



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

BUCK APPEL

Expend All Ammo!

Since I was five years old I'd always wanted to be a Marine. I saw one of my mother's cousins in dress blues at a wedding when I was a boy and that impressed me. My father was an MP stationed in England during WWII, my grandfather was in the cavalry in WWI and fought in France, and my great-great grandfather was in the Union Army during the Civil War, so I have a lot of military tradition in my family. When I was growing up my father took me to every war movie that came out: Sands of Iwo Jima, To Hell and Back, and many more. I used to build WWII model airplanes when I was really little, like the Messerschmitt 109, the P-38 Lightning, and the P-51 Mustang. I suppose that's how I got interested. In high school I got in trouble a few times, but I graduated in June of 1966 and joined the Marine Corps with six buddies and two cousins.

I flew to Vietnam on Continental Airlines on April 25, 1967 and landed at Da Nang air base. After we deplaned, everyone stood around waiting for their base assignment. The next day I was on a truck that would take me to a place where I could be transported by helicopter to my base. I'm in the back of the truck thinking, "Hey, this is cool. I'm in another country, a new place, and this is exciting. There is a war going on in this country but it's probably not around here." We're driving down a dirt road and we stopped where there's a company of Marines. We got off the truck and I'm looking at their faces and I knew right away that this was no game, this was some serious bullshit. They were mortared the night before by the VC and took some casualties.

A while later I flew to my base at An Hoa, about 25 miles southwest of Da Nang. I was assigned to Echo Battery, which was part of 2nd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment. I was assigned to gun six, a 105 Howitzer. I settled in rather quickly, making friends. I met John Peel of Bradford, MA. John was an easy going and friendly. He took me under his wing right away and got me familiar with everything in the battery. We quickly became good friends. John was killed two months later, shot through the kidneys by a sniper while trying to help a wounded Marine. Eventually I moved to the 155mm howitzers on gun 7, which was a much bigger howitzer, firing sixty pound projectiles with an 11 mile maximum range.

On July 4, 1967 while still at An Hoa, a buddy of mine asked me if I wanted to accompany his unit to a place called Nong Son, which was a coal mine on top of a mountain. US Marines guarded the coal mines for the South Vietnamese. It was easy duty and the Marines of my buddy's unit looked forward to going up there. It was supposed to be very secure and they never had any problems in all the times they went up there. Since I'd never been off of An Hoa, I wanted to go. I asked our CO for permission and he asked me if I was crazy? Did I know the amount of paperwork he'd have to do if I got hurt? "No way!" he said. I was disappointed at the time, but the next night Nong Son was overrun. The VC very quietly scaled up the back side of the mountain to launch a savage and well-coordinated mortar and infantry assault. Nong Son was out of range of our 105 mm howitzers so it was up to the 155's to fire support for the overrun Marines. We knew the situation was critical when we got the order to "expend all ammo."



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Fox Company got beat up pretty bad. About 20 Marines lost their lives that night. It still makes me shudder when I think of it. To this day I still wonder how I would have reacted if I was there that night. Would I have made a difference? I'm thankful that my CO didn't let me go.

We moved from An Hoa 50 miles north to Phu Bai in December of 1967, which was about eight miles south of Hue City. When we moved into Phu Bai the bunkers were already built, so we just moved our gun batteries in and set up shop. The night of January 31, 1968 everything was quiet. I had gone to bed after doing four hours of gun watch and was just falling asleep when I heard an explosion very close to our hooch. I knew it didn't sound right, but I just listened and didn't move. I heard another explosion and this time dirt and rocks landed on the tin roof. I yelled for everyone to get out of the hooch and head for the bunkers near our 155. Everybody ran out and eight guys crammed into the powder bunker. Another 122mm rocket flew over and hit our hooch, where only minutes ago we had been sleeping. We all hunkered down and hoped the next round would land somewhere else. The next 122mm rocket came in and flew over our bunker and landed in the Gun 8 position and exploded. The gun crew was trying to get their 155 howitzer turned around when the rocket hit. I knew by the sound of the explosion that it was bad. Everyone was wounded. On our right, Gun 6 then took a direct hit, but luckily for them the round was a dud. If it had exploded they all would have been killed.

We didn't know it at the time but this was the start of the infamous TET Offensive. The Fire Direction Center, or FDC, ordered us by radio to man our 155s and return fire. Since I was the gun crew chief I had the headphones on to the FDC and they repeated we were to man our guns. That was easy for these guys in FDC, because they were calling us from a bunker well-fortified with sand-bags. I said, "Fuck you. We ain't moving until this shit slows down." After both guns on my left and right took direct hits, I wasn't going to send my men out on the guns to be cut down. I remember thinking to myself, I don't want to be responsible for the death of these men. I still know it was the right thing to do, but as a Marine I didn't follow a command. Although it still haunts me, I'm sure it would have been much worse if I had made my gun crew man the 155 and they had all been killed. After a while, thank God, the rockets stopped coming in. We found out later the NVA fired 122 rounds to soften us up because they were going to hit us with a ground attack. We soon received a call from FDC for another fire mission. Apparently a patrol had spotted a large enemy force of 500 NVA and VC coming our way across an open rice paddy. I'm not sure if that number is accurate or not, but it scared the hell out of us. The enemy, however, only 500 yards away, was soon caught in a death trap. As they were crossing the rice paddy, six 105mm howitzers, ten 155mm howitzers, and several 8-inch artillery guns opened up on them. It was slaughter.

In May of 1968, with only five days left on my tour, I was sleeping on my cot out in the rain—miserable, wet, and cold. I couldn't wait to get out of there. In Vietnam you are never fully asleep, but in a shallow fog with one ear open. I thought I heard the thump of mortar tubes somewhere beyond our perimeter. Then I heard the call that almost every soldier in Vietnam



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has heard at one time or another...“Incoming!” At first the rounds seemed to fly way over our position. Because we didn’t have a bunker to jump into, my gun crew scrambled into a shallow ditch that had been dug to dump the trash. For some unknown reason, one of our own mortar crews shot up an illumination round, which lit up our battery like daylight. The VC must have thought this was their lucky day because now they adjusted their fire and mortar rounds started dropping directly onto the battery area, where Gun 2 took a direct hit.

Gun crew 7—my crew—was still lying in the trash pit, praying the mortar rounds would stop, but they kept getting closer and closer. It didn’t take us long to figure out that if we stayed there they were going to drop one right on top of us, so we took off running in different directions. I knew of a large concrete drainage pipe about 50 yards away, and I figured if I could make it to that pipe I would be safe. I ran as fast as I could. All of a sudden a mortar round exploded directly in front of me. I remember seeing a bright flash and then immediately felt an intense burning sensation sinking deep into my chest. It felt like I had been stabbed in the chest with a red-hot icepick. My first thought was that I had a sucking chest wound and I started breathing very hard, thinking I needed to get enough air in my lungs before they collapsed. I kept spitting into my hand expecting to see blood, but there wasn’t any. I don’t know for sure but I think the round that wounded me was the last one fired on us. I remember trying to stand up and my legs felt like rubber. I couldn’t stand up. The guy beside me was yelling that we needed help, and a few guys from our gun crew came over and helped us to the aid station. They called for a medevac chopper to evacuate us to a hospital in Phu Bai.

They brought all the wounded to a spot away from the battery in case the VC tried to shoot at the medevac when it came in to pick up the wounded. Finally the chopper arrived and almost landed on top of the stretchers that were on the ground. The wounded were all loaded on the chopper and I was the only one left. They said they had no more room for me. I said, “I have five days left in Vietnam and there is no way you are leaving me here!” I jumped on the chopper and sat on the door gunner’s knee all the way to 3rd Med battalion in Phu Bai. I remember when we landed another Marine unit had been hit that night by the VC, because the choppers were stacked up one behind the other waiting their turn to land and offload the wounded. I don’t know for sure how many wounded were coming in, but it seemed like forty or fifty. The scene was a nightmare. Wounded Marines were screaming, moaning, and yelling. There was blood everywhere, all over the floor, all over the stretchers, all over the doctors and nurses working on the wounded. I remember a Corpsman coming over to me and asking me where I was hit and I told him in the chest. The wound was small and at first they said they couldn’t see anything because there was no blood. I started feeling guilty since all the people around me were seriously wounded. I felt I didn’t belong here with these men. Later though, I found out that the piece of shrapnel had lodged right next to the aorta of my heart. A fraction of a millimeter one way or the other and it would have been a very different story. They ended up not even operating on it, as it was too deep and dangerously close to my heart. At some point, maybe a few days later after they sent me back to Da Nang, I felt relief that I was going



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home. Eventually, the Marines flew me to Japan, then home to McGuire, and then on to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital for a couple of months. But I was home and I was alive.