

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia To Viet Nam Section Three

Some of Life's Reflections

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

I realize that there will be some people who will not believe these accounts I'm writing about. I know what I have experienced and will, to the best of my ability and memory, share with you about it. There are some things about me that you might like to know. One thing you got to remember, I am Georgia born and was raised up in between Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida and I was schooled in both States. Of the two I'll take Georgia above Florida every day of the week. No disrespect intended.

My Mom and Dad separated when I was five years old and my sister was nine years old. Mom was sick and we lived with Daddy in Jacksonville, Florida. Mom went home to her parents to live in Waycross, Georgia and in 1952 she was declared a legal schizophrenic. Out of the next forty five years I had physical contact with her maybe seven times.

Daddy drove a truck and found it necessary to board us out with a family in Jacksonville, the Hansons. Mr. & Mrs. Hanson had three children, two boys and a girl, Iren she was my sister's age. The youngest boy was "Herman" but we called him "Hoppy" because he was a fan of "Hopalong Cassidy". Marvin was their oldest son, and he was a year younger than I was. Mr. Hanson worked at the base in Jacksonville, and he repaired watches on the side. He also collected buffalo nickels. Any time one of us kids got a buffalo nickel we would have to give it to him, of course he would replace it with a regular nickel. When Janice and I first came to their home we were taken to Mr. Hanson's watch repair room. We were given strict orders to never go into that room unless invited into it. He had small parts that he repaired the watches with and did not want us to damage or lose them.

I was in the first grade when we started living there and stayed until I was in the third or fourth grade. Around the third year I was there a family from Germany moved in across the road from us. They had a son who was a year older than I was, which put him bigger than I was. The three of us boys liked to play on their side of the road. Our side didn't have a dirt ditch like their side did and we would play with some farm toys in the ditch. Their son came out one day while we were playing, he was tall and had blond hair and was wearing some kind of uniform like

those in a boy's military school. He told us we needed to go back to our side of the road. He didn't like us being in his yard. Then he got to bragging about being a German and was of the Superior Race. And how he was much better than us because he had blond hair and was better physically and had a better mentality. He even snapped his heels together and gave us a hail Hitler salute. All this didn't impress us, but we did invite him to play with us. He just stated again that we need to move back to our side of the road, and went back inside his house.

We were not on his property, so we just kept on playing. In a little while I told Marvin and Hoppy that I needed to go to the restroom and that I'd be back shortly. Going back to the house and using the restroom didn't take very long. As I was coming out the back door, looking across to the ditch, I saw the German boy push Hoppy to the ground and when Marvin stood up to defend his younger brother he also knocked him down. When Marvin would try to get up, he would push him back down and was holding him down when I got back over there.

Hey! Why don't you pick on someone your own size? Well he stood up and tried to knock me down. I would not go down, instead I lit into him and in a little bit I had him on the ground and was telling him to say Uncle. Which if he had I would have let him up and offered him my hand and then invite him to join us in playing. Instead his Dad stepped out the back door and shouted to us, "boys I think that's enough". And told his son to come back into the house. *"When I had walked up to him before our fighting, I had seen what looked like someone peeking through the blinds in his house."* To this day I believe that his dad was watching and as long as his son was on top, he wasn't going to say anything. But my standing up to him and whipping him changed the game plan. Later Hoppy and Herman went back to the house, I stayed and played on. I was hoping he would come back out and we could pick up where we had left off.

When I did go home, coming through the back door into the kitchen, Mrs. Hanson told me to go wash up because supper was almost ready and that Mr. Hanson wanted to see me. I asked her where he was and she said he was in his work room. I knew I was in deep-deep trouble; they had heard about the fight. Back then if you did something bad enough to get a spanking by a teacher or some other parent, when your parents heard about it you would also get one from them. This was bad and I would be getting a double spanking out of this. Mrs. Hanson had a red plastic belt about half inch wide that could bring fire to your behind. My Daddy had a truck driver's belt, it was an inch and a quarter wide and it could make your britches smoke. He also had a razor strap that I had experienced several times. I just knew this fight was going to cost me dearly.

I knocked on the work room door and Mr. Hanson told me to come in. He was working on repairing a watch as I entered. There was a straight back chair to the left of the door. He told me to have a seat there while he finished up the repair he

was working on. Seated there I could see several things. He had a desk in the middle of the room and was seated in a rolling chair. Right next to me on the floor was an almost full two gallon pickle jar of buffalo nickels. Across the room I also saw two more jars full to the brim of buffalo nickels. I'm sitting there trying to take my mind off of what was coming and sweating bullets all the while.

Mr. Hanson finished the repair and rolled his chair around the desk until he was directly in front of me. "Clenton, I understand that you got into a fight with the son of our German neighbor today." I didn't try to make any excuses, all I could say was, **Yes Sir**. Clenton you see that jar of buffalo nickels beside you. "**Yes Sir**". I want you to reach inside there and get you one out. *What's going on here I'm in trouble for fighting, which is bad enough, now is he going to accuse me of stealing too? We never got a buffalo nickel back once we give it to him.* He had to tell me twice before I got one out. "Clenton, fighting is not a solution to a problem and I frown on anyone getting into a fight. And those who do, should be punished. Do you understand me?" "**Yes Sir**".

"And I also understand that he was picking on Hoppy and Marvin and that you were defending them. Is that what happened?" "**Yes Sir**". "I repeat, I do not approve of fighting and you boys should never fight. But, if that boy ever picks on Marvin or Hoppy again and you jump in there and whip him again I'll give you another one of those Buffalo Nickels for doing it. I'm proud of you for defending my boys."

So instead of a whipping I got a reward. But there again, a few days later we were asked did we have any buffalo nickels and yea, I had to return it to him. I never got into another fight with that boy again seeing as a couple of weeks later they moved. You might in a way say I've fought in two wars. I helped whip the Germans of WWII and then served in Viet Nam. Years later I found out that Marvin did not appreciate my defending him. Probably because of how Mr. Hanson praised and rewarded me.

I have a first cousin (Vernon) who was more like a brother than a cousin. At a family reunion last September he reminded me about this event. Vernon and I had thought about joining up under the buddy system the Army was offering and even went to an Army Recruiter to check it out. Well, I appreciate this Recruiter's honesty with us. He told us flat out that he could sign us up under the buddy system, but it would only apply to boot camp. And as Vernon stated at the reunion: "I wasn't going to do that if we could not do our whole tour together." Then he stated that when his number came up with Selective Service he was turned down because he had a history of Asthma. He then said it was probably for the best because he would most likely have been killed over there. I'm glad he didn't have to go.

When I was inducted into Service, I knew I would be going to Viet Nam, and I'm talking about from day one, and felt like I would not come out of it alive either. There were other things that concerned me also about being in Service. Could I kill another human being, would I be a coward and run, as a Medic would I save a life or would I freeze up and that person would die because of me. When I was on LZ San Juan, Lance and myself figured up how many men were on just the Artillery portion of the hill. If I remember right there were seventy two lives I was responsible for. While training to be a medic we were told that there was one piece of our dress uniform that we as a group could never wear. It was the Maroon and White shoulder cord. The reason we could not wear it was because one medic had committed a cowardly deed. The only way we would be authorized to wear one was if one of us did a heroic deed. I knew that I would not be the one to do that.

In basic training, we were told of how the VC would set up an ambush, they use an "L" shape ambush. They would find a trail that would have a barrier on one side or they would create one using booby traps. They would set up a machine gun in the direction of our travel. Then on the other side of the barrier they had riflemen positioned. When we entered the trap, some of them would close in the rear having us boxed in. We were instructed not to stay in the trap, but instead screaming as loud as we could, charge into the face of the riflemen. Our screaming and charging might scare them long enough that we could break out of the trap. True, some of us were going to die, but some of us would break free. Each person had to be willing to sacrifice their life for the good of the others.

We were told about the different booby traps they used. Of how they would fix traps by digging a hole and placing sharpened bamboo spikes in it. They would also urinate on them so that they would not only penetrate your foot, but cause it to get infected. The Army, to help protect us, placed steel sheets in the sole of the combat boots we wore. This helped when our foot was going into the trap. But they also fixed the traps where spikes placed at a downward angle would catch us when we withdrew our foot.

We were also informed that the VC had a killing order. First on the list was to kill the patrol leader. Normal shiny or outstanding rank identity would stand out and the bearer would become a target. Our rank was dark and blended in with our uniforms and we did not salute any officers when in the field. If they could not find him, the next in line to kill was the radio operator. The radio operator had a rougher time of concealing his radio so he would not stand out. Then the third person to kill was the medic. The medic did not have the white cross on his aid bag nor on his helmet, but still he had an extra bag that the others in the patrol did not have. And if he went to someone's aid that would make him stand out. Of course this did not lessen the danger for the other patrol members, but it was sobering to know that you were a special target if you were one of these people.

Before I reached Viet Nam I had no way of knowing that I would be assigned to an Artillery unit. As far as I knew I would be assigned to an Infantry unit. Was I scared” Hell Yes I was! Being assigned to an Artillery unit was a plus, but did not lessen the danger I would be in. I doubt that you could not have found one person that wasn’t scared to some degree coming in to Viet Nam. The Artillery bases would have loosely rolled barbed wire barriers around them to keep the enemy out. But a zapper squad could go through 300 strands of barbwire in less than a minute we were told. In the seven months I was on LZ San Juan we had two zapper squads hit us. One on our side and one on the Infantry side. We would also receive Mortar and/or Rockets many times.

This was to be the world I would be living in for 365 days, which turned into 409 days instead.

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