



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

RICHARD BRUCKER

A Fortunate Change of Assignment

After graduating from Abington High School in 1964 I worked as a surveyor for 2 years before receiving my draft notice. After being sworn in, I boarded an overnight troop train for Fort Bragg, NC. In the morning I got up, ate a breakfast of cold eggs on the train and thought "I'm in the army now."

Basic training was very rigorous. We were given aptitude tests and asked what our interests were. I requested engineering because of my surveying background. At the end of boot camp, we were given our assignments for advanced training. I was assigned to Fort Leonard Wood, MO for Corps of Engineers training. There, I continued to train with the rifle, but also learned how to build temporary bridges and airfields, set up concertina wire, lay and dig up land mines and work with explosives. Some of the training was in the classroom, but most was hands on. After the two month of training, I ended up as a holdover meaning I had graduated, but was not yet assigned a place to go. For about the next month I filed sandbags, did construction, cleanup, etc....anything to keep busy. Finally the orders for Vietnam arrived.

A commercial carrier took us from Oakland to Vietnam and I arrived to see lush, green fields after leaving winter in the US. I had arrived on February 25, 1967, my 20th birthday. Trucks took us through the local villages and over the winding roads. Our destination was a holding area where the men waited for their next assignment. While waiting, I had guard duty in the interior of the camp. Originally I was slated to be assigned to the northern part of South Vietnam, but suddenly, I was re-assigned to US Army Engineers Headquarters Command at the military installation and airbase at Bien Hoa. I joked that my ability to type may have saved my life.

I was assigned to be manager of classified control. In this job, I was responsible for logging in and maintaining confidential and secret documents for copies of communications between engineering and Headquarters. These records were kept in locked file cabinets in an office in a large "hooch" (mostly tin, rounded roof building). Before I could begin this job of working with secret documents I needed to get a secret security clearance. While waiting for the clearance I was a courier. I would drive jeeps or ¾ ton trucks to pick up and deliver documents. My trips often took me into Saigon which was about 10 miles away on Highway 1. Saigon had both modern and poor sections. I remember lots of markets and old French cars and rickshaws.

When leaving the base, the couriers would recruit a guard to go along. During the day it was fairly safe, but once it got dark it was best to be off the road. I did get caught out a few times after dark and experienced sniper fire. Sometimes, when we got back, we would find bullet holes in the canvas canopy of the jeep. One day, we stopped to look at a road side religious shrine when we were fired at by a sniper. We quickly moved on.



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Once my security clearance was received, I began my job with the classified and secret documents. Documents had to be logged in and filed for quick retrieval. When documents were destroyed, I had to burn them and certify that they were destroyed. If the base were overrun, it would be my job to destroy the documents by setting off some incendiary grenades on top of the filing cabinets and letting them burn through and into the documents. There were a number of occasions when I was told to prepare the grenades, but I never had to use them.

Living conditions on base included a hooch for barracks. There was limited fresh food and the milk was awful. There were also a number of times that the base was under mortar attack and the men had to scramble into sandbag bunkers. I carried my M-14 nearly everywhere I went.

I and a friend decided to organize a softball league for our Sundays off. There was enough interest to field four teams. Because the field we used was outside the perimeter, there were a few precautions we had to take. The first was to sweep the field for booby-traps and mines. Ained as engineers. Since we were trained as engineers, this wasn't a problem. The other precaution was to have the team that was up to bat stand guard duty around the field. The league proved to be quite popular and there was almost as much enjoyment gained from looking forward to the games as there was in playing them.

At Long Binh, I would pull guard duty some nights. The guards would show up at a designated area with their M-14 rifles and 200 rounds of ammunition and be trucked out to a berm on the perimeter. On the berm would be a sandbagged knoll where we would stand. About 20 – 40 yards out would be concertina wire and we would set up flares, booby traps and claymore mines each night. Beyond the wire was the jungle. We would spend the night with four hours on guard duty and four hours off. During the off time we could try to sleep in a small tent that was set up behind the berm for this purpose. There were a number of times I was involved in fire fights with the enemy and in one incident in May 1967, the enemy breached the perimeter and were on the airstrip with explosives before being repulsed.

The enemy was most active at night and men had heard of occasions when the enemy had snuck inside the perimeter and turned the claymore mines around so that when they were detonated, they would fire toward the defenders. To combat this possibility, we would put reflective tape on the back of the claymore mine to make sure it was facing the correct way. We would also sometimes put a flare on the mine so if someone tried to move it the flare would go off. At first, we were authorized to fire at anything that moved out in front of us, however, after a near miss friendly fire incident, we had to hold our fire and seek confirmation before firing. During heavy enemy activity at night, a flare system was used to signal to the perimeter guards when we could fire and when we should stop. A red flare meant "turkey shoot" and everyone was to shoot a low ground covering fire. A green flare meant stop.



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In early 1968 there was very little warning about the impending Tet Offensive. I saw documents indicating the possibility of an attack, but the size and scope of the attack was a surprise. In late January, the North Vietnamese struck at 80 different cities in the south. By now, I had been promoted to E-5 and one of my duties was to be in charge of the guards on a section of the perimeter at Long Binh. I would take 12 men, load them up with hand grenades and spread them out between four bunkers. During Tet, I was pulling guard duty every other night. There were skirmishes at Long Binh, but my former base at Bien Hoa was hit hard and I could see the smoke rising from the city of Bien Hoa. In a letter home on February 4, 1968, I wrote to my parents "part of Bien Hoa City no longer exists. Many homes have been burned....only four out of twenty of the Vietnamese employees have come to work so far.....The others will not come back to work because they have been threatened by the V.C. (Viet Cong)."

Even after pulling guard duty, I still had to keep working my day job in the confidential and secret records room. I was aware of the massive scale of the attacks as communication flow increased during this time: reports on casualties, troop displacement, movement of troops, etc..... I did have to read parts of the communications so I could log in the titles of the documents and their content so they could be quickly retrieved. The Tet activity lasted about a month and half. I would normally have been sent back to the states at the end of February, however, a few months earlier I had taken advantage of a program that allowed soldiers who were exiting Vietnam with 90 days or less left on their enlistment to then be discharged upon return to the United States. I extended my tour by two months to get inside the 90 day period not realizing that I would then be there for the full length of the Tet Offensive.

For my work in managing the classified control center where the confidential and secret documents were kept, I earned the Army Commendation Medal which is given for meritorious service to the US Army. The Army would make un-announced reviews of the records and I did well at these reviews. General Duke, Head of Corps of Engineers, gave me the Commendation Medal in a ceremony. I was also promoted to E-5 based on his appearance before the review board and testing. I had scored in the top 10%.

As my time in Vietnam wound down, the last 30 days really dragged. I became extra cautious as I didn't want anything to happen so close to going home. At the end, I had to turn in almost all of the items I had been issued. I took my combat boots and dress greens home with me. We were able to also ship a box of belongings home. One of the more interesting souvenirs I sent home was an elephant skin brief case.

Once I saw the airplane I was to take home I couldn't wait to get on it. The plane flew to Oakland, CA via Clark Field in the Philippines and Honolulu, HI. It was a great feeling arriving back in the states. I was discharged in Oakland after debriefings and a physical. During the physical, I had a fever. I quickly shook the temperature back down to normal before the nurse came back to check because I was afraid they would keep me in the Army Quarantine until I was better. It was here in Oakland, however, that I saw my first sign that all was not well in the



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US. I saw a sign saying “GI’s and dogs, stay off the grass.” In San Francisco, I saw my first hippie. I said it was hard to stay in touch with what was going on in the world when I was in Vietnam. We did not have TV and the only paper was the *Stars and Stripes* published by the Army.

I didn’t have trouble adjusting to civilian life although my mother would wake me up with a close pole since I tended to be a little jumpy when waking up. I took advantage of the GI bill and went to college. While attending Montgomery County Community College and the University of Denver, I met and make friends with other veterans. I never regretted being drafted, which wasn’t the case with some of the people I knew. I felt that my Army experience made me a better, more mature person.

Rich’s story was told several years ago as his church did a tribute to their members that were in the Vietnam War. This story was taken from that tribute and used here for his story.