



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

FRANK STRUNK

The Hardest Part Was Watching Those You Left Behind.

It was damn hot and humid and it smelled. If I'm behind a diesel truck today, that reminds me of how it smelled. We arrived there about two o'clock in the morning on a military transport. We left Travis Air Force base and went to Guam, then Bangkok, Thailand early in the morning. That was the debarkation area. These people were sitting up high, from all branches of the military. Someone would call out a unit, and that unit would step up and then get assigned to where they were going. Picture a Kennedy Airport rush hour. That's how it was. Then every kind of unit got separated further. There were only 13 of us coming out of Strategic Air Command (SAC); most of us knew each other. The B52s flew early to Guam, and they were supposed to follow us into Thailand. But it was in a NATO agreement that Strategic Air Command would not go to Southeast Asia, so we always wondered, "Where the hell are we going?"

The name of our unit was the 4209 Combat Support Group. There were about 15-18 of us. Our mission was to rescue the downed crews of B52s. Early on in Vietnam, they went with the old bombing program left over from WWII. They'd go in with three B52s. The first one would be okay; the enemy would lock coordinates on the second one; then they'd bring down the third one. We lost quite a few. But the government had put a lot of money into training the B52 crews, and there was a high priority for their extraction.

My particular job was the accountability – to make sure we got the B52 crew members out, and if the plane wasn't destroyed, we had to make sure that it was destroyed or the instruments were removed. And we accounted for all the people. If someone had been killed, we got their dog tags and noted it. Everyone had to be accounted for.

If you were a downed crew member and you were on the north side of the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) and we went in for rescue, you didn't tell anybody you were there. Touching down north of DMZ was a major restricted zone and could result in a reprimand or even court martial. We had to be mindful of the rules of engagement and those rules changed constantly. When we were well aware that our military prisoners that were captured were being tortured, the rules changed and the restricted zone eliminated. There was always a danger on any mission, but the danger high point was being in a holding pattern until the area was safe to land, to off-load or load, depending on the situation. Then the high danger was lift-off because once again you were an easy target for any and all ground fire. Remember, by the time we received a rescue call, the Navy Seals had already raced to the aid of the downed crew plus they made sure the B52 was destroyed, but the VC were doing the same, so the area was very active. Once the Seals felt they had a secured area for landing, they would use green smoke, and we started towards the landing zone. Once committed, only the pilot could make the decision to pull out because of risk of losing the chopper and crew. If the smoke turned orange or yellow, that was a warning VC were in the area, and red smoke meant that the Seals were engaged with VC and a live fire fight was in progress. We only had two pullouts: One was a mechanical problem with



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the chopper taking a few rounds in the tail blade that made it hard to control landing and take-off, and the other was the VC were waiting for us to touch down at the LZ (Landing Zone).

Our craft was wide open all the time; bullets came in the sides. The floor was double sheet metal. If you had a problem going in, you could jump out. Our problem was getting hit in the propellers or tail. Sometimes when the pilots would take off from an LZ, they would be spinning the craft just to stop from getting hit.

We didn't go out every day. We had enough aircraft to alternate. Our problem became, once these guys started to rotate back to the States, and all these green guys came in, they were clumsy. We went from Thailand to Da Nang and had locals building our hooches. This was a risk because one never knew if they were real laborers during the day and VC at night. We always had to look behind the shower or the back of the toilet for the booby traps such as a grenade etc. Every time a new guy came on station from the States, we assigned him to someone who had been in country for few months to make sure he, too, became familiar with the same area risks.

I did probably 20-25 missions, but we would do what we could to get out of a mission. I'm just being honest with you. I had a friend who worked in the sortie and set up missions. We'd drink with him and ask, "Are you able to say which crew goes on a mission?"

He said, "Yeah, I have the list of who's out and who's in."

"You mean you could bump us?"

"Yeah, I could."

We worked a couple bumps. Everyone did.

When they said they needed a crew and it was a hot zone, they'd ask for single people. We'd let the married guys stay back. Sometimes we'd go because we knew we'd get three or four days off. Sometimes the mission got called off. We would rotate who had off, and if someone said, "I got a bad feeling," we didn't want him to go out on a mission. I'd say about 10 of my 25 were probably "hot missions."

We might go in for a simple extraction, say, of two injured Navy Seals. Then we'd get a call from the First Cavalry to do them a favor and go into a hot fire zone. Our support group would set up the perimeter. We stayed with the aircraft. The primary responsibility of the pilot was to save the aircraft. And you didn't want to be left behind with the ground troops. They also didn't want you getting them killed. The hardest part was maneuvering replacements and watching those you left behind. Those who were critical got on the aircraft, bleeding and patched up. Those were the Army guys; they went through hell.



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Pulling into an LZ – You talk about a stare. The medic in charge on site was responsible to tag the serious wounded for extraction. If they had a yellow tag and if we had room, we'd take them, but sometimes we just couldn't fit them in. Just the looks on their faces haunt you for awhile. A lot of times you'd have guys shoot themselves in the leg/calf so they could go home, and many would hit an artery and bleed out before the medic could get to them.

We had a couple guys where the medics did everything they possibly could, and then they died in the aircraft. We also had a couple where the medic said, "He won't make it." I remember one... he bled all over the aircraft. We dealt with it, with a hose, when we got back to base. That was life. We hosed it off, with the smell of dried blood and flies all around. But overall, we saved a lot more than we lost.

It played on you. I could have been one of those guys. It wasn't necessarily the hot zone situation. It was who you were leaving behind. It's what stays with me today. You wonder, "Did that guy ever make it out?" You could go crazy thinking about it: Why did I get out and not my friend? Of all of us who went over in the Strategic Air Command HQ, we only lost one. Our loss ratio was very low and that's because we were in and out. When mortar shells came in, we didn't know where foxholes were. We didn't have that type of constant action. We could cool down, have a shower and a cold beer. We felt bad for the other guys. We had a chance to recoup, go downtown, get a few drinks, get drunk and get back to base a day or two later. We always wore civilian clothes downtown. There were bounties out on us. NCO (non-commissioned officers) and above were worth \$150. Officers were worth \$500. When we were on duty and in uniform, we hid our rank because the more stripes you had, the more attractive to the VC bounty hunters. This included saluting officers in public.

I didn't allow it to change me. I came back from overseas and we were more or less all being called "baby killers." So we came in through the closet and we lived that way. I can remember when I went home, I told my mom I was in Guam. I'd been sending letters to my sister and she would throw out the envelope and then show the letters to my mom so she didn't know where I really was.

Home was the coal region. I went to church when I got back and I didn't have any clothes, so I wore my uniform. I heard people say, "There's the Strunk boy. He just came back from Vietnam. Wow. He doesn't look bad." On Monday I went to the local clothing store. I was happy to get back to Omaha, where I still had a year left to serve, and away from John Q. Public, who had no idea what was going on. We'd had a couple days in California to detox, but we had no psychologists to talk to or anything like that.

Back in Omaha, I carried 2 MOSs, one of which was accounting. I didn't want to fly anymore. It was too real. I was going to re-enlist...if I could have stayed in the accounting and finance department or special assignment and remained on station for three years. Then my buddies warned me, "Be careful, Frank, they're re-assigning to Southeast Asia." That was when the Tet



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Offensive hit. They lost a lot of Army people, medics, and rescue groups. The B52 action was picking up because peace agreements were not being kept. It wasn't worth me staying in the service so I took a discharge, and the military and I parted ways.

You get out, you get a new life going. I got a degree in accounting. But for 20 years we hid. We were all moles. The only ones who knew were our family members, if we even told them. We talk about it now because the country wants to hear about it. When I got my first job, and they asked if I was in the military, I said, "yes." And that I served in Germany. I wouldn't dare tell them I was in Vietnam. Society didn't want us. The VFW didn't want us. That's when the VVA (Vietnam Veterans of America) formed. We all had something in common. It was easier for us to talk among ourselves. Instead of fighting society, we honored those who didn't come back. We poured our energy into the memorial in Pottstown's Memorial Park. A lot of guys feel that's their memorial.