



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

TERRY FOULKE

It Could Have Been Us

When I talked to the Navy recruiter, I said I wanted enlist in the Seabees, a construction battalion (CB.) He said, "You'll never get in." Around that time my dad and his two brothers had taken over a dump truck company that was in the family, and I went with my dad to see the company lawyer. Behind the lawyer was a painting of a war scene that included a PT boat cutting through the water at high speed.

"Is that Leyte Gulf?" Dad asked. The lawyer replied that it was and the painting was of his boat picking up survivors in the water. "I was on that island and watched that battle take place." My dad had been a heavy equipment operator in the Army's Combat Engineers in the South Pacific during World War II.

The lawyer asked, "What's your son going to do after high school?"

"I want to join the Navy," I said. "Seabees." And that was the end of the conversation.

A couple weeks later, I went back to see the recruiter and he said, "Who the hell do you know? They got your name down in the Seabees."

I shrugged and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The lawyer we'd gone to see happened to be a personal friend of the Admiral who was in charge of all Seabees.

I was in Vietnam Christmas 1967 through 1968, at the time of the Tet offensive. I was stationed about five miles north of Da Nang at a base next to "Freedom Hill," an R & R area for Marines and grunts coming out of the bush. There was a movie theater, beer garden, and an exchange with a hamburger and milkshake shop. The village closest to our camp was called Dogpatch. The Seabees were not combat troops. We were support troops, but whatever we built, we defended. The Seabees have two mottos: "Can Do!" and "We build, we fight." We had very few moments that were terrifying, but we had a lot of camaraderie.

We did a lot of work for the Marines over at Hill 55. Hills were numbered based on how many feet they were above sea level. We also stood the security at Red Beach where MCB 74 was building a helicopter base for the 1st Air Cav. We'd truck over to the beach at six in the evening 'til six in the morning, standing security in two shifts. There'd be two guys in a bunker and we had six bunkers.

One night, me and Pete Davie, from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, went out to a bunker in the corner to stand first security, from 6 pm to midnight. Harry Hodges from Tennessee and Joe Stoko from Minnesota had the next shift. On this particular night we saw something like someone striking a lighter. We knew it wasn't ours and something was going on. When Joe and Harry came out for their shift, we told them about the unusual lights we'd seen. They said, "Yeah, go



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back and get something to eat. We'll take care of it." And Pete and I went to the field kitchen for some mid-rats (late night rations.)

A short time later we heard an explosion and machine gun fire, and figured the Marines FLC (Force Logistic Command) were getting hit again. A gunnery sergeant assigned to our unit ran into the field kitchen and said, "Bunker 3 just got hit! One down and one wounded." A helicopter came and picked up Harry, but he was already dead. What had happened was this: A VC had crawled up beside the bunker, pitched an American grenade in, and Harry jumped on it. It was an hour after we had changed shifts. It could have been us.

Once we convoyed up to Phu Bai with replacements for a Seabee battalion that had lost people and equipment. The Seabee base shared a perimeter with an ARVN boot camp on one side, and maybe the 82nd Airborne on the other side. After we unloaded all the trucks, we were taken to hardback huts where we were to sleep. So, we picked out our beds, and I was going to take a nap, when someone asked if I wanted to see a flick (movie.) They'd set it up on the basketball courts. I had gotten two Cokes and was headed there when all of a sudden, the basketball courts blew up. We turned around and started running. Their mortar trenches were above ground—metal drums, sandbags, metal matting—but I wasn't looking for that. I was looking for something in the ground. I'm about to dive into a hole, when my buddy Pete says, "That's a pisser!" He grabbed me by the shirt and guided me to an opening in the above ground trench. Rockets were going off all over the place. We got back to the hut, and it was blown up. There was 122 mm Russian rocket shrapnel stuck in a 2x4 above the pillow where I would have laid my head if I had taken that nap.

There's one place I hated over there more than any other, and that was Hai Van Pass. We would form up convoys with the Marines or Army north of Red Beach, at a confirmed VC village called Namu. We also went up one time with the Koreans. We'd go north one day and come back the next...

The pass was on Highway 1A and ran along the coast of the South China Sea. The higher we got, the narrower the road. The pass was only wide enough for one vehicle. On either side of the pass were long plateaus where the "Cong" would set up their mortars. If you got stopped for any reason, they would just start walking the mortars down the road. I hated that place. It was just so narrow at the pass. I was a truck driver. We knew if a truck got hit in front of you, you rammed it and pushed it over the side. You do not stop. You do not stop.

Once, we got stopped on the pass when we had the Koreans running in front of us, and pretty soon everyone's asking, "What's going on? What's going on?" It was radioed back that one of the Korean trucks got shot. We got moving again, got through the pass, turned, then turned again, got down out of the mountains and went through this VC village. On the long straightaway heading into the village, we would kick the trucks out of gear so we could pass



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through there as fast as possible. This time, though, the Koreans stopped the convoy and killed every man, woman, child, and animal in that village.

One morning we were headed out to Hill 55, a Marine base. We had three Galleon graders, all these trucks, and a 50-ton rubber tire roller. There was one grader on one side of the road and another on the other side pushing gravel to the middle, then another one rolling up the middle. We see these people in the distance and figure it's the Marines doing mine sweeping. They'd go out and sweep the roads ahead of us. But then we noticed they were coming towards us. When we reached their unit, the gunnery sergeant yelled, "Who are you dumbasses?" And we realized—holy shit. He says to his men, "Pack it up. The Seabees just swept the road for us." They'd gotten a late start so they had not swept the road we'd just come down. He called us everything but gentlemen. After that, we always had our 50-ton roller go first, with its big bins full of water, then the trucks, then the graders—with the least protection for the drivers—in the back.

At the time of the Tet Offensive, we were told 10,000 VNA were going to come up the pass. Yeah, right. We were all sitting around. We never went in bunkers, because they were filled with standing water and mosquitoes. But we watched as they lit up the air base at Da Nang. It was like broad daylight. It was tremendous. It was five miles away but like the 4th of July. We didn't know that Saigon had been hit, and we didn't get attacked.

We won the war that night, then Walter Cronkite lost it for us. We beat the VC and VNA so bad at Tet that they were done and General Giap wanted to quit. Until Cronkite came on and said we'll be fighting for another four thousand years, and the national mood shifted. I'm not saying the war was right, no more than this war is right. To do what? Kill another 3,000 to 4,000 guys or send them home with one leg?

For what?

When we got back to the States, we were told to wear civvies as we traveled and at home. When I got back home and walked into the American Legion, a guy I'd gone to school with—he was 4F—he said, "Hey, Foulkie, you're one of them baby killers, huh?"

I said, "Larry, when did I ever hurt anybody? I was a bulldozer operator. Except for practice, I never shot my gun, and I never pointed it at anybody."

My girlfriend, who later became my wife, Lynne, wrote to me every day. She would write in red ink and put in little red hearts with Avon's Rapture perfume on them. After a while, the guy in the mailroom knew who it went to just by seeing it and smelling it.

I knew Lynne before I went over. I was from Quakertown, and me, my cousin, and a friend were graduating. He had his dad's '65 Ford Galaxy 500 convertible and said, "Let's go to Pottstown to see the cruisers."



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“Where is it?” my cousin asked and I said, “I don’t know. Down 663.”

We drove to the west end of town—to the Tropical Treat. The gas station was closed, and we didn’t see anyone and were going to head home. Then two girls passed by, honked the horn, and we chased ‘em. When we met up, we told them we were leaving for the Navy and asked if they wanted to ride with us. Lynne got out and she had on a pastel green sweater that fit like her skin. I pulled her to sit next to me. We rode around about 30-45 minutes. I asked if I could see her the next night. She and two other girls showed up. Later that night, my cousin Kenny and I dropped the other girls off, and we dropped Lynne off at Franklin and Beech Streets, where she lived. I said to Kenny, “I’m gonna marry that girl.”

My friends went to boot camp in August. I went in November, so Lynne and I dated from about June to November 1966. I signed on for 48 months, got out in 38 months, and from the day I left, she wrote me every day. I broke up with her once when I was home on a 30-day leave. One of my buddies told me I was crazy and I realized he was right. I called her up and asked her to put her ring back on, and she did.

We got married on a Thursday night—November 14, 1968. Her father couldn’t attend because he worked second shift at Firestone. We went to her church in Quakertown, got married, went to the fire hall, and had soda and cake. On Friday morning she went to work at Kiwi, on Saturday we went to Eaglesmere, and on Sunday I went back to California. Two weeks later, I was in Okinawa.