

Arriving in Vietnam, April 1967

It was April 29, 1967 when my troop ship, the General John Pope, anchored in the Qui Nhon Bay in the South China Sea for the beginning of my year tour of duty in the Republic of Vietnam. We had begun our journey from Fort Hood, Texas where we assembled a Construction Engineer Battalion of five companies and enough construction equipment and supplies to later build, port facilities, hospitals, bridges, airfields, rock quarries, water purification facilities, and pave miles of highways inland from the coast to the Central Highlands of Vietnam and beyond. This was accomplished in just the first year of our presence in the country.

He took a train from Killeen Texas to Oakland California where we boarded the John Pope for our three week voyage to Vietnam. This was not a pleasure cruise. Our bunks were stacked four high in the enlisted quarters below deck. We spent our days elbow to elbow on deck reading or writing letters but there was no other activity available. We tried a group physical training but this was short lived. We jumped up for jumping jacks and the deck shifted and we came down and careened sideways. We tried pushups but the deck tilted and we pushed up over onto our sides. Thus ended PT. We were diverse group of soldiers from all over the US, mostly 19 to 20 years olds who had been trained in the use of weapons, Southeast Asian warfare and the military code of conduct should we be captured and how to treat a sucking chest wound.. We were all wondering how we would react when we were in a combat situation even though our first mission was construction.

It was beautiful warm April day when we finally arrived and prepared to disembark to the Republic of Vietnam. Small grey patrol boats with 50 caliber machine guns and with shark heads with open mouths and teeth painted on the bow were cruising around the bay where we anchored. Several large LST landing crafts approached our ship looking right out of World War II. This reminded me of D-Day invasion films that were shown in the tv when I was a kid. World War II, my father's war, seemed like ages ago then but in reality it was only twenty-five years.

D Company, my company formed up together and we felt like John Waynes descending from the ship onto the deck of this landing craft with its open top and ramp for a bow that plopped down like a draw bridge when we landed on shore. We poured out of the LST onto a beach with our rifles slung over our shoulders steel helmets on our heads, flack jackets, duffle bags, carry on bags, live ammunition and an apprehensive feeling of what might happen next.

Well what happened next was not what we expected at all. Instead of a scene out of D-Day what we saw was an indication that this next year would be an experience as transformative and crazy as the sixties were in the US. There were dune buggies made from old jeeps racing down the beach with shirtless GIs in cut-off shorts, We saw GIs with beach towels, music tape players and beers relaxing on the beach. There were tin shacks advertising massage and beer. I saw surfboards and local Vietnamese in conical straw hats selling souvenirs, cigarettes, and t-shirts. There was rock and roll music blasting. We were obviously overdressed for this beach party. We were also wondering what kind of war we were getting in to. This was just the beginning of a collision of unrealized expectations and confusing realities that we would experience in the next 12 months.