

My Vietnam Experience

My entire Army career seemed to be a little different than most soldiers. I was drafted in 1968 and had basic training at Ft. Bliss. Being a draftee, it was almost certain that I would go on to AIT after finishing basic. However, much to my surprise, the army, due to my civilian job experience, awarded me my MOS of refrigeration and air conditioning technician. I was sent to Ft. Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis where I worked with civilians repairing refrigerators and air conditioners. However, it could hardly be called work. Those guys didn't do anything and I was used to working hard. Being bored to death, I volunteered for Honor Guard Duty performing military funerals for soldiers coming back from Nam in body bags. It sounds like rough duty but I was a small town South Texas boy that had never been out of the state and this duty allowed me to travel all over Indiana, Michigan and parts of Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky. I loved the travel aspect of it and we took great pride in doing a good job putting our fellow soldiers to rest. I helped perform over 100 funerals in only 8 months until I got my orders for Nam.

I arrived in Cam Rahn Bay in May of 1969. They were processing me in and sarcastically informed me that there wasn't a big demand for air conditioning technicians in Nam and asked what else I knew how to do. I told them I was raised in a construction family so they said, "Great, we'll put you in an Engineer Company building highways and bridges." They put me on a convoy headed for Phan Rang. It was a long, hot, bumpy drive and I had more than a little apprehension about what my future held for me. They processed me through at battalion HQ for the 589th Engineer Battalion and sent me on to Song Pha where Company C was located. After being in the larger posts like Cam Rahn and Phan Rang, Song Pha seemed awfully small and isolated. The heat, humidity and smells were pretty intense. That is something that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Diesel smoke from trucks and the thump thump of a helicopter rotor still take my mind back to Vietnam even after all these years.

I was anticipating being put on a crew that built forms for pouring concrete bridge revetments. Again, much to my surprise they put me in charge of the tool shed. This shed was located out beyond the motor pool and supply yard. My job was to clean and repair tools and anyone that needed shovels, power tools or any other assortment of various tools would check them out and sign for them and I had to make sure they were returned and accounted for. Well, accounting for the tools was like nailing jello to the walls. Most of the soldiers were openly contemptuous of paperwork and it was like pulling teeth to get them to sign the check-out sheet. Once everyone headed out on the road for their work sites it was rather boring work until they arrived back into camp at the end of the day. I was for the most part alone all day in the tool shed. One of my biggest challenges was to keep the local MACV officer from checking out tools which he then permanently kept. I quickly learned that everything in Nam worked on the barter system....or out and out thievery. If he had drills that we needed and we had shovels that he needed I was then able to maintain a certain checks and balances even if it didn't match up with our inventory list.

I always held a certain degree of guilt that everyone else was working their rear ends off while I sat in a tool shed, but I've got to admit that during the monsoon it felt pretty good to be in a dry building. Despite my relatively cushy job there were times that we were short on personnel so I'd be called on to assist the work details out on the road. It was back breaking work under horrible conditions but I enjoyed the break in my usual monotony. We worked 6 days a week and pulled maintenance duties on equipment for half a day on Sunday. After a few weekends of going into the village of Song

Pha even that became monotonous and Sunday afternoons were spent in camp listening to music on Armed Services Radio. There wasn't a lot more to do.

We did have movies after the sun went down. The projection screen was plywood sheets painted white and there were benches and barrels to sit on to watch the movie. We never seemed to have a choice as to what movie was available. It was like pot luck. When the courier got back from Phan Rang with supplies and mail we would look at what movie was shipped to us. We may have seen the same movie 10 times in one month but having nothing else to do, we watched it anyhow until we could recite the dialogue almost perfectly. Somehow I inherited the job of projectionist which I quickly learned was not a respected position at all. The film strips were in horrible condition having been repaired and spliced multiple times. When the film broke I learned to duck because I knew I was going to be pelted by empty beer cans and comments like "Read the f****ing maintenance manual, fool!!!" It was all done in fun and I think I'd have been disappointed had they not reacted like that.

My biggest challenge came after I had been in country for about 5 months. We were out on the worksite standing in knee deep water having to wear a helmet and flak jacket because we were in "condition yellow". Top Sergeant Murphy walked up to the hole I was working in at a bridge site and yelled down to me, "Gillespie, I've been looking at your file and it appears that you are the only SOB in this company that can type. Do you think you can do the job of a company clerk for a while until we can get some new personnel?" Well, I didn't have a clue what a company clerk did but I handed my buddy the shovel I was using and said, "I'm your man, Sarge! Help me out of this hole!"

I quickly learned that I was way in over my head. Yes, I could type but that was about the extent of my knowledge of being a clerk. Sergeant Murphy, who was gruff and crude on the outside but a big teddy bear on the inside, told me not to worry about it saying, "The Army has manuals on how to do everything from how to take a morning dump to building igloos, just study them and you'll do fine". And that's what I did. I poured over those manuals hour after hour learning how to do a daily report, etc. A lot of my self-tutoring was done at night and I had to endure taunts from my buddies about being a "f****ing lifer" because I was putting so much effort into it.

I slowly got the hang of it and also learned that a company clerk had a certain amount of power that others didn't have. Sarge was supposed to make out the duty rosters but he always turned it over to me. If I had a buddy on guard duty I'd make sure that he was assigned to one of the guard posts near the hooches instead of the ones that were out on the perimeter where it could get pretty scary at night. If there was someone I didn't especially like he was sure to get guard post number five every time which was out beyond the motor pool, a long way from the rest of the camp. I could manipulate the system quite a bit if I was inclined to do so. I was quickly learning how to survive and thrive in the "big green machine".

Though I was supposed to have only been temporary as company clerk we had a hard time getting clerks. The upper echelon would snatch them up before we could get them. I was finally getting short and Sarge decided he'd just let me finish out my hitch before they worried about replacing me. I was getting the job done, even if it was unorthodox, so the brass was happy with what I was doing. However, there was one last hurdle when we learned that we were having an IG inspection right before I was due to leave country. Top pulled me aside and said, "Dammit, Gillespie, I'll do anything in my power for you if you can just get this office through this IG inspection without failing it." I had gone from Private E1 to E5 in that year in Nam and it was mostly due to Top's help. I felt that I owed him at least that much.

The IG Inspection was a little like a circus. We had scores of equipment and supplies that we had traded for or outright stole them from other units. We had to drive Jeeps and heavy equipment out into the jungle to hide them because they were not part of our inventory. It was a typical military snafu, but when the smoke cleared I had passed my part of the IG Inspection much to the delight of Sarge.

The long awaited day that I was due to process out came. I said my goodbyes to everyone with promises to write and call when they got home as well. I reversed the order that I arrived at C Company. We traveled back by convoy to Phan Rang, certain that I was going to be ambushed and killed in my last days in Nam. When I arrived at Battalion Headquarters in Phan Rang I was told to immediately report to the commanding officer's office. I figured that this was not good news, trying to figure out what they had finally pinned on me from the IG Inspection. I believe it was LTC Ramsey's office that I walked into thinking I was probably going to the brig or something. However, a photographer appeared and Col. Ramsey presented me with an Army Commendation Medal while taking pictures to send home. There is no doubt that Top Sergeant Murphy was behind that and I'm forever appreciative of that.

After a day in Phan Rang I hoped a convoy to Cam Rahn where I waited to catch a plane home. I think it was about an 18 hour wait....the longest 18 hours of my life. We all boarded a Japan Airlines jet, the plane taxied down the runway and you could literally hear a pin drop. No one was talking, just staring out the window practically holding our breath. The plane reached speed and the wheels lifted off the tarmac. That's when the plane erupted with cheers, shouts and slaps on the back knowing that we had made it and were on the way back to the real world. I didn't dare sleep while processing out fearing that I'd miss the announcement of my name on the plane's manifest. Fifteen minutes later almost everyone was asleep. Other than the birth of my kids, I don't think any other event has ever felt as good as that day. I was 22 years old, had survived one of the biggest and most dangerous events of my life and had my entire future ahead of me. What more could a young man ask for.

Addendum: This brief story hardly scratched the surface of my experience in Nam but, sadly, I have forgotten a lot of names, events and times that things have happened. One of the good things about this forum is that, as I read stories from other soldiers, it awakens different memories that are apparently stored somewhere in the cobweb covered recesses of my brain and I slowly begin to piece together little things in my mind. I would encourage all of you to jot down a few things that stand out in your mind and send it in. It might seem insignificant but it could very well help others begin to remember long forgotten events. None of us are getting any younger and our experiences need to be documented, less it is all forgotten.

Submitted by:

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