

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia To Viet Nam Section Five From Saigon to Chu Lai to Duc Pho

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

This was going to get real serious from now on!

With both feet in Saigon I could only go forward. As we went toward the new arrivals sign-in building, looking toward my left I noted the bomb shelter. This would become second nature from now on, wherever I was, I'd know where the closest bomb shelter was. Although we did not get hit that day, I like the others drifted toward this bomb shelter a little bit anyway. When the last of us came off the plane we saw a large group headed for the plane to go home. One thing I noticed right off was that this place stank to high heaven. Not just the base but the whole country. Best I can remember we spent a couple of days in Saigon. We were issued jungle clothing and boots. We had to exchange our money to government issued gook money. I was placed into the Americal Division and would be flown up to Chu Lai.

In Chu Lai we were housed in a large circus type tent. There were a hundred or more army cots set up in it. Most of them were taken, so we had to take those that didn't have personal effects on it. I would spend around three and a half weeks in this tent. The cot I had to take was close to an upright pole and it leaked when it rained. We arrived there during the latter part of the Monsoon seasons. If you're not familiar with what a Monsoon season is, it's where it rains for weeks on end, steady. I was issued a poncho and that's what I wore most of the time. And at night I would spread it over me to sleep. I had a constant dripping on it from the rain. When some of the other men moved out I was able to find a cot that was dry and I could sleep without a constant dripping of water. That wasn't the only thing that kept me awake at night. They told us that if Charlie hit us it would most likely be around one or two o'clock in the morning. For the next two months or so guess when I would wake up and just listen for something out of the ordinary for a couple of hours.

I would stay in Chu Lai longer than normal. My holdup in Chu Lai was due to getting my paper work done where I could be assigned to a unit. We also had to go through some "in country" classes. One of these explained about booby traps and

we went through a mock trail that had a booby trap on it. Each person had to walk the trail alone, they had a trap that was rigged to a pit that created an explosion when you tripped it. Very few would not trip it off. I'm thinking I'm from Georgia where there were lots of woods. I'd be a Daniel Boone and be one of those that didn't set it off. The instructor told us to look extremely hard if we found something in the path. So I begin my walk and I'm examining every tree, bush, the ground, up above me and on each side. I came to a bend in the path and on the other side of it in the middle of the trail a trench shovel was stuck up in the dirt.

Looking all around me, and I even got on my hands and knees to peer at that shovel. It was stuck in-between two trees and I would not be able to pass by it on either side. I thought about getting me a running start and jumping it, but there wasn't enough straight path behind me. And even if I did jump it there was the possibility that the trip was on the other side of it. Examining the area closely I figured that I could pass around it between two other trees on the left side.

Watching that shovel real close (*figured it might jump out of the ground*) I eased through on the left side, half way through there was an explosion telling me somehow I had set it off. I looked all around and still could not see the trip wire. Later the instructor brought us back and showed us where it was. The shovel was a decoy to get us off the path. When we went through the opening on the left there was a small limb that was against a tree. Wrapped around this small limb was a wire. On the tree there was also a wire. A leaf was inserted between the two wires preventing them from making contact, when we came by it we moved the limb and the leaf drops down and when the limb snaps back the wires connect and an electrical current set off the explosion. If this had been real, I'd be dead, dead, dead.

While there one day I decided to walk out to the South China Sea beach. I was passing by a sand dune when I heard this loud hissing. Now we got lizards in Georgia, miniature in size to the one I saw that day. It was around five foot long and when it lifted up its head "which it was doing" it was off the ground by eighteen inches. His hissing told me he considered this beach was his, not to be trespassed on by me. I had no rifle or any other kind of weapon with me, so I decided it was totally his beach and turning around I left it with him. Several months later on a convoy to Chu Lai I returned and went to the beach with my rifle and two other guys. I enjoyed walking out on the rocks in the water.

One evening on my way back from a late supper I passed by an Officers Club. The building had flaps (sheets of plywood) on the sides that were connected by hinges on top and these flaps would be lifted up to allow air into the building. They were up that night and they were showing a skin flick movie. Only officers could go inside. Outside we could stand and watch through the windows. Approaching the building I noticed that there was an Officers bomb bunker on the back side of

the building. Standing there with several others, we heard the whistling sound of an incoming round pass over us and it exploded close by. Someone had hollered “incoming” and we all scatted. As for me I went into that Officers Bunker. Looking around, I was the only enlisted, low ranking one in there.

A few minutes later we got word that it was “Friendly Fire”. A mortar or an artillery round had been fired short of its intended target and it fell inside the compound. It came not from the enemy, but from our own gun team. This added to my list of woes. Not only did I have to watch out for the enemy shooting at us, but also from our own people.

Now this didn’t happen often, but it did occur sometimes. No one was hurt that night thank goodness. There are several factors in serving up a dish of explosive. First someone has to put in an order, this is someone in the field that is usually under fire and is under pressure to make quick decisions. They have to have their location pin pointed and where they want the round to hit. Next they have to put that order precisely to Fire Direction Control. FDC has to enter it precisely into a computer that will project the direction and elevation of the projectile along with the amount of powder need to deliver it. FDC then sends that information to the gun pit.

There, several men will aim the gun, set the fuse length, fill the case with powder, insert the projectile into the case and then into the gun. When each shell is fired it will not hit in the same spot. These men are highly trained and work as a team. But they also are depending on the suppliers to put the same amount of powder in each powder bag and that each projectile is the same length, diameter, and weight. If even one thing is off there is a possibility of hitting the wrong spot. I am not speaking from experience on this matter, I have never served on a gun crew nor have I ever fired one. Those that have could explain the process more correctly than me. What I’m trying to explain is there are a lot of factors to be considered in a “Friendly Fire” occurrence. Also FDC crew worked twelve hour shifts. (This information came from Dennis Burt, he served in FDC on LZ San Juan Hill while I was there. There are other factors that are figured in along with the above and also we manually checked the figures the computer came up with. And if they didn’t match, we didn’t fire the gun. On most fire missions we could crank out a round within a minute. Even less if the guns were pointed in the correct direction already. At night at least one gun was pointed toward the last known position of our troupes in the field.)

I finally received my orders and was to be sent to Headquarters of the 6th BN, 11th Artillery stationed in Duc Pho. I and several others were flown down from Chu Lia to Duc Pho in a transport plane. There was a guy in a jeep and he asked me where I was headed, and offered to take me there. I checked in, and was told where the Air Station was. It was located on the left side of perimeter road. Our front door was facing the perimeter wire. There were two medics there at that time, Thomas Zigmant and George Karsiladze and I was introduced to our hooch maid,

Lien High. Each Battery had a Medic so I was told that I would serve my first six months there in Duc Pho and the latter six months on one of the Gun Batteries.

On the other side of the airstrip was a Field Hospital, so we didn't have any serious cases at our aid station. If we did have one we would take them directly to the Hospital in our Medical Jeep. It was equipped with stretcher racks. I can remember taking only one person to the Hospital during my stay in Duc Pho. Don't remember what the problem was, it was around late at night when I took him. The jeep had the headlights half shielded so that I could only see about ten or less feet in front of it. This was done so that Charlie could not see it and target it. No other lights were on it. Also while I was there we never had a Doctor visit our Aid Station.

Several months after I had been there, I had a guy come in one day asking how I could help him, he told me he needed some eyeglasses. I believe he worked in FDC there at H.Q. and he had gotten where he couldn't see good enough to do his job and was afraid that it would cost someone their life. We could not give him an eye test there, so I told him to go to the Hospital and ask for an eye exam. He stated he had been there to do that, but they would not give him an eye test without a prescription. I then told him to ask to see a Doctor and he could give him a prescription. Well, he had tried that also and the admission staff would not let him see a Doctor unless he had an eye exam. And I was not authorized to write a prescription. Although there was a prescription pad on the desk, so that if a Doctor came there he could write out a prescription if need be.

Now here was a soldier who had a need and I believed it was a justified need. And he was seeking help so that his actions would not cost someone their life. The only way I could figure to help him was to give him a prescription. Now I knew that if I put my name as the one ordering it. It would be worthless as a three dollar bill and get both of us into hot water. I need at least a Captain's name, and if I used a real name, that would be more trouble (impersonating an Officer). Laying on the desk was a Forbes's magazine. So I filled out the prescription in my most professional scribble like the Doctor's do. And signed it Captain Frank Forbes M.D. and boy did I ever scribble it too. I gave it to him, with instructions if he had problems with it I did not do that prescription. He gave me his word that I would not get into any trouble from it. He said he would tell them he had stolen it.

Some three or four weeks later, I had a visitor come in. I asked could I help him. He responded: you don't remember do you. No I can't say I do. He then explained that he had come in several weeks ago in need of eye glasses. And I had written him a prescription. He had come to let me see his new glasses he had gotten that very day. He stated that he didn't have a bit of a problem, he presented the prescription at the eye exam station they glanced at it and took him right on

back and did the eye exam. He just wanted say “thank you” and let me know it worked.

Had a guy come in one day coughing real bad and asked could he get a bottle of Robitussin for his cough. I had a couple of bottles and it was for bad coughing. I didn't realize it had 10% codeine in it. So I gave it to him, a whole bottle. Later that day one of the guys that I hung around with came and told me I shouldn't have given it to him. He was faking the cough and was bragging on how he had fooled me and he really wanted it to get a high on. Now this pissed me off, not only his lying to me, playing me for a fool and bragging about it but if he was to have gotten caught under its influence then it would come down hard on me for giving it to him. It didn't matter to me that he was twice my size and taller than I was. I was pissed and I headed directly to his hooch to confront him about it.

He was in his hooch, with one of the hooch maids. I told her to “*di di mau*” which means (“get the hell out of here”). He didn't like that. Then I dressed him up one side and down the other. He came back with how bad a cough he had and he needed it. I called him a liar and told him that he was going to return the bottle to me right then. I didn't care if he wanted to get drunk or high, that's his business. But when he used me to accomplish it and it could cost me worse than what it would him. That crossed the line and if necessary I was willing to do whatever it took to get it back. One way or another I was going to leave with that bottle. I did have one advantage over him, he knew that I could take it to the Battery Commander and he would be the one in deep hot water. He surrendered the bottle and we shook hands and parted as friends.

The medics didn't have a shower when I got there and we decided to build one. First thing we did was to pour a cement pad. I helped to do this as can be seen in Tom Zigmant HQ pictures (#27) and the finished product in picture (#9). We used anything we could find to build it with. A wooden pallet was placed on top to hold an upside down 55 gallon drum with the bottom cut out. The top of the drum had a 3/4” pipe threaded hole with a faucet in it. In Duc Pho we had a city life style and on LZ San Juan Hill we had the country style. In the City we had a water truck come around and fill the drum. It had several Vietnamese workers that did this as a G.I. drove the truck. In the Country we would have to hand fill the drum with water from five gallon cans we toted from across the hill. Most of the time on the LZ we worked in teams to fill the drum so several could shower. Although some would put just five gallons into the drum for their shower alone.

When we would take our showers we conserved water by turning on the faucet enough to wet us down and then apply the soap all over. Then we would rinse off quickly as we could. The showers had to be labeled as “Non Potable”, this was water that you could not safely drink.

Our drinking water came from the local river that the Vietnamese used not only for themselves and their rice paddies, but would also serve as a watering hole for water buffalo and other animals. They would wade out into it and drink and release their waste into it. We had a truck with a water purifying equipment on it that supplied us with pure water! The troops in the field only had their canteen to drink from. When they ran out of water, they would find a water source and fill it. They would place the bottom of the canteen in the water and allow the water to seep into the top opening. This helped to strain any large solids from entering into the canteen. They would then drop in a couple of tablets, some thirty minutes later it purified the water so they could drink it.

The LZ's water came from Duc Pho in an inner tube type drum. Allen Shafer's Battery "B" pictures show one in picture #60. Water from it had a rubbery taste to it. To counter it we would ask our family members to send us "Kool Aid Packages". We drank a lot of cool aid while on LZ San Juan Hill.

We didn't have any running water in the Aid Station. I believe it was Tom Zigmant that came up with what looks like a big aluminum bullet (see HQ photos #16 in my pictures). We had to make do with whatever material we could find, steal or trade for. One of the guys wanted to build a nice looking enlisted men's club house. The Officers had one but we didn't. He was able to come up with some 2x4's for the frame. But we didn't have any plywood to dress it out with. Our Battery Commander told us that the Company Chaplain had received a load of plywood to build a Chapel with. He told him where it was stored at, how big a truck would be needed and how many men it would take to quickly load it into the truck. And he also told him what night he would be with the Chaplain at the Officers Club and how long they would be there.

On the appointed night I joined with several other men and with a borrowed deuce and a half we met at the plywood storage building. We left the building empty when we left. I have no idea where it was stored at until we needed it to finish our club house. It was well hidden because the Chaplain searched the whole battery area for his plywood. Several weeks later we brought it to the building site. We didn't have any paint so we took hand held flame torches and lightly toasted the plywood to create designs on it. We did cover it with shellac that protected it and brought the toasted area out real good. (HQ photo's see pictures #5 and #15 in my pictures). It looked a whole lot better than what these two pictures show.

My stay in Duc Pho, more to come!

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