

Another Step in a Long Journey

TET 1968

By Bob Spencer
A Company 589th Engineer Battalion
January 13, 2012

Dedicated to my Brothers of the 589th Engineer Battalion. May we remember the good times and the bad, the happy and the sad; find ways to remember, ways to forget, and ways to heal together. God bless each of you.

*"I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin-to-Die Rag",
sometimes referred to as the "Vietnam Rag."
By Country Joe McDonald*

*Well, come on all of you, big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again.
He's got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam
So put down your books and pick up a gun,
We're gonna have a whole lotta fun.*

*And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whoopie! We're all gonna die.*

As a young boy, I remember how dark it is at night in the mountains of Washington and Oregon. My father frequently took my younger brother and I camping - stream fishing for trout. We would spend the nights under the stars, not in a tent as others, but under an old tarp. The tarp was long enough to be folded to serve as both a top and bottom – we would think of ourselves as a sandwich – the meat between two slices of canvas bread. My father would explain that the tarp was like a tent, but it allowed you to stay closer to nature. "But our friends have tents they sleep in," we would protest. My father's reply to any "why don't we have everything the neighbors have" question was always, "They just don't know what they're missing, do they?" We would have to agree...they probably didn't.

Nighttime in the Rocky Mountains is always dark...so dark it makes no difference whether you have your eyes open or closed. That's what this night is like – as black as a preacher's coat, with a Central Highlands chill in the air.

Another Step in a Long Journey

A trusted friend, William “Hardy” Page, and I are lying in a road ditch at a bridge crossing along Highway QL 19, east of the An Khe Pass. Other members of our platoon aren’t far away – they are each trying to find their own cover from the unknown. There is lots of activity. It is still daylight so everyone remains relaxed – at least on the outside. Inside, a petri dish of excitement and emotions is fermenting within each of us.

This isn’t the kind of place you’d choose to spend the night, if you had a choice, which we don’t. It is like most things in Vietnam...it happens by chance – it is fate that we end up wherever we are, doing whatever we are asked to do. We assume somebody, somewhere, has a master plan, although it usually isn’t apparent to those of us on the ground.

If we were choosing, we would pick a location with more cover...a deeper hole, something with rocks or trees around. Had we been equipped, we would have spent the early hours burrowing down, but that wasn’t an option under the circumstances. In Vietnam, what you have is what you got – don’t expect any more – make it work. We each take it in stride - nobody would really want it any other way, although we reserve the right to bitch and complain.

We are doing what we did as kids, sleeping under the stars, getting close to nature. Only it doesn’t feel that way...this isn’t the way camping is supposed to be. There is no campfire, no Coleman lantern with broken mantles to light. There is no folded tarp for protection from the elements. There is no gazing at the heavens and watching for falling stars. There is no asking “kid” questions; there are no “dad” answers. We won’t be waking up early to fish the river – no breakfast cooked over a campfire. However, none of us is concerned about what we don’t have – it’s the long uncertain night that occupies our minds.

Last night was the first night of the TET Offensive. I know the year is 1968. It is around the end of January or the first of February. Days make no difference, as each day seems to be the same as the last. The only thing a day is good for is to mark off a calendar – to get rid of – to put behind you. Days of the week mean nothing – whether it is Monday or Friday is meaningless. Any significance weekends and holidays had back home, is lost here.

There is an official cease-fire declared for the TET holidays. A cease-fire means the South Vietnamese army goes home, while we go on high alert. The North Vietnamese used the opportunity to embark on the largest offensive of the war – they literally attacked every major military facility in South Vietnam.

We only know what we are told, which isn’t much. The Marine base at Khe Sanh is under siege. The historic provincial capital city of Hue is in the hands of the North Vietnamese. The American Embassy in Saigon has been overrun. Chaos abounds...the only territory we hold for sure is the ground we are standing on.

As a result, elements of the 589th Engineers are being dispatched throughout the region to bolster local security efforts. I understand that C Company, or at least a portion of it, is providing security for the airport at Qui Nhon. Some of us from A Company are at this bridge site – or what is left of it. Others are at An Khe, while still others are covering our base camp.

Another Step in a Long Journey

Last night, the VC blew up the bridge we are guarding - we understand the detail guarding it are casualties. They were obviously not able to hold off the enemy.

Highway QL19 is a major road running west from Qui Nhon into the central highlands, so the bridge – every bridge – is of strategic importance. Earlier in the day, part of the 589th built a bypass around the bridge to help maintain military traffic. The bypass consists of a rough road down each bank of the river, with a one-lane float bridge across the water. The river is low, so the span is relatively short.

Daily traffic on QL19 isn't like traffic back home. There are no modern cars or pick-up trucks; most of the vehicles are old busses or 3-wheeled lambrettas. Regardless of their make, model or design, each vehicle is piled so high with passengers and freight you expect it to crash to the ground under the sheer weight of its load. Passenger safety is of no concern - I think about how US government safety agencies would respond...they would simply shit themselves. Mix in some military vehicles that are huge by comparison, a Vietnamese population accustomed to playing chicken with their vehicles, GI truck drivers who are more than willing to play their games, and you have a recipe for adventure.

The truck drivers that traverse these roads daily – the 589th has many – do so under great peril. Most of the time they are not traveling in big convoys that offer the protection of numbers, but one or two vehicles at a time. Snipers offer lone vehicles the greatest threat, as the drivers have few defenses... except the sand bags piled on their floorboards, and any other homemade armor the driver has been able to devise. They soon learn to depend on speed, agility, and being the most daring person on the road to survive. For them, each day is a roll-of-the-dice.

This afternoon our platoon sergeant gave us the news, “we will be guarding bridges tonight – on QL 19, up by the An Khe Pass. I've been told the bridge has already been destroyed, so our job is to hold the ground and keep the VC from taking the rest of it down.” The news was met by the typical round of bitching and complaining, not so much that anyone was upset by the assignment, but more so because anything less could have been mistaken as a sign of mindless compliance.

The sergeant responded with, “I want everyone here at 1600 hours, ready to go with flak jackets, steel pots, and weapons, full issue of ammunition, canteens, and rations for a couple days. You'll leave the funny business and grab-ass behind!”

Suggesting that we leave the grab-ass at base camp is a useless suggestion. In the military, those in charge consider “grab-ass” to be any activity that is not authorized in the Army Field Manual. The notion is idealistic at best, and downright foolish on its face. For the enlisted men in Vietnam, grab-ass and joking around is as much a part of what we do as anything...no one can leave it behind. It is like our flak jacket and weapon – it goes everywhere we do. Grab-ass is more important to our mental health and well-being than the malaria pills we take every week, or the countless number of salt tablets we consume daily. Without it, daily life in Vietnam would be unbearable – especially for us who are 18 to 20 years-old.

Gathering our gear isn't a big job – we have it near our bunks, at the ready, prepared for any day-to-day crisis. The platoon climbs aboard a couple duce-and-a-half trucks – a couple jeeps with mounted machine guns accompany us on the 10 to 15-mile trip to the bridge site.

Another Step in a Long Journey

There is a sense of excitement in the truck – nervous excitement – a lot of chatter. Perry Blanchfield as we try to take our minds off the unknown. It is hot, so the wind through the open-air truck as we go down the road feels good. The smell – the smell of Vietnam – seems to hang in the air like pockets of fog. It is always the smell – it never goes away. As we convoy along, we pass through the pockets of odors so heavy I can imagine it clinging to us like sprayed-on perfume. It is not only the smell, but knowing the odor, combined with our own sweat and grime, will attract flies, mosquitoes and bugs by the thousands throughout the night.

As we pass through one of the clouds of stench, Larry Westmoreland says in the deepest southern accent I have ever heard, “This smells like a billy goat’s ass.” Westmoreland’s accent is so pronounced, I haven’t been able to understand most of what he says since we met – for me, it’s like trying to decipher a foreign language. However, he is a hell of a nice guy, so I enjoy being around him. Westmoreland’s assessment of the smell is accepted without debate, although I detect the additional nuance of rotting fish. Being from Georgia, we figure Westmoreland would know all about the smell of a goats ass – he says he knows, so we believe him. Even if one of us wanted to debate the subject, the price of suggesting you know more about the smell of a billy goat’s ass is too big a price to pay. Westmoreland proves you can win a fight without an argument, although it doesn’t happen often.

Page sits to my right; Perry Blanchfield sits across the truck box. I am smoking a cigarette – I find myself smoking a lot in situations like this. Others are simply staring at the countryside, or having small conversations.

“Want a cigarette?” Blanchfield asks Page. Without saying a word, Page shakes his head no.

“What’s wrong with you?” Blanchfield asks.

“I don’t smoke,” Page replied.

“Oh!” responded Blanchfield, “I thought you were smoking while you were taking a shit the other day.”

By this time, Blanchfield had everyone’s attention – everyone knows that Page doesn’t smoke – ever. Blanchfield is trying to set him up for something, and we all want to be part of whatever goes down. I think this is part of the grab-ass we were supposed to leave at the base camp.

Blanchfield removes his steel pot – like he was afraid it was messing up his hair - and holds it in his lap. Blanchfield is well liked, 18 or 19 years old, with a good sense of humor – quick witted. He likes a joke as well as anyone, but knows where and how to draw the line between good and bad taste. Everyone likes him.

“Page, are you sure you don’t want to start smoking?” Asks Blanchfield.

“Now, why would I want to start smoking? I tried it, but I never liked it, so why would I want to start now?” Page responded.

Another Step in a Long Journey

“Because it makes you smarter. If you were smarter, you wouldn’t be here. We could all stand to be a little smarter.” was Blanchfield’s comeback.

“If we were smarter, we wouldn’t be here.” Now that’s a statement to ponder. None of us comes from wealthy or influential families, but that doesn’t make us “not smart.” Maybe we weren’t smart enough to avoid the draft – if we wanted to avoid the draft to start with. I don’t know anyone that was plucked out of an Ivy League college - everyone seems to have come from worlds they were simply trying to survive. There are several, Jim Swick, Bill Greenhalgh and William Page, who are married, but the Army still got them. We are all as “blue collar” as they come...with a splattering of “red neck” mixed in for flavor. It is easy to feel dumb, for every newspaper or magazine article we read suggests those who are home protesting the war are the enlightened ones...therefore, those of us who have been sent to Vietnam must be stupid.

But could we be smarter? I suppose we could be, but I don’t think being dumb is what got us here – I don’t think Blanchfield does either... he is in control and is taking this conversation somewhere, I just don’t know where.

“Now how could smoking possibly make you smarter? You are not making any sense,” responded Page.

Blanchfield had a good sense of humor; always ready to engage. He has dedicated his entire military career to fine-tuning the art of sucking others into a debate they are going to lose. At this point Page was hoping to put Blanchfield on the ropes by making him explain his logic– an explanation that couldn’t possibly make any sense – thereby getting the last word. The rest of us are anxiously listening, content to be distracted from what lay ahead.

“I read it in a published study,” responded Blanchfield. “The study reported that smokers, on average, have an IQ that is 5 points higher than non-smokers.”

“That’s crap,” Page responds. Anyone else would describe Blanchfield’s declaration as “bull shit,” but not Page. Page is from the Bible Belt of North Carolina, seldom uses profanity, doesn’t drink to excess, doesn’t smoke, attends religious services regularly, is smart, and is the kind of person I wish I could be more like – although I don’t see in myself the willingness to exercise the self-discipline necessary to do it. When you are 20 years old, “just going with the flow” has a much more attractive appeal.

Everyone’s attention turns back to Blanchfield for his response. We know damn well Blanchfield didn’t read this in any book – nobody in Vietnam lays around reading published academic studies related to the health concerns of smoking – certainly not anyone in the 589th Engineers. Blanchfield is more likely to spend time sporting his girlfriend’s bra through the tents than studying a textbook. Then it dawned on me; I’m not too sure Blanchfield even smokes. I’ve seen him smoking, but not often, maybe just when he’s drunk, so I’m not sure he could even be classified as a “real smoker” himself.

“If it’s in a book, how come I have never seen it?” Page fires back, pushing for his own victory.

Another Step in a Long Journey

At this point, Blanchfield knows he has Page pinned to the ropes. "Because everyone knows that if you want to hide something from people in North Carolina, the place to put it is in a book...they'll never see it."

The response is a round of groans – nobody saw it coming – Blanchfield wins. As he sits there on the bench, steel pot in his lap, wind blowing through his hair, a little grin of victory appears on his face. It was good, even Page had to smile.

These exchanges help create a bond between us - like brothers arguing. If you don't like another person, you simply ignore him – you engage those you care for. Sometimes it is crude and rough around the edges, but we realize that each other is all we have. This is boys having fun, making as much of a bad situation as we can.

Once we arrive, we form a defensive perimeter around the bridge site - or what is left of the bridge site. We speculate that individual positions around the perimeter are determined by drawing straws...only all the straws are short straws – there are no winners. We settle in for the night – no one will sleep.

When you are trying to find security in a ditch, time passes very slowly. It is dark. Nothing is happening – absolutely nothing. The smallest, most trivial events are elevated to significance – very much worth talking about and debating. Where do you relieve yourself? The answer is anywhere you want to, as long as you don't wonder so far away that you get shot by your own men, or end up so close that you lay in it later. "What if" scenarios help pass the time – they are played in the dark, while whispering so quietly no one else can hear – like sharing ghost stories as kids. Only now the ghosts are real...they are out there, you just don't know where. Just as when we were kids, simply thinking, and talking, and speculating, and contemplating the possibilities keeps the adrenalin flowing. Our own imaginations do as much damage as the enemy.

We watch and wait in the dark. Vietnam is like the mountains of Washington and Oregon – blacker than pitch after sundown. There are no lights – anywhere – except for the fireflies, or the occasional flare, or tracer rounds from a distant firefight illuminating the night. When I see the tracers, I can't help but think, "Those poor bastards," as I wonder what is actually happening.

The fireflies are maddening – they make me crazy. They probably cause reactions in others also, but I can't feel their insecurity, but I know my own. Sometimes the sudden appearance of the light of a firefly takes my breath away...stops my heart. I understand why this is a young man's war – anyone any older couldn't possibly survive having their heart stopped as many times.

Those damn fireflies...the night is totally black, when suddenly a small light appears. In total darkness, you can't tell if the light is a large light, miles away, or a small light within feet. The immediate assumption is it is the beam from a flashlight about 200 yards out. Not just any flashlight, a VC flashlight – on and then off before you can determine exactly what it is. Our world is full of uncertainty – we don't need fireflies compounding the misery.

We talk about various things, very low, in a whisper - sometimes personal, sometimes not. Page is from North Carolina...I'd never been there, but he makes it sound nice. His family owns and operates a

Another Step in a Long Journey

gyppo logging operation – they purchase the timber rights on small tracts of land, harvest the lumber, and haul it to a local sawmill. Page explains that is it hard work, very physical, sometimes dangerous if you don't keep your head out-of-your-ass. Those are my words, not Page's words. Page chooses not to use profanity - normally. He knows all the words and how to use them, he simply saves them up, like money you only have so much of, and spends them carefully. Among many other characteristics, I admire his self-control. I can't tell what is going on the inside, but on the outside Page is typically cool and calm.

As we lay in the ditch, trying to be invisible as we watch and scan the perimeter for any activity, a light suddenly appears. The light flickers at first, fades away, and then returns. The light is close...coming from a hut on the south side of the road. There is activity in the hut – people are moving around.

“Spencer, look at this. What in the hell is going on?” Page says very quietly as we both stare intently. “The people in that hut are moving around. What do you suppose they're up to?”

A lantern, carried by a middle-aged male, illuminates the hut as the three occupants gather around a small table in the middle of the room. “Damned if I know,” I reply. “But it is certainly strange.”

I almost feel like we are “window peeking,” I whispered. “But they have to know we are here.”

What we are looking through isn't a window, but a large hole in the wall. Contrasted against the dark of night, the inhabitants are as visible as the look of wonder on our faces. We can watch their every move, clearly, and the expressions on their faces as they tackled the task at hand.

The three inhabitants are obviously a family unit – father, mother and 10 to 12 year-old child. You can hear them talking in muffled voices, although we can't understand what they are saying. If we only knew the language, but I only know a handful of Vietnamese words, and because Page doesn't cuss, he knows even fewer. It appears as though they are performing some type of religious ceremony.

Reaching down in the corner of the small room, the father picks up a cone-shaped basket and places it on the table. As they untie a strap securing the top of the basket, a pig is pulled out of the basket by his hind feet – not a large pig, but a typical 50-pound pot-bellied Vietnamese pig. Once out of the cone-shaped basket and on the table, the pig comes to life, obviously relieved by the freedom he'd acquired. As the mother and child grab the pig with all hands to keep him from gaining freedom, the father secures a large knife. With the pig on its side, with five hands holding him down and one hand with a firm grip on the knife, the father proceeds to cut the pig's throat.

He saws at the pig's throat with the knife, back and forth, back and forth, and back and forth – for what seems like an eternity. The pig is squealing – squealing that shatters the still of the night. “What the hell!” I whisper in Page's direction. “Why don't they kill the bastard first? This is nuts!” Nevertheless, the sawing and the squealing continue.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, the father stops sawing. There is no blood – he hasn't even scratched the pig's throat with the dull knife. The pig stops squealing. There is a short discussion – they obviously made a decision to put the pig back in the basket. The pig is quiet, so we agree that the pig

Another Step in a Long Journey

also thinks returning to the basket is a good plan. The pig and the basket are placed back on the floor, the lantern is extinguished, and everything is quiet in the hut.

“Wow! Have you ever seen anything like that?” I asked Page in a low, soft voice. “I sure haven’t, but then when we slaughter animals, we kill them before we cut their throats.”

Page was slow and thoughtful in his response. “No I haven’t either...maybe this was supposed to be some type of religious sacrifice. Even if it wasn’t, they’re not supposed to have guns, so it would be hard for them to pull a rifle out and shoot the damn thing first.”

Page’s logic satisfies us both...it was a religious sacrifice gone wrong. We ponder what their consequences will be – there has to be some consequence for blowing a sacrificial ceremony. But what would an appropriate consequence look like. They already live in Vietnam, in a hut with no doors, floors or windows, using lanterns and candles for light, living on a diet of rice and fish heads, wearing pajamas during the day, going to the bathroom wherever, drinking and bathing in polluted water, with the threat of violence at every turn. What could be worse? They already live in Hell!

Things were quiet for about an hour, when another light appears – coming from the same hut.

“They’re up again,” I whisper to Page, knowing he sees what is going on as well as I do. We watch...and we wait – not sure of what to do. Again, the family gathers around the table in the middle of the room; a lantern hangs above the table for light. The man pulls out his butcher knife and begins to sharpen it on what appears to be a hone. He rubs the knife back and forth, as his family quietly observes. I say to Page, “If this was happening back in the US, his wife would be giving him all kinds of shit for not having the knife sharp the first time.”

“Yah,” whispered Page, in a tone more to acknowledge that he heard what I said than to agree with my assumption.

Up and down the hone, back and forth, round and round – every once-in-a-while the father checks the knife’s edge. Eventually, he sets the knife and hone on the table, reaches into the corner of the room and picks up the cone-shaped basket. Off comes the strap and out comes the pig, rear end first, back on the table with everyone finding a handhold. We learn that pigs have a memory, because this one starts squealing right away...knowing he is going to have his neck rubbed again with the sharp edge of this knife.

With one quick slash, the pig’s throat is cut; another slash or two finishes the job. Instantly, as the pig is held down on the table, squirming, kicking and jerking around, the man grabs a small container – it looks like a metal drinking glass - and places it against the pig’s throat.

“Oh my God,” I exclaim. “It looks like they are trying to catch the blood.” Sure enough, as the pig fights and kicks, they slide its head to the edge of the table to make it easier to do just that. Then, when the container is full, the man holds the container to his mouth and takes a big drink. When he had his share, the father passes the container to the mother, and she drinks her fill. The container then goes to the child, who, like the two before her, drank blood from the glass.

Another Step in a Long Journey

“This is setting my gagger off,” I whisper to Page. “Have you ever seen anyone drink warm fresh blood?”

“No,” he replied. “We don’t do this in North Carolina. This must be some type of religious ceremony.”

As rapidly as the ceremony begins, so does it end. The pig goes back in the basket, the basket goes back on the floor, and the light goes out.

“They must be going to wait until tomorrow to finish gutting the hog...or maybe they don’t remove the guts!” Page speculates.

Page and I talk back and forth about what we had witnessed and how strange it appeared. “I know one thing,” I whisper to Page, “I am never, as long as I live, going to forget the sound of that hog squealing as he is getting his throat cut with a dull knife.” And I haven’t.

By this time, it is late evening. Even if nothing else happens, I’ll always remember this night. Wishing we had better protection in this ditch, the dark, the fireflies lighting up the night, and a hog being sacrificed. The US looks better by the day – nothing is normal here.

Then, all of a sudden, from behind us is what sounds like hundreds of guns being fired at once, each on full automatic. Flares are going off – tracer rounds fill the air. The eruption is instantaneous – one second the night is dead quiet, the next moment a living hell of noise and commotion.

In moments like this, our bodies and minds often go on autopilot – to this day, I am not sure how much control we actually have. I still ponder what went through my head, and why. I still wonder what it means.

I have made several attempts to complete this story - as I struggle for words I find myself over-using the delete key. I am struggling...the object of this story is to discuss the firefight and the fear I felt, but it won’t come out right – whatever ‘right’ is. I’m not sure if I am trying to make it too complicated, or too simple. I simply need to puke it out and sort through the chunks.

My first thought that night, instinctively, as we lay hugging the bottom of the ditch in the middle of all the shooting and noise and chaos, is “God, please don’t let me pee my pants.” Actually, I’m not sure if I have already wet myself, or I’m just about to. If I haven’t wet myself, I know if things break loose, it will be a soaker, not just a little wet spot. Am I wet? I can’t even focus enough to tell...it is so loud and chaotic. No, I can’t feel anything wet – I think I’m dry. God, I hope so.

As I look back, I am frequently stuck on this moment...these few seconds that felt like an eternity. I am stuck on two questions. The first question I struggle with is, “of all the things to ask God’s help with, why was my first choice not to pee my pants?” I could have asked not to die, or not to be seriously wounded, or simply to survive the night. But no, I asked Him not to allow me to pee my pants. I have only been able to reach one conclusion, which, although I don’t find it personally flattering, was one consistent through the ranks of Vietnam vets. The conclusion I’ve made is that nobody wanted to show any sign of weakness. Shoot me, that’s all right – being wounded is honorable, but don’t let anyone know I peed my

Another Step in a Long Journey

pants. Kill me if you must, but don't let me wet my pants. Always be strong – never, never show any signs of weakness.

Being concerned about peeing my pants is a complex issue for me – I will think about it for years. For the first 30 years, I questioned myself – my courage, my manhood. As I started to realize the emotions and feelings I have are shared by others, I began to realize those emotions reflect the culture of Vietnam, a culture of never showing weakness, always needing to appear strong, never being vulnerable.

As an example, what would have happened if I had wet my pants that night? For sure, I would have tried to cover it up – hide it. However, if I wasn't successful, would I forever have been known as "Bob, pee your pants, Spencer"? Every time I would have interacted with someone, I would have known he was thinking, "Hey, I remember the night at the bridge below the An Khe Pass when you peed your pants." That would have been something worse than death.

While a culture that creates such fears sounds crude and uncaring, that culture is probably what kept most of us alive. We knew we could count on each other, because there were consequences to letting your friends down. Death was far more preferable than being labeled a coward.

Adherence to that culture while in Vietnam is one thing, but it did not serve most of us well after we returned home and had to interact with wives, families and friends. Some of us continued to cover up - always pretending things are different than they really are. Never letting our defenses down. Never being honest with ourselves, let alone anyone else.

The second question I ponder from that night is why I would instinctively turn to God. I had never been a religious person – I could have been called an agnostic, or at least someone who wasn't quite sure of God. Although my parents tried to provide a religious background, I fought back with everything I had. I had other little voices riding my shoulder giving me suggestions and telling me how to run my life...I didn't need God confusing me. So, when I instinctively turned to God in this time of need (the need to not wet my pants), I concluded that the distance I tried to keep between myself and a higher power was overdone – maybe I am not the "non-believer" I think I am.

My talk with God that night wasn't finished. As soon as I had figured out I hadn't wet my pants, my next thought - a very clear thought – was "God, please give me the courage to lift my head out of the dirt and fire my weapon." My plea is answered...and I am so damned relieved – it is as if the weight of the world is off my shoulders. Now I am sure there is a God, somewhere, and I think He is on my side.

The firing, the unbelievable noise, confusion and commotion, stops as fast as it starts. Is everyone OK? They seem to be, no casualties. What started all this? No one is sure, although we know it was something. What is "something"? In the black of the night in Vietnam, when everyone is on edge, "something" could be anything from a VC attempt to test our perimeter, to a water buffalo wondering down to the river for a drink. The "something" doesn't matter...what matters is that we are still alive, everyone in one piece.

The rest of the night passes uneventfully, although I know everyone is as pumped and ready to go as I am. My mind has been stretched to a new dimension by this experience – I don't know how this event

Another Step in a Long Journey

will influence the rest of my life, but I feel it will serve me well for now. I still have 6 months left in country, and I don't have any idea what lays ahead.

We have survived another night, another day in Vietnam. Each of us are able to cross another day off our short-timer calendar – but this day and night have to be more than just another X on my calendar – this was an entire day out of my life. There have to be some take-a-ways to consider.

God is certainly one. What role will I allow Him to play in my life? He came to my side this night – how much control do I dare hand over in the future? Since that night, I have felt an obligation to “give something back.” I haven't always had much, but I have tried to be a kind person, polite, I don't kick dogs, I've been generous to a fault at times. I wish I could say I was a regular churchgoer, but I can't, although I try to live my life as though I was.

As the sun comes up in the morning, I think about Vietnam and those of us in a perimeter around the destroyed bridge site. I want to believe Vietnam is not our destiny – although it will be for some. I want to believe it is simply a detour in our lives...a detour that will provide experience and prospective as we fulfill our destinies - whatever they are. This experience has to be preparing us for something.

As John Denver stated in one of his songs, “some days are diamonds, some days are stone.” The determination as to whether our days are diamonds or stones is in the eyes of the beholder – it is up to us. The day I describe in this story could be either...but because it is my choice and I am viewing the day in hindsight, I choose “diamond”. I want to search for the value in each day – even in Vietnam the days have to be good for more than just crossing off a calendar.