



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

CLYDE HOCH

Left Behind

I wanted to go to Vietnam. I enlisted in the Marine Corps three months before graduating from high school. I felt it was every man's duty to serve his country. Three days after I graduated I was on my way to boot camp, which was in Parris Island, South Carolina. Upon enlisting we were given three choices of what we wanted to do. I chose infantry, motor transport, and I forget the other choice I made. Instead, the Marines put me in tanks, which surprised me. You don't often get what you ask for in the military. Mostly, you just do what you're told. At that time, everyone who enlisted in the Marine Corps went to infantry training. I did mine in North Carolina. I never went to tank school, just on-the-job training. I became the tank driver right away, although you usually have to work your way up the tank hierarchy. Lowest on the rung is the loader, then the driver, then the gunner, and on the top is the tank commander.

We have military ships in the Mediterranean all the time, complete with a battalion of Marines. I found out I was going to be on one of those ships, and one of the more troubling thoughts I had up to that time was wondering how the hell you get a M48A3 tank loaded on a ship? Somebody said when I asked, "Well, you'll see." I had learned how to maneuver the tank, but it was still scary when I had to load it on a railroad car for the first time to get it to the ship. The tank's tracks hung over 6-8 inches and you couldn't see when you were going up the ramp; at the last second the front end of the tank slammed onto the railroad car. When we got to Morehead City, North Carolina we drove the tanks off the railroad cars and then down to the beach, where we waited for the ships to arrive. I'd be in the Mediterranean for six months, come back to North Carolina for six months, and then do another six months in the Mediterranean. All the while I was moving up in the Marine Corps in rank.

When I came back from the Mediterranean for good, I got a couple of temporary assignments. I received orders to be a brig guard, which I did for six weeks; later, I was sent to try out for an elite Marine drill team. I didn't want anything to do with the drill team, all its spit and polish. I went back to my company headquarters and got orders for Vietnam. I'd made sergeant by that time. I arrived in-country on a civilian airliner in the middle of Tet, which is the Vietnamese New Year, spring celebration, and left at the end of Tet in 1969. This time period was the heaviest fighting of the Vietnam War. My first day, near Da Nang, I slept in this huge barracks for arriving soldiers. The next day I was taken to Battalion Headquarters and shown to my hooch. This staff sergeant I had met on the plane on the way over came in; it was good to see someone I knew. A warrant officer walked in a few minutes later looking for volunteers to man a tank. The staff sergeant volunteered and then said I'd go along as well. Welcome to Vietnam!

We drove out to this place somewhere west of our position. It was a high point overlooking a wide, lazy river. Thick jungle ran right up to the opposite side of the river. We were there to support an observation tower, where a squad of Marines watched the jungle across the river for enemy movement. They were supposed to call in to the Battalion Headquarters if they saw something. Later in the day, someone spotted an NVA soldier across the river in full uniform,



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and Da Nang was informed, but they radioed back saying there was an American patrol in the area across the river and it was too risky to have our tank fire at him. The staff sergeant had gone up into the tower to help recon and wasn't too happy with what Da Nang radioed back. Pretty soon we received intelligence that an entire NVA battalion, more than 500 men, was heading toward us. There were maybe twelve of us at this observation point, and the tank. It was my first full day in this war. I didn't know, especially after dark, if I'd be able to handle the situation. I was a sergeant and I was supposed to know everything, but I knew better than anyone that I didn't know everything.

We called back Da Nang and told them the situation. After a while artillery rounds started going right over the top of our heads. Even Puff the Magic Dragon came to support us, which is a C-130 plane with super-fast firing Gatling guns aboard. Every fifth round or something was a tracer bullet and they lit up the sky like some sort of weird lighting show as they fired down into the jungle. After Puff went away and the artillery rounds quieted down, the staff sergeant told me to go and get some sleep. I thought there was no way I could ever get any sleep, but I conked out right away. The sergeant woke me up a while later to stand guard. It was so dark outside. I'm thinking I'll never see the enemy if they come. Then I hope to God they don't come the next two hours during my watch. The two hours seemed like twenty. They crept by so slowly I could almost hear a soft clicking sound in my head. When the staff sergeant finally relieved me again, I crawled over beside the tank and immediately fell asleep. When I woke the sun was shining brilliantly in the pale blue sky. I remember thinking that after this first night, if it was like other nights here, I would never make it out of Vietnam alive.

Nine months later I'm on patrol in my tank, along with another one. I'm the commander of my tank, but there's a staff sergeant, not the one I met coming over here but one I don't get along with, in the other tank and he ranks me, so he is in charge of our American detachment. We're supporting a company of ROK (Republic of Korea) Marines. We were making our way across a flat, grassy piece of ground in the middle of nowhere and I hear an explosion on the far side of the other tank. The Koreans were in line with the tanks, spread out to either side of us. Our two tanks were about a hundred yards from one another. When I heard the explosion I looked over at the other tank. I assumed it had hit a mine. Small arms fire and RPGs were coming more frequently from the tree-line. I called the other tank on my radio but couldn't understand what the staff sergeant was saying. It sounded like gibberish. I took off my helmet and ran to the other tank and discovered that an RPG had scored a direct hit. The driver had been hit in the head. The turret was knocked out and they had to turn it with a hand crank. I ran back to my tank under fire and sent my driver over to the other tank and had our loader do the driving. I asked a Korean lieutenant if he had someone who could speak English to help us load the gun in our tank. He sent one guy who listened a few seconds to me explain how to load the 90mm main gun and he jumped out in terror and ran away. Then the lieutenant sent a private who didn't run away, but he looked terrified.



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The Koreans tried a flanking maneuver to come around the far side of the enemy. They were in the open and several were wounded. The Koreans left them in the middle of the field. They asked us to go get them. Four or five Koreans followed behind our tank, using it as a shield as we moved forward to get to the wounded. As we advanced, I saw a flash and then a cloud of smoke, and this little black dot in the middle of the smoke got bigger and bigger. I soon realized it was an RPG that had been fired at us. I remember seeing the round get closer and closer, until I could almost see the writing on it. It seemed like it was coming in slow motion, but I couldn't get out of the way and it whooshed past six inches over my head and exploded somewhere behind me. They talk about your life flashing before your eyes but I didn't have time for any of that. And that, it turned out, wasn't the worst part of the day.

We loaded up the wounded and the staff sergeant in the other tank called on the radio and said we were pulling out. I radioed back saying lets pull back by leaps and bounds, which is when one tank retreats about 75 yards, and then covers the other tank as it retreats to them, and then that tank retreats a further 75 yards, and in that way makes a coordinated and controlled retreat. I told my driver to turn the tank around, and as he did this I brought the turret around to fire at the enemy. After I felt the other tank had time to regroup and cover us, I told my driver to pass them by 75 yards and stop. He said, "What other tank?" I turned around and everyone was gone. We were alone. That's when hundreds and hundreds of NVA stood up along the tree-line and started coming at us, shouting and firing their AK-47s. I was the only one who saw this, as the gunner couldn't see much through his scopes. The driver was facing the other way and the Korean loader was as low in the tank as he could get. The staff sergeant, the bastard, had skedaddled for the rear, leaving me without support. I said to the driver, "Kick this thing in the ass!" We roared back across the field as best we could, firing behind us the whole time, RPG rounds and small arms fire zinging over our heads. It was sheer terror for me and my men. When we got back to base I was dangerously angry at the staff sergeant for taking off with the Koreans and leaving us there. I stayed away from him for fear of what I might do to him. His guys, I found out later, hated him. They told me the reason I couldn't understand him on the radio that day was because he was so scared he couldn't talk—literally. Turns out a round hit him in the helmet in the field, but didn't penetrate. We both wrote out reports. He put in for the Silver Star! His men assured me they'd make sure he never got it. Until my last day in Viet Nam, I was sure that I was never going to make it out of there alive.