

John R. White Vietnam Story
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My name is John Richard White from Austin, Texas. I am 67 years old and Vietnam was almost 45 years ago, but it was just like yesterday too. I was in the U.S. Army Signal Corps and in Vietnam stationed in Da Nang and Hue from 1967 to 1968. I write this account not to my role or war, but to let people know what it was like in a combat support role (as least for me). As some of my fellow veterans tell me - "they gotta know it's not all just about the battles" and they're going to use this as a living history for educational purposes. So with that in mind, here is my best recall of what it was like in as much detail as possible.

Joining The Army to Become a Helicopter Pilot

My story has to start in 1966 around Valentines day when I enlisted in the Army as a skinny 19 year-old kid from Austin, Texas. Helicopter flight school had been opened to high school graduates and I wanted to fly. My only previous military experience had been one semester of mandatory ROTC at Sam Houston State University which I barely passed. I didn't like playing soldier, shining boots, and marching around on a parade field. The only reason I passed the course was that I made an agreement with the Sargent Major that if I came to class, he would give me a "D" instead of an "F". The next semester I returned to UT Austin because I was homesick. I wasn't doing well in school and one day I noticed a protest rally on the West Campus of UT. About fifty protesters were carrying around a fake black coffin and protesting the war in Vietnam. We formed a counter-protest yelling back in favor of the war. Suddenly a guy jumped up on the steps of the old Student Union and yelled - "If you want to really do something about it, join the Army like I did today". I thought about it and realized he was right. The next day I talked to an Army recruiter about going to flight school. Soon I was on a bus to San Antonio to take the written test for flight school. My friend Gordon Fowler was going there too. When I got home and told my parents that I had passed the test, my mother got very upset about me going in the service. I guess she remembered how many of her friends had been killed in WWII. She urged my father to do something since he was a state official (The Commissioner of Agriculture - John C. White). He made

some calls. He told me that they could get me in the reserves at Camp Mabry. It surprised me because the reserves were supposed to be full and you couldn't get in. I told him that I didn't want to do that and that I wanted to go in the regular Army. He said he was proud of me. I returned to the Austin recruiting office and based on the recruiter's advise I joined the Army at 19 years old without any school, including flight school. He told me that people already in the Army would get a preference for flight school and I should apply after I got in. (I later found out there was another program where I could have joined the Army specifying flight school and if I didn't get to fly, I would have been discharged.)

Training for Vietnam

I left the bus station in Austin on Feb. 13, 1966 with Mickey Rylander and another friend that I had joined up with on "The Buddy Plan" (that meant we would go through Basic Training together). Gordon Fowler happened to be on the bus again too. He was going to join the Marines. We checked into an old run-down hotel in downtown San Antonio that the Army had booked for us. It was almost filled with beds wall-to-wall and we spent our last night of civilian life drinking beer together and shooting pool in a nearby seedy strip joint (I was two years under the legal drinking age of 21). The next morning we were taken to the processing center. When we got there, we were ushered into a big room with a big wooden railing running through the center of it. They told the volunteers to get on the front side of the railing and the draftees to get on the back of it. Then told us all to form lines. They told the draftees in the back to count-off by fives and for every fifth man step forward. After they finished and each fifth man had stepped forward, they told them that they had just been drafted into the Marines. Then, we were all instructed to raise our hand and we were sworn into the Armed Forces.

As soon as I got to Basic Training at Ft. Polk, LA., I told the Drill Sargent that I wanted to apply for flight school. He was not impressed and told me that I had to complete Basic before I could apply. However he did make me the Assistant Platoon Guide because of my previous ROTC experience. (He asked who had any ROTC and me and one other guy were the only ones who raised their hands.) I was made Assistant Platoon Guide but I later I got busted because I had the platoon fall out for sick call on April Fool's day as a joke. I found out the Army didn't have a sense of humor. After Basic, I was

sent to Microwave Electronics school in New Jersey. Frankly, I was very relieved and surprised. I expected to be sent to the infantry since I didn't specify any school when I enlisted. (Maybe it helped that I made sure that I didn't do too good on the rifle range even though I was an excellent shot.)

When I arrived at Ft. Monmouth, I was made the Platoon Guide because I had been an Assistant Platoon Guide during Basic Training. I re-applied for flight at the first opportunity. This time I finally got the process started. I had to take the written test again and I scored the highest grade on it recorded to that point. Next I had my flight physical and passed it. Lastly was my helicopter orientation ride to see if I had any fear of flying. It was at the old Naval blimp station at Lake Hurst N.Y. where the Hindenburg crashed. I loved it and even got to fly it myself for a little while. (My dad had taught me to fly our when I was about 12 in our plane, but this was different.) Unfortunately, we had a hard landing because I had over controlled the helicopter while attempting to hover for my first time. The next morning I couldn't get out of my bunk due to sever back pain and I went through months of physical therapy. I was put on hold for flight school. Also they discovered a previous back injury that I had not told them about when I joined. Frankly, I'm not sure that they knew what to do with me after that. I finished the seven months of electronics school and did well. After the school, I was sent to Ft. Huachuca in Arizona where I tested new electronic equipment while I was waiting on the decision on flight school. After a few months of waiting I was told that I was going to have to go three years with no back problems and then I could reapply for flight school. Shortly afterward the decision I got orders to report to the 337th Signal Company at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina.

When I got to Ft. Bragg I found out the company was training to go Vietnam. It was part of the First Signal Brigade whose mission was to modernizer the entire communications systems in Vietnam. (More about the First Signal Brigade can be found at the Army History Center website at: <http://www.armyhistory.org/ahf2.aspx?pgID=877&id=74&exCompID=56>). We trained in teams and as a company to defend ourselves and to do our jobs. The concept was that we could go in with assault troops and provide them communications support while taking care of ourselves. It was the forerunner on the modern day satellite trucks, except the equipment was in conexs and it

was designed to be carried in by helicopters. In reality, we ended up setting up sites and stayed there. This time I was made an Acting Sargent because I had been the Platoon Guide at electronics school. (“Acting” meant I got the responsibility without the pay.) After months of training and lots of PT, it was finally time to ship out for Vietnam. An advance party had left a month earlier by freighter with our equipment and gear. That included refrigerators that our Company Commander (Capt. Tandy Barty from Caldwell, Texas and graduate of Texas A&M) had the foresight to have the officers purchase them privately. (It was his second tour and he knew what to take.) Just before we shipped out we exchanged our M-14 rifles and were issued M-16 rifles. We were one of the first units to have them at Ft. Bragg. We flew from North Carolina to Oakland, California and they took us by bus to the ship. (I think it was the USS Walker – an old troop WWII ship pulled out of moth balls.) We boarded the ship and we were told we would be shot if we tried to leave the ship. I sat there that night looking at the lights of San Francisco. The next morning we pulled slowly away from the dock as a band played.

Shipping Out

It was 1967 and we were finally on way to Vietnam. The entire ship was filled with the 1st Calvary except for our 337th Signal Company and a few Marines to guard and probably police us. Most of us were on the deck as the ship slowly pulled away from the dock as it started to sail under the Golden Gate Bridge. . It was very emotional to see the bridge behind you and the U.S. mainland starting to fade in the distance. Suddenly I heard people yelling “Stop Him! Stop Him!”. It was a 1st Cavalry soldier running for the fantail of the ship and he was going to jump off the back of the ship and swim back to the U.S. shore. We heard he was locked in the brig for three days and did the same thing when they let him out. Most of time on ship was spent on gambling and I didn't gamble and there was not much else to do. I got so bored that I volunteered for KP to have something to do and even tried to read the entire Bible front to back since it seemed to be the only book available. (We were told not to bring any books so a smuggled in Playboy was like gold. One guy “rented” his.) Once when we were in the middle of the Pacific with no land in site, the Chaplain said, “If the ship sank, it would barely make a ripple on the ocean floor.” Somehow I did not find that reassuring. We did stop at Okinawa for refueling and we were told that no one would be allowed to leave the ship. As soon as we got land in sight,

some of the guys from the 1st Calvary started jumping overboard to swim to shore. Soon we heard a commanding voice on the loud speakers ordering us not to jump off the ship, but that didn't stop them. They repeated the orders a few times without any success. The closer we got to land, the more that jumped. Finally they announced that arrangements had been made for buses to take us to the NCO club and to please stop jumping overboard. Also, we were to report back to the ship by 12:00 AM midnight or face charges. That was a wild night complete with barroom fights that looked like something out of old western movies. The next morning we sailed for Vietnam. About three days later, I noticed the sick call line went almost all the way around the deck of the ship. I was told it was guys who got VD in Okinawa.

The entire trip to Vietnam took 28 days and it was nightfall when we arrived at Da Nang's harbor. (We didn't complain about slow voyage because that counted as time-in-country off our tour.) We anchored offshore because it was too risky to sail at night past Marble Mountain that stood at the entrance to the harbor. If a VC rocket hit the ship it could cause a disaster. So as night fell, I sat on deck with other guys and watched the sky continually light up with flashes and flares and the sounds of loud explosions. Tomorrow I would be in Vietnam and I thought to myself that I needed more training for this. (We were too inexperienced to realize it was mostly out-going artillery and routine patrols.) The next morning we sailed into the harbor and I noticed some guys water-skiing behind a ski boat in the bay. We loaded in LST boats and landed on the beach. I was in one the first boats. When the front gate dropped down on boat, wondering what we were getting into. We did know that we hadn't been issued any ammunition. When I got out of the boat, I saw a woman with a push cart trying to sell us Coke-Cola's and a Shell oilfield tank farm to our right. We fell into formation and buses pulled up for us with wire over the windows. We asked what the wire was for and we were told it was to keep someone from throwing a grenade into the bus.

Da Nang

We arrived at the 37th Signal Corps compound which became our headquarters. Our advance party had already gotten there and set up tents with wooden floors and bunks. My first order was to have my men dig trenches beside the tents so that we could jump in them in case of an attack.

By this time it was late in the day, and they did it halfheartedly at best and made little progress. That night I was sitting on top of a bunker talking with some guys. I was looking towards the airfield and and at the mountain behind it. I noticed a red streak of light shoot up in the sky from the top of the mountain and thought to myself – cool fireworks. It wasn't so cool when we realized that it was an incoming rocket. That night we experienced one of the worst rocket attacks every recorded at Da Nang. There were over 80 rockets and it lasted about three hours. We laid under our bunks as the rockets screamed in and exploded one at a time. Again we were too inexperienced to realize that their real targets were the F-4 fighter jets at the airfield next to us. But some of the rockets flew directly over us and one of them exploded in the ARVN compound next to us. We only had one casualty – a man ran into the center post of the tent and broke his nose. The next morning my men were digging the trenches without me even having to tell them to do it – they were properly motivated! That same week we had another rocket attack and I jumped in the closest bunker. It was filled with officers and high ranking NCO's. One senior Sargent's false teeth were chattering so much that he couldn't keep them in. The next morning I was assigned the task of driving him to the airport so that he could return to the States.

I spent the first part of my tour at Da Nang. Mostly, we built bunkers, dug trenches (that later filled up with water during the rains), and got the new communications system going in the I Corps (the northern most part of South Vietnam). I was very homesick at first and off-time was boring. I wasn't much of a drinker or a gambler and I had read every book and magazine in the camp that I could find. So I volunteered to teach English at a school in town. This way I could at least get off the base. I often wondered how my family and friends and girlfriend where seeing the same stars and moon I did, and how could my world could be so different now. It took about a week to get mail from home and another week to send one back, so if you asked someone a question, it took about two weeks to get an answer. I kept getting letters from home asking me about all the fighting at Da Nang. I wrote back that Da Nang was not under constant attack, in fact we rarely had any problems other than in-coming rockets. What was happening was the reporters were using Da Nang as a reference point in the news (for example, there was a firefight 20 miles southwest of Da Nang today.) We could use

the MARS overseas radio system to make a call home but it had to be scheduled and there was a lot involved in doing it, unless it was an emergency call. We took turns having latrine duty which consisted of lifting the back flap on the latrine, pulling out the 55 gal drum that had been cut in half with a hook, filling it with kerosene, and burning it. (I joked after I got back to the States when I was having a bad day at work that at least it was better than the day I was burning shit.)

Off time was frequently spent at our enlisted men/NCO club where we were allowed to wear civilian clothes. Sometimes there was a USO band and the favorite song was always “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” by The Animals or “The Green, Green Grass of Home”. The bands were usually Filipino and they had trouble pronouncing “S's”, so “I Left My Heart In San Francisco” came out interesting. The Da Nang compound had a large mess-hall and even a room we used as a movie theater. They showed films of TV shows. Our favorites were “The Wild, Wild West” and “Combat” (a TV show about WWII where you always knew who the enemy and the front-line was and the G.I.'s always won.) I found out that the Vietnamese didn't have any issues about using men's and woman's bathrooms the hard way. I was in the latrine standing at the urinal when some Vietnamese “mommasans” came in to clean it and use it. I almost pee'd all over myself trying to zip up my pants. One of my big “treats” was to walk to the PX, look around, get an ice cold Coke and walk back. It was like a big discount store. It had shiny floors and even had a jewelry department. I bought a wedding ring there for the girl I left behind in hopes she would be there when I got home. One day the PX got in some oscillating fans and I bought one and put it beside my bunk – life was good. We paid the local women to do our laundry. They had a little house just outside of our gate and they did laundry the old fashion way – with a washboard in a washtub. A month or two after we got settled in Da Nang, I was sent to a school in Na Trang for the newest technology - Tropospheric Scatter equipment (“Tropo” for short). This new equipment was much more powerful and it was solid-state instead of the old tube technology that we trained on in the States. Na Trang was a beautiful old French city (much like New Orleans) and it had a good NCO club there too that got bombed occasionally, but that didn't stop us from enjoying it.

One day I was surprised when I learned that my dad was coming to see me.

He and President Lyndon Johnson were old friends from Texas politics. Somehow the President somehow knew I was in Viet Nam (perhaps Dad had told him) and convinced him to go on a private mission, if he could get to spend some time with me. When Dad got to Saigon he had the Assistant Ambassador requested that I be sent to his residence in Saigon. Dad and Senator John Tower from Texas were there when I arrived. It was wonderful to see him and I liked Sen. Tower because he was still an enlisted man in the Naval Reserve. The ambassador's residence was unbelievably nice and plush with servants. Besides seeing my dad, my favorite thing was it had unlimited supply of hot water in the shower. While I was there I got to attend a cocktail party with Dad and Senator Tower. I met and visited with General Creighton Abrams who was just coming in-country to become deputy to General Westmoreland. He asked me if I knew why we were there. I told him that I thought I did when we got here, but I wasn't sure anymore. There was a Lt. Colonel at the party who was an aid to the General Abrams and he was trying to figure out why a low ranking enlisted man was at the party as a guest, much less visiting with the General. I finally talked with him before he called the MP's. After my two day visit I flew back to Da Nang in an Admiral's personal Lear jet and it was a great ride – much better than the C-130 I rode to Saigon. I never let the guys in my unit know about all this because it would have been nothing but trouble for me, especially if the VC found out. Only my CO knew to my knowledge.

The Tet Offensive of 1968

On New Year's eve of 1968, I had the “swing shift” monitoring the communications equipment. Most of the guys had already drunk too much by the time I got off and it was no fun to be around them. I could either catch up with them or go back to my tent. I went back to my tent and went to sleep. Suddenly I was awoken by machine gun fire. I looked out of the tent at the sky and it was filled with tracers. There was one other guy in the tent. I told him to grab the ammo box and I grabbed the M-60 that stayed under my bunk. We crawled on the ground out to the perimeter while the tracers were still flying through the air. When we got there, I saw the company commander standing there in his bathrobe with some others. We learned that the Marines were having an unauthorized “New Years celebration” by firing their weapons into the air including M-60's mounted on jeeps while driving

around town. Fortunately for me, my CO believed my story that I thought we were actually under attack.

About two months later the same happened again. When the guys tried to get me up, I told them that no way was I going to make a fool out of myself and fall for this one again - I knew this was the Vietnamese New Year (Tet). Suddenly I realized that they were telling the truth— we were under attack! I think it might have been the rocket that convinced me or the round that flew through the tent. This was the beginning of the Tet Offensive of 1968! I spent the next three days in a bunker with my M-60 machine gun. On our second and third nights on guard without any sleep, the Medics gave us some pills to keep us awake. I never fired my machine gun because I never saw anything to shoot at in range. I did see some VC running across a field in a distance with some of our guys right behind them in pursuit.

Shortly after Tet I was transferred to the 513th Signal Detachment in Hue. Our site in Hue had been surrounded by thousands of NVA and VC and pinned down by a sniper as the North Vietnamese overran the city. But they held out and kept the communications on-the-air. Now it was time for some replacements and I was one of them. The timing was good because just before Tet my job as a volunteer English teacher had been canceled because some other volunteers had been killed on their way to the school. We were told that the VC had our pictures. So I sold my fan to another guy and packed up.

Hue

I flew to Phi Bai because the Hue airfield had been destroyed during Tet. My new Sergeant from the site picked me up in a ¾ ton truck. He told me to keep my M-16 loaded and ready because there could be snipers on the road to Hue. As we drove into Hue on Highway One I noticed a large white European style Catholic church with a high steeple to my left. I thought to myself, how can they be Christians and shoot at us? To my right I could see the communications towers from our site rising up to the sky. The Sergeant told me that I had picked a great time to get there because they were expecting some action that night - he was right! During the firefight and mortar attack I started to throw up. The guys in the bunker threw me out and

said you're not going to mess our place up. (We were living in the bunkers.) I spent the duration of the attack laying on the ground outside the bunker. That was my first night of many mortar attacks and the last time I threw up.

Hue site was the communications link to Da Nang for everything north up to DMZ. Also, it was the link to the besieged Khe Sanh where our 544th Signal detachment stationed. Those communication provided airstrikes and everything to the rest of the world. It was critical that we stayed on the air – people's lives literally depended on it. I remember the site having 28 men on it, but I've read another account that says there were 22. The site was comprised of our microwave signal team, some other guys who trained at Fort Gordon on UHF signal, a specialist in diesel generators and a small infantry detachment (maybe that's four extra men). I quickly learned the site was run by the senior NCO. He was a career soldier (we called them “life'rs”). The Army assigned a young OCS Infantry Second Lieutenant to us. Unfortunately he had no training or previous experience in electronics or communications, but he did have to sign for the equipment and other things. (The Army was very short on officers with our training as were the other services.) Fortunately the new solid-state equipment was practically trouble free and required little maintenance. Usually all we had to do with it was to keep it cool, dust free, and dry.

Hue was filled with bicycles and the wealthy Vietnamese had Honda scooters. Often you would see a whole family with mom, dad, and children all riding on one scooter. Cars were very rare. The older men and women often had black teeth from the beetle-nut roots they chewed to mute the pain having dental problems. They had a way of squatting and sitting on their heels while they talk to each other or rested. Even the elderly men and woman could do it. Also they openly smoked pot and thought nothing of it. If they liked something you did, they would said, “G.I. number one”. If they didn't they said, “G.I. number ten”. Often, the pungent smell of Vietnamese Nước mắm sauce drifted into our site during the day and early evening as they were cooking. It smelled like rotting fish to me. At dusk the sweet scent of incense would fill the air as the locals offered their prayers to Buddha. Mass graves were beginning to be found from when Hue had been over-run. One morning I woke to find a dog we had adopted chewing on a human skull. One of the guys from one of the other teams put it on a stick

on top of the bunker at our main entrance, but I made him take it down after I saw how the Vietnamese walking by looked at it. (This brings tears to my eyes now writing about it – somehow we lost part of our humanity, but I promised to tell the real story.) This particular soldier prided himself with being the “Meanest SOB in the Valley”. There were lots of rumors about terrible things he had done including raping a young girl, running down a old man with the truck, and burning down the nearby village. If I had been able to confirm any of them, I would have brought him up on charges. I think he would have killed me if he ever found a way to get away with it.

Daily Life

On a typical day we would clean-up, eat breakfast and start to work. It was hot and we usually didn't wear shirts. We only wore our steel helmets and “combat gear” when we were getting hit or when we were on alert. I bought some “VC sandals” at the local market and wore them around the site and got rid of my athletes' foot. (They were sandals made from car tires.) Also, most of us bought broad-rimmed hats and didn't use our Army issue baseball caps. It was the closest thing I could find to a cowboy hat was an “Aussie” style hat. (Later the Army would issue the “boonie” hat to help with this problem). We had pocket transistor radios and would listen to the rock'n roll and news from the U.S. on Armed Forces Radio. Most of our day was spent rebuilding damaged bunkers, perimeter walls, and going to get water, unless it was our turn to monitor the communications equipment. Sometimes we got VC prisoners from the nearby prison and had them do the hard labor. They were no trouble to guard because the last thing most of them wanted to do was escape. Later, we hired “Papasan” out of our own pockets to help us with the sandbags and he was great at building bunkers and walls. He was in his fifties or sixties and he could out work most of us. He said he had been a Major in the Vietnamese Army against the French (for all we knew he could have been a VC General now). We got our water by trucking it from the Perfume River. We hooked up the “water-buffalo” (a big water tank on a trailer) behind our truck and went to the river and filled it up from the downspout. Then we threw a bunch of water-purification tablets in it, but the water still smelled and tasted terrible. So we drank a lot of soft drinks and beer during the day. Also we thought anything canned in the U.S. was safer. On one water run, I was riding guard in the back of the truck when I spotted a Vietnamese man running up onto the road behind us with a rifle. He was

wearing the VC “black pajamas” but lots of the locals wore the same thing, including the local Vietnamese militia that called “The P.F.'s” (South Vietnamese Popular Force). I was pretty sure I knew what he was up to so I jumped off the truck and ran at him. I was right - he offered to sell a North Vietnamese SKS rifle to me for \$80.00. I shook my head and got back on the waiting truck. One thing I learned was that the Vietnamese were very always trying to make a buck off the Americans.

We ate the nearby MACV compound (Military Assistance Command Vietnam, see link <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~tpilsch/AirOps/hue-compound.html> .) It welcomed all Americans. There were lots of Special Forces guys there and lots of “civilians” like the CIA guys, Radio Free America and other special teams. We walked there for meals because they had a great chow hall with steaks and cold milk. It was better than opening “C” rations of lima beans and ham at our compound. It was only about a mile away and we went in groups with loaded weapons. (We never left our compound without being armed even during the day.) MACV had a post office, liquor store, and a bar. Once they even had a Filipino stripper. None of us wanted to miss that. It had a chapel too but I was never in it. It was not that I didn't pray, I just didn't need to be in the chapel to do it.

Each morning we would clean up and shave. If we took a shower, we usually did it at night to cool off. We built a shower by putting a 55 gallon drum on a wooden tower and installing a facet on the bottom of it. Of course we had to climb up the ladder and fill it up too. (Later we swapped out something and got a kerosene heater for it too.) Electricity was no problem because we had plenty of excess capacity from our twin diesel 40KW generator so keeping things cold was no problem because we had brought those refrigerators from the States. We went in pairs to get haircuts at the local market and many other things. One person held a loaded M-16 with the other person was getting his hair cut by a Vietnamese with a straight-razor. We kept our hair very short because of the heat and some guys even shaved their heads. About once a month we would pool our money together and send our “Deuce and half” 2-1/2 truck to join one of the coveys to Da Nang to buy cases of beer and soft drinks and get other important things like toilet paper (the Army furnished that). We had to always be on the lookout for snakes, even inside of the site. One of the most feared snakes was called the Bamboo Viper. It

looked like a common green American garter snake and it was what we called a “two-stepper” because that's how far you got after it bit you. I saw one of our guys empty a whole clip from his M-16 trying to hit one almost between his legs. We also had cobras. One of the guys from Kentucky said he saw one raise its head outside the perimeter when he was on guard duty. He took a shot at it and missed. He couldn't sleep for a few nights because he was raised with a believing that a snake would come after you if you shot at it and missed. Everyday basic medical care was very limited. We had quinine tablets that we were supposed to take daily to prevent malaria. One guy didn't and he got it. I've never seen such a high fever in my life the night he came down with it. We drove him to MAVC in the jeep in middle of the night and he was shipped to Da Nang. Once I had a bad cough and I didn't want to go to Da Nang for sick call so I called the medics there and asked that some cough medicine be sent up to me. The medic said he would do it, but it was mostly alcohol so I could get something up there. So I bought a bottle of Scotch at MAVC.

During the night we had free time. I usually was working the swing shift from 14:00 to 22:00 was my favorite shift to monitor the communications equipment. (We monitored it 24 hours a day, 7 days a week regardless of what was happening). I liked that shift for the following reasons. First, the conex housing the microwave equipment was air-conditioned and that got me out of the heat during the hottest part of the day. Second, I could use our internal communications network catch-up with the guys on the other sites. Third, I had signed up for a correspondence course and I could work on it. Lastly, I wasn't much of a hard-liquor drinker and I didn't smoke pot. At night most of the guys sat around and told stories. The drinkers sat on the old shot-up jeep in the front of the compound and the pot smokers sat in a circle in the back of the site. Since I wasn't the ranking officer or NCO, I didn't say much about the pot. (In fact for the first time, I wasn't even an acting Sergeant – just a Spec 4.) Each night the same stories about what they were going to do when they got home (or got back to “the world” as we called it) and the stories of great past sexual escapades were told. After a while I had heard them all.

Prostitution was open in Hue. Often we hung out a Vietnamese bar/brothel on Highway One close to our site. The woman would ask, “G.I. want boom,

boom? Although tempting at first, it wasn't very appealing after you watched them go to the back rooms with soldier after soldier. I got less judgmental about prostitution as I learned that they were just trying support themselves and often their families too. Sometimes the woman who owned the place would tell us - "GI go home". We knew that she knew something and we promptly left. Once I asked an old Vietnamese woman who worked there who she wanted to win the war. She said that she just wanted it be over, both of her sons and most of her family were dead now.

Perhaps the closest I came to getting killed was when I was the "new guy" wanted to fit in. One night my Sergeant said "let go to the cafe on Highway One and get them fix us some french-fries. Soon, the three of us were sitting at a sidewalk table late at night eating our french-fries and drinking beer. Suddenly we noticed a formation of Vietnamese soldiers marching down the street towards us. As they passed us, my Sergeant said, "Smile at them and wave", so I did. After they were gone, he said, "Let's get the hell out of here - those were NVA!". He got me in trouble a second time when he decided that it would be great to go to the "Cherry Street Bar" late at night. We walked into a South Vietnamese ambush. He realized what was happening and he started shouting every four-letter word he knew. Suddenly soldiers started coming out of the dark from every direction. He told me that if I ever found myself in a similar situation, to start cussing because no one could cuss like an American. I didn't join him on anymore of his adventures.

I finally made Sergeant with full pay on July 21, 1968. I've never been able to save as much money as I did while I there. The military was providing my "room and board" and most of my expenses. About all there was to spend money on was laundry, soft drinks, booze, and cigarettes. Most of us smoked even though the Army warned us it could be bad for our health. Often we took turns going to our headquarters at Da Nang to "get parts to take a break. There we could get a good shower, go to the PX and the club. Also we could go on sick-call or see a dentist. During one of my trips to Da Nang a fight broke out at the club between the blacks and the whites. That was the first time and only time I ever saw a fight based on race while I was in Vietnam. I didn't understand why until I learned the next day that someone had just killed Dr. Martin Luther King back in the States. That same trip I met with our Chaplain in Da Nang and told him how much it would improve my men's

moral if the Army would rent the house across from our site in Hue for us to live in. I had learned that if you wanted to get something done in the Army, talk to the Chaplain. So we moved our living quarters across the street and only used the bunker when we needed them.

We got hit by a typhoon while I was there and Hue was a coastal city. Fortunately our site was not directly on the beach. During the storm one of the antennas started shaking too much on the top of the tower. It had to be secured even though we were in the middle of the storm. (I had a antenna fall off a tower during training back in the States and I wasn't going to let that happen again.) I asked for volunteers and I didn't get any. So remembering that I wouldn't ask my men to do anything that I wouldn't do, I went up. I had climbed this tower many times, it was tougher than I thought it would be in the high winds and driving rain. The whole tower was swaying and very slick. When I got to the top I hooked up my safety equipment and leaned out to secure the antenna's yoke to the tower. I was blown off the tower three times before I was finally able to do it. My safety equipment caught me each time. (Maybe that's why I'm scared of heights now.) Also, it flooded but we never went off the air because we built sandbag dams around the equipment. People were counting on us and often their lives depended on us.

Enemy Action

We could usually see some type action from our compound every night but we didn't hit the alarm unless it was within about 1000 yards or a direct attack on us. Otherwise we wouldn't get much sleep. The night was always filled with illumination flares drifting down on their parachutes, occasionally punctuated by various colors of signal flares shooting up into the sky. Sometimes we would go weeks without an attack, but when it happened, it usually was between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning - especially on a cloudy or rainy nights. (It was harder for us to get air cover and the VC knew it) After an attack we would have to stay up the rest of the night to make sure it was clear and then do our regular duties during the day. Sometimes the VC would lob in a few mortar rounds around 2:00 A.M. a few nights in a row to keep us up and wear us down before hitting us. During an attack my training and experience usually took over, but after it was over I would sometimes sit down and just shake. During one attack we heard something coming at our

bunker through the rice paddy. I was concerned that it might be a “sapper” sneaking up on the bunker to throw a satchel-charge in through the window. I knew the M-60 enough to get him. I probably should have ordered someone else to go get him, but I went out with a pistol to get him. I knew everyone's life in that bunker depended on me. I was very relieved when it turned out to be a dog and I always took a M-16 from that point on.

Rarely did we have any problems during the day. But once about 10:00 in the morning we were told by MACV's intelligence that we were surrounded by 5,000 troops and that we were going to be overrun in at noon. We followed procedure and rigged explosives to the communications equipment and asked to be lifted out by helicopter. We were told that they couldn't get us out due to bad weather conditions (I've recently learned that the Army helicopter pilots didn't get much instrument flying training; consequently, most of them were not rated to fly with low or no visibility). We asked about putting machine guns on the sides of our 2-1/2 ton truck and trying to make a run for it. We were told not to try it because we could never make it. Now it didn't too look good for us and I was all for it. We hoped that the F-4 Phantom jets could bring some Napalm in to help protect us. I had struggled with the use of Napalm because I had seen some its victims earlier in my tour. (We called them “crispy critters” perhaps to minimize their horrific appearance). Now I was all for it. Some of the men had been on the site during Tet and they told us what had happened to the soldiers who surrendered during Tet. We heard stories about soldiers being captured and marched to Hanoi to become prisoners for the duration of the war. Also, we remembered the mass graves after Tet. Facing those realities, we temporarily abandon military procedures and simply took a vote on whether to surrender or not. The vote was unanimous to fight to the end. So we put up our Texas flag and prepared to go down fighting. As noon approached, I saw a few guys break into tears and a few got angry, but most of us just sat at our positions in silence. Thankfully, nothing happened and we never saw anything. Apparently they didn't want us and went around us. So we went back to our daily activities of filling sandbags and repairing bunkers and always keeping the communications system running. Such was life in Viet Nam.

I spent the remainder of my tour in Hue. When I first got there it was mostly

just our Signal Detachment and the Marines and the personal at the MACV compound. Then the Army built Camp Eagle south of us and brought an MP detachment to Hue from Na Trang. We didn't get along very well with the MP's. They were "green" and inexperienced and they were driving us nuts. Many of my men had been complaining to me about them. For instance the MP's wanted us to always walk the route to MACV during the day and night. We knew that was asking for trouble and could get us killed. One night we could see that the MP compound was getting hit for the first time, so our alarm was sounded and we went on alert too. Much to our surprise two of our guys came in the main gate of our compound. (No one was supposed to be outside the perimeter after midnight.) They were drunk and laughing. They told us that they had decided to go over to the MP's compound and give them some "experience" – they had been shooting over their heads! Thank God and the luck of fools that no one was hurt. You should have heard the MP's telling us about their firefight the next morning. I told our guys never to tell anyone and this writing is the first time that this had been told. This could have caused a lot of trouble like investigations, court-martials and other things we didn't need.

I was the ranking NCO in charge of the communications for a while after our Staff Sergeant was transferred back to Da Nang. He had been through Tet in Hue and his nerves had gotten to him. I continued in that position until I had an incident at the MACV compound with the new Lt. Colonel who was fresh out of the States. He issued an order that all military personal had to be wearing regulation uniforms to enter his compound. We were not aware of this new requirement. So when I took my men for lunch at MAVC, I was surprised when the guard at the gate told me that he couldn't allow us to enter. Only one of us was wearing a regulation baseball hat. So I solved the problem by having one man go through the gate wearing the hat and then throw it over the fence to the next guy. The guard at the gate thought this was funny, but the new Lt. Colonel happen to drove up in his jeep. He did not find it so amusing. He asked me "what in the hell we were doing?" I stepped forward and I replied that I was trying to feed my men. Then he asked me "If I thought he was a God -damned idiot". I replied that "I had just met him and didn't know him yet." He got so angry at me that he had trouble writing down my name on his pad. I decided it was a good time to

go to Da Nang to “get some much needed parts” while he cooled off. When I got to the Phu Bai airport, I told them that I needed to next available flight. They said a C-130 was preparing for take-off and to run and jump in it. I did and found out that I was the only live passenger. It was filled with body bags. I checked the tags but didn't know any of them. A few weeks later after I returned to Hue, we got a visit from our Colonel in our chain-of-command. As he was inspecting the site, he pointed out that our sandbags were not all the same color or even regular Army issue. I told him the reason was that we were unable to obtain sandbags and other needed item from MAVC supply as we were instructed to do. When we tried to get supplies, MAVC told us that they didn't even have enough for themselves. So our guys had pitched together out of our own pockets and bought our supplies at Vietnamese markets or traded liquor for them with the Marines. After that the Colonel toured the compound with the Lieutenant aside. Then he took me aside and talked to me. I thought I was about to be busted to Private. He told me that the Lieutenant had at that time didn't know “his ass from a hole in the ground” and he was holding me personally responsible for this site until he could get us another Staff Sergeant to us. I got along great with the new Staff Sergeant. Another thing that changed was that we got word to be especially watchful for anything that we thought someone should be awarded a metal for. Apparently the Army was ready to start handing out some metals. Up until that time, it had been very difficult to get one.

Toward the end of my time in Hue, my best friend Sgt. Donald Hollister from our Khe Sanh site was reassigned to us after the Battle for Khe Sanh was over. We spent the last few months of our tour together and the war seemed like it was winding down. We decided to extend our tours a month so we could get out of the Army when we got back to the States and we hadn't seen any real action in a month. (At that time, if you got back to the States with less than six months, you were discharged.) Also, we had gotten some letters from guys that had rotated back home. They said they were only allowed two weeks leave in the States and they were sent to the DMZ in Korea because of the capture of a U.S. Pueblo by the North Koreans. Everything was on high alert now. The Army just didn't have that many people trained with our skills yet and we knew that we could be extended by the famous “needs of the service” clause in our enlistment papers. So the choice appeared to be to stay in Vietnam where we knew what we were doing and it

was warm and get out of the Army or go to the very cold DMZ in Korea and maybe get stuck in another war. We filed our extension papers to stay in Vietnam and of course the action picked up as soon as we did. The night before Hollister left Hue, we were in the worse firefight we ever had. We together on the perimeter wall and the sandbag in front of his face exploded when it was hit. He left the next morning to process out of the service and I never saw him again. I was almost killed my last night in Hue too, but this was my fault. We got a new guy in and I took him outside the perimeter outside of our rented house as it was turning dark to orientate him. I neglected to tell the guy who was coming on guard duty that we would be out there. It turned dark while we were out there and all I saw was an M-16 in my face and a very shaky guard. He said he was so glad it was me.

Going Home

Finally it was time for me to go home and I flew to Da Nang on a C-130 for the last time. I checked in my weapon and gear and got a clean uniform. That night a VC rocket came in. Alarms were sounded and one of the guys said we had to run for the bunkers. I asked him were the rocket hit and he said over by the docks. I rolled over and went back to sleep because there was no reason to lose a night's sleep over something that far away. The next morning I boarded a contract 707 jet and we flew back to the States (or "The World" as we called it). When we lifted off the ground, everyone cheered. I looked out the window and I saw some black smoke as we were lifting off. I thought to myself, it would just be my luck to get shot down leaving Vietnam. It was a 22 hour flight to Ft. Lewis, Washington with a stop in Tokyo. When we landed at Ft. Lewis at 2:00 in the morning I was blown away by how clean everything was. They had some of the best steaks for us that I think I've ever eaten. I couldn't believe I had made it unhurt except for having dysentery and some bad acne on my back. I wore my "Saint Christopher's Medal" the whole time I was in-country (and I'm not even Catholic or even went to church at the time). I didn't claim any disability when I got out because I didn't get shot by the enemy. But, my weight had dropped from the 175 lbs when I got to Vietnam to 114 lbs due to the dysentery. Later I would later learn that the acne on my back was a symptom of Agent Orange exposure. I left Ft. Lewis to return to Austin and they warned us not to go home through San Francisco because they might throw eggs at us because we were wearing our uniform (People knew we were

military even out of uniform because of our short hair.) I flew into Austin's Mueller Airport on a Braniff Airlines DC-3 prop plane on the night of September 18, 1968. I think it was an old DC-3. My parents, brothers, and girlfriend were there along with a neighbor to who had been one of the "Flying Tigers" in WWII.

Life After Vietnam

My first night at home, my brother set off some firecrackers outside and I hit the floor in my own living room – it was instinct now. At first I was worried I wouldn't fit in because I knew I was different now. I worked at blending in and becoming a productive, responsible, and grateful citizen. I had saved enough money to buy an car I wanted cash and I bought a gold 1968 Pontiac Lemans (and I still had money left over). I had to learn to drive in traffic again especially on just one side of the street and get accustomed to how fast everyone drove. I felt guilty that I was safe home in the States and my team was still in danger in Vietnam. I had to learn to feel safe enough to go to sleep even though I knew no one was standing guard. I married the girl who waited for me and we raised two sons together. I had to clean up my language and cut down on my drinking. I was able to go back to college finished my degree with high grades and the GI bill really helped. I slept with a pistol beside my bed for five years and I often jumped if a car backfired or there was a loud noise behind me and I still have trouble being around fireworks sometimes. The Army assigned me to the inactive reserves I worried about being recalled until my final discharge on Feb 13, 1972. I was told that the Hue site was blown to pieces after I left by direct hit from a rocket but I've never confirmed it. It really bothers me when I read in books that it was only Marines in Khe Sanh or Hue. We lost our first team at Khe Sanh except one man and then an all-volunteer team replaced them. Their team, the 544th Signal Detachment, was awarded a Navy Presidential Citation. The guys at Hue in the 513th Signal Detachment during the 1968 Tet Offensive were awarded a Valorous Unit Citation. As for me, I was awarded usual metals, except the Good Conduct Metal because I wasn't in the service a full three years.

Twenty years after my return to the US, I was diagnosed with PTST. I had nightmares about being overrun for decades. Sometimes I still have dreams

about being recalled back into the service. Now I'm dealing with peripheral neuropathy in my feet and hands that I believe was caused by Agent Orange. The VA has already listed it as one of the presumptive diseases connected Agent Orange but currently requires that a claim be filed within a year of exposure, so I would have had to file my claim back in 1969. While I was in Vietnam, I really wanted to know that I had killed at least one enemy soldier. Now, as an old veteran, I'm thankful that didn't happen. I was so very fortunate and I'm proud that I stepped forward and served my country. I realize what a gift it was to work with and meet some many different people from different parts of the U.S. that I would have never gotten to know otherwise. I'm especially grateful to those who did such incredible, courageous jobs and sacrificed so much more than I did. As to the politics of the war - we weren't very interested in politics when we were in-country unless it was to declare that the war was over and we could go home. We were just young (sometimes stupid) kids who did our jobs well, took care of each other, and tried to get home alive.