

VIETNAM IMPRESSIONS – LARRY JINKINS
(Earthmoving Platoon, C/589)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

1. Cam Ranh - too military for my taste.
2. Qui Nhon Airport Terminal - what a small place.

CHA RANG:

1. Cha Rang - saw first strip tease dance ever - done by a Korean dancing to "House of the Rising Sun." I'm impressed. Loved that song ever since.
2. 20th birthday doing guard duty manning a machine gun.
3. This place isn't so bad.
4. Oh hell - we're going north which doesn't seem to be good idea

WUNDER (UTAH) BEACH:

1. Wunder Beach looks like something out of a World War II D Day movie.
2. Thirty years later Gary Cowie reminds me that I and 5 others volunteered to haul ammunition into Khe Sanh. I can't remember volunteering. We talk more and it comes back to me. Six of us (Clyde Hutson, Willie Goodwin, Bill Cummings?, and ???) volunteered. I'd forgotten the volunteering part because **it was so stupid**.
3. Get to LZ Jane and load 5-ton tractor-trailer with lots of boom stuff tied down with air force cargo nets. **If this thing goes up they won't be able to scrape us off the scenery with a spoon**. Leave it to the Army to stick me in this situation. Oh – that's right, I volunteered. Maybe I should forget that part.
4. Driving towards Khe Sanh with Cobra gunships covering the flanks of the convoy. Air Cav to the rescue. Charge! I need to get me one of those Cav Stetsons.
5. Spend the night somewhere near Khe Sanh sleeping on the trailer. Flares going up all night. Spooky.
6. Coming out of Khe Sanh area running empty and fast with Tex (Willie Goodwin) driving and I'm riding shotgun. Three trucks ahead a mortar round lands on the trailer. Expect the truck to go off the road, but it keeps moving.

7. Get to Ca Lu and stop. Wounded truck driver gets out. Spare tire standing behind him saved his life. Fortunately his shotgun had missed the movement and wasn't in the truck.

8. Back at Wunder Beach. Tired of sand in tooth paste, sand in bed, sand in clothes, sand in shaving cream. Sand sucks.

9. Damn - how did I get stuck driving this scraper bobcat towing a sand-cement mixer at 2 miles per hour.

10. Spending nights outside the perimeter between the beach and the big sand dune towing that damn sand-cement mixer with headlights on making a big damn target of myself for a sniper. Wish I had a smaller head for them to shoot at. Wasn't that road along the dune known as the "Street Without Joy" to the French. One foot aimed towards the door ready to bail out when the first bullet comes in.

11. Scraper hydraulic cap got away from me and I'm drenched in OE 10 hydraulic oil. Now I seem to remember something in heavy equipment school about releasing hydraulic pressure before removing the cap. Hard to get clean. One uniform down.

12. Mortar attack.

13. Navy battle ship shooting over our heads at something. Sounds like car size shells going through the air.

14. At night C130 with a mini-gun laying down covering fire about a mile outside the perimeter. Like a laser beam coming down.

15. Back "in the world" Martin Luther King is assassinated.

16. Camp Evans ammo dump goes up during attack- better than 4th of July if I wasn't worried about our platoon members who are there.

17. Visit Camp Evans the next day. My, my, my - what a mess! Shrapnel everywhere – ammo dump still smoking – more than 100 helicopters damaged. Our guys had been trapped underground for 14 hours. Real jumpy bunch – not that any of us would make sudden loud noises to see them jump.

18. Watching an entire convoy driving around a can in the road.

19. Getting sh_t burning detail.

LZ JANE:

1. Listening to a "native national" (PC term) walking around the perimeter in the jungle one night with a recording bad mouthing us. Surprisingly, no one shoots at him.
2. Great - a shower point has been built. Not so great - snipers have taken to shooting at us taking showers - undignified being shot at while in the open and naked - someone should add a clause in the Geneva Conventions about this - back to washing out of a helmet pot of water every day.
3. Informed one night the LZ is surrounded on 3 sides.
4. Living in a dirt hole. Rain at night - get off cot and stick feed into mud. Mud sucks, dust sucks, rats suck, C rations suck, noisy artillery suck - love the infantry provided steaks and beer that we occasionally scrounge from them.
5. 5-ton dump hits mine in borrow pit. Wounded truck driver pissed because his new truck was damaged.
6. Another 5-ton dump hits a mine.
7. Road grader hits mine – Clarence Slusher wounded.
8. Road grader hits mine – Bill Stafford and Jim Goff wounded.
9. New Soviet mines that the mine detectors don't find.
10. Scrapers start following the mine detector operators to "proof" the road. Scraper operators not a very smiley bunch about this.
11. Ralph Downing has a mine go off under his scraper pan. He is OK, but grader operator Dennis Cluth is splattered with flying dirt.
12. Freddie Guth has a mine go off under a scraper tire.
13. Dennis Cluth narrowly avoids setting off a booby-trapped claymore mine.
14. With all of these mines one would think the enemy actually wants to stop us from building this road. No appreciation for fine engineering. Forty years later I learn from a history book the importance of this road (Wunder Beach to Hai Lang) to the U.S. Army and Marine logistics in the DMZ area.
16. Mines suck. Enemy finally runs out of Soviet mines before we run out of equipment and operators.
17. Someone picks up a M79 round off the ground; starts to take the primer out with a knife; we start backing away; **this is going to really suck**; he stops and shakes his

head; throws the round in the scraper pan; it bounces about three times and explodes; whole LZ runs for cover; really upset 1st Cav Captain arrives to “discuss” the incident.

18. And if I should die before I wake ...

19. Starting to get use to artillery firing over my head all night - doesn't keep me awake anymore - lullaby stuff.

20. Back “in the world,” Bobby Kennedy is assassinated. “The world” has gone crazy.

DONG BA THIN:

1. Great timing! At Wunder Beach when LT Hines (Herbert Hines) is informed he has to send someone to Dong Ba Thin for 2 weeks of training - and I'm standing there when he gets the word. But, I have to make a courier run to battalion on my way south.

2. Hitchhike to Camp Evans. Hitch an air ride to An Khe.

3. Spend night at An Khe. Base gets attacked - helicopter explodes in air.

4. Hitchhike to Qui Nhon. What a big place this airport terminal is.

5. Hitch a ride by air to Cam Ranh.

6. Have to stay at the replacement station at Cam Ranh before going to Dong Ba Thin next day. Get off bus at replacement station during evening formation. Formation stops while new guys turn around to look at me with expressions of shock and awe. Wearing the only uniform I have left - brown boots, dirty uniform with holes, dirty helmet cover with holes, dirty flak jacket with holes, two days worth of beard, covered in red dirt - rifle is clean.

7. Free drinks from the newbies all night long.

8. Next day shower, shave, wash dirt out of uniform, get over to 18th Engineer Brigade training center - and get sh-t about my appearance from school 1SGT.

9. What's this BS from the 1SGT about turning in my rifle while I'm at the school?

10. Some place 5 miles away gets hit and the 1SGT is ordering me to get out of bed to get in a bunker?

11. Get to the bunker and am told this is the officer and senior NCO bunker. Enlisted get in the ditch. Good thing this wasn't real or I'd been climbing up someone's backside going through the door. Maybe I could find the 1SGT to land on.

12. Cooks are great! Learned I'm from the north country and am a real badass combat type (hey - the stories get me free drinks at the enlisted club). Everyone else gets a scoop of ice cream - they give me a bowl. A bowl everyday.

13. Free drinks, lots of ice cream, hot shower everyday – life doesn't suck. Miss my rifle. Keep reaching for it and it isn't there.

14. Time to leave - I think the 1SGT will miss me. He was going to make a soldier out of me.

GOING SOUTH:

1. Informed LZ Nancy hit hard the night before, and my high school classmate (Decorah) was killed. Rumor that one side of the perimeter was overrun. 40 years later learn that this was true and there were 53 WIA and 20 KIA (12 KIA were engineers - some from the 14th and 8th that we had worked with).

2. Using hoses on ship deck to get clean. Hard to sleep - miss the artillery fire lulling me off to dream land.

3. Get to Phan Rang. Actually have a meal sitting in a real chair at a real table with real silverware. Why do I get the impression people are looking at us funny?

SONG PHA:

1. Definitely nicer than the north country.

2. Get stuck being a company clerk for a short time while the company clerk takes leave after having extended in country. My typing skills suck.

3. On dozer Rome Plow with Gary Cowie. Up close and personal with incoming Vietnamese wildlife as we knock down trees. This is kind of fun. We are getting good bailing off the dozer when we receive wildlife we don't care for. Everything bites or stings.

4. Bee nest in cab while I'm operating and Gary is riding shotgun. He knocks nest off dozer while bailing out. I'm stuck with a cab full of bees. Very, very slowly I get out and get stung once. Face swells up. We are out here with no transportation back, no communications, and I'm in bad shape. Luckily, Gary catches a jeep going by and gets me to the aid station. I'm laid up for awhile. Bees don't suck; I like bees – one of nature's engineers.

5. Spend day riding shotgun with Norm Goodman on grader. We run into VC resupply squad carrying huge packs. Being polite and being guests in a foreign country, we don't

shoot at them and, being good hosts, they don't shoot at us. We do it the US Army way. Norm backs us out of there really (I mean really) fast and around the corner where our squad is, and a helicopter gun ship is called in to track them down.

6. Driving tractor-trailer. This is fun. Making a run from Phan Rang to Song Pha by myself (no shotgun, no other vehicles). In retrospect, not a good idea – maybe I should forget this part – it was stupid. Load of 6 scraper tires on the trailer - one too many. Pass Tan My bridge and the tire on the end comes off. No way I'm going to lose a \$3,000 tire, and if I leave it overnight it will be booby trapped by morning. So I chain it to the back of the trailer.

7. By now it is dark and I'm alone in Indian country. Song Pha is a long ways away. I head back to the ARVN group guarding the bridge. They are jumpy because local bad guys have made many attempts to destroy the bridge. I drive near the perimeter, turn the engine off, and get out with my rifle above my heading shouting "I'm an American, dam it, don't shoot" while listening to about 50 rifles and machine guns locking and loading. Nearer my God to Thee.

8. ARVN offers me a cigar that obviously came out of the glove compartment of my truck. Other ARVNs watching to see what happens. I smile and light up my cigar and his. Everyone relaxes and my remaining cigars show up in ARVN hands. We establish international relations over my cheap cigars.

9. Forty years later I learn that I had turned around just short of where Cirilo Silva and SSG Claibourne were ambushed a few evenings later.

10. Lee (Cowboy) Brown gets hepatitis. I go out with him to Phan Rang to hospital. Two of us told to hold him down in a tub of water filled with ice blocks because Doctor says we have to get his body temperature down really fast or he will have brain damage and may die. Brown making comments about my ancestry. How am I ever going to explain how my arms got frost bite in Vietnam?

11. I do something nice for a Vietnamese family (can't remember what it was). From then on a family member is waiting for me at the gate every Sunday evening to take me to eat dinner with the family. They don't speak a word of English, and my Vietnamese is not something to be used in polite society. But we get along. Ever since I've wondered if they paid a price for being friendly with me after the North Vietnamese took over.

12. Local villager comes up at night to gate and informs us that one of our guys is in the village really drunk and a VC tax collecting squad is going to visit the village that night. This doesn't make any sense - why would a VC tax collecting squad be allowed in the village with an ARVN unit being next to the village? But three of us go out to get him. Real spooky. Everything shut up, no light, no sound, no animals making noise. Not normal. Find the culprit and get him back to camp. Feel like knocking the snot out of

him but I'm too tired and besides, I'm thinking about converting to being a hippy with the whole love/peace thing.

12. Getting good at judging distances that mortar rounds land away from me by the color of the flash. But, this is the first white-yellow flash I've seen. This is really close. The round that killed Norm and wounded Joe Newell. I've given up the hippy idea. I'm ready to kill someone.

GOING HOME:

1. At Cam Ranh and being told that we will have to stay an extra day in Vietnam because the aircraft that was to fly us out hadn't arrived. Hey, this is Cam Ranh, what can go wrong, they don't even have traffic accidents - first mortar round lands across the street about 3 in the morning. Vietnam sucks.

2. Dam, my parents seem so young and I feel so old.

3. Go to the liquor store to get a bottle - guy asks me for my ID - I'm too young to buy the bottle.

AFTERMATH:

1. And then it is over, and miraculously you are still alive and still in one piece. Life is so precious. It must be lived carefully and well. And yet, what is there to live for? The war has taken away your belief in human decency, your beliefs in justice and in a sane and benevolent god. You are afraid to trust in anything. Just as life has become precious, there is no longer any meaning to it or for it.

2. Old-young men, wanting nothing more than to be left alone.

3. We mourn for them, and weep alone, in still dark hours of the night. For those who went, not wanting to, while listening in some jungle for the sound that sharply marked the first of those last moments of their war. And of their lives, a cry, a moan, then silence. And no matter how we strain to hear them speak again, that silence is forever. Now we speak of them, who were our own, with pride to family and to friends. Who knowing us, know very well, that smiles hide sorrow that often sends us here to read the names in stone and marble and dull metal plaque, there for all the world to read. Who are we? Why, we are those, who still mourn for them, and weep alone, in still dark hours of the night. For those who went, not wanting to ...

FORTY YEARS LATER - REUNION:

1. What can be said about seeing and talking with those you haven't had contact with in 40 years? Dam, I'm proud of these guys.

2. Five us walking across a road at Fort Leonard Wood – all of us limping and gimping. Mike Morrish starts calling cadence which is a complete joke since we cannot move that fast much less stay in step. At least C Company can call cadence – I'm not certain if A Company could – the whole counting to 4 challenge.

3. Get to the engineer equipment display. Relieved to see the “do not climb on equipment display.” Figured I could climb onto the D7 Rome Plow, but concerned that I might not be able to climb off.

4. Memorial service. Too much pain.