



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

CHARLIE BECKER

I was on the first troop train where students threw themselves across the tracks. It was April 1966 when our battalion formed at Fort Wolters, Texas, and we headed to the Oakland Army Terminal in California. As we passed through Berkeley, anti-war protesters blocked the tracks. The train was stopped for about four hours; guards were put on every entrance. After that, we boarded a ship at Oakland and headed down to pick up Marines in San Diego. It took us 21 days to get over there. We dropped the Marines off at Da Nang and then went on to Vung Tau at the very southern end of South Vietnam, where we weren't going to get off the ship until the next day.

When we arrived at Vung Tau, a battle was raging. That night I watched C130s with Gatling guns – an airship known as “Spooky” – lay down fire. Every fifth round was a tracer; there was a steady red line. But it still didn't seem real to me – that I was in the war. The next day we boarded the landing craft. We were halfway to the shore, and I thought, “Wait, there's no music.” All the WWII movies I'd ever seen had music. I'm 23 years old and I'm thinking, “Oh, shit, this is real. There's no music.” When we landed, they were still establishing our company area in Long Binh, so they put us in a C130 and sent us up to Saigon to Tent City Alpha for almost a week.

My job was communications security and I monitored our unsecure communications. Most of what I did was classified, top level clearance. Basically everything was top secret, but there are a couple stories I can tell you. One day I was monitoring Henry Cabot Lodge's communications. (The U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam.) We had reel-to-reel tape running. His aide mentioned said the Ambassador will be leaving at 0800 hours, up to such-and-such by 0900 hours... I had the whole itinerary. We were at our base camp, and I called First Lieutenant John Cochrane, and he had the whole thing changed. The reasoning was, if I could hear the whole phone conversation, then the VC could hear the same thing, and if they wanted to kill him, they could.

You'd be surprised what went over unsecured lines... battle plans, all kinds of stuff. One time a colonel gets on and says, “You SOB, I know you're listening to me. And this is what I'm gonna say” And from that, he was relieved of his command that day.

I was at base camp at Long Binh for about eight and a half months. When I had a few months left in my tour, I was sent to Tan Son Nhut, an Air Force base on the outskirts of Saigon, to a spit-and-polish unit. First thing, they said we had to give up our weapons. They wanted to put it in an arms room, but I hid it from them for a week. I had been used to supporting the grunts. But eventually I had to turn it over.

By that time, I was working in what I was trained in, as a communications specialist, rather than in communications security. I was done the swing shift, and it was around 0100 hours, December 4, 1966, when we first heard small arms fire. Then the mortars started coming in. I went to the front of the hooch, and we could see they were basically walking the mortars in. The Air Force guards had dogs – most of them were killed that night. We had to run two city



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blocks to get our rifles. About 100 guys all running to get their weapons. I'm in my helmet, skivvies and boots. While we're running, a sergeant is hit by mortar. When we get there, the arms room is locked. When we finally get in, I grabbed my weapon and a couple of mags and started running back.

The next thing I know, I'm on the ground. The percussion from an explosion picked me up and just threw me against a bunker. I lost most of my hearing that night. I couldn't stand up. I was scared shitless.

You're looking at the biggest chicken that ever lived. I just started doing things I had to do. Every time we got hit, I had a better appreciation for what I was taught in basic training.

One of our bunkers had been taken over by the VC and they were just shooting 50 mm down the road. To make matters worse, ARVN (the South Vietnamese army and our allies) was shooting low-flying mortars from another direction. We got hit three times that night. Because of what happened that night, it put me in the hospital for a couple of days. Afterward, I thought: I spent 8, 9 months in the field and didn't get hurt, and then I get into a supposedly secure area and they take my M-14 away. If we had had our weapons, we'd have all been in a bunker and that would be it. We kind of knew something was up that night. On the base, there was a Vietnamese club and every night a bunch of Vietnamese girls showed up, but that night there were only 3 there. Because of that, we knew we were going to get hit. The next day we learned that 35 VC had been killed.

One of scariest things that happened to me over there was the night my buddy Chuck and I decided to go into town – Bien Hoa – to have a good time. If we were not on military business, we had to wear civilian clothes and we couldn't carry a weapon. So, we missed the last truck out of town at midnight. It was a weird war; we'd clear out of the bars by midnight and Charlie (the VC) would come in after midnight. So, we were ducking behind buildings, hoping not to be discovered when we saw a Lambretta with a driver. It was a type of 3-wheel scooter with a hood on back and parallel benches, like a taxi. The driver goes left down this one road that was off-limits to us, and he takes us right to the entrance of a Michelin rubber plantation. That's when we knew he was VC. They would mortar our base from that location. Fortunately, Chuck had a .45 under his shirt, and he cocked it and pointed it at this guy's neck. Then he drove us to the main entrance of our camp.

I still had two-and-a-half years to go in the Army, but I was getting ready to come home from Vietnam. I was actually leaving a couple weeks early – I was a “double-digit midget,” a short-timer. I left Tan Son Nhut and went to my old company with some of my old friends and got wasted. (At a reunion in 1994, I found out one of those guys was killed the day I left.) We had to report on the other side of the base at Long Binh. The next morning they just put me into a jeep and rolled me out with my duffel bag. This was my last day in-country. We were all in one big Quonset hut, telling stories. Wouldn't you know it? We got

Charlie on Guard of the Rear Perimeter



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hit. We get the order: "Everybody out on the perimeter." Those of us that were leaving said, "Fuck you. We're not going out." They had all these GIs coming in, a couple thousand, and I'm thinking as the FNGs come in, "We're not leaving here. Dear God, not tonight. Tomorrow night, I don't care. Not tonight." (FNGs were "fucking new guys.")

The next day we got on a Delta flight from Bien Hoa to Okinawa to Honolulu and all the way to McGuire in New Jersey, 23 and a half hours. We landed about twelve at night on March 7, 1967. It was 20 degrees out with a 19 mile an hour wind. We were in short sleeves. I'd been up for 3 days. My parents met me, and they brought my girlfriend. Over there you always dreamt of home. When woke up, I realized I was home, and that was only two-and-a-half hours after I went to sleep.

I was shielded from the negative reactions of people for a couple years because I was still in the Army. My best buddies who I grew up with, my best man, they were all college students. We were playing cards one night after I got out of the Army. The war was on the TV and they shut it off. I said, "Leave it on. I want to see what's happening." And they said, "We don't care." That was the last day I ever saw those guys. I had new friends after that.

I was 24 when I got home. I used to be 230 pounds, but I'd lost a lot of weight over there. There was no such thing as a fat GI in Vietnam. When I got home, I went down to Gimbels in Cheltenham. I asked, "How much?" for a shirt.

The saleswoman said, "\$5.99."

"I'll give you \$2," I said, like I was still in Vietnam.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I just got back from Vietnam and that's how we bought things there."

After that she walked away and wouldn't wait on me.

The next night I went to Cavanaugh's Beef and Ale House near St. Joe's. I used to go there before I was in the service. There, when an Irish bartender heard I'd just got back, he said, "He doesn't pay for a damn thing tonight."