



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

KEN SCHWEITZER

The Life of a Huey Crew Chief

I signed up for the reserves in 1963, my junior year of high school, and became associated with an artillery outfit called the 105s up in Reading, Pennsylvania. But there was really no call for artillery in civilian life, so I switched from the reserves to active duty before I went to boot camp. I was looking to get into aviation. I graduated from high school and then went to boot camp from June to September 1964 in Parris Island, South Carolina. Then I did my eight week ITR (infantry training regiment) course at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, where I learned field maneuvers and survival. That was pretty grueling. The Marines sent me home on leave. After leave, I reported to Naval Technical, which was the Marine air detachment unit in Memphis, Tennessee. Everybody goes through what's called mechanical fundamentals, where you do a battery of tests, and then they tell you where you're going to go and I tested out for reciprocating engine school. After that I was sent to Camp Pendleton, down near San Diego, where I went through four weeks of jungle training. I guess I should have known what that meant.

They woke us up unexpectedly around 4am on October, 12, 1965 and told us to pack our gear and then we got on a troop transport ship. I was nineteen years old. I don't remember how long it took us to reach Oahu, Hawaii, but soon after arriving I spent eight hours in a place called the *Bar Down Under*, near Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, and then walked back to the ship. We went from there to Yokohama, Japan, where we resupplied. We had fun with a papa-san who came out to our ship in his san-pan. "Papa-San, you like scrap iron?" we called down from the ship to this old Japanese man one day. When he wagged his head in the affirmative, we dropped a 35 pound anvil, which landed square in the middle of his boat and punched a hole in it and sank it. There were about six thousand troops watching us, but nobody said a thing when the commanding officer demanded to know who had done this. That was my first time being bad in the service.

Eventually, we made it to Vietnam. The ship anchored off Da Nang August of 1965. We went over the side of the ship on rope netting, like you see in the movies, and into an LST troop landing craft. The bosun, however, stopped about 5 feet from shore and said it was a Marine tradition that its soldiers always waded to shore. Forty-five or fifty men then waded ashore, most of them swearing at this guy. At the Da Nang base, we checked in and were given our orders and we got on trucks that took some of us to Marble Mountain VMO2 or Vietnam Marine Observation Squadron 2. We provided aerial fire support spotting and intelligence, plus medivac. When I first got there I worked on bird dogs, UH-1 "Hueys," 34s and flying deuces doing various mechanical duties, including repair and inspections. Eventually I took the crew chief test and passed. I had over-all responsibility for the UH-1s mechanical well-being while it was on the ground. In Naval tactical operations terms, I was in-charge of the huey when it was on the ground and the pilots were in charge when it was in the air.



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On combat operations, we usually came in with a load of combat troops, which we were charged with protecting as we landed them. We usually didn't know if the LZ was hot or not until we landed. In Operation Hastings in July of 1966, the VC didn't hit the landing zone until the 4th CH-46 helicopter was on the ground. I guess I liked the excitement of the war because I did two tours of duty in Vietnam—about 26 months.

“Pop smoke when you are ready,” we radioed back.

A while later we see yellow smoke, which means it's safe to land the chopper, but as we're going in we see this huge explosion through the tree-line. “What's going on?” our pilot yelled over the radio. We were right in the middle of the enemy's battalion headquarters. We blew up the HQ, let them know we were here. They were growing potatoes, peppers, cabbage, all in the middle of this war. It felt surreal. Anyway, we maneuvered and picked up the six guys who had been wounded and we pull out and head back to base. My friend Bob Elverson—he was my gunner on that mission—always blamed me for taking him into North Vietnam that day.

I left Vietnam on December 10, 1967, over two years after I had arrived. I spent five days in Camp Hansen decompressing and when I got back to my base I realized I still had five-and-a-half months to go in the Marine Corps. I found out from someone that the USS Boxer—a helicopter carrier—was going on a Caribbean cruise to Vieques, Puerto Rico. I was asked if I wanted to come along, saying they'd make sure I'd get back in time for my discharge from the Marines. How could I miss an opportunity like that? When I got back from the cruise, about three weeks later, an Army recruiter up in Reading, Pennsylvania said to me, “I understand you're out of the Marines and familiar with Hueys.” He offered me a spot in the warrant officer program. “You'd be down at Fort Rucker, Alabama. You'd probably end up back in Vietnam.”

I said, “No way, been there, done that.” The war was over for me. I was home.