

# 6<sup>TH</sup> BATTALION, 11<sup>TH</sup> ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

*On Time, Sir!*

## From Georgia to Viet Nam

### Section 14

### On LZ San Juan

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

“BLOOD ON MY HANDS”

Most of the guys, whether in the Infantry or Artillery, build up a trust in their Medic. And will go to see their own Medic, when sick or wounded, except when it is an emergency, then they'll take whoever comes alone. And even the Medic's will stick with their own charges normally, but are still willing to see anyone when the needs arises, thus begins this event. Burt had come out of FDC to get me, there was an Infantry guard bunker on the side of our area and someone was wounded. I being the closest one to it, within a minute away. Infantry had requested that I respond to it, their people were on the way but would take them anywhere from five to ten minutes to get there. Burt told me, and he said he would show me which bunker it was, so I grabbed my aid bag, and we took off across our battery area. Reaching the bunker, they had a man down, and I inquired where he was hit. He lifted his left arm and every time his heart would beat, it would squirt out a stream of blood. It does not matter how many times you see a picture, nor how many times you were told about wounds. It is totally different when you experience it firsthand. For about ten seconds my mind went blank, then my A.I.T. training kicked in, but it only identified what type of wound it was. My Basic Training instruction told me what to do. I knew that I had to stop or slow the bleeding down or he would bleed out. My biggest question was, could I do the right thing and preserve his life, or would I fumble it and cost him his life. I was the first responder and the weight was on my actions.

I got out a field bandage to apply pressure against the wound, but I had to clear away his clothing to get to it. And blood was squirting all over my hands and arms. I told Burt to call me a dust-off and bring the stretcher leaning against FDC, and he took off running. I didn't know how he had been wounded, and if it was a bullet wound it might have an exit wound also. I asked the others what had happen as I also rolled him over some so I could check to see if there was an exit wound or any other wounds. One of the guys spoke up and said that they were playing catch with a hand grenade and it got stuck in his hand. When he was able to release it, it was closer than it needed to be and he got hit with some of its shrapnel. I've read

somewhere that the average age of troops in Viet Nam was eighteen and you wonder, why they were playing with a hand grenade.

Burt had made it back with the stretcher and informed me that a dust-off was on its way. When two infantry medics arrived a couple of minutes later as we were putting him on the stretcher, I still had pressure on his wound and I explained what had happened and what kind of wound he had. One of them said he would take over with the bandage and I surrendered it over to him. I did not fuss with them about it being my patient, because it was in the best interest of the patient that his own medics work with him. They were the ones he had the most confidence in.

I informed them that a dust-off was on its way and would land on our pad. Both of them agreed that our pad was closer than theirs plus they would have to take him down a steep grade if they used theirs. They hadn't brought a stretcher with them and was thankful that we had ours there to transport him. One of the medics took off toward the pad to guide the dust-off in and Burt went with him to coordinate the color of smoke he would pop and what color the dust-off pilot saw. I enlisted three other men to assist me in getting the stretcher to the chopper pad, while the other medic administered aid to the patient. It only took us three or so minutes to get him to and onto the dust-off chopper. The assisting medic never let go and went on into the chopper with the patient. He told the other medic to tell the Captain, that he was going in with him and would return as soon as possible. The rest of us cleared from the chopper and it took off.

The remaining medic thanked me for the help we gave them and told me he would send another stretcher of theirs to replace the one used. With that he returned to the infantry side of the mountain. In the command area we had a shaving stand with a dish pan, and usually a five gallon canister of water at it. Having blood on both hands and arms, I headed to the stand to wash up. When I got there, one of our guys was coming by the stand and I asked him to pour me some water into the wash pan, I didn't want to get blood all over the can. I washed my hands and arms with the bar of soap that was there. After drying them, I went to grab the pan to take it over to the trash dump site and empty it there, but I noticed that I still had a lot of blood on my hands and arms. Deciding I needed clean water, I went ahead and emptied the pan as planned. There wasn't any one around when I got back to the stand, so I had to pour my own pan full of water! Again I washed them using a lot of soap, dried them off and didn't see any blood on the drying towel, even after two times of drying my hands. Yet when I looked at my arms and hands I still had blood on them.

I knew that after washing them twice, they were clean but my eyes still saw them bloody. Over the next two days, I don't know how often, I would wash my hands because every time I looked at them they were bloody. I ate c-rations for those two days because if I went down to the mess hall, I would not know where

their wash stand was, so I could not wash my hands. With eating the c-rations, I could close my eyes and not look at my hands, but if I did I could go wash them again. I did not know what I could do to get the sight of blood off my hands, and I was tired of eating c-rations. I decided that I would go down to the mess hall the next day. Somehow I was going to have to learn to live with it until it went away.

Next day I got dressed to go down to the mess hall for a meal, and I was determined to not look at my hands some way or another. Dressed I headed toward the wash stand to wash my hands before heading on down the hill. I did alright going down by keeping my hands down by my side. Do you realize how hard it is to say you're not going to do something, then actually not do it. When I got down to the mess hall, there was a long short line, by this I mean there was not all that many ahead of me. But we had a ninety days wonder (new Lieutenant) instructing us to stay 5 meters apart. You could tell that it was bothering some of the troops, because it was like he had a tape measure making sure you were exactly 5 meters. It didn't bother me because it distracted me enough, that I wasn't looking at my hands.

I was somewhere about being the third or fourth person from being served, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. Turning, this guy asked me if I was the medic from the artillery unit. I confirmed that I was, he then told me that he just wanted to let me know that the infantry guy I had aided at their guard bunker, was going to be alright. And he would be out for about 4 to 5 weeks, and would be returning back to duty. I thought that you would like to know! You dang tooting I did, and I thanked him for telling me. When I was in A.I.T. we had a moto **“Conserving the Fighting Strength of our Troops”**. As medics it was our duty to see that our troops were in the best of health, and if sick or injured, to give them the medical aid they needed, so that they could return to active fighting duty.

After he left, I was soon at the serving line, where I was given a paper plate, (*did I mention how much I hated paper plates*). If it had been up to me I would have stacked that paper plate twelve plates high, but I was only handed one plate. I'm still not looking at my hands and I had the paper plate in one hand with my fingers spread out for balance, when food was placed on it. The first item put on the plate was mashed potatoes and of course, he placed it on the edge where my fingers were not covering that area. It started tilting and I had to use both hands to keep it from tilting and dumping out on the ground. And in the process of this, I had to look at what I was doing.

This included looking at my hands, which I discovered were not bloody at all, but were clean and free of any blood. I don't know if anyone can explain why, I kept seeing blood on my hands, and if my hearing that the guy was alive and well made a difference. I know I can't, I just know that it happened and that I am thankful that the blood went away.

## WHO'S THE BOSS

I have thought of many different titles on this next account, and finally come up with this one. The Arm Force's, which included all branches had what was called a "Chain of Command". And simple put, was that beginning with the person at the lowest rank. That person was under the next rank above him and so forth all the way up to the President of the United States. And that the lowest rank person could, if he had a complaint, protest it all the way up to the President, but he would have to go through each rank above him. Everybody had a "Boss" or "Bosses" above him, except the President. And everybody was directed to follow the orders of the rank above him. That was also how orders came down to each lower rank, until it got to the person who would be doing the job.

At the time of this story, I was a Specialist 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> class. When I left Viet Nam I was an E-4 or Specialist 4<sup>th</sup> class. I could give orders to those below me, but I had to take orders from those above me. Anyone who refused to obey an order from a rank above him, would find their self in heap, deep trouble! "Except".

I looked up and saw Burt headed toward me, and I knew that he was coming for the medic. Even before he reached me he was telling me, Doc Lieutenant "B", has passed out, and we could not get him to wake up. You need to come quickly. Grabbing my aid bag I took off to FDC where Burt told me he was. Lieutenant "B", was laying on the ground just in front of FDC. I knelt down beside him and felt of his forehead, which was hot to my touch and he felt clammy. I checked his pulse and lifted his eyelid to check his eyes which were rolled back. I had broken my thermometer some time back and had not received another one yet, so I could not tell how high his fever was. I had no idea of what was wrong with him. I thought it might be heat stroke, but the guys in FDC said: that he had been inside FDC where it was cool, up until he had walked out a few minutes before and had passed out. I could not get him to wake up either.

I told Burt to get me a dust-off on the way, and instructed one of the other guys to bring the stretcher around, so we could put him on it. As we were placing the stretcher beside him, Burt came out and told me that the Captain had not called for a dust-off. But had call the infantry and that they had a Doctor and he was coming up to see about Lieutenant "B". And we would wait and see what the Doctor said. If he thought we needed one, he would call one then. I'm toning this down a whole lot, but I told Burt to tell the Captain, that I am ordering a dust-off and I want it on the way Now, I don't care if the Surgeon General himself is coming, I want a dust-off on the way. I instructed the guys around me on how we were going to put Lieutenant "B" on the stretcher, when Burt came back out and said "Doc, your Dust-off is on the way.

A couple of minutes after we had placed Lieutenant "B" on the stretcher, the Doctor and a medic showed up. He was a Captain, and I stepped back and told him

all that I knew about Lieutenant “B” condition, which wasn’t very much. While he examined him I filled out a toe tag and tied it to his boot. The Doctor did basically the same thing that I had done. He asked me what his temperature was, and I explained, why I didn’t know. He asked the medic that came with him if he had a thermometer with him, he didn’t. At this point I told him, that I had ordered a dust-off and it should be here any minute now. He agreed, that was the best course of action, it would be better for him to be at a field hospital. Where they had access to more and better equipment to determine what was wrong with him. He was like myself, he could not figure out what was wrong with him. A couple of minutes later, we heard the dust-off coming.

The infantry medic took charge of getting Lieutenant “B”, to the chopper pad. I told Burt I would be popping purple smoke for the dust-off and he went into FDC to confirm smoke color with the dust-off Pilot. I went to the landing pad and popped purple smoke and guided the dust-off onto the pad. When we had Lieutenant “B”, loaded onto the chopper I told the medic on board what was wrong with him. We stood clear of the chopper and it took off for Duc Pho.

Lieutenant “B”, would spend a little over a month in the Hospital at Duc Pho. Around midway of his stay Cash and Davis went to Duc Pho and while there visited with him. They came back to the LZ and told me that they still didn’t know what caused him to pass out, but he was doing fine and might be released in a couple of weeks if his condition held steady or improved. We were notified that he was coming back to the LZ a couple of weeks or more later on. On the day he returned, I was going to the chopper pad to meet him, and was about midway of the Command area when, I saw him getting off the chopper. I could tell by the way he walked or something that he was coming to see me. He didn’t slow down to converse with anyone but made a bee line straight to me. I didn’t know if he was coming to chew me out about something or to tell me that they had figured his problem out and wanted to let me know. Before I could say a thing when he reached me, he stuck out his hand and said: ***“Doc, I want to thank you for saving my life!”***

I didn’t do nothing, because I didn’t know what to do. And I told him that: Lieutenant “B” I didn’t do anything. “Doc, when Cash and Davis came to visit me they told me about how you stood up to the Captain and got me a dust-off when he didn’t want to call one.” *I didn’t figure that was a lifesaving procedure, all I did was, do the best I knew how, to get him some help.* And I kind of surged it off and told him it wasn’t that big a deal. He came back with: Doc what you don’t know is that the medic that was on the dust-off later came to visit me to see how I was doing and he told me that I was lucky that I was on the chopper when I was. For a couple of minutes after we took off, I started throwing up and would have choked to death if I was still on the hill. The chopper contained the equipment to prevent my choking to death. He told me, your medic could not have prevented you from

choking to death, because he didn't have the equipment I had to deal with it. You would have died! **Doc, you saved my life!** They never did figure out what caused his problem.

What if, I had waited for the Doctor from the infantry to get there, would it have made a difference? Could he have done something, that I could not? If seeing that he couldn't do anything, and had told me to call a dust-off and took off before Lieutenant "B" started throwing up. I would most like have spent the next 47 years wondering if I could have done something to save his life. Would I constantly mental kick myself for not doing, what I did to get that dust-off there on time.

P.S. As I'm writing this story, on July 8th I had an occasion to speak to my Daughter ex-husband Ronald. When they were married several years ago, I met his twin sister at the wedding. According to him, she was three seconds younger than him. She was married and had three children. He told me that she had died a couple months ago. I asked him what happen to her and he told me that she had cancer of the liver. But that was not what killed her. She had fainted and in falling had hit her head on the corner of a table and it knocked her out. She started throwing up and had choked to death. There was no one there to help her. Evidently this was what could have taken Lieutenant "B" life, if he was still on the hill when it happen.

### "Except"

In the beginning I told you about the "Chain Of Command", that we all were under. The strength of our Arm Forces rest mainly on this C.O.C. and following our superior Officers orders, no matter what rank it was required by all. Then why was it that when I gave an order to my superior Officer "A Captain", he followed it and ordered a Dust-off. Simply put, I an E-3 out ranked him! My M.O.S. was a medic and I was the senior medic on the hill, until the Infantry Doctor arrived on the scene, then he was in charge. Because our Captains M.O.S. was different than mine, he was not qualified to give medical assistance to the Lieutenant. Thus he had to follow my orders as long as it was dealing in my M.O.S. When the Dust-off left the hill, I went back under his command.

There were three people, that had an altercation with Blivet Belly. There was most likely more, but I'm sure of these three. Lance was one of them, he charged Lance with being A.W.O.L. The second one I don't remember his name, and will give him a name for the sake of the story. And the third one was with myself. The next Section I've titled it "Almost Murder" and it can cover both of the last two, that had an altercation with B.B.