

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

Hawaii



Viet Nam

*On Time, Sir!*

## From Georgia To Viet Nam Section Six Flashbacks and Nightmares

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

There are times I can remember a person's name, and at other times I can remember his face but not a name. This story contains one of the latter, so I'm going to give him a nick name. Let's call him "Shorty" and another one "Buck".

I had been in Duc Pho for a couple of months when one day Buck came running up to me telling me that Shorty had been hit by a mortar round. Grabbing my aid bag I followed Buck to Shorty's hooch. This was to be my first combat wound. There had been no one else in the aid station so I was on my own. I fully expected to find Shorty blown into a dozen or more pieces or him looking like a pin cushion. Was this to be my first person to lose their life because I wouldn't know what to do? I was trying to recall every lesson I had been taught at A.I.T. medical training.

Shorty's hooch was a waist high, two sand bag deep, twelve foot square area. Up above the sand bags was a regular tent structure. From outside the front door it didn't look like it had any damage. Buck held the tent door flap back and said he was inside. Going inside, Shorty was face down in a half push-up position and trembling like a leaf in a wind storm. I didn't see any blood on his back and all his body parts seemed to be intact. Glancing around, I didn't see any damage to the hooch. Kneeling down beside him I laid my hand on his shoulder, "Shorty where are you hit?" He had stopped trembling when I placed my hand on his shoulder and laid down flat on the floor. "*I don't know.*" Are you hurting anywhere? "*No but I know I've been hit.*" "I don't see any blood on your back, turn over and let me check your front." He rolled over and sat up. There was no blood on his front side. I asked him could he stand up. He did! I told him to remove his shirt and I checked him out. There were no signs of him being hit in the upper body. I asked him to drop his pants and there was no sign of him being hit on the lower body either.

I asked him to explain what had happened to him because he kept saying he had been hit. He said that he was standing next to the wall when the round exploded and it knocked him down to the floor. The only thing I think that could have

happened was that the concussion from the exploding round was what hit him and knocked him to the floor. That side of the wall did not show where any fragments had come through the tent. So my first combat case was not a disaster after all ... or was it?

To finish this story I'll have to take you back to the States. In November of 1969 I came back to Atlanta, Georgia. My brother-in-law drove for Allied Van Lines and I rode with him for eight or nine months just to see the country. I wasn't making any money doing this so I went back to the company I had worked at before. It was in another division and I went back to welding. They had a fog horn that would blow for our breaks and lunch time before and after. It didn't bother me too much when it would blow before these breaks; the sound would blend in with the other loud noises around me. But the blast at the end of breaks wreaked havoc on my nerves. A lot of times I would be half way to the floor fixing to shout incoming when I remembered where I was. Plus, living in Atlanta among the hustle and bustle was driving me crazy. I knew it would not be too long before I got myself into trouble. Had a cousin that lived in a smaller town and he invited me to come live with him until I could get my own place there.

There were times that I could smell the stink of Vietnam on me and it made me feel unclean inside and out. Taking a shower would clean me on the outside but not the inside. It's funny in a way because when I returned to the States it had a bad odor too. I think that the time I was in Vietnam I got used to its smell and coming back it was a different smell than what I was used to. When the Vietnam smell came upon me it reminded me of the time I was over there. There was one peculiar time that the smell came to me; it was late in the evening. I was at a party at a friend's house. We were all drinking and having a good time. When it hit me, I was toward the back of the house and did not want to draw attention to myself. So I slipped out the back door. There was an uncovered small cement porch and it had started to drizzle. It was around the end of October and was somewhat cool.

I was standing there letting the rain wash away the smell and the thoughts of Vietnam. When the back door opened, a woman by the nickname of "Sissy" stepped out and shut the door behind her. "*What are you doing standing out here in the rain?*" she inquired? "I just need to get out of the house for a little bit. I'll be back in a minute or two. You need to get back inside before you get wet" I told her. "*Well, I'm not going back in until you do*". I argued with her for a little bit, until I saw she wasn't going back inside until I did. Back inside we talked and I had to explain why I was outside. She and I struck up a friendship from that point on.

There was another time Sissy was involved with me. The National Guard Armory had a dance on Thursday nights. And one Thursday I came in and saw Sissy sitting at a back table with some other people. She was sitting on the other

side of the table by herself and I joined her sitting on her right side. While in Vietnam I had walked by a firing 105 and it had affected my hearing on my right side. I had a high frequency hearing loss from it. With the noise of people talking and music playing, I had to have my good ear toward her to hear her. Even then, I would have to lean close to her sometime, which I didn't mind doing, to hear her talking.

On my right there was an empty seat and then a five foot walkway and behind us they had spare chairs, 15 or 20, set back far enough that we could get in and out from the table. Sissy and I danced a couple of dances and when we got back a guy came and sat next to Sissy. She spoke to him so I figured she knew him. When they would talk to one another I could not hear what they were saying, although I got the impression that he was hitting on her which didn't bother me because we had not come to the dance together. What I did not know was that he was also trying to talk to me and I was ignoring him because I could not hear him.

He got up and I assumed he was headed to the restroom and someone across the table said something to me that drew my attention. Instead of going to the restroom he came around behind me. There was lull in the music for a second and I heard someone say "I reckon you'll hear this". Then he hit me upside the head. For a second or two, as I was falling toward Sissy, I passed out. In regaining my senses and used my falling direction to pivot around as I stood up. I don't know what he was expecting but it sure wasn't me coming up to my feet that quickly. His eyes got rather large as he realized he had stirred up a hornets nest. He began trying to hit me to stop me from advancing on him. We got tangled up in the chairs that were behind us and I could not get into a position to return blows with him. So I just put a bear hug on him and picking him up I waded through the chairs until I got him in the broad pathway.

Sitting him on his feet, with my left hand I grabbed his shirt front and leaning backwards I dropped my right almost to the floor. I was going to plow his corn field real good. He had stopped swinging at me, he knew what was coming. I had started my upward swing when somebody behind me grabbed my wrist stopping my swing. **OK, there's two of them that I've got to whip.** Thought I better check out the one behind me before I shook off his grip and finished my swing on the one I was holding. He might be the bigger one and I would have to deal with him first. Glancing over my shoulder at him I saw he wasn't all that big a fellow, but that .38 pistol on his hip and the badge on his chest told me I needed to stand down.

With all the noise going on, the officer told us to take it outside. So the three of us headed toward the exit door. When we got outside, I noted that Sissy had followed us outside. The officer asked me why I was going to hit the other fellow. I told him what he had done and he looked at Sissy and asked her if she witnessed

the fight. She said she had and he asked her if what I had said was true. She confirmed that it was. He then asked the other man why he had hit me. He told him that he was trying to get my attention because I would not hear him when he spoke to me. The officer looked at me and I explained about my hearing loss. The officer then told the other man he owed me an apology and asked me if he apologized would I accept it. I said I would, he did, and the officer told us to shake hands and go back inside. We did. Sissy and I went back inside; the other fellow left.

Now if I was writing a "Love Story" at this point it would say that we fell in love, Sissy and I, and got married and had a bunch of kids. But this is not that type of story. At the time that this occurred Sissy had been married four times and would later marry number five husband and a year later divorced him. In talking with Sissy later, I asked her about her recent divorce. She told me that she didn't love him, that she was in love with a married man. And any time he wanted her she would drop whatever or whoever and go to him. She told me that he had a house and a couple of kids. I told her she had no future with him; he was playing her. He was not going to divorce his wife and lose his children and house for her. Her reply was that *"if a man could not get what he needs at home, then he would find it elsewhere!"* And as long as he wants me, I'm going to be there for him. *"I love him!"* I asked her why she had married husband number five if she did not love him. She told me that he had been good to her family and had helped them out over several years. *"I told him that I didn't love him, but he still wanted to marry me."* Sissy was a friend, the last account I had of her. She had given birth to twins in her seventh marriage. In 1972 I met and married my first wife Eva Mae.

The Vietnam smell was just one of the woes I experienced but I think it sometimes would precede what I call Flashback/Nightmares. I never knew when it would happen, but it was only in my sleep that they would occur. The flashback part of it would always start first with me going through the account I gave you at the beginning of this story. It would start but never go to the ending that I stated above. Then the nightmares would begin, and I was back in Vietnam. The events in the nightmares never happened, just the flashback part did.

Shorty was always the person that was hurt; sometimes just minor, other times there was blood all over him. In each case we would be overrun by V.C. There were times that I would be standing over him protecting him from the attack. The location changed also, sometimes it was in Duc Pho, other times we were in the rice paddies or in the mountains. I was killing them with my M-16 or with an M-60, knives or hand to hand combat. Each time I dispatched one V.C. another one was there to take his place. Sometimes Shorty wasn't hit too badly and he would stand with me. The bad part about it was that in the back of my mind, I knew that it was a nightmare, but I could not come out of it. In my nightmare I was fighting two battles; one with the V.C., the other one with trying to wake up. When I did finally come out of it. There would be times I would be sitting straight up in bed

sweating and breathing real hard. It would take a while afterwards to calm down and relax. Other times I would just come out of it without waking up and vaguely remember it or would not remember it at all.

Eva and I had not been married very long, a year or so, when I woke up one Saturday morning and she was not in bed. She heard me stirring around and came into the bedroom and sat on the bed beside me. We need to talk, "*Clenton you hit me last night*". I don't hit or slap women, I'm not that sort of person. I looked at her face and what I could see of her body and did not see any bruises on her. I thought that she might have had a bad dream because I did not remember hitting her. I asked her was she sure I hit her. "*Yes, I'm sure you hit me.*" I don't understand, why would I hit you, I questioned? "*You were having a bad dream and I wanted to wake you, so I grabbed your shoulder intending to shake you awake, and you hit me in the stomach*".

It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was in Vietnam in my nightmare fighting with the V.C. and her touching me was just another V.C. trying to kill me. Then it scared me because I could have killed her and not even realized it until the next morning when I found her dead body. I then instructed her very strongly that if she ever saw me having a bad dream, "DO NOT TOUCH ME". Stand ten or fifteen feet from me and gently call my name. I will hear you and wake up. But don't you dare touch me for any reason. But I was afraid that she would forget.

I've heard of people talking about having a sixth sense. In my opinion there is a portion of our brain that each of the other five senses reports to. Usually it processes them individually and you react to them on a one to one basis. When someone is in a combat environment, then it processes all five senses jointly and you react swiftly to the input of all five senses to protect yourself. This is what I call my combat mode and it is what I went into. But not to protect myself as much as it would protect her and it also protected me. (Point in case: I had gone to Jeff Davis Park with the Church one Saturday for a church social and meal. Three or four of the men was throwing a Frisbee to one another. I had seen a person that I wanted to speak to and had just gone slightly past the area that they were playing. One of them had cast the Frisbee to a guy that missed it and it was headed directly toward the left side of my head. Alarm bells went off and without turning my head my left hand shot out and caught the Frisbee before it could hit me.

Eva and I lived in a sixty foot mobile home at this time. There was a kitchen/dining room in the front of it. A counter separated it from each other. The living room on its right side had a hall that had a spare room off to the left of travel. Just past that room on the left also was the washer and dryer. Then there was a door that led into the bathroom. Across from it was the outside door. The hall ended just past these two doors with the door into the master bedroom. There would be times that I would be in the bedroom taking a nap. Eva would be in the

kitchen and when she left the kitchen I could tell if she was just going into the living room or was headed down the hall and I knew where she was headed before she got there. If she went into the bathroom or was going outside or one of the other spots I would continue sleeping.

But if she was going to open the door to the bedroom, I would come awake and be watching her when the door opened. We moved the trailer a couple of years later to a nearby town and later sold it and rented a house on Camp Brookline Road. In 1983 or '84 it was one of those very hot years. I had come into the house and Eva was fixing supper. My son Daylon and his sister Melinda were playing on the floor in the kitchen. I told Eva that I was going into the bedroom and cool-off if I could. We didn't have any air conditioners in the house; just some box fans.

I set the box fan in the window and sat down in the floor to cool off. It wasn't but a little bit that I became drowsy and was drifting off to sleep when I felt myself going into the flashback. I was trying to bring myself out of it by waking up but I drifted further into it. I knew I was going to be going into the nightmares at any second. The only thing I could do was utter three words. No I don't know if I did this out loud or just in my mind. The only thing that came to me to say was "**Lord Help Me**". What happen next I can only describe what it felt like! It was as if there was a warm blanket descended over me from above! When it completely covered me the flashback was gone. What had happened, I believe, is that the Peace of God covered me and from that day to this day I have not had any reoccurrence of the Flashback/Nightmares nor the Vietnam smell. Neither will I have them unto my last breath on this earth.

God took them away from me. And what God Takes, God Keeps!

Now "Back to Duc Pho."

P.S. One of the mind bogging things about serving in Vietnam was that for weeks, or even a month or more, nothing would happen but you constantly stayed on edge expecting something to happen at any moment. There was one morning on the LZ that we received some 21 mortars and 3 rockets if I remember correctly. At least that's the number the Stars & Stripes reported in their Newsletter. There was two sections to LZ San Juan. We had the upper portion of the hill and the Infantry had the lower portion. So when the mortars came in they hit the upper and lower portions. Even in Duc Pho, although it was a larger area, we were hit some although not often. The aid station was hit one time as I know of while I was there. In one of my pictures there was a couple of rounds hit outside the perimeter in front of the aid station. We had an air strip and it was hit several times but it was a good distance from the aid station. Donald Cash once made this comment: "Army uniforms were pretty good but the only drawback was that when we were receiving

incoming rounds; the buttons on the shirt held you too high off the ground.” He also told me this account. When the battery had first jumped to San Juan they were receiving incoming rounds one day. They had set up those half round culverts with two layers of sand bags on it to sleep at night. He dove into one of them that was close by and, with his head down, was low crawling as fast and as hard as he could to the other end of it to be safely under it. He finally figured he had crawled into it deep enough. He rolled over on his back and **looked up at the clear blue sky**.

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