The BC was very strict on me sorting the mail quickly and into the correct box. Of course someone in FDC might put the mail on the chopper or take it off when I didn't know when the chopper was due. But they

would let me know it was there so I could sort it. The bad part about being the mail man was I delivered any “Dear John” letters that came. These were letters from someone’s wife or girlfriend letting them know that they had found another person to take their place back state side. His name, the one who took their place, was always called “Jody”. When these letters came, it would cause a lot of pain and distraction for the one receiving it. And in many cases the distraction in a war zone could be fatal, to not only the one receiving it, but to those around him too.

There was a rumor that our Captain was once a Baptist Preacher, but it wasn’t exciting enough for him so he changed his M.O.S. (Method of Service). His favorite cuss word was G.D. Not trying to judge him, but in my opinion that didn’t speak to well of his faith, of course I was a self-proclaimed Baptist myself. And I could not say anything about cuss words, I was well versed in several myself. Several years ago Penny and I were teaching a Wednesday night Youth group and I was telling them that when they were saved they became Saints. When one of the girls said this: *I’ll tell you something! I’m saved and I’m going to Heaven! But I ain’t no Saint!* I believe we know ourselves better than anyone else. Whatever! We were stuck with him. He also had another little saying that I’ll discuss later on.

While I’m on rumors, I’ll take time to tell you another one. One of the guys was nicknamed “Country”. He was from Virginia, and he loved his whiskey. He was what we called a “Good O’L boy” everybody liked Country. Rumor had it that his Father worked in a Cannery, and they canned Tomatoes. And he would fill one of those big tomato cans with whiskey or moonshine and slap a tomato label on it and ship it to Country. EPA would have had a fit. I called Country back in May to confirm this rumor, found out that his father did not work in a cannery, but was a coal miner and he didn’t get his whiskey that way. But Country did have a supply line to get him some whiskey on the hill. In all probability the tomato can idea did happen, just not in Country’s case.

There was a day when H.Q. brought some veal out to the hill for a cook out. During the event I was filming it, and had laid my camera down. Country was well on to being high as a kite. He picks it up and starts filming with it, in the process he catches one of the guys, when he had stepped out of the shower and was drying off. It was not a full on view but a side shot, and I was reminded of an old song, *“England swings like a pendulum does”*. I would send the film off to be developed and they would send it back with a new 8mm film. I would send the develop film on to my sister. I didn’t have a projector, so I could not proof them but Janice did. Imagine her surprise while viewing one film, alone with her seven year old daughter, that scene pops up. I got a letter from her explaining why I should not send any more X-rated film to her. If I had known I would have warned her.

If anyone has stopped reading this and is pulling up my video on 6-11 Arty to view it again, don't waste your time, I did not include it in the video, I deleted it. If your wondering who it was, "let's just say: some things that happened on the hill, stays on the hill."

Our hooch was the party hooch, we had a get together every Friday night and any other time we could. On Fridays we received our two beers and two soda's. We did not have any way to cool them, until later so we drank them at room temperature 90 degree. When I first came on the hill, a Sgt. Hattacher was our Chief of Fire. He liked to party as much as we did and would join us often. Lieutenant "B" (he was called "LT B" because his last name was hard to pronounce and he didn't mind us calling him that) had received a bottle of whiskey and wanted to share it with the rest of us. So alone with him and Sgt. Hattacher, Ramsey, Lance, Orton and myself we gathered inside our hooch. At one point that night everybody except Ramsey and Lt B got up on one of the three beds, while they Indian wrestled on the floor.

Our BC decided that every Saturday morning he would do inspections. I don't know how the other hooch's did, but when he came into ours it looked like a tornado had come through it. There was beer cans and paper all over the floor along with soda cans too and various items of clothing. Most of the time the three of us were still in bed, with a hangover when he came. And none of us was clothed right, mainly in tee shirts and underwear. He'd chew us out every time and would leave shaking his head. Sgt. Hattacher would come in first and call us to attention and hold the curtain over the door so that the BC could enter in. A lot of us wore either a T-shirt and cut off pants, or some just regular pants no shirt. If we were headed down to the mess hall on the infantry hill we would dress up, pants, shirt, helmet, boots all laced and pants tucked in them. And of course we had our M-16 with clip in and a couple of extra clips.

Now, I will say this for the Captain, there for a few months we didn't have any way to cool out beer or soda's. So the Captain got us some ice shipped out to the LZ, from Duc Pho. It was produced by the Vietnamese in the town of Duc Pho. And it was made from unpurified water, although you could not tell it by looking at it. We were told not to eat the ice or put it in our drinks. He even went around to each hooch to remind us not to do this. I was by myself when he came into our hooch. He reminded me that I wasn't supposed to consume the ice in any way but just to set our drinks in it to cool them off. He glanced at a canister that we had in a recessed shelf in our hooch. It was like those that was at the mess halls where chocolate milk was dispensed from it had a spout on it that you could fill a glass from. But this one had a label on it that stated that it was not for milk or any dairy products. He asked me what it contained and I told him that it had our drinking water in it.

He asked me if I had put any ice in it, and I confirmed that I had. He got upset that I had and that I needed to empty it out. I said: *Sir, if you took a piece of plastic and put the ice in it and wrapped it up and tied it off. Then dropped it into the water it would cool the water but keep it separated from the drinking water.* I could tell that he thought it was a great idea and that I was smarter than I looked. I'm just glad he didn't say **show me**. I didn't tell no lie, I didn't say that was what we had done. I just gave him the idea of a working solution. Anyway it didn't make any of us sick from it.

I hate paper plates, when we went down to the infantry mess hall, leaving our hill there was a downward slope of about 40 degrees. Whatever we had and most of the time it was roast beef (we called it water buffalo) and mash potatoes and gravy, with homemade light bread. They would put it on a single flimsy paper plate, and we would have to climb back up the hill with the plate and all the extra gear we had. What was really fun was on a rainy day. The slope got slippery and the rain when it filled up the plate, washed the mash potatoes and gravy out of the plate, that is what was left if the plate hadn't started bending. Of course we had soggy bread and the rain washed all the taste out of the roast beef. I also hate soggy bread. A common saying was that LBJ had a cattle farm in Texas and furnished all the beef to the troops in Viet Nam. I don't know who got the choice cuts, but it sure wasn't us. Even today I don't care much for roast beef and my wife loves it.

COMING NEXT: "OH' BY THE WAY"