

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia to Viet Nam Section Two To Fort Sam Houston and Back to Georgia

I was put into a transport plane to fly to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. This was my first flying experience. We stopped at an airstrip in Oklahoma to refuel. There wasn't much at this airstrip; a couple of buildings and a whole lot of wheat fields. The wheat fields surrounded the airstrip. I walked out into it a little ways, the wind was blowing strong and causing the wheat to resemble ocean waves and it went on and on into the horizon.

Soon after I got there, I was approached about entering into "Platoon Leadership Training". I believe that's what it was called. This was a new thing they were doing. This program was designed to train enlisted men to become platoon leaders. Not only would we have to keep up our studies to become medics, we'd also be trained into a leadership position. There were several perks that would be enjoyed by those in this course. We would not eat in the general mess hall, but in a special one. Food would be of a better quality. And we would be advanced a rank above the other trainees and would always advance ahead of the others. Where the normal trainee was expected to maintain a dress code, we were expected to accomplish a higher degree of dress. Inspections were done twice as many times than regular inspections. I did not intend to make the Army my career. But, only making \$98 a month, a higher pay scale was appealing to me so I said "yes".

It was tough. A couple of weeks into it I was called into the AG's office and he informed me that my Grandmother had passed and that if I wanted to go to the funeral I would be given a couple of days leave. If I didn't have the money for a plane ticket the Red Cross would lend it to me and I could pay it back monthly.

If you knew my history in detail you could understand why it was important for me to go even if it was only for a couple of days. I'm here to tell you that two days was not enough time, especially when I spent a lot of it traveling to get there. Those two days set me back in my training, plus I was idled by her death for a couple more days. And I'm not saying that was the reason I was called into the First Sergeant's office soon after this. He felt, based on my low performance and the personal loss, I would not make the grade. I agreed and stepped-out of the program.

The barracks at Fort Sam Houston were old buildings, WWII era, and the floors were dyed red. We would have to buff them until they shined. I was assigned to the upstairs of one building. There was only one latrine and it was downstairs. We would spend most of the day in classes being instructed in various aspects of becoming medics.

We were taught to give shots, change bed linen with the patient still in the bed, how to assist a patient to use the bed pan, and even how to deliver a baby. We had to take a rectum temperature and practiced on one another. One minute you were the medic, the next you were the patient. Training also included treating the wounded in the field. Our job would be to patch the patient up enough that he would arrive at a Field Hospital alive. In this respect we were the First Responders, in a lot of cases. What we did would mean life or death for the wounded person. We were instructed that in any case, serious or not, to remain calm. Never give the wounded the idea that he would not survive.

Fear can kill, even in a minor wound. Point in case, I once heard that there were two new arrivals to Viet Nam who were assigned to an Infantry unit. On their first patrol they ran into fire from the enemy. These two men were beside each other when a bullet grazed the calf of one of them. It was not a deadly wound, but it was bleeding badly. The other man seeing the blood panicked and started screaming, **“You’re going to die”, You’re wounded!, “You’re going to die”** **Medic, Medic, He’s going die,He’s been shot, Medic, hurry before he dies.** The wounded man looks at his wounded leg, sees the blood, and dies from the fear the other man had put in him.

We came in one evening from classes to find all our bunks were turned over and bedding thrown everywhere. Foot lockers were turned upside down and emptied, all our shoes were in a pile. It took a while to relocate each person’s shoes. The floor was scratched where beds were slid across the room. We were told that we would be inspected in 2 hours and we had better pass. We all went to work and by inspecting time we had everything together and we passed. If I remember right, this was done because one bed was not done correctly.

One of the guys in our barracks, alone with one from another barracks, got together one evening and went to a secluded part of the base and got high on sniffing glue. When I heard about it I thought that was the most stupid thing in the world to do. Didn’t they realize that it could scramble their brains? Army beer must not have been strong enough for them or they didn’t have the money to purchase it.

One night I was polishing my shoes when one of the guys from downstairs came up. He announced that one of our guys was downstairs lying on the floor and was either drunk or high on something and we might want to get him upstairs before one of the Sergeants found him. I knew that if he was found in that

condition that we would all be in trouble, both up and down stairs. I went downstairs and, sure enough, it was the glue sniffer and he was high on glue. With the other guys' help we got him up and I put him on my shoulders. He was about 30 pounds lighter than I was. I took him up the stairs some 20 or 21 steps to the top and put him in his bunk.

A week or so after that we were coming up for a pass and four of the guys came to me and asked if I would like to go with them to **Boy's Town in Nuevo Laredo in Mexico**. It would "give us a chance to study the female anatomy", whatever that meant. The only reason they wanted me to go was that none of them were old enough to rent a car. I finally agreed and we went and I rented us a car. We headed for "Boy's Town". We had to cross over the border. This was the first time I had been out of the United States. I'll not bore you with what all I experienced there but let's just say it was an eye opener for me. Around 8:00 that evening we headed back. On our way, still in Mexico, we stopped at this liquor store. We bought a jug of Rum, a bottle of Vodka and I got a bottle of Tequila "with the worm".

At the border crossing we had all three bottles hid in the trunk. The Border Patrol Agent asked us if we had anything to declare; we need to tell him. I told him that the only thing I had to declare was inside me. He told us to pull over to the side and pop the trunk for an inspection. Of course it took him all of two seconds to find our stash. He then asked who had rented the car. That being me, I figured I was in deep trouble. He told me that I had a choice; I could let them confiscate it or I could pay the tariff. I'm thinking I don't have much money left and it would most likely be high on those three bottles. But I asked anyway, "**how much?**" I believe it was a \$1.25 for all three of them. I paid and we went on our merry way. I don't remember how we got them on Base, but we did.

We all started drinking our bottles. I drank a little over half of mine and the more I drank the bigger and longer that worm got to be. Decided I wasn't going to chance swallowing that worm so I went looking to swap it for some Rum. The guy that had the Rum had shared it with several others and it was gone. Then I went looking for the Vodka bottle. When I found it, there was a shot and a half left. My bottle had twice or more in it but I traded it anyway. I finished off the Vodka and went downstairs to the latrine then planned to head upstairs to bed and sleep it off. I came staggering out of the latrine to find the glue sniffer at the bottom of the stairs. It took me a little time to focus him in. "*What's up?*"

"Thomas, you're drunk! You carried me up the stairs and put me in my bed when I was bombed out, now I'm going to carry you up the stairs and put you in your bed". I did my best to convince him that I wasn't that drunk and also he was 30 pounds lighter than I was. He would not hear of it. He felt honor-bound to return the favor I did for him, and do it in the same manner that I did it. I argued

some more with him and got nowhere. *O.K. whatever!* So he put me on his shoulders and we started up the stairs. Now, I'll admit I was pretty well drunk when we started up the stairs. I could tell by his sluggish steps that he had too much weight on him. By the time we reached the top he was almost crawling on his hands and knees. There were several times I thought we was going back down faster that we were going up. If you've ever been on some ones shoulders going up the stairs, you'll understand what I'm saying: *I was drunk at the bottom, but sober as a Judge at the top.*

At the top of the stairs I was low enough to come off his shoulders onto my knees. When we stood up I thanked him for the ride, but it wasn't over yet. He said, "No you took me to my bed and I'm taking you to yours". I didn't try to argue. Back onto his shoulders I go. Now, you think a drunk staggers? You should have seen him hauling me down between those rows of bunks. Mine was on the far end but I knew we would never make it. So I lied, "there's my bunk right there, bottom one." He takes me over to it and drops me in it then turns and heads for his bunk and crashes into it. I gave him a little while then moved over to my real bunk.

On the last day in A.I.T. we woke up as usual, ate and were sent to a building where we would receive our orders. There was a basketball court out behind this building. We all had our duffle bags and gear with us. From around 8 o'clock to almost 2 o'clock we stood, sat, laid down or walked around. It was the end of the month and we were all broke and just about out of cigarettes. Those who had some cigarettes shared with the ones who didn't. Finally, they brought the orders out and began to issue them. Then they called out three names and they were to go to Germany. Then two more names were called out; they would be going to Hawaii. Then the Staff Sergeant says, "if your name has not been called, you're being sent to Viet Nam. So, out of a full Company, only seven were not sent to Viet Nam.

When I got my orders I was given a twenty-one day leave then would have to check-in at Atlanta Airport where I was to fly to California, then on to Viet Nam.